

“EATING OUR WAY BACK TO GOD”: SACRAL NUTRITION AND ACCULTURATION IN THE KRISHNA CONSCIOUS LIFESTYLE

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Introduction¹

Since the late 1980s Hungary has become the scene of many different intellectual tendencies; religious and just so-called religious movements have departed, have been brought to the surface and become parts of everyday life. In these spiritual movements, there is a connection between their very different ways of thinking and of dealing with nutrition. Diet's increasing importance in these movements and certain attitudes toward nutrition can be interpreted in opposition to a way of looking at eating as a merely physical, worldly fact or action. It is the community of Krishna conscious believers that entirely refuses looking at nutrition as profane action but understands it and practices it in a sacral level.²

Krishna Consciousness³ as a new religious movement has been brought from India to the West. It belongs to Indian *vaisnaism*, more precisely, the so-called *gandija vaisnaism* branch. The founder of this branch is Csaitanja (1485-1584) who has worked in Bengal in the 15th century, who is known as Krishna according to the Krishna faith. According to his theories, reaching God and liberation can be available for everyone -without any respect to age, sex and caste - with singing the name of Supreme Identity of God and with devotion and love towards God. It started with Csaitanja Prabhupada, who lived by *gaudija vaisnaism*; A.C. Bhativedanta Prabhupada is also the member of the disciples. In 1965, he went to the USA from India and there he founded the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Krishna believers want to take over and put into practice not only the religion but also its roots the *vaisnava* culture, and they never omit to emphasize that Krishna consciousness is not a religion but also a lifestyle.⁴

This movement reached Hungary in the 1970s, and it has been operating as a registered

temple since 1989 under the name of the Community of the Hungarian Believers of Krishna Consciousness. The Krishna consciousness faith strongly emphasizes its separation from earthly world, but it does not order believers to break away from it totally.

A Krishna village has been established in Hungary where they live relatively isolated but the vast majority of Krishna believers live in big cities or in the temples of these cities or even at their own homes. Studying the lives of Krishna believers who are living in towns is a perfect field for analyzing the introduction of an entirely different culture and lifestyle into the new environment of contemporary Hungary.

The aim of my research was to find out, on the one hand, how a secular act becomes sacral about religious rules (Prabhupada 1990:15) and teaches; and to what extent has this influenced Krishna conscious nutrition; are there any basic theories or dogmas for believers to start out? . On the other hand, I have studied the problem of rules and realization, how dietary rules succeeds in practice. Vedic culture inevitably revises itself when it is placed into a new surrounding, and its practice undergoes some sort of changes. During my work, the main problem was to find out to what extent changes can be allowed, and how sacralism can be maintained in spite of changes. It is in close relation to the self-controlling attitudes towards the profane world and the way of explanation of the roles, which I will discuss as well.

In my paper, I consider the sacral to be something which does not treat nutrition on a physical level, as a bodily need or as the satisfaction of its need; rather, I assign greater significance to nutrition, and look at it as a connection between men and the transcendent that links men to a higher purpose of life, in this case to divinity.

Sacrality is the typical feature of everyday lives of Krishna believers. I limited my

studies to the question of nutrition because I wanted to point out the importance of dietary practice. Prabhupada himself, who was the founding father of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, often called this religion a “culinary-religion”. Sacral nutrition is a central position in the lives of Krishna believers, which shows that they did not only talk about it to please me, but this topic also came up in all of the lectures or teaching I have seen.

Krishna consciousness distinguishes three needs of the body. These are in connection with the tongue, the stomach and the genitals and they are placed vertically within the body, with the tongue at the top. If someone is able to control the demands of his tongue, then he can restrain the other two. Therefore, regulating the tongue in the question of eating is the starting point in the Krishna consciousness, and I think it is also a good starting point for understanding the Krishna religion.

My paper is based on a yearlong participation in ethnological fieldwork, including participant observations and interviews. The community of believers of Krishna consciousness emphasizes philosophical descriptions; there is a huge literature on dogmas however, the practice and the acquisition of rules and customs happened by means of orality. However, there are short descriptions of rules in Krishna consciousness literature, however my paper does not deal with them. My ethnographical account describes my experiences among Krishna believers generally in Pécs. It is about what rules and customs they practice or at least of which they have knowledge.

Sacral nutrition

The basic theory of how nutrition becomes sacral is that a Krishna believer only allows consuming food that was already offered to Krishna. Offered food is called *prasādam*, meaning grace.. Consuming food that was offered to the divinity is not only a rule that has to be obeyed. *Prasādam* is the basis of spiritual life, of Krishna consciousness, and Krishna believers can reach Krishna through *prasādam*. Offered food is considered as a sort of spiritual life that has no need for consciousness; it is unconsciously effective with helping the spiritual improvement. Therefore, Prabhupada often suggested to the beginner Krishna believers to consume more offered food because it quickly purifies the spirit from material pollution. This is a simple method for those who have difficulties

with the philosophy at the beginning. After all, nothing can be easier than eating.

To understand sacral nutrition, we should make some things clear and become acquainted with the two basic theories of Krishna consciousness.

Krishna religion considers the *Vedas* as its sacred gospel in the interpretation of “Prabhupada” and *Bhagavad-Gita*⁵ is the most important of them. Srila Prabhupada completed these interpretations with his explanation. This is how the huge literature developed and Krishna believers regard it as the collection of their sacred books. They take the content of these books by all means. In this way Vedic discipline was inherited through the chain of disciples. “That was the only way to understand the Vedic discipline this fact is confirmed by Bhagavad-Gita as well (Bg.4.2.). If someone makes efforts to have experiences on his own, he comes to the same conclusion as well, so the best way to accept the doctrines of the Vedas is at the beginning.” (Prabhupada n.d: x).

The other important point is the world-view of Krishna consciousness. According to it there is the spiritual world where individual spirits and creatures live together with the Supreme Being, in their original place. On the other hand, there is the material world where such spirits live captive to illusion and the material and who try to be independent from the divine. Men were given higher intelligence in order to accomplish God and get back to Krishna and to the spiritual world; this method is written down by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

Bhakti yoga is the name of the method by which one can get to Krishna. *Bhakti yoga* is the yoga of action and love, and its essence is loving and devoted service given to Krishna. In Prabhupada’s words “the process of restoring our private relationship with the Supreme Lord is through doing devoted service” (Prabhupada 1996:167). *Bhakti yoga* does not propagate withdrawal or asceticism but the active and loving service given to God. The whole life of a Krishna believer is meant to be offered in Krishna's service. One unit of this service is cooking to Krishna and eating food that was offered to Krishna before. Devoted service such as doing something for Krishna, makes the profane act transcendental. “Krishna consciousness means action. All the things we have ought to use on Krishna's behalf. That is the process of *bhakti yoga*. Krishna gave us brains

and we should use our brains to think of Krishna. We were given legs and we should use them to go to Krishna's temple. We were given noses and we should use them to smell the flower offered to Krishna. And through the process of *bhakti yoga* we put these senses into Krishna's service and all of them became spiritual.” (Prabhupada 1996:6-7)

If someone follows this method and consume only from offered food, then he is not only purifying his body from its earlier evil reactions; but he makes it resistant towards all the pollution of the material world (Bg.3.14. explanation). Then it helps him to develop in spiritual life, to clean the body and to create those fine brain-tissues that are believed to lead to clear thinking. (Bg.9.26. explanation).

Krishna-conscious nutrition and the Krishna believers' lifestyles are imbued with the complicated system of the Vedic rules that help the devoting service. This system is attributed to the Vedas, consequently to Krishna. “The regulating actions are ordered by the Vedas, however the Vedas are the direct revelations of the Divinity's Supreme Identity. So the transcendence, which is imbuing everything, is always in present in sacral acts.” Bg 3.15.) Believers learn rules step by step from their master or from each other. It is not compulsory to know and follow the rules from the moment of converting, but everybody is expected to learn continuously. These rules are not entirely rigorous; they mainly depend on the place where the believers live. Monks living in the temple, in the *múrtis*⁶ closest service have the most restricted lives. Rules are more relaxed for those have to insert the rules into ordinary circumstances, for example, those who live at home in a non-Krishna believer family. There are many stages between these extremes, but most important of all is to live to the best of one's knowledge. Of course, it raises the question of relaxing and controlling, a point to which I will return later.

Regulation covers the whole process of nutrition: from the first step of shopping. Krishna believers are allowed to choose only those foods that can be offered to Krishna. Foods are classified to three so-called binding-powers⁷ these are: goodness, passion, and ignorance. “Foods that are in the quality of goodness make lifetimes longer, clean people's lives, give strength, health, happiness and contentment. Such nutritious food is sweet, juicy, fatty and

tasty. People living in the binding-power of passion favour foods that are too bitter, too sour, salty, hot, dry or burning. These foods cause pain, depression and illness. Those who live in spiritual ignorance enjoy foods that are cooked more than three hours before eating and foods that are tasteless, stale, smelly, rotten, and impure” (Bg.17.8-10.).⁸ Foods belonging to the binding-power of passion or ignorance cannot be offered to Krishna, who clearly tells people what he accepts. “If somebody offers me a leaf, a flower, fruits, or a drops of water with love and devotion I accept them” (Bg.9.26.).

Having food that belongs to the binding power of goodness is part of devoted service. Believers have foods that are desired by Krishna and these foods help them to get higher in spiritual level. That means Krishna believers do not have food of animal origin except milk.⁹

Adherents do not eat meat or eggs, and they omit to have garlic, onion, and mushrooms from their menu because garlic and onion are associated with passion, and mushrooms with the binding powers of ignorance. They do not drink coffee, black tea and cocoa because of their caffeine-content, and they do not drink alcohol. Whatever food they buy must not contain components of animal origin, and they try to get their food from bio-farms. In the farm, they use plants grown in their own garden and milk from their own dairy for cooking. They deliver mainly rare spices by a car to smaller centers. Special Indian spices are transported from India. Raw materials should be fresh and very clean; they do not use rotten vegetables or fruits. If something falls to the ground, it will be washed immediately if it is washable, or it will be thrown away.

The question of consciousness in which meals are produced is important. They usually avoid having a food that is made by a person, who is not Krishna conscious. The consciousness of the cook has effects on the food and that food mediates that consciousness to people who eat it. Therefore, when someone is having food made by a person living without spirit-consciousness, so without Krishna consciousness, he is materially polluted, and his spiritual development is held back. Cereal meals are especially significant because cereals are best to take over human consciousness. So the best way is to avoid food is made by non-Krishna believers, and if it is unavoidable, offering the food can reduce the bad effects of such foods.

In cooking, the most important thing is that people have to be clean in physical as well as spiritual level. As we have seen it so far damaged or rotten, in fact unclean materials should be very clean. Cleanliness of the kitchen, the dishes and the cook is also essential. They do not cook in serving dishes and do not eat from cooking dishes. Moreover, they keep bowls and pots that are used only for cooking in the kitchen, and plates are kept somewhere else. They wash dishes right away after using, even during cooking. The kitchen is cleaned thoroughly before and after usage. The cook has to wash himself before cooking. One has to put on clean clothes and has to wash his hands several times during cooking. If there is no opportunity to have a bath or a shower, cooks have to at least wash their hands. They wash themselves by all means before they make food for the “*mūrtis*” in the temple.¹⁰ They are not allowed to go to the toilet during cooking or if it cannot be solved, if cooking takes a long time, for instance in restaurants, or before big festivals, when they make a hundred different foods they have to wash themselves well after going to the toilet. They should not touch their lips or the floor. If this happens, they ought to wash their hands again. Women have to have their hair covered.

Besides avoiding physical pollution, it is important that a believer should not think of himself while he is making the food. If he does he defiles the food. He has to be aware of the fact that he is cooking not for himself but for Krishna. Therefore they do not taste or smell the meal before offering, and therefore it is important to follow recipes. If they obey the proportions and cooking methods that are perfectly worked out, then there is no need for tasting and thus polluting the food. The cook should speak about Krishna or cooking itself, and by doing so he helps people, who will eat that food to be cleaner and more developed spiritually. In this case cooking for them is not simply an action but a meditation.

When the meal is ready, the most cardinal step comes, the offering. Every raw material or cooked meal that has not been offered to Krishna is a material thing, namely *bhōga*. Food becomes spiritual at the moment of offering. To offer food is significant because people get all the things they have from Krishna; and not only is the killing of animals considered to be sin, but also destroying plants is believed to have karmic¹¹ consequences. By offering food, actually they

are *offering it back* to Krishna, and he takes away the karmic effects of the action. On the other hand, when a believer offers something, he offers not only food but also his devotion in the food, and that is what Krishna likes best.

It does not mean that anything can be offered, even meat, because Krishna was speaking clearly about what he would accept. In spite of this there can be a special situation in which these things cannot be done and then the spiritual master should make a decision.

The spiritual master is a prominent person in a believer life, and later on he gains a chief role in connection with the purifying effect of offered food, so he should be mentioned here. “Devotion towards the master is a fundamental part of the *bhakti*. The guru should not be regarded as an ordinary man, but as the one who is identical with Krishna, and should be loved as much as Krishna (Sb.11.17.27.). “Guru is considered to be a mediator between the *bakhta* and *Bhagavan*” (Tóth-Soma 1996:323).¹² A Krishna believer cannot follow Krishna directly, he should ask for the guru’s help because there are few people who get instructions directly from Krishna. “Devotion towards the guru is even more important than to be devoted to Krishna because the guru can save the *bhakta*, even if it makes Krishna to be displeased; although, Krishna is not able to save the *bhakta* when his guru is dissatisfied with him” (Tóth-Soma 1996:323). Krishna believers get their names and initiation from their own masters with whom they discuss spiritual problems either personally or by letters, as they are not together all the time and rarely see each other.

Let us look at the question of offering again: a meal when it is ready should be covered because it gets dirty easily by a glance of either an animal or *abhakta* - who is a non-Krishna believer. This rule however is only obeyed in temples. Offering is done in presence of the *mūrti* or when there is no *mūrti*, it is done in front of the picture of Śrīla Prabhupada or the master of a believer. In the case of “*mūrtis*” who are initiated in the temple, a *brahmana*¹³ always does the offering. A *Brahmana* is a believer who is initiated twice, and he is a servant of an *mūrti*. A believer who is not initiated or initiated just once can offer foods only to his master or Prabhupada. Where a Krishna believer lives together with his non-Krishna conscious family, and in their kitchen they cook meat -

consequently, this kitchen is unclear - a “*múrti*” altar cannot be set up there. When a believer is unable to practice his religion publicly, it is quite enough to say “Dear Krishna, please accept this food!” without any ceremony. He does the same when there is no way to do the offering properly. If there is no chance to offer food to a “*múrti*” just to the spiritual master, then it is meant to be similar to offering it to Krishna; since the spiritual master can pass on homage to Krishna, he works as a mediator between a believer and Krishna. Where believers live in a community usually the cook is the one who does the offering; in families it is the one who made the food or the husband and sometimes the children, in order to make them familiar with this act. They put small portions from all of the food into special silver or stainless steel bowls reserved especially for Krishna and they always put a glass of water beside the food and drinks. They try to make this dish beautiful by decorating it with flowers and arranging the colourful foods neatly. The simplest way of offering is saying the sentence cited above, and singing the Hare Krishna mantra. To make it more complex they make altars to place in their homes. An altar has three pictures: Krishna’s, Prabhupada’s and Srí Csaitanja’s¹⁴. Offering should be done in front of this altar. They put the divided pieces of food to the altar and fall on their knees before it. During this action they are singing three mantras that belong to Prabhupada, Csaitanja, and Krishna. There is a little bell ringing. They are thinking of Krishna and Krishna should accept this food, which is offered with love. These divided pieces are left on the altar for about a quarter of an hour. Then these bits are taken back to the others. Krishna can have the food within ten or fifteen minutes while the believers sing together. The offered food on the altar is called *maháprasádám*¹⁵, and all the other food becomes *prasádám* through them. God eats *Maháprasádám* directly so it has special power and everybody should be given a piece of it.

According to their beliefs, God eats the food. Krishna as the Supreme Identity can function with all the parts of the Absolute. For example, he can eat with his eyes. All in all, he is pious enough to leave the food as it was. (The word *prasádám* means grace.) After all that food becomes *prasádám*, it becomes part of his grace. Each part of God’s body has the ability of the other senses. Even though we are able to see with our eyes, we are unable to eat with them. The senses of God do not work like that because

they are infinite. Simply by looking at the food, He can eat it” (Prabhupada 1996:31). In this sense Krishna helps his followers to develop spiritually and eventually to find their way to him.

When believers are having meals together they serve foods in the prescribed way. After taking away the food from the altar, they put them into huge stainless steel buckets or plastic bowls only used for portioning out food. Everybody has their own set of dishes; a set includes a divided bowl made of stainless steel, a spoon, a fork and a glass. They do not use knives because they are not needed for Indian food. Thus, they do not need to use their left hands. Using one’s left hand is considered unclean according to Hinduism. Guests are given plastic bowls and cutlery. Everyone sits on the floor, men and women in separate lines, and children sit beside their mothers without respect to sex. In a group of fifteen or twenty, there are three or four people who do the serving. While the others are having their food, they wait and when everybody has finished the meal, they sit down, and the others serve them. Concentration on eating should not be disturbed; so one must not stand up while eating. Serving is considered to be a devoted service just like eating; so serving and accepting food carry the meaning of loving association with other believers, and both are in Krishna’s service. At the beginning, there are small portions carefully put on the plates with care as not to mix them. Foods should be arranged as beautifully on the plates as they are on the altar because that is also a part of the cleaning effect of the food.

Those who are serving food have to pay attention to the right order. However, during my research, it did not turn out what is the right order exactly. I have mentioned so far that Krishna believers learn their customs from each other or from their masters. Cooks usually try to learn their profession in India, or at least from Indian people. Because they study in different parts of India however, they see different customs, and that is why I heard several equally acceptable orders. The point is that someone who has nothing to do with cooking cannot say the right order.¹⁶ When everybody sits during serving, they sing glorifying songs and start to eat together. If there is enough food everyone can ask for seconds, paying attention to leave portions for those who are serving. *Bhaktas* usually recommend to have a drink before eating, and not to drink afterward - this rule be

not always obeyed, so it is one of the rules that remains in the level of knowledge and theory.

Following the meal they wash up all the dishes, and when everybody is gone they wash the floor because the place of eating is considered to be unclean when it is not cleaned. The leftover food is considered to be sacred and thus cannot be thrown away to an unclean place. Sometimes it is buried or according to my research, they often gave it to farm animals or take it to a place that animals can reach. They think the second solution is best because food accepted by God cleans not only people but also animals. There are so many stories referring to the Vedas in which animals eat from the offered food then they rebirth as human beings; they avoid the expected modes of existence and get a chance to find their way back to Krishna.

Nutrition itself is a spiritual life in Krishna Consciousness for which there is no need for consciousness and therefore it can be accomplished by anybody. Eating, consuming sacred food, becomes sacred by eating consciously and devotedly. According to the substance of the religious meaning of physiological acts, it is the fact either of copying God's model or being identified with some cosmic phenomena (Eliade 1966:158). In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna, as the beginning of all things, let the people who are aiming to get to know him, how to live their lives. Consequently, acts and devoted services - prescribed by Krishna - become sacred. In this way the *Bhagavad-Gita* justifies and takes every profane act including eating and cooking to a sacral level. "Every human experience can be transformed and revised in a transcendental level" (Eliade 1966:161). It is the same in connection with food, which is simply a base material without offering. By offering food, it becomes sacred and it is not material any more, but a spiritual food that helps people release from the capture of the material. People who are getting acquainted with Krishna consciousness like delicious Indian food from the beginning and subsequently become aware of its sacredness. Later on they definitely feel the difference between the foods; the offered food is much better for their bodies and their souls as well. In the practice of Krishna consciousness they mention the offering as the first ritual they do by themselves. Offering and eating offered food changes their attitudes towards eating.

They see *prasádám* as the remains of Krishna's food, and according to the offering the food like everything belongs to Krishna, and people can enjoy it by Krishna's kindness. At first Krishna enjoys the food, then people do as well. In the *Bhakti yoga* the offered life means active life, a believer offers his acts to God. In this way all his acts become sacrifices. Krishna believers emphasize that giving the food to Krishna, which was given by him actually, is a sacrifice. "Sri Krishna makes it clear that for those who want to develop spiritually and to get rid of the bonds of the material the right foods are exclusively the cleaned remains of the offered food" (explanation of Bg.9.26.) As I have previously mentioned, Krishna teaches the perfect lifestyle to his followers - to understand and to copy him. He is the final purpose of offering. Krishna is working continuously so every act should copy him and aim to be like him, in addition to keeping the rules that are given by him and relating them to the basic theories. In this sense doing correct things means *doing sacred things*.

Offering food means giving back everything to God that belongs to Him and do the same thing that He did and left the benefit of the acts to God. With Eliade's words *sacrifice* changes into an action and becomes part of the method of keeping cosmic order (Eliade 1996: 194). At the same time, they interpret the offering as a thanks giving: thanking God. He gives people what belongs to Him. Thankful that He is they're for people to serve Him, creating the possibility of arriving back at the spiritual world. Therefore thanks-giving recreates the cosmic order, and this creates natural balance and the likelihood that the offering will be part of the cosmic order. In Krishna believers' opinion, not to thank the food or to miss the offering is equal to stealing: which means to take what is not ours without saying "Thank you," to God.

The offering helps the communication between the sacred and worldly. The offering and consumption of food brings Krishna closer to the people and strengthens the relationship between god and the people: "By admitting man to his table, the god became bound to the community in a special relationship."¹⁷ The offering as a sacrifice thus reconstructs cosmic order. Believers think of it as a possibility to get back to their original state, so they would be able to go back to Krishna in the spiritual world. "The *bhaktás* get rid of all kind of sins because they only consume the food which they already have

offered as sacrifice. Others, who only make food for their personal pleasures really are eating the sins” (Bg. 3.13.)

We have seen that the only edible nourishment for Krishna believers is food accepted and fully enjoyed by Krishna because what is non-*praszadam* is unclean. The opposition of clean and unclean is an important element of Krishna faith in controlling the purity of the soul. Offered food cleans the heart, soul and mind. Food which has been tasted before it was offered to Krishna, however, is unclean. By their strictest rules, if a non-Krishna believer or an animal looks at their food, it becomes unclean. However if a superior clean thing touches an unclean object, the unclean will become clean. Therefore, it is good to eat the remains of the spiritual master or eat the food, which was touched by the hand of the guru or by a blessed object. There are possibilities to do these things on feasts, for example in autumn on the Govardhan hill festival.

The Govardhan is a holy hill in India. By the legend, when Krishna was seven years old-had lifted up this hill and he was holding it up for days above his family and friends to save them from Indra demigod as he tried to destroy them by storm and hailstones. A fragment of the Govardhan hill (*sila*) is kept in the Somogyvamos temple. On celebrations, they decorate this piece and they hold a whole day ceremony, lead by the spiritual masters in respect of the *sila*. Like all the celebrations, the Govardhan festival also has its washing ceremony (*abhiseka*). During this ceremony, they put the *Govardhan-sila* on a metal tray and then two or three Brahmans sprinkle it with different drinks and rub it with sweets. Then they put chains on it, which were made of dried fruit. Later these are given to worshippers. Then they collect the drinks and the sweets, which were put on the *Govardhan-sila*, and these, will be shared during the communal eating. It is very important that each of them have some. Later on, they put the *sila* on the middle of a “relief map” which is made of sweets. This map shows the Govardhan hill and its surroundings. On the ceremonies they dance around this special map, they sing festive songs and in the end the spiritual master distributes the “sweet-map” among the Krishna believers.

As mentioned earlier, karma is the basis of nutrition. That is why one must not eat off unclean or sinful people's food, and this is also

the explanation how you can get superior effects through food. In this case, the sweets are blessed several times. The fragment of the Govardhan hill is regarded as sacred; therefore whatever touches it becomes clean. All the food on which the *sila* was put is transformed into the Govardhan hill in India, therefore the food is sacred and on the other hand, because it touched the *sila* and it all has been offered to Krishna it becomes *mahaprasadam*. The spiritual master is so superior that whatever he touches becomes clean and will have a cleaning effect. Therefore, the liquid and the food that touched the *sila* and - what is more - were touched by the master's hand help the mental development of the Krishna believer. On festivals, they always cook the favourite meal of whom they celebrate. This person could be one of the masters or one of Krishna's earthly appearance or Krishna himself. If the celebrated person is not in presence, they treat his “*murti*” as it was that person. With that custom, they show their love and devotion, the kind of love that is the essence of the bhakti-yoga. The *mahaprasadam*, which can be given on these celebrations, is another excellent possibility for the development of one's spiritual life.

Food as the manifestation of the clean and the unclean constitutes a complicated system in Hinduism.¹⁸ In Hinduism, the caste system strictly makes the difference between clean and unclean, touchable and untouchable. However, this system does not give clear rules concerning leftovers, and if these do exist, they would be even more complicated than the hygienic rules (Malamoud 1989: 13). In the Krishna consciousness, the material is the bad and has lower ranking than spiritual things, but it becomes sacred as it is offered to Krishna. Yet the problem of the clean and unclean still exists. This and the hygienic rules, and avoiding unclean things are there in the Krishna believers' lives and practice. Making the contrasts even bigger the Krishna believers do not get these experiences with the nationalization, they have to learn these even if they do not see the system clearly. On the other hand, they have to put what they learn into practice within a different culture. This essay investigates this problem later when I describe how Krishna faith adapts itself to Hungarian circumstances.

Despite contradictions and problems, I feel that the contrasts are very important to make in order to better understand the Krishna faith and lifestyle. Prabhupada says there are three

transcendental qualities. These are cleanliness, “giving up,” and grace, where the cleanliness means that Krishna believers do not spoil themselves with bad food and habits (Syamasundara 1998: 12). According to Mary Douglas, the best way to understand their eating habits is to connect it with spiritual impurity, and she sees cleanliness as an element of the universe's order (Douglass 1966). Whatever is against the order makes chaos and all becomes spoiled and unclean. Within Krishna consciousness the unclean is always opposite to what is Krishna conscious, therefore it is not in favour in spiritual life. The unclean is against the order of spiritual life and consequently creates chaos and suffering, and these are equal to the material world, which is the birthplace of the unclean. Getting back to Krishna is to undo the chaos and re-establish order by making food as clean, loving, and caring as the Krishna follower's life has to be. If we take Krishna conscious people as an example, we agree with Mary Douglas that avoiding the unclean has not done by fear or religious terror; it is not negative, but a positive effort. Clean things are liked by the gods therefore they lead us to Krishna and he decides what he thinks is clean. The contrast of clean and unclean things decides on many details of the Krishna follower's life. For example what they can eat and what they cannot eat, and where, how and what they can do. For *mūrtis* who were initiated in temples, only twice-initiated *Brahmans* can offer. They only deal with the *mūrtis* and are clean - superior Krishna conscious - *bhakta*. Before offering it is better to hide cooked food from unclean glances.

Practice: Sacralism and Acculturation

In practice, Krishna consciousness sticks to the Indian *vaisnava* tradition - keeping to the rules allows both the assimilation to God's sanctity and attachment to Him (Rekai 1998: 69). The disjuncture between specifically Indian and contemporary Hungarian eating habits creates many problems. In the view of nutrition and Krishna consciousness, I assume that local Hungarian circumstances are acceptable as long as these do not interfere with the religion's four basic rules: 1) the prohibition to consume meat and egg, 2) the prohibition to take drugs and ecstatic remedies including the alcoholic drinks, tea and coffee, and cigarettes 3) the prohibition of gambling, 4) the prohibition of extramarital sex. However these rules give a wide interpretation, which shows its comparison with the world.

The comparison with the world is an important question in the view of the new religions movements. This decides on the different cultures or, in our subject, on the fate of rules. If we try to categorize the Krishna Consciousness by one of the two methods of Max Weber's world-rejection, we will not find it easy. According to Weber, there is an active asceticism, which tries to change the world inside the world, makes God to do it as His tool. And there is an ascetic,¹⁹ outside the world, who runs away and refuses to do his tasks. As Prabhupada influence on the Krishna followers, they reject the other kind of yoga because they believe that *bhakti-yoga* is the only continuous action and the one and only way to get to Krishna. Among other things, Eliade sees the importance of the *Bhagavad-Gita* because it shows yoga technique as a way “which helps us to break away from the world while we are still living and working in it...” (Eliade 1996a: 196). According to István Kamarás, who did sociological research on Hungarian Krishna followers, it cannot be decided whether Krishna consciousness belongs or can belong to Weber's first or second theory (Kamarás 1998: 96). Krishna consciousnesses is deep within the world and at the same time consciously separate from the world through the method of sacralism, which I believe is very important.

Dissociation from the world makes everyday life sacral and puts it and the whole Krishna conscious lifestyle into opposition with non-Krishna conscious societies. The sacrificial life, the opposition of clean and unclean, order and disorder, inside and outside, We and They, all strengthen the dissociation and support what Hoppál says:

The great world religions have too many theories and formalities, and the semi-system of the religion's beliefs perhaps most important feature is that in many cultures this subsystem stores the given community's value judgements (pointed out by me) and in many cases in the form of the religions customs and rules (Hoppál 1992: 113).

Very often, these Krishna conscious customs and rules seem strange in our culture. These strange, unfamiliar rules, regulations, and prohibitions are different from Hungarian practices. Krishna believers use two explanations drawn from holy books to give explain regulations. For example, they explain the prohibition of onion eating by

saying that the onion belongs to the group of passionate plants and therefore, it must not be offered to Krishna. Eating onions raises physical passion that would unnecessarily make the monk's life more difficult because of their commitment to celibacy. It would not make Krishna believers' lives easier either because they only have sex in marriage to beget children. The fact that they do not eat from other people's food means that food transmits karma. Krishna believers sort the dishes in the kitchen and they connect it with the spiritually and physically unclean.

Therefore, there are two types of explanations: the idealist and the materialist. Mary Douglas thinks - taking mainly the Jewish kosher laws and their explanations - of religious materialist explanations as verifications, and specifically of the idealist explanation as primary. In this case, Krishna consciousness can easily build into a similar explanation system with the help of the introduction of the new symbolic form. Through these examples, we have seen that Krishna believers try to give materialist explanations to their rules. Krishna faith does not consider itself only as a religion but as a scientific ground, and the foundation is given by the Vedas. The believers often emphasize that Krishna conscious philosophy is actually a science that gives sufficient explanation. According to a Krishna conscious cookery book, nutrition is a "scientific and practical way of culinary" (Goura Kirtana 1998: 7), and the *Bhagavad-Gita's* explanation of Prabhupada advises the believers not to eat the kind of food which belongs to the ignorance category because such foods are the cause of infections and illnesses (explanation of Bg.17.8.-10.) To emphasize the priority of the idealist explanations, the rationalist explanations are given a big place. In my opinion, this is so because Krishna consciousness is a foreign and strange thing and therefore this culture tries to connect itself to the dominant explanatory system, which is used here to control peoples' minds. Moreover, it is not only towards them, and about the explanation with they convince themselves. After all, they are thinking in accordance with local cultural models and these basics get them to the "way" to become Krishna believers.

The authors who examine Indian culinary habits always warn about its differences, and the main point in the analysis is the community and the differences between social

and political stratification and nutrition. Jack Goody illustrates his comparison of Asian culinary traditions and with a description of Chinese, Indian and Egyptian examples (Goody 1982). Charles Malamoud examines the connection between leftovers and the caste system, establishing that in connection the context of the clean and unclean gives the basic image of social hierarchy (Malamoud 1989). According to Mary Douglas, created views of cleanliness and other ideas in the society work on two levels: one level is about influencing others, and the other level refers to social life (Douglas 1966: 3). Within these cultures, cuisine-- meals and their rules, customs and their dissociation and connection-- creates a complicated system that operates as a symbol of the connection between social units. In Hungarian Krishna faith, all these are not meant to regulate and represent the relationships inside Krishna society, but to indicate the contrast with the non-Krishna conscious world to show the Krishna believers a strong sense of belonging.²⁰ To consume only clean, already offered food saves believers from the material world's impurity, and assures them of the connection between each other; so they do not make others unclean.

For believers living in this world, it is important because they want to introduce and show their Krishna consciousness through their actions. They do not have to give up the material world's equipment to do this, but they have to use it in a way that serves Krishna. Therefore in their view, an Indian Krishna believer who wears traditional disciple's garments, lives a simple life, and preaches its importance, but who has a mobile phone and drives a car, is not contradictory. Similarly, that is the way a Govinda restaurant attains higher value, as we will see later.

Whether living inside the world or departing from it, Krishna believers gradually improve knowledge of correct Krishna-conscious lifestyle. The integration of foreign cultures into Hungarian life is a problem which raises further interesting questions about the Hungarian Krishna faith, about Krishna believers self-estimation, and about smaller subjects, connected to the sacral nutrition.

In connection with the keeping of dietary rules, I experienced radically different ideas during my research. The written sources from the *Bhagavad-Gita* emphasise their

importance as a sign of dedication to Krishna and as the base of spiritual improvement. The founder, Prabhupada, also deeply emphasises the rules although what he had taught is that the best way to practice Krishna Consciousness is to adapt it to place, time, and circumstance. For believers, the rules are not always clear; believers do not equally know them and what they know, they do not practice perfectly yet. The believers who had been in India are presently learning the *vaisnava* lifestyle, which they are trying to follow; the spiritual masters are gradually teaching it to the Hungarian Krishna followers. Without doubt, these techniques are shown in their practice. The local circumstances inevitably influence the believer's everyday life and in some places force the usual Krishna conscious life to make changes.

But, before we discuss it in detail, let us discuss an earlier subject, connecting to the rules the question of supervision: What makes Krishna believers adhere to rules?

There are certain things that believers do together, where the community takes on the role of supervisor. Leaders are continuously given information about the believers' behaviour. However, during interviews there is very little talk about it, because they think self-control is much more important. The believers regard the rules as easy; they think of them as tools which help to practice the Krishna consciousness by forcing them to think of Krishna all the time. In doing so, they intensify their love for Krishna. As a Krishna believer said: if somebody does a lot of good for the other, he or she will automatically be devoted to that person. Devotion therefore strengthens love and, in the same way the rules which have to be kept because of Krishna strengthen the devotion and love towards Krishna. This love is what the bhakti-yoga teaches. Supervision has another important level: the spiritual level. If someone breaks one of the four basic rules, he will get karmic reaction for it and the reaction will harm his spiritual master. This is possible because when a spiritual master accepts a disciple, at the same time he takes on particular responsibilities. At the initiation, the guru undertakes almost all of his disciple's sins; if the disciple does anything bad after the initiation, the master will be partially responsible for those actions and will be influenced by them. In the case of eating non-initiated food, the believer will often react by feeling ill. The other, larger part of the negative reaction will be on the spiritual master because

Krishna holds him responsible for the believer's bad actions - because the master has responsibility for his disciple. This result is not intended to urge one to displace their own responsibility, but to appreciate the master and to avoid causing him unnecessary problems.

The Krishna believer takes the traditions of the *vaisnava* cuisine, which is liked by Krishna, as an example to be followed and sticks to it. However, this cooking had to change even in its original home in India due to the politics regarding British colonization and Islamic influence (Goody 1982: 127). It is unthinkable that the tradition would not change outside its original surroundings, especially when inserted into a totally different culture. This research shows that by now the Jews from Munkács, a small group isolated from the larger Jewish community, do not keep many religious rules. However, they concentrate on their feasts much more than on normal weekday meals. This observation can be used in the case of the Krishna believers as well, because it seems that they try to follow the Indian model much more carefully during their festivals. The menu includes several kinds of Indian food. The meal and numbers of its variations suit the given celebration, or believers cook the celebrated person's favourite meal. The other situation in which believers are very keen on original traditions is in the temple, where they cook for the initiated divine statues according to especially strict rules.

However, on other days there are more concessions, partly because believers do not always know the rules properly. Everybody keeps to the basic rules; therefore there is not one Krishna believer who would eat unoffered food. Yet this phenomenon is quite understandable because this particular rule is the easiest: the believer must only say 'thank you' to Krishna. It is believed that fasting is very important: festive feasting is regular during the calendar year. The eleventh day before and after every full moon is the day of *Ekedasz* fast when they do not eat grain or legumes because on these days sins may enter these foods. Krishna believers think of their cookery books as holy books: the recipes are from Krishna and therefore cannot be changed. If they were to be changed, Krishna would be harmed. So far, my experiences show that there are concessions mainly in the ingredients: fruits and vegetables which do not grow and are hard to get in Hungary can be replaced, and believers cook with oil or butter instead of purified butter

(*ghí*). However, it is still forbidden to consume meat, onion, egg, mushrooms, and alcohol, etc., for the four basic rules must be kept. The four basic rules set the trends for any kind of meal because Krishna believers do not eat Indian food every day, but mainly simple vegetarian food, naturally after the food has been offered to Krishna.

The Bhagavad-Gita designates the very spicy and hot food within the passion group, which is responsible for illness and pain (Bg.17.8-10). However, cooks realize how heavily Indian food lays on the Hungarian stomach because Hungarians are unaccustomed to such hot and spicy flavors. What is considered mild in India cannot be in the passion group, although the same food might be considered hot by Hungarian standards, a paradox that renders uncertain what belongs to the passion group. In the same way the *Bhagavad-Gita* states that the foods in the goodness group are healthy, even though these foods contain lots of sugar and spices and often cause stomach problems. They often say if they eat the different food in a proper order they could avoid this problem. Yet they hardly care about this order, nor do they know it. Though it is true that you cannot serve Krishna with an empty stomach, you must not eat too much either, because overloading your stomach means you cannot serve and work well. Despite these, the communal eating looks like huge feasts where everybody eats far too much.

Most of the questions, which seem to present problems even for Krishna believers, are connected with the unclean and mainly with leftovers. It would be easy if we could say that what has been offered is clean and that, conversely, what has not been offered is unclean. However, this is not the case. For example if somebody eats *prasádám* food, the eating itself is sense-satisfaction and therefore unclean. If somebody touches his or her mouth during eating it also becomes unclean. One must not eat another's food because it is considered unclean. However, it is good to eat what the spiritual master touched --even if he touched it with his mouth-- because that has a positive effect on the believer's spiritual development. Believers would break the rule of separating serving and cooking dishes if they were not able to keep to it; to avoid waste, they would use fruits that were less fresh in preparing foods like *csatni* (chutney).²¹ Touching the ground makes the hands unclean; however, the offered food can be eaten from the

ground. There are many more examples, but what seems to be important is that there are rules they have to keep – “Making the ‘*prasádám*’ by the given way is a written rule” (Bg.17.8-10 explanation), but other rules can be broken if there is no alternative.

Now, the question is whether or not they use alternative ingredients or do not keep entirely to the given way of making the *prasádám*. Does the sacralism get hurt? Does all it become worldly in the view of the Krishna consciousness? Does it mean the sacralism is invalid? If we fail to keep sacral rules and therefore make the spiritual development doubtful, can we get to Krishna at all?

Before I would try to answer this question, let us think a bit of the Govinda Snack Bar. Here are two ways in which nutrition is important: partly as a symbol of opposition between everything that is not clean and not Krishna conscious, things that are Krishna-conscious, and outside world or “the Other”. And at the same time, this is what connects it the most to this Other, how the non-Krishna believers accept the Indian food most easily and how it makes them the most curious, and why food interests them in the most pleasant way because of the exotic-strange details of the Krishna conscious life. These two merge into a complicated system in the network of Govinda restaurants, which are run by the Krishna believers. This is the same in the Govinda Snack Bar in Pécs.²² In the case of the snack bar, this duality poses other questions that are important because of their sacralism. Running the snack bar means that Krishna believers have to compromise: to make food suitable for the Hungarian taste, they had to cook food that was less spicy. It is impossible to keep the order of eating because the snack bar has a permanent menu and the fast cannot be kept. The leftovers and the clean and unclean make problems. The believers eat up what is left in the restaurants where they only serve offered food, which is supposed to be clean food, but then the question is in this case what means eating into the food: when somebody actually has eaten into that portion is the food the leftover? Of course, in the first case the believers do not eat that, but in the second case what they eat is unclean leftover, even though it is *prasádám* because unclean people have eaten it.

While trying to avoid these questions above, we find an explaining principle, which

solves the problem, at least for Krishna believers: In this way, priority is not given to the rules, but to the way of getting nearer to Krishna, the devotion in service and love towards Krishna and the action of helping others in so doing. However, what Prabhupada wrote is: “To neglect the regulating principles, ruins the devoted service. In this Krishna conscious movement there are four basic rules that restrict sexuality, diet, gambling, and drug consumption. A bhakta has to follow these principles with his whole heart, if somebody is neglecting these rules surely will prevent himself from developing” (Prabhupada 1990: 35-36). The believers refer to Prabhupada in another, already mentioned teaching, in which he emphasizes, in connection with keeping to the rules, that we have to use the possibilities given by the place, time and circumstances. However, we do not have to undertake the impossible. In one sense, keeping to the rules strengthens love towards God. Yet at the same time, Krishna sees the love and devotion felt for Him, which means more to Him than thoroughly keeping to the rules even if it is harmful and soulless. On the other hand, spiritual development cannot be the Krishna believers’ only important practice. He has to provide this knowledge for other people as well.

The point is that the believer has to be able to merge his Krishna consciousness into his everyday life, practice it on the right level in the given circumstances, and use his five senses in Krishna's service. In this case whoever goes into the snack bar immediately stands in Krishna's service as he smells the offered incense stick, or looks at the picture of Krishna, listens to the *mahāmantra* from the tape recorder, talks to other Krishna believers and above all, eats the offered food, the *prasādam*, which can be a first step, a spiritual beginning. (Let us remember that according to Krishna believers Prabhupada himself said, if somebody engages the Krishna consciousness, he has to eat a lot to start with, and therefore automatically, without knowing it, he becomes clean). In this way, the devoted service perfectly fits into the operation of the Govinda network. Here the eating could be profane, but because of the rules’ connection to the circumstances – for example the basic rules, to offer the food before it is eaten – the nutrition does not lose its sacral characteristic.

So the basic theories are kept in the restaurant's everyday life and just the higher rules are broken, but only for the sake of the big purpose. Therefore, the Krishna believers still

stick to the spiritual level of their everyday life, and they nevertheless live their sacrificial life and are with Krishna through their devoted service, which is sorted by their circumstances.

Summary and further Plans

In the practice of the Krishna consciousness, the sacral nutrition is an action by which the profane loosens up in the sacramentalism, which is in turn regulated by the gospel. The rules have their sources from God, the actions in Krishna's service, and by these, everything has the same purpose, which is getting back to the spiritual world. Therefore, the profane nutrition comes up to sacral level where man and God are together. In my opinion the context of the opposition between clean and unclean creates the starting point, which helps the sacred and the profane, and helps the believers to make the distinction between what is liked or disliked by the divinity. In doing this, believers may put themselves into the sacral-profane system and begin to analyse their position in the world. In this way, in a Krishna believer's life the ordinary becomes sacred and the sacred becomes ordinary.

However, the basis of Krishna consciousness originates from the Indian *vaiṣṇavism*, from a greatly differing culture, the separation of clean/unclean, keeping the rules and therefore categorizing what is sacral. Religion gives the solution to this problem by putting general aims and Krishna's love before of the strictness of the rules.

I acknowledge that my essay leaves several questions open. Comparing theory and the practice is not easy where both have uncertainties. The Hungarian community of Krishna believers is an ambitious congregation; they are presently learning the rules of their religion. In my opinion, this state of transition, the stage of formation, is what makes the Krishna believer's lives especially interesting for social research. To take the traditional Indian lifestyle and mentality into Hungarian circumstances gets a distinctive role in the study of the Hungarian (Western) Krishna believers' lives, and researching this new reality's development, its technique, and new forms of socialization it begets. (Berger-Luckmann, 1998)

The Krishna conscious diet itself offers new opportunities for research. In my present research I have been analysing this system in Hungary and the role Krishna believers play in

local charity movements by portioning out food and setting up free eating-houses. The Krishna faith represents a new trend of vegetarianism. My research poses another question: How does the Hungarian Krishna conscious community become a part of the vegetarian movement? What is their institutional background, what do they do to support these movements, and what kind of products (meals, ingredients, equipments, cookery books, other literature about nutrition, etc.) do they use? One might also investigate traditional and newly discovered occupations, which are presently in use in the Krishna villages, such as dairy farmers, bakers, apiarist, and Krishna-conscious chefs. The question is how they adjust themselves with their products on the market, what established trades can learn from them, and how they use all these to present themselves in private and in society.

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Notes

¹ I would like to thank the Krishna believers - especially those from Pécs - who helped my work a lot. The study was published in Hungarian in *Sors-áldozat-divináció* (Éva Pócs, ed.), Budapest: Janus/Osiris, 103-136. I rewrote the Sanskrit words for the sake of easier understanding.

² Since 1989, the Hungarian Society of Krishna Consciousness is registered temple. It is difficult to judge the number of believers, Kamarás guesses there are 280-300 monks under training, monks and people of the temple and he thinks the congregation exists of 500-700 people. There are four temples: Krishna-valley in Somogyvámos, Szolnok, Debrecen, Budapest and there are fifteen proselytizing centers, one of these is in Pécs. The Krishna believers follow the tradition of the Hinduism's *vaisnava* branch both in dogma and in practice.

³ The “Krishna-Consciousness” itself expresses the divinity, and means the knowledge of the relationship between Krishna conscious religion and also the movements.

⁴ In Kamarás István's survey, for the question, “*Mit jelent önnek a Krishna tudat?*” (What does the Krishna consciousness mean to you?), lifestyle was the most frequently given answer. Kamarás (1998:173).

⁵ The Vedas (“The Books of Knowledge”) is just a short form, this means the Hindu Holy books, which can be sorted like that: the Four Vedas, the One Hundred and Eight Upanisads, the Eighteen Puranas, the Vedanta Sutra, the Mahabharata and the Ramajana. The *Bhagavad-gíta* is part of the Mahabharata epic, and it contains the basic theories of the *vaisnava* philosophy to which the Krishna consciousness connects itself.

⁶ This means the statues of Krishna and of his avatars and in the eyes of the Krishna believers these are not only statues but also something equal to the divinity.

⁷ Nature's material binding power that binds the soul to the material world.

⁸ This marks the *Bhagavad's* chapter and verse.

⁹ In this case the fatty food does not mean the animal fat but the fat in the milk.

¹⁰ In Somogyvámos temple, the *bhaktas* cook for the initiated *múrtis* in a separate kitchen.

¹¹ Karma: the reactions of actions, in which the reaction returns to the person who committed the action, usually in the next life.

¹² *Bhakta* is a Krishna believer who practices the *bhakti-yoga*, the yoga of love.

¹³ The Krishna believers according to which level they reached in the Krishna consciousness will be initiated. With the second initiation they become *Brahmana*, a priest.

¹⁴ Csaitanja (1486-1534) is the founder of the so-called *vaisnava* branch of Hinduism. The Krishna consciousness connects itself to this branch and sees Sri Csaitanja as Krishna's incarnation.

¹⁵ *Maha* means big, main.

¹⁶ This is the one of the so many versions: rice, bitter vegetables, *dal* (soup made of pods),

szamóza (vegetable filled pastry) or *pakora* (fried vegetables), *szabjik* (greens); *csatai* (very sweet but also hot purée) and finally the sweets.

¹⁷ “By letting the people to His table, God is having special relationship with the community” Translated by the author. Eliade (1987:391)

¹⁸ This system is analysed in Malamoud (1989).

¹⁹ “In the eyes of a worldly ascetic, a mystic's behaviour is sluggish self-satisfaction, and in the eyes of a mystic, a worldly active ascetic's vanity and arrogance interfere with the world's non-divine corrupt practices.” (Weber 1982: 344)

²⁰ Without doubt, there are differences in the relationships between initiated and un-initiated, monk or believer with a family, disciple and spiritual master.

²¹ *Csatni* (or chutney) is a very sweet and indeed very hot puree made of fruits and vegetables.

²² The snack bar in Pécs has closed since I started writing this paper.