

A Review of Steven J. Rosen's *Śrī Caitanya's Life and Teachings: The Golden Avatāra of Divine Love*

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Steven J. Rosen — not to be confused with Steven J. Rosen, the lobbyist and possible spy for Israel, or Steve Rosen, the former country and western musician now creating music for Christ — is an extraordinary fellow. With no college degree that I can find, his enthusiasms for writing and for his religion (Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism), and his love for India, have driven him to publish over thirty books in about as many years. Since 1992 he has been the editor and publisher of the *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies*, a journal which continues to operate today and which has published numerous articles and book reviews by well-known scholars and members of the various Vaiṣṇava communities around the world.

Vaiṣṇavism is a subset of Hinduism which focuses on the belief in and worship of the ancient god Viṣṇu and his numerous incarnations and forms. Rosen's latest book, *Śrī Caitanya's Life and Teachings* (Lexington Books, 2017) is about the founder of his particular Vaiṣṇava tradition, Śrī Kṛṣṇacaitanya who lived in Bengal and Orissa in the 15th-16th centuries (1486-1533 CE). Śrī Caitanya is considered by his followers to be a combined incarnation of Kṛṣṇa (whom the tradition believes to be the source of even Viṣṇu himself) and his primary consort/lover Rādhā. All incarnations have purposes, and according to the Caitanya tradition, the purpose of the incarnation of Śrī Caitanya was to spread divine love not just to humans, but to all life forms without any concern for qualification or worthiness.

Rosen presents us with a reasonably complete overview of Śrī Caitanya and his religious movement in ten chapters and an afterword, augmented by a short introduction, an acknowledgements section, extensive end notes

after each chapter, a good bibliography for further reading, and a somewhat slim index. I think there should have been a glossary as well, since there are many Sanskrit terms and names that will be unfamiliar to, and hard to pronounce for, readers new to the tradition.

The book begins with a brief discussion of the Indian context within which the Caitanya tradition developed and blossomed (Chapter One), and then introduces Kṛṣṇa, the dark blue lord, of whom Caitanya is believed to have been a descent or *avatāra* (Chapter Two). Rosen next tells the story of Caitanya's life, the golden-complected *avatāra*, drawing from some of the extant Sanskrit and Bengali hagiographies (Chapter Three). Then he discusses the main guiding force of the Caitanya tradition, the cultivation of *bhakti*, often translated as "devotion," but in this tradition ultimately identified with "selfless love" for Kṛṣṇa (Chapter Four). An exploration of the theology and practices relating to the holy names of Kṛṣṇa, which are at the core of the tradition's form of worship, is presented next (Chapter Five), and that is followed by translations of and commentaries on eight Sanskrit stanzas of instruction (known collectively as the *Śikṣāṣṭaka*) that are believed to be not only Caitanya's own compositions, but the very core of his teaching (Chapter Six).

Since all orthodox religious traditions in India must legitimate themselves on the basis of a credible interpretation of the Upaniṣads (aka. the Vedānta) Rosen next describes the tradition's view, which is referred to as "inconceivable oneness and difference" (Chapter Seven). Then he provides an account of Caitanya's encounters and interactions with some of the other religious traditions in India during his life (Chapter Eight).

Next comes an account of a conversation between Caitanya and a great devotee named Rāmānanda Rāya in which some of the most cherished beliefs of the tradition are revealed to Caitanya by Rāmānanda, and in appreciation Caitanya reveals his true nature to Rāmānanda (Chapter Nine). There follows a description of a special form of *bhakti* practice called passion-inspired (*rāgānugā*) *bhakti*. In passion-inspired *bhakti* one is attracted to the way one of Kṛṣṇa's companions loves and serves him, and one tries to follow or become like that companion (Chapter Ten). In an Afterword, Rosen describes some of the main people and events involved in the spread of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition to the West, beginning in the early 20th century.

Rosen's work has the trappings of good scholarship; he knows the tradition well. But *is it* good scholarship? Scholars today foreground critical analysis. By that standard, Rosen is an apologist, one who uses his many skills to cushion and protect rather than to interrogate his tradition. Were Caitanya's seizures caused by ecstatic experience—or by epilepsy? Rosen to

his credit mentions the debate, but then dismisses the secular explanation. Was the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* really written almost 4000 years ago, or was it composed much later and made to appear ancient? Rosen again notes that the debate exists, but assumes that the ancient date is correct, and dismisses evidence to the contrary. Traditional Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism does encourage critical questioning and debate; its modern offshoots like the one Rosen belongs to do not.

Good scholarship is not the friend of religious groups like Rosen's, but it is not necessarily the enemy either. Many years ago I was castigated by Rosen's *guru*, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, who was also my *guru* at the time, for wanting to make ISKCON schools academically rigorous. He asked me "What? Do you think the world needs more scholars? No! It needs more devotees!" Actually, I do think the world needs more good scholars, and maybe fewer devotees if being a devotee means rejecting one's ability to think critically.