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The Universalization of the Bhakti Yoga of Chaytania Mahaprabhu

Ethnographic and Historic Considerations

Marcos Silva da Silveira

Abstract

Inspired by Victor Turner's concepts of structure and *communitas*, this article commences with an analysis of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas – worshipers of Radha, and Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu followers. Secondly, we present data from ethnographic research conducted with South American devotees on pilgrimage to the ceremonial center ISCKON in Mayapur, West Bengal, during the year 1996, for a resumption of those initial considerations. The article seeks to demonstrate that the ritual injunction characteristic of Hindu sects, only makes sense from the individual experience of each devotee.

Keywords: religion, Hinduism, New Age, Hare Krishna, ritual process

Resumo

Este artigo trata de revisitar o conceito consagrado de Victor Turner *Estrutura – Communitas*, tendo, como ponto de partida, uma análise de seus estudos de caso do Leste da Índia, em particular, entre os Gaudiya Vaishnavas – adoradores de Radha e Krishna, seguidores de Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Em segundo lugar, apresentamos dados de uma pesquisa etnográfica realizada com devotos da América do Sul em peregrinação ao centro cerimonial da ISCKON em Mayapur, Bengala Ocidental, durante o ano de 1996, para a retomada destas considerações iniciais. Este artigo procura demonstrar que a característica liminar ritual de seitas hindus, só faz sentido a partir da experiência individual de cada devoto, retomando a discussão de Max Weber sobre o conceito de Individualismo místico, a partir desse tipo de seita.

Palavras chave: religião, Hinduismo, Nova Era, Hare Krishna, processo ritual

The Universalization of the Bhakti Yoga of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

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Introduction

The global expansion of the congregational chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra, since the 1960s, with the opening of temples dedicated to this cult in various countries outside of India, allow a series of considerations about contemporary religious movements. One important question is, has this cult expanded through an “ethnic” appeal, or because of its exoticism as an “Indian” cult, with its clothes, chanting, dances, food and incense, or is it the universalist appeal of its philosophy, of its union with the divine, through the ecstatic singing of the Hare Krishna mantra, which inspires devotees outside of India?

This article will first consider Victor Turner’s studies about the Bhakti Yoga of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and its universalization, to then analyze the trajectory of a Brazilian adept of the Hare Krishna movement during the 100th anniversary celebration of its founder, in 1996 in West Bengal, as an example of the realization of the mystic individualism characteristic of these Hindu sects. The article will then present historical considerations, based on studies of this cult in its original Indian context, which indicate its importance in the construction of the cultural identity of West Bengal. These authors allow a return to the dialog with Victor Turner and his considerations about these sects, which, thanks to their quite unique dynamic nature, allow its spiritual masters to have successfully created a new movement with foreign devotees inside and outside of India.

The central issue, presented through the trajectory of the Brazilian adept, is that the conversion to this type of cult only makes sense from an anthropological perspective when analyzed based on an individual trajectory and

not from that of the organization of the movement, the cult, the sect, etc., given that the universalist appeal of Bhakti Yoga is realized for individuals, as is its entire ritual language and philosophy. The social effects that this appeal has deserve greater study, as well as the organizational problems of these movements, in the various contexts in which they have been presenting themselves, with their organization limited by the very universalism that allows their expansion.

Victor Turner and Bhakti Yoga

British anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) discussed the Bhakti movement of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu during India's medieval¹ period, based on the work of Edward Dimock Jr, producing a reflection about Hari nama sankirtana, based on the Sahajyas modality of bhakti yoga. This movement is the tantric line of Vaishnavism, which is characteristic of the lower castes of Bengal and presents a clear opposition to the structural hierarchies of the Vaishnava orthodoxy. The Smartas, which were made popular in the West by Srila Prabhupada Bhaktivedanta Swami, through his International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCKON), or simply, the Hare Krishna movement. Turner(1974:187) used this movement to illustrate his dialectical concept, structure:anti-structure considering India and its religiosity to have better examples of these social processes than Christianity.²

Unfortunately, Turner(1974:193) did not deeply explore the unique characteristics of the Bhakti movement of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, which rose in the early 16th century in eastern India. He conducted a reading of the movement within a general scheme, which was a bit forced in certain points. Bhakti Yoga operates a series of social transitions, that allow discussing Turner's considerations in a satisfactory manner, because they keep alive the strength of this anti-structural spirit of India and make it universal.

1 The notion of "medieval India" is problematic. According to Chattopadhyaya(1996:135), the idea of a "feudalism" in India has Marxist origin. The term is also used to designate Muslim India, and distinguish it from "ancient Hindu India" and from "modern British India." Covering a period that ranges from the 7th to the 15th centuries, this notion locates the period that Weber(1958) denominated the "orthodox restoration of Hinduism", from Shankaracharya to Chaitanya. The term can be used to denominate the period of flourishing of the Indian sects that are considered here. It is important to register that "medieval India" culminates and terminates in the movement of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

2 His Christian example is St. Francis de Assisi, a European ascetic similar to others in the east.

Turner (1974:199) illustrated his concept of “spontaneous *communitas*” with the Baules, a *sahajia* sect, and one of its songs of *sankirtana*, which he affirmed “clearly indicates how the Vaishnava spirit of ‘*communitas*’ has persisted in the world today”. All of the *sankirtana* songs praise the equality of all before Krishna. This is the essence of the teachings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The Baules intend to live in a permanent *sankirtana*, and for this reason are looked down on by the *smartas*. It is a liminal lifestyle, even among the *sahajia*, but one with a deep structure, like the other *Sankirtana* movements.

The issue that will be discussed here, instigated by these movements, is that from the perspective of a ritual theory, the notion of spontaneity does not make sense. From Van Gennep, Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown to Malinowsky and more recently Stanley Tambiah, ritual processes were always perceived as the most formal dimension of the social life of any culture, although characterized by intense emotional expression. They generate these emotions, which could never be discussed, based on a notion such as “spontaneous”.

The concept of **structure**, as consecrated by British social anthropologist, Victor Turner (1974:176), considered another dimension of social life which he denominated *Communitas* or Anti:structure. The social liminality of tribal rites establish a great simplification of social structure, accompanied by a rich proliferation of symbolic structure, Turner affirmed. The liberation from the routine established by social rules liberates the force of the symbol, the myth and the rite. He denominated this effect of the ritual processes normative *Communitas*, because it was structured as a cultural tradition.

Turner (1974:240) believed that the institutionalized religions of the great civilizations, in particular, had an affinity with the rites for change of status, found in various tribal societies. Some religions have an ideal of permanently establishing the type of liminality found in rites of passage, proposing a universal ideal egalitarianism. Others offer a religious reversal of the secular social positions, accentuating a characteristic found in rites of reversal of status.

In the genesis of the religious movements characteristic of the “great religions,” this social dimension assumes other characteristics. These movements arise in epochs of radical social transition, when a society passes from one fixed social structure to another. They are movements that propose egalitarian social utopias and formulate ideological *Communitas*. It is this type of movement that is at the base of what Weber calls “Religions of Salvation.”

The problems of the utopias is that they must face the need to renounce the pleasures of the spirit of *communitas* that unite individuals around a common ideal, through the suffering needed for the structuring of a permanent social movement. There is something enchanting about this spirit of the original spontaneous *Communitas*, from the sense of freedom and power that it triggers. For this reason, this feeling will always be a transitory and unexpected phase, rising from the undefined limits of the social structure. Without this restorative power of the *Communitas*, the structured social life becomes too heavy.

In the complex civilizations where these movements take place, the realization of the spirit of *Communitas* becomes problematic, it loses the normative character found in the tribal rites. Situations of structured *Communitas*, as in the case of the sects, also allow speaking of social processes experienced in a quite intense manner, in which social tensions inherent to situations of social change are dramatized. All societies must find a way to balance their structural tensions with interventions of *Communitas*.

Turner argues that the egalitarian ideal of the modern world, as formulated by Rousseau, Marx, Henry Morgan, Durkheim and Mauss, tend to define tribal societies based on the spirit of *communitas* of their rites, and oppose to this dimension the differentiated problems of social structure of modern civilization. For this reason, Emile Durkheim, for example, studied the rites of primitive Australians in search of social harmony lost by the West, while Marx spoke of a “primitive communism”, and Rousseau of the “good savage”.

By addressing this theme, Turner(1974:201) had difficulty in formulating, in the same terms, that the modern world does not know the value of this ritual reversibility. Modernity breaks this dialectic, separating and making autonomous its social dimensions so much, that religion and rite come to be one more aspect subordinated to routine social life. This is why the protest movements in the West, such as the social movements of the 1960s, were so quickly reabsorbed. Turner uses the term spontaneous *Communitas* to consider the spirit that animated these movements at their origins. The concept appears to have been influenced by the atmosphere of the time.

In a certain sense, Turner “reinvented the wheel”, because he did not return to a dialog with sociological theory, to the point of perceiving that he was facing one of its most sensitive problems, as Sennet(1998:332) formulated:

A person does not need to believe in God to analyze a religious society, of course; but the reluctance of Freud and Weber to consider religion on its own terms created in both a completely unique illusion. This illusion is found in that the charismatic figure was someone who dealt with his subjective feelings in a vigorous manner, and who was a figure of domination who acted amid great passions. Given that religious Grace was, in reality, an illusion, the charismatic person was in contact with the “irrational” in society. Therefore, both made a fatal exclusion: they eliminated from the rational and routine matrix of the society the desires for a charismatic figure. Both could imagine the intense power of charisma creating order, or losing its strength and becoming routine; neither of them imagined that charisma could be a force for trivialization, and not for the intensification of feeling, and in this way, the lubricant of a rational and ordered world.

What is significant, in the case of Srila Prabhupada, is that his Hare Krishna movement is born in this same anti-structural atmosphere of the 1960s, which allows a new look at Turner’s theoretical considerations, within its development outside of India. In this paper we will analyze the trajectory of a devotee Brazilian at the festival for the commemoration of the 100th birthday of Srila Prabhupada, which was held at some sacred sites of the Bhakti Yoga of Chaitanya, in West Bengal, and in Vrndavanam, UP, in early 1996. I accompanied a South American delegation – composed mostly of Brazilians – of some sixty devotees and sympathizers, who were present at this event in the months of February and March of that year, associating myself permanently to the devotee in question, which provided me a quite specific research position in this field. This devotee, who was not initiated, was the only member of this excursion who would make his spiritual initiation before a Guru of the ISCKON, in that centennial year.

What will be discussed is how, based on the unique trajectory of one devotee in that time and space, the Hare Krishna movement presented itself before the specific demands of this new adept, at the moment in which he organized his devotional life according to his understanding of these new religious premises. The universalization of this religious movement, although it is a movement on a global scale, in various distinct locations, can also be understood based on an ethnographic study of a single case.

Brahmacharis, Brahmanas, Bhaktas

Thus, the evident universalization of the Chaitanya Bhakti, based on the efforts of Srila Prabhupada and of other Vaishnava Swamis close to him, as well as his first disciples, brings us to the following question: What is the meaning that this religious symbolism and its ritual practices establish for their new adepts and frequenters? The theme can be related to the celebrated discussion of Colin Campbell(1997), about “The orientalizacion of the West” and the problem of the substitution of the theodicy of Christian predestination for the theodicy of Karma, in Weberian terms. Without wanting to enter into his terms of the ideal types of the “West” and “East”, I prefer to look at Campbell’s brief comment on the ISCKON of Prabhupada:

Although it is clear that the Eastern religions, together with the quasi-religious movements with inspiration from the East, such as Transcendental Meditation and the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON), have been penetrating the West, their impact has been small and on their own do not justify this affirmation. Evidence of a change in the beliefs of the population as a whole is required, more than the enthusiasm of a minority that is still seen by the majority of the population as “exotic” movements. (1997:09/10)

The question that this commentary raises, in the first place, is once again, what is the influence and the meaning that these movements come to have, not in the “West”, or in “modern society”, as a whole, but for those individuals who adhere to their appeals, in a process that is in some way comparable to the individual adhesion to Indian sects in their original context. On the other hand, as Otávio Velho(1997:23) indicates in his comments on Campbell’s text, Brazil – as a fertile ground for religious heterodoxies in relation to the historic religions – allows taking a look – in two directions I would add – at the place of Bhakti Yoga in our combinations and syncretisms, through deeply individualized and individualistic religious experiences, characteristic of the New Age, in which the Hare Krishna movement wound up being located.

* * *

The central research moment of this article were two weeks spent at the ISCKON complex in Mayapur, in West Bengal. Located some 100 km from Calcutta, Mayapur is neither a village or a city, but a group of temples and

centers of religious institutions – mathas – set along the Bhaktisiddantha Saraswati Road, the highway baptized with the name of the spiritual master of Prabhupada Bhaktivedanta Swami, which links the port of Krishnanagara – the district center – to Mayapur, located at the end of its two kilometer stretch. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born here, and in the 19th and 20th centuries a series of Vaishnava Swamis would transform it into the pilgrimage site that it is today, the spiritual heart of West Bengal.

It was possible to accompany the most important ceremony to worship Srila Prabhupada, the installation of his memorial, denominated the Puspa samadhi (The Mausoleum of Flowers). This ceremony, focused on Hari Nama Sankirtana, revealed fundamental aspects of the meaning of this ritual for the Hare Krishna movement and took place after the 10 days of the parikrama of Nawadeep. This parikrama consists in a pilgrimage through the countless sacred places of the nine islands – Nawa deep – that compose the sacred land of Mayapur. The nine islands are considered a micro cosmos, a small replica of the entire Earth, and contain, in some form, all the main sacred places of Hinduism. At the end of this pilgrimage, a series of ceremonies, events, talks and shows are held around the installation of the Mausoleum of Prabhupada, in the best style of contemporary Indian religiousness and with the artistic sensibility characteristic of the Bengalis.

Below we will describe how the Brazilian devotees are lodged in the ceremonial complex of ISCKON at Sri Mayapur Dhama, during this period. At first there were three lodging options. One could sleep at the provisional encampments of the Parikrama, divided only into a male and female wing, which combined devotees from India and all parts of the world, in an anti-structural movement of realization of the ideal of Chaitanya and of the Vaishnava swamis: devotees from the entire world chanting Hare Krishna in sacred places.

The other two options consisted in staying at the fixed encampment of the ceremonial complex of ISCKON, going directly to the parikrama by bus and returning in the late afternoon. There were two prices for accommodations at the Festival. For US\$200 it was possible to have lodging in traditional Bengali straw tents with woven jute floors, bare electric lighting, toilets dug into the ground and a bath with a pump handle. For US\$400 one could stay in canvas tents, with brick floors, in military type cots, with porcelain bathrooms and piped showers.

The first option proved to be a visible test of the theme of Srila Prabhupada: “Simple life and high thinking”. These tents were incredibly cool during the day and pleasant at night, while the canvas tents were insupportably hot during the day and cold at night. In addition, a strong storm at night knocked over many of them, on the night following the return from parikrama (27.02.96), leaving the devotees exposed to the elements. The devotees commented that these were “Kṛṣṇa’s doings”, so that they would all realize the importance of austerity to spiritual life, the devotees commented.

The style of the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil is clearly observable in the encampment where we stayed in the Mayapur complex. When we arrived, some twenty-four devotees – all men – were placed in three tents. We received from the festival organizers, along with an identification bracelet and the inscription receipt, a card with the number of the tent site. A selection was made of the members of the Brazilian delegation. My tent, for example, was for initiates and devotees who were returning to spiritual life.

One young bramachari from Maranhão, recently-initiated, was accompanying the pilgrimage of his spiritual master; Iswara Swami. Another bramachari practicing renunciation, still a bhakta, also accompanying Iswara Swami, had recently left from a three-month stay at the temple in Belo Horizonte for India. An “external devotee”³ from Belém, Pará, an architecture student, interested in traditional Indian architecture, had no guru. He had been visiting all the ISCKON temples in Brazil before going to India. There was a Uruguayan Brahmana, who was living in Porto Alegre, who had abandoned the Vaishnava standard of worship and was using the trip to try to return to the devotional platform; an initiated devotee, from Argentina, a former Marine, who was living in Assuncion, Paraguay, where he was a Yoga teacher; and there was a psychologist from Pernambuco, in his forties, known to some devotees in Recife, but who did not chant japa, or accompany the spiritual programs of the Temple. The devotee whose trajectory we will examine, was another Bhakta, a disciple of Iswara Swami. He was born in Campina Grande, Paraíba, where he is a high school teacher and actively participates in the local cultural center.

In the next tent, some 14 Brahmanas, disciples of Hridayananda Goswami Acharya Deva, simply left their bags and all went to the Parikrama

3 “devote externo” é uma categoria da ISCKON e referia-se aos devotos que não viviam no templo.

encampment. They were the older devotees, some leaders of the Temple, part of the Brazilian elite of the movement, who were between 30-40 years old. When they returned from parikrama, they decided to stay together in that tent, which was very crowded. In the last tent there were four bramacharis, all disciples of Iswara Swami, who took turns serving him and participating in the parikrama. The Swami stayed in the building of ISKCON's book distributor (BBT) in Mayapur, together with an older disciple.

There was one tent with Brazilians in the US\$400 section. In it was one Brahmana from Minas Gerais who was returning to the standard of the devotional life, which he had abandoned in his daily life as a hair dresser in Belo Horizonte. One young bramachari, who was not initiated, had just moved to the temple in Rio de Janeiro. One sympathizer of the movement, a native of Cascavel, Paraná, sang japa at times. The female Brazilian devotees stayed in a hall in one of the buildings of the complex, together with female Russian devotees.

We had a problem in our tent. On the first day of the parikrama, when the devotees got back at about 16:30, they found the tent locked. The psychologist from Pernambuco, who had not gone to the parikrama, had left for an excursion and only got back at 18:30. The next day, we agreed that the key would remain with us. The situation was inverted and he had to wait. On the third day, we decided to leave the key under the bamboo floor, inside the tent.

On the fourth day however, one devotee who was in the encampment, returned to the tent, because he would not continue the pilgrimage on the fifth day. He left for the early morning worship and locked the man from Pernambuco sleeping in the tent. At 8 am, at the end of the ceremony, by chance I asked if the first man had the key. He said yes. I ran to the tent and was able to open it as the other man woke up. He was quite upset, because he was having problems with the younger devotees, who criticized him for not participating in the Parikrama. He felt that the near incident was a form of aggression.

When the parikrama was over, the crisis exploded. The psychologist from Pernambuco appeared at the tent with an apple from the morning meal, inside a small clay pot in which juice was served in the cafeteria. These clay utensils are supposed to be broken after use. In the eyes of the devotees, that small pot with fruit inside looked like an offering...to the ghosts! To take food, even ceremonially consecrated food, to the place for sleeping is an impure habit that is condemned at the temples. It is seen as a stimulus to the

beings that are in the subtle body, the shadows condemned to not reincarnate a human body who accompany the great god Shiva. Since that man threw runes and did readings for other non-devotees, one of the Brahmana bramacharis from Rio de Janeiro, in the third tent, upon seeing his little clay pot quickly retorted: – “Is that where you leave your “Exu?” in a syncretic allusion to the Afro-Brazilian cults.

The psychologist obviously did not feel comfortable. He wound up moving to the US\$400 tent. In addition to moving his tent, he decided, together with some other non-devotees, to go to Calcutta to visit the works of Mother Teresa. They stayed there nearly the entire week, only returning on the day we left. This type of incident was also interpreted by the devotees as an “Krsna’s doing”. The psychologist was seen by the others not only as a non-devotee, but as an impure person, who was not interested in the spiritual life of the others. This created tension. On one hand, he should be respected, because he was associated to the Festival and was not required to accompany the official program. On the other, the younger devotees, who were still not initiated, did not resist criticizing him according to the principles of discipline in which they were being socialized. They treated him with clear disdain. From their point of view, he placed himself in the lowest of positions, because he did not follow the devotional lifestyle that they made an effort to place themselves in.

* * *

Another incident, involving the teacher from Campina Grande, became a good example of how the ideal of spiritual self-realization could be experienced by an initiating devotee, allowing the visualization of immersion in the Vaishnava communitas, from the perspective of this individual. Upon returning from the parikrama, my tent companions began to speak a lot with each other about each one’s situation in relation to the ideals of the spiritual life and of their positions in the movement as a whole. It was a collective process of evaluation of spiritual self-realization before their sacred sources in India, not the Hare Krishna movement in Brazil, but of the individual limits of “becoming a devotee”. With the departure of the man from Pernambuco, the atmosphere calmed down and the seven others sought to be cordial to each other.

On February 27, when the man from Pernambuco left the tent, they were all concerned about organizing their things, washing clothes, counting their money, and mainly, keeping the tent clean. The next day, the 28th, that Bhakta from Campina Grande continued to clean and organize his things. He began a process of self-evaluation speaking out loud to himself, while he looked for a list of orders that the members of the Hare Krishna Cultural Center of Campina Grande had given to him:

– Where did I leave that piece of paper? I never know where I put things! My mother always told me that I don't lose my head because it's attached to my neck! It must be here in this bag, I did not take it to the parikrama! My mother was shocked by the modes of the devotees: – “Son, will you eat with your hands? Don't lose your good manners”! Where is the paper, my God, I am not good for anything!...

He had a utility knapsack with lots of small pockets and zippers. He was becoming a bit hysterical, and deprecated himself while he continuously asked for Krishna to help him. I wound up asking him to keep calm, that he would soon find the paper. His concern, however, was in buying in Mayapur some worship objects for his Cultural Center, because these articles are of better quality in India. He wanted to do this with his free time on those days. In his agitation, however, he vented his tensions, including the values of his original family rearing, and his devotional lifestyle. He was “passing”, from one lifestyle to another. I would discover, later, however, that this was not an “hysterical attack”, but one of the most authentic processes that a Vaishnava could make from the perspective of Bhakti Yoga.

On the next day, I found him when he left the inauguration of the Pushpa Samadhi, at about 13:30. He had a big problem. He had gone back to the tent soon after the morning meal and found the paper he had been looking for, in a bag with his money, and not in one with the money from his companions, where he thought he had left it. Getting the paper bag, with all his money, he went to the shop in front of the Memorial de Prabhupada, to buy batteries for his flashlight.

He could not explain what happened, but he left the bag with the money on the shop counter. Since he did not speak English, he wanted me to go there to know what had happened. The store, which was owned by ISCKON and run by Bengali devotees, sold a bit of everything, batteries, candles,

medicine, towels, cups. For this reason, it was a very busy place. I asked the salesperson if he had found a bag that the devotee had forgotten. He did not say anything, simply gave me the bag, with the shopping list and without the money, US\$500 and 2,000 rupees. There was obviously nothing more that could be done about the money.

The devotee was quite depressed at first. He did not want to say anything to Iswara Swami, but the next morning his Guru called him to talk about the issue. He said that these things happen, since there are thousands of people at the Festival and not everyone could be trusted. The Guru wanted to know if the devotee would be able to continue his trip without that money. In fact, the devotee's expenses for food and lodging were paid for. If he saved the money from the Cultural Center, he could buy all the things they asked for and still have a bit for an emergency, because things in India were quite cheap. I agreed to lend him something when we got to New Delhi.

We became close and he told me a bit about his history in the movement. The Cultural Center in Campina Grande is quite active. They receive support from the Indian merchants who live there and have a regular program of free distribution of vegetarian food. The Hare Krishna presence is composed of groups in Campina Grande, João Pessoa, Recife and Caruaru, where there is another rural community, Nova Vrajadama. Due to the local climate and ecology⁴ it is similar to some places that we visited in India, a fact that was very pleasing to the devotees from the Northeast, who felt "at home".

He lived in a small city close to Campina Grande, where he worked, dedicating Sundays to activities at the Cultural Center. Campina Grande is the capital of forró dancing and of large and important festivals known as "festas juninas" because they are held in June of each year. The local lifestyle is marked by these manifestations, with lots of drinking and licentious behavior. He believed the Hare Krishna movement would "save him", because he was "sinking", into that lifestyle marked by "intoxication and illicit sex", "contaminating" activities that the movement condemned.

In the year of the 100th anniversary, a series of activities was being held, with considerable success in those four cities and he was quite involved in all

4 This municipality is located in a "small mountain range, with streams and forest. Like most of India, it is semi-arid with a rainy season in the middle of the year. The largest temple in the Northeast, however, is the one in Salvador, which also helps to administer Nova Vrajadama.

the programs. He met his guru on a visit that the guru had made to Recife, during a festival. The Swami had asked for a cup of water and the man from Campina Grande wanted to take it to him, but another Bhakta did so first. This other devotee tripped, falling on the floor and scraping his knee. This man went back to him and said; – “I’m sorry, you should have taken the water, Iswara Swami is your guru.” The man from Campina Grande went to the Swami with the water. The swami asked: – “Are you afraid?” he said no, and asked if the Swami would accept him as a disciple. On that, his first trip to India, he was having the opportunity to have a personal association with the Guru, and serve him, although he did not accompany him constantly like the bramacharis.

He was chanting sixty-four daily rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra on his rosary beads that every devotee uses, while the others would chant only the 16 rounds prescribed by Srila Prabhupada. He had made this vow on the day we left for India. He was firmly determined to purify himself on the trip. His attitude changed completely after the incident. He began to serve prashadam in the large hall in the mornings, and to participate in the Hari Nama at midnight, which took place in the small hut where Srila Prabhupada had lived in the 1970s. These are voluntary activities, considered very purifying, but few Brazilian devotees participated.

My association with this Bhakta was very fruitful. Since I also had little money, we stayed far from the shopping activities of various devotees. I began to see that he was realizing one of the ideals most dear to Vaishnavism. Involuntarily, he “gave up everything for Krishna”, and now truly delivered himself, accompanying the development of the events. According to the other devotees, he had offered his impurities to Krishna, who was purifying him. The incident was proof of Krishna’s mercy, it was a special blessing from Srila Prabhupada.

This incident allowed him to access the principal dimension of spiritual life, which is the personal relationship of each devotee with Krishna, through the Guru, the japa mal, the Aratiks, the pujas. The entire Hare Krishna ritual life is understood as a means for the individual to attain this tie with the Supreme Being, connecting his individual soul to the Supreme Soul. Although this is one of the most common themes in the talks of the swamis, the devotees speak little about it, discussing their own experiences. The redundancy of the solemn words of the Swamis creates a false impression

that everyone is joined in the same perpetual rite whose meaning and objectives are reduced to themselves.

Thanks to the affliction of the Bhakta, due to the loss of money, he wound up sharing with me a bit of his transcendental emotions. When he ended the trip, he sent me a letter, in which he demonstrated he was already in command of the evangelical discourse of the movement, an expression of his spiritual realization, or in the terms considered here, an expression of the normatization of his mystical experience:

All glory to the 100th Anniversary of Srila Prabhupada!

I was very happy to get your letter and the other objects. I was waiting for this moment, mainly to reveal our paths to each other. It's really impossible to forget the trip to India. I always thank Krishna and Prabhupada for this wonderful opportunity. My mind and the photographs are constantly revealing the auspicious moments that I lived and witnessed and I miss those days...

This June here in Campina Grande there was a week of the walk, a Padayatra, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Prabhupada. We were graced through the satsanga of Maharaja Iswara and Maharaja Purushatraya, which deeply illuminated us. It was the day of Corpus Christi and there was an initiation ceremony, two male devotees and one woman devotee received their spiritual names, together with the presentation of the Brahmama thread to each of them. I was one of the initiates and received the spiritual name of Markandeya Rishi das.

The commitments and responsibilities become more evident. I am still strongly contaminated and have many desires in my mind, but, nevertheless, I am convinced that I need to make an effort to be worthy of the mercy of the Guru and of Krishna, and in this determination I seek refuge in the Maha Mantra Hare Krishna (japa), in the devotees (Sadhusanga) and in the books of Prabhupada. I found a spiritual master who gave me Krishna and I pray to Krishna to overcome the obstacles.

Come to visit the farm,⁵ in terms of lodging, the devotees always stay with the brahmacharis in their ashramas, they don't have to pay, but we must always be courteous and make a donation to the temple. Usually, when people visit the temple they make donations, we saw this a lot in India.

Keep working on the environmental week, it is very important that we idealize or organize events to promote Krishna consciousness (this was always Prabhupada's objective). People today are increasingly plunged in materialism, and thus distant from God, we have a very important mission which is to expand Krishna consciousness, taking people back to the Supreme. A

5 In this case, Nova Vrajdham, in Caruaru, Pernambuco state.

priori, we conduct a program at the school where I teach (Padayatra Week). The devotees captivate the students singing the Maha Mantra with karatalas, drums, harmonium. Everyone sings, dances, jumps, it was incredible, soon afterwards, we distributed the prashadam (a natural snack with juice.)

Krishna is constantly calling us: surrender to me, do not be afraid, I will illuminate you, I will protect you. Isn't that what he said? What are we waiting for? Please, accept to be the most beloved son of the Master and live a more pure life. For this reason, the first step is to accept the spiritual master and move forward. "Making an effort to learn, simply by approaching a spiritual master, inquire submissively and serve him. The self-realized soul can give you knowledge because it knows the truth...and when you have thus learned the truth, you will never again fall into illusion".

It is worthwhile to be initiated and accept the guru as our master, father, teacher, friend. Which is also to say to assume more responsibilities and sacrifices. We live quite austerely to have education, food, clothing, etc....when we know that all these things are mere material effects, and moreover, temporary. To invest in transcendental knowledge, in love and service to the Supreme Personality of God, Sri Krishna, is the most intelligent route, because it will give us the discernment to finally end the cycle of birth, aging and death, our own and of our brothers.

We will remain perseverant in the Krishna Consciousness and spread the message of Srila Prabhupada!

* * *

There is no generic devotee among the adepts of the Hare Krishna Movement, because to become a devotee and maintain a devotional life is a process in permanent construction, through the ritually constructed positions. On the other hand, the most characteristic rite of the movement, the Hari Nama Sankirtana, aims to have all the participants feel united in a single generic category, the Bhakta, the devotee of Lord Krishna. It is even possible to interpret the idea of this religious option, prema bhakti, the pure devotion, as the search for the realization of a state of permanent liminality, free of any structural social reference, such as family origins or other social positions. This ideal is only achieved by the "pure devotees", who should even transcend the specifically spiritual positions of this culture, like that of the Swami.

Those three tents in encampment N° 08, in particular, wound up being organized according to the large internal categories of the Hare Krishna movement. The first was characterized by those who do not have a defined spiritual

discipline, like the bhaktas, those aspiring to a spiritual life. The second was the tent of the Brahmanas, who were firm in their austere practice. In the third, were the devotees located in a very special position, that of the “servants” of the spiritual master. All of them were living in renunciation as young bramacharis, Brahamanas, dedicated to cooking and washing the clothes for the Guru, in addition to being responsible for the inexperienced disciples. They were in the **purest** tent of all, while mine was the most contaminated.

The living standard of the bramacharis, based on renunciation, is as they say, “very austere”. It involves waking up at four in the morning, taking cold baths, cleanliness, humility, prayer hours and serving the advanced devotees. The initiated and adult devotees make demands on the younger ones and the neophytes, until they introject the standard. The bramacharis are the best known devotees, the bald young men, dressed in saffron robes, who distribute the books of Prabhupada in the streets.

No one can be a bramachari alone, in their home, but there is no rite of entrance into the Bramacharya ashrama. To the contrary, the passage takes place through the change of residence, clothes and other daily habits, associated to an intensive process of introjection of the values of the movement. If the devotee leaves the community of the ashram, he must stop using the saffron robes. The Bramachari “sankirtanas”, who distribute the books of Srila Prabhupada through the streets, is considered the one who incarnates the spirit of renunciation of the devotee. He is glorified, and there is a periodic journal, the “carta de sankirtana”, in which all the book sales are registered, as well as the performance of each one. The annual champions earn prizes, like a free trip to India.⁶ They are the personification of the anti-structural character of the movement, which takes the contagious joy of the Hari Nama to the streets.

Only after the moment of the first initiation, which for the bramacharis can take place in less than one year, what until then was a liminal process, marked by the spirit of spontaneous communitas, with the candidate to become a devotee, the bhakta, adapting to this new lifestyle, the focus of the new devotional lifestyle becomes transformed into an essential obligation. The naive spontaneity of the sympathizers is worked with through spiritual

6 The champions that year were there, but they were not bramacharis. They were important devotees. The unbeatable champion of the temple in Belo Horizonte is a Brahamana from Recife.

discipline, in a totally ritualized lifestyle. Bramacharya is certainly an anti-structural social category, and it is certainly in it that the normatization of the spirit of *communitas* of Vaishnavism is established.

* * *

The Vaishnava Brahmanas, meanwhile, are devotees par excellence. They are the “twice borns”, in ritual terms. They receive the distinct mantra of the Gaudya Vaishnava sampradaya and the Gayatri mantra, a privilege of the Brahmanas. These devotees complete the process of spiritual formation, they can provide direct service to the deities placed on the altars and they are the commanders of the movement. To be a Brahmana means to belong to a formally recognized social position of people based on a platform of ritual purity, with individual life totally guided and subordinated to the demands of devotional service. The devotees of the second tent, behaved, in Mayapur, as a single body, closed unto itself. They all went to the parikrama together, in a single group. They took prashada together, at the same time. They even took baths in the Ganges together. Mature devotees, already properly normatized, they lived an anti-structural condition that was possible for them, gathered in a single tent. In that liminality, they shared their spiritual realizations.

Spiritual realization, self-realization, which are key concepts within the Hare Krishna movement, are entirely aimed at the devotee as an individual. What is at play, in the first place, is his relationship with Krishna, through devotional service realized under the instruction of his spiritual master. This sociability, in the first place, is explicitly aimed at the good progress of the mission of Srila Prabhupada, the obligations to the maintenance of the deities and service to the guru. At the encampment, these responsibilities were fully realized by the devotees in the third tent. They were Brahmanas, definite devotees, they were bramacharis, devotees who had accepted renunciation. As the Iswara Swami served Prabhupada, they serve him, revising the basic tie of the succession of disciples.

In the case of the future Markandeya Rishi dasa, however, he would realize something else. The entire Vaishnava spiritual discipline, the entire “devotional service”, has a structural social effect. They construct this person who is the Hare Krishna devotee. This should have been clear in the previous pages. The anti-structural value, however, that the devotees truly seek to

realize, is expressed in the category Krishna lila, the transcendental pastime of Krishna. That devotee attained this position, in the eyes of the others, upon losing everything that he had in Mayapur. He became an example of resignation for all the others.

On the day after the installation of the Puspa Samadhi, the prashadam was distributed in Shatipur. This ceremony, conducted in the Samadhi of Adwaita Acharya, allows the participants to receive a special blessing from Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He had promised to personally bless those who distributed prashadam at the location, on that day. This Bhakta from Campina Grande went there, participated in the Hari Nama, in the bhajans and distributed prashadam in a unique state of spirit, because only he had such an intense and unique experience at the Festival, on that important day.

“Lila” literally means “play” and serves to designate practically the entire symbolic universe of the Krishna cult, the bhajans, the pujas, the Aratiks, the daily domestic rites and the big annual rites. This term has been addressed by scholars of ritual such as Tambiah (1985:126), Turner (1982:35) and Singer (1972:148). Not only are Krishna’s pastimes dramatized, but the dramatization, the rite, and the myth, simultaneously, are “Lila”. It is all very festive. They are all playing with Krishna and Krishna is playing with everyone, like the young and innocent pastors of Vrndavanam, 5,000 years ago.

All of this revelry, however, are expressions of the human soul and of its pleasure in encountering the Divine. This is its true transcendental meaning, the objective that the devotees seek. To feel pleasure within that entire life guided by rituals and informed by mythic narratives. Tambiah emphasized that lila does not mean something ordinary, but an effective communication with the divine plane and its extra-worldliness. The realization of this plane is understood as the realization of the spiritual Soul, a theme that also deserves to be discussed, on another plane, not without difficulties in the case of Vaishnava.

A lesson from Narayana Swami, the spiritual brother of Srila Prabhupada, was recently published in Brazil, in which he explained this dimension that is characteristic of devotional life – intimacy:

None of the associates of Sri Krishna speak about their nocturnal experiences. They may enjoy them, but they would never say something about these experiences. Radha would never say how she met with Krishna. We must always pray like the gopis, for whose mercy and by the mercy of Srimati Radhika

we can realize all these things. With our prayers Srimati Radhika grants us understanding. Once she is satisfied with our prayers, she grants us all the teachings, if not, it would be a mere mental exercise.

In the case of the Brazilian devotees, with whom I spoke and who I interviewed afterwards, I realized that they spoke little about themselves as devotees, indicating this dimension. They spoke of the need for spiritual life, of the importance of purification, of the realization of the sankirtana and of the role of the guru. These issues are basically technical, in the sense that Mauss(1974:217) gave to the concept of the Corporal Technique, to the effective traditional acts that constitute the symbolic life of the spirit, as a symbol of assemblages. Mauss(1974:233) came to affirm that India and China developed corporal techniques, mainly respiratory ones, as routes of their mysticism, which can be studied socially.

The teachings of Srila Prabhupada and his disciples, are, in these terms, effective techniques of purification, which are socially available to those who want to try them. Their result, however, the spiritual feelings that it induces, are a delicate theme. The maximum that I attained was the statement below, made by a devotee who was also at the Indian Festival, and with whom I had considerable contact during all the fieldwork:

My relation with the movement is quite mystical. There is no explanation for how I entered the movement. It's not that I went there to the temple and read the books and thought that's it, Prabhupada is right. It was Krishna who brought me. I came here in 86 in Nova Gokula, to get to know it. I stayed for six months. I did not become a devotee. I chanted japa, used the kanti, did devotional service, but I did not understand very much. Someone can come here, but in principle, you are not able to conceive the deities, the mantra. You are very identified with the body. I came to see how it was, I continued to practice devotional service, but since I was contaminated, I was not able to understand many things. I had many doubts. I had an experience to come here and leave. I had to pass through another place, because it wasn't the time for me to awake the Krishna consciousness. But Krishna made a deal for me to become quite strong after this. Now I have no difficulties. I was not realized. You need realization, if not, you don't understand. It's something artificial and you go away. So, Krishna sent me away, because I needed to take a trip to understand something. I felt that something was missing, a gap in my heart,

life was meaningless. Even with material realization, life was without meaning. I decided to come back. The moment I stepped back here I said: it's now! And I gave myself to Krishna, with great austerity, and was able to realize a bit of philosophy in me, to experiment the realization, thanks to the guru.

In relation to the Centennial Festival in particular the other devotee, also a disciple of Iswara Swami, commented in a short and slow interview in 1997:

It was a very special year because of the Festival. We participated in a very beautiful festival in India, you must remember. Mayapur, Vrndavanam. Any devotional service that is given in an ephemeral way like that has a special value, it has a transcendental strength, according to the scriptures. This is a reality, At the time we don't realize it, we will only realize it many years later. It was something very important. 1996 was the year that I was initiated. It was the year that I had the opportunity to travel with my Guru Maharaja, to conduct the excursion to the sacred places of India and spend quite a bit of time there. In addition, there were many important changes in my life. I began to live alone. I took *vanaprastha*, I abandoned the family. That is, the family abandoned me. It was a year of memorable changes in my personal life.

In the case of Markandeya Rishi dasa, however, the apparent misfortune would end up being interpreted as a very special relationship with Krishna. By luck I saw him praying, on that hot afternoon in our tent in Mayapur. Since our association became quite intense after that incident, I was able to speak with him about it and perceive a bit of his parakya realization. All the devotees feel that they are part, in some way, of the Krishna lila. They speak generically about this issue, because, the spiritual life is described as such. No one speaks, however, about the realization of the parakya feeling. It is a secret common to all, paradoxically, the sentiment that individualizes them among each other and makes them feel like a group of people with something very significant in common.

In fact, it involves the most classic theme of the entire cult to Radha Krishna, as narrated in chapters 29 – 33 of the tenth song of the Bhagavata Purana: dance of the Rasa, the apotheosis of the Krishna lila. Krishna enchants all the gopis, the young female pastors of Vrndavanam and has them abandon their homes, to dance with him at the margins of the Yamuna River, on a moonlit night. He dances with all of them, expanding into countless forms, but each gopi believes that Krishna is dancing only with him.

Upon perceiving their pride, he disappears, going to hide with Radha. She also winds up manifesting the same presumptuous sentiment of the favorite, causing him to escape from her as well. Enraged, the gopis look for him in the forest, until they realize that they all enjoyed his company and lost him for the same reason. By being released of this false prestige, of the *ahankara*, he reappears, for all, justifying his disappearance. His desire was to intensify all of their feelings for him. Then, the *Rasa lila* continues, for an entire life of *Brahma*.

The themes of spiritual self-realization are better expressed on the plane of myth. If there is a plane where anti-structural ideas and values, which are transcendent to the plane of social organization, are expressed, it is that of myth. Purification, purity, spiritual realization, liberation, are conceptual expressions of this strength. The myth of the *rasa lila*, which is chanted, dramatized, painted, sculpted and remembered by all of India, appears to contain the key of the devotional sentiments, and to serve to interpret the behavior of the Hare Krishna. Although everyone evidently has in common the option to worship Krishna, which makes them equivalent, it is simultaneously where their peculiar individualism resides. Each devotee relates with Krishna in a unique manner, this is the heart of their individuality, revised by a ritual structure shared by all.

Historic and Sociological Aspects

Victor Turner produced a substantial reflection about the movement of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in West Bengal, and of the ritual aspect of his *Hari nama sankirtana*, the congregational chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra, in streets, squares and temples, which is the registered mark of the religious movement and its Yoga.

The movement of Chaitanya, which Prabhupada propagated, was codified by the Six Goswamis, Bengali disciples of Chaitanya, in his ashram in Vrndavanam, in the 16th century. In Bengal, the preaching of Bhakti yoga is divided among two intimates associated to Sri Chaitanya, Nitiananda Prabhu and Advaita Acharya. Turner presents them as rivals, the first, as an outcast who normatizes the *communitas* spirit of Bhakti, while the other as a Brahmana who would incarnate the structural values of the caste system.

Baskar Chatterjee (1989:321), locates both in relation to the plans of Sri

Chaitanya, within the scope of his movement:

The noblest achievement in Chaitanya's life was an extending of the right to the love of God to all including the backward sections of the society. He charged Nityananda with this noble task by saying(..⁷), while he was residing at Nilacala. He also asked Adwaita Acharya to make the gift of krshna-bhakti to all including the Candalas. He himself embraced Raya Ramananda, Sanatana and Yavana Haridasa with out caring to consider their caste or community. Residing at the residence of Vacaspati Misra, he liberated the invalid, the blind and the deaf. His mission was to reconstruct an egalitarian society under the banner of the name Hari, where there would be no distinction between the ruler and the ruled, the learned and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the Bramana and the Sudra, the Hindu and the Muslim.

Sanyal(1996:183)⁸ expresses how the religiosity associated to Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu became the religious spirit of Bengal since the 18th century. His Bhakti Yoga, which is deeply syncretic, is at the base of a wide variety of local sects, including tantric sects, primarily influenced by the Buddhism from the region. Sri Chaitanya has his life divided into two phases. The first, in Nadia, is marked by the democratic preaching of the Hari Nama Sankirtana, through the interior of Bengal. At 24 years of age he took sannnyasa and went to live in Jaganatha Puri, in the neighboring state of Orissa, while Nityananda Prabhu continues his Sankirtana movement, preaching to the Bengali people. In this second phase, Sri Chaitanya did not constitute a sect around himself, to the contrary. He was the living example of Krishna Bhakti self-realized. In his person, he combined the enthusiasm of the Bengali masses, with which he also captured interest in Orissa, a neighboring state to the South, with the theoretical and literary principles of Vaishnavism.

Majumdar(1989:337) discusses a more delicate aspect. Many of the sahajiya sects related to Sri Chaitanya did not have historic ties with his movement, but many, including Indian authors, had prejudices against them. Nityananda Prabhu, for example, also wound up being described in these terms:

7 In this portion there is a verse in Bengali that was not translated, about the importance of Bhakti for spiritual salvation.

8 Sanyal's text is in the collection organized by D.N. Jha, *Society and Ideology in India: Essays in Honour of Prof^o R.S. Sharma*.

Sri Chaitanya, the founder of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, made Nilacala (Puri) the centre of his activities and directed his followers to propagate his ideals at different parts of India. Nityānanda, who had a special charisma owing to his long association with the Master, was sent in Bengal. But according to a few Vaishnava authors, Nityānanda deviated from the high ideal of Sri Chaitanya and plunged into a life of comfort and luxury. “In his hands he wore gold bangles and his arms were adorned with gold armlets. His fingers contained costly rings and various necklaces set with pearls, jewels and corals adorned his neck.” According to most historians of the earlier generation, to which even R.C. Majumdar was included, the activities of Nityānanda created an atmosphere of anarchy and confusion among the poor and grass-root level followers of Bengal Vaisnavism. The spiritual ideal of non-duality in the idyllic love of Radhā and Kṛṣṇa was not understood. They took it in vulgar sense. Being confused they were divided into so many splinter groups like the Āul, Sāin, Bāul, Darvesh, Nedā, Kartābhajā, Spastadāyaka, Sakhibhāvaka, Kisoribhajani, Rāmavallabhi, Jaganmohini, Gauravādi, Sāhebhdhani, Pāgalanāthi, etc.

Turner, however, affirms that: “But, once again, a devotional movement is predestined to capsize in the choices of doctrinal formulation”, without considering that he was facing, not one movement, but various movements, which have in common the same symbolic universe. Thus, it is not an issue of an internal distinction that is directly interpretable in terms of structure-anti-structure. All of these sects are anti-structural in relation to the caste system characteristic of northern India, because people are affiliated regardless of their birth, and all reinterpret the same symbolic universe, each one according to distinct options. As Turner emphasized, equality in one social dimension supposes inequality in another. Here, to the same cult corresponds two large socially distinct modalities, smartas and sahajias, which illustrate well the limits of egalitarianism and of social transit, which the Indian sects construct in their original context.

Prabhupada taught the “uppercast” version of the Gaudya Vaishnavism, in which the people of Chaitanya, Nityananda, Adwaita and Gadadhara, are considered divine incarnations, and Nityananda is as adored as Chaitanya. They are Goura&Nityai, a deity that is extremely popular, chanted and celebrated by all the Gaudyas. The relations between them, including the tensions between Nityananda and Adwaita, are considered to be based on an elaborate manipulation of the symbolic Vaishnava structure, which it is

not appropriate to present here, but which instead of shaping oppositions, establishes a plane of symbolic mediations between true social oppositions. These social distinctions are manifest in mythic and biographical versions of these personalities who are considered sacred, differing according to the particular sect.

Turner (1974:163) was more interested in illustrating the thesis that there is a “regular connection between liminality, structural inferiority, low social position and structural foreignness, on one hand, and of universal human values peace, health, justice, fraternity, equality, formulated in a utopian manner”.⁹

In general, this consideration makes sense for gaudya Vaishnavism, and is appropriate for considering the new adepts, like the Brazilians, given the universalization of this religious movement. On the specifically symbolic plane of myth, however, we find another dimension. The great anti:structural theme of the Vaishnavism, on the symbolic plane, is common to both groups of sects, but with radically distinct reinterpretations. There is a strong consensus among the Bengali sects about the sacredness of Sri Chaitanya, the young Brahmana of Nadia and the Swami of Puri. He is adored by all as a simultaneous incarnation of the supreme couple Radha-Krishna, through the mantra Hare Krishna. The symbolic link of Vaishnavism is the ecstasy of the love between Radha and Krishna. Radha is a married youth, but has a youthful love for Krishna. In this story, all are pastors – gopas and gopis – living on the banks of the Yamuna River, in Vrndavanam, in the district of Mathura, about 100 km from Delhi.

According to Chatterjee(1993:181) in the sahajya sects, men and women can realize the spiritual form of Radha and Krishna in their own beings, through their own ritual practices. The sahajias incorporate this mythological theme in a doctrine that is realized in extra-conjugal ceremonial practices. These sects are seen as impure or disrespectful to good conduct, causing the Sahajya to survive as peripheral movements in Gaudya Vaishnavism. The orthodox Vaishnavas would never think of conducting

9 Peirano(1995:50) warns of the difference between Turner writing about the Ndembu people, where deep analyses are developed about a first-hand ethnographic material, and Turner using other ethnographic materials for his more general theoretical considerations. In the second case, as I discuss in relation to Sri Chaitanya, the diversity of cases addressed implies a superficiality in the intellectual treatment. The data becomes illustration, instead of discussion.

among themselves the ecstasy of Radha Krishna and of the gopis. For the lower castes, however, spiritual life allows a recourse to symbolic protest against social injustices, in the form of a “revolt of the spirit”, against the excessive social obligations.

Both practices, *sahajyas* and *smartas*, therefore, are anti-structural in relation to routine social obligations. Both establish particular forms of mystic contemplation. There is a voluntary and conscious option for ecstasy, for the liminal transcendence of *Bhakti yoga*. *Sahajyas* are impure in relation to the *smartas* within the Gaudya Vaishnavism, in an hierarchy that considers levels of realization of the ideals of Sri Chaitanya, within quite specific social interests.

The meetings of Krishna and the gopis are simultaneously routine and ecstatic, transcendental to any code of conduct, symbolizing that there are no limits to spiritual life, qualitatively distinct from material life. Here is the paradox: it is through an apparent impurity, conjugal infidelity, taken as a symbol, that the spiritual purity is completely expressed. The specifically karma-free, liberated platform is represented in terms of a break with the specifically karma-ethic values, of the social conventions. It is this innocent illicit union, *parakya*, which allows the establishment of *prema*, love of God. As *Swakya*, the licit and sacramental union of marriage, leads to *kama*, enjoys material life. This difference expresses the difference between spiritual life and material life, as Gaudya Vaishnavism indicates.

There is only one common question to all of Indian philosophy, which is: How can souls escape the ties of causality that keep them bonded to the wheel of the world? It is this liberation, “*Moksa*”, that consists of the salvation in the Indian sense. It is the realization of this ideal that leads to the “religious individualism” that is characteristic of Indian mysticism. There is nothing comparable here to the idea of “predestination” or divine selection. It is the responsibility of each “individual soul” (to use Max Weber’s term) to work to resolve their own destiny. In the final analysis, each individual can only save him or herself.

In this sense, Weber(1958:170) defines that: “Indian philosophy essentially represents a theory of the metaphysical structure of the soul as the vehicle of individuation.” Later he concludes that: “from such mysticism no ethic for life within the world could be deduced”.

Weber defines the hierarchy of spiritual roles that results from this

belief system, as well as the extra – and intra-worldly dimensions of the doctrine of salvation:

Corresponding to the organically graded holy statuses there were: redeemed ones (*jivanmukta*); other-worldly aspirants to salvations by means of asceticism or contemplation; the ritually correct and Veda-educated Brahmins; and, further, the simple laity. In accord with this attempt was naturally made to bring the steps of extra-worldly, soteriological, karma-free holy seeking and the inner-worldly *karma*-ethic together into organic relation. (1958:179)

In these terms, karma-ethic means that good actions have good results, while karma-free means that actions taken within a spirit of “detachment”, do not result in karma, good or bad. The passage from one plane to another can be understood by the term spiritual self-realization. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and the other Gaudya Vaishnava saints are celebrated with such enthusiasm by the adepts of his movement, because they completely realized this passage. This is the great theme of the Bhagavad-Gita, the most popular Hindu literary work, which Weber considered afterwards.

The doctrine of the Gita exposes the importance of a state of spirit in which actions are conducted without an “attachment” to their results but guided only by Krishna, the Supreme Lord. Any action can have sacred value as long as it is taken with complete indifference, as a manifestation of devotion to Krishna. It was this knowledge that Srila Prabhupada came to teach in the West, exhaustively discussing the theme that Weber denominated as karma-free, the liberation of the individual from the cycle of births and deaths, through detached action.

This is the plane where the distinction between structure-anti-structure as discussed by Turner (1974:195) makes sense. It is possible to locate the values of karma ethic /karma free of Chaitanya bhakti based on this dialectical concept of structure-anti-structure. Krishna Bhakti consists in a profound and intimate contemplation of this mystery, personified by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

Turner’s mistake was to interpret the symbolism present in the largest religious movement of Western Bengal as an expression of this social system, without considering it in its broader historic context. Turner had access to more information and studies about Indian religion, such as Marriot, which he used in his fifth and final chapter in O Processo Ritual [The Ritual

Process].¹⁰ Marriot analyzed the Holi, the Indian new year festival, in a village in Vrndavanam, as a rite of status reversal, where the socially weak become aggressive and the socially dominant, humble, amid countless ecstatic experiences of *Communitas*.

What Marriot shows is that Krishna is the soul of Holi, the personification of the spirit that transcends all the social rules. According to him, (in Turner-1974:226):

Krishna does not put off the settling of accounts of the powerful until the final judgment day, but programs them regularly in the form of a dance with masks, to be conducted on the full moon each March. The Holi of Krishna is not a simple doctrine of love, it is primarily the text of a drama that should be played out by all the devotees, with passion and joy.

The reversal of status liberates the participants from the social positions that they occupy. They are all devotees, playing the pastimes of Krishna, the cow herd of Vrndavanam, who inundates all with *prema*, divine love, liberated in the atmosphere of the *communitas* of the ritual. The final result, on the other hand, is the accentuation of the principle of individually purified social hierarchy, thanks to ritual reversal.

Turner (1974:240) discusses that the notion of individual liberty, by means of rituals and religious beliefs, has one meaning for the dominant and others for the subordinated. The social liminality of the strong is weakness, manifest in attitudes of humility, renunciation and resignation, as found in the religious teachings of the spiritual leaders of high social origin. The social liminality of the subordinated, however, is symbolic strength, liberated by the playful dramatizations of the ceremonies of status reversal. The religious beliefs and practices dominated by structurally subordinated individuals also appeals to this force. Bourdieu (1987:87), commenting on Weber, saw in this type of relationship the essence of the religions of salvation. He affirmed:

The religious demands tend to be organized around two large types that correspond to two large types of social situations, that is, the *demands for legitimation* of the established order particular to the privileged classes, and the *demands for*

¹⁰ Singer(1966), edited a collection entitled "Krishna: rites, myths and attitudes, with some of his own articles and those by Dimock Jr, Marriot, and others, which summarizes the discussion about *Bhakti yoga* at that time. The article by Edward Dimock Jr. in this collection has a detailed discussion about *swakiya/parakiya* among *sahajiyas* and *smartas*.

compensation particular to the disfavored classes (religions of salvation). (Italics by the author)

Given these perspectives, the social situation of Vaishnavism in West Bengal becomes clearer. High and low castes find and reinforce their distinctions around the same symbolic universe in which is constituted the Bengali identity. Purity/impurity in this context are values related to that type of demand. It is possible to infer that the high castes are required to confer their purity before the impurity of the lower castes. They, in turn, have symbolic mechanisms for demanding social compensation, within this same idiom.

The issue in question, that is, what can be understood of this Vaishnava social configuration, in terms of structure-anti-structure, must consider the other social agents involved. This observation reinforces the need for a study that seeks to consider the religiosity of the Vaishnava sects in their specificity, in a sociology of spiritual self-realization, which these Indian movements allow discussing, whose object is constituted around the social effects derived from their mystic individualism in their specific contexts.

Madan(1994:204), upon describing the development of Islam in Bengal, leads us to believe that Islam was promoted in East Bengal within this social dynamic. Muslim missionaries and kings reached Bengal after the 13th century, when the Brahmin order was being restored,¹¹ taking the place of a socio-political order of Buddhist orientation. The Islamization took place primarily in the lower rural castes, in opposition to the Hindu high castes, in a dynamic and syncretic movement that gave origin to Bengali Islam itself. Many of those converted were sahajyas.

When Islam finally organized a new Bengali society in the 16th century, within Islamic India, Sri Chaitanya and the Hari nama sankirtana arose, which was anti-structural in relation to the new order. The Bengali Muslim dynasty, which at the time of Sri Chaitanya governed Bengal, remained independent from the Sultanate of Delhi, and gave great impulse to cultural development, translating to the local idiom both the Koran and Sanskrit texts, allowing Sri Chaitanya to popularize them.

For some time, the Vaishnavism of Sri Chaitanya was also seen with reserves by the high castes, which accused him of being sentimentalist and

11 In the sense of the historic orthodox restoration of Hinduism, as presented by Weber(1958) in the ninth chapter.

naive, a promoter of a religion suitable for the uncultured masses that he attracted. This dynamic between structure-anti-structure, in this Indian case allows considering the Indian social universe operating within the plane represented by this dialect, with much less restraint than in the West. For this reason its examples are better.¹²

To understand them, however, it is necessary to recognize, as does Dumont(1992:323), that in this case, nothing exists outside of the relational universe. Since no institution, in particular, is defined based on its own essence, no religious movement can be exclusively anti-structural, because no social category is only essentially structural. What can be perceived is a dialectic between social categories and social dimensions, operated symbolically and ritually.

Turner, in his manner, also “returned to the West”, in his theoretical considerations. Based on a deep analysis of the rites of the Ndembu people of Central Africa, he discusses the spirit of *communitas* of the religious movements to reach the questions particular to the modern utopias. Turner’s final conclusion (1974:244) is substantial. He observes that in modern societies, which are highly specialized and have strong intergroup ties, individuals make efforts to feel the spirit of *communitas* by participating in supposedly universalist ideological movements or in small groups of “outsiders” such as hippies. The modern world offers many opportunities for the rise of scenes of “spontaneous *communitas*”, whose effects are reabsorbed in their characteristic dynamic.

What Turner does not discuss extensively is that the value and position of these situations of *communitas* in the modern world are highly displaced, compared to their presence in traditional situations. A good example that he uses is Halloween in the United States. An entire “mythic fauna” is incarnated in threatening costumes for children, who are the ages of Krishna and his gopis of the Holi. Both ceremonies establish an indubitable spirit of *communitas*. Both are youthful games, but Holi has a symbolic importance that Halloween does not have.

There is no city of witches in the United States where Halloween is “taken

12 It is important to recall that Weber(1986:145) characterized the universality of the Indian doctrine of karma/samsara as the more rational formulation of another worldly contemplative mysticism. For Weber, the Brahmanas organized the only doctrine of salvation and of society that exists with complete logical coherence. That is, a formulation of humanity in structural and anti-structural terms.

seriously”, comparable to Vrndavanam, Mathura and Mayapur, the sacred sties of the Vaishnavas. These locations are marked by an anti-structural spirituality within their context of origin, which constitute a very well-defined symbolic structure. They are important pilgrimage centers, they are essential centers of reference for the Hindu ethos. It is questionable to speak of spontaneous *communitas* in social contexts such as Vrndavanam and Mayapur, given that the lifestyle of these locations is completely structured around Hari Nama Sankirtana.

When Turner (1976:199) uses the Baules as an example of spontaneous *communitas*, which is a *sahajia* sect, and one of its songs of *sankirtana*, he comments that the pop singer Bob Dylan placed his photo among Baules on one of his records, approximating the two groups. This image is very important, because at the same time in which Turner released the first edition of his “*O Processo Ritual*” in 1969, Srila Prabhupada and his U.S. adepts made a record with the Beatles, which was very successful. The Maha Mantra was also included on the sound track of the musical *Hair*, definitively associating itself to the New York hippie culture. The *sankirtana* simultaneously reached the pop world, in its most expressive *smarta* version and in its more characteristic *sahajya* version.

For this reason it is necessary to reflect on the difference between the Indian *Swami* and his Western disciples,¹³ to be able to consider the relevance of the concept of *communitas*, considering this type of social process. It is evident that Srila Prabhupada was in the first place seeking to realize his guru’s plan by distributing Vaishnava books and promoting festivals outside of India. From his point of view, to create a community of followers of Chaitanya Bhakti, can be understood progressively from a perspective of structured or normative *communitas*. He was resocializing those people within a lifestyle that only he knew, a set of organizational norms of Indian origin.

From the perspective of his followers, everything is new, everything is spontaneous. The notion of spontaneous *communitas* makes sense for interpreting the relationship between these people, from the hippie environment, and the world that Srila Prabhupada offers them, in those improvised

13 This theme was the subject of another article I wrote: “New Age & Neo hinduísmo: uma via de mão dupla nas relações culturais entre Ocidente e Oriente” published in *Ciências Sociais e Religião* Nº 07, Ano 7, setembro de 2005. Porto Alegre: ACSR. Pp. 73-101.

environments. Seen in this way, we have three dimensions to consider: that of the Swami, that of the disciples and that of the temple. The organization of the guru-disciple relationship was being constructed around a temple and a ceremonial life developed for them. This needs to be properly considered.

At another moment, Turner(1988:272) himself reconsiders his concepts, in a dialog with Indian authors, around fundamental aspects of the symbolic universe of the sects. The title of the work is quite explanatory.¹⁴ If we are facing another social plane, the expression of its organization would also be on the connotative and analogical plane. The Indian examples illustrate the type of normative *communitas* found in periodical rituals of the status reversal.

Based on a Sikh example and the criticisms of J.S. Uberoi, Turner admits that the caste system is only one part of the Hindu universe. Social anthropologists always work with the castes, excluding the ashramas, which compose the “*varnashradharma*”. The social system of the castes has been subordinated to an anti-caste dimension, manifested in the religious orders of those who have taken to a life of renunciation, whose principles do not consider birth status and caste, as we have seen.

The total social structure of medieval India was composed of three levels: the governing class; the real caste system, which is the world of heads of family; and the orders that adopt renunciation. The inter-relations between these dimensions define the social field at the time. The anti-structural dimension of these sects, personified by their *swamis*, located permanently at the limits and passages of social life, are opposed to the person of the prince, the center of socio-political life. The life of renunciation, and family life, on the other hand, form a cycle, not an opposition.¹⁵

In the *Sikh* case there was a social process comparable to Protestant reform. The Sikhs created their intra-worldly asceticism, combining the principles of royalty, renunciation and of family life in a single set of faith and renunciation. Turner(1988:286) would finally discuss how processes of structure, anti-structure, counter-structure¹⁶ and re-structuring coexist and

14 Metaphors of Anti-structure in Religious Culture, in *Dramas, fields and metaphors*, Cornelli, 1974. London.

15 As Madan(1988) discusses in depth. It should not be forgotten, however, that, according to the Bhagavad-Gita, both Rajah as well as a Bhaktah (understood as one who lives in renunciation) are representatives of Krishna, on distinct planes.

16 Turner discusses that anti-structure does not mean opposition to social structure. As the Indian cases

modify each other in a single ritual field. Their influences are expressed in metaphors, through the properties of reversibility of this field, which is characteristic of the Indian sects.

* * *

Turner uses one more example, Lingayat,¹⁷ analyzing its modality of Bhakti yoga. Lingayat began as a movement of oppressed peoples, but not a movement of low castes against high castes, but of illiterate against literate. A symbolic protest in name of direct, original and individual religious experience, against the temple hierarchies and their ritualism. Here we also had the production of translations of Sanskrit literature to Karnak, producing the first distinct regional expressions, including with saints originating from all the castes. In the place of the ancient hierarchy by birth, the movement proposed a mystical hierarchy by experience, an hierarchy based on the experience of self-realization.

In the specifically symbolic field, as Dumont (op.cit.) observed, the fundamental trinity of the virasaivas is composed of the guru, linga and jangama, the spiritual master, the symbolic emblem of Shiva and the ascetic saint, considered the living representative of the temple by the linga. This relationship is expressed in terms of an opposition, because the characteristic movement of the wandering jangama is opposed to the evident fixedness of the linga of the temple, sthavara.¹⁸

Turner(1974:291) proposes that the distinction between the characteristics of sthavara and jangama can be interpreted in terms of structure-anti-structure. To the first term, corresponds, in the first place, the temple and everything that it represents, the state, property, the positions of status. The second, to the contrary, is the mystical individual in constant movement, a man in permanent liminality, moving from village to village.

Both are approximate, they become one, in the following terms: to the temple of the linga corresponds the body of the ascetic. The first term is

show, the egalitarianism of the sects complement the hierarchy of the castes. But there are counter-structural situations, which establish passages between structural planes.

17 A.K.Ramanujam, Structure and Anti-structure: The Virasaiva example.

18 As Dumont(op.cit) described, the *Lingayat* carry with them a small stone known as a *linga*, which is a symbolic tie between their individual bodies and the body of the sect, the temple.

fixed, the devotees go to the temple. The second term is in movement, the jangama goes to the devotees. Within this symbolic field, society moves, taking advantage of the passages between the planes that these symbolic distinctions allow.

Turner concludes that complex societies, like India's, have a multiplicity of structural subsystems that form a field that is propitious for the growth of counter structures, by which individuals pass through subsystems. The Indian sects, in this case, arise breaking with the established values of the Hindu tradition, but then give them structure, assuming some of its values. Here, Turner, by looking only at Indian cases, is finally able to think conceptually about the movements of symbolic reversibility of this spiritual culture, as "castification." This fundamental characteristic points to the importance of considering the specificity of each modality of cult, within the common symbolic universe of the Hindus. Each sect creates a quite *sui generis* movement that serves the very particular dimensions of each regional context.

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