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THE GURU, MAYAVADINS, AND WOMEN

Tracing the Origins of Selected Polemical Statements
in the Work of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami

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IN 1965, Bhaktivedanta Swami, a retired pharmaceuticals manufacturer from Calcutta, moved to New York, where he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In the following years he published his English translations of and commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. By paraphrasing the words of and repeatedly referring to the earlier Gaudiya Vaishnava writers in his books and lectures, he popularized these authors—perhaps for the first time—among a large English-speaking audience outside India. While these earlier commentators, in their writing, remained strictly within the boundaries of scriptural context, often limiting their notes to clarifications of syntax, grammar, and word meanings, with occasional quotes from other scriptures, Bhaktivedanta Swami added his own urgent and personal message. The contemporary world economy, politics, social development, education, and racial and gender issues are not uncommon topics in his commentaries. And while the works of his predecessor commentators had always remained reading matter for an elite minority, he wanted his books to be translated into all the languages of the world and distributed profusely.

Bhaktivedanta Swami's work is neither text-critical nor systematic. He basically drew from whatever sources happened to be easily available to him at the time. For his English translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*,¹ he relied to a large extent on Dr. Radhakrishnan's English *Gita* translation.² His English translation of the *Bhagavata Purana* is based on a number of different sources. In his translation of the third book,³ for example, there are a large number of stanzas that agree verbatim with C. L. Goswami and M. A. Sastri's earlier English translation of the text.⁴ While Bhaktivedanta Swami continued to use their work when he translated the fourth book,⁵ he no longer copied any of their translations verbatim. From the twenty-eighth chapter of book 4 to the thirteenth chapter of book 10,⁶ his work is clearly based on the Gaudiya Math Bengali edition of the *Bhagavata Purana*.⁷ Many of Bhaktivedanta Swami's translations in this part of his work are not rendered directly from the original Sanskrit, but from this Bengali translation.⁸ His books, however, nowhere state the actual sources on which they are based.

Many explanations in Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentary on the *Bhagavata Purana* can be traced directly to the traditional Gaudiya Sanskrit commentaries that he used. It appears that in order to formulate his own commentary on a given stanza of the *Bhagavata Purana*, he would first glance at the notes of two or three of the earlier commentators, paraphrase fragments of their glosses, and then add his own elaborations.⁹ He called his commentaries "Bhaktivedanta purports" and often suggested that they had not actually been written by himself, but that God, Krishna, had revealed them to him.¹⁰ For the *Bhagavata Purana* alone, he produced 5,800 purports averaging 250 words in length.¹¹

Not everything in the purports builds upon the earlier commentaries. There are many passages wherein Bhaktivedanta Swami clearly presents his own views—for example, when he dismisses the reports of the Moon landing in 1969,¹² debates scientific theories like Darwin's theory of evolution,¹³ or condemns contemporary culture and morals when discussing the miniskirt fashion.¹⁴ While it is easy to identify these statements as the author's own opinions, Bhaktivedanta Swami's purports also contain a range of statements that sound as if they were the conclusions of earlier commentators, but turn out to be his personal contributions when one compares them to all the commentaries that he possibly could have used.

To explore this aspect of Bhaktivedanta's commentaries, a list of about 150 most frequently recurring keywords in the Bhaktivedanta purports (such as *varna*, *brahmana*, "scholars," "women," "Mayavadis," etc.) was drawn up. Then, purport after purport was analyzed to see how many, and which, of those keywords corresponded to words in the traditional commentaries on the same stanzas. This procedure was repeated with all the purports to the *Bhagavad Gita* and 664 purports to the *Bhagavata Purana*,¹⁵ with a view to eliminating those