



# Is a Guru as Good as God? A Vedāntic Perspective

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## Abstract

Within Hindu religious contexts, a guru plays a crucial soteriological role, and is sometimes viewed as being as good as God. Questions of a guru's sphere of epistemic authority thus have far-reaching socioreligious implications. In this paper, I highlight one such implication within the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. I then analyze various Caitanya Vaiṣṇava texts in order to precisely define the parameters of a guru's epistemic authority within this tradition. I suggest that the statements made by gurus within this tradition are of a bipartite nature and describe how an understanding of this bipartite nature can lead to social progress within the tradition. In particular, I highlight how the teachings of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition can be made consistent with contemporary socially progressive values. I also consider some objections and respond to these.

**Keywords** Guru studies · Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism · ISKCON · Religious epistemology

## Introduction

The Hindu guru and theologian, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977 CE), along with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the religious institution that Prabhupāda founded in New York in 1966, have started to receive greater scholarly attention (Bryant & Ekstrand, 2004; Goswami, 2012; Karapanagiotis, 2021; Ketola, 2008; Rochford, 2006). It has been noted that Prabhupāda has made various statements about the role and the status of women, racial minorities such as blacks, and individuals of a lower caste. These statements, which were not uncommon to Prabhupāda's sociohistorical context (20<sup>th</sup>-century West Bengal), portray such groups in a negative light. I will not repeat such statements because they have been described extensively (see Lorenz, 2004 for Prabhupāda's comments on women; Deadwyler, 2004: 371–372 for his comments on racial minorities and lower caste individuals). I will just

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point out that such statements have been uncritically received and internalized by many of Prabhupāda's direct students and present-day followers (Lorenz, 2004: 124), leading to various social problems within ISKCON. For instance, Nori Muster, who spent ten years within ISKCON, recounts, "we women [in ISKCON] lived under a cloud of chauvinism and outright hatred of our gender" (Muster, 2004: 312; for Muster's book-length account of her experience within ISKCON, see Muster, 2013).

Recently, I offered some correctives to the various problems that have affected ISKCON and proposed alternate, socially progressive ways of interpreting Prabhupāda's teachings (Gupta, 2021). In this paper, I make a similar attempt. I argue that when the scope of the epistemic and spiritual authority of a guru within the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition (henceforth Caitanya tradition), to which Prabhupāda belongs, is clearly defined, then individuals, who do accept Prabhupāda as a spiritual authority, can interpret his teachings in a socially progressive manner, even in the face of statements such as those mentioned above.

Before defining the scope of this epistemic and spiritual authority within the Caitanya tradition, I will provide a brief historical backdrop to the Caitanya tradition and describe the role of a guru within Hindu thought and in this tradition. This tradition is based on the life and the teachings of Caitanya (1486–1534 CE), who initiated a widespread movement of loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa (Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*) primarily in parts of eastern India such as Orissa and present-day West Bengal. This movement later spread to the Vṛndāvana area in northern India as well (Bryant, 2017: xxiv). The Caitanya tradition, like other Vaiṣṇava traditions, which emphasize the spiritual importance of cultivating devotion (*bhakti*) to Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, has as its final spiritual goal (*prayojana*) the cultivation of intense devotional love to Kṛṣṇa and his consort Rādhā, whom the tradition considers to be the supremely personal God and Goddess (Sardella, 2012: 182–183; Holdrege, 2015: 160).

The Caitanya tradition is affiliated with the following six exegete-theologians known as the six Gosvamins: Sanātana Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE), Rūpa Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE), Raghunātha Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE), Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE), Raghunātha Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE), and Jīva Gosvāmin (c. 15<sup>th</sup>–sixteenth century CE). Notably, Jīva in particular has engaged the Caitanya tradition with Vedānta,<sup>1</sup> the systems of theo-philosophical inquiry and soteriological practice that have as their textual foundation the *Bhagavadgītā* (c. 500 BCE–200 CE) (henceforth *BhG*), *Brahmasūtra* (henceforth *BS*) (c. fifth century CE), and the *Upaniṣads* (c. 800–300 BCE) (for an in-depth exploration of Jīva's engagement with Vedānta, see Gupta, 2007).

In order to grasp the importance of carefully defining the scope of a guru's epistemic and spiritual authority within the Caitanya tradition, it is first necessary to understand the soteriological importance of a guru within some traditional Hindu contexts.

Jan Gonda defines a guru as "the man who on account of his special knowledge and function was held to be a bearer of power conspicuous by his prestige, 'weight' and influence" (Gonda, 1965: 240). In broader Hindu contexts, the guru is the individual

<sup>1</sup> Hence my choice of referring to this tradition as the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta tradition.

who embodies and enacts spiritual gravitas, and thus has been viewed as “the adept, the skilled one, the preceptor, the saint, the destroyer of karma, the embodiment of god” (Forstheofel & Humes, 2005: 3). Moreover, in the context of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, Māns Broo defines a guru as “a charismatic person who is offered special reverence by one or several persons on account of his awarding him/them initiation and/or especially important spiritual advice” (Broo, 2003: 103).

Indeed, these conceptualizations of the guru are closely aligned with how gurus have traditionally operated within Indian socioreligious contexts (Sooklal, 1990: 16–21). Although a comprehensive survey of the guru’s role throughout Indian history is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Mlecko, 1982 and Sooklal, 1990 for such surveys), it suffices to say that within certain Hindu contexts, the guru has occupied a position of spiritual authority from which they receive intense adoration and reverence from their students. By the medieval *bhakti* period (c. 1000–1750 CE), “respect for the guru was evolving into a devotional form similar to that relating to worship of God” (Sooklal, 1990: 19).

The role of the guru within the Caitanya tradition, as in other Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* traditions such as the Mādhva tradition<sup>2</sup> (Sharma, 2014: 379), is crucial to an individual’s soteriological progress. However, there is an important question concerning the guru’s epistemic authority raised by Daniel Gold: “is the guru taken to be basically an exceptionally wise human being, a respected teacher of age-old traditions? Or is he or she considered first to be an instance of the embodied divine, somehow superhuman and distinct from ordinary mortals” (Gold, 2005: 220). As Gold himself notes, this question has “far-reaching socioreligious implications” (Gold, 2005: 220).

As I shall argue, the epistemological framework of the Caitanya tradition illuminates the answer to this question and provides the means to interpret Prabhupāda’s teachings in a socially progressive manner.

## The importance of a guru within ISKCON

In order to understand the Caitanya tradition’s epistemological framework, it is important to understand the specific role that a guru plays within the Caitanya tradition. Broadly speaking, the two main categories of gurus within the Caitanya tradition are 1) *śikṣā* gurus and 2) *dīkṣā* gurus (Broo, 2003: 96). The former provides spiritual instructions to their students, and the latter “initiates” or formally consecrates an individual into the Caitanya tradition. One can possess several *śikṣā* gurus although one is supposed to have only one *dīkṣā* guru. One’s *dīkṣā* guru can also function as one’s primary *śikṣā* guru. Within ISKCON, Prabhupāda is considered to be the preeminent *śikṣā* guru for every member, providing guidance through his books, lectures, conversations, etc. (Bozeman, 2000: 386).

<sup>2</sup> Founded by Madhva (c. thirteenth century CE).

Broo has presented various reasons why Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas accept a *śikṣā* guru and a *dīkṣā* guru: a) the *śikṣā* guru acts as a spiritual guide for their students, b) the *dīkṣā* guru gives one the ritual and spiritual eligibility to worship Kṛṣṇa by initiating them as a student within Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, c) scriptural texts such as the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*<sup>3</sup> (c. 9<sup>th</sup> to tenth century CE) (henceforth *BhP*) mandate that one accept a *dīkṣā* and *śikṣā* guru, d) the *śikṣā* guru acts a savior who liberates their students from this world, and e) the acceptance of a *śikṣā* and *dīkṣā* guru is a sign of humility that wins Kṛṣṇa's favor (Broo, 2003: 83–93). Hence, the guru within the Caitanya tradition is held to be as good as God (Ketola, 2008: 62 and Broo, 2003: 78–80). However, the precise meaning of this statement must be clearly understood.

According to Jīva in his *Bhaktisandarbhā*, there are three primary reasons why the guru is to be seen as being as good as God: 1) the guru is deserving of the same respect as God (*Bhaktisandarbhā* 211<sup>4</sup>), 2) the guru is like God because they are merciful and can liberate one from ignorance (*Bhaktisandarbhā* 212<sup>5</sup>), and 3) there is a devotional relationship between the guru and God that forges a union between the guru and God (*Bhaktisandarbhā* 213<sup>6</sup>). Hence, as Graham Schweig notes, the guru is “a type of extraordinary confluence of divinity and humanity” (Schweig, 2003: 124). On the one hand, the guru is not viewed as an ordinary human being—they are viewed as God's representative who wields the spiritual capacity to liberate one from worldly ignorance, and on the other hand, the guru is not to be seen as omniscient or omnipotent as God is. The failure to apprehend the guru's status—a mediator between deity and devotee—thus carries a grave social and soteriological risk for the guru's followers according to the Caitanya tradition. If one views the guru as an ordinary human being, one can fail to avail oneself of the guru's soteriological guidance and thus miss the opportunity to attain liberation. For this reason, Prabhupāda cautions his readers against such a perspective (Prabhupāda, 1998: 234). Yet, if one understands the guru to be fully God and possess God's omniscience and omnipotence, then one

<sup>3</sup> For instance, *BhP* 11.3.21 states, *tasmād guruṃ prapadyeta jijñāsuḥ śreya uttamam | śābde pare ca niṣṇātaṃ brahmaṇy upaśamāśrayam ||* (Śāstrī, 1965–1975: Book 11, p. 131). “Therefore, one desiring to know the highest good should submit to a tranquil guru who has knowledge of the scriptures and of God.”

<sup>4</sup> *ācāryaṃ māṃ vijānīyān navamanyeta karhicit | na martya-buddhyāsūyeta sarva-deva-mayo guruḥ ||* (Gosvāmin & Śāstrī, 1985: 438). It should be noted that this of Jīva's reading of *BhP* 11.17.27.

<sup>5</sup> *tataḥ sutarām eva paramārthibhis tādrṣe gurāv ity āha— yasya sāksād bhagavati jñāna-dīpa-prade gurau | martyāsad-dhīḥ śrutam tasya sarvaṃ kuñjara-śaucavat || eṣa vai bhagavān sāksāt pradhāna-puruṣeśvaraḥ | yogeśvarair vimṅgyāṅghrīr loko yaṃ manyate naram || | eṣa śrī-kṛṣṇa-lakṣano 'pi | tataḥ prakṛta-dṛṣṭir na bhagavat-tattva-grahaṇe pramāṇam iti bhāvaḥ ||* (Gosvāmin & Śāstrī, 1985: 438). The bolded text is Jīva's reading of *BhP* 7.15.26–27.

<sup>6</sup> *śuddha-bhaktās tv eke śrī-guroḥ śrī-śivasya ca śrī-bhagavatā sahābheda-dṛṣṭiṃ tat-priyatamatve-naiva manyante, yathā— vayaṃ tu sāksād bhagavan bhavasya priyasya sakhyuḥ kṣaṇa-saṅgamena / suduścikītsyasya bhavasya mṛtyor bhiṣaktamaṃ tvādyā gatīṃ gatāḥ sma || || fikā ca— tava yaḥ priyaḥ sakhā tasya bhavasya | atyantam acikītsyasya bhavasya janmano mṛtyoḥ ca bhiṣaktamaṃ sad-vaidyaṃ tvāṃ gatīṃ prāptāḥ || ity eṣā | śrī-śivo hy eṣāṃ vaktṛṇāṃ guruḥ ||* (Gosvāmin & Śāstrī, 1985: 439). The first section of bolded text is Jīva's reading of *BhP* 4.30.38. The second section of bolded text is an excerpt from Śrīdhara's commentary on *BhP* 4.30.38.

can mistake the guru's somewhat opinionated claims concerning women, racial groups, etc., to be epistemically authoritative with absolute certainty, whereas such statements may have instead been formed on the basis of the guru's enculturation within certain sociohistorical milieus. Defining the precise parameters of a guru's sphere of epistemic and spiritual authority within the Caitanya tradition thus requires a careful analysis of other aspects of its epistemological framework, which I will now turn my attention to. I will first expound upon the epistemological framework of Jīva, who delineates his epistemological views in the *Tattvasandarbhā*.

## Establishing the parameters of a guru's epistemic authority within the Caitanya tradition's epistemological framework

In the *TS*, Jīva declares *śabda*, or scriptural testimony, to be the most reliable means of attaining knowledge about the divine reality (*Tattvasandarbhā* 10<sup>7</sup>). He defends this claim by explaining that the other means of acquiring knowledge, namely sensory perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inferential reasoning (*anumāna*), are insufficient means of apprehending God (*Tattvasandarbhā* 9<sup>8</sup>). Jīva explains that *pratyakṣa* does not wield the same degree of epistemic authority as *śabda* because selves have four basic defects, 1) *bhrama*—the tendency to commit mistakes, 2) *pramāda*—the tendency to become subject to illusion, 3) *vipralipsā*—the desire to cheat others, and 4) *karaṇāpātava*—deficiency in sense-capacities (*Tattvasandarbhā* 9<sup>9</sup>). Jīva also explains that worldly *pratyakṣa* is incapable of comprehending a divine reality whose nature is supramundane and inconceivable (*Tattvasandarbhā* 9<sup>10</sup>). Jīva cites *BS* 2.1.11 “logical reasoning has no solid foundation” in order to demonstrate the inability of *anumāna* to provide perfect knowledge about God (*Tattvasandarbhā* 11<sup>11</sup>).

Thus, for Jīva, the primary means of knowing God is *śabda*, and notably, Prabhupāda also affirms this viewpoint (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda, 1998: 3573). Yet, this is not to say that *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna* are wholly unreliable means of acquiring some measure of knowledge of the world and of God. Jīva mentions that one can acquire knowledge through *pratyakṣa*, although such knowledge is not epistemically infallible (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 10<sup>12</sup>). As Jīva also mentions,

<sup>7</sup> *tatas tāni na pramāṇānīty anādi-siddha-sarva-puruṣa-paramparāsu sarva-laukikālaukika-jñāna-nidānatvād aprākṛta-vacana-lakṣaṇo veda evāsmākaṃ sarvāṅgita-sarvāśraya-sarvācintyāścarya-svabhāvaṃ vastu vividiṣatāṃ pramāṇam* | (Gosvāmin & Śāstri, 1983: 17).

<sup>8</sup> *tatra puruṣasya bhramādi-doṣa-catuṣṭaya-duṣṭatvāt sutarām alaukikācintya-svabhāva-vastu-sparśāyogyatvāc ca tat-pratyakṣādīny api sa-doṣāni* | (Gosvāmin & Śāstri, 1983: 11–12).

<sup>9</sup> See text in note 8.

<sup>10</sup> See text in note 8.

<sup>11</sup> *tarkāpratiṣṭhānāt* from *BS* 2.1.11 (Gosvāmin and Śāstri 1983: 20).

<sup>12</sup> *na hy āgama-jñānaṃ sāmvyavahārikam pratyakṣasya prāmāṇyam upahanti, yena karaṇābhāvān na bhavet, api tu tāttvikam* | (Gosvāmin & Baba, 1965: 9). Note, this is cited from an unspecified passage from Vacāspati Mīśra's *Bhāmāṭī*, which is his commentary Śāṅkara's commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*.

*pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* can also be employed in order to assist the interpretation of scripture (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 9<sup>13</sup>). For instance, Jīva explains that ascertaining one's viewpoint through inferential reasoning (*tātparya-nirṇaya*) is one of several hermeneutical tools that can be used to understand the meaning of scripture (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 11<sup>14</sup>). This perspective is echoed by the Caitanya theologian Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (c. eighteenth century CE), who explains that *ūha*, or reasoning, can be employed in order to understand the intended meaning of a scriptural passage (*Gītābhūṣaṇa* 1.1.3<sup>15</sup>).

So, according to Jīva it is through scriptural testimony, the interpretation of which can be aided by sense perception and inferential reasoning, that one can acquire authoritative knowledge concerning supernatural truths. Still, one may wonder: why should a guru who is held to be a spiritually perfect self<sup>16</sup> have greater epistemic authority than an ordinary self?

Jīva's epistemological framework provides an answer to the above question. Jīva states that like God, the devotees are not overcome by ignorance (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 10<sup>17</sup>). As this statement implies, ordinary world-bound selves are under the influence of such ignorance. Indeed, Jīva later explains that it is difficult for non-omniscient selves to understand the import of scriptural testimony (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 11<sup>18</sup>). However, he mentions that the scriptural teachings can be fully understood when distinguished selves, who possess the necessary perception to attain mastery over the meaning of scripture, acquire insight into scriptural truths through their own experience (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 11<sup>19</sup>). Jīva also adds that logicians cannot comprehend such scriptural truths (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 11<sup>20</sup>). Elsewhere, Jīva cites a verse purportedly from a text called the *Puruṣottamantra*, and this verse states, "the highest form of knowledge is experience connected with the meaning of scripture" (*Sarvasaṃvādinī* 11<sup>21</sup>). It can be implied from Jīva's statements that an advanced spiritual practitioner is not influenced by ignorance and can comprehend the intended meaning

<sup>13</sup> *yathā-śakti kvacid eva tasya taiḥ śācivya-karaṇāt svādhīnasya tasya tu tāny upamardyaṅpi pravṛttidarśanāt* | (Gosvāmin & Baba, 1965: 5).

<sup>14</sup> *upakramopasaṃhārāv abhyāso'pūrvaṭā phalam | arthavāḍopapatī ca liṅgaṃ tātparya-nirṇaye ||* (Gosvāmin and Baba 1965: 18). This verse is purportedly from a text called the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* and is also supposedly quoted in Madhva's commentary on *BS* 1.1.47.

<sup>15</sup> *pūrvāparāvirodhena ko'rtho'trābhīmato bhavet ity ādyam ūhanaṃ tarkaḥ śuṣka-tarkaṃ tu varjayet ity ādi śruteḥ* | (Vidyābhūṣaṇa & Baba, 1965: 9).

<sup>16</sup> A spiritually perfect self, according to the Caitanya tradition's theological framework, is a self who has attained the soteriological aim of pure love of God (*preman*). Prabhupāda is viewed within ISKCON as a spiritually perfected self.

<sup>17</sup> *parameśvara-prasādena parameśvaravad evāvidyāttīānāṃ cic-chakty-eka-vibhavānām ātmārāmāṇāṃ pāśādānām api brahmānandoparicaya-bhakti-paramānandena sāmādi-pārāyaṇāder darśayīyamāṇatvāt* | (Gosvāmin and Baba, 1965: 10).

<sup>18</sup> *kintu sarvajñeśvara-vacanatvenāsarvajña-jīvair durūhatvāt tat-prabhāva-labdha-pratyakṣa-viśeṣavadbhir eva sarvatra tad-anubhave śakyate, na tu tārkkikaiḥ* | (Gosvāmin & Baba, 1965: 12).

<sup>19</sup> See text in note 18.

<sup>20</sup> See text in note 18.

<sup>21</sup> *tad uktaṃ puruṣottama-tantre—śāstrārtha-yukto'nubhavaḥ pramāṇaṃ tūttamaṃ matam | anumādyā na svatantrāḥ pramāṇa-padavīm yayuḥ ||* (Gosvāmin & Baba, 1965: 12).

of scripture because of their scripturally rooted experience and spiritually attuned perception.

By examining Jīva's epistemological framework, we can understand that, according to this framework, a guru possesses epistemic authority when they enunciate the messages that they have received from scriptural testimony, since, by virtue of their spiritual purity and experience, a guru can accurately relay the intended meanings of such scriptural teachings. It is likely for this reason that we find Prabhupāda too repeatedly emphasizing that a spiritually perfected self repeats the message of God without adulteration (Prabhupāda, 1977), a claim that suggests that such a self is not perfect in the sense that they possess absolute epistemic authority and hence realizes their own epistemic limitations when they attempt to acquire knowledge independently of scriptural testimony. However, the specificities of these limitations are not evident to many individuals within the Caitanya tradition—as evidenced by pervasive notions within ISKCON that Prabhupāda has God-like cognition (Ketola, 2008: 147). Thus, precisely understanding these epistemic limitations according to the Caitanya tradition's conceptual framework requires further inquiry into this framework.

A proper understanding of the guru's sphere of epistemic and spiritual authority requires careful nuancing, and this nuancing can draw inspiration from the Caitanya theologian Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838–1914 CE). Bhaktivinoda offered a bipartite interpretive understanding of scripture that distinguishes between components of scripture that a) relate to transcendent truths, which are beyond human understanding (*paramārtha-prada*) and b) make claims about this world (*artha-prada*) (Das, 2004: 107). The former are held to be epistemically infallible, whereas the latter are subject to rational analysis (Das, 2004: 107). I argue that a guru's statements can also be placed in two categories in a similar fashion. Although one may argue that the sharp distinction between “religious” and “secular” domains is heavily influenced by a modernist Protestant view of religion, I argue that it can be applied in the context of the Caitanya tradition for the following reasons. First, as I have just indicated, prominent theologians within the Caitanya tradition like Bhaktivinoda do draw this distinction. Second, there is evidence that suggests that this distinction is implicitly present within Prabhupāda's own teachings.

## Understanding the bipartite nature of a guru's statements

When one examines Prabhupāda's statements, for example, one finds two types of statements a) scripturally grounded claims that repeat and rearticulate scriptural texts and b) opinions that have no explicit scriptural basis. With regard to a), Prabhupāda often stated that he doesn't speak on the basis of his own opinion (Prabhupāda, 1975), which he considered to be without soteriological value (Prabhupāda, 1975).

However, at other times, Prabhupāda *does* offer his opinion. For instance, Prabhupāda has stated, “so American people, I very much appreciate them. They are religious. They have got very good potency for understanding God consciousness. That is my opinion” (Prabhupāda, 1971). Therefore, we seem to have a puzzle. On the one hand, Prabhupāda says that he hasn't presented his own opinion and that



his personal opinion has no soteriological value, and on the other hand, Prabhupāda offered his personal opinions on certain mundane issues. I argue that this puzzle can be resolved by highlighting the bipartite nature of Prabhupāda's statements. When Prabhupāda speaks about God or about transcendent truths, Prabhupāda does not present his own opinion but instead repeats the message of scriptural testimony. However, when Prabhupāda speaks about mundane topics that are not directly addressed in scripture, then Prabhupāda offers his own opinion formed on the basis of his own reasoning (here, it is worth adding that Prabhupāda also repeatedly changed his opinions when presented with new information).

Thus, I argue that when interpreting Prabhupāda's teachings, one can adhere to the following hermeneutic principle: the guru is epistemically infallible when they reference scripture, but not otherwise. This view finds support in both scriptural testimony and in the exegeses of Caitanya theologians. For instance, *BhG* 4.34<sup>22</sup> indicates that one should approach a wise individual (such as a guru) who possesses knowledge, has seen the truth, and can impart this spiritual knowledge to others. However, this verse does not indicate that such a wise individual has epistemic infallibility concerning knowledge that is not contained within scripture. Although such an individual is held to be a seer of the truth (*tattva-darśina*), the term used in *BhG* 4.34 is *tattva*, which connotes the truth about ultimate reality and not the truth about ordinary mundane entities. This is particularly true in the Caitanya tradition—where *tattva* can mean the truth about a particular theological motif. For instance, *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*<sup>23</sup> (henceforth *CC*) 2.25.265<sup>24</sup> describes six types of *tattvas*, namely the truth about 1) Kṛṣṇa (*kṛṣṇa-tattva*), 2) *bhakti* (*bhakti-tattva*), 3) pure love of God (*prema-tattva*), 4) devotional ecstasy (*bhāva-tattva*), 5) aesthetic sentiments (*rasa-tattva*), and 6) God's playful activities (*līlā-tattva*).

Moreover, in his commentary on *BhG* 4.34, Baladeva states that the one possessing knowledge can provide others with knowledge about a) the self's original form (*jīva-svarūpa*), b) the self's relationship with God (*parātma-sambandhi-jñānam*), and c) the spiritual means of realizing the self's original form (*tat-sādhanaṃ*) (*Gītābhāṣaṇa* 4.34<sup>25</sup>). Yet, crucially, Baladeva does not state that one should approach the one possessing knowledge for *mundane* knowledge. Thus, from his comments, it can be implied that one should approach a wise individual in order to acquire the *supramundane* knowledge contained in scripture, and no clear indication is given by Kṛṣṇa or by Baladeva that an individual possessing knowledge, such as a guru, can, with epistemic infallibility, impart *ordinary* knowledge to their students.

<sup>22</sup> *tad viddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā | upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas tattva-darśinaḥ ||* (Schweig, 2007: 293).

<sup>23</sup> A foundational text of the Caitanya tradition compiled around the sixteenth century.

<sup>24</sup> *kṛṣṇa-tattva, bhakti-tattva, prema-tattva sāra | bhāva-tattva, rasa-tattva, līlā-tattva āra ||* (Kavirāja & Prabhupāda, 1998: 4528).

<sup>25</sup> *evaṃ jīva-svarūpa-jñānam tat-sādhanaṃ ca sāṅgam upadiśya para-svarūpōpāsana-jñānam upadśan sat-prasaṅga-labhyatvaṃ tasyāha tad iti | yad arthaṃ tad ubhayaṃ mayā tavopadiṣṭaṃ avināśi tu tad viddhi ity ādinā tat parātma-sambandhi-jñānam praṇipātādibhiḥ prasāditebhyo jñānibhyaḥ sadbhyaḥ tvam avagata-sva-svarūpo viddhi prāpnuhi |* (Vidyabhāṣaṇa & Baba, 1956: 141).



With this understanding of the bipartite nature of a guru's statements, we can now fashion a hermeneutical lens through which the statements of Prabhupāda can be interpreted. When Prabhupāda teaches on the basis of scripture, these teachings are held to be authoritative since the guru, on account of their spiritual purity, is capable of properly interpreting them. However, Prabhupāda's statements on mundane subjects are not authoritative and can be opinionated statements made on the basis of the guru's particular enculturation within a specific sociocultural milieu.

When the above-mentioned hermeneutical lens is applied within ISKCON, individuals within the institution can learn to responsibly engage with Prabhupāda's opinionated statements and begin to address its pervasive systematic and societal issues vis-à-vis specific groups. For instance, individuals within ISKCON can first identify that various social statements that Prabhupāda made are subject to rational analysis. Once such statements are not viewed as infallible spiritual truths, but rather, claims that can be questioned, individuals within ISKCON can actively cultivate values that are optimal for their own locations within Euro-American modernity.

## Addressing objections

I now address objections to my view. One is that arguably, Prabhupāda's social statements are rooted in scripture. For instance, it is well known that Hindu scriptural texts promote a hierarchical vision of society through its emphasis on the importance of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, which has served as a conceptual basis for the caste system. However, if Hindu scriptural texts themselves prescribe hierarchical or hegemonic attitudes, and Prabhupāda's statements are based on such prescriptions, then Prabhupāda's statements are rooted in scripture and hence epistemically infallible.

I have various responses to this objection. First, as I have argued elsewhere, there are hermeneutic lenses that can be employed to interpret scriptural texts in a socially progressive manner (Gupta, 2021). For instance, one can draw a distinction between soteriologically necessary principles, which are essential to follow if one wishes to attain soteriological perfection (in this case, unadulterated love of Kṛṣṇa), and context-specific details, which do not need to be adhered to as rigidly (Gupta, 2021). Within the Caitanya tradition, prescriptions about the role of women or individuals of a particular caste can be interpreted as context-specific details (Gupta, 2021). This being the case, although Prabhupāda's social statements are rooted in scripture, they are details and hence given less epistemological priority than statements which concern soteriologically necessary principles (such as the cultivation of devotion for Kṛṣṇa, in this context).

Another response is that, arguably, the scriptural texts of the Caitanya tradition do not unequivocally promote a worldview that runs counter to progressive values. For instance, *BhG* 9.32, a well-known verse, states that all individuals, regardless of their social location, can attain Kṛṣṇa (*BhG* 9.32<sup>26</sup>). Moreover, within the *BhP*, one

<sup>26</sup> *māṃ hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye 'pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ / striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te 'pi yānti parāṃ gatim* // (Schweig, 2007: 303).

finds verses and narratives that subordinate social norms to the cultivation of *bhakti*. For instance, *BhP* 1.2.8 states that one's discharge of their occupational duties is merely useless labor if it does not awaken attraction for narrations of God (*BhP* 1.2.8<sup>27</sup>). Furthermore, within the *BhP*, there is a narrative about the wives of ritually minded *brāhmaṇas*.<sup>28</sup> These wives, unlike their husbands, gave food to Kṛṣṇa and his friends when they requested it. Consequently, these wives were glorified for their devotion, because they spontaneously gave food to Kṛṣṇa out of love, unlike their husbands, who were too preoccupied with their performance of ritual sacrifice, to pay any heed to Kṛṣṇa (*BhP* 10.23; Tagare and Shasti, 1950: 1401–1409). Additionally, as Gopal Gupta has argued, there are various verses and passages within the *BhP* that depict women in a positive light (Gupta, 2020: ch. 6).

So, given the existence of socially progressive motifs within the *BhG* and the *BhP*, it is unclear that the Caitanya tradition's scriptural texts wholly endorse any negative attitudes toward marginalized individuals. Consequently, it is difficult to claim that Prabhupāda's attitudes toward such individuals is authoritative in virtue of it being rooted in scriptural testimony. Rather, I believe that one reason why Prabhupāda made the statements that he did is because of his enculturation within a specific sociocultural context. As Nietzsche has noted, our assumptions and worldviews are molded by the sociocultural circumstances that we are raised in (Emden, 2014: 184–203). Thus, as Alister McGrath argues, the cognitive basis for what we view as rational is too shaped by these sociocultural milieus, and thus, a belief that is rational in one sociocultural context can be viewed as irrational within another (McGrath, 2019: 25). Since Prabhupāda's upbringing was in 20<sup>th</sup>-century present-day West Bengal, which was permeated with certain socially conservative values, and since Prabhupāda received his college education from British missionaries at Scottish Churches College (where, among other things, it was taught that women had significantly smaller brains than men and were thus less intelligent than men), it should be no surprise that Prabhupāda himself held some of these values. If we reflect on our own upbringing, we can also recognize that many of the modern beliefs that many of us hold to be transparently rational have not been viewed as rational for much of human history, and it is largely because of changing sociocultural attitudes that these modern values have started to be seen as rational across large parts of the globe. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Prabhupāda possessed the particular social beliefs that he held, since his enculturation in a particular sociocultural context would have made these views seem reasonable to him.

So, if the Caitanya tradition's scriptural texts do not have any prescriptions that run counter to socially progressive values, and there is plausibility to the claim that the basis for Prabhupāda's social statements is not entirely informed by the Caitanya tradition's scriptural texts, I argue that such social statements can be rationally investigated, and individuals can opt to adopt different social views.

<sup>27</sup> *dharmah svanuṣṭhitāḥ puṁsām viṣvaksena-kathāsu yaḥ | notpādayed yadi ratim śrama eva hi kevalam ||* (Śāstrī, 1965–1975: Book 1, p. 122).

<sup>28</sup> A *brāhmaṇa* is held to be the highest social role within the Hindu social hierarchy. Their role is analogous to that of a priest.

## Conclusion

I conclude that according to the Caitanya tradition's own conceptual framework, a guru, such as Prabhupāda, is not omniscient, though they are held to possess a high degree of spiritual purity and authority, through which they can accurately access the transcendent truths contained within scripture. A guru is also held to have experienced these truths for themselves, thus giving them deeper insight into such truths than their disciples. Hence, the guru within the Caitanya tradition can be said to occupy a position in between humanity and divinity. They are not viewed as an ordinary human because they can accurately relay scriptural teachings to their students, thus giving them similar salvific capabilities as God. For this reason, the guru can be said to be as good as God. However, the guru is not identical to God in all respects and lacks God's omniscience and omnipotence. This understanding of the guru is significant because an awareness of it could help members of ISKCON to interpret Prabhupāda's social statements in a more mature manner and thus counter the various societal problems within the institution that have been caused by an uncritical acceptance of some of his teachings.

Moreover, the epistemological research that I have undertaken in this paper can also be illuminating to other religious traditions. Epistemological questions arise in other religious traditions, and so this research can demonstrate ways that such traditions can begin to more clearly delineate their epistemological framework and the epistemic authority of their gurus or religious leaders.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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