

## **The Gospel of the Ebionites**

From [The Writings of Vasu Murti](#)

The apostle Paul and the gnostics who followed him, rejected the Law and the Old Testament, which Jesus himself never denied. In his as of yet unpublished manuscript, *Broken Thread: the Fate of the Jewish Followers of Jesus in Early Christianity*, secular scholar Keith Akers writes that the early church fathers wrote volumes attacking the gnostic heresy, while hardly paying any attention to the Ebionites, who were arguably the original (Jewish) faction of Christianity.

Christianity remained a part of Judaism even after the death and resurrection of Jesus. From the Acts of the Apostles (2:22), we learn that Jesus' followers believed him to be "a man certified by God..." It was God who made Jesus Lord and Messiah (2:36), and they hoped Jesus would soon "restore the kingdom of Israel (1:6). The first Jewish Christians went to Temple daily (2:46), celebrated the festival of Weeks (2:1), observed the Sabbath (1:12), and continued to worship the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob..." (3:13)

These Jewish Christians carried their belief in Jesus as Lord and Messiah from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and Galilee (1:4,8, 8:1, 9:31). Their numbers began to gradually increase. The initial 120 members of the Pentecostal assembly in Jerusalem grew to three thousand (2:41), then five thousand (4:4). Their numbers continued to grow; a great number of priests embraced the faith (6:7).

The church enjoyed peace as it was being built up (9:31). There was a strong community spirit; they broke bread and said prayers together (2:42). They shared property (2:44,46) and lived without personal possessions (4:32). Many Pharisees came to believe in Jesus (15:5) and this Jewish messianic movement was on friendly terms with Gamaliel, a powerful and highly respected Pharisee, who intervened on their behalf.

James held a respected position in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:28). According to Albert Henry Newman in *A Manual of Church History*, "Peter had compromised himself in the eyes of the Jewish Christians by eating with gentiles. (Acts 11:1-3) James thus came to be the leader of the church at Jerusalem. It seems he never abandoned the view that it was vital for Christian Jews to observe the Law. He supported missionary work among the gentiles, and agreed to recognize gentile converts without circumcision (Acts 15:29), but as a Jew he felt obliged to practice the whole Law and require Jewish converts to do the same."

Later Christian writers (Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, etc.) called James the Bishop of Jerusalem. However, this term was not used in the early days of Christianity. James' authority came about because of the strength of his character, his relationship to Jesus, and his staunch adherence to Judaism. He had a reputation of purity among the Jews, and was known as "James the Just." The early church historian Eusebius, in his *Church History*, Book II, Chapter 23, quotes from the early church father Hegisuppus' 5th book of "Memoirs" (AD 160) that James, the brother of Jesus, was holy from birth. He never drank wine, nor ate the flesh of animals, nor had a razor touch his head.

"Both Hegisuppus and Augustine, 'orthodox' sources, testify that James was not only a vegetarian, but was *raised* a vegetarian," writes Keith Akers in the (updated) 1986 edition of *A Vegetarian Sourcebook*. "If Jesus' parents raised James as a vegetarian, why would they not also be vegetarians themselves, and raise Jesus as a vegetarian?"

James wrote an epistle refuting Paul's interpretation of salvation by faith. James stressed obedience to Jewish Law (James 2:8-13), and concluded that "faith without works is dead." (2:26) When Paul visited the church at Jerusalem, James and the elders told him all its members were "zealous for the Law," and they were worried because they heard rumors that Paul was preaching against the Law. They reminded Paul that the gentile converts were to abstain from idols, blood, strangled meat, and fornication. (Acts 21:20,25)

From both history and the epistles of Paul, we learn there was an extreme Judaizing faction within the early church that insisted all new converts to Christianity be circumcised and observe Mosaic Law. This must have been the original (Jewish) faction of Christianity. These Jewish Christians eventually became known as "Ebionites," or "the poor." Jesus' teachings focus on poverty and nonviolence. Jesus preached both the renunciation of worldly possessions in favor of a life of simplicity and voluntary poverty, as well as acts of mercy towards the less fortunate. In his epistles, Paul referred to the poor among the saints at Jerusalem (Romans 15:26, Galatians 2:10).

Jesus blessed the poor, the meek, the humble and the persecuted. His brother James wrote: "Listen, my dear brothers. Has God not chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom He has promised to those who love Him?" The Ebionites took note of biblical passages in which the children of Israel are called "the poor." For them, this was a designation of the true Israel; the pious among the people. The Ebionites connected the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20) with themselves.

The Ebionites read from a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps the earliest written gospel; now lost to us, except in fragments. They believed Jesus to have been a man gifted with messianism by the grace of God; at the time of his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. The voice of God then proclaimed, "Thou art My beloved son, this day I have begotten thee." (Hebrews 1:5, 5:5) Jesus was no longer a mere mortal, but the "elect of God," greater than all the angels. (Hebrews 1:4-5)

Like James, the brother of Jesus, the Ebionites were strict vegetarians. Their Gospel describes the food of John the Baptist as wild honey and cakes made from oil and honey. The Greek word for oil cake is "*enkris*," while the Greek word for locust is "*akris*" (Mark 1:6). This suggests an error in translation from the original Hebrew into the Greek. In the Gospel of the Ebionites, when the disciples ask Jesus where they should prepare the Passover, Jesus replies, "Have I desired with desire to eat this flesh of the Passover with you?" According to the Ebionites, Jesus was a vegetarian!

The Ebionites taught that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17-19; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 16:17), but only the institution of animal sacrifice (Matthew 9:13, 12:7; Hebrews 10:5-10). The Ebionite Gospel of Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "I came to destroy the sacrifices, and if ye cease not from sacrificing, the wrath of God will not cease from you."

In his excellent *A Guide to the Mised*, Rabbi Shmuel Golding explains the orthodox Jewish position concerning animal sacrifices: "When G-d gave our ancestors permission to make sacrifices to Him, it was a concession, just as when He allowed us to have a king (I Samuel 8), but He gave us a whole set of rules and regulations concerning sacrifice that, when followed, would be superior to and distinct from the sacrificial system of the heathens."

Some biblical passages denounce animal sacrifice (Isaiah 1:11,15; Amos 5:21-25). Other passages state that animal sacrifices, not necessarily incurring God's wrath, are unnecessary (I Kings 15:22; Jeremiah 7:21-22; Hosea 6:6; Hosea 8:13; Micah 6:6-8; Psalm 50:1-14; Psalm 40:6; Proverbs 21:3; Ecclesiastes 5:1).

*"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? Saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats.*

*"When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide Mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear, for your hands are full of blood."*

--Isaiah 1:11,15

Sometimes, meat-eating Christians foolishly cite Isaiah 1:11,15, where God says, "I am full of the burnt offerings..." These Christians claim the word "full" implies God accepted the sacrifices. However, in Isaiah 43:23-24, God says, "You have not honored Me with your sacrifices... rather you have burdened Me with your sins, you have wearied Me with your iniquities."

This suggests, as Moses Maimonides taught, and Rabbi Shmuel Golding confirms above, that "the sacrifices were a concession to barbarism."

According to the Ebionites, animal sacrifice was a pagan custom which became incorporated into Mosaic Law. In Jeremiah 7:21-22, God says: "Add whole-offerings to sacrifices and eat the flesh if you will. But when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt, I gave them no commands about whole-offerings and sacrifice; I said not a word about them. Jesus referred to this passage in Jeremiah, which begins at Jeremiah 7:11 with, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a 'den of thieves'..." when cleansing the Temple of the money-changers.

In his (updated) 1986 edition of *A Vegetarian Sourcebook*, Keith Akers notes that there was a link in Judaism between meat-eating and animal sacrifices, that the prophetic tradition to which Jesus belonged attacked animal sacrifices, and that Jesus attacked the practice of animal sacrifice by driving the money-changers and their animals out of the Temple. He concludes, *"The evidence indicates that for those who first heard the message of Jesus... the rejection of animal sacrifices had directly vegetarian implications."*

Otto Pflieger, in his 1906 work, *Christian Origins*, similarly observed: "When he (Jesus) saw the busy activity of the dealers in sacrificial animals and Jewish coins overrunning the outer court he drove them out with their wares. This business was connected with the sacrificial service and therefore Jesus' reformatory action seemed to be an attack on the sacrificial service itself and indirectly on the hierarchs who derived their income from and based their social position of power on the sacrificial service."

Abba Hillel Silver, in his 1961 book, *Moses and the Original Torah*, is similarly of the opinion that animal sacrifices were never divinely ordained. Silver refers to biblical texts such as Jeremiah 7:21-22 and Amos 5:25, and cites differences in the style and content of passages referring to animal sacrifice when compared with other parts of Torah, to prove his thesis that the original Mosaic Law contained no instructions concerning sacrifice. The sacrificial cult, Silver insists, was a pagan practice which became absorbed into Torah. (Few rabbis, of course, would agree

with Silver's analysis. They would voice the traditional view, that the Hebraic sacrificial system differed considerably from those in the pagan world.)

Silver writes that when the prophet Amos (5:25) quotes God as asking, "*O House of Israel, did you offer Me victims and sacrifices for forty years in the wilderness?*" he was clearly expecting a negative answer. But he couldn't have made such a statement unless there was an earlier biblical tradition which did not call for animal sacrifice.

There is an echo of this in the New Testament in the speech of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27 (at Acts 7:42-43), which implies that no sacrifices were ever made by the Israelites in the desert. Most Christians today would naturally deny that sacrifices were necessary, but Stephen is the only person in the entire New Testament to imply that Mosaic Law never condoned animal sacrifice in the first place.

Ernest Renan's controversial 19th century book, *The Life of Jesus*, was one of the first secular studies of Jesus and the history of Christianity. Renan described Jesus as the very human child of Joseph and Mary. According to Renan, "Pure Ebionism" was the original doctrine of Jesus. Renan depicted Jesus as seeking "the abolition of the sacrifices which had caused him so much disgust..." and wrote, "The worship which he had conceived for his Father had nothing in common with scenes of butchery."

Perhaps alluding to the Ebionites, Reverend Norman Moorhouse of the Church of England admits, "There is an ancient tradition that Jesus was a vegetarian. Whether this is actually true I do not know. But I would go as far as to say that St. John the Baptist was a vegetarian, and those who belonged to the same sect as he. And, of course, in the Old Testament we have the example of Daniel, who lived as a vegetarian... So the Christians are many times bidden to be vegetarian. Adam and Eve, before they fell, lived a simple life by eating those things that God provided for them. They didn't kill animals for food. We should all try to get back to that way of life..."

According to Christian scholar Dr. Edgar J. Goodspeed, "Symmachus, the first Christian translator of the Old Testament into Greek, in the days of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-80) was an Ebionite; in fact, he made his translation for the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians of that sect." The early church fathers tell us the Ebionites revered James and rejected Paul as both a false prophet and an apostate from Judaism.

Paul saw the sacrificial system not as a pagan custom which became incorporated into Mosaic Law, nor as a concession to barbarism, but as legitimate, because he claimed it foreshadowed the sacrificial death of Jesus.

According to writer Holger Kersten:

"What we refer to as Christianity today is largely an artificial doctrine of rules and precepts, created by Paul and more worthy of the designation 'Paulinism'...By building on the belief of salvation through the expiatory death of God's first-born in a bloody sacrifice, Paul regressed to the primitive Semitic religions of earlier times, in which parents were commanded to give up their first-born in a bloody sacrifice. Paul also prepared the path for later ecclesiastical teachings on original sin and the trinity. As long ago as the 18th century, the English philosopher Lord Bolingbroke (1678 - 1751) could make out two completely different religions in the New Testament, that of Jesus and that of Paul. Kant, Lessing, Fichte and Schelling also sharply distinguish the teachings of Jesus from those of the 'disciples.' A great number of reputable modern theologians support and defend these observations."

The attack on Rome in the Book of Revelation is **not** an attack on the Roman Catholic Church (which many Protestants claim is the "Beast" in Revelation!), but an attack upon gentile Christianity and the gentile followers of Paul. In *The Story of Christian Origins*, secular historian Dr. Martin A. Larson writes about Revelation:

"Like Daniel, Revelation is intensely Judaistic... The Jesus of Revelation was a human being of the line of David... Who is the Antichrist of Revelation? The intensely Jewish nature of the book gives us the necessary clue. The writer was not concerned over the persecution of gentile Christians by Nero: what aroused in him such frenetic wrath was the Roman attack upon Judea...

"The vision of things shortly to be is addressed to the Jews of the seven Asian churches, which had repudiated Paul. As in Daniel, the Messiah appears 'Like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot... His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were a flame of fire.'

"The first three chapters constitute the message of Christ to the seven churches. He is deeply outraged by 'the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, but are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.' These and similar denunciations point to Paul and his school, against whom the Jewish Christians were embittered...."

Jesus was Jewish! Many Jews are unaware that Jesus' words in Revelation are not an attack on Jews, but rather an attack upon the gentile followers of Paul. In his excellent, *A Guide to the Mised*, for example, Rabbi Shmuel Golding mistakes Jesus' words in Revelation as evidence of anti-semitism within the New Testament.

Dr. Martin A. Larson writes:

"Chapter 4 begins with an invitation to the apocalyptist to come up to heaven to see 'things which must be hereafter.' God, resembling a vision out of Daniel or Ezekiel, sits on His throne... As in Daniel, 'ten thousand times ten thousand' angels surround the throne....

"Revelation was the swan-song of militant Jewish Christianity. When Jerusalem was destroyed, when Rome waxed greater and more powerful, when the false prophet (Paul) gained more and more followers... the Hebrew Christians lost their virility and faded under the combined assault of orthodox Judaism and gentile Christianity."

Like the Ebionite Jesus, the Vaishnavait Hindu tradition similarly regards Jesus as a *shaktya-avesha-avatar*, or an empowered representative of God, serving on behalf of the Lord. This is closer to the Judaic concept of the messiah: he's not God, but an empowered representative. However, in Vaishnavait Hinduism, the *shaktya-avesha-avatar* serves as an intermediary ("intercessor") between God and man, and is worshipped as though he were an incarnation of God. This is closer to the Christian concept of the messiah.

In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, one of the main scriptures in the Vaishnava canon, Lord Krishna tells His disciple Uddhava that the spiritual master is "one with Me" (compare John 10:30 and John 17:21), is to be revered as though he were an incarnation of God, and must never be mistaken for an ordinary man, for he "fully embodies all the qualities of God." (Compare Colossians 2:9)

Scripture teaches that one is saved and freed from all sins when he or she becomes the disciple of a divine master. The guru or spiritual master willingly suffers for the sins of his or her disciples

(takes on their *karma*). In his purport (commentary) on the *Srimad Bhagavatam* 9:9:5, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada writes:

*"The spiritual master, after accepting a disciple, must take charge of that disciple's past sinful activities, and suffer -- if not fully, then partially -- for the sinful acts of the disciple."*

In a letter to his disciples Satsvarupa and Uddhava dated July 27, 1970, Srila Prabhupada wrote:

*"The spiritual master has got the responsibility of absorbing the sinful reaction of his disciple's life. This is a great responsibility of the spiritual master... To accept disciples means to take up the responsibility of absorbing the sinful reaction of life of the disciple."*

Srila Prabhupada similarly wrote to another disciple: "Regarding your question about sufferings of master, you can simply ponder over Lord Christ's crucification." (*Letter to Rebatindandan dasa*, 12/31/72.)

This concept of the messiah is foreign to Judaism, but familiar to Christianity. In his book, *You Take Jesus, I'll Take God: How to Refute the Christian Missionaries*, Jewish writer Samuel Levine exchanges letters with a Jewish convert to Christianity. The new convert to Christianity quotes John 15:13, referring to the sacrificial death of Jesus, that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for others. Samuel Levine responds that suicide is prohibited in the Torah!

*(Christians unable to validate the authenticity of their own beliefs from Judaism and the Old Testament, can thus turn to Vaishnavite Hinduism to substantiate their views.)*

The *guru* is considered sinless, because he is obedient to the will of God through scripture; following the instructions of his own spiritual master. Thus, there is a living chain of saints and spiritual masters who take on disciples and guide them toward maturity in their relationship with God. Brother Aelred, a Catholic monk and Krishna disciple residing in Armidale, Australia in the 1990s, compared the disciplic succession in Vaishnavite Hinduism to the Apostolic succession in Catholic Christianity.

Through a *guru*, one receives God's directions on a deeper, more personal level than one receives through scripture itself. Moreover, it is taught in scripture that the only way to know God personally is through those souls whose relationship with Him is already established. No one comes to God except through a spiritual master. (Compare John 14:6)

Srila Prabhupada may be compared to other Vaishnava *acharyas* (spiritual masters and founders of institutions) like Madhva or Ramanuja. A *guru*, or living spiritual master, suffers for the sins of his disciples once they have taken formal vows to follow him. A *guru* is given the honor and worship Christians ascribe to Jesus Christ -- he is revered as though he were an incarnation of God.

Srila Prabhupada himself is revered as a *shaktya-avesha-avatar*, or empowered representative of God in Vaishnavite Hinduism. A few days before Srila Prabhupada left the planet in 1977, his godbrother Puri Maharaja said, "You have saved millions of people around the world. You should be called *maha-patita-pavana* (the great savior of the fallen)."

St. Peter referred to Jesus as "a man certified by God." (Acts 2:22) Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of The Way International, wrote an entire book on the subject, entitled, *Jesus Christ Is Not God*. It is unclear to some Christians, having studied the Sanskrit literatures, whether Jesus is

*jiva-tattva* (one of God's children, like ourselves) or *vishnu-tattva* (an expansion of God Himself, like the Trinitarian conception).

And is God limited to expanding Himself into a mere Trinity? According to secular scholar Keith Akers, the Valentinian gnostics believed God could expand Himself into multiple Supreme Beings yet still remain one, and the Valentinian gnostics referred to these thirty manifestations of the Deity with names like Father, Only-Begotten, Word, Life, Faith, Hope, Love, Grace, Church, Advocate, etc.

A poem by St. Patrick of Ireland refers to God as "three-in-one." Dr. Klaus Klostermaier similarly compares the worship of God in plural form as Radha and Krishna in the Vaishnavite Hindu tradition to the Christian Trinitarian concept of God. "The inner, divine relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost is fundamentally a relationship of love -- profound, unending spiritual communication... The Western theological context in which the love of Radha and Krishna could perhaps be best understood is precisely that of Trinitarian theology.

"For the Christian, the Trinity represents the deepest mystery of faith... Similarly, the Radha-Krishna relationship cannot be fathomed by paralleling it with romantic love poetry or late medieval Marian devotion, as some writers have tried to do. The mystery of these things goes very deep, and there is no earthly symbolism that can accurately convey its truth."

According to Dr. Klaus Klostermaier, Vaishnavas, or the worshippers of Lord Vishnu, like their Christian brethren, view Jesus Christ differently. "Some Vaishnavas consider him an *avatar* or some kind of divine incarnation. Others see him as a great teacher of moral codes and ethical principles, a saint whose selfless spirit of sacrifice is a great inspiration to mankind. Then there are those who see him as a miracle worker, a sort of *yogi*... There are quite diverse conceptions of Christ both in the minds of Vaishnavas and in the minds of Christians.

"Peter's confession to Jesus, saying, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' ... Now, this becomes a difficult passage to explain to Hindus... *Isva ke putr* -- 'the son of God' -- is a very common expression in Hindu India. In the epics and *Puranas* are countless stories of 'sons of gods' -- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva beget sons from princesses and queens. Hindus will say: 'What is so special about Jesus? We are all sons of God.' So the idea does not convey the notion of uniqueness as it does in the West."

Dr. A.L. Basham says: "The old-fashioned type of missionary was quite certain that Hinduism was the work of the Devil, and hence that it was very evil. It did all the things which Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, said you shouldn't do, such as image worship and the worship of many gods.

"Catholics were always much more tolerant of this sort of thing. Though he may be theoretically monotheistic, the simple Catholic will, to all intents and purposes, pray to quite a wide range of divinities, including the Blessed Virgin Mary and various important saints, often in the form of physical images.

"But Protestant Christianity was founded on the basis that there is one God only, divided into three persons, and that worship of images is sinful. To the Protestant of the old-fashioned kind, this was a terrible thing to do, almost as bad as it was to a traditional Jew or Muslim. So the missionaries, I think, are largely responsible for the polytheism stereotype and 'caste-ridden' society stereotype."

Madhavendra Puri dasa (Steve Bernath) of the Bhaktivedanta Institute reports that at a Jewish-Vaishnava interfaith conference in 1986, none of the rabbis would take *prasadam* (sacramental food), because it was food offered to "idols." On the other hand, Catholic and Episcopal clergy have defended Krishna devotees against charges of "idolatry" from Christian fundamentalists, and have favorably compared *prasadam* with the Eucharist.

Reverend Alvin Hart, an Episcopal priest in New York, says about *prasadam*: "It's like the Mass, where the Host is considered nondifferent from the body of Christ..."

George Harrison said: "I think that *prasadam* is a very important thing... It's a blessing from Krishna, and it's spiritually important. The idea is that *prasadam* is the sacrament the Christians talk about, only instead of being just a wafer, it's a whole feast, really, and the taste is so nice -- it's out of this world... It's a pity you don't have restaurants or temples on all the main streets of every town and village like those hamburger and fried chicken places. You should put them out of business."

"*Haribol*" ("*praise Hari!*") is the Sanskrit equivalent to "*Hallelujah*" (which means "*praised be the name of God*" in Hebrew). George Harrison explained his putting the chanting of Hare Krishna in his 1970 hit song, "My Sweet Lord":

"Well, first of all, '*Hallelujah*' is a glorious expression the Christians have, but Hare Krishna has a mystical side to it. It's more than just glorifying God; it's asking to become His servant..."

"Although Christ in my mind is an absolute *yogi*, I think many Christian teachers today are misrepresenting Christ. They're supposed to be representing Jesus, but they're not doing it very well. They're letting him down very badly, and that's a big turn off."

When teaching his disciples how to pray, Jesus Christ glorified God's holy name: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name." (Matthew 6:9) Jesus also approved of his disciples' singing joyfully in praise of God. (Luke 19:36-40)

Of his own name, Jesus said: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there with them." (Matthew 18:20)

Some Christians cite Matthew 6:5-8. Jesus instructed his followers to perform their charity, prayer and fasting in private. Religious devotion must never become a means to adulation, fame and social recognition. (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18). However, Jesus, a rabbi, could hardly be opposed to praising God or God's name, in public or private!

As to Jesus' words: "When you pray do not repeat and repeat as the pagans do," some Bible translations appear to be attacking chanting or praying in "vain repetition."

Was Jesus attacking the *method* of prayer (chanting/repeating) as being pagan, or rather the *mentality* behind the prayer?

Matthew 6:7 suggests Jesus was attacking chanting/repeating, or praying "in vain repetition" as a pagan practice.

However, Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 6:31-32 (*in the very same chapter!*): "Do not, then, be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' For on



all these things pagans center their interest, while your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

Jesus told his followers there is no need to pray to God for material blessings or even necessities. (Matthew 6:8, 31-33; Luke 12:29-30)

The *\*pagans\** concern themselves with these things.

When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he began by teaching them to hallow God's name, and to pray to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven -- to be a servant of God. (Matthew 6:9-13)

This is the Hare Krishna *mantra*, which can roughly be translated as, "O Lord, please engage me in Your service."

Repetition helps keep the mind focused on God, rather than on worldly distractions.

Dr. Harvey Cox, a liberal Protestant theologian at the Harvard Divinity School (and one of the signers of the Seamless Garment Mission Statement) says:

"...there aren't many examples around of people who choose a path of religious asceticism, and devotion... The people who understand the Hare Krishna movement better than many others are people who have a relative who's become a Benedictine monk or a nun. They know somebody who has chosen to do something which appears to be crazy: giving up television, giving up family life, leaving professional careers and going off to live in a monastery. But that's legitimated in the Catholic system. I've talked with people about the Hare Krishna movement in this way and they can easily make the connection."

A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada wrote to a Canadian heart surgeon, Dr. Wilfred Bigelow, in 1972:

*"Contraception deteriorates the womb so that it no longer is a good place for the soul. That is against the order of God. By the order of God, a soul is sent to a particular womb, but by this contraceptive he is denied that womb and has to be placed in another. That is disobedience to the Supreme. For example, take a man who is supposed to live in a particular apartment. If the situation there is so disturbed that he cannot enter the apartment, then he is put at a great disadvantage. That is illegal interference and is punishable."*

Our material desires keep us bound to the physical world, forcing us to accept material bodies, life after life. The solution to this existential dilemma is to do all as an offering to the Lord, rather than for our own personal sense gratification, and in this way, we're liberated from the cycle of repeated birth and death.

Similarly, in a room conversation with a Jesuit priest in Melbourne, Australia in 1975, the following exchange took place:

*Srila Prabhupada:* "So sex life is not bad, provided it is under the religious system."

*Jesuit priest:* "I thought you were saying sex in itself is bad... There have been people in the history of the world, like the Manicheans..."

*Srila Prabhupada*: "No, just you can have sex for begetting nice children but not for sense gratification."

*Jesuit priest*: "But suppose they can't have children. Would you say they can still have sex?"

*Srila Prabhupada*: "No. That is not allowed. That is illicit sex. If you cannot produce children, and still have sex, that is illicit sex."

Birth control has been in place in India for decades. Over thirty years ago, there were contraceptive ads appearing in Indian newspapers (*albeit, aimed only at married couples!*).

Gandhi was celibate, religious, studying the *Bhagavad-gita*, opposed birth control (*and was at odds with Margaret Sanger over this one!*), and wanted India to remain an agrarian nation of 700,000 villages, etc.

Nehru, by contrast, was an extremely shy aristocrat, but through public speaking became a skilled orator and politician. He wrote several books while imprisoned by the British, he encouraged industrialization and the emancipation of Indian women.

He advocated birth control programs, made Hindu marriage monogamous, established divorce procedures, outlawed the practice of dowry, and introduced laws that gave daughters an equal share in family estates. He despised the superstition, ritualism, and mysticism in religion.

Mukunda Goswami says: "Srila Prabhupada always trained us to stick to our principles. He said that the worst thing we could ever do would be to make some sort of compromise or to dilute the philosophy for the sake of cheap popularity. Although many *swamis* and *yogis* had come from India to the West, Prabhupada was the only one with the purity and devotion to establish India's ancient Krishna conscious philosophy around the world on its own terms -- not watered down, but as it is...

"... a lot of rock groups like the Grateful Dead and the Police get *prasadam* backstage before their concerts. They love it. It's a long-standing tradition with us. I remember one time sending *prasadam* to one of the Beatles' recording sessions. Paul and Linda McCartney have *prasadam* frequently.

"Bob Dylan did a lot of chanting at one time. He used to come to the Los Angeles temple and came to the Denver and Chicago temples as well. In fact, he drove across the United States with two devotees once and wrote several songs about Krishna. They spent a lot of time chanting." Also, Stevie Wonder put the chanting in "Pastimes Paradise."

The Vaishnavite Hindu tradition similarly regards the Buddha as a *shaktya-avesha-avatar*. According to the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the Buddha (like the Ebionite Jesus) came to abolish animal sacrifices which were being carried out in the name of religion.

In her book, *Sexism Is a Sin: the Biblical Basis for Female Equality*, the late Reverend Janet Regina Hyland (1933 - 2007) cites Bertrand Russell as having referred to Paul as the "inventor" of Christianity.

The Buddha founded a religion separate and distinct from Hinduism, but his teachings were absorbed into Hinduism and reformed and reshaped Hinduism. Jesus, on the other hand, repeatedly stated he did not come to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to fulfill (Matthew

5:17-19; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 16:17). Jesus came to reform the Jewish tradition and arguably abolish animal sacrifice (Matthew 9:13, 12:7; Hebrews 10:5-10), and (through Paul), a religion separate and distinct from Judaism emerged in Jesus' name!

(James Dawson, raised Catholic and now a Buddhist, publisher of *Live and Let Live*, a pro-life/animal rights/libertarian 'zine, responded to an article on Buddhism which appeared in a 2001 issue of *Back to Godhead*.)

"I've read *The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism* by Satyaraja dasa (Steven Rosen), and have some critical comments on it. First, I can only speak from a 'Theravadin' viewpoint, and of course only as an individual Theravadin, though I feel my observations are doctrinally well-grounded. I would agree that the affinity between Mahayana Buddhism (which Bodhi Santosh Roshi adheres to) and Vaishnavism may indeed be quite strong, but less so between the latter and Theravada.

"Satyaraja dasa doesn't even refer to Theravada by name, obliquely referring to under the phrases 'various Buddhist positions' and 'those forms of Buddhism that reject the soul.' But by referring to Theravada in this way, he's unjustifiably implying that it's just a minor collection of marginal, heterodox sects. It isn't. It's one of the three major branches of Buddhism, with a very widely professed and distinct teaching (which includes the no-self or *anatta* doctrine), with millions of devout adherents in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, and even India! And the no-self doctrine, or *anattavada*, has been one of its fundamental tenets for 2,500 years.

"I don't know where Satyaraja dasa gets the information that 'the earliest forms of Indian Buddhism accept the Vedic conclusion about the nature of the soul and reincarnation.' There were several competing schools of Buddhism during the days before Mahayana. Theravada is the sole surviving school among them. The one sect that most closely resembled Vedism regarding the soul might be the pudgalavadins, but their total numbers never reached more than 25% of all Buddhists (according to T.O. Ling, in *A Buddhist Dictionary*). I'm not really an expert on the several other schools of pre-Mahayana Buddhism, so I can't say for sure how true Satyaraja dasa's statement is, but I'm very skeptical of it.

"His statement that in Buddhism, 'Ignorance begins with bodily identification,' as far as Theravada is concerned, is at best, only half true. The mind, or what might be better called the mind-stream or mental processes, is also something we believe is identified as self in ignorance. The Buddha said all things are not-self, conditioned and unconditioned, which includes physical and mental phenomena AND *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvana*).

"My point isn't to convince you of this... What I'm saying is, Satyaraja dasa's article is dismissing, distorting and ignoring major points of Buddhist teaching and history.

"Are there points of affinity between Vaishnavism and Buddhism? Of course, but let's not force them beyond well-established fact and logic.

"Look up <http://www.lanka.com/dhamma> or email [bps@ids.lk](mailto:bps@ids.lk).

"Look at their catalogue, order a few booklets, or read a few online essays (which I assume they may have). Everything I'm saying is easily verifiable.

"I'm not disparaging Vaishnavism. There's much that's quite admirable in it. I'm just saying our differences are much more significant than this article implies.

"I've been aware for years that, to put it in scholarly terms, the Buddha was eventually 'absorbed into Hinduism,' several centuries after his supreme *nibbana*, so the quotation from the *Srimad Bhagavatam* is not a big revelation to me. However -- and I realize this book is holy to you, so I hope you won't take this as a sign of disrespect -- the idea that the Buddha's great renunciation, spiritual struggle and final enlightenment were followed by 45 years of 'deluding' people with a deliberately false doctrine, just to induce them to follow *ahimsa* (nonviolence), is unthinkable to put it mildly.

"The whole *Dhamma* teaching, in all its depth, subtlety and profound internal consistency, an artifice to promote vegetarianism? Maybe there's some basis in Mahayana *Sutras* for such a premise, but no Theravadin worth the name could be persuaded by it.

"It isn't more convincing than a claim that Jesus' mission on earth wasn't really to declare himself the messiah, save mankind from original sin, preach the social gospel, etc. He only did all of that as a pretext to teach people new winemaking techniques and the practical importance of good carpentry skills.

"I realize the complete sincerity of Vaishnavas in their belief about the Buddha, and I don't take any offense at it, but I doubt it's going to persuade any but the most uninformed Buddhist."

James Dawson  
October 17, 2001

Satyaraja dasa (Steven Rosen) responded via email on October 19, 2001:

"I agree with many of your distinguished friend's criticisms. *Back to Godhead* is not a scholarly magazine but rather a tool for promoting Krishna Consciousness. The editors do not want pros and cons or controversial elaborations. They just want simple articles that show the universality of Krishna Consciousness (the holy names, vegetarianism, reincarnation), and that was the point of my brief lecture as well which was all of ten minutes!

"If I were writing for an academic journal on this subject, such as the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, I would have delved into thornier issues, elaborating on our differences with the Theravada tradition, and so on. These subjects are quite complex, and I meant no offense in my superficial and brief presentation. I did not mean to trivialize great Buddhistic traditions but rather to show that there are certain meeting grounds, certain points of commonality.

"I hope your friend will forgive my rather simplistic article and try to appreciate it in the spirit with which it was given. His comments are most welcome."

On May 13, 1973 in Los Angeles, CA, Srila Prabhupada said about modern science:

"Promotion to the spiritual world (*samsiddhim paramam*) is the ultimate perfection of human life. Read *Bhagavad-gita*... But the scientists have no idea of this perfection; they do not even believe in the existence of the living entity apart from the gross body.

Dr. Singh responded, "They do not speak of the living entity (the soul); they speak only of bodies."

One of Srila Prabhupada's students commented, "Their conception is something akin to (Theravada) Buddhism. The (Theravada) Buddhists say that the body is like a house. Just as a

house is put together with wood, the body is put together with chemicals. And when the body dies, it is just like a house that falls apart. Just as the house becomes pieces of wood, so the body becomes chemicals..."

Srila Prabhupada responded, "That state is called nirvana. And then, with the ingredients, you can build another house or another body. That is (Theravada) Buddhism. The (Theravada) Buddhists do not have any information regarding the soul."

Contemporary Hindu spiritual master Ravindra Svarupa dasa (Dr. William Deadwyler) writes that the Buddha "...taught that our material existence is suffering, that our material desires cause suffering, and that by extirpating these desires we can attain nirvana, release from material existence. The Buddha refused to deal with any question concerning God, the soul, life after salvation, and so on. When asked about such things, he would reply, 'The Tathagata [the Buddha] is free from all theories.'

"Later, some of his followers spread the doctrines of *sunya*, voidism, and *anatma*, no soul, but these were mundane interpretations of the Buddha's silence on transcendental topics. The simple fact is that the Buddha had denied the Vedas, yet he remained faithful to them by refusing to make 'theories,' that is, to discuss God or the soul independently of the Vedic teachings; so he said nothing."

In *The Path of Perfection*, Srila Prabhupada describes the Vaishnavaitic Hindu understanding of Jesus Christ and Christianity in greater detail:

"*Bhakti-yoga* means connecting ourselves with Krishna, God, and becoming His eternal associates. *Bhakti-yoga* cannot be applied to any other objective; therefore in Buddhism, for instance, there is no *bhakti-yoga*, because they do not recognize the Supreme Lord existing as the supreme objective. Christians, however, practice *bhakti-yoga* when they worship Jesus Christ, because they are accepting him as the son of God and are therefore accepting God. Unless one accepts God, there is no question of *bhakti-yoga*. Christianity, therefore, is also a form of Vaishnavism (the worship of Lord Vishnu), because God is recognized... However, where there is no recognition of a personal God... there is no question of *bhakti-yoga*."

Srila Prabhupada drew an analogy between the biblical and the Vaishnava doctrine of the fall from grace:

*"When a living entity disobeys the order of God, he is put into this material world, and that is his punishment... The real fact is that the living entity is eternal, and the material world is created to satisfy his false existence... The individual is thinking that he is independent and can act independent of God. That is the beginning of paradise lost, of Adam's fall.*

*"When Adam and Eve thought that they could do something independently, they were condemned. Every living entity is the eternal servant of God, and he must act according to the desire or will of the Supreme Lord. When he deviates from this principle, he is lost. Losing paradise, he comes into the material world... That is the process of transmigration, the rotation of the cycle of birth and death. This is all due to disobeying God... Having rebelled against the principles of God consciousness, we are cut off from our original position. We have fallen."*

Following biblical tradition, St. Augustine made a distinction between the earthly and the heavenly, the flesh and bodily appetites versus the spirit and peace of the soul. Describing the predicament of the soul in a physical body in the material world, Augustine similarly wrote:

*"And so as long as he is in this mortal body, he is a pilgrim in a foreign land, away from God; therefore he walks by faith, not by sight."*

Augustine said the soul "needs divine direction, which he may obey with resolution, and divine assistance that he may obey it freely..."

These doctrines are consistent with Vaishnava theology.

Hayagriva dasa (Professor Howard Wheeler) describes Srila Prabhupada's preaching in San Francisco during the Summer of Love in 1967:

"In this material world, we are captured by sex life and put into prison," he tells us. "Just today I saw one prison in the Bay surrounded by water (Alcatraz). Yes. So many arrangements are made there to keep the prisoners entrapped. Now we are in the prisonhouse of the body. And what is our entrapment? Sex life. As long as we do not know that our happiness is with Krishna, we will try to enjoy this material world, and so be bound by sex life..."

*"...Now you are thinking that if you just end the Vietnam War, you will have peace. But there can never be any peace here. This place is meant for misery, and so misery will come in one form or another. That is the nature of the material world."*

Hayagriva dasa writes further:

"The San Francisco temple certainly abounds in pretty girls. Swamiji begins performing weddings weekly (opposing unmarried couples living together). Zen Buddhists come. And strange new LSD Christian sects. The Brotherhood of the Golden Swan. All the members dress like Franciscan friars and chant, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.' They call themselves yogis. Swamiji is most gracious; he allows them to speak briefly in the temple. The Buddhists, however, he does not invite to speak."