

## **BHAKTIVINODA THAKUR IN MODERN RATIONAL CRITICISM OF TRADITIONAL BELIEFS<sup>41</sup>**

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*The article deals with the relationship between faith and rational knowledge in modern Gaudiya Vaishnavism. It is shown that the position of modern Vaishnavas regarding revelation and critical knowledge is defined in the books of the reformer of Gaudiya Vaishnavism Bhaktivinoda Thakur. The positions of modern teachers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism – Bhaktivendanta Sadhu Swami and Dandi Maharaja are explained, the importance of their position for the development of interreligious dialogue in modern conditions is shown. The points of contact between Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Christianity in matters of understanding time, eternity, revelation and rational cognition are shown.*

**Keywords:** *Gaudiya Vaishnavism; revelation; faith; rational knowledge; interreligious dialogue; time; eternity; Bhaktivinoda Thakur; Śrīmad Bhāgavatam; Christianity.*

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## **Introduction**

The mythological picture of the world of the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata and Puranas determines the national and cultural identity of the majority of the population of modern India. At the same time, Western science is developing successfully in India, which has a variety of cultural ties with other countries. Under these conditions, the Hindus faced a rational criticism of their worldview. This raised the question: to what extent is it permissible to deviate from tradition, critically rethink the spiritual knowledge, and change the rules of life? In India, there are both conservatives and reformers who give different answers. However, for the first time, this question was not faced by the Hindus now, but in the British colonial era.

The 19th century was the time of British colonial rule in India, when Indian traditional society faced the challenge of European culture. This challenge has given rise to various reform movements designed to assert their own identity in the face of European cultural influence. Among the outstanding Indian reformers of the time, Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914) can be mentioned. First, because it was grateful to him that, after a period of decline, a new revival of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism tradition, one of the most influential movements of modern India, began to spread beyond its borders. And, secondly, because in the new paradigm of the relationship between faith and critical thinking, he showed how, taking into account the modern view of the world, it is necessary to follow the traditional ideas about the world and the principles of life. This is also important because new movements have begun to emerge in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which attract adherents in different countries of the world, and Vaishnavas of non-Indian origin need to understand and justify the need for their transition to the spiritual tradition of a distant country.

## **The relationship between faith and critical thinking in the new paradigm of Bhaktivinoda Thakur**

In the medieval era, the Vedic tradition was perceived as the basis of the worldview, giving ready-made answers to any questions about the life of Hindu. Getting to know European culture during the colonial era changed the way we look at the world. India was previously perceived not as a separate country, but as a whole world. During the colonial period, the people of India found that they lived in a much larger world, and they needed to find their place in it again. This gave rise to new questions about their own identity, about the traditional social way of life and everyday life. It was necessary to determine their attitude to Western science and technology, to participate in political life, to the caste system, to travel outside India, to early marriage, to increase the role of women in society, etc. In this situation, the main challenge for the Hindus was the European type of rationality, which called into question the traditional Indian picture of the world.

Although logic and philosophy have a rich tradition in India, however, the peculiarity of Indian rationality was that it did not conflict with mythological thinking, but complemented it. Therefore, before the arrival of Europeans in India, there was not even such a thing as "prejudice". In European rationality, there is a division of knowledge into what is proved by rational methods and into prejudices, to which the British attributed all the traditional ideas of the Hindus. It was impossible to ignore the European rationality, it penetrated into the Indian public consciousness along with European education, science and technology. In this regard, the Indian reform movements set out to justify their own religious tradition, but already cleansed of prejudice. In a situation of facing the European rationality, it was important to reaffirm traditional Indian beliefs, and this task was solved by Bhaktivinoda Thakura.

The religious tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, also called Bengali Vaishnavism or Chaitanya Vaishnavism, was founded by the Indian spiritual master Chaitanya (1486-1534), who is revered as the incarnation in one person of Krishna and his eternal

beloved Radharani. Krishna is considered the supreme divine personality and the source of all existence. The main spiritual practice of Gaudiya Vaishnavism adherents is bhakti yoga, and the main spiritual method is the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. The Gaudiya-Vaishnavism tradition is based on the authority of the Vedas, but the most important books that adepts study daily are the Bhagavad-gita and Srimad-Bhagavatam. In the XVIII–XIX centuries, the tradition was in decline, but at the turn of the XIX–XX centuries, it was revived again thanks to the preaching of Bhaktivinoda Thakur, who wrote books not only in Sanskrit and Bengali, but also in English, initiating the spread of the teachings of Chaitanya outside of India. Bhaktivinoda Thakura's work was continued by his son, Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874-1937), who founded the Gaudiya Math missionary organization to spread Gaudiya Vaishnavism. After his death, the Gaudiya Math was divided into several maths – independent religious associations. In 1941, Sridhara Goswami founded the Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math, which later spread throughout the world. A quarter of a century later, in 1966, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York, which, continuing the tradition of Bhaktivinoda Thakura and Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati has become the largest Hindu society outside of India.

These movements are very close to each other, and they have a common task – to open the way to Vedic knowledge and Vedic traditions not only to Indians, but also to representatives of other people. The preaching of Hinduism outside of India was a completely new phenomenon and faced a question: how to convince a person in the truth of the Hindu picture of the world, which in his culture are perceived as prejudices that have no rational justification?

Vaishnava missionaries who spread the Mahabharata-era world view in Western countries can no longer simply ignore modern scientific knowledge. Bhaktivinoda Thakur, having shown how one can consciously choose spiritual knowledge based on the authority of the scriptures, taking into account the rational criticism of modern

science, formed the paradigm of the relationship between faith and critical knowledge, in which modern spiritual teachers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism preach.

### **Modern Gaudiya Vaishnavas**

The highest spiritual rank in Vaishnavism is sannyas, which is accepted only by a few, but now it has become accepted by philosophically educated intellectuals who are able to conduct scientific and interreligious dialogue. Among them are Sadhu Maharaja (Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami), an authoritative spiritual mentor at ISKCON, who proposed a philosophical method of *asymmetric dialectics* for understanding the Vedic tradition, and Dandi Maharaja, a spiritual teacher at Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math.

In 2011, Sadhu Maharaja initiated an interfaith round table in Tomsk, which was attended not only by representatives of other faiths, but also by academic scientists, specialists in philosophy, history and sociology. The method of "asymmetric dialectics", which determines the relationship of knowledge on the authority of the scriptures and on the basis of logic and practical experience, allowed the Sadhu Maharaja to use rational arguments to explain to his interlocutors a position based on non-rational knowledge of revelation, which in the Vedic tradition is passed down through the line of succession from teacher to student.

Sadhu Maharaja's method of asymmetric dialectics proved to be the most adequate to the task that Bhaktivinoda Thakur was solving – to meet the challenges of modernity, while maintaining a firm commitment to tradition, and at the same time not to fall into either dogmatism or formalism. An example of the solution of this problem is the attitude of Bhaktivinoda Thakura to varnasrama – the rules that determine the duties of the varna estates. "According to the holy scriptures, a person has the right to engage in only those activities that correspond to his varna" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2004. P. 131), but should modern society live according to these rules? Currently, India is the largest democracy in the world, in which equality is legally enshrined, but the caste

division that has developed on the basis of varna still affects the position of a person in society.

On the one hand, Bhaktivinoda Thakur argued that "a country where there is no varnasrama-dharma can not be considered civilized" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2004. P. 106). India was prosperous in the era when varnasrama existed in its original form. The decline of India is associated with the decline of the varnasrama system. Moreover, in his opinion, no society can exist without division into varnas: "Whatever European culture we take as an example, upon closer examination it becomes clear that its achievements are due to the system of estates that takes into account the natural qualities of a person" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2004. P. 128). Thus, Bhaktivinoda Thakur not only accepts varnasrama on the basis of the authority of the scriptures, but also evaluates it in the broader context of the experience of European culture, and already with this in mind defends his position: "It may be argued that there is no need for the varna system, since Europeans have achieved success in many areas and have earned the respect of other peoples even without it. However, such objections are groundless. It should be noted that European culture has emerged relatively recently. Brave and energetic Europeans took advantage of the knowledge already existing at that time in the field of science and art. But sooner or later their countries will fall into decline due to the lack of a scientifically based system of social structure" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2004. P. 127).

On the other hand, Bhaktivinoda Thakur understood that formal adherence to the rules is meaningless, they need to be adjusted in accordance with the conditions and opportunities of modern life. He argues that a person's Varna is not always determined by his birth. Varnasrama-dharma itself is only a stage on the path of bhakti, the highest religious love, and without bhakti it has no value. "Thanks to the purifying power of bhakti, the line between sudra and brahman is blurred. A sudra who has attained enlightenment through the service of God and the devotees rises to the same level as a sinless brahmana" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2004. P. 19).

Thus, by the example of the attitude to varnasrama, Bhaktivinoda Thakur, first, demonstrated how to relate unchanging principles to changing conditions of life, and, secondly, gave the basis for choosing the authority of the tradition, taking into account its understanding in a broader cultural context. His example is followed by modern Vaishnavas outside of India, who received European education and upbringing.

Modern adherents of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in the post-Soviet space perceive their tradition as integral and self-sufficient, not needing any additional justification in Western culture. But they also cannot completely ignore the rational criticism and scientific knowledge that they use in practice. The situation resembles that of the early Christians in the ancient world. Among Christian apologists, two tendencies emerged: some opposed faith to knowledge, Christian revelation to ancient culture, while others, on the contrary, sought agreement between faith and reason, using ancient philosophy to explain the Christian faith. Similarly, among modern Vaishnavas, there are those who believe that all rational knowledge that is not derived from the scriptures is useless. But there are also those who believe that it is necessary to strive for mutual understanding in interreligious and intercultural dialogue, taking into account modern knowledge and rational methods of cognition.

### **Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue on Revelation and Rational Knowledge**

The interreligious dialogue in Tomsk initiated by Sadhu Maharaja has transformed into a full-fledged scientific cooperation between Vaishnavas and representatives of the scientific community, perhaps also because Tomsk is a university city, and many Vaishnavas themselves are graduates of Tomsk universities. One of the organizers of the Tomsk interreligious dialogue, professor of philosophy N. N. Karpitsky, initiated a Christian-Vaishnava discussion on revelation and rational knowledge in the fall of 2020. He noted that the academic approach implies a critical attitude to the scriptures, the authority of which is absolute for Vaishnavas, and this

imposes restrictions on cooperation between secular and Vaishnava researchers of the Vedic tradition. To reach a new level of mutual understanding and cooperation, we need «our own philosophy of the ISKCON tradition with its own system of concepts, methods and principles of critical thinking, which would not only allow other people to have meaningful discussions with Vaishnavas and adequately understand the Vaishnava tradition, but also to rethink it not as something imported from outside, but as an integral part of the multifaceted culture of their own country. The first such purely philosophical book in Russian in the ISKCON tradition was *The Code of the Absolute* by Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami, published in 2012<sup>42</sup>. It is possible to discuss these or other ideas of the book, but the author has proposed a language and a method of asymmetric dialectics, thanks to which such a discussion becomes generally possible<sup>43</sup>.

However, many Vaishnavas would disagree with this position, believing that rational knowledge is useless when there is faith. In this regard, one of the participants of the discussion, Kala Chandra Das (Moscow), criticized this judgment of N. N. Karpitsky: "The main thing for bhakti is faith (shradha), while intellectuals measure everything by logic. This is the difference of approaches. Logic is powerless in obtaining a transcendental experience, which can only be obtained through proper communication with truly exalted Vaishnavas (*Ibid.*)". However, if we recognize the uselessness of rational knowledge in the field of religion, then it becomes unclear how inter-religious dialogue is possible at all.

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<sup>42</sup> Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami. *The Code of the Absolute: The path to perfect reason*. Moscow: Philosophical Book, 2012. 256 p.

<sup>43</sup> Christian-Vaishnava dialogue "Revelation and Rational Knowledge": based on the materials of discussions on the Internet, comp. Pavel Urvantsev // Portal of interreligious dialogue "Dialogi. Online". December 10, 2020. (URL:[http://dialogi.online/hristiansko-Christian-Vaishnava\\_dialogue "Revelation and Rational Knowledge": based on the materials of discussions on the Internet, comp. Pavel Urvantsev // Portal of interreligious dialogue "Dialogi. Online". December 10, 2020. \(URL: http://dialogi.online/hristiansko-vajshnavskij-dialog-otkrovenie-i-racionalnoe-znanie/\)](http://dialogi.online/hristiansko-Christian-Vaishnava_dialogue_Revelation_and_Rational_Knowledge/))- date of access: 28.05.21.vajshnavskij-dialog-otkrovenie-i-racionalnoe-znanie/) Christian-Vaishnava dialogue "Revelation and Rational Knowledge": based on the materials of discussions on the Internet, comp. Pavel Urvantsev // Portal of interreligious dialogue "Dialogi. Online". December 10, 2020. (URL:[http://dialogi.online/hristiansko-vajshnavskij-dialog-otkrovenie-i-racionalnoe-znanie/\)](http://dialogi.online/hristiansko-vajshnavskij-dialog-otkrovenie-i-racionalnoe-znanie/) – date of access: 28.05.21. Date of access: 28.05.21.



On the other hand, the Indian Vedic tradition has always developed a culture of dialogue, logic and rational philosophical thinking. This is also true of the modern ISKCON movement, as demonstrated by the position of Sadhu Maharaja, who proposed the method of «asymmetric dialectics»: "This method consists in the coordination of knowledge obtained in practice and knowledge based on spiritual experience, which allows you to overcome the danger of both skepticism and dogmatism. Based on the authoritative knowledge of the mind, a thesis is formulated, which is opposed to another thesis obtained with the support of practical knowledge. Then there is a dialectical agreement between knowledge based on shabda and knowledge based on pratyaksha. However, these two opposing theses are not equal, or, in other words, are not symmetrical. A thesis based on shabda provides the basis for understanding, and a thesis based on pratyaksha provides the basis for critical rethinking. However, critical analysis does not lead to denial at all, but to the identification of a deeper knowledge that has authority as its basis. At the same time, the formal side of authority is overcome, thereby revealing the depth of spiritual life underlying this knowledge" (*Ibid.*).

Nevertheless, the position advocated by Kala Chandra Das adequately expresses the prevailing mood within ISKCON. In his opinion, rationality is the» material «mind – buddhi, which, along with other elements, makes up man and the universe. He is limited in his abilities and is unable to comprehend his transcendental source. Since Vaishnavas do not understand matter in the same way as it is understood in the European tradition, the use of this term can cause misunderstanding. By matter, they mean the primordial nature of everything – prakriti, as well as all its manifestations, not only physical, but also psychical and mental. At the same time, matter, that is, prakriti, together with all its manifestations, is also understood as the energy of the transcendent God (*Gupta, 2017. P. 206*). In the ensuing discussion, Kala Chandra Dasa argued that the path of knowledge is possible only through the purification of the heart from desires that are not bound by the transcendental principle in association with an exalted person.

This happens through discipleship, service to this person, respect, and true questioning. Self-study is useless, so it is necessary to accept the guru and learn under his guidance.

During the discussion, Mikhail Sheludko, a religious scholar and specialist in the philosophy of religion and theology, pointed out the limitations of this position. He noted that there must be rational reasons for choosing the scriptures, and for this it is necessary to study the history of their origin, otherwise a person will follow someone's illusions. Therefore, in the Indian tradition, along with shabda, pratyaksha and other ways of knowledge are distinguished. Kala Chandra Dasa replied that the desire to serve Krishna is sufficient to understand the truth, and that the logical side is no longer needed, but is manifested in the heart. However, Dandy Maharaja took a broader position, pointing out that approaches can be different, and the historical-critical approach of Mikhail Sheludko is not the only possible one, so you need to look for mutual understanding even with differences in beliefs: "Often the obstacle to mutual understanding is a difference in theoretical attitudes, and the will to understand can overcome this difficulty without abandoning its most important worldview principles" (*Ibid.*).

Both the opponents of the discussion, Mikhail Sheludko and Dandi Maharaja, appealed to Bhaktivinoda Thakur. Mikhail Sheludko pointed out that although the Vaishnava tradition teaches that the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Mahabharata were written by Vyasa 5,000 years ago, this is refuted by scientific research. The Bhagavad-gita was formed not earlier than the first century BC, and the key Gaudiya-Vaishnava scripture Bhagavata Purana, otherwise called Srimad-Bhagavatam, dates from the VIII-IX centuries AD. He also stressed that Bhaktivinoda Thakur had made independent studies of the texts of the scriptures and had come to results that are much closer to modern scientific research than to the Vaishnava tradition: "The attempt to reconcile Vaishnavism with academic science was made for the first time by Bhaktivinoda Thakur. It was he who first voiced the real dating of the shastra – Gita of the I–II century

AD and the Bhagavata Purana of the X century, but it was more convenient to reproduce the mythologems about the purely ancient Vedas and srutis to popularize the teachings"<sup>44</sup> (Ibit.).

Bhaktivinoda Thakur formulated the task of his own research in the preface to the Sri Krishna-samhita: "First, we decided to date, in accordance with the modern point of view, the main historical events of India. Later we will determine the dates of the scriptures. As soon as the dates of the scriptures are established, I will explain, in accordance with the modern point of view, the history of the Vaishnava dharma that is set forth in these scriptures. Although we ourselves consider the scriptures in accordance with ancient methods, I will now follow modern methods for the benefit of the people of the present time" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 17). Based on the analysis of the sacred texts themselves, Bhaktivinoda Thakur independently reconstructed the periodization of the events that are reflected in them.

According to his calculations, the Mahabharata was written after 1000 BC, while "it cannot be argued that the author of the Mahabharata was the same Vyasa who divided the Vedas and received the title of Vedavyasa in the time of Maharaja Yudhishtira" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 42). Srimad-Bhagavatam was written in the ninth century (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 47). At the same time, Bhaktivinoda Thakur confesses: "I could not determine the name of the author of Srimad-Bhagavatam. Whoever he is, we are grateful to him and accept with great reverence this great personality, Vyasadeva, as the spiritual teacher of people with pure, elevated consciousness" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 47).

The chronology of events has also changed. According to the Vaishnava tradition, the battle of Kurukshetra took place five thousand years ago, but according to the calculations of Bhaktivinoda Thakur – 3791 years before his research, which he cited in the book in 1888 (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 34). Similarly, the periodization of the yugas in Bhaktivinoda Thakur differs significantly from that described in the Puranas

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<sup>44</sup> Christian-Vaishnava dialogue "Revelation and Rational Knowledge"...

and Srimad-Bhagavatam. According to the traditional periodization, the Satya yuga lasts for 1,728,000 years, the Treta yuga for 1,296,000 years, the Dvapara yuga for 854,000 years, and the Kali yuga for 432,000 years. The ratio between them is 4:3:2: 1. However, Bhaktivinoda Thakur gives a different calculation: "Satya yuga lasts 650 years, Treta yuga – 1125 years, and Dvapara yuga – 775 years. Thus, the total number is 2550 years" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 21). At the same time, he emphasizes that the Vedic scholars do not recognize these calculations, and explains: "The history of the past of India and the age of the various scriptures are presented according to the opinion of modern scholars. Everyone has the right to accept it or reject it. Vaishnavism does not depend on these statements. We know that Vaishnavism, the Vedas, and the devotional scriptures, such as Srimad-Bhagavatam, are eternal" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 50). In defending the traditional understanding of the scriptures, Dandi Maharaja refers to the same book of Bhaktivinoda Thakur that Mikhail Sheludko draws on in his critique of the Vaishnava tradition. Dandi Maharaja points out that, contrary to the alternative historical dating of the scriptures, Bhaktivinoda Thakur claimed that Srimad-Bhagavatam is an eternal and ancient scripture, which, along with the Vedas, does not apply to modern works: "We have presented the dating of events and scriptures according to modern opinion. People like swans don't engage in useless arguments, so if there are conflicting conclusions with true arguments, we will accept them. We hope to hear opinions on these topics from future transcendentalists or intelligent materialists. According to our scriptures, we do not accept such dates. We believe only the statements of the scriptures. I have presented modern conclusions for the benefit of interested people" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 49).

This double reading of Bhaktivinoda Thakur is due to the peculiarity of his position: on the one hand, he recognizes the authority of the scriptures, on the other hand, he takes into account their rational criticism. In this way, he differs from his predecessors, who accepted the authority of tradition by default, and from those of his

contemporaries, who, under the influence of Western rationality, perceived traditional beliefs as a set of prejudices. The position of Bhaktivinoda Thakur defines a new paradigm of understanding the Vedic tradition: first, critical views on the scriptures are examined, and already with their consideration makes a conscious choice of the scriptures as the unconditional and authoritative source of true knowledge: "Srimad-Bhagavatam has no birth, no beginning, no end, because it is eternal. Nevertheless, it is necessary to find out when, where and thanks to whom this work appeared, according to modern opinion" (*Bhaktivinoda Thakur*, 2019. P. 46). However, the transition from critical consideration to the recognition of authority in Bhaktivinoda Thakur is made by leaps and bounds, because there is a gap between these two views of the scriptures.

In the discussion, Mikhail Sheludko pointed out the insuperability of this gap, thus defending a position that corresponds to the modern scientific and critical view of the Vedic tradition. Another panelist, Kala Chandra Das, represented the most popular position in the Vaishnava community of ignoring any rational and critical assessments of the Vedic tradition. However, Dandi Maharaja, in objecting to Mikhail Sheludko, demonstrated that the gap between a critical view of the scriptures and the recognition of their absolute authority is quite surmountable. In this aspect, he was closest to Bhaktivinoda Thakur, although he was in a more difficult position, since he had to defend this position already in view of the new scientific knowledge accumulated in the hundred and fifty years after the publication of the book «Krishna-samhita».

### **Discussion on the relationship between eternity and empirical events**

The further development of the discussion between Mikhail Sheludko and Dandi Maharaja demonstrated how modern Vaishnavas, in the paradigm of the relationship between faith and rational knowledge formed by Bhaktivinoda Thakur, can oppose the scientific and Christian-theological positions:

"Dandi Maharaja: Bhaktivinoda's point of view is clear: the scriptures are non-historical, so there is no point in arguing about their historical origin...

Mikhail Sheludko: Non-historical does not mean that their appearance in history cannot be dated. Therefore, Bhaktivinoda dates it with his own research.

Dandi Maharaja: Non-historicity means that there was no beginning in history, because there was no beginning. They metaphysically belong to a different plane of being.

Mikhail Sheludko: You can't date the content, the idea, and the form – why not? ... Bhaktivinoda diplomatically avoids the direct explanation of the correlation between empirical dating and faith dating. But it is the history of forms and the codification of the sastras that can reconcile the two statements. And sometimes the idea can be dated-it all depends on the data that we have. In the history of the Gaudiya sampradaya, all the key ideas can be dated.

Dundee Maharaja: Obviously not. Take the idea of Krishna at least. For example, in a dream yesterday, let's say I saw my father. My dream has clear boundaries. I know I saw him yesterday. But that doesn't mean my father showed up yesterday. In the same way, eternal reality is different from a temporary dream (Ibid.)".

Like Bhaktivinoda Thakur, Dandi Maharaja takes note of the rational criticism of the Vedic tradition and already chooses religious truths based on the absolute authority of the scriptures. At the same time, he justifies the transition from a rational-critical to a religious position by philosophical means, and does it in two stages.

First, it shows the limitations of rational thinking and scientific knowledge of the world: "No significant progress has occurred – no one has overcome death, disease, despair, loneliness, depression – people are left with the same things they have always struggled with. We have expanded our horizons a little, but the unfathomable and mysterious part of our world remains as limitless as ever. And to this day, we still refer to this incomprehensible part with some symbols and vague abstractions. The dispute is only about which symbols are better, and what terminology to choose. These discussions do not touch on the essence of the problem – namely, that the world is still

incomprehensible and magical for us, while our science only systematizes everyday information" (Ibid.). The possibilities of rational knowledge are limited, and there is nothing humiliating for the mind, if we understand that the human mind is adapted to solve well-defined tasks. However, the incorrect use of rational knowledge leads to the fact that traditional worldviews are deconstructed, and nothing better comes to replace them. At the same time, tradition does not suggest blindly believing in absurd prejudices, it only asserts that the world is incomprehensible and cultivates a reverence for revelation. And it is precisely in the traditional picture of the world that the use of reason is defined as clearly as possible.

Secondly, Dandi Maharaja shows the fundamental difference between the Vaishnava worldview and the Christian one. In his opinion, the difficulty of combining the historicity and eternity of the scriptures, which are identical with Krishna, arises only in the Christian worldview. He sees a contradiction in the Christian position that each event is unique in history and at the same time remains in eternity: "The worldview dualism, in which one can say that Christ appeared in time and not in time with the same degree of reality, is a characteristic paradox of Christian theology. It would be more consistent to say that Christ did not appear in time, but that his appearance is included in the calendar as a temporary symbol of an incomprehensible spiritual act. This is the Vedantist model (Ibid.)".

### **Overcoming the contradiction between the Christian and Vedic traditions in the question of the temporal and eternal worlds of consciousness**

According to Dandi Maharaja, one should avoid the division into eternal spiritual content and temporal form, as if they were two different existences in time and not in time. In accordance with this, it is wrong to simultaneously recognize the eternity of the sastras and immediately say that they were written by people in the Middle Ages. Events in time are manifestations of maya and are not related to true reality, and everything related to truth is not related to maya. References to events in time are necessary for

purely practical purposes, but they have no spiritual significance. This is due to the fact that Indian culture is characterized by a cyclical understanding of time, in which there are no unique events, therefore, the uniqueness of religious revelation can only be explained by the fact that the shastras themselves are identical with God and are an eternal reality.

In an attempt to clarify this position, Nikolai Karpitsky asked in what sense Srimad-Bhagavatam is eternal. Since this book contains a description of empirical events, the statement about its eternity can be understood in different ways. The first option: only the general meaning of Srimad-Bhagavatam is eternal, and this does not apply to the description of empirical events that are conditioned by time and circumstances. The second option: the entire text is eternal, including the style and features of the language. But then people are deprived of free will, because they have to act out their roles in the play exactly as it is written in the eternal book. The third option: people have free will, but then their actions will be different from what is described in Srimad-Bhagavatam. In this case, the description does not refer to the events that happened in history themselves, but to what is either in God's plan or in some other dimension of time. In this case, the description of events in the holy book serves only as a sample of similar events in our history.

Dandi Maharaja replied that the scriptures express the highest spiritual reality, and they have no denotations in empirical reality. At the same time, the scriptures refer to objects of empirical reality in order to be understandable to people. For example, the waters of the Ganges carry many impurities, but this does not change the sacred character of the Ganges in the higher reality, so that the river is the object of worship for many millions of people. Here we can talk about the unsymmetrical dialectic of the earthly image of the holy scriptures and their unearthly eternal nature. Srimad-Bhagavatam contains descriptions of events that are cyclically repeated, but not exactly to each specific detail. People have freedom, but they don't have the ability to do



anything, they don't have the ability not to die, they don't have the ability to create their own universe, and so on. This allows God to carry out a predetermined plot, such as changing the four yugas, leaving people free to choose. In addition, free will is limited by karma, which allows you to keep the overall outline of the events of the sacred plot, but each time with its own unique features. Therefore, the same stories are presented differently in different texts. Dandi Maharaja drew an analogy with the lives of people in a state that allows its citizens to act freely, intervening when they use freedom beyond the permissible limits. At the metaphysical level, such a framework is set by karma. At the same time, such limited freedom is still questionable and should not satisfy a person, so God calls for liberation from the world of karma for the sake of eternity, true freedom and the perfection of God's communion.

This understanding of eternity differs from both the ancient and the Christian understanding. In the ancient understanding, only the intelligible being has eternity – the world of *aidos*, the world mind; in the Christian understanding, God from the position of eternity contemplates the entire history, all events occurring in time, so eternal life as the ideal of salvation includes empirical time together with specific unique events.

In the Vaishnava tradition, eternity is understood in the context of the cyclical concept of time. As Dandi Maharaja explained, all events take place within the continuum of consciousness, so there is no reality independent of consciousness. Under the influence of time is only a part of consciousness, that is, the world, which is a conditioned reality. This world within time is cyclical. The scriptures are the link between these two worlds of consciousness: the temporal and the eternal. The difference between the two worlds is relative. When consciousness is released, this difference disappears, and then it becomes clear that in fact the world of consciousness is one. From a conditioned point of view, the scriptures are presented as part of a borrowed history, but in their original state they are eternal and perfect, and this is how a person sees them from the position of an unconditioned, liberated consciousness.

In this regard, Nikolai Karpitsky pointed out the theoretical possibility of a synthesis of the Christian and Vaishnava understanding of eternity: "In the Christian understanding, revelation is also revealed in sacred history. But this story is unique, and for God, the whole story is given in the present. That is, in addition to their empirical temporal state, historical events also remain in eternity. However, this understanding is still limited. After all, being in the present means being able to act freely. Then, it turns out that people who act freely in empirical history, from the position of eternity, are limited to those variants of their actions that they have committed in time.

In the Vedic sense, the opposite is true. There is an archetype, a pattern of history that repeats itself endlessly in empirical time... But then the jivas ... find themselves very limited within the cyclical empirical time, they can exercise freedom in small things, but they cannot fundamentally influence history... In the Christian understanding, we come to a limitation within eternity, and in the Vedic understanding, we come to a limitation within the empirical world.

If all reality is given in eternity in infinitely different versions, as God sees it, then the contradiction between Christianity and the Vedic tradition is overcome. Then Christians can recognize that from the point of view of eternity there is not one, but many variants of history, and Vaishnavas—that all descriptions of cyclically repeated events are the disclosure of different variants that are already given in eternity, and from the point of view of God they occur in the present.

Then the question of the eternity of the scriptures is removed, because they describe events from the perspective of eternity. Within historical time, the scriptures refer precisely to those variants of events that occurred in empirical history, and at the same time convey through them an eternal meaning that is common to all variants of these events from the perspective of eternity" (*Ibid.*).

Dandi Maharaja replied that there was nothing in this conclusion that could be disagreed with from the Gaudiya Vaishnava point of view: "In this light, one can

understand the position of Baladeva Vidyabhushana, who said that the Scriptures have no denotations in the earthly world, that all the names in them are common names. But the presence of many variants of the earth's history in eternity is, as far as I understand, a bit like origenism, and I do not know how much Christians will be willing to agree with this" (*Ibid.*). Responding to the doubt of the Dandy Maharaja, Nikolai Karpitsky explained that religious and philosophical thought in Christianity develops in parallel with theological thought and does not imply any restrictions in the study of religious experience.

### **Conclusions**

Gaudiya Vaishnavism provides a holistic understanding of the world, the adept of this tradition does not need any other principles of knowledge and organization of his life, and it is unacceptable for him to critically rethink the revelation and authority of the scriptures. In the medieval era, Gaudiya Vaishnavas could ignore any knowledge based on someone else's type of rationality. This attitude is quite common today, but it excludes the possibility of scientific and interreligious dialogue between Gaudiya Vaishnavas and representatives of other cultural traditions.

When Hindus faced criticism of their worldview from the standpoint of European rationality during the British colonial period, Bhaktivinoda Thakur formed a paradigm of the relationship between faith and critical knowledge. He independently conducts research from the perspective of modern scientists and, taking into account the rational criticism of his own tradition, consciously chooses the revelation and authority of the holy scriptures. This position expands the possibilities of rational knowledge by understanding other positions and promotes scientific and interreligious dialogue. In addition, it allows you to adjust the rules of life in the modern multicultural world, while maintaining support in your own tradition.

The transition from a critical position to a conscious choice of the authority of tradition requires a philosophical justification, which predetermined the intellectual trend in modern Gaudiya Vaishnavism. An example is the philosophical idea of

asymmetric dialectics, which was founded by the initiator of interreligious dialogue, Sadhu Maharaja.

In the process of developing interreligious dialogue, both Vaishnavas and their opponents turn to the ideas of Bhaktivinoda Thakur, in particular, to his critical study of the dating of the scriptures. Although it is unacceptable for a Vaishnava to deny the eternity and authority of the scriptures, the very possibility of discussing them from a critical perspective requires a deeper understanding of eternity that opens up points of contact with the Christian understanding and serves as an example of the fruitfulness of interreligious dialogue in the paradigm of the relationship between faith and critical knowledge set by Bhaktivinoda Thakur.

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WE MUST THINK  
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