Article

Exploring and Applying a Socially Progressive Hermeneutical Lens in Hindu Thought

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Abstract: Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpreting texts. In this paper, I describe and explore the implications of a hermeneutical lens that was utilized by the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologian A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977 CE). My aims in doing so are to (1) contribute toward inter-religious reform within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which Prabhupāda founded in 1966, and to (2) further develop Hindu conceptual resources that can inspire societal change. I also apply Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens to one narrative within the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (*c*. 9th to 10th century CE) and show how reading this narrative through this lens can de-emphasize certain patriarchal attitudes that are found within Hindu universes. Moreover, I demonstrate this lens' applicability within ISKCON. I conclude by showing how this lens can also be applied in some other Hindu contexts.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism; ISKCON; Feminism

1. Introduction

In this paper, I describe and explore the significance of a particular hermeneutical lens that was utilized by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977 CE), who is a theologian within the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition (henceforth Caitanya tradition). This Hindu devotional tradition is based on the life and the teachings of the Bengali saint Caitanya (1486–1534 CE) and is centered on cultivating intensely affective forms of devotional love toward Kṛṣṇa, whom the tradition views as the supremely personal God (Sardella 2012, pp. 182–83). I then discuss how this lens can facilitate religious reform by applying it in an exegesis of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*c*. 9th century CE) (henceforth *BhP*), which is considered to be one of India's most influential sacred texts (Gupta and Valpey 2016, p. 1).

First however, it will be helpful to define the term "hermeneutics", as it is employed within some Anglophone contexts. In such contexts, hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpreting and understanding texts. Early use of the term in the late 18th and 19th centuries "referred strictly to rules for the interpretation of texts, particularly ancient texts" (Brown 2011, p. 113). More recently, it has been defined as "the act of interpretation that inquires into the ways in which meaning is formed in text and is also more broadly a philosophical inquiry into human existence" (Flood 2016, p. 150). There are various extant hermeneutical lenses and approaches. To begin with, there is "theological hermeneutics", which is the interpretation of religious texts that are regarded as sacred (Zimmermann 2015, pp. 72–97). Individuals can also employ "historical critical hermeneutics", or "the "historical-critical method" that seeks to understand the "historical origins and trajectory of a text" (Flood 2016, p. 154). Moreover, one can configure a feminist hermeneutical lens, which "develops theories of interpretation that specifically explore the relationship of power to 'meaning', and offers analyses that seek to empower women" (Amador 1998, p. 40).

It is also worth noting that in Hindu philosophy, modes of inquiry analogous to hermeneutics have been developed since as early as 200 BCE. The closest Indian equivalent

of the term "hermeneutics" is *mīmāṃsā* ("desiring to contemplate"), and it was first codified in Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* (*c.* 200 BCE) and later developed by the exegetes Śabara (*c.* 3rd–6th century CE) Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (*c.* 5–7th century CE) and Prabhākara (*c.* 5–7th century CE). It is worth noting that there are two systems of *mīmāṃsā*, namely, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā and Uttara Mīmāṃsā (more commonly known as Vedānta) (Chakraborty 2018, p. 25). As Nirmalya Chakraborty explains, both of these systems "are concerned with explaining Vedic sentences and determining their meaning as well as their significance or import (*tātparya*)" (Chakraborty 2018, p. 25). One crucial distinction between these two systems is that Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is concerned with the "investigation of the (logically preceding part of the Vedas (the Brāhmanas)", whereas Uttara Mīmāṃsā pertains to the "investigation of the (logically subsequent) part of the Veda (the Upaniṣads)" (Freschi 2018). Although both these systems of *mīmāṃsā* have been immensely influential within India's intellectual history, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them in greater depth. For a brief overview of Pūrva Mīmāṃsa, see (Freschi 2018; Dudney 2018; Clooney 1990b), and for a brief history of Vedānta along with various explorations into different Vedāntic traditions, see (Maharaj 2020).

Given the plethora of hermeneutical lenses, both within and outside of Hindu thought, one may question why it is important to examine and analyze Prabhupāda's employment of his hermeneutical lens in particular, especially when similar hermeneutical lenses exist (Sherma and Sharma 2008; Fiorenza 2014), and when other thinkers, either within or outside of the Caitanya tradition, could be examined. For instance, there are other notable exegete-theologians within the Caitanya tradition such as Rūpa Gosvāmin (15–16th century CE), Jīva Gosvāmin (15–16th century CE), and Baladeva Vidyabhūṣaṇa (18th century CE), who have made contributions to the Caitanya tradition's hermeneutical philosophy and whose views shaped the views of later theologians with the tradition, such as Prabhupāda himself (see Gupta 2007; Okita 2014; Uskokov 2018).

My aims in focusing specifically on Prabhupāda and his hermeneutical lens are twofold. At the outset, I should note that it has been documented that Prabhupāda has made a number of statements concerning the role and the status of women, racial minorities such as blacks, and individuals of a lower caste. Such statements, though perhaps common to Prabhupāda's socio-historical context (20th century West Bengal), portray these groups in a negative light and have led to various problems within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the religious institution Prabhupāda founded in New York in 1966. Such statements have been described extensively (see Lorenz 2004 for Prabhupāda's comments on women; Deadwyler 2004, pp. 371–72 for his comments on racial minorities and lower caste individuals), and so I will not reiterate them here. However, I will briefly mention that it is well-documented that such statements have been uncritically received and internalized by many of Prabhupāda's direct students and present-day followers (Lorenz 2004, p. 124).

As I will later argue, I do not believe that mistreatment of women is justified when one understands Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens and examines Prabhupāda's attitude towards women in his other teachings or in his personal dealings with women. While it is true that Prabhupāda did make certain statements that could be selectively interpreted in order to justify patriarchal attitudes, there are a variety of other factors that need to be taken into consideration when making judgements about how to apply Prabhupāda's teachings.

For these reasons, the first aim of this paper is to offer one corrective to the various problems that have affected ISKCON, and to put forth alternative readings of Prabhupāda's teachings that can be utilized by practitioners within ISKCON that do wish to adhere to a socially egalitarian vision of the world. My goal is not to argue that Prabhupāda's teachings unequivocally support a socially egalitarian worldview. Rather, I seek to demonstrate that there are conceptual resources within ISKCON that practitioners within the institution can draw upon in order to justify such a socially egalitarian worldview, even in the face of interpretations to the contrary.

My second aim in writing this paper is to, by means of socially engaged scholarship, offer a corrective to socially detrimental attitudes, such as patriarchal attitudes, that exist on the broader Hindu landscape. Granted, it is difficult to address all the factors that contribute towards these issues in one fell swoop. However, I argue that locating, retrieving, and emphasizing conceptual resources that (a) have their origins in Hindu thought and (b) can combat these issues, is one step toward curbing such issues. Although this paper focuses primarily on one specific religious tradition (Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism), I argue that this paper also serves as a model for other Hindu traditions and can inspire them to develop and apply similar hermeneutical lenses.

At this point, it is worth drawing attention to a logical fallacy known as the "genetic fallacy". When someone discredits something on the basis of its origin or history and not on the basis of its own merits, they are guilty of committing the genetic fallacy. For this reason, I argue that Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens should be evaluated according to its own merits, and should not be discredited at the outset simply because Prabhupāda himself was known to advocate for views that we would consider antiquated or in tension with contemporary socially progressive values.

Moreover, when I speak of "Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens", my intention is not to imply that Prabhupāda is the first one to have developed and formulated this lens. Similar hermeneutical lenses have been employed in other contexts, see (Kassam 2014, p. 184). Within India, Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century seeking to convert native Hindus employed a similar approach as well (Clooney 1990a). Moreover, Prabhupāda's employment of his hermeneutical lens may have been inspired by other Hindu thinkers, perhaps within his own tradition, although it is unclear precisely where this inspiration originates. For these reasons, when I speak of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens, I use this term somewhat loosely to indicate a specific hermeneutical lens that Prabhupāda described and himself employed at various junctures, even though Prabhupāda did not invent this lens *per se*. Bearing this in mind, I will now proceed to describe this lens.

2. Understanding Prabhupāda's Hermeneutical Lens

Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can be characterized as an exegetical tool that is shaped by, and which also aids and enhances, the discernment between (a) a religious tradition's doctrinal tenets that are soteriologically[1] necessary and (b) the details of spiritual praxis that are context-specific.[2] This hermeneutical lens is highlighted in *The Nectar of Devotion*, wherein Prabhupāda draws a clear distinction between what he considers to be "basic principles", on the one hand, and particular "details" on the other hand. He explains,

> for example, a basic principle is that one has to accept a spiritual master [guru]. Exactly how one follows the instructions of his spiritual master is considered a detail. For example, if one is following the instruction of his spiritual master and that instruction is different from the instructions of another spiritual master, this is called detailed information. But the basic principle of acceptance of a spiritual master is good everywhere, although the details may be different. (Prabhupāda 1998, p. 53)

Thus, as I have just indicated, Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens acknowledges that there is a vital distinction to be made between soteriologically essential "principles" and context-specific "details" of spiritual praxis. Of course, applying Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens is done the most effectively when an individual is consciously aware of, and educated about, the soteriologically necessary doctrinal tenets within a particular religious tradition. For this reason, some knowledge of ISKCON's theological framework is first required. Delineating the entire set of soteriologically necessary doctrinal tenets within ISKCON's theological framework would be a lengthy task in itself, and is thus outside the scope of this paper. However, I will provide a brief summation of this framework so that the reader can acquire a general understanding of its soteriologically necessary principles. A concise explanation of ISKCON's orthopraxy is given by Rūpa, whose theological views

inform much of ISKCON's theological framework as well as Prabhupāda's own theological perspectives (Gosvāmin and Prabhupada 1998, pp. 1–2). In his work titled the *Bhakti-rasāmṛtasindhu* (henceforth *BRS*), Rūpa, purportedly citing from a Hindu scriptural text, *Pādmapurāṇa* (*c*. 4th to 6th century CE), states, "Viṣṇu [Kṛṣṇa] is always to be remembered and never to be forgotten. All prescriptive rules and prohibitions should serve these two principles" (*BRS* 1.2.8[3]). Thus, the primary aim of a practicing spiritual practitioner within ISKCON is to cultivate a continuous, loving remembrance (*smaraṇa*) of Kṛṣṇa.

By continually remembering Kṛṣṇa with love and by performing various devotional activities, such as hearing (*śravaṇa*) and glorifying (*kīrtana*) him, one can enhance one's devotion (*bhakti*) for Kṛṣṇa (*BhP* 7.5.23[4]). A more comprehensive list of different devotional activities that one can perform is mentioned by Rūpa Gosvāmin in the *BRS*, which lists 64 components (*aṅga*s) of *bhakti* (*BRS* 1.2.74–245[5]). Through the performance of such devotional activities, the spiritual practitioner can awaken pure, unselfish love of Kṛṣṇa (*preman*), the attainment of which is considered to be soteriological perfection. Thus, within ISKCON's theological framework, the ultimate soteriological aim is to love Kṛṣṇa purely without any ulterior motives, and ISKCON's various spiritual disciplines and scriptural imperatives are solely intended to lead practitioners toward this goal. For this reason, *preman* can be seen as what Klaus Klostermaier terms the "hermeneutical centre", around which ISKCON's textual interpretation and spiritual praxis revolves (Klostermaier 2008). Hence, a soteriologically necessary principle can be viewed as something that enhances a spiritual practitioner's remembrance of Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, as the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* (henceforth *CC*) (*c*. 16th century), a hagiography of Caitanya that serves as one of ISKCON's foundational scriptural texts (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998b, p. 3853), indicates that two of the major principles for a spiritual practitioner are to desire whatever is favorable for one's devotion to Kṛṣṇa and to avoid whatever is unfavorable for one's devotion to Kṛṣṇa (*CC* 2.22.100[6]). However, the particularities concerning how Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* is to be cultivated and performed should be considered to be context-specific praxic details. In this connection, it is also worth pointing out that in his *Upadeśāmṛta*, Rūpa cautions spiritual practitioners about the dangers of insisting on following certain scriptural prescriptions (*niyama-āgraha*) when it is unhelpful to do so (*Up* 2[7]).

Prabhupāda concretely demonstrated how his hermeneutical lens can be applied with his adjustment of some traditional gender norms concerning the intermingling of men and women within ISKCON. In one instance, Prabhupāda observes that certain individuals with a socially conservative mindset[8] had criticized him for allowing his male and female students to intermix freely in Europe and America (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 835). Prabhupāda states that such individuals had failed to consider that "one cannot suddenly change a community's social customs" (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 835). Indeed, elsewhere, Prabhupāda states that the practice of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* should be developed according to the contingencies of "*deśa-kāla-pātra* (the place, the time and the recipient)" (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 842), and this is a notion that echoes A.K. Ramanujan's claim that certain dimensions of Hindu thought and religious praxis are context-specific (Ramanujan 1989, p. 53). Prabhupāda explains that "stereotyped" gender norms can never help to spread devotion to Kṛṣṇa within the Western countries (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 835), thus reinforcing the motif that the performance of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* should be adapted to one's particular sociocultural historical contexts in order for its propagation and cultivation to be effective.

Prabhupāda also describes the benefits of allowing both men and women to perform ISKCON's missionary activities. He explains that he instructed both men and women about how to proselytize ISKCON's theology, and, as a result, both men and women have been able to propagate ISKCON's teachings with "redoubled strength" (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 842). Prabhupāda also states that he finds the combined preaching efforts of his male and female students to be "wonderful" (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998a, p. 842), thus implying that making praxic adjustments that allowed women in the Western countries to propagate and practice Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* according to their country's social

conventions produced more favorable results than imposing on them restrictions such as some of the patriarchal Indian customs of his time.

Prabhupāda's modification of gender roles is worth highlighting because it challenges some prevalent patriarchal attitudes within Hindu thought that are commonly associated with *strī-dharma*. *Strī-dharma* can be loosely translated as the duties of women, and patriarchal interpretations of *strī-dharma* defined women's roles as servants of their husbands and as domestic caretakers (Lipner 2012, p. 116). Presently, patriarchal and androcentric attitudes still persist amongst men in India. For instance, as Subhadra Mitra Channa states, "one of the biggest contradictions in Indian society today is that the ideals of womanhood have not been transformed to include the modern woman. For a majority of Indian men, the ideal is still their mother" (Channa 2013, p. 178). Thus, Prabhupāda's de-emphasis of the religious importance of patriarchal attitudes is highly significant because it indicates that a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* is *not* a soteriologically essential principle within ISKCON's theological framework but is instead a context-specific detail, which can be disregarded if it turns out not to be conducive to one's performance of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*.

3. *Strī-Dharma* in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*

Having described Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens, I will now explore the wider implications of this lens by analyzing how it can be applied to certain scriptural texts. Specifically, I will turn my attention to the *BhP*. The *BhP* emphasizes the worship of Kṛṣṇa (Gupta and Valpey 2013, p. 2), whom *BhP* 1.3.28 regards as the supremely personal God.[9] For this reason, the *BhP* is a central text for many Vaiṣṇava traditions that are devoted to Kṛṣṇa, including, but not limited to, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition.[10]

Within the *BhP*, there is one narrative that suggests that a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* is evaluated as a context-specific praxic detail. This narrative describes Kṛṣṇa's satisfaction with the devotion of the wives of ritually minded *brāhmaṇa*s[11] as well as his subsequent blessings upon them. The story begins with Kṛṣṇa asking his friends to beg for some food in his name and in the name of his brother (Balarāma) from some *brāhmaṇa*s who were performing a sacrifice (*BhP* 10.23.3–4). However, the *brāhmaṇa*s ignored Kṛṣṇa's friends' request for food (*BhP* 10.23.9). The *BhP* adds that the *brāhmaṇa*s had insufficient intelligence and did not consider Kṛṣṇa to be the fullness of God, instead regarding him as an ordinary human (*BhP* 10.23.11[12]). When Kṛṣṇa's friends returned to him without any food, Kṛṣṇa asked them to instead ask the wives of the *brāhmaṇa*s for food (*BhP* 10.23.14). Upon hearing that Kṛṣṇa was hungry, the wives rushed towards Kṛṣṇa with containers of food (*BhP* 10.23.19–20). Although these women's husbands, brothers, relatives, and sons sought to prevent them from seeing Kṛṣṇa, the women persisted nevertheless, for their hearts had been drawn to Kṛṣṇa by having heard about him repeatedly (*BhP* 10.23.19–20). The women's insistence on meeting Kṛṣṇa against their family's wishes is notable because it signifies a departure from the social constraints imposed upon women by patriarchal understandings of *strī-dharma*. In fact, when the women arrived in the presence of Kṛṣṇa, he initially remarked that their wish to see him was proper (*upapanna*) (*BhP* 10.23.25[13]), even though they had acted contrary to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma*.

Kṛṣṇa then insisted that the women should return to their families (*BhP* 10.23.28). However, Kṛṣṇa's reasoning for this exhortation is significant. He mentions that if the women stayed in his physical presence, then (1) it would not be pleasing in the sight of the people of this world and (2) it would not be conducive for developing their love for Kṛṣṇa, since meditation upon Kṛṣṇa is a quick method of attaining the love of Kṛṣṇa (*BhP* 10.23.32[14]). Thus, there is no indication in the *BhP* that Kṛṣṇa wanted the wives to go back to their families because performing domestically inscribed duties was required for their attainment of soteriological perfection.

I will revisit these points shortly, but before doing so, I will finish narrating this story. Seeing their wives' devotion, the *brāhmaṇa*s condemned themselves for their lack of devotion towards Kṛṣṇa (*BhP* 10.23.39). They then contrasted their own spiritual ignorance with the devotion of their wives (*BhP* 10.23.42–44), thus signifying that their wives were

spiritually superior to them. Hence, in this narrative, it is the women, who failed to act in accordance with patriarchal interpretations of *strī-dharma*, who are glorified for their devotion towards Kṛṣṇa, and not the men, who were instead preoccupied with the performance of ritual, which, notably, was their worldly dharma as priests and upholders of the Vedic cosmos. Thus, the glorification of the women illustrates that in the *BhP*, it is ultimately the cultivation of loving devotion, and not simply the performance of domestic duties, that can win the favor of Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, the soteriological superiority of bhakti over worldly dharma is a recurring theme throughout the *BhP* and is also seen in the famous narrative of the *rāsa-līlā*, or namely, Kṛṣṇa's moonlight tryst with the cowherd girls (*gopī*s) of Vraja (Schweig 2002, pp. 435–39).

However, in this particular narrative of the *BhP* (10.23.3–10.23.44), we observe that Kṛṣṇa nevertheless insists that the women continue to perform their worldly obligations. As mentioned previously, Kṛṣṇa's reasoning is that (1) the women's abandonment of their domestic duties would not be pleasing to the people of this world, thus signifying Kṛṣṇa's concern with the maintenance of the social order, and (2) the women could make quick progress towards soteriological perfection even without physical proximity to Kṛṣṇa.

With regard to (1), it is important to bear in mind that within the context of this specific narrative, the prevailing social attitude is patriarchal, and thus, the women's abandonment of their domestic duties would upset the social order and lead to worldly confusion. Yet, this does not indicate that the women's adherence to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* is soteriologically essential but only socially salutary in some specific circumstances. Thus, in contexts where the prevailing social atmosphere does not encourage such interpretations of *strī-dharma*, there would be no scripturally rooted incentive to promote an adherence to it.

Moreover, Kṛṣṇa's statement in *BhP* 10.23.32 that the women could make quicker soteriological progress while they are physically distant from him does not promote a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* either. In this verse, Kṛṣṇa specifically recommends that the *brāhmaṇa*s' wives should focus their minds on him, and I argue that this meditative practice does not necessitate that the women adhere to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma*, since even if the wives are at home, they need not perform the domestic duties enjoined by such an interpretation of *strī-dharma*. Furthermore, the *BhP* holds that a devotee's love of Kṛṣṇa can be intensified when they are separated from Kṛṣṇa's physical presence. For instance, *BhP* 10.32.20[15] states:

> O friends, in order to increase their yearning for me, I [Kṛṣṇa] may not immediately share my love even with those who share their love with me. When a poor person obtains wealth and then loses it, they know nothing other than that wealth, and their minds are filled with anxiety. Similarly, a devotee who becomes separated from me can think of nothing other than me.

Thus, when we take other devotional motifs within the *BhP* into consideration, one plausible interpretation as to why Kṛṣṇa asked the wives of the *brāhmaṇa*s to leave him is that their love for Kṛṣṇa would become even more intensified if they were physically separated from him. Yet, such separation does not necessitate any rigorous adherence to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* in contexts outside of this particular narrative.

4. Understanding the Reformative Efficacy of Prabhupāda's Hermeneutical Lens

However, we may note that there is one limitation to Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens' ability to facilitate religious reform. As we have seen in the narrative of the *brāhmaṇa*s' wives, these women were still compelled to return to their homes to discharge their domestic and family obligations there, despite the spiritual glory they received by temporarily abandoning these *dharma*-shaped obligations in order to devotedly serve food to Kṛṣṇa. Moreover, as Tracy Coleman points out, within the *BhP*, the celebrated episode of the *rāsa-līlā*, or the moonlight tryst of *gopī*s of Vraja with Kṛṣṇa, also contains a similar motif. Though the *gopī*s initially abandon their worldly obligations and experience intimate union with Kṛṣṇa, they are nevertheless exhorted by him to return to their worldly obligations,

thus leading Coleman to conclude that women are ultimately "powerless to resist the forces of social convention for more than a brief moonlit tryst" (Coleman 2010, pp. 410–11). Furthermore, in other on-the-ground contexts, medieval Vaiṣṇava groups often adopted "the restrictions of the orthodox [caste system] [in order to find] acceptance within the broader Hindu social structure" (Hopkins 1998, p. 14). For instance, some Caitanya Vaiṣṇava communities in the 16th century have observed socio-ritual norms concerning caste restrictions, such as not marrying or dining outside of one's caste, in order to maintain social cohesion within their broader social-cultural milieus (O'Connell 1993, p. 23). Thus, the application of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can be of limited efficacy when applied in contexts where spiritual practitioners are bound to follow certain styles of social conventions, even when such conventions are ultimately unnecessary for the attainment of soteriological perfection.

I acknowledge that while Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can be employed in order to initiate and achieve religious reform, the degree to which this reform can be concretely realized is largely contingent on the sociocultural sensibilities of individuals within a religious tradition's surrounding environment. However, it worth highlighting that there are instances within history where religious traditions, such as the Vaiṣṇava traditions, challenged the contemporary sociocultural norms of their time. For instance, from the 16th to the 18th century CE, the Caitanya tradition was able to give women a greater status in society, relative to the sociocultural norms of the time, by granting them the ability to function as spiritual teachers (gurus)[16] (Chakravarti 1985, p. 174; Brzezinski 1996, pp. 73–74), thus supporting Rodney Stark's claim that "new religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment—[they] are strict, but not too strict" (Stark 2005, p. 120). As Lauren Iannaccone indicates, the "strictness" in his claim indicates the degree that a religious tradition maintains "a separate and distinctive life style of morality in personal and family life, in such areas as dress, diet, drinking, entertainment, uses of time, sex, child rearing, and the like" (Iannaccone 1994, p. 1190; cited in Stark 2005, p. 120). Conversely, Iannacone notes that "a group is not strict to the degree that it affirms 'the current . . . mainline life style in these respects" (Iannaccone 1994, p. 1190; cited in Stark 2005, p. 120). Therefore, in instances where its surrounding environment is reluctant to award women egalitarian rights, we may infer that a religious tradition might be able to grant a greater degree of these rights to women than what this environment promotes, provided that tensions between the movement and the environment remain medium. In such contexts, I argue that Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can still be helpful for initiating or generating religious reform.

To bring my discussion of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens around in full-circle, I will now turn my attention to how this lens can be applied within ISKCON in particular. Since its inception, ISKCON has witnessed the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes in places such as North America and Europe. These attitudes have led Kim Knott to claim that "women's issues are second only to ISKCON's crisis of leadership in threatening the movement's future" (Knott 1995, p. 116). Starting in the mid-1970s and continuing up to present times, some men within ISKCON have become more intensely patriarchal in their outlooks and have marginalized the role of women within its social spaces (Rochford 2007, p. 116). As this paradigm of male chauvinism grew, certain men in positions of leadership wanted to disempower the women who participate within ISKCON as spiritual practitioners. Thus, from the 1980s to the early 2000s, they instituted several institutional changes that restricted women's institutional and spiritual roles. For instance, they (a) segregated the temples by gender, thus forcing women to stay in the back of the main temple rooms during worship services, (b) forbade women from leading *kīrtana*s (musical glorification of Kṛṣṇa's auspicious names), and (c) prevented women from occupying pedagogical as well as managerial roles (Rochford 2007, p. 117). Women's "intelligence, motives and capabilities" were also routinely criticized or dismissed in the public lectures given by ISKCON male leaders (Dasi and Dasi 2000, p. 2). Thus, women were projected as "unintelligent", individuals whose presence was "spiritually dangerous" to men, and who

had little scope to perform activities beyond their domestic and family duties (Whitworth and Shiels 1982, p. 161). According to one ISKCON woman who experienced these forms of misogyny:

> I've never so much regretted being born in a woman's body since I joined [ISKCON]. I've never been so much criticized, abused, slandered, misunderstood, or chastised because I have this woman's body. It makes it very difficult to do my service and/or assist others with their service if they are always thinking about these bodily designations instead of the constructive things I could do or say to help them in their service and to help this movement go forward. If you are a single woman [*brahmacāriṇī*], every man thinks he is an authority and will yell at you if he feels like it. But it's worse when you're married, because you have one authority and you have to surrender to his inflexible, lord-it-over nature whether he is right or wrong and whether he is nice or cruel about how he relates to you. (Dasi 1999)

Thus, many women devotees within ISKCON were denied equal social and spiritual rights and were instead subordinated to male authority figures, who have evidently failed to give them the proper respect that they deserve. The discrimination that they have faced in ISKCON has seriously hampered their ability to cultivate *bhakti*. In one survey conducted in the late 1990s, an astounding 67% of women strongly agreed that sexism within ISKCON is a barrier to their soteriological advancement (Rochford 2007, p. 123). Therefore, as ISKCON's history since the 1970s demonstrates, it has been afflicted with various strands of misogyny that seek to confine women to the roles traditionally ascribed to them in patriarchal interpretations of *strī-dharma*. These patriarchal attitudes, though less pronounced than they were in the past, still linger today. For instance, ISKCON is still reluctant to allow women to serve as gurus who initiate individuals into the institution (*dīkṣā*-guru). Although ISKCON has recently passed a resolution in October 2019 allowing women to act as *dīkṣā*-gurus, at the time of writing, there are still no women who have stepped forward to accept this role. Thus, there is an urgent need within ISKCON for initiating and sustaining women-empowering reform. I argue that one conceptual vehicle for generating and advancing this reform is Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens, which can serve as a corrective to ISKCON's misogynistic strands by reimagining ISKCON's theological framework in a socially beneficial manner that would be suitable for current times.

For instance, as I have previously argued, according to the *BhP* and to Prabhupāda, the traditional gender roles that certain men within ISKCON insist on confining women to are not soteriologically necessary but are instead context-specific praxic details. With this understanding, I argue that there is no legitimate theological basis for the subordination of women within ISKCON in Europe and North America to the authority of males within domestic spheres. If one seeks to argue that women should perform the activities directed by a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* in order to maintain social order, then, given the social conditions of many present-day sociocultural contexts in social spaces such Europe and North America, this argument is unpersuasive because the contemporary social climate has acknowledged, at least to a greater extent than, say, the sociocultural universe of the *BhP*, that a woman's domain of agency, authority, and influence can extend beyond the home. If one puts forth the argument that the discharge of domestic duties enables women to make quicker soteriological progress, then, in the light of the abovementioned narrative of the *brāhmaṇa*s' wives and Prabhupāda's own example of not upholding a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* in the Western countries, this argument also fails to deliver the desired conclusion. Even if there are certain women who may feel that discharging domestic duties is more favorable for their cultivation of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*, this does not mandate that *all* women should discharge such duties. Finally, if one argues that women should adhere to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* because this is what Prabhupāda seemed to advocate in his teachings, then this view is problematic since (a) Prabhupāda, in his personal dealings with his female disciples, did

widen the scope of women's activities to extend beyond the domestic sphere, and because (b) maintaining this view requires the assumption that Prabhupāda's views are static and that Prabhupāda, if alive today, would hold the same socially conservative views that he did over forty years ago. However, given that Prabhupāda did exhibit a certain degree of flexibility by not rigidly sticking to the patriarchal gender roles he was accustomed to in India, (b) seems implausible to maintain. At the least, if a practitioner within ISKCON wishes to adopt a more egalitarian worldview, I argue that the case for (b) is insufficient to persuade such a practitioner to abandon holding on to such a worldview, especially in the light of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens.

For these reasons, I argue that when Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens is properly applied, women should be free to adopt and cultivate whatever role they feel is most suitable for their soteriological advancement, whether this role lies within or outside the domestic sphere.

5. Exploring the Relevance of Prabhupāda's Hermeneutical Lens Outside ISKCON

I now argue that the application of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens is not limited to ISKCON, nor is it limited to the empowerment only of women. ISKCON can serve as a conceptual microcosm that illustrates some of the issues that are present within larger sociocultural macrocosmic realms. I thus suggest that Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens has relevance for other Hindu traditions.

To begin with, Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can be applied within other Vaiṣṇava traditions. As I have argued, the *BhP* does not value the discharge of domestic duties as a soteriologically necessary principle. With this awareness in mind, the Vaiṣṇava traditions whose scriptural foundations include the *BhP* can draw upon this text's evaluation of a woman's duties to assess whether or not an adherence to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* is truly soteriologically necessary. However, in order to draw any conclusions about the applicability of Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens to the Vaiṣṇava traditions, it would be necessary to critically examine all the foundational scriptural texts and the theological frameworks of such traditions in order to ascertain whether or not these traditions consider a strict adherence to a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* to be a requirement for women to attain soteriological perfection. For instance, some Vaiṣṇava traditions such as the Vallabha tradition do place a distinctive emphasis on the cultivation of *bhakti* through the social role of a householder, and this emphasis given to the householder may shift this tradition's views on *strī-dharma* (Klostermaier 2007, p. 213).

Nevertheless, if this examination was conducted and it revealed that a patriarchal interpretation *strī-dharma* is not, in fact, a soteriological necessary principle for at least some of these traditions, this discovery would have major implications for Hindu praxis since devotional traditions like Vaiṣṇavism have exerted a continual influence on India's religious landscapes since the early modern period (*c.* 15th–16th century CE) (Plau 2019, p. 34). An awareness that a patriarchal interpretation of *strī-dharma* is only a context-specific praxic detail, if this indeed turns out to be the case, would thus provide a theological justification for empowering women within contemporary Hindu milieus by enabling them to occupy the societal roles that are the most conducive for their performance of *bhakti*.

Moreover, within broader Hindu contexts, Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens is a particularly helpful tool for social reform because it can lead to critical reflection on the authority of the classical Sanskrit texts that have shaped various Brahminical notions of Hinduism. As Anantanand Rambachan notes, "as long as the values of the Sanskrit texts are held to be normative, these texts cannot be ignored and will have to be engaged in critical dialogue" (Rambachan 2014, p. 92). While Prabhupāda's hermeneutical tool does not deny the epistemic authority of the classical Sanskrit texts, it can foster certain forms of critical dialogue that would question the particular sociocultural values that these texts embody or promote, such as patriarchal interpretations of *strī-dharma*.

Furthermore, Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can be utilized to address other forms of oppression within Hindu contexts. For example, caste oppression is still prevalent within

India, and as recently as 2016, an Indian Ph.D. student named Rohith Vemula committed suicide due to the discrimination he had experienced because of his lower caste status (Divya and Ankur 2019, p. 216). However, in certain interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*c*. 500 BCE–200 CE) (henceforth *BhG*), which is one of the most important Hindu sacred texts, *varṇa*, the idealized textual model of caste, is not viewed as soteriologically necessary. For instance, *BhG* 9.32 states, O Arjuna, those who have resorted to me [Kṛṣṇa] can reach the highest destination, even if they are from wicked families, women, *vaiśya*s, or *śūdra*s [the lowest caste]".[17] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to draw a definitive conclusion as to whether or not one's membership in a particular caste is soteriologically necessary for the Hindu traditions that adhere to the *BhG*, it is worth reinforcing that verses such as *BhG* 9.32 do support the thesis that members of all castes can attain soteriological perfection. At the very least, if there are Hindu traditions that wish to hold to a view of social equality, such readings, when paired with Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens, could inform their ethical frameworks and assist their attempts to end caste-based oppression. Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens could be used similarly to combat racism. While it is also beyond the scope of this paper to examine the relationship between one's membership in a racial group and their ability to attain liberation within Hindu traditions, I can briefly note that Hindu traditions that do not ascribe any meaningful soteriological role to one's race could also draw upon Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens in order to support a view of racial equality.

Finally, I argue that Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can improve the conditions of Indian society at large. For example, as Werner Menski mentions, despite the adoption of the Constitution of 1950, the values and customs of many Hindus are heavily influenced by their religious values (Menski 2019, p. 257). Thus, if Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens can assist Hindus with their creative interpretations and reconfigurations of religious values, this process can in turn guide the reformulation of the customs and the values of Hindus in India, whose ethical frameworks and quotidian behavior are not shaped solely by legal policies that have been adopted by the Indian government.

6. Conclusions

I have argued in this paper that an application of Prabhupāda's hermeneutic lens can facilitate religious reform within ISKCON and Hindu thought by enabling individuals to distinguish between socioculturally contingent and context-specific details of praxis and soteriologically essential doctrinal tenets that must be carefully adhered to even on shifting sociocultural landscapes. While I have focused my attention primarily on patriarchal attitudes, I believe that there is scope to apply Prabhupāda's hermeneutical lens to address a wide variety of other social concerns, such as the mistreatment of LGBTQ individuals or individuals of a lower caste status. However, attempting to address such concerns is beyond the scope of this paper.

Notes

[1] I use the term "soteriology" in a broader sense outside of a strictly Christian context to encompass various notions of emancipation from this world, whether it be in Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, or other instances.

[2] It is worth briefly noting that similar hermeneutical approaches have been developed in Islamic thought as well. See (Kassam 2014, p. 184).

[3] *smartavyaḥ satataṃ viṣṇur vismartavyo na jātucit/sarva-vidhi-niṣedhāḥ syur etayor eva kiṅkarāḥ //* (Gosvāmin and Das [1946] 1979).

[4] *śravaṇaṃ kīrtanaṃ viṣṇoḥ smaraṇaṃ pāda-sevanam/arcanaṃ vandanaṃ dāsyaṃ sakhyam ātma-nivedanam //.*

[5] *guru-pādāśrayas tasmāt kṛṣṇa-dīkṣādi-śikṣaṇam/viśrambheṇa guroḥ sevā sādhu-vartmānuvartanam // sad-dharma-pṛcchā bhogādi-tyāgaḥ kṛṣṇasya hetave/nivāso dvārakādau ca gaṅgāder api sannidhau //* (Gosvāmin and Das [1946] 1979).

[6] *ānukūlyasya saṅkalpaḥ prātikūlyasya varjanam/rakṣiṣyatīti viśvāso goptṛtve varaṇaṃ tathā // ātma-nikṣepa-kārpaṇye ṣaḍ-vidhā śaraṇāgatiḥ ///* (Kavirāja and Prabhupāda 1998b, p. 3834).

7 *atyāhāraḥ prayāsaś ca prajalpo niyamāgrahaḥ/jana-saṅgaś ca laulyaṁ ca ṣaḍbhir bhaktir vinaśyati / /* (Gosvāmin and Prabhupada 1998, p. 14). The compound *niyamāgrahaḥ* can be broken apart into either (a) *niyama-agraha* (failing to grasp scriptural prescriptions) and (b) *niyama-āgraha* (holding onto scriptural prescriptions when they are not helpful).

8 It can be implied that these individuals were from India during Prabhupāda's time, where such norms would have been more common.

9 In this paper, my references to the *BhP* are from (Tagare 1950), unless a reference to the original text is given, in which case, I cite from (Śāstrī 1965–1975).

10 For instance, the *BhP* occupies a central role within the Vaiṣṇava traditions of both Madhva (*c*. 13th century CE) and Vallabha (*c*. 1479–1531 CE) (Okita 2014, pp. 64–65; Redington 2013, pp. 76–78).

11 A *brāhmaṇa* is held to be highest social role within the Hindu social hierarchy. Their role is analogous to that of a priest.

12 *taṁ brahma paramaṁ sākṣād bhagavantam adhokṣajam/manuṣya-dṛṣṭyā duṣprajñā martyātmāno na menire //*.

13 *svāgataṁ vo mahābhāgā āsya tāṁ karavāma kim / yan no didṛkṣayā prāptāupapannam idaṁ hi vaḥ //*.

14 *na prītaye 'nurāgāya hy aṅga-saṅgo nṛṇām iha/tan mano mayi yuñjānā acirān mām avāpsyatha //*.

15 *nāhaṁ tu sakhyo bhajato 'pi jantūn bhajāmy amīṣām anuvṛtti-vṛttaye/yathādhano labdha-dhane vinaṣṭe tac-cintayānyan nibhṛto na veda //*.

16 To understand the extent to which gurus are revered within Hindu contexts, see (Gonda 1965, p. 240; Forstheofel and Humes 2005, p. 3).

17 *māṁ hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye 'pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ / striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te 'pi yānti parāṁ gatim //* (Schweig 2007, p. 303).

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