

ISKCON and intelligent design

The case of Leif A. Jensen and *Rethinking Darwin*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.112484>

 Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

 VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896–1977), the founder of ISKCON, had a complex relationship with science and modernity, and many of his followers have consequently allied themselves with various kinds of critiques of the modern project. A favourite enemy has been Darwin's theory of evolution. This article undertakes a close reading of the book *Rethinking Darwinism*, written by a Danish member of the society, Leif A. Jensen, and published by the movement's official publishing house, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust in 2010. Contextualising the book within the history of ISKCON's relationship with science, the article asks what the motivations for challenging Darwin here are, how it is done, and what the consequences of it are for a movement often taken to be a fundamentalist one.

Introduction

The term *fundamentalism* is a famously problematic term, that is, one that is widely used but little understood. Fundamentalism began as a self-descriptive term among North American Protestants protesting against modernist ideas of biblical criticism, and arguing for the authority of the Bible as the faultless word of God: the Bible should be taken literally whenever possible and the morals it teaches (particularly the Ten Commandments) should be the basis of a Christian life (Boone 1989). From this follows the most common understanding of the term fundamentalism, that is, a type of conservative religious stance advocating

a strict conformity to sacred texts that are to be taken literally. This is also the understanding that has been widened into academic domains other than that of the study of religion (e.g. Stähler and Stierstorfer 2009) and into popular discourse as well ('he is such a fundamentalist Trekkie'). Nevertheless, following the influential five-volume Fundamentalism Project of Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby in the 1990s (summarised in Marty and Appleby 1992), the term fundamentalism has also come to refer to the political phenomenon of a militant rejection of secular modernity, aiming instead for a totalitarian society where everything is governed by religious principles.

In this article, I approach fundamentalism in the first of the two meanings indicated above. I will do a close reading (see e.g. Brummett 2019) of a text promoting intelligent design (ID), that is, the idea that the world and its inhabitants are the result of some (typically unspecified) intelligent designer, rather than of random, natural causes. Critics have often seen ID as a kind of softened-down creationism (e.g. Ruse 2017: 114) or even as a 'Trojan horse' for introducing creationism into the public sphere (Forrest and Gross 2004). Creationism, 'a doctrine or theory holding

that matter, the various forms of life, and the world were created by God out of nothing and usually in the way described in Genesis' (Merriam-Webster 2021), is routinely linked with the kind of fundamentalism I have opted to investigate (e.g. Price 1984: 19). But do all the parts of this equation (that is, ID = creationism = fundamentalism) really hold together when subjected to scrutiny, especially when what is studied falls outside the scope of Western Christianity, the original context of the concept of fundamentalism?

The text that I will look at is entitled *Rethinking Darwin: A Vedic Study of Darwinism and Intelligent Design*. It is written by Leif A. Jensen, 'Danish science writer, Chairman of the Danish Society for Intelligent Design and university lecturer on the subject of Darwinism and intelligent design' (Jensen 2010: 248). In addition to this, Jensen is an active member of ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, having the initiated name of Lalitānātha Dāsa. Jensen's book is published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT), founded in 1970 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), the charismatic Bengali renunciant behind the ISKCON movement.

While the BBT calls itself 'the world's largest publisher of classic Vaishnava texts and contemporary works on the philosophy, theology, and culture of bhakti-yoga' (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 2021a), it began as the exclusive publisher of the writing of Bhaktivedanta Swami alone. The BBT today publishes other authors within the fields mentioned in the quotation above but reprinting the writings of the founder and compiling new books based on his teachings remain its focus. All the BBT trustees and managers are ISKCON members (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 2021b), and ISKCON and BBT are

said to exist for the same purpose, that is, to serve Bhaktivedanta Swami's movement (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 2021c). The BBT can thus be said to be ISKCON's official publishing house, and by being published through the BBT, Jensen's book can be taken to represent a stance at least not in opposition to ISKCON doctrine.

I will therefore in the following contextualise the book within ISKCON and its troubled relationship with science, and describe its contents and main ideas before finally offering some thought about what its implications are for a movement often described as fundamentalist (e.g. Green 2008). As I am not a trained biologist, chemist or astrophysicist, it perhaps goes without saying that I will not pass judgement on the book's scientific merit or lack of such, merely noting that it does not seem to have garnered any response from the scientific community.

ISKCON and science

ISKCON is a modern form of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition begun by Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533), a theistic Hindu movement focused on *bhakti* or devotion to Kṛṣṇa (for an overview of ISKCON, see e.g. Cole and Dwyer 2007). As *Rethinking Darwin* presents itself as a book on science, before coming to the book itself I will give a brief overview of the relationship between ISKCON and empirical science.

Olav Hammer (2004: 201–2) has differentiated four general ways in which religious spokespersons since the time of Copernicus and Bacon have defined the relationship between religion and the increasingly dominant scientific world-view. The first Hammer calls the *God of the gaps* approach, that is, invoking religious explanations for whatever science cannot (yet) explain. The second is *conflict*, that

is, consistently making science subservient to revelation. The third approach Hammer calls *two worlds*, meaning that religion and science fundamentally deal with different and incommensurable worlds. The fourth approach, finally, is *scientism*, or the position that if it is performed correctly, scientific inquiry serves to prove the religious viewpoint.

In general, modern Hindu groups have tended to take Hammer's scientist approach, by trying to show that modern science is presaged in the Hindu scriptures. According to Meera Nanda, this is facilitated by the pervasive power of monist ideas in modern Hinduism:

This doctrine of equality, of 'no real differences' of all sciences, enables the Hindu ideologues to erase distinctions between myths and science. Consequently, Hindutva ideology presents myths of Hindu texts as containing propositional knowledge about the natural world, and presents the method of introspection (yoga) as 'scientific' within the metaphysical assumptions of Hinduism. (Nanda 2003: 267)

Others (e.g. David Kinsley, quoted in Norelius 2009: 30–1) see the inclusivist tendency of Hinduism as behind this tendency, but whatever the cause, since the late nineteenth century, various Hindu thinkers, such as Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda, Keshub Chandra Sen, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda, have incorporated aspects of evolutionary theory into their thinking (pp. 31–4). This holds true today as well. Paul Lurquin and Linda Stone (2007: 84) have noted that the powerful 'Hindu nationalist' Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has never singled out evolution theory as a threat to Hindu values.

The relationship between ISKCON and science has on the other hand been a complicated one. In his overview of Bhaktivedanta Swami's engagement with science, Benjamin Zeller (2010) has shown how the swami tried several different approaches, from interpreting the discovery of anti-matter as evidence of a spiritual reality in his early booklet *Easy Journey to Other Planets* (first published in 1960) to presenting his teachings as 'spiritual science' through a kind of 'inverted Orientalism', and finally to an outright denunciation of empirical science altogether. Respectively, the first of these positions corresponds to Hammer's *scientism*, the second to what James R. Lewis (2003: 14) has called 'rational appeal' as a legitimising strategy (that is, appealing to someone's sense of logic and reason), and the third to Hammer's *conflict*.

Nevertheless, it is the conflict strategy that has most often been employed by later ISKCON authors, especially when it comes to the theory of evolution (see e.g. Rothstein 1996: 144–65). Bhaktivedanta Swami himself is sometimes held to have been fiercely anti-Darwinist (e.g. Rothstein 1996: 147), but Oliver Zambon and Thomas Aechtner (2018: 82–6) have shown him to have adopted several different approaches to this topic. The book *Life Comes from Life* (Prabhupada 1979) is within the movement often held to represent his criticism of Darwinism, and is indeed mentioned as such by Jensen both at the beginning and end of his work (Jensen 2010: 7, 212). *Life Comes from Life* is based on a series of informal discussions between Bhaktivedanta Swami and his followers, in particular Dr Thoudam Singh (1937–2006), who later went on to serve as the leader of the Bhaktivedanta Institute (BI), the scientific research institute of the ISKCON movement (Brown 2002: 102). Bhaktivedanta

Swami is rather less than generous in his evaluation of modern scientists in the discussions, calling them ‘thieves’, ‘demons’, ‘animals’ and ‘rascals’ to be ‘kicked in the face with boots’ (Zeller 2010: 274).

There is no indication of Bhaktivedanta Swami really wanting anyone to inflict physical harm on scientists (or of a disciple of his to have taken it literally); rather, I have elsewhere argued that such language to a large extent reflects Bhaktivedanta Swami’s love of drama (Broo 2006a). Furthermore, both Benjamin Zeller (2010: 272) and Stewart Kreitzler (quoted in Zambon and Achtner 2018: 72–3) have shown *Life Comes from Life* to have undergone a complicated editorial process, making it less than reliable as an example of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s view on evolution. Nevertheless, while later ISKCON authors such as Richard Thompson and Michael Cremona jettisoned the swami’s abusive language and nuanced his arguments, both having impeccable academic credentials themselves, *Life Comes from Life* and Bhaktivedanta Swami’s language in general have had a profound influence on the view on science within his movement.

Mikael Rothstein (1996: 18–19) has called the relationship between ISKCON and science one of ‘negative syncretism’, that is, not only that syncretism between science (in this case) and religion does not happen (no syncretism), but that a conscious effort is made to keep these two domains separate – but not in the sense of Hammer’s *two worlds* approach, but in a way that explicitly relegates science to an unimportant or false position.

But why do ISKCON authors focus on evolutionary theory in particular? In a perceptive essay, Per-Johan Norelius (2009: 34) has pointed out that the science-critical stance of ISKCON stems from its founder, Bhaktivedanta Swami, not from the

Gauḍiṃya Vaiṣṇava tradition that the movement stems from. Norelius goes on to show (2009: 35–41) that this stance has two ideological roots: Bhaktivedanta Swami’s often adopted scriptural literalism (to which I will return below; see also Rothstein 1996), and, more importantly, the Vedantic idea of everything stemming from Brahman, the absolute. Matter thus arises from consciousness, rather than consciousness arising as an epiphenomenon of matter. It was this last idea that Bhaktivedanta Swami found particularly hateful and that his followers picked up and developed.

In their overview of ISKCON’s Darwin-scepticism, Zambon and Achtner (2018: 74–5) briefly mention Jensen’s book as an example of how ISKCON co-opts arguments employed by Christian ID theorists, much as earlier ISKCON authors took over arguments of Christian young-Earth creationism (see Brown 2002). Let us now turn to the book itself to see exactly how Jensen does this.

Rethinking Darwin

Jensen’s book is printed as a convenient little paperback volume of 248 pages with several black-and-white illustrations, many (such as the one of a near-death experience on page 163) reproduced from earlier BBT and BI publications. The language and style of the book are geared to a general, non-specialist audience such as university students, and not limited to ISKCON members, as seen by the helpful glossary at the end (Jensen 2010: 229–35) and the way in which specific ISKCON language and doctrines are toned down. The name Krishna, for example, is never applied to the source of everything (which is simply called ‘God’) and is in fact only mentioned once, in the context of presenting Bhaktivedanta Swami as the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Unusually for

ISKCON books, while there is a portrait of Charles Darwin on the cover and another one within (p. 2), the book contains no pictures of Krishna or of Bhaktivedanta Swami.

On the other hand, while toned down, the connection between Jensen, the book and ISKCON is not hidden in the publication. It is after all published by the BBT, mentions Bhaktivedanta Swami at the beginning and the very end, and provides the link to an official ISKCON webpage on the copyright page. Jensen gives both his secular and his initiated ISKCON name at the end of his introduction (Jensen 2010: 8), though the second is within parentheses. Whether all of this is enough to link the book to 'the Hare Krishnas' for a general readership is nevertheless perhaps doubtful.

In his introduction, Jensen familiarises his readers with the idea of the book, his co-authors (see below), the BI and (very briefly), the 'Vedic alternative' to follow, but he focuses on the importance of Darwin's theory for 'the very fabric of the modern world' (Jensen 2010: 1) and how it has been instrumental in forming a materialistic, naturalist view of the world, a view that is now being challenged by the ID movement. Jensen writes:

The question of life's origin and development influences every human being's self-understanding and indeed lies at the foundation of how we each build ideas of what is true and false, right and wrong, important and unimportant, and about the meaning of existence. (Jensen 2010: 5)

Apart from the introduction, Jensen's book contains fourteen chapters implicitly divided into two parts. The first and largest part consists of the first ten chapters. Four

out of these ten chapters have been written by other, more famous, proponents of ID and at least three of them were previously published elsewhere, but here they are positioned in such a way as to function as integral parts of Jensen's book.

The first chapter traces the history of Darwinism, focusing on how parts of Darwin's original theory have been disproved while neo-Darwinism has nevertheless become scientific dogma. The second chapter, written by Jonathan Wells, is provocatively called 'Survival of the Fakest' and focuses on how many classic examples of Darwinian evolution (e.g. the Miller and Urey experiment of creating amino acids, Haeckel's embryo drawings or Kettlewell's peppered moths) are still routinely reproduced as evidence of evolution even though they have been disproved or problematised decades ago. Wells argues that such sloppy practices are an indicator of how Darwinism is more about ideology than science.

Chapter three examines the fossil record, arguing that it not only does not support Darwinian evolution but that it in fact presents anomalies that speak against it. Chapter four, written by William B. Dembski, introduces the reader to the history of the ID movement, noting that it is 'promising to upturn the cultural dominance of Darwinism much as the freedom movements in Eastern Europe overturned the dominance of Marxism at the end of the 1980s' (Jensen 2010: 65).

Chapter five deals with the question of convergent as opposed to homologous structures, arguing that this supports the idea of one creator forming variations of the same theme rather than the mechanisms of evolution independently coming up with the same structures at different geographical and temporal instances. In chapter six, Michael Behe presents the argument

of irreducible complexity, that is, cases of complex molecular systems where with the removal or absence of even one part the whole functionality would break down; they therefore could not have evolved gradually, as anything less than the complete system would have been useless.

Chapter seven, introduced with a quotation from a discussion of Bhaktivedanta Swami from *Life Comes from Life*, deals with the origin of life, arguing that the theory of the chemical origin of the building blocks of life is disputed and unsatisfactory. This is followed in chapter eight by another look at the molecular evidence introduced by Behe in chapter six. In chapter nine, the leading BI scholar Michael Cremo summarises the findings of his and Richard Thompson's book *Forbidden Archaeology* (1993), in which, through anomalous archaeological evidence (much of it from the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries), they claim a much longer history for the human race than mainstream science does. The tenth chapter deals with cosmology and in particular the anthropological principle, that is, that the universe appears to have been designed for life.

So far, there is really nothing in the book that has not appeared in earlier texts on ID, and indeed, Wells, Dembski and Behe are famous ID proponents affiliated to the Discovery Institute, a think-tank based in Seattle, Washington, with a 'special concern for the role that science and technology play in our culture and how they can advance free markets, illuminate public policy and support the theistic foundations of the West' (Discovery Institute 2021). Just as the creationist publications of the Institute of Creation Research in the United States influenced Muslim creationists such as the author of the lavish and widely distributed *Atlas of Creation* (Edis 1999), Harun Yahya (the pen-name of the Turkish

author and preacher Adnan Oktar), the ID movement has created a body of arguments used by a broad range of anti-Darwinists. Jensen presents no original arguments against evolution, which is easily understandable: though he calls himself a 'science writer' (Jensen 2010: 248), he is not a scientist himself. He writes nothing about his educational credentials in the book, but in a presentation on an official ISKCON webpage, he is said to be a 'former science student' (Anon. 2021). Nevertheless, he has clearly made an extensive study of the field of ID, as evinced by the bibliography of his book, and has found of way of conveying its findings to a lay audience.

But what if Neo-Darwinism is wrong and there really is an intelligent designer behind everything? Where does that lead us? This is the implicit question behind the last few chapters of the book, where Jensen tries to argue for the reality of non-material phenomena. In chapter eleven, Jensen looks at consciousness, claiming, primarily on the basis of near-death experiences and memories of previous lives, that it is something different from matter altogether. In chapter twelve, he argues for the reality of paranormal experiences and in chapter thirteen he looks at inspiration and instinct, both deemed to point towards another, higher consciousness, 'superconsciousness'. None of this is usually done by ID authors, careful not to compromise their scientific standing any more than mainstream scientists already think they are doing. This is nevertheless an important part of Jensen's project. He writes:

Modern evolutionary thinking typically tries to reduce everything to matter and explain away indications for anything non-physical or beyond material nature. By demonstrating the shortcomings of this mode of think-

ing, intelligent design points to something apart from matter. If evidence for the paranormal can be substantiated, this can only strengthen the case that intelligent design proponents seek to make. (Jensen 2010: 174)

Of course, as the book is presented as a scientific publication, the evidence garnered for such phenomena are not taken from religious texts but from the (arguably) scientific field of parapsychology. The arguments and the evidence (e.g. the reincarnation studies of Ian Stephenson) are familiar from BI publications and have here only been updated a little.

The subtitle of Jensen's book is 'A Vedic Study of Darwinism and Intelligent Design', but it is only in the fourteenth and last chapter that he introduces what he calls the Vedic paradigm, as 'Darwinism is a failed idea' (Jensen 2010: 196). This chapter therefore merits a closer examination than the previous ones. It mentions the 'Vedic texts of ancient India' once, and the 'Vedas' once too, but the term 'Vedic literature' is used more than a dozen times. Yet only two texts are explicitly mentioned, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* once (Jensen 2010: 201) and the *Bhagavad-gītā* twice, the latter being once also directly quoted (pp. 208–9).

On the basis of this 'Vedic literature' the following ideas are presented. As the effect is always related to the cause, this world can tell us something about its original cause, the intelligent designer. As this world is made up not only of matter but also of consciousness and superconsciousness, as Jensen has tried to show throughout the book, these three categories describe the cause, though Jensen, following Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy, argues that matter and individual consciousness are subordinated to superconsciousness or God. The problem of theodicy is explained in the typical

ISKCON way (but this time not in line with orthodox Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism; see e.g. Dāsa and Dāsa 1994) as a fall of a minority of all souls from a spiritual world into this material world. The cause of the fall is a misuse of the free will of the soul. Jensen writes:

The problem with the world, therefore, is not that it is poorly designed but that it's the wrong place for us, a place where we don't belong, a world to which the soul has insisted on coming but which the Vedic literature insists can never be our real home. (Jensen 2010: 209)

After an introduction to the idea of a gradual evolution of consciousness through reincarnation, Jensen finally argues for a relationship between all forms of life through a common design but also through a common relationship, as the secondary creator Brahmā, being entrusted with the task of secondary creation or populating the universe, creates beings from his own body who then create new beings.

Jensen ends his book with some 'concluding words', describing his own journey towards scepticism of Darwin's theory and towards the BI and, later, ID, distinguishing ID from creationism on an epistemological basis, that is to say, creationists 'argue from the Bible' while ID people argue from empirical observations. He finds the association of ID people 'both fruitful and stimulating' (Jensen 2010: 213–14) and writes:

This book is the first of its kind in that although I use the same overall approach normally used by the BI, I have tried to blend material from both groups. Indeed, one of my goals has been to present to audiences normally reached only by the BI how the ID

people demonstrate the inadequacy of Darwin's theory and the concept of natural evolution. If the book can also inform the ID movement of some of the ideas from the BI, then so much the better. (Jensen 2010: 214)

Appositely for a book published by the BBT, Jensen ends with a quotation from Bhaktivedanta Swami on how, contrary to what 'modern scientists' say, life comes from life, and matter comes from life, which is the 'essence of the Vedic understanding of nature' (Jensen 2010: 214).

What does it mean to be Vedic?

As we have seen, while the book claims to be a 'Vedic study', there is not much about this 'Vedic' paradigm given in it, and it is unclear what 'Vedic' really refers to. Rahul Peter Das (2006) has argued that Bhaktivedanta Swami and his followers use the term 'Vedic' in three different ways. The first one, that he calls Vedic₁, corresponds to the Sanskrit term *śruti* ('that which is heard') or what Western academics usually call Vedic, that is, the four parts of the Vedas, beginning with the hymns (*saṃhitā*) and ending with the Upaniṣads. The second one, Vedic₂, is any text connected with Vyāsa, held to be the divider of the Vedas and the author of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Purāṇas* and the *Brahma-sūtra*, and an *avatāra* of Nārāyaṇa himself. Finally, Vedic₃ is a more restricted sense of Vedic₁ that includes only the *saṃhitā* part of the four Vedas.

There are historical and ideological reasons for these shifts of meaning that fall outside the scope of this article (see e.g. Broo 2006b). Suffice it to say that most of the time, Bhaktivedanta Swami and his followers use the term 'Vedic' and 'Vedic literature(s)' in the broadest of these three ways ('Vedic₂'; Das 2006: 35). Jensen's use

of the term follows the same understanding, thus stretching all the way from the Upaniṣads to the epics and the Purāṇas.

In its valorisation of 'Vedic', ISKCON is not alone (for an introduction to how, for example, the Transcendental Meditation movement views the Veda, see Rothstein 1996: 72–9). Nevertheless, engaging with science in the 'Vedic' way that Jensen's book does poses an ISKCON member with several challenges. One of these has to do with epistemology. In common with other schools of Vedānta, the tradition that ISKCON affiliates itself with (*acintyabhedābheda-vāda*) accepts three valid sources of knowledge: sense perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*) and verbal testimony (*śabda*). Of these three, however, only the testimony of sacred texts is deemed to be faultless (see e.g. Gupta 2007). Sometimes this primacy of sacred text is claimed only for topics outside the scope of other sources of knowledge (e.g. the nature of God, see Uskokov 2009: 71), but Bhaktivedanta Swami often downplayed the epistemic value of anything outside the sacred texts. A graphic example of this is found in his commentary on a verse of the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (8.10.38), describing a particularly ferocious battle between the gods and the titans, where blood splattered all the way to the sun. Bhaktivedānta Swami writes:

A point to be observed here is that although the blood is stated to have reached the sun, it is not said to have reached the moon. Apparently, therefore, as stated elsewhere in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, the sun, not the moon, is the planet nearest the earth.

Engaging with Darwinism on the basis of scientific evidence (sense perception and inference) turns the tables. It is no longer

the evidence of the scriptures that decides the issue, but the evidence of man-made, empirical science. Of course, in common with other types of creationism, ID has often been accused of obfuscating this point by claiming to be based on science while it actually depends on theistic presuppositions (Kojonen 2014: 89–101). That may be, but by paying such close attention, for instance to molecular evidence, while the scriptural canon of ISKCON is not aware of the very existence of molecules, Jensen's book implicitly challenges the epistemological basis of the ISKCON movement.

Jensen is not alone in doing this; Norelius (2009: 37) has noted the same with regards to the difference between the argumentation of Bhaktivedanta Swami and his BI followers. For example, Bhaktivedanta Swami generally seems to have understood the mythological cosmology of the *Śrīmad-bhāgavatam*, replete with milk oceans, golden mountains and a sun closer to the earth than the moon, in a literal way. In trying to make sense of this fantastic cosmology, his disciple Richard Thompson (Sadāpūta Dāsa), taking a cue from Nils Bohr's quantum physical theory of two different but complementary perspectives of the atom (the 'wave perspective' and the 'particle perspective'), has argued that the *Śrīmad-bhāgavatam* propounds a 'higher dimensional' view of the cosmos (Rothstein 1996: 122–4). While Thompson's first book on the topic (*Vedic Cosmography and Astronomy*, 1989) stayed very close to the position of Bhaktivedanta Swami, basing its treatment of the topic as much on his comments as on the statements of the *Śrīmad-bhāgavatam* itself, in his second (*Mysteries of the Sacred Universe*, 2000), Thompson is much less dependent on Bhaktivedanta Swami's comments, as he is on his final suggestion for how to visualise the cosmos in the form of a mechanical chandelier,

written shortly before his untimely passing (2008) and which forms the basis for how this chandelier will be constructed in the flagship temple of ISKCON in Mayapur, India (Temple of the Vedic Planetarium 2021).

What happens in the case of Thompson's 'Vedic cosmology' resembles the case of evolution in Jensen's book. Neither Thompson nor Jensen offer a single word of criticism of Bhaktivedanta Swami, who with the ageing and diversification of ISKCON steadily becomes more and more of the infallible, unifying figure of the movement, regardless of his having passed away in 1977, but they do move away from his exclusive reliance on a literally understood scripture for correct knowledge of the world.

How literal does literalism have to be?

As the example of the blood splattering to the sun above shows, Bhaktivedanta Swami often took a very literal view of the scriptural canon of Gauḍiṃya Vaiṣṇavism. This has led some scholars to see him and his movement as an example of fundamentalism. Bhaktivedanta Swami famously named his translation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, 'Bhagavad-gītā as it is'; Eric J. Sharpe (1985: 145) saw this edition of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and by extension the whole ISKCON movement, as an 'alternative fundamentalism', where the Bible has simply been exchanged for the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Other scholars have followed the same lines of thought (e.g. Green 2008). Not everyone agrees, though. Kim Knott (2000: 166) argued already twenty years ago that it is time to stop calling ISKCON a fundamentalist movement, 'in the light of ISKCON's openness to theological exchange, its flexibility in finding appropriate ways of delivering its message in new contexts, and its realism regarding its relationships with the wider society, and

with its own changing membership, but her opinion may be coloured by her having focused her study on the particularly liberal UK branch of the movement.

Nevertheless, if ‘scriptural literalism’ is to be taken as a defining factor of fundamentalism, how literal does a literal reading need to be? In chapter ten of his book, Jensen briefly describes the Big Bang theory, noting that this today almost universally accepted theory was initially opposed by many scientists for anti-religious sentiments, as ‘a universe with a beginning invariably points to a creator’ (Jensen 2010: 145). The Big Bang theory, Jensen continues,

reveals a number of physical constants that are so precise that if they were only fractionally smaller or larger there would be no stable atoms, stars, galaxies, and none of the elementary particles necessary for life. The value of these constants appears arbitrary; that is, there is no inherent quality or property in nature that determines them. They just happen to be perfect. The probability that this perfection could be the result of pure chance is beyond exceedingly small. (Jensen 2010: 145)

Leaving aside, as usual, the merit of the argument itself, what is surprising, or, for an ISKCON reader perhaps even shocking, is that Jensen’s argumentation here builds on the premise of the Big Bang theory being correct. In a recorded conversation from December 1973, just a few days after the conversations of the *Life Comes from Life* book, Bhaktivedanta Swami ridiculed the theory, calling it a ‘nonsense proposition’ and a ‘rascal argument’ (Prabhupada 2021a).

What Jensen does, then, is argue for the existence of a creator, but with arguments that fly in the face of a literal reading of the ‘Vedic literature’, which of course has nothing to say about a Big Bang, but which can be construed to imply such a type of creative event – if read non-literally. In fact, Bhaktivedanta Swami himself in later discussions seemed open to such an idea. In a lecture from 1975 he said:

Explosion, yes. So they are seeing that explosion and the chunk, but they cannot explain how the chunk became exploded. Sometimes we see that some earth, by the sunshine heating, heating, heating, it breaks, all of a sudden. So this explosion of the chunk does not take place automatically. It is due to the sunshine drying it, drying it, drying it, and at a point it breaks. Similarly, the chunk is also, we can accept, the total material energy. That is, you can take it as a chunk. But this material energy in the form of a chunk is agitated by the glance of Mahā-Viṣṇu. That is stated, *sa aikṣata, sa asṛjata* [*He glanced, He created*]. Material energy itself cannot explode. The explosion theory is there ... Not theory, fact. But the total material energy, *mahat-tattva*, when it is glanced over by Mahā-Viṣṇu, then it becomes agitated, and the modes of material nature begins to act. (Prabhupada 2021b)

Here, Bhaktivedanta Swami takes the ‘chunk’ of primordial, pre-Big Bang matter to be synonymous with the totality of unmanifest matter of Bhāgavata Sāṃkhya (*mahat-tattva*) and equates the ‘explosion’ with the creative glance of Kṛṣṇa in the form of Mahā-Viṣṇu, going so far as to call the ‘explosion theory’ not a theory but a fact.

He does so on the basis of scripture (the Sanskrit phrases are quoted from *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1.1.1–2; Olivelle 1998: 316), but this is hardly a literal reading of the scriptures or a confrontational approach to science, but rather a type of Hammer’s scientism, corresponding well to Zeller’s (2011) observation on how flexible and context-specific Bhaktivedanta Swami could be in his approach to science in general.

What we have seen, then, is that the idea of ‘literal’ understanding of religious texts is very difficult to measure. Except as a straw-man, it is also very difficult to find. Where are the people who affirm a completely literal reading of religious scriptures? Even the famous 1979 Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy, signed by 200 North American Evangelical leaders, recognised the need for ‘taking account of [the Bible’s] literary forms and devices’ (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy 1979, 6). While ISKCON certainly subscribes to a much more literal view of its scriptures than most other Hindu movements do, that does not mean that all interpretation is abandoned.

Conclusion

Why exactly Bhaktivedanta Swami’s followers so often latched on to his confrontational approach to science rather than the other approaches that he used falls outside the scope of this article. What is important here is that both Bhaktivedanta Swami and at least some of his followers, such as Jensen, are willing to adopt approaches towards science that do not presuppose a literal reading of the ‘Vedic literature’ so important for the theology of the ISKCON movement and that does not deprive empirical science of all its epistemic value.

Of course, Jensen’s book may from a wider ISKCON perspective be seen as presenting a provisional teaching like some

of the other outreach work of ISKCON in recent years (Karapanagiotis 2021), that is, as using the language of science to set the reader on a path that one day will lead beyond it. This is how Rothstein (1996: 147) understands the ways in which Bhaktivedanta Swami’s followers have toned down and intellectualised his criticism of science, that is, as ‘strategy’. But such a strategy would be a dangerous one. For one thing, any secret, underlying strategy will eventually leak, such as in the case of the so-called ‘Wedge’ document of the Discovery Institute (see e.g. Forrest and Gross 2004), but more importantly, how exactly would you go about saying that what set you on the path was really a lie all along?

Despite its title, it would be naïve indeed to take Jensen’s book as a simple ‘rethinking’ of Darwin’s contribution motivated by new empirical findings: it is an ISKCON publication, motivated, like earlier BI publications, by a wish to present a superior ‘Vedic’ alternative to what is deemed the basis of a materialistic worldview, using carefully selected empirical findings to further that goal. Nevertheless, to see the argumentation in his book as merely a provisional one is also reductive. After all, Jensen is the founder and moving force of the Danish ID association, actively networking with an international group of ID people (Intelligent Design DK 2021).

To come back to the question posed at the beginning of the article: is Jensen’s ID project an instance of fundamentalist thinking? Obviously not if ‘fundamentalism’ is taken in the political sense of Marty and Appleby, but while it certainly is motivated by religious concerns, it is also not fundamentalist in the conservative, literalist sense in which many scholars have painted ISKCON. If anything, this exercise has reminded us of the deeply problematic

nature of both ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘literalism’, both terms that appear to be very difficult to operationalise, especially outside their original contexts.

Looking at Jensen’s book as an instance of ISKCON’s engagement with science, on the other hand, has given us some useful information. Jensen is not engaged in what Rothstein called ‘negative syncretism’ with science; rather, in allying himself with the broader ID movement, he has cautiously moved outside the confines of ISKCON and broadened the audience of the efforts of the BI. It remains to be seen in which direction the next steps will be taken. ■



Måns Broo is a lecturer in the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi University, Finland, and a research fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, UK. His research interests include ritual studies and both modern and classical forms

of Hinduism. At present, he is engaged in compiling a critical edition and annotated translation of the sixteenth-century Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava text *Haribhaktivilāsa*. He lives in Åbo, Finland, together with his wife, daughter and dog Frodo.

Bibliography

- Anon. 2021. ‘Contributors’, *Back to Godhead*, <<http://btg.krishna.com/contributors>> (accessed 14.11.2021).
- Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. 2021a. ‘About’, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust [website], <<https://bbt.org/about>> (accessed 11.11.2021).
- Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. 2021b. ‘BBT organogram’, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust [website], <<https://bbt.info/bbt-organogram/>> (accessed 11.11.2021).
- Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. 2021c. ‘ISKCON and the BBT’, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust [website], <<https://bbt.info/iskcon-and-the-bbt/>> (accessed 11.11.2021).
- Boone, Kathryn C. 1989. *The Bible Tells Them*

So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism (New York: SUNY).

- Broo, Måns. 2006a. ‘Bhaktivedanta Swami’s rhetoric of violence’, in *Exercising Power: The Role of Religions in Concord and Conflict*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis 19 (Turku/Åbo: The Donner Institute), pp. 38–50, doi: <<https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67299>>.
- Broo, Måns. 2006b. ‘Jīva Gosvāmin on the extent of the Vedic paradigm’, *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 15(1): 5–29.
- Brown, C. Mackenzie. 2002. ‘Hindu and Christian creationism: “transposed passages” in the geological Book of Life’, *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 37(1): 95–114.
- Brummett, Barry. 2019. *Techniques of Close Reading*, 2nd edn (Los Angeles, CA: Sage).
- Cole, Richard, and Graham Dwyer. 2007. *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change* (London: I. B. Tauris).
- Das, Rahul Peter. 2006. “Vedic” in the terminology of Prabhupada and his followers, *ISKCON Communications Journal* 4(2): 23–38.
- Dāsa, Satya Nārāyaṇa, and Kuṇḍalī Dāsa. 1994. *In Vaikuṅṭha Not Even the Leaves Fall. A Treatise on the Bondage of the Jīva* (Vrindavan: Jivas).
- Discovery Institute. 2021. ‘What we do’, Discovery Institute [website], <<https://www.discovery.org/about/>> (accessed 10.11.2021).
- Edis, Taner. 1999. ‘Cloning Creationism in Turkey’, *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 19(6), <<https://ncse.org/cloning-creationism-turkey>> (accessed 13.11.2021).
- Forrest, Barbara, and Paul R. Gross. 2004. *Creationism’s Trojan Horse. The Wedge of Intelligent Design* (Oxford University Press).
- Green, Andrea D. 2008. ‘Moral and Faith Development in Fundamentalist Communities: Lessons Learned in Five New Religious Movements’, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Emery University).
- Gupta, Ravi. 2007. *The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī* (Abingdon: Routledge).
- Hammer, Olav. 2004. *Claiming Knowledge. Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill).
- Intelligent Design DK. 2021. ‘Intelligent Design DK. Har livet udviklet sig av sig selv, eller

- er der træk, der tyder på en intelligent årsak?', Intelligent Design DK [website], <<https://intelligentdesign.dk/>> (accessed 30.11.2021).
- International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. 1979. 'The Chicago statement on Biblical inerrancy', Dallas Theological Seminary, Moshin and Turpin Libraries [website], <https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf> (accessed 14.4.2022).
- ISKCON webpage, <<https://www.krishna.com>>.
- Jensen, Leif A. 2010. *Rethinking Darwinism: A Vedic Study of Darwinism and Intelligent Design* (Korsnäs: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust).
- Karapanagiotis, Nicole. 2021. *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- Knott, Kim. 2000. 'In every town and village: adaptive strategies in the communication of Krishna Consciousness in the UK, the first thirty years', *Social Compass* 47(2): 153–67.
- Kojonen, Erkki Vesa Rope. 2014. 'Intelligent Design: A Theological and Philosophical Analysis', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Helsinki), <<https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/135937/intellig.pdf>> (accessed 9.11.2021).
- Lewis, James R. 2003. *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).
- Lurquin, Paul F., and Linda Stone. 2007. *Evolution and Religious Creation Myths: How Scientists Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Marty, Martin E., and R. Scott Appleby (eds.). 1992. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalists Challenge to the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press).
- Merriam-Webster. 2021. 'Creationism', *Merriam-Webster*, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/creationism>> (accessed 11.11.2021).
- Nanda, Meera. 2003. *Prophets Facing Backwards: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).
- Norelius, Per-Johan. 2009. 'Vedisk kreationism' – ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) och polemiken mot modern vetenskap', unpublished MA thesis (Gothenburg University), <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/23213/1/gupea_2077_23213_1.pdf> (accessed 26.11.2021).
- Olivelle, Patrick. 1998. *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Prabhupada, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. 1979. *Life Comes from Life: A Startling Challenge to the Modern Scientific Theory of the Origin of Life and the Universe* (Los Angeles, CA: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust).
- Prabhupada, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. 2021a. 'Morning walk from 18 December 1973', Bhaktivedanta Vedabase [website], <<https://vedabase.io/en/library/transcripts/731218mwla/?query=big+bang#bb260942>> (accessed 15.11.2021).
- Prabhupada, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. 2021b. 'Lecture on Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 1.12, 5 April 1975', Bhaktivedanta Vedabase [website], <<https://vedabase.io/en/library/transcripts/750405ccmay/>> (accessed 30.11.2021).
- Price, Robert M. 1984. 'Creationist and fundamentalist apologetics', *Creation/Evolution Journal* 4(4): 19–30.
- Rothstein, Mikael. 1996. *Belief Transformations: Some Aspects of the Relation between Science and Religion in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)*, RENNER Studies on New Religions, vol. 2 (Aarhus University Press).
- Ruse, Michael. 2017. *Darwinism as Religion. What Literature Tells Us about Evolution* (Oxford University Press).
- Sharpe, Eric J. 1985. *The Universal Gītā. Western Images of the Bhagavadgītā* (London: Duckworth).
- Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Eighth Canto. 'Withdrawal of the Cosmic Creations', with the original Sanskrit text, its Roman transliteration, synonyms, translation and elaborate commentary by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda (Los Angeles, CA: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1988).
- Stähler, Axel and Klaus Stierstorfer (eds.). 2009. *Writing Fundamentalism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

- Temple of the Vedic Planetarium. 2021. 'Cosmic chandelier', Sri Mayapur Chandrodaya Mandir [website], <<https://tovp.org/vedic-science/cosmic-chandelier/>> (accessed 30.11.2021).
- Thompson, Richard. 1989. *Vedic Cosmography and Astronomy* (Los Angeles, CA: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust).
- Thompson, Richard. 2000. *Mysteries of the Sacred Universe* (Gainesville, FL: Institute for Vaishnava Studies).
- Thompson, Richard. 2008. 'The chandelier model', Richard L. Thompson Archives [website], <http://richardlthompson.com/sites/default/files/2008_Chandelier_Model_TOVP_Proposal_1.pdf> (accessed 30.11.2021).
- Uskokov, Aleksandar. 2009. 'Bengali Vaishnava epistemology', *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 18(1): 53–86.
- Zambon, Oliver, and Thomas Aechtner. 2018. 'Vaishnavism, anti-evolutionism and ambiguity: revisiting ISKCON's Darwin-skepticism', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 53(1): 67–94.
- Zeller, Benjamin. 2010. 'Inverted Orientalism, Vedic science, and the modern world: Bhaktivedanta and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness', in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, eds. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill), 249–77.