

VIRTUAL REALITIES. THE REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN GOVINDA'S WORLD.

PIECES FROM A HUNGARIAN KRISHNA DEVOTEE'S BLOG¹

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Abstract: In the present paper a Hungarian Krishna devotee's attitude towards Christianity is being scrutinized. It is postulated that the devotee's re-interpretation of Christian doctrines of faith can be regarded as an aim of inculturation which is in accordance with his religious community's main principles. The temporary virtual communities formed by readers leaving comments are also included in the analysis.

Keywords: Krishna devotees, inculturation, Christianity, individual interpretation, blog

1. INTRODUCTION

As a would-be social scientist, my field of research has long been Hungarian Krishna devotee communities and the way they get inculturated into the local social and religious context. I have always been interested in individual interpretations like interviews as these interpretations contribute to the horizon of meanings shared by the whole community.² This time my choice was a relatively new genre: a blog or virtual diary. As virtual diaries are always meant to be shared with others, the author gets in touch with his/her readers and the readers can also communicate with each other in the form of text comments. By these interactions new virtual communities are formed which create new horizons of meanings. In my presentation I shall include the analysis of these temporary virtual communities.

First let me introduce Govinda and the religious community he belongs to. Govinda makes two statements about himself at the beginning of the blog: "Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle."³ "There are enough things in this world to satisfy everyone's

¹ The research I carry out is sponsored by OTKA K68325 research project. In this short essay I present a work in progress, a part of a larger project in which I scrutinize the relationship between some Hungarian Krishna devotee communities and the social, cultural and religious context which surrounds them.

² Kocsis 2006: 105–117.

³ <http://govinda.blogter.hu>

needs, but there aren't enough to satisfy their avidity. Many many years ago I decided not to be greedy anymore. I got to know the culture, life and attitude of a far away country and it captured me. This is what I'd like to broadcast here, for the sake of everyone."⁴ Govinda belongs to a community called Hungarian Vaisnava Hindu Association. This group is the second largest and oldest Krishna devotee community in Hungary. Let me make a few short remarks on the history of Hungarian Krishna devotee communities. Krishna consciousness first appeared in Hungary during the 1970s. Among some others, an originally Hungarian devotee who was later called Abhay Narayan was responsible for preaching behind the "iron curtain". Narayan was an ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) member and a follower of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Praphupada who is the founder of all 20th century Western European and North American Krishna devotee communities. In the mid-1980s, a few years after Praphupada's death, Narayan broke his ties with ISKCON and so did most Hungarian Krishna devotees. ISKCON reappeared in Hungary only after 1989 and now they are the largest and most visible Hungarian Krishna devotee group. The community of Abhay Narayan is the Hungarian Vaisnava Hindu Association, where Govinda belongs to as well. They have their own temple not far from Szeged and a bunch of houses around it where devotees live. It is called Nandafalva, in English "the village of Nanda". Although Narayan died in the early 1990s, the devotees remained faithful to his principles about Krishna consciousness. For Narayan it was important to fit Krishna consciousness into the local social, cultural and religious context. His followers never wore Indian clothes in public, did not do bookselling and begging on the street but translated Sanskrit religious songs and transformed Hungarian folksongs into verses of devotion to Krishna.⁵

The intent of inculturation plays an important role in Govinda's interpretation of Christianity.⁶ Govinda reveals in one of the comments in the blog that he intends to appear as a member of his religious group, the studies he presents are not always his own writings but they contain ideas which he identifies with as a devotee of the Hungarian Vaisnava Hindu Association. I must note here that I shall treat Govinda as the author of every article as these writings are published in his blog, he identifies with them and the real authors are not always revealed. The blog deals with a wide range of topics, my concern were those writings which focus on Christianity. I chose four themes in which the community's relationship to Christianity was discussed. These were the following: "Reincarnation and the Bible", "Did Jesus ever visit India?" "Krishna and Christ" and "Was Jesus a vegetarian?". These topics were also very popular among readers as they recieved many text comments.

⁴ <http://govinda.blogter.hu>

⁵ KAMARÁS 1998: 46–64; KOCSIS 2004: 329–337; KOCSIS 2006: 105–117; FARKAS 2009: 29–33; TASI 2006.

⁶ Inculturation, or the Krishna devotee groups' – sometimes ambivalent – relationship to the local social, religious and cultural context can be regarded as an important subject in researching Krishna devotees. I must note, however, that most researches deal with ISKCON. See for instance FARKAS 2009; BARABÁS 1997; FUJDA – LUZNY 2010: 235–237.

2. REINCARNATION AND THE BIBLE

Let me turn to the first topic, "Reincarnation and the Bible".⁷ Altogether three writings belong to this theme, they are interconnected and make a whole. Govinda intends to prove that reincarnation was part of Jesus' teachings. He writes: "Jesus taught about the real reincarnation throughout his mission – the spiritual reincarnation of the living human being..."⁸ He interprets it as the human being's mystical unity with God's spirit and thus the soul can finally get out of the circle of birth and death. He indeed treats reincarnation as a reality in the New Testament by claiming that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of prophet Illiah. He argues that Illiah killed someone by sword and thus – according to the rules of karma – John the Baptist was killed by sword. There are many references and citations from the Bible all over the text.⁹ It is remarkable that this interpretation of the Bible reinforces the community's aim of inculturation; Govinda uses the theological concepts and vocabulary of his own religion to create new meanings of Jesus' teachings. These new interpretations are in accordance with the key theological concepts of Krishna consciousness.

What about the temporary virtual community that was created by the text comments? What sort of reflections did this article receive from its readers? I divided text comments according to the themes they brought up. The main topics for this article were: criticism, call for tolerance, praise and reflection to the style of the comments. I subdivided criticism into two: reflections from people who were definitely outside the religious community and criticism by those who were Krishna devotees but did not necessarily belong to the Hungarian Vaisnava Hindu Association. Critics from the outside claimed that the article makes no sense, it is a total misinterpretation of the Bible. One of them wrote that the whole site is the manifestation of the Satan.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that these critics were mainly not from the historical Christian churches but from new religious communities of Christian origin – there are references to several groups in the comments. Sometimes the names they use as a virtual identity are also a telltale: there is one comment by a reader whose nickname is *Faith*: "I think what you write is simply stupid. Go to the Assembly of Faith and ask advice from Sándor Németh. He knows the truth."¹¹ There is another comment by a user called *Damn*: "This article is full of terrible misunderstandings. Don't try to translate the Bible to your own language."¹² Criticism from the inside comes from a reader called *narayanguru*. As the main leader of Govinda's community was Abhay Narayan, one can assume that this reader may belong to Govinda's religious group. *Narayanguru* mentions that the crucifixion was simply murder yet Christians treat it as a human sacrifice which should be worshipped. He writes: "a clear attitude should not be ruined by this"¹³. By "this" he means connecting Krishna consciousness to Christianity.

⁷ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

⁸ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

⁹ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹⁰ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹¹ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹² <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹³ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

Call for tolerance appears in many comments: a lot of readers claim that the spiritual path one chooses is not important, let it be Krishna consciousness or Christianity, love is the only thing that matters.¹⁴ This kind of tolerance was an attribute of Abhay Narayan and thus it is a characteristic of Govinda's community, however, it is not revealed whether the comment writers belong to the Hungarian Vaisnava Hindu Association or not.

Some readers simply praise the article by claiming that it is "good writing", or a "nice blog"¹⁵.

There is an interesting meta-level in the comments, as one reader reflects to the style some people use without revealing their real name thus creating a virtual identity. Hiding behind their nicknames they use words like "stupid" or "bullshit" which the reader considers to be quite unfair.¹⁶

3. DID JESUS EVER VISIT INDIA?

"Did Jesus ever visit India?"¹⁷ is a short description of a book published in 1894 by Nikolaj Notovics. Its title is: *The Unknown Life of Christ*. According to the book Jesus spent many many years in India in his youth and learnt a lot of yogic skills, which he later used during the three years of his teaching.¹⁸ This writing is also an attempt of inculturation claiming that Hinduism and Christianity are connected to each other. In the comments two themes appear. One of them is praise and reinforcement as a reader identifying himself as *yoda* writes that "Jesus really did visit India".¹⁹ The other theme I labelled as tolerance because many readers expressed that it is not important whether Jesus visited India or not, the question is: did Jesus visit you? It is not revealed whether these comment writers are Christians or not. One reader claims that Jesus did visit her personally and taught her about things that religions do not know about.²⁰

4. KRISHNA AND CHRIST

The topic of "Krishna and Christ"²¹ consists of four writings, all connected to each other. As the title designates, the articles intend to compare Krishna and Christ. Again, there are many citations from the Bible and there are some from Krishna devotees' holy script, the Bhagavad-Gita. The two main arguments of the author are: there are parallels in the two persons' lives and in their teachings, too. Concerning the autobiographical similarities Govinda mentions that both Jesus' and Krishna's mother was a virgin and their names

¹⁴ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹⁵ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹⁶ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹⁷ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/11929/jart_e_jezus_indiaban

¹⁸ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

¹⁹ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

²⁰ <http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/107973/biblia-lelekvandorlas>

²¹ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

were also quite alike: Miriam and Maia. While Jesus was crucified, once an arrow went through Krishna's body. As for the teachings Govinda claims they both taught that we are not our material body but the children of the Supreme Soul, we occupy our material bodies only temporary. To prove this, he copies citations from the Bible and the Bhagavad-Gīta. As a conclusion Govinda advises to read the New Testament and the Gīta in a contemplative, pious manner for a better understanding.²² These writings can also be interpreted as attempts of inculturation by suggesting that Christianity and Krishna consciousness are not that far from each other.

The articles received many comments and the main themes were: criticism, praise, call for tolerance and humour. Criticism is twofold; first it comes from readers who belong to a Christian background. *Timi* writes for instance: "The article is misleading. The truth is simple: Christian."²³ Others go into long arguments about the nature of Jesus and Krishna and try to prove that they have nothing in common. *The voice of rippling waters* acknowledges that the fact that an arrow went through Krishna's body cannot be the equivalent of crucifixion.²⁴ The other aspect of criticism deals with the argumentation of the author. Some readers complain about the lack of coherence in the text which makes them difficult to follow the author's point.²⁵ Other comment writers express praise and sympathy with the article, like *Petya*: "the religion of Jesus is rooted in the religion of Krishna"²⁶. Call for tolerance is an important aspect again, as many readers indicate that it does not matter whether you are a Krishna devotee or a Christian until you love God and your fellow citizens.²⁷ Humour appears in only one comment. *Mcdas* – who is an ISKCON Krishna devotee, which is not mentioned in the comment but I know him from other internet sites – writes: Jesus Krishna which is a paraphrase for Jesus Christ and Gourangel paraphrasing Krishna devotees' religious greeting: Gouranga.²⁸

5. WAS JESUS A VEGETARIAN?

Let me turn to the last theme: "Was Jesus a vegetarian?"²⁹ This theme consists of four interconnected parts in the blog. As the title suggests these pieces of writings are also attempts of inculturation by trying to create a connection between Krishna consciousness and Christianity. The author starts by pinpointing that those who are vegetarian are rather taken aback by the belief that Jesus did eat meat. Then he strives to prove the opposite by formulating a novel interpretation of the New Testament. As a proof Govinda brings up the last supper which was supposed to happen on the Jewish feast of Passover when Jews traditionally ate lamb. Govinda argues, however, that the last supper was not during Passover.

²² http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²³ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁴ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁵ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁶ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁷ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁸ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

²⁹ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/8265/vegetarianus_volt-e_jezus

To confirm this statement he uses citations from the Bible and from Christian theologians. The other subject is consuming fish. Govinda gives a mystical understanding of fish claiming that Jesus did not really eat it, it is just a misinterpretation of the mystical symbolic language of the Bible.³⁰

The comments of the article gather around three topics: call for tolerance, rumination about becoming a vegetarian and arguing whether Jesus was a vegetarian or not. Call for tolerance is again central. Many readers claim that it is not important whether he ate meat or not, his teachings matter only. *Halandor* writes for instance: “everyone should decide on their own what to eat and what not to eat”.³¹ Some readers express their opinion about the reasons of becoming vegetarian. *Solyomz* indicates that the best way of becoming a vegetarian is to have an inner desire, but one must appreciate those who are vegetarians just because it is fashionable.³² *The voice of rippling waters* assumes that in this case the body is purified first.³³ Among the comments of the article there is a large argument about Jesus’ eating habits; was he really a vegetarian or not? Those who agree that he was a vegetarian do not support the article with any further claims, just express their praise, sympathy and reinforce like “yes, he was a vegetarian”.³⁴ Their opponents, however, develop further arguments. *Idmakai* uses citations from the Bible to prove that Jesus ate meat.³⁵ *Hanter* writes “by eating meat Jesus took the suffering of others”.³⁶ Although *Hanter* does not reveal his religious background, the idea in his argumentation implies that he might be a Christian. Again, readers from Christian origin express their dislike. It is noteworthy that Govinda himself leaves a comment to his own blog here claiming that proving that Jesus was a vegetarian is important for those who do not eat meat.³⁷ It is a response to a reader called *Crys* who states that it does not matter whether Jesus was a vegetarian or not.³⁸

6. SOME FINAL REMARKS

As a conclusion, I assert that the articles Govinda publishes in his blog are in accordance with the main principles of the religious community he belongs to. Christianity is represented as bearing similarities to Krishna consciousness, Christian doctrines and holy scripts are interpreted in a new way to confirm this. It can be interpreted as a way of inculturation; fitting to the local cultural and religious context.

As for the temporary virtual communities gathering around the articles in the blog, the main themes that accrued were criticism, praise and call for tolerance. It is noteworthy that people from various religious backgrounds – especially from new religious groups of Christian origin – left comments and expressed their dislike and argued – sometimes in a

³⁰ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

³¹ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

³² http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

³³ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

³⁴ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

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³⁷ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

³⁸ http://www.govinda.blogter.hu/257081/krisna_es_jezus

harsh way – with Govinda. Why do members of new religious groups of Christian origin read a Hindu blog? How could the attitudes of the temporary virtual community members be conceptualized? Answers to such questions are the subject of further research.

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