

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

Neal Delmonico,
PhD. (UChicago, 1990)
Independent Scholar
www.caitanya-symposium.org

June 8, 2018

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. It is surely this latter work that has provided him with much of the material for the latest under review here.

Vaiṣṇavism is a subsect of Hinduism which focuses on the belief in and worship of the ancient god Viṣṇu and his numerous descents or incarnations and his many partial manifestations. Rosen's latest book, *Śrī Caitanya's Life and Teachings* (Lexington Books, 2017) is about the founder of his particular tradition within Vaiṣṇavism, 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 descents 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 took root 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 an important 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. 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 particular way in which 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.

While there is much that is praiseworthy and much to be learned from Steven Rosen's book, it is and should be recognized as a work of apologet-

ics. One might even say it is a sustained advertisement aimed at attracting new members to the religion. This is consistent with the particular part of the tradition to which Rosen belongs. Rosen is a member of the ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) and Gauḍīya Maṭha (collectively known as IGM) sub-sect of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism which date to the early 20th century. The main purpose of these organizations and their offshoots is to preach and spread Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, that is, essentially to save souls and send them “back to Godhead.” They were founded on the model of the Ramakrishna Mission which in turn was modeled on Christian missionary organizations active in Bengal in the 19th century. Mainstream Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is more focused on worship, repetition and singing of the holy names of Kṛṣṇa, and on visualizing the divine play of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. It focuses much less on preaching. IGM also engages in worship and repeating and singing the names of Kṛṣṇa (not so much in visualization), but on a reduced scale. Apart from this, the mainstream tradition and IGM share many views and beliefs. It is to Rosen’s credit that, even though he mostly sticks to the IGM program, he sometimes refers to and quotes from thinkers and practitioners of the mainstream Caitanya tradition. In his discussion of passion-inspired *bhakti*, for example, he discusses the esoteric practices of visualization that are embraced by the mainstream even though they are not practiced or even encouraged in IGM.

The upshot of these comments is to suggest that the views of Caitanya, his teachings, and his movement found in Rosen’s book are somewhat distorted by the missionary zeal of IGM. The real spirit of the Caitanya tradition is much more inward, deep, and contemplative, much more concerned with cultivating inner emotions of love for Kṛṣṇa.