

# HUMILITY AND PASSION

## A Caitanyite Vaishnava Ethics of Devotion

Graham M. Schweig

### ABSTRACT

Two axiological elements—humility and passion—I argue, are at the ethical core of Bengal Vaishnavism. These modes of behavior, derived from early theological sources, are dialectically related and form the basis for an ethics of devotion that allows the devotee to accept, while simultaneously transcending social norms and identities. I draw primarily from what is considered the most honored story of the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, the Rāsālīlā, involving the cowherd maidens who exhibit the highest devotion to God, and from the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, the biography of the sixteenth century revivalist and saint Caitanya, the tradition’s model for devotional life.

KEY WORDS: *ethics, devotion, hierarchy, egalitarianism, passion, humility, feminine*

SCHOLARS OF INDIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS have observed that the subject matter of ethics is an area of intellectual concern that is merged or intertwined with Hindu religion and philosophy. Ethics as an independent field of inquiry has not received the exclusive attention it has in Western philosophical traditions.<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true for the theistic sects within the Hindu complex known as the Vaishnava tradition.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S. K. De confirms this, but takes it further to the point of claiming Indian traditions to be ethically inadequate: “As we find it in the general history of Indian thought, ethics is not a subject of independent speculation; and ethical principles, which underlie theory and practice, are expressed, in the main, only incidentally in connexion with religious and theological exposition. Morality is regarded as necessarily religious and religion as necessarily moral, so that the bearings of religious doctrine on moral life never receive independent or adequate treatment,” *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961, 542).

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars therefore have criticized Indian traditions for an apparent lack of ethics. A good example of the criticism of Indian ethics from the Christian perspective, and specifically in regard to the Hindu theistic traditions, is the work, *Indian Theism: From the Vedic to the Muhammadan Period*, by Nicol Macnicol (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1915). See Part II: “Criticism and Appreciation” (220–260). Macnicol claims that the ethics within theistic traditions of India is greatly eclipsed by the deterministic idea of *karma*. He further describes the subordination of ethics to divine aesthetics of God’s realm and play (*līlā*), in relation to which human emotion and passion are engaged in worship in an apparently

Nevertheless, one can observe a profound sense of ethical and metaethical interests evident within Vaishnava sacred texts and theological discourse.

Here, I will explore essential values found at the core of ethical thought within a specific theistic Vaishnava tradition arising in the eastern province of Bengal, referred to here as Caitanyite Vaishnavism.<sup>3</sup> This tradition spread throughout regions of Bengal, Orissa, and the northern areas of India, initiated and inspired by the charismatic figure of Krishna Caitanya (1486–1533). This ecstatic mystic and devotional revivalist of the 16th century, along with his close disciples, established a theological school of thought and religious practice centered upon devotion, or *bhakti*, to the supreme Lord Krishna.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the ethics of the Caitanya school, as we shall explore here, poses some unique challenges, in addition to those normally associated with other traditions within the greater Hindu complex, including other Vaishnava traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Particularly challenging for the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism in discerning its ethics of devotion is, among practitioners, the continued loyalty and submission to social distinctions within what has become known by Westerners as an oppressive “caste” system, along with what appears to be excessively emotional devotion to the erotic deity of Krishna. These two issues continue to fascinate, perplex, and even disturb Indian

---

untamed or unethical fashion. On the other hand, some have discovered sources profoundly rich in ethical thought. See Klaus K. Klostermaier’s discussion of Hindu ethics in Chapter 10: “Purity and Merit: The Twin Concerns of Karmamarga” found in his work, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Second Edition, Albany: State University of New York, 1994). Sections especially relevant are, “Ethical Standards of Hinduism,” “Vice and Virtue in Hinduism,” “Great Sins and Lesser Sins,” and “Penance and Atonement” (172–181).

<sup>3</sup> This tradition is often known as Bengal or Gaudiya Vaishnavism. These names, however, are limiting because they fail to indicate the full extent of the spread of the tradition. Moreover, the other Vaishnava traditions are named after their founders; thus, I am justified using the name of the founder to identify this Vaishnava school.

<sup>4</sup> The word “*bhakti*” denotes self-surrender and loving devotion to the personal deity, and God’s transforming grace for the *bhakta*, or “devotee.” It is to be contrasted to other “*margas*” or paths, or other “*yogas*” (means for achieving union with God), such as “*karma*” (the way of action), or “*jñāna*” (the way of knowledge). While *bhakti* is a pan-Indian/Hindu phenomenon, it was primarily the Vaishnava traditions all around India that developed *bhakti* into sophisticated theologies and practices, especially during the *bhakti* renaissance of the medieval period, from the 11th through 16th centuries.

<sup>5</sup> Sudhindra Chakravarti understands our task well when he states, “As in other schools of Indian thought, so in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism ethics is not treated as a separate study. The philosophy of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism is primarily theological, and its Ethics is embedded within its Theology. An independent treatment of the ethical principles of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism is by no means easy, since it requires the extrication of the ethical elements from the religious settings.” *Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*, by Sudhindra Chandra Chakravarti (Santiniketan: Academic Publishers, 1969), 283.

and Western scholars alike. I argue that these two confounding issues are addressed by the Caitanya school through a vision that engages a deeper, more significant religious and ethical purpose of both in a dialectical tension between *dharma*, an embracing of established social norms, and *parodharma*, a simultaneous transcending of all social boundaries. I will attempt to show that this embracing and transcending corresponds to two essential characteristics of ethical and devotional behavior—humility and passion respectively, personal virtues which also correspond to the powerful (*aiśvarya*) and intimate (*mādhurya*) attributes of the supreme deity. For the Caitanyite school, these two essential axiological elements—humility and passion—are sustained in healthy and necessary dialectical tension with one another within devotional love, or *bhakti*, constituting the very core of an ethics of devotion.

The dimensions of humility and passion presented by this school of *bhakti* can be observed in two primary devotional models that we will examine here: (1) the devotional behavior found in Caitanya himself, and (2) the behavior of those after whom Caitanya modeled his own behavior, the cowherd maidens of Vraja, specifically as they appear in the famous story of the Rāsa dance (as passionate lovers of Krishna).<sup>6</sup> Caitanya's life as an ethical model of *bhakti* for practitioners is revealed in the *Caitanya Caritamṛta* (CC) of Krishnadas Kavirāj. This large work was written within a century of Caitanya's own life, and it has been and still is, for practitioners, the most revered text written about Caitanya, perhaps because it contains an unparalleled synthesis of the school's philosophical teachings in addition to its hagiographical content. Among the numerous stories of the divinity (*līlās*) within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP), the Rāsalīlā (RLP) story of Krishna with the cowherd maidens, the Gopīs, is considered by followers to be the pinnacle of all divine episodes.<sup>7</sup> In both these texts one can observe a tension between the ethical and the devotional and therefore, it is primarily to these two works that I will turn in order to observe some of the school's ethical vision. Key statements from the *Bhakti Sūtra* will also be presented, since this text represents a synthesis of the *bhakti* philosophy of several Vaishnava traditions, allowing us to observe conceptions of *bhakti* in the Caitanya school that resonate with the wider tradition.

<sup>6</sup> The story of the Rāsa dance, known as the Rāsalīlā (“Dance of Divine Love”), comprises five consecutive chapters within the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.29–33). A very brief summary of this story is reviewed in the section below, “Ethical Tensions in the Rāsa Dance Story.”

<sup>7</sup> The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, known for its presentations on the life story of Krishna throughout its tenth book (there are a total of 12 books in this large text), is one of the most loved sacred Sanskrit texts of India, along with the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* (the latter in which the well known sacred text of India, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, is found).

### The Intimate Deity as the Ultimate Deity

For the earlier Vaishnava traditions which emerged as philosophical schools during the *bhakti* renaissance period beginning in the 11th century, Vishnu is the ultimate majestic and powerful cosmic deity who reigns supreme above all other gods and divinities. He sustains and supports the deities of the endless cycling of creation (Brahmā) and dissolution (Śiva) in the endless cycling of cosmic regeneration, within the myriad of universes, regulated by his mere exhalation (creation) and inhalation (dissolution). This deity is the ultimate deity from whom all other divinities and universal creations come, and the deity with whom the supreme feminine deity, the Goddess Lakṣmī, consorts.<sup>8</sup> Vishnu is known to emanate many manifestations of divine descent (*avatāras*), among whom Krishna is one.<sup>9</sup>

For the Caitanya school, however, the reverse is found. Krishna is the ultimate deity from whom the embodiment of God's power (*aiśvarya*), who is Vishnu, comes. Krishna is also the intimate (*mādhurya*) deity, who displays perhaps the most multifaceted personality of any of the Hindu divinities.<sup>10</sup> In his highest heaven he conducts loving play as a mischievous cowherd boy, and creates flute music that captivates all beings within the paradisaal village of Vraja. Indeed, it is his identity as the divine lover of the cowherd maidens from that village, including his divine consort Rādhā, that challenges the question of ethics. The Caitanya school considers the play of the amorous and erotic Krishna with Rādhā and the other cowherd maidens (Gopīs), as the ultimate display of pure love between deity and devotee. At the same time though, Krishna is understood as the originator of all religious and

<sup>8</sup> The conception of divinity in ancient India has always included female as well as male deities. In the highly theistic Vaishnava context, the supreme God is also accompanied by a supreme Goddess. The more cosmic deity Vishnu, known as Nārāyaṇa, is accompanied by the Goddess Lakṣmī; whereas the more intimate and personal deity of Krishna, he is accompanied by the more intimate and higher form of the Goddess, known as Rādhā. According to the theologians of the tradition, Lakṣmī and Rādhā are but one deity in two different forms and divine contexts.

<sup>9</sup> The meaning of the word "*avatāra*" is "divine descent" of divinity to this world. It is a pan-Indian concept that is often loosely translated by the Christian word "incarnation." The notion of incarnation possesses much more of the idea that God comes in a human "carnal" form; whereas the *avatāra* of God is his own divine form descending to earth.

<sup>10</sup> The *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the greatest and most loved of sacred Hindu texts, presents Krishna as the intimate deity who consoles Arjuna in his personal challenges. However, in Chapter 11, Krishna also shows Arjuna his power and might. Here, Arjuna begs him to return to his intimate form, which clearly expresses the evolution of and theological trend toward the intimate, personal deity of Krishna. For a good general introduction to the different aspects of the majestic and intimate personae of Krishna, see David Kinsley's *The Sword and the Flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 1–80, especially his section entitled, "Kṛṣṇa and the 'Kṛṣṇas'" in Chapter 1, 9–11.

ethical principles (*dharma*). For some scholars, even among specialists in the Caitanya tradition, it has been confounding how God, the source of *dharma*, can also be the amorous deity of Krishna whose affairs with the Gopīs appear to be unethical.<sup>11</sup>

The intimate deity is emphasized over the cosmic or almighty deity, and yet for the devotee, they are always experienced in dialectical tension with one another. Neither is excluded; rather, the one is implicitly or explicitly experienced while the other is in the background. The intimate deity inspires a passionate devotion, and the cosmic or powerful deity a devotion of humility. As the *Bhakti Sūtra* states, when the devotee is absorbed in the passion of devotion, it *appears* that such a devotee has no knowledge of the power and greatness of God:

Here, however, it is not contradictory to say  
the Gopīs were forgetful of  
the knowledge of their Beloved's supreme greatness.

Without knowledge of their Beloved's greatness,  
the devotional love of the Gopīs would be like  
the selfish love of a paramour for her lover. (*Bhakti Sūtra*, texts 22 and 23)

Thus, the devotee “knows” the greatness of God and therefore, in the background of *parodharma*, continues to apprehend the ethical dimension of *dharma* that flows from divinity. However, due to being absorbed in devotional passion, the devotee appears to “forget” this dimension. Intimacy with the divine elevates the devotee into a transethical sphere of divine love and affectionate play with the Lord, as well as loving fellowship with other devotees. Whereas veneration and awe for the greatness of the deity creates an atmosphere of deep reverence and humble admiration among followers. It is clear that both passion in devotion and humility combine together in the hearts of the devoted followers of the Caitanyite tradition, forming an axiological core of an ethics of devotion.

In passages focusing on the devotion of the Gopīs, one can observe an ever-intensifying dialectical tension between the absence and presence of God, which in turn intensifies the humility and passion of devotion, each one further complementing and augmenting the other. For example, the Gopīs, even while Krishna is standing directly before them, fear

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most thoroughgoing scholarship on the Caitanyite school has been presented by S. K. De, in his *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961). In this rich presentation of the historical, literary, and theological tradition, the one confounding factor for De was the question of ethics in relation to the tradition's erotic mysticism of Krishna. See the chapter, “Ritualism and Devotional Practices,” especially section three of this chapter, entitled “Ethics of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism” (542–555). Also, see his criticism of Krishnadas Kavirāja's *Govinda Lilāmṛta* as an erotic text that ignores the ethical and presents what he describes as an “excessive load of sexual passion” (610–611).

separation from him. In anticipation of his immanent absence, both their humility in service and passionate devotion are heightened:

O beautifully ornamented Person,  
 please grant us,  
 Whose hearts are burning with intense passion (*tīvra-kāma*)  
 inspired by your beautiful glances and smiles,  
 the chance to serve you (*dāsyam*). (*BhP* 10.29.38)

It is especially important to note here that the tradition ultimately promotes a devotion that delicately balances passion with humility in the concept or experience of *viraha-bhakti* (“devotional love in separation”). The highest form of intimacy with the deity is understood by this school as love in separation. The *Bhakti Sūtra* describes *viraha*, out of eleven different types of loving attachment to God, as the highest process: “Devotion in separation from the Beloved is the highest devotion of all (*parama-virahāsakti*)” (*Bhakti Sūtra*, text 82). The Caitanyite school not only accepts this statement but indeed models its devotion specifically on loving service in separation or “from afar” (known as *vipralambha-sevā*).<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this love in separation that truly balances humility and passion because, as seen above, the intimacy of union (*yoga*) with God can lead to “forgetfulness” of the knowledge of God’s greatness, thus causing humility to remain in the background of passion. However, when the Gopīs either anticipate or experience separation from Krishna, they more consciously and actively acknowledge his almighty attributes which, in turn, corresponds to their expression of intensified humility, combined with their passionate love for God. For the tradition, then, humility intensifies the experience of passion, and conversely, passion further intensifies the experience of humility in devotion. Thus, precisely because of this dialectical balance between humility and passion in devotion, it is my observation that the fear of an excessive emotionalism within this tradition is unfounded.

### Metaethics and Metaphysics of the Caitanya School

Caitanya is portrayed in this seminal work as rejecting the normative roles and identities of *varṇa* and *āśrama* and, at the same time, as rigorously upholding their prescribed etiquette, even to the point of appearing excessive. In the introduction to their recently published translation of the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Dimock and Stewart suggest that this

<sup>12</sup> The literal meaning of *vipralambha-sevā* is “performing service (*sevā*) while having attained (*Lambha*) distance (*vipra*).” In the Caitanyite tradition, distance or separation in divine love is a most intensively positive experience of union, paradoxically, and not the negative experience associated with the way lovers of this world agonize when apart.

paradoxical stance, like other paradoxical aspects in the thought and practice of the school, is justified in light of the central philosophical formula of their Vedantic doctrine, *acintya-bhedābheda*.<sup>13</sup> This position conveys the essential idea that complementarity and harmony of apparently contradictory elements are possible in God since divine power goes far beyond any human comprehension, and that a higher order of being and logic exists that allows these achievements to exist in God.

Dimock and Stewart imply that perhaps these apparently contradictory elements are too easily explained away by the tradition, which, they suggest, relies upon an easy philosophical crutch that “eliminates the need for certain obvious questions” (2000: 119). However, the tradition prides itself upon the philosophical explanation and analysis of later thinkers, and even addresses philosophical reflection and discourse within some of its foundational scriptural texts, which I will briefly present later in this study. What is important to point out here is that there is an implicit metaethics embedded in the metaphysical formula of this school: that in God, on some level, can be found both the ethical and supraethical at the same time.

### Rejection of Social Identities

It can be seen that the school’s vision is one of humility directed toward God and intense passion of devotion in loving God. Sudhindra Chakravarti describes Vaishnava humility further, as follows:

A true Vaishnava is a religious man who sees one God in all beings and apprehends all beings including himself as parts of that God. . . . His humility comes from his knowledge that his God dwells in all bodies. He pays respect to all creatures, as each of them is a dwelling house of Krishna, the Lord. He makes obeisance to all irrespective of caste, creed, colour, age, merit, learning, wealth and status. (Chakravarti, 1969: 298)

The humility of a Vaishnava, then, allows him or her to offer the greatest respect to all living beings, ignoring any type of social identification. Certainly we see this in the personality of Caitanya.

Caitanya’s exemplification of the *bhakta*’s rejection of the identification with the four major divisions of human occupation (*varṇa*) and the four major phases of the life cycle (*āśrama*) is striking. Krishnadas

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of *acintya-bhedābheda*, see *Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*, by Sudhindra Chandra Chakravarti (Santiniketan: Academic Publishers, 1969), chapter entitled, “*Acintya-Bhedābheda*” (299–339). The meaning, application, and historical developments leading to the fully developed formulation of this philosophical position in the thought of Baladeva Vidyābhūṣana by the 18th century are presented in this work.

Kavirāja, in his *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (CC), presents Caitanya saying the following famous words:

I am not a teacher or priest (*brāhamaṇa*),  
 nor am I a ruler of men (*kṣatriya*).  
 I am not a tradesman (*vaiśya*),  
 nor am I a laborer (*śūdra*).  
 I am not a religious student (*brahmacāri*),  
 nor am I the head of a household (*gṛhastha*).  
 I am not a forest dweller (*vānaprastha*),  
 nor am I one in the renounced order (*sannyāsa*).  
 Yet he who is perfect and brilliant,  
 whose bliss is supreme,  
 who is an ocean of nectar,  
 who is the Lord of the Gopīs—  
 It is he for whom I am the meager servant  
 of the servant  
 of the servant  
 of his lotus feet. (CC 2.13.80)<sup>14</sup>

Here, Caitanya, refusing to identify with the traditional *varṇas* and *āśramas*, identifies only with being the “meager servant of the servant of the servant” of the feet of God, who is Krishna, “the Lord of the Gopīs.” In other words, as a *bhakta*, Caitanya does not identify with the social or vocational designations of the traditional dharmic system. In the first stanza of the verse, Caitanya presents words rejecting the four hierarchical vocational divisions (*varṇa*), from highest to lowest, and in the second stanza, he rejects identification with any of the four stages of the life cycle (*āśrama*), listed here in sequential order. In the third stanza, he passionately dwells upon the attributes of God, and in the fourth stanza, expresses devotional humility in the role of a very remote and meager servant of the beautiful feet of God. Again, Caitanya further prays passionately for selfless devotion in the following verse, as he is willing to humbly serve God continually in this world, never leaving the endless cycle of birth and death, *samsāra*:<sup>15</sup>

Not wealth, nor followers, nor beautiful women,  
 nor meritorious results do I desire,  
 O Lord of the universe.

<sup>14</sup> *Śrī Śrī Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (CC), by Krishnadas Kavirāja, with the *Amṛta Prāvaha-bhāṣya Commentary* by Bhaktivinoda Thakura (Calcutta: Gaudiya Mission, Caitanyabda 471 [1957]), CC 2.13.80. All the translated verses from this text are numbered according to this Bengali edition of the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, abbreviated throughout this study as CC. All translations in this study are my own.

<sup>15</sup> The word *samsāra* means literally, “cycle,” connotatively referring to the “endless cycle of suffering,” consisting of eternally repeated births and deaths for the soul.



Please bestow upon me, birth after birth,  
 selfless devotion unto you,  
 the supreme Lord. (CC 3.20.29)<sup>16</sup>

Here, Caitanya emphatically states that one should completely reject the *varṇāśrama dharma* and take up *kṛṣṇaika śaraṇa*, “the one shelter of Krishna” (CC 2.22.93). It is more specifically declared that anyone can be a *bhakta*, or devotee, despite social status or line of work: “A low birth is not a disqualification to perform devotion to Krishna, nor is a *brāhmaṇa* from a good family qualification to perform such devotion” (CC 3.4.66). Clearly, Caitanya has no regard for social norms in attaining devotion unto the supreme Lord.

There are other instances in which social norms are transcended and disregarded. Krishnadas Kavirāj tells the story of how Kālidāsa, a high born *bhakta*, would go to *bhaktas* from low born families, eat their food remnants, and offer them gifts (CC 3.16). When one devotee by the name Jhadu, who was born into a *śūdra* family, questioned this behavior, Kālidāsa quoted several verses from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that justified his behavior: even though one may be born as a *brāhmaṇa*, or very learned in Sanskrit, or born into aristocracy, if one is not devoted to the Lord and praising him with the recitation of his names, such a person is not as good as one who happens to have the lowest birth. Moreover, one who has a very low birth, but who is fully devoted to God in love and recites the Lord’s name and praises, such a person is better than a *brāhmaṇa* and is himself worthy of worship (CC 3.16.27–29). In another instance, Caitanya himself, born into a *brāhmaṇa* family, embraced the *śūdra*-born Bhāvānanda Rāya who then said to Caitanya, “you must be God if you can embrace me!” (CC 2.10.50–54). These instances clearly express the rejection of normative social and occupational values.

We can even recall a story that shows Caitanya’s willingness to be tolerant and subservient to a woman, in spite of restrictions strictly governing contact with women in the renounced order to which Caitanya himself belonged. It was customary for Caitanya to go to the temple in Puri to receive the *darśana* of Jagannātha.<sup>17</sup> Once, when he was in the

<sup>16</sup> This verse is one of eight verses from the *Śikṣāṣṭakam* said to be written directly by Caitanya himself. The goal of all Hindu traditions is to become liberated from this world of birth and death, *samsāra*. Even so, Caitanya, expressing his humility, is willing to forego liberation in order to selflessly serve God.

<sup>17</sup> The word “*darśana*” means literally, “seeing.” It is the worshipful vision of the sacred image within the temple setting, situated either in the Hindu home or in the local community. (The word also has another major connotation as “philosophy,” or a school of philosophy.) Jagannātha is a name for Krishna, meaning “Lord of the universe.” This name refers to the sacred image of the deity found in the famous temple of Jagannātha Puri, located on the east coast of Orissa, just below the province of Bengal.

midst of a very crowded gathering of worshipping pilgrims, while standing next to a column that held the statue form of Vishnu's bird carrier Garuda, an Orissan woman, intensely eager to achieve the *darśana* of Jagannātha, climbed up the column, with one foot on the column and the other on Caitanya's shoulder. Caitanya's servant, Govinda, upon seeing this, urged her to come down off the column and Caitanya's shoulder. Seeing this, Caitanya admonished Govinda for distracting the woman from her fervent devotion, who, becoming aware of what she had done, immediately descended the column and begged Caitanya for forgiveness. Caitanya responded by saying that he would pray at her feet so that she would bestow such enthusiasm on him, and that she had been blessed by Jagannātha for such eagerness to receive his *darśana* (CC 3.14.22–32). These examples illustrate Caitanya's willingness to overlook strict adherence to dharmic regulations due to the devotee's intensified humility and passionate devotion, comparable to the intensity of devotion experienced by the Gopīs when they dropped all worldly duties, running off to be with their beloved Krishna.<sup>18</sup>

### Caitanya's Talks with Rāmānanda

There are other instances in which Caitanya exemplifies and enacted his identity as a devotee, or *bhakta*, disregarding social norms and practices, asserting the higher *dharma* of *bhakti* or *parodharma*. The famous dialogue between Rāmānanda and Caitanya is one such instance. This dialogue is a type of catechism in which Caitanya made inquiries and Rāmānanda provided responses. Caitanya began the dialogue with the request, "Please present a verse explaining the goal of life." Rāmānanda retorted, "The devotion to Vishnu is found in the activities of one's *svadharmā*," or particular life calling. He then quoted a verse from the *Vishnu Purāṇa* that specifically promotes the *varṇāśrama* system as a means for worshipping Vishnu.<sup>19</sup> To this Caitanya responded by saying, "This is external (*bāhya*). Please go ahead and say more" (CC 2.8.59). Rāmānanda then stated, "Offering one's actions to Krishna; this is the essence of all perfection," and he quoted a verse (9.27) from *Bhagavad Gītā*. To this, again, Caitanya replied, "This is external, go on." Rāmānanda then stated that the best among humans completely gives up all of these

<sup>18</sup> It is in the first chapter of the Rāsa dance that we find the Gopīs dropping everything when they hear the sound of Krishna's flute. This is described below in the section called, "Ethical Tensions in the Rāsa Dance Story."

<sup>19</sup> CC 2.8.58. *varṇāśrama dharma* is the social organization embracing "the four types of vocations (*varṇa*) and the four stages of the life cycle (*āśrama*)."  
*Varṇāśrama* is to be distinguished from the later so-called "caste system," known as *jāti-dharma*, but it is not within the scope of this article to discuss the finer distinctions between them.

*varṇas* and *āśramas* and that perfection is simply the worship of God (CC 2.8.617–62). He further quoted the climactic verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.66), *sarvadharmān parityajya*, that one should completely give up all *dharmas* and accept God as the only shelter. It was not until Caitanya heard about the highest *rasa* (*Śṛṅgāra-rasa*), as exemplified by Rādhā and the Gopīs with Krishna in the Rāsaliḷā episode, that Caitanya’s mind became satisfied.<sup>20</sup>

In this well known dialogue some important observations can be made. We are immediately struck by the fact that Caitanya’s social position is one of a *saṁnyāsīn* born in a *brāhmaṇa* family, who is taking advice from Rāmānanda, a householder and *śūdra*. Although Rāmānanda respectfully acknowledges their different social and occupational statuses, Caitanya wants to ignore these distinctions, which results in an intimate and deeply loving fellowship between them.<sup>21</sup> At different points throughout their dialogue, Caitanya and Rāmānanda embrace each other and cry tears of joy out of affection for one another. Caitanya’s humility and devotional passion motivate him to apparently completely reject social norms, while embracing them at the same time. It is significant that their dialogue begins by asserting the value of *varṇāśrama dharma*, yet concludes with the assertion that passionate loving service to Krishna (displayed in *parodharma*), as the Gopīs serve Krishna in the Rāsaliḷā episode, is understood as the highest perfection. (CC 2.8.94)

### Strict Observance of Ethical Principles

At times, however, we find that Caitanya himself voluntarily participates in *āśrama* and *varṇa* distinctions. Caitanya, for example, became a *saṁnyāsī* at the very young and unconventional age of twenty-five, ostensibly to spread love of God to certain classes that would otherwise remain unreceptive to him, such as logicians, philosophers, and others. Even though his purpose is described as solely devotional, Caitanya at times rigorously upheld the traditional and formal etiquette required by the *āśrama*, and expected others to do so as well. When the close associate Sārvabhauma Bhāṭṭācārya invited Caitanya to stay at his home for twenty days and have lunch with him each day, Caitanya refused his invitation on the basis that this would not be in keeping with the

<sup>20</sup> The highest relationship with God, or *rasa*, is that of *śṛṅgāra*, the relationship consisting of the passionate love that is found in a lover for his or her beloved.

<sup>21</sup> Caitanya is known for stating, “Regardless of whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, a *saṁnyāsī*, or a *śūdra*, one who knows the truth about Krishna, such a one is known as a ‘guru’” (CC 2.8.128).

renounced order of a *saṁnyāsi*<sup>22</sup> (CC 2.15.188ff.). Another example of strict adherence to dharmic regulations was demonstrated when Gaḍādhara Paṇḍita wanted to break his vow of *kṣetra saṁnyāsa* out of love and devotion to God.<sup>23</sup> Caitanya would not allow him to do so, and instead made arrangements for him to keep his *saṁnyāsa* vows (CC 2.16ff.).

The king of Orissa, Pratāparudra, who considered himself a humble servant of Jagannātha, and who would sweep the path of the *ratha* carts on which Jagannātha rode during his yearly festival, requested an audience with Caitanya.<sup>24</sup> Caitanya refused on the grounds that a *saṁnyāsin* should not associate with worldly persons, especially a king. After petitioning Caitanya many times through mutual associates, and being refused each time, Sarvabhauma came up with a plan for the king to surreptitiously achieve an audience with Caitanya. The king was to get out of his royal raiment and dress in very simple garb, then approach Caitanya in his courtyard while reciting verses sung by the Gopīs. When the king did so, Caitanya went into a rapturous trance, and from that time forward, the king was able to enter into close association with Caitanya (CC 2.11.1–61; 2.14.4–22).

It was especially in Caitanya's strictness with women that we can observe how he rigorously upheld the social etiquette and conventions of renunciation or *yati dharma*, that is, the *dharma* of the renunciant stage. One day, while on his way to the temple, Caitanya heard at a distance a voice coming from the Jagannātha Temple, singing the Gītagovinda of Jayadeva.<sup>25</sup> Upon hearing this exquisite melody, Caitanya went into an ecstatic state of mind and ran toward the voice, getting pricked by thorny hedges on the way. As he got closer, Caitanya's servant, Govinda, following behind, grabbed the arm of Caitanya and warned, "The singing is from a woman!" The narration explains that as soon as Caitanya heard the word "woman," he came to external ("*bāhya*") consciousness and then

<sup>22</sup> A *saṁnyāsi* is a person who has accepted the renunciation of *saṁnyāsa*, the state of being dead to the world, giving up all worldly activities, dependencies, and former identities. He or she is in the fourth stage of the life cycle, which consists of the first quarter of life in studentship, the second in marital and family relations, the third in retirement and withdrawing from the world to spiritual practice, and the fourth in *saṁnyāsa* or complete renunciation. He or she is often a wandering renunciate, preparing for the journey of death.

<sup>23</sup> The specific type of renunciation called *kṣetra saṁnyāsa* refers to one who is renounced (*saṁnyāsa*) by residing always at the place of pilgrimage (*kṣetra*).

<sup>24</sup> The annual festival in which the deity image of Jagannātha is taken from the great temple of Puri and rides a chariot for all to see is called Rathayatra, "the festival of the chariot."

<sup>25</sup> See Barbara Stoler Miller's introduction to and translation of *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītagovinda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). This Sanskrit poem of the love of Krishna and Rādhā, written by Jayadeva in the late 12th century, was one of Caitanya's favorite poems.

turned back, thanking Govinda profusely for saving him from this transgression (CC 3.13.78–86).

Perhaps a truly confounding example is that of Caitanya's punishment of Chota Haridas. When preparing Caitanya's lunch, Bhagavan Acharya asked Chota Haridas to beg some rice from a woman named Mādhavī, who was considered to be a very saintly woman. In fact, Krishnadas counts her among the closest associates of Caitanya. After Caitanya praised the rice and inquired as to its origins, Bhagavan Acharya explained that he arranged for Chota Haridas to get the rice from Mādhavī. As soon as Caitanya heard this, he requested his followers that Chota Haridas should never come there to see him again. When asked why he had rejected Chota Haridas in what appeared to them as harsh, even severe terms, he stated that "he cannot see the face of a *vairāgi* [mendicant] who speaks intimately with a woman" (CC 3.2.117). Even after many devotees petitioned Caitanya for his forgiveness for such a seemingly small infraction, he repeated his strong feelings on the matter and his followers found his decision inscrutable (CC 3.2.102–127). Thus, it is clear that Caitanya expected the conventions of the *dharma* for the renunciate to be rigorously supported. From these examples, we can observe Caitanya's upholding what has been stated in *Bhakti Sūtra*: "Scriptural teachings must be followed even after one is firmly fixed in devotional love. Otherwise, persons not observing scriptural teachings risk falling away from devotional love" (*Bhakti Sūtra*, texts 12–13).

### Caitanya's Enigmatic Behavior

From the foregoing we can make the following observations: Caitanya's relationship to normative social practices was enigmatic. We can observe how the structure of social norms, along with the transcending of the boundaries defined by such norms, provides fertile ground for portraying and exemplifying what the tradition offers as its devotional ethics—humility and passion in devotion to God, and in relations with others.<sup>26</sup> Caitanya's behavior at times was a radical departure from the normative; other times it was conservative and even radically strict, either unpredictable or apparently erratic in application. We also can observe that when Caitanya was more externally conscious, he tended to be concerned with the ways of *dharma*; whereas, when he was in a deeply internal frame of mind, perhaps in trance, it was possible for him to drop any concern whatsoever for these normative conventions. Caitanya's example and behavior seem to be sending a message that is both one of affirming and transcending and, to some degree, this must be the

<sup>26</sup> Caitanya and Rāmānanda, at different points throughout their dialogue, embrace each other and cry tears of joy out of affection for one another.

message his followers received. The question arises, then, exactly what is the logic behind this shift between the external and internal life of a devotee? What is the mechanism that allows for a shift from an affirmation of social structures to a transcendent rejection of them?

### *Dharma and Parodharma in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

It has thus been implied from the above discussion that without *parodharma*, *dharma* is devoid of humility and passion in relation to God. Caitanya's various examples of *dharma* and *parodharma*, as narrated by Krishnadas Kavirāj, draw heavily from statements of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a text which, among all the Hindu scriptures, is seen as the tradition's foundational revelation. At this point, therefore, I would like to turn our attention to some key themes and stories of the *Bhāgavata* which perhaps relate in important ways to our inquiry.

Indeed, throughout the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, statements exist upholding and supporting the normative *varṇāśrama dharma* and, in addition, insisting that these social statuses and phases of life must be devoted to the worship of Vishnu. We find statements that suggest that the *varṇāśrama* system is intrinsic to human society, and others that claim that the goal of *varṇāśrama dharma* is *bhakti*.

The *varṇas* or divisions of work are seen as related directly to God. The *Bhāgavata* does this by invoking the relationship between the Supreme Person (the *puruṣa*) and the *varṇas*:<sup>27</sup> all humans, and even gods and sages, should submit to the *varṇāśrama* system (BhP 1.16.31); the proper respect and etiquette must be maintained between the *varṇas*, otherwise one suffers at death (BhP 5.26.30); and the *brāhamaṇas* are to be respected as the best of the *varṇas* (BhP 3.29.31). If a person possesses the characteristics of a *varṇa* other than the one into which he was born, such a person should be accepted as belonging to the *varṇa* for which he is qualified (BhP 7.11.35). Most significantly, it is emphasized that the goal of working within the *varṇāśrama* structure is to perfect one's loving service to God: one is to dedicate all one's activities in the *varṇas* and *āśramas* to God, and such a person will be awarded the perfection of life (BhP 11.18.47).

The *Bhāgavata* speaks about the perfection or the highest *dharma* as satisfying to both the soul and God:

The highest *dharma* (*parodharma*) for all humans is certainly  
 devotional love (*bhakti*) for the transcendent Lord,  
 Which is selfless (*ahaitukī*) and unremitting (*apratīhatā*),

<sup>27</sup> See the following verses: *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (BhP) 2.1.37; 3.7.23; 11.5.2–3. This conception of the supreme person, or *puruṣa*, originates in the thought of the ancient Vedas.

by which the self (*ātman*) is most deeply satisfied (*suprasīdatī*).  
(BhP 1.2.6)

Therefore, O best of the twice-born,  
the complete perfection of  
the observance of *dharma*  
Within the organization of *varṇa* and *āśrama*,  
is to bring pleasure to God (Hari). (BhP 1.2.13)

Thus, the tension between the normative ethical system of *varṇāśrama* and something that transcends it is far less apparent in the *Bhāgavata* than it is in the example of Caitanya as provided by Krishnadas Kavirāja. This harmonious movement between strict adherence to the normative *varṇāśrama* system and the complementary rejection of this system, specifically with regard to religious self-identity, is clearly present in the *Bhāgavata*. While both *Bhāgavata* and Caitanya embrace and transcend, the *Bhāgavata* presents the connection between the two as a peaceful transition; whereas in the Caitanyite presentation there is much greater tension. Strict observance of dharmic identity being external, and rejection of such identity being internal to spiritual life, in the *Bhāgavata* the former leads to the latter, and even when attaining the latter, the former is upheld and supported. Throughout the *Bhāgavata*, there is no real demonstration or recommendation that normative social values be given up; rather they should be taken up with service to God as their ultimate end. Whereas for Caitanya, the conflict between observing and transcending *varṇa* and *āśrama* is very pronounced. There are many instances recorded in Caitanya's biographies wherein he undergoes intense stages of ecstasy in singing and praising God's names, even experiencing trances and physical transformations, all arising from his passionate devotion. Perhaps this discord in Caitanya's example heightens the intensity of humility and passion in the devotional community and in devotion to God.

### Ethical Tensions in the Rāsa Dance Story

The normative social roles and identities should be maintained in order to lead one to the service of God, so says the *Bhāgavata*. However, the *Bhāgavata* also promotes a breaking away, an antithetical approach to social convention, though very selectively, with regard to the particular group of women in Krishna's village of Vraja, the Gopīs. In the beginning of the Rāsalīlā story, upon witnessing the beauty of the autumnal nights of the paradisaal Vraja countryside, Krishna is moved to make melodious flute music that causes the Gopīs to be irresistibly and spontaneously drawn to the forest to be with him, their beloved, even at the cost of abandoning their families. When they arrive, Krishna teasingly encourages them to stay with him in the forest, even to become his paramours. At

the same time, Krishna admonishes the Gopīs for leaving their homes and neglecting their families.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage it is clear that Krishna speaks verses that both establish and transcend *dharma*. There is no better expression of this than Krishna's own words when he greets the Gopīs, just as they have left their homes. In the following verse, Krishna attempts to "frighten" the Gopīs into doing the right thing, while ostensibly offering protective words:

Night has a frightening appearance.  
 Inhabiting this place  
 are frightening beings.  
 Please return to Vraja.  
 You ladies should not stay here,  
 O ones with beautiful waists. (BhP 10.29.19)

Commentators delight in the double entendre of Krishna's words in several verses within this passage of the story, which allows him to uphold and reject *dharma* at the same time. They point out, for example, in the above verse the ways in which the Sanskrit words are combined and the varying ways negatives can be applied, effectively can produce opposite meanings,<sup>29</sup> allowing Krishna to suggest to the Gopīs that they indeed *should* remain with him in the forest:

<sup>28</sup> The full story of the Rāsāilā is found in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, Tenth Book, chapters 29–33. For an introduction to, translation of, and commentary on the Rāsāilā according to the Caitanyite vision, see *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsāilā of Krishna and the Cowherd Maidens of Vraja*, by Graham M. Schweig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2004). This book is a revision of *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsāilā of Krishna as a Vision of Selfless Devotion*, by Graham M. Schweig (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> In this verse along with others, the ways in which original Sanskrit words combine, and the varying ways negatives can be applied to both nouns and verbs, can produce opposite meanings, effectively allowing Krishna to suggest to the Gopīs that they should *not* remain with him and *should* remain with him in the forest at the same time. In English, we often employ coy words, words of exaggeration, or sarcasm, to evoke opposite connotative meanings of words, and certainly these can be found in the Sanskrit language as well. But here, the Sanskrit grammar, syntax, and laws governing the euphonic combination of connecting words can be utilized, resulting in two or more opposing possible interpretations of the verse at hand.

Let us look at the following examples. The four words in the first quarter-line of BhP 10.29.19 are: *rajany eṣā ghora-rūpa*. In the original characters of the Sanskrit language, these transliterated words appear merged as *rajanyeṣāghorarūpa*, according to the rules of euphonic combination in which the endings of words are combined or merged in sonorous fashions with the beginnings of following words, known as *sandhi*. Thus, when the demonstrative pronoun *eṣā* ("this") is merged with the word following it, an adjective, it appears as *eṣāghora*. However, the text presents an ambiguity here. The exact spelling of the word following *eṣā* is unclear: it can be either the positive form of *ghora* ("frightening"), or the negative (with the prefix *a-*) *aghora* ("non-frightening"), because both positive and negative forms of this adjective appear the same when either of these words is combined with the preceding word *eṣā*. The same ambiguity conveniently occurs in this verse the second



Night is without a frightening appearance (*aghora-rūpa*).

Non-frightening beings (*aghora-sattva*)  
inhabit this place.

Please do not return to Vraja (*pratiyata vrajaṃ na*).

You ladies should stay here (*iha stheyam*),  
O ones with beautiful waists.

A few verses later, Krishna seems concerned with the right dharmic thing to do, which is to return to Vraja. Krishna explicitly encourages the Gopīs to uphold dharmic behavior on the one hand, and on the other hand to continue to sacrifice everything for him:

Please go to the village without delay.

O chaste ladies, attend your husbands.

Your calves and children are crying for you.

You must go feed and nurse them! (BhP 10.29.22)

This verse can also be interpreted as Krishna persuading the Gopīs to ignore dharmic obligations, and instead to remain with him in the forest:

Please don't go back right away

to attend your husbands, O chaste ladies.

Your calves and children are crying for others.

There is no need to feed and nurse them.

Krishna further emphasizes the highest *dharma* for women:

For every woman the highest *dharma* (*parodharma*)

is to serve her husband without falsity,

Be agreeable toward his family members,

and nourish the children. (BhP 10.29.24)

Here, again, the double entendre comes through. Commentators point out what Krishna is actually saying to the Gopīs:

For the *dharma* of all other women

(*parodharma*) is to serve false husbands . . .

---

time the word *ghora* / *aghora* is used, combined with its preceding word *rūpa*, as *rūpaghora-sattva* ("frightening beings" or "non-frightening beings").

Unlike English, whose syntax depends upon word order or placement within the sentence, Sanskrit does not require word order, being an inflected language: i.e., syntactical force and meaning is indicated through the endings of nouns and verbs. Therefore, when the negative particle "*na*" meaning "no" or "not" is found in a verse, it can be applied singularly or in multiple ways. In this verse, if the negative is applied in a singular fashion, then the only negative would be "women should *not* stay here," and this application of the negative serves Krishna's motive to encourage *dharma*. But if the negative is not applied here, and instead applied to other elements in the verse in a multiple fashion, these various negatives then serve Krishna's motive to encourage the positive notion that the Gopīs should remain in the forest.

In this instance, the word *parodharma*, instead of meaning “the highest (*para-*) *dharma*,” is taken as “the *dharma* of other (*para-*) women,” who serve only “false husbands.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Krishna is proclaiming himself to the Gopīs as their true husband.

The Gopīs, in response to Krishna’s duplicitous words, cleverly retort using his reversible logic to serve their own desires:

O dear one, it may be true  
 as you, who knows *dharma*, have stated,  
 That the proper duty for women is to be loyal  
 to husbands, children, and dear friends.  
 Let this *dharma* of ours be for you, O Lord,  
 since you are the true object of such teachings.  
 Certainly you are the dearest beloved  
 of all living beings, the most intimate relation,  
 for you are the supreme Soul. (BhP 10.29.32)

It appears from this verse that relinquishing normative social conventions for the Gopīs was impossible to resist, since for them Krishna was the most beloved of all living beings; therefore, a relationship with him would be fulfilling the highest *dharma*.

The passionate devotion of the Gopīs is clear. They are irresistibly drawn to Krishna, and certainly leaving their husbands and all worldly dharmic duties is an expression of their passion for Krishna. The humility of the Gopīs is also clear. They wish to follow their *true dharma* and submit themselves to him, who is their “real” husband, thus relinquishing their “false” husbands, and consequently destroying their social status by apparent dharmic transgressions, interpreted by the tradition as dharmic transcending. However, the *Bhāgavata* text itself is not so willing to see the Gopīs’ transgression of *dharma* (by leaving their homes and husbands to be with another “male” in the forest) as a transcendent movement beyond dharmic boundaries. Rather, the Rāsālīlā story attempts to recover *dharma* and compensate for the subversive behavior of the Gopīs, while simultaneously allowing for their transgressive participation in God’s *līlā*.

It is interesting to note that Krishna cleverly pacifies the husbands of the Gopīs while “borrowing” their wives for the night, indicating the importance of upholding dharmic obligations, even toward “false husbands”<sup>31</sup>:

<sup>30</sup> The prefix “*para-*” used with *dharma* in the first instance utilizes the sense of degree, i.e., “the higher,” or in the superlative sense, “the highest” (the latter sense of which is used throughout this study as meaning specifically *bhakti*, or devotion). In the second instance commentators also cleverly interpret the prefix in its sense of relation, i.e., “other,” “strange,” or “different.”

<sup>31</sup> In earlier textual presentations of the story of the Rāsa dance, in the *Harivāṃśa* and *Vishnu Purāna*, the Gopīs are *not* given duplicate forms to pacify their husbands at

The husband cowherds of Vraja  
 felt no jealousy whatsoever  
 toward Krishna.

Deluded by his special power *māyā*,  
 each thought his wife  
 had remained all the while by his side.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, by virtue of *māyā*, the Gopīs are able to stay at home and dance with Krishna in the forest at the same time. Additionally, the real Gopīs, at the end of the Rāsa dance story, return to their homes as if they had never left.

Therefore, in the *Bhāgavata*, *dharma* is preserved and simultaneously transcended without conflict, clearly demonstrating the *acintya-bhedābheda* philosophy as applied to ethics: God, being omnipotent and “omnivalent,” is capable of embracing and transcending at the same time (“*acintya*”). This *acintya* ethics is observable in the duplicitous, teasing words of Krishna to the Gopīs, entreating them to both stay in the forest with him and to leave. The double-entendre of Krishna’s words is not merely a literary device to convey flirtatious affections to the Gopīs; rather, the double-entendre is engaged in by Krishna, according to the traditional commentators, in order to demonstrate the simultaneous embracing and transcending of *dharma*.

### Humility and Passion versus Pride

The important role of the feminine in Caitanya’s theology should not be underestimated. The Gopīs are the paradigmatic devotees after whom all other devotees are to model themselves (*Bhakti Sūtra*, text no. 21); indeed, Caitanya models himself after them. Caitanya is honored by followers as the special *avatāra* of Krishna who comes to experience the

---

home. Thus, the *Bhāgavata* distinguishes itself ethically by this synthesis of *dharma* with *parodharma*.

<sup>32</sup> BhP 10.33.38. This verse is spoken to King Parikeit by the narrator of the Rāsa Dance. The king asks, “How could he the expositor, executor, and protector of the limits of *dharma*, O knower of supreme Spirit (*brahman*), act in contrary ways by touching others’ wives?” (BhP 10.33.28). The king is assured by the narrator that Krishna, as the greatest and most powerful supreme person, always has an ethical purpose for performing his divine acts, *līlā* (BhP 10.33). Moreover, since he is the supreme controller, how could such apparently transgressive acts adversely affect God (BhP 10.33.30)? The narrator also warns the king that one should never imitate the acts of the powerful Lord who, if he so desires, can drink an ocean of poison without harm (BhP 10.33.31). Thus, the author of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* expresses his concern about how humans will understand and appreciate this divine *līlā* of God without dangerously trying to imitate it in this world, as mere mortals.

love of the Gopīs or the supreme Gopī, Rādhā, for himself.<sup>33</sup> What does this tradition find in the qualities of the feminine or the position of women to be so valuable for its theology?

One of the essential teachings of the Rāsalīlā passage is the adverse effect of the undesirable quality of “pride.” In the first chapter of the Rāsa story, the narrator explains how Krishna disappears from the Gopīs due to their pride:

Thus those who had obtained  
honor from the Beloved Lord,  
Krishna, the great Soul,  
Thought themselves the best  
among all women in the world,  
and became filled with pride.

Keśava could see how they  
had become intoxicated  
with their good fortune.  
In order to quell their pride  
and bestow upon them his grace,  
suddenly, right before them,  
he disappeared. (BhP 10.29.47–48)

Moreover, in the second chapter of the story, Krishna disappears again from a single special Gopī who, according to the narrator, “believed herself to be the best of all women,” thinking, “he honors me as his beloved.”<sup>34</sup> *Bhakti Sūtra* also confirms, “God dislikes egoistic pride and finds humility endearing” (*Bhakti Sūtra*, text 27). Furthermore, Caitanya expresses in prayerful verse how pride and humility are opposing:

<sup>33</sup> An extensive theological discussion of this complex relationship between Krishna and Caitanya, as well as between Rādhā and the Gopīs and Caitanya, is found in CC 1.4.

<sup>34</sup> BhP 10.30.36. This special Gopī is identified as the chief cowherd maiden, the supreme goddess Rādhā, not by the text but by the tradition. That this short story from the *Bhāgavata*, only approximately 175 verses, emphasizes this point of pride by presenting two instances of Krishna’s reaction to it, is some indication of its importance. Diana Eck makes an intriguing observation about human jealousy and possessiveness in relation to God, which is related to this idea of “pride,” when interpreting the meaning of the Rāsalīlā story. Although Eck inaccurately portrays the story itself and therefore also misinterprets the particular events, she nevertheless makes an important observation about human jealousy and possessiveness expressed by the symbolically powerful message of the Rāsa dance: “The point is one that speaks to us all: The moment we human beings grasp God with jealousy and possessiveness, we lose hold of God. One might add that the religious point here is quite the opposite of God’s jealousy, of which we hear so much in the Old Testament; it is God’s infinite capacity to love and the problem of *human* jealousy.” *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 47.

By feeling oneself lower  
 even than a blade of grass,  
 even more tolerant than a tree,  
 Without expecting any honor,  
 yet giving all honor to others,  
 Hari [Krishna], the name of God, is to be celebrated.<sup>35</sup>

The women of Vraja that we hear less about from the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata* are the “wives of the *brāhamaṇas*” (BhP 10.23). Again, in this narration, pride is considered the enemy of devotion and humility. The story relates as follows: When the two brothers, Krishna and Balarama, along with their cowherd friends, became hungry and approached the ritualistic *brāhamaṇas* for some food, they found that the *brāhamaṇas* were too preoccupied with their sacrificial performances to help them. However, the *brāhamaṇas*’ wives, out of great affection, immediately prepared and served the food, demonstrating passionate devotion for the Lord. When the foolish husbands ultimately realized the ardent devotion of their wives, they regretted their own pride as *brāhamaṇas* (“*vṛddhamāninaḥ*”) and their attachment to ritualistic activities.<sup>36</sup> Despite their wives’ underprivileged position, the women had excelled their husbands in devotion to God, as the *brāhamaṇas* themselves admitted:

For them there have been  
 no *samskāras* (rites of passage) for the twice-born,  
 and they have not even resided with the *guru*.  
 There has been no performance of *tapas* (austerity),  
 nor any analysis on the nature of the self,  
 nor purificatory or auspicious rituals.

Nevertheless, for Krishna,  
 the Lord of the masters of yoga,  
 who is praised in exquisite verse,  
 Their devotional love is strong,  
 and ours is not, even though  
 we possess *samskāras* and so forth. (BhP 10.23.43–44)

Indeed, they recognized their wives as exalted souls absorbed in devotional love for God.

<sup>35</sup> This verse is one of eight believed to have been written directly by Caitanya himself, found in the CC 3.20.21. I use the English word “honor” to translate the word “*māna*,” the same word that is used by the narrator of the Rāsa story to describe the thoughts of the Gopīs just before Krishna disappeared from them (BhP 10.29.47–48).

<sup>36</sup> BhP 10.23.9. The wives of the *brāhamaṇas*, upon seeing Krishna and Balarāma after long separation, embraced them within their hearts as “sages give up their pride by concentrating on their inmost hearts” (BhP 10.23.23). Again, pride is contrary to ethical and religious life.

### Concluding Remarks

*Dharma* and *parodharma* structures, in a Caitanyite ethics of devotion, therefore cannot exist without one another. In *dharma* without *parodharma*, pride, as we have seen, is often the result of mere obedience to the external dharmic system. Thus pride, rather than humility and passion, becomes the predominant feature within social identities and interactions. Pride certainly obscures the myriad of possible intimate relations between devotee and deity, as well as between devotee and all humanity.

The key to understanding the Caitanyaite school's approach to the *parodharma* of *bhakti* is found in the way Caitanya saw the subordinate role of women within *varṇāśrama*, specifically the women of Vraja. The position of women was somewhat removed from the laws of *dharma*, since their social position was always in relation to a male's, whether it be a father, brother, or husband. In this respect, the position of women was not fully *within* *varṇāśrama*, nor was it fully *outside* of the system. This marginal position contained essentially the ideal structure for devotion: the woman did not possess a status of her own, but only in relation to the status of the male with whom she was connected. Furthermore, the feminine nature maintained an inherent humility and meekness in service to the worldly male as well as to the supreme "male," thereby satisfying both dharmic obligations and transcending those obligations simultaneously. So it is for the Vaishnava who, out of inherent humility and pridelessness, does not fully identify with his social (dharmic) position, and thereby only marginally participates in the external dharmic arrangement. Due to his humility and passionate devotion, he transcends the limited statuses of *varṇa* and *āśrama*, while fully dedicating himself to the service of God (*parodharma*).

The subservient, loving role of women within *varṇāśrama* is employed by this school as the model for illuminating and exemplifying the highest and most intense form of *bhakti*, demonstrated in the devotion of the Gopīs as presented in the Rāsa story. Moreover, Caitanya was understood by his followers, even during his lifetime, to be the veritable embodiment of the supreme Lord as Krishna, who descended in order to experience the nature of the Gopīs' devotion, especially Rādhā's, which naturally exhibited various phases of humility and passion. Finally, it should be pointed out that the description of pure devotion in *Bhakti Sūtra* presents the model of the Gopīs, who, as we have seen, embody the humility of an eternal servant (*nitya-dāsa*), and the passion of an eternal lover (*nitya-kānta*).<sup>37</sup> Thus, Caitanya sets the stage for the school's ethics of devotion

<sup>37</sup> *Bhakti Sūtra*, text 66: "...devotional love manifests as the self constantly devoted to God as an eternal servant and eternal lover. One should cultivate pure love, *premā*,

by desiring to become the meager servant of the servant of the servant of the lotus feet of the Lord of the Gopīs. Indeed, embedded within the Caitanyite school's elaborate theological thought, a complex and compelling ethics of devotion can be found, although such elements of its thought have yet to be discovered and further illuminated by scholars both inside and outside the tradition.

## REFERENCES

- Chakravarti, Sudhindra Chandra  
 1969 *Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*. Santiniketan: Academic Publishers.
- Dasgupta, Surama  
 1961 *Development of Moral Philosophy in India*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.
- De, S. K.  
 1961 *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Dhavamony, Mariasusai  
 1971 *Love of God According to Śaiva Siddhanta*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dimock, Jr., Edward C., trans.  
 2000 *Caitanya Caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja*. Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University.
- Kapoor, O. B. L.  
 1976 *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers PVT. LTD.
- Klostermaier, Klaus, K.  
 1994 *A Survey of Hinduism* (Second Edition). Albany: State University of New York.
- Krishnadas, Kavirāja  
 1957 *Śrī Śrī Caitanya Caritāmṛta. Amṛta Pravaha-bhasya Commentary by Bhaktivinoda Thakura*. Calcutta: Gaudiya Mission, Caitanyabda 471.
- Macnicol, Nicol  
 1915 *Indian Theism: From the Vedic to the Muhammadan Period*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Majumdar, A. K.  
 1979 *Bhakti Renaissance*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

---

for God, and pure love alone." Earlier in this study, in the section "The Ultimate Deity as the Intimate Deity," we observed this servant-lover dialectic in the prayerful words of the Gopīs, expressed as "intense passion" (*tīvra-kāma*) and "the chance to serve you" (*dāsyam*).

Radhakrishnan, S.

1939 *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Radhakrishnan, S., trans.

1953 *The Principal Upaniṣads*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India Pvt. Ltd.

Schweig, Graham M.

1998 *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsalīlā of Krishna as a Vision of Selfless Devotion*. Cambridge, MA: Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University.

Schweig, Graham M., trans.

2003 *The Bhakti Sūtra: Concise Teachings of Narada on Devotional Love*. Translations from the Asian Classics Series. New York: Columbia University Press (forthcoming).

2004 *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsalīlā of Krishna and the Cowherd Maidens of Vraja*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (forthcoming).

Vyasa, Dvaipayana

1971 *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa, Parts I and II, with Sanskrit Text and English Translation*. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.