

TOPIC REVIEW: MODERN VEDIC HERMENEUTICS

REVISIÓN TEMÁTICA: HERMENÉUTICA VÉDICA CONTEMPORÁNEA/MODERNA

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ABSTRACT

This topic review focuses on the elements of the Purvamimansa interpretative school of India that have been adopted by ISKCON, a contemporary or modern Vaishnava institution that for the exegesis of classics on Indian religious philosophy such as the Srimad Bhagavatam uses the hermeneutic system of Vedic revealed/sacred texts. In the following pages, the origin and characteristics of Mimansa school are delineated and it is argued that sabda (authoritative testimony) is the core of both Vaishnava epistemology and the exegesis of sacred texts. This work emphasizes that, for Vaishnavism, epistemology and hermeneutics are inseparable and mutually dependent and argues that this contemporary appropriation of an ancient system of interpretation can be considered a contemporary or Modern Vedic Hermeneutics.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Vedic Sacred Hermeneutics, Vedic Religious Exegesis, Vedic Eisegesis, Vedic Epistemology, East/West Hermeneutics, Mimansa, Nyava Nyaya.

RESUMEN

Esta revisión temática se concentra en describir y explicar los elementos de la escuela interpretativa Purvamimansa de la India que han sido adoptados y adaptados por ISKCON, una institución contemporánea o moderna Vaishnava que, para la exégesis de los clásicos religiosos de la filosofía de la India, tales como el Srimad Bhagavatam, usa el sistema hermenéutico védico de textos revelados o sagrados. A continuación se delimita el origen, desarrollo y características de la escuela Mimansa postulando que sabda (testimonio autorizado) es el centro, tanto de la epistemología como de la exégesis de textos sagrados, y enfatizando además que, para el vaishnavismo, epistemología y hermenéutica son inseparables y mutuamente dependientes. Este trabajo sostiene que la apropiación y adaptación del sistema de interpretación ancestral que ocupa estas líneas podría considerarse una forma contemporánea o moderna de la hermenéutica védica.

Palabras Clave: Vaishnavismo, Hermenéutica Sagrada Védica, Exegesis Religiosa Védica, Eiségesis Védica, Epistemología Védica, Hermenéutica Oriente/Occidente, Mimansa, Nyava Nyaya.

1. INTRODUCTION

This review on the contemporary form that Vedic hermeneutics has taken in the Western world is part of a major undertaking on an analysis of female voices in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* part of a Ph.D. research project. In dealing with an interpretation of each female intervention presented in the most recent commentary of the Indian classic, the relevance of reviewing different schools of hermeneutics is self-explanatory and that process has arrived to the finding of a very rich and well-established hermeneutical tradition in the East which is currently being used, presented and enriched by contemporary philosophers of the West.

The main objective of this topic review is to introduce the readers to what could be considered a modern or contemporary Vedic hermeneutics (MVH). Here we will explore and present a comprehensive summary of its theory, methodology and ethos. Since the aim of this paper is not to establish comparisons among East and West interpretative schools but to deepen the knowledge and understanding of MVH with the perspective to apply its ways in the ongoing process of analyzing the above-mentioned topic in the *Bhagavata Purana*, some historical references will be made regarding the European hermeneutical tradition in general and religious exegesis in particular with the exclusive and sole purpose of contextualizing our topic.

The present review will provide us with the adequate theoretical, axiological and methodological tools to develop an exegesis of religious texts that do not belong to the Abrahamic tradition, possess an ancient and profound spiritual message and could serve, at the minimum, as a glimpse to a future cross-cultural application, intersubjectivity and, with MVH, a reciprocal East West hermeneutics. In order to contextualize and even translate those cultural instruments to the language of the Western academia we will start by describing the historical development of MVH from the beginning of its original school called Mimamsa till its formal current presentation by Western modern philosophers and intellectuals belonging to the Bhaktivedanta school of thought [1:1]. This will unavoidably take us to explore important concepts such as the object of MVH, the hierarchy of Vedic texts, Vedic principles of acquiring knowledge, the ontological nature of the Vedas, the role of the audience in the hermeneutical process, and the more than controversial and -sometimes paradoxical- figure of authorship in the Vedas.

Although MVH shares with its Western counterparts the same intentions (i.e. reconcile or harmonize the paradoxes, contradictions or multilayer readings that a sacred text may present) [2:2], it nevertheless possess its own processes mostly based on a concept of the goal of human life (*sambhanda*, *abhideya*, *prayojana*) which translates in the four context question of a Vaishnava exegesis and in the emphasis on avoiding eisegesis, biased readings, impersonal interpretations, allegorical interpretations or personally motivated understandings of religious/sacred texts.

In order to fulfill our objectives, the article explores its subject in three different subtitles, the first one revises the history of Mimamsa as one of the most influential schools of hermeneutics in India, the core foundations of its methodology and its main concepts; then, we will focus and explain the ontology and epistemology of the Vedas, the all-pervading impersonal knowledge from which all Vedic texts – theological and non-theological – emanate as all-pervading sound much before they come to existence as written texts. Finally, the third subtitle focuses specifically on what we argue can be seen as a contemporary Vedic Hermeneutics, theological in mood and, given its particularities, susceptible to be studied for the benefit of studies within religion and theology in other traditions besides Vaishnavism. In order to make the process of reading clear, this part is divided in various subtitles: the interpretation principle “As It Is”; Four Context Questions, the Six criteria for interpretation, the rules of debate; the relation between interpretation and (the) ultimate conclusion of a doctrine and, finally, the center of the hermeneutical circle.

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on a qualitative methodology this topic review is narrative or semi systematic. As such, it allowed us to overview our subject (Vedic Hermeneutics in a contemporary presentation and use, its history and development), understand how research within the field of Vedic hermeneutics of sacred texts has progressed over time and even understand how it developed across cultures (East and West). The present exploration, could identify and understand potentially relevant research traditions and concepts such as the doctrine of *intrinsic validity* (*savataha pramanaya*) and the concepts of *mukhya-vritti* (as it is) among others. All this have potential implications for our studied topic since these found elements, synthesize Vedic hermeneutics and allow us to analyze and apply the findings in the planned future research on feminine voices in the *Srimad Bhagavata* [3].

In terms of techniques, this is the result of a thematic or content analysis of articles, books and reviews on the history of Mimamsa school, the Vedas; the *Sad Sandharva* a treatise on epistemology by Vaishnava philosopher Jiva Goswami, the course material prepared by the Sastric Advisory Committee (SAC) of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), also articles, podcasts and audiovisual material related to it. In addition, we reviewed literature, books and essays on Hindu hermeneutics, and others related areas, that if broadly understood as method, permitted us to identify, analyze and report patterns or themes that influenced the construction of what could be considered a contemporary or modern Vedic Hermeneutics or MVH mainly practiced in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

In addition, the present work used bibliographic research and a retrospective systematic observation of the hermeneutical praxis of the said Bhaktivedanta School of thought [4]; it obtained relevant information on strategies and methodologies of exegesis of sacred texts, methods, ethos and theory of MVH by summarizing the academic literature related to it [5]. SAC's course on hermeneutics was specially analyzed. It helped us to detect themes related to Purvamimamsa adaptation to contemporary exegesis; also, we could identify issues common to both Indian Hermeneutics of religious literature and general hermeneutical systems in the West (for example, the identification of a theological center in the hermeneutical circle proposed by Gadamer/Heidegger, if applied to a theological text) and finally, we could determine theoretical concepts of summon importance for interpretation practice, i.e., *pramana* (evidence) and *sabda* (testimony).

The result helps us to understand MVH's theory (intrinsically united with its epistemology), method and ethos; it also provides us with interpretative tools that pay especial attention to avoiding eisegesis while researching classical Vedic sacred and revealed literature and confirm the relevance of its application to modern readings of the *Bhagavata Purana* [6].

Besides showing a historical overview or timeline of the development and travel of the Purvamimamsa interpretative school, the contribution of this topic review may be the mapping of the field of Vedic religious hermeneutics of Vaishnavism and of relevant academic production related to MVH especially in the West and by contemporary philosophers, intellectuals and scholars. Furthermore, this review permitted us to synthesize the state of knowledge regarding Jiva Goswami's epistemological/hermeneutical contribution to Vaishnava exegesis and also propose the agenda for further research on the potential and limitations of ISKCON's adaptation and adoption of Purvamimamsa in its hermeneutics. As previously explained, this was done with the view of applying the theoretical and practical tools offered by MVH to the interpretation of female interventions in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* or *Bhagavata Purana*.

A key element of this article is the analysis of the hermeneutical tool developed by ISKCON's Sastriic Advisory Committee (SAC). For that analysis we separated the tools in two groups, those that deal with doctrinal constructions and those that directly deal with either epistemology or hermeneutics. Because doctrinal tools are of little interest to our objective, we acknowledge that they are part of SAC's proposal, but are not included in our analysis. Instead, we focus on those instruments that are intrinsically hermeneutical as they can show the processes of adoption and adaptation of the original Mimamsa school by contemporary Vaishnavas. In this paper, we grouped them in four areas: hermeneutical procedures, epistemological principles, hermeneutical ethos and Vaishnava ethos.

In order to achieve the previously explained results, we revised academic information produced on MVH in, among others, SAC's course on hermeneutics, databases such as Scopus, EBSCO and Google Scholar and books related to Indian Hermeneutics. In order to taxonomize the findings and material, three areas of inquiry were defined: 1) History of Hermeneutics in India 2) Mimamsa and Vedic Sacred Literature 3) MVH and its current presentation in the West.

3. MIMAMSA, SCHOOL OF HERMENEUTICS

Mimamsa is a Sanskrit word that means inquiry, investigation, also "revered thought". The root of this word is "man" which means "mind" and also "thinking" [7]. Because the method of its philosophers is exegetical or hermeneutical, Mimamsa can be understood as the process of probing and acquiring knowledge or, of critically reviewing and investigating the Vedas [8]. Uttar Mimamsa is also called Vedanta, Jnana or Brahma mimamsa because it is based on the later (uttar) jnana-kanda (knowledge seeking) part of the Vedas, [9:15]. On the other hand, Mimamsa is also called Purva, karma or dharma-mimamsa, because it is concerned with the karma-kanda portion (rituals) and earlier (purva) part of the Vedas that mainly deal with religious duties or dharmic injunctions [10].

The founder of the school is Sage Jaimini (placed between 250 BCE and 50 CE) who wrote the Mimamsa Sutras by the end of the 2nd century AD in India. Mimamsa Sutras is a collection of nearly 2500 aphorisms that share the main objective of establishing the incontrovertible authority of the Vedas as the source of all knowledge about religion, ceremonial duties or rituals and to explain the true meaning of these holy books; meanwhile, in order to understand the objects of the world, other sources are accepted by Mimamsakas¹ [9:16].

Although Purvamimamsa does emphasize the interpretation of Vedic texts in relation to rituals, Jaimini's philosophical school is considered non-theistic because its core thesis is that Vedas' most important messages are the embodiment of impersonal imperatives (*viddhi-vakyas*), prescriptions and prohibitions that do not come from God [8] as quoted by [9:16]. Interestingly, the paths established by Jaimini for the interpretation of these so called impersonal sacred texts, are applied by both personalists and impersonalists theologians of India such as Bhaktivedanta Swami and Sri Aurobindo respectively [11] [9:15].

For Purvamimamsa, reason is an important instrument for understanding the import of the Vedas whose texts, sentences and words require some interpretation; it accepts perception and inference as sources of knowledge [9:15] and [16] and holds *śabda* or testimony as an "intrinsically valid criterion of knowledge, until and unless proven otherwise" [12:27]. This aspect of the school is often over simplified and therefore misunderstood by Western (and even Indian) intelligentsia that considers it to be a practice utterly opposite to a philosophical inquiry [12:26].

¹ *Mimamsakas* refers to students or philosophers who apply Mimamsa hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, I would argue that such Eurocentric judgement generally overlooks the fact that *sabda* does not refer to *any* testimony, but only and exclusively to the one given by the Vedas [13], a very specific and unique type of texts with an ontology that challenges most of what we know about a large number of metaphysical topics, about linguistics, the origin of language, human communication and even philosophy of sound [14]. Furthermore, it is in this source that we find the true major difference between the Hermeneutics of Jaimini and Western schools of interpretation, a difference that if faithful to the meaning of science the academia should embrace as a challenge and with curiosity instead of confronting it with dismissive indifference, since as we will see later in this article, the ontological nature of Vedas defines the processes of interpreting its multiple, profound and often full of answers content.

Because of its central relevance to the understanding of MVH, this article presents a detailed subtitle on the ontology of the Vedas. Nevertheless, in the meantime, suffice to say that because of the timeless and independent nature of the Vedas, Mimamsakas understand that the relationship between words and their meanings is natural and therefore necessary and eternal: "...the entire Mimamsa project (...) concern will be (...) that language as such is intrinsically valid, and that such validity is only compromised by the agency or intentions of speakers (with the Vedas, as authorless, this being immune to charges of invalidity on this score)" [12:28]. This implies that language is not and cannot be a creation of humans just as knowledge in its most pure and essential form (Veda) simply exists and is not a creation of any person, not even the Supreme Person [9:16].

In addition, it is worth noting here that Mimamsakas adopted some aspects of the school of logic called *navya nyaya* developed by philosophers Udayana from Mithila (ca. 983), Gangesa also from Mithila (ca. 1320) and Ragunath Siromani from Bengal (ca. 1510) and that covered metaphysics, epistemology and theory of logic. According to Bogdan [15], Mimamsa, Vedanta and Vyakarana schools use the techniques of definition of concepts and terms of *navya nyaya* in literary theory, aesthetics, rhetoric and law. Vaishnavism uses some elements of *nyaya* in order to regulate the art of debate. In fact, the intense doctrinal controversy of the 2nd half of the 16th century between the Dvaita and Advaita philosophies (non-dualistic and dualistic respectively) regarding the nature of the soul and its relationship with God (among other discussions) was developed and resolved by each side, using *navya nyaya*'s instruments and categories.²

All the above informs us that Purvamimamsa is a hermeneutical school for *viddhi-vakyas* or the content of Vedic texts and it was (and is) equally valid as an exegesis option for both, theist or not. Furthermore, with the additions adopted from *nyaya nyaya*, traditional Mimamsa offered exegetical principles under which light a Vedic text should be interpreted; one of the most important ones is *Upakramopasamharau Abhyasa-Apurvata Phalam, Arthavada-upapattishca Lingam Tatparya Nimaye*, six-fold principles of the interpretation that will be discussed in detail in the part of this article dedicated to MVH.

4. VEDAS: ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

4.1. Ontology

4.1.1. Sound as the purest form of knowledge

As mentioned earlier, the word *Veda* means knowledge (*vid* = know, is the root of the word) and it refers to the "esoteric wisdom of the universe" [16:14]. Although considered the oldest scriptures in the recorded history (1500-800 BC) [17:36], originally the Vedas were conveyed by oral tradition. In fact, whether being self-existent, self-revealed and authorless- as were considered by Mimamsa School- or having their origin in God -as they are understood by Vaishnavas-, they are at the end: uttered words, impersonal, self-existent, intrinsically valid *sound* [9:15-16].

Because the Vedas are pure energy, primary sound in its more essential manifestation, knowledge in its most essential form, they are considered *aparauseya* (independent from any person to exist): "...is a revelation that does not come from any person, not even God. It is co-existent with God, an aspect of God" [13]. This is the ontological condition that defines their flawless authority and also the one that defines the stages of their interpretation since each one of these (now written) books is aloof from the imperfect, defective, self-indulging, biased or limited perception that an *author* persona could show in the production of any other type of literature (an issue that we try to cover in later lines).

² There are various examples of how both sides of the controversy used *nyaya nyaya*'s tools, one of the most important is Madhava's argument in favor of the *upasamhara* (ulterior statement) over the *upakrama* (prior statement) in the interpretation of Vedas: He "intended to show that *bheda* is not accepted merely on the ground of logic but it has to be accepted on the basis of *sruti*. Mere logic is not able to prove any doctrine. It cuts both ways. It is *pramana* only when it is supported by *sruti*." [8, p. 273 note 40]

Although in this review we introduce the topic of the Vedas, our focus is on MVH’s object of interpretation that corresponds mostly to some of the sattvic puranas (texts in the mode of goodness) and other smrtris. We present the first three tables of this paper, all related to Vedic Canon but divided in three genres: Sruti, Smrtri and Sutras. While Table 1 shows the most important ancient Vedas (not including the Vedanta Sutras or aphorisms also considered ancient Vedas), Table 2 presents the detail of sattvic books that are the focus of MVH.

TABLE 1 - VEDIC CANON FOR SRUTI OR THAT WHICH IS HEARD

| <i>Sruti</i> |
|---|
| <i>“That which is heard”</i> |
| Four Vedic Samhitas (Vedic collections) |
| Rig Veda (from the early Vedic time) |
| Sama |
| Yajur |
| Atharva |
| Brahamans |
| Aramyakas |
| Upanishads (more than 108 separate books) |

[16] S. Rosen, “The Hidden Glories of India”, Sweden: BBT. 2002. p.15-16.

TABLE 2 - VEDIC CANON FOR SMRTRI OR THAT WHICH IS REMEMBERED

| Smrtri | Includes |
|--|--|
| <i>“That which is remembered”</i> | |
| Ramayana* | |
| Mahabharat* | Bhagavad Gita* |
| Puranas (i.e., ancient texts) divided into three categories according to the consciousness of their objective readers | |
| Six <u>Sattvic</u> Puranas | Bhagavata Purana or Srimad Bhagavatam* and Visnu, Naradiya, Garuda, Padma, Varaha puranas |
| Six <u>Rajasic</u> Puranas | Brahma, Brahmananda, Garuda, Padma, Varaha Puranas |
| Six <u>Tamasic</u> Puranas | Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda, Agni Puranas. |
| Upapuranas | Versified forms of many of these texts. |
| Large number of sthalas or regional puranas | |

[16] S. Rosen, “The Hidden Glories of India”, Sweden: BBT. 2002. p.15-16.

* My emphasis

Strictly speaking then, the Vedic canon is not literary, but oral [18:2] and even though it may have been preserved in the memory of people, it did just as if it had been printed; that is why the Vedas (poems, injunctions, etc.) are considered *books* [18: 2 quoting [19: 27-28] and the printed versions of those oral books, “are really mere inscriptions of the ‘urtext’, which is the chanted: sound” [18:15]. That sound, considered sacred and impersonal, when considered speech, is called *Vak*, a special language also called *deva bhasa* (language made of light, language in potent essential form) different from the signifier or sound symbols created by humans. As *Vak* it is not yet a spoken language, it is mere vibration that descends from that subtle manifestation to the grossest articulated form we know through four stages: *para* (as original/primal sound or voice), *pasyanti* (as a form with color in the mind), *madhyama* (as unexpressed sound in the heart), *vaikhari* (as language) [20]. The esoteric nature of this divine sounds turned into written texts makes it difficult to agree about the time line of their appearance. Nevertheless, Table 3 shows the commonly agreed process of constructions of these old Vedas, where it is possible to see what texts were originally interpreted by Purvamimansa.

4.1.2. Authorless sound and literature

In that sense, the Vedic *rishi*³ “is someone through whom [*apauruseya*] mantras are revealed” [20]. The content of the Vedic texts “get[s] to be seen by sages who are advanced and qualified, empowered to see. They simply record and repeat what they see” [13]. Consequently, Vedas may have: 1) an Origin (*sarva karana karanam*, the Cause of all causes

³ *Rishi* means sage, saint and inspired poet.

or the Supreme God), 2) a translator, 3) a commentator, 4) a compiler, 5) a narrator, but they do not have neither one nor different *author* in the modern sense of the word. Furthermore, all of the roles mentioned before, act as simple and *pure intermediaries* between the Vedas and humanity. The unadulterated nature of the transmission of this knowledge is a quality carefully conserved throughout millenniums with the system of disciple succession (*parampara*) within each tradition (*sampradaya*) [11], [13], [14], [16].

TABLE 3 - HISTORIC LINE OF SRUTI OR THAT WHICH IS HEARD

| Vedic Era | Sruti “that which is heard” |
|---|---|
| EARLY (<i>purva</i>)* VEDAS 1700-1000 BCE 3900 years ago | Four Vedic Samhitas (Vedic collections) |
| | Rig Veda (from the early Vedic time) |
| LATER (<i>uttarva</i>) VEDAS 1000-850 BCE 3000 years ago | Sama |
| | Yajur |
| | Atharva |
| | Brahamans |
| | Aranyakas |
| | Upanishads (more than 108 separate books) |

[16] S. Rosen, “The Hidden Glories of India”, Sweden: BBT. 2002. p.15-16.

*[my emphasis].

Therefore, I would argue that to attempt the study of Vedic texts or Indian philosophy, even Mimamsa or its application, overlooking (intentionally or unintentionally) the fact that it was developed in order to deal with *that unique type* of texts, i.e., the Vedas, is the origin of the main misunderstandings regarding not only Mimamsa hermeneutical school but also the other orthodox schools of philosophy of India. Those miss-encounters tend to take the researchers to oversimplifications such as the minimization of the importance of the uniqueness of the Vedas to understand ancient Indian philosophical traditions. Hence the relevance of exploring the modern adaptation of this interpretative tradition to a current hermeneutical project such as the one we dealt with herein.

Once established the nature of the object of study that the school of interpretation of the Vedas has, it is not difficult to understand that these texts are considered the source of sacred knowledge and wisdom in the different forms of religious practices within India [9:23] and that Purvamimamsa is the hermeneutical system *per excellence* regarding ancient Indian revealed scriptures. Nevertheless, this means (as we briefly stated in earlier passages) neither that the Vedas are only religious texts nor that Mimansakas are exclusively religionists.

There are countless instances where the openness and non-sectarian nature of the Vedas can be seen. In fact, the knowledge offered by them covers the four Vedic goals of life: *dharma*, *artha*, *karma*, *moksa* and also *prema* (the objective of the monotheistic theological tradition of India) [13]. This is to say that the Vedas provide information to humanity as how to proceed if interested in obtaining rewards for fulfilling duties, in material richness, in improving the reactions to our actions or in obtaining liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The hierarchy of the Vedas also depends on the consciousness of the public to which they may be intended: mundane, *dharmic* or transcendental literature for people in any of the three modes of material nature, i.e., *sattvic* (goodness) *rajasic* (passion) or *tamasic* (ignorance) [16]. This can be more clearly understood with the rough taxonomizing presented in the table 5.

Vaishnava hermeneutics deals with *sattvic puranas* (texts in the mode of goodness) and specifically with the ones related to Krishna, who is considered the Supreme Personality of Godhead. As a general information, Table 4 presents a detail of the puranas divided by the reader they are intended to. Worth noticing here that, while accepting the *aparauseya* nature and the authority of the Vedas, MVH also acknowledge and declares that both sound and the knowledge that conveys emanates from the Original Person.

In the following parts of this article, we will explore how Purvamimamsa has been adopted and adapted by modern Vedantists of the Bhaktivedanta theological school to understand and interpret their sacred God-centered ancient texts even in the 21st century European Western context as part of a *parampara* and specifically, the Brahamana Madhava Gaudiya Sampradaya. Because of that specificity, some space will be devoted to describe the historical evolution of the

MVH School from the general descriptive point referred in previous paragraphs, reviewing its ancient past till our modern times.

TABLE 4 - HIERARCHY OF PURANAS ACCORDING TO THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE READER

| Smrtri | Includes |
|---|---|
| Puranas (i.e., ancient texts) divided into three categories according to the consciousness of their objective readers | |
| Six Sattvic Puranas | Bhagavata Purana or Srimad Bhagavatam and Visnu, Naradiya, Garuda, Padma, Varaha puranas |
| Six Rajasic Puranas | Brahma, Brahmananda, Garuda, Padma, Varaha Puranas |
| Six Tamasic Puranas | Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda, Agni Puranas. |
| Upapuranas | Versified forms of many of these texts. |
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[16] Based on S. Rosen, “The Hidden Glories of India”, Sweden: BBT. 2002. p.15-16.

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5. EPISTEMOLOGY

5.1. Acknowledging Human Limitations

As shown previously, Vedic Vaishnava epistemology has a very particular object of study (sacred sound conveyed through the un-adulterating intermediation of a saintly person). In order to grasp that reality and according to Sri Jiva Goswami, considered by Vaishnava scholars the ‘Thomas of Aquino’ of their tradition [13], it is of utmost importance that the interpreter/reader/listener accepts the following human limitations: *bhrama*, *karaṇapāṭava*, *pramāda* and *vipralipsā* [13]. This assertion is not particular of MVH. As explained by Mei, the idea that humans are creatures and are trapped in finitude is something admitted by Western philosophers too (religious or not), just as Jiva Goswami spoke of our tendency to commit mistakes, cheat, be cheated and confuse the temporary with the eternal, among other philosophers, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer too recognized that we are not only finite but we are also confused or polluted as we often think from positions of self-interest and self-deception [21].

5.2. Two Types of Perceptions

Jiva Goswami explains that marked by those limitations, humans may have two different types of perception of reality: *abhyuadusya pratakshia* or faulty perception and *bhyadushia pratakshia* or faultless perception. The earlier being the most common situation and the latter being reserved for extremely advanced persons who have passed through the many interests of the mind and senses to be able to become completely absorbed in the object of their attention. In Vaishnavism, *samadhi* is the state in which one obtains *bhyadushia pratakshia* [20].

5.3. Five Stages of Perception

In addition, according to Vaishnava epistemology, reality, can be perceived in five stages. These stages are mentioned in the tool 2 of SAC’s Hermeneutics course (please see the first column of Table 6) and can be understood as inductive or deductive in relation to their origin: ascending or inductive as those stages that allow perception of the spiritual reality through a superior external materialized source (Spiritual Master, disciplic succession, authorities); while the stages of

perception of the spiritual reality that come directly from God or the Absolute Realm are considered deductive or descending:

Inductive or Ascending

- (1) *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception and/or knowledge received through disciplic succession)
- (2) *Parokṣa*, (knowledge acquired from authorities or others)
- (3) *Aparokṣa* (if used just to negate the other two)

Descending or deductive

- (4) *Aparokṣa* is considered deductive or descending if it is focused on self-realization
- (5) *Adhokṣaja* (acquisition of knowledge through the regulation of our senses, rules and regulations),
- (6) *Aprakṛta* (Transcendental knowledge, totally independent from material conditions, realization of Godhead).

This idea has been developed with some semantic differences by the three most recent *acharyas* or exemplary teachers of the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya, with the detailed presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5 - STAGES OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION ACCORDING TO VAISHNAVAS

| TOOL 2 refers to the five stages of perception of reality/knowledge | General methods to gain knowledge [23:112] | Specific Methods of understanding the Absolute Truth [23:112] | Srila Bhaktivinode Thakura [23:112] | Srila Bhaktissidhanta Sarasvati Thakura [23:206-207] | Srila Prabhupada [23:207] |
|---|---|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Parokṣa</i> Knowledge acquired from authorities | By a mediator (guru, sastra) not realized, theoretical. mediated knowledge | Associated collective perception by many persons in the past and present | Hostile to the understanding of the Absolute Truth | knowledge received from others based on their <i>pratyakṣa</i> ; the body of knowledge consisting of the collective sense-perception experience of the human race | Hearing from authorities |
| <i>Aparokṣa</i> | By realizing parokṣa knowledge, direct knowledge unmediated knowledge | Cessation from individual and collective perception, intuition or realization | Hostile to the understanding of the Absolute Truth | intuition or realization based on <i>pratyakṣa</i> and <i>parokṣa</i> or beyond <i>pratyakṣa</i> and <i>parokṣa</i> , leading to and only as far as impersonal realization of the Absolute | Self-realized knowledge |
| <i>Pratyakṣa</i> Direct perception | By material senses mediated knowledge | Direct sense perception | Neutral. It can be used in proper way. | knowledge received through the senses | Direct perception |
| <i>Adhokṣaja</i> Knowledge acquired by following rules and regulations | | External or reverential method of serving the Transcendental Object of Worship | The best methods to understand the Absolute Truth | transcendental knowledge, from above the plane of mundane perception and speculation, surpassing <i>pratyakṣa</i> , <i>parokṣa</i> , and <i>aparokṣa</i> , leading to and only as far as Vaikuṅṭha realization | Understanding what is the position of God and His Situation |
| <i>Aprakṛta</i> Transcendental knowledge, Realization of Godhead | | Internal, confidential method of service of the Absolute | The best methods to understand the Absolute Truth | Full-fledged spiritual knowledge of the Supreme Lord's Vraja pastimes of intimate love | Non-material although externally similar to material |

[23] Urmila devi dasi *et al.*, "ISKCON Hermeneutics Supplementary Material", USA & India: SAC, 2020.

On the other hand, Bhakti Vigyana Goswami, philosopher and theologian in the Bhaktivedanta line, argues that there are three means of true knowledge: a) reception (corresponding to descending knowledge), b) inference and c) scripture [22] (both corresponding to ascending knowledge) and emphasizes the principles of purity for any of them to bring fruits. The importance of this author's statement lays on the emphasis put on purity of sound as the true factor that completes the process of communication of knowledge or transference of it. In other words, for spiritual knowledge to be fully accessed, both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader must be pure.

5.4. Aikia: The Goal of Spiritual Knowledge

By now and for all the above mentioned, it is clear that the object of study for Vedic Hermeneutics is *sound* and the knowledge that is being search for, in the case of Vaishnavism, does not aim to any philosophical speculation nor logical conclusion. As revealed by Narottama Das Thakura, philosopher and writer of the 16th century Bengal quoted at various times by Valpey: “I pray that all of the words of the sadhus, sastra and guru become a singularity in my heart [and] that I have clear vision in my heart.”⁴ [13] This means that from a Vaishnava point of view, the intellectual understanding of the Vedic texts, has a lower rank than the emotion/spiritual understanding; in fact, considering the objective of searching for knowledge in Vaishnavism, intellectual understanding is almost insignificant. Clearly, the objective of searching for knowledge in this version of Mimamsa is neither the use of logic nor the accumulation of information, but the wonder and beauty of self-realization: *aikia*, the singularity in the heart that transforms actions and lives [13].

Because that singularity in the heart or self-realization, is lived experience, *sabda* or testimony has the status of epistemological evidence in Vaishnava hermeneutics. Moreover, as it is shown in the graphic above, that is the type of knowledge favored by the modern Mimamsakas over theoretical knowledge and all other type of knowledge, either perfect, imperfect, mediated or not, if coming from the sound vibration of the Vedas.

5.5. Adhikari: Qualifications for Hearing

Among other things, this aspect is the guaranty of the unchangeability of Vedantic message through the pass of time and encompasses the utmost importance of three aspects of Vaishnava school of interpretation: *sravanam*, *guru-sadhu-sastra* trilogy and *parampara*. *Svaranam* means hearing with submissiveness from an authority, being the Vedas the original authority of all spiritual knowledge. “Can sense give us Absolute Knowledge?” asked the interviewer, “Yes, if it is hearing and from the right source” answers the monk [13]. That is in a nutshell the epistemological principle of the Madhava Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya. Hearing is *the* most important means of knowledge because it involves experiencing the spiritual information contained in the Vedas.

Furthermore, for *svaranam* to achieve its full perfection, knowledge has to be heard from the right source. For a source to be considered *bona fide* in MVH, it must belong to a *parampara* (disciple succession) and the knowledge received from it has to pass a sort of triangulation of information through the confirmation of it in the instructions of the Spiritual Master, in the words and actions of saintly people and in the scriptures, that is called *guru-sadhu-sastra*. The inclusion of all these elements in the interpretative practice is nothing but conclusive prove of the extreme care given by the tradition to preventing history to fall into eisegesis and therefore it is testimony of the importance that hermeneutics has for this part of modern Vedantist Dvaita schools [23].

In addition, the other end is also important for *svaranam*. For a testimony to bring the right result, *adhikara* or qualification of the listener/reader is a requirement: “The meaning of any statement depends not only on the words used, but also on the realization of the listener or reader” [24]. This has relation with the *sattvic* reader for whom this literature is produced (see Table 5). According to MVH, the responsibility of the interpreter extends to the duty of harmonizing apparent contradictions, paradoxes, multilayer statements and even controversial messages in the scriptures because the acharyas or exemplar teachers have the mission of both challenging the context and being part of it: “One cannot blame an acharya for speaking according to their context and also, as acharya, rejecting and challenging that context” since it is their duty to change that context. Therefore, *anbhaya vyatikeya* or the ability to harmonize conflicting views is duty of the listener/reader that has to consider (as we will see in the analysis of the hermeneutical tools) that their own needs, capacities and devotional perspective can change and influence the type and profundity of their realization on a subject [24].

5.6. Sine Qua Non

Up to here, we have presented what could be understood as all possible efforts required from a human person to be able to acquired transcendental knowledge according to MVH. We have recognized *aikia* as the epistemological objective of Vaishnavism and we have stated the qualifications expected in a seeker in order to actually experience the Truth. Nevertheless, from the strict perspective of Vaishnava doctrine, the final success of the whole process (i.e., acquisition of knowledge, understanding of the Absolute Truth and interpretation of Theo-philosophical reality) rests on the

⁴ Sastra means scripture; Sadhu means saint, devotee; Guru means Spiritual Master.

willingness of the Supreme Lord to grant “entrance” to the transcendental reality, those glimpses allowed by the Supreme, reinforce the value of sabda as the main source of evidence for knowledge in Vaishnavism.

Bhaktivedanta Swami himself explained this principle in his books; an example is his purport of the Srimad Bhagavatam canto 6 chapter 4 verse 34: “One must therefore know the Supreme Personality of Godhead *by the grace of the Supreme Personality of Godhead* [my emphasis]. He reveals Himself, but He cannot be understood by speculation.” One could conclude in this regard that if one at all starts this process in first place, it is because there is an understanding that gaining the adhikari (qualification) means getting access to that sort of revelation that transport one’s spiritual experience from theory (what is seen/read) to reality (Truth As It Is).

Although this issue is not central to this topic review’s objective and since in the following paragraphs we will dig deeper in the material produced by ISKCON scriptural council, it is relevant to mention here that for some important members of the international society, Krishna’s grace is a major point overlooked in the content of SAC’s course, as clearly stated by philosopher practitioner Tore Karlsen (a.k.a. Tapas das) in a private correspondence material: “The tendency in academic world is to strive to gain control by intellectual effort. But with Krishna there is always His free will so He can empower anyone He likes as He likes, both with understanding and power”.

6. SAC’S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

The conceptual framework developed by SAC for ISKCON starts by presenting the theory of their hermeneutical practice which consists of *principles of interpretation*. As the following tables on hermeneutical principles and theory show, the content of those axioms can be divided in four different topics: hermeneutical procedures, epistemological principles, hermeneutical *ethos* and Vaishnava *ethos*. Out of twenty-four principles, only four are related to hermeneutical *ethos*, six deal with pure hermeneutic procedures, four with epistemological principles, only one talks about *sabda* (testimony) as the highest *pranama* or source of evidence while eight are concerned with Vaishnava *ethos* [23]. These numbers shouldn’t be considered proportional to the importance given to each of the areas since, as we already explained, sabda (mentioned only once in the principles) is the utmost criteria of proof for Vaishnava tradition.

TABLE 6 - SAC’S TOOLS BY AREA

| Hermeneutics | Tool |
|---|-------------|
| Scripture provides theory and method for its own understanding. / “reading the text through the text” | 3 |
| Identifying categories of texts, and of statements within texts, illuminates their meaning | 4 |
| Sastra both transcends and addresses context, within which is revealed | 10 |
| Consideration of context, including historical circumstance, is essential to gaining sastric insight | 11 |
| Texts are properly understood and explained in terms of the intended reader or audience | 12 |
| Scriptures are consistent and coherent, enabling meaningful dialogue between “part” and “whole” | 6 |
| Epistemology | |
| Texts are understood according to the mood and intent of the author/speaker | 12 |
| Insight emerges through apt dialogue, and through mediation, resolution, or reconciliation of paradox, apparent contradiction, and multiple views. | 14 |
| Education in sastra, delivered by the self-realized teacher (guru) helps preserve disciple succession | 24 |
| Knowledge is not simply a collection of correct objective information but is invariably mediated through the knower (can be in ignorance, passion or goodness). | 13 |
| Epistemological evidence | |
| Sabda is the highest pramana (source of evidence) | 2 |
| Hermeneutical Ethos | |
| Hierarchies are present within sastra and between sastras | 5 |
| There exist universal truths. Applicable in all times, in all places, and to all people | 7 |
| Parampara is perpetuated through discerning of meaning more than mere repetition of words | 23 |
| Truth is conveyed, with logic, reason and exemplary character, through the system of Parampara | 22 |

These numbers show that while introducing some hermeneutical principles, ISKCON’s SAC emphasizes the axiological education of the members of the Society. Although this could be considered a common practice of indoctrination within a religious organization, because of the previously explained epistemological characteristic of the school, it is also clear that for interpreters of Vedic sacred scriptures, the cultivation of purity as a personal project cannot and should not be separated from the hermeneutical practice. In other words, according to MVH, the understanding of Vedic sacred

literature without practicing the principles of Vaishnavism, is simply impossible. That this leaves materialistic academics out of control is of very little importance to the philosophy concerned as it is with obtaining the “singularity in the heart”, its goal.

6.1. Modern Vedic Hermeneutics, MVH

“Is there Philosophy in Asia? (...) That the *Upanishads* are full of absurdities and contradictions is not something we did not know before” [25:4], this quote is evidence that for a long time, and since the beginning of the British rule in the subcontinent, the study of Indian religious philosophy and theological schools was defined by Western methods and parameters. This invariably concluded dismissing the validity of Indian traditions as theology, religion or philosophy, in the best of the situations defining them as fables and myths and in the most common and worst scenario locating them in the realm of magic and witchcraft with the researchers not even trying to conceal certain derogatory value judgements.

Nevertheless, with the change of millennia, research in the fields of theology, religious studies and similar have move forward to a more inclusive, honest, curious and scientifically rich approach to traditions that are not Abrahamic [30:11-18]. The inclusion of Hinduism departments or Research Centers in practically every Faculty of Religious Studies in Europe and USA could be evidence of that change, as it could also be the research and investigation production they regularly conduct on the different religious traditions of India including the one that occupies this text, a very important (in influence and number) global Vaishnava movement, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada the year 1966 in New York [26].

6.2. Srila Prabhupada’s Contribution and Position in MVH

HDG Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896-1977) was a renunciate monk dedicated, by the instruction of his Spiritual Master, Bhaktissidanta Sarasvati Thakura, to spreading bhakti philosophy among English speaking public. He did so by an intense global preaching effort based on the gradual publication of commented translations of Vaishnava classics from Sanskrit and or Bengali to English. In only twelve years, he published with the BBT (his mission’s publishing company) more than fifty volumes in English, among which are various foundational texts such as: *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, *Srimad Bhagavatam* (ten cantos out of twelve volumes), the three volumes of *Caitanya Caritamrita*, *Upadeshamrita*, *Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu* and the *Sri Isopanishad* [26].

Being an acharya (a master that teaches by example), HDG showed in each translated verse and each purport of his extensive work, how to apply all the aspect of the Vaishnava hermeneutic school whose parameters are based on an epistemological method established in the 16th century Gaudiya Vaishnava saintly scholar Jiva Goswami in his main work *Tattva Sandharba* [23]. As we explained earlier, being the authorless ontology of the Vedas their main attribute and guaranty of flawlessness, the method to obtain knowledge from them is particularly centered on the quality of the sound which in turn is determined by the purity of both, the intermediary (speaker, commentator, narrator, etc.) and the listener/reader [24].

Here we argue that Srila Prabhupada’s *oeuvre*, sets the hermeneutical parameters for MVH through his writings which in themselves are rigorous interpretations of the original Vedic books. If based on strict Vaishnava doctrine, Bhaktivedanta Swami’s life and production are in themselves proof that he was granted Krishna’s grace both in understanding and strength. Nevertheless, it is in the current ISKCON that we find a clear institutional focus on education specifically directed to hermeneutics within a contemporary Vedic community: “The basis for all ISKCON’s rules, policies, programs, preaching and social development is how members understand sastra, Srila Prabhupada and our acharyas. (...), the continuation of the parampara depends as much on the transmission of clear sastric understanding as on initiations”⁵ [23:13]. The Figure 1 is a representation of the position of the Founder Acharya in the Vaishnava hermeneutical circle according to ISKCON. Although the institutional objective is undeniable, still, the pedagogic impulse of the international society can be considered a contribution to the philosophical literature on religious experience, religious hermeneutics, theological interpretation, the understanding of exegesis and eisegesis in Vedic literature and therefore to the academic interreligious research.

⁵ *Sastra* means scripture; *acharyas* meaning exemplar teachers; *parampara* means disciplic succession and *sastric* means, coming from the scriptures.

Srila Prabhupada - Parampara



Figure 1: Hermeneutic Dynamic and Srila Prabhupada – Parampara.

6.3. ISKCON - SAC’s Course on Hermeneutics

Consequently, the disciples of Srila Prabhupada, with the declared objective to remain over the years and contra resting the bad propaganda against Indian philosophies previously mentioned, have adopted their founder acharya’s hermeneutical tools and established them as the Modern or contemporary version of the Vedic Hermeneutic school to be used by Vaishnava researchers of the theistic Vedas in the West.

Accordingly, the year 2022, ISKCON’s Sastric Advisory Council (SAC) produced the first course on hermeneutics open to everyone in the community; the course is divided in eight separate sessions and presents forty hermeneutical tools, based on twenty-four hermeneutical principles and six qualities of the Vaishnava hermeneutic ethos as graphically shown below. All this is supported by essays written by Vaishnava academics and scholars such as Dr. Ravi Gupta and Dr. Kenneth Valpey who have dedicated much of their efforts to build a solid common ground for the community to safely interpret both Srila Prabhupada’s books and the message of all previous Vaishnava acharyas in the contemporary context [22], [23], [24].

6.4. MVH’S Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 is a model of the conceptual framework of ISKCON’s hermeneutical course (MVH in this review), with each component in the correspondent position. It is in the method (or the interpretative tools) presented by SAC where both the theory (basically encompassed in the Vaishnava’s epistemology) and the ethos (the axiological axe of MVH) amalgamate to nourish bone fide understandings of Vedic sacred scriptures.

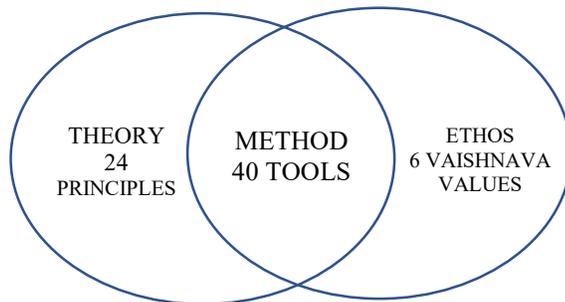


Figure 2: MVH Conceptual Framework.

For reference, in the following pages we include the list of tools divided in the thematic groups we analyzed. As mentioned in previous pages, we are not analyzing the doctrinal aspects of these tools; therefore we only consider the instruments that deal with interpretation and the way to acquire knowledge. The subsequent analysis follows a narrative thematic order and therefore, tools are mentioned accordingly and not in numeric orderly manner.

According to Valpey: “hermeneutics is the branch of theology which deals with interpretation”. It discusses methods of interpretations with the aim to uncovering the intended meaning of a text”; the methodology of that interpretation is usually “established by people belonging to an interpretative community that understand the interpreted texts as revelations” [13], in this case ISKCON that developed a conceptual frame with three elements: principles of Vaishnava hermeneutics, the ethos of Vaishnava hermeneutics (qualities of the interpreter) and the Vaishnava hermeneutical method or tools [23:13]. Just like with any other theological hermeneutical methodology, the idea behind this effort is “...to have the right meaning of revelations that come from God or from representatives of God (...) to make sure that we get the message right, *as it is.*” [13].

Two elements of the course are especially noticeable for our purposes, on the one hand the first tool presented in the course: “How does it point out to Krishna?” [23:110] which signs a clear ethos in the hermeneutical effort. And the statements that introduce the reader to the hermeneutical tools: “The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas have their own system of interpreting Uttara-mīmāṃsā, i.e., Vedānta sutras (...) whatever parts of Pūrva-mīmāṃsā are unopposed to Vedānta are acceptable to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas (...). Mīmāṃsā techniques can be engaged with if they are helpful in establishing the glory of Kṛṣṇa Bhakti. They are not to be engaged with in case they go against the conclusions of Bhakti” [23:109] a clear demarcation of differences with the old tradition. As Table 7 shows, these statements have a direct correlation with the Vaishnava ethos stated in SAC’s document.

TABLE 7 – SAC’S TOOLS ON VAISHNAVA

| Vaisnava Ethos | Tools |
|---|--------------|
| Krishna is the object, purpose and ultimate goal of all sastric knowledge (Sambandha, Abhideya & Prayojana) | 1 |
| Authentic understanding and exposition of sastra is consistent with <i>siddhanta</i> | 8 |
| Summary statements of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava siddhanta are included in sastric text | 9 |
| The meaning of sastra is directly revealed to one with full faith in guru sastra and Krishna | 16 |
| By purifying the senses, bhakti removes the conditioning that clouds and distorts perception | 17 |
| Realization requires virtue, transformation & assimilation of knowledge by experience | 18 |
| The highest truth aims at the welfare of all | 19 |
| We understand SP’s statements by his application of them in relation to his mood and mission | 21 |

Nevertheless, given that the content of the course was developed mainly for internal use, in this article we focus only on the material related to hermeneutics and epistemology, leaving aside the strictly doctrinal content of it as it lacks use outside ISKCON hermeneutical efforts. This means that we analyze how modern *bhaktivedantis* present and use the ancient precepts of Mimamsa to understand correctly or better understand their scriptures in current times. With that in mind, the eighteen (out of forty) hermeneutical instruments presented in the course that deal with doctrinal injunctions are left aside, while the other twenty-two providing actual hermeneutical tools are entertained in our article.

6.5. The Center for the Hermeneutical Circle

As Uskokov explains, the history of the process through which an hermeneutical system was established to posit Srimad Bhagavatam (and all Vaishnava literature as a matter of fact) as “one of the most influential Hindu scriptures of modern times” [27:15] wrongly quoted in [28:49] encompasses yet another important process in which the interpretation of the *Bhagavata Purana* became “an all-important locus of close interaction between the two traditional schools of interpretation, Mimamsa and Vedanta”, a point of encounter for both traditions where the objectives of those schools faded in front of bhakti’s highest good and objective: to place Krishna in the center of all Vedic hermeneutical circles [28:48] as it is visually clear in Figure 3.

In that sense, because of the ontological nature of the Vedas, (sacred) sound is the basis of most part of religious philosophies and practices of India. Sacred sound (the sound of the Vedas, the knowledge imparted by and in the Vedas) reaches a soteriological status for most part of the subcontinental theologies. Therefore, it is no surprise that the hermeneutical system developed on the basis of the premises laid by Mimamsa School, emphasize the status of *hearing* as means to receive knowledge and that it understands testimony as evidence. As we will see here, the same criteria apply to the rationale behind the tools offered by ISKCON’s SAC to their members [14][24].

Vaishnava Hermeneutic Circle

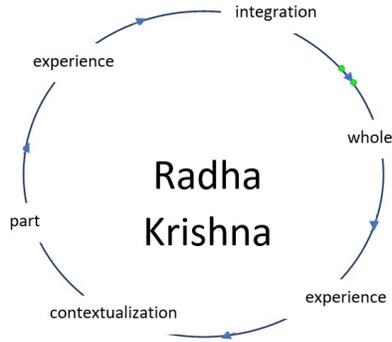


Figure 3: Hermeneutic Circle with Vaishnava Center.

6.6. Authority

Consequently, following Jiva Goswami’s *Tattva Sandharba* injunctions, out of forty hermeneutical tools presented in ISKCON’s course, six deal with levels of authority (of *sastras*, of the modes of nature or *gunas*, of *siddhanta*, of *parampara*) meaning what is the type of element within a category which should be given more authority over the others. As Table 8 shows, according to MVH, *sattava guna* statements should be favored over statements in other *gunas*; more recent commentators have more authority than older commentators (*tīkā tāratamya*); statements that are in harmony with the Bhaktivedanta conclusion (*siddhanta*) have more authority than those that don’t and the authority of *sastras* is proportional to the hierarchy of scriptures developed by Madhvacharya in the 13th century.

TABLE 8 - ISKCON HERMENEUTIC TOOLS RELATED TO AUTHORITY 13/40 [23: 109-249]

| Authority | Tool | Content | pp. |
|---------------------|------|--|-----|
| Authority | 10 | Which Text Provides a Higher Level of Authority? | 133 |
| Authority/Sastra | 11 | Madhva’s Hierarchy of Sāstras | 139 |
| Authority modes | 12 | Give More Authority to Statements and Scriptures that Favor Sattva-Guṇa Over the Lower Modes | 143 |
| | 15 | Using Six Stages of Strength to Determine Authority or Applicability | 146 |
| | 16 | Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas Give Different Levels of Authority to Various Commentators: Tīkā Tāratamya | 150 |
| Authority/Siddhanta | 19 | Reference Siddhānta: Prayojana, Abhideya, Sambhanda | 159 |

In this respect, it is also important to remember that both Mimamsa and Vedanta belong to the *Sad Dharsana* systems, both characterized by their orthodoxy within Indian philosophical schools (*Astika Vedic*) which implies the *de facto* acceptancy of the authority of Vedas. Therefore, ISKCON includes in their tools, the instrument provided by Mimamsa to check the authority of *sastras*, *gunas*, *siddhanta* and *parampara* in relation to their connection with the Vedas.⁶

6.7. Commentarial Tradition

It is noted by Gupta [4] that for the analysis of the Vedas in general, the most important factor is word order and accent, while for the specific interpretation of the Puranas, the most important function of language used in a text is explaining, supplementing and completing the Vedas, hence the commentarial tradition. Therefore, with Jiva Goswami, the Purana interpretation became “more important than the original Veda, since without the second, one could not understand the first” [11:112–17]; the author calls this phenomenon “a reversal of *sruti* and *smṛti*”⁷ because the second element turns out to be the most important one; “we may add that it is a subordination of the first through the first, legitimation through intertextuality” [28:42].

⁶ *Sastras* meaning scripture; *gunas* meaning material modes; *siddhanta* means doctrinal conclusion.

⁷ *Sruti* means “that which is heard” and *smṛti* means “that which is remembered”.

If the interpretation considers different commentators, Table 9 shows that MVH gives more authority to statements presented by more current authors and that the later statements are favored over the earlier ones.

TABLE 9 - ISKCON HERMENEUTIC TOOLS RELATED TO OTHER TOPICS 13/40 [23: 109-249]

| Area | Tool | Content | pp. |
|---------------------|------|--|-----|
| Chronology | 14 | Chronologically Later Statements are Often Stronger | 145 |
| Intention of Author | 39 | Determine the Meaning of a Word or Phrase (Among Several Possible Meanings) According to the Author's Intent | 245 |

Furthermore, that process signified an extension of the hermeneutical canon by Jiva Goswami, a new standard followed by the whole posterior disciplic succession or *parampara* till Srila Prabhupada himself. As a result, thirteen out of forty hermeneutical instruments selected by ISKCON's SAC are specifically concerned with some aspect of language (function and structure of language, type of message and content and meaning) and cover the spectrum developed by the Goswami without any modification whatsoever although they are enriched with three topics that coincide with Western hermeneutical tools: Force of meaning (tool 13), Nested narratives, multilayer narrations (tool 9) and Function of a statement (i.e. part of an argument or argument) (tool 37) [23:144; 133; 236 respectively]. All this is clearly presented in following Table 10.

TABLE 10 - ISKCON HERMENEUTIC TOOLS RELATED TO LANGUAGE 13/40 [23: 109-249]

| Language | Tool | Detail | pp. |
|-------------|------|---|-----|
| Language | 4 | Mukhya, laksana, gauna | 119 |
| Language | 5 | Samadhi, darsana and Guhya bhāṣā (direct, delusive or obscure language) | 126 |
| Type of msg | 6 | Genre: philosophical/narrative/poetry | 128 |
| Type of msg | 7 | Tattva, Rasa, or Both | 129 |
| Type of Msg | 17 | Paribhasa, key statement of a text | 153 |
| Type of Msg | 20 | Criteria to find the main import/conclusion of a sastra. Tātparya-liṅgas: upakrama, upasamhara, abhyasa, apurvata, phala, arthavada, upapatti | 161 |
| Type of msg | 34 | understanding as the master (Vedas), friend (Puranas) and lover (Poetry) | 229 |
| Type of msg | 35 | 1.Vidhi (injunction), 2.Mantra (incantation), 3.Nāmadheya (designation), 4.Niṣedha (prohibition), 5.Arthavāda (exaggerated assertion). | 231 |
| Function | 37 | Function of a statement (i.e., part of an argument or argument) | 236 |
| Content | 8 | (1) Sarga (primary creation), (2) Visarga (the secondary creation by Brahma), (3) Sthāna (the maintenance of the universe by the Lord), (4) Poṣaṇa (special care and protection for devotees by the Lord), (5) Ūti (the urge for creation, or initiative power), (6) Manvantara (the periods controlled by the Manus), (7) Īśānukathā (scriptural information regarding the Personality of Godhead, His incarnations on earth and the activities of His devotees), (8) Nirodha (the winding up of all energies employed in creation), (9) Mukti (liberation of the conditioned souls), (10) Āśraya (shelter, Kṛṣṇa, the summum bonum) | 132 |
| Content | 9 | Nested narratives, multilayer narrations | 133 |
| Meaning | 13 | Force of meaning | 144 |
| Structure | 18 | Guru, sadhu, sastra. A part can be understood only knowing the meaning of the whole | 115 |

In addition, as shown in Table 11, Tool 34, informs us that the main Vaishnava text -Srimad Bhagavatam- offers the whole three types of understanding given by Vedic texts: master (*prabhu*, Vedas in general), friend (*mitre*, Puranas) and lover (*prema*, Poetry) [23: 229].

TABLE 11 - THREE TYPES OF UNDERSTANDING GIVEN BY A VEDIC TEXT

| Type of Understanding | Vedic Text | Srimad Bhagavatam |
|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Prabhu (master) | Vedas in general | x |
| Mitre (friend) | Puranas in general | x |
| Prema (lover) | Poetry texts | x |

At the same time, Table 12 shows that tool 35 provides with the five types of statements one could find in an interpretation of Vaishnava texts, namely: *Vidhi* (injunction), *Mantra* (incantation), *Nāmadheya* (designation), *Niṣedha* (prohibition) and *Arthavāda* (exaggerated assertion) [23:231]. And, tool 17 offers the criterion that helps to identify a *paribhasa* or key statement in a scripture or in a part of it [23:153].

TABLE 12 - FIVE TYPES OF STATEMENTS IN A VAISHNAVA TEXT

| Type of Statement | Meaning | Srimad Bhagavatam |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Vidhi | Injunction | x |
| Mantra | Incantation | x |
| Namadheva | Designation | x |
| Nisedha | Prohibition | x |
| Arthavada | Glorification or exaggeration | x |
| Paribhasa | Key statement | x |

Moreover, table 13 conspicuously shows that tool number five, develops with detail the difference between direct (*samadhi bhāṣā*), delusive (*darsana bhāṣā*) and obscure (*guhya bhāṣā*) language, informing also about their respective use in specific type of texts. According to Madhavacharya, sacred Vedic texts may show *Samādhi-bhāṣā* or direct language when and in order to inform that Lord Visnu is the Supreme and Absolute Truth; *darsana-bhāṣā* or delusive language when promoting other deities as Supreme and *guhya-bhāṣā* or obscure language when differentiates messages according to the type of listeners/readers intended to [23:126].

TABLE 13 - THREE TYPES OF LANGUAGE AND THEIR USE

| Type of language | Meaning | Use | Srimad Bhagavatam |
|------------------|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| Samadhi bhasa | Direct language | To inform about Visnu | x |
| Darsana bhasa | Delusive language | To promote other deities | x |
| Guhya bhasa | Obscure language | To differentiate messages according to the audience | x |

6.8. Six criteria to find the conclusion of a Vedic text

Most important however, is the explanation of tool number twenty: *Tātparya-līngas* or the six criteria to find the conclusion of a sacred text: *upakrama*, *upasamhara*, *abhyasa*, *apurvata*, *phala*, *arthavada*, *upapatti*. According to this classical Mimamsa instrument, the interpreter must try to find out: (1) What is stated in the beginning and the end of a text (*upakrama* and *upasamhāra*), (2) What is repeated again and again (*abhyāsa*), (3) What is unique (unobtainable otherwise) in the text (*apūrvatā*), (4) The result of the knowledge explained in the text (*phala*), (5) What is glorified throughout the text (*arthavāda*) and (6) the logical support (*upapatti*) provided in the text in relation to the supposed main import [23:161].

6.9. Four Context Questions in MVH

Finally, table 14 shows that tool 24 deals with contextualization of a text, a delimitation that may or may not include historic-chronological contextualization. The tool presents a category called *Anubandha-catuṣṭaya* or the Four Traditional Context Questions: What is it about? (*abhidheya* or *viśaya*), Why was it produce? What is it for? (*prayojana* or *phala*); Who is it for and what are the qualifications of the intended audience? (*adhikāra*); What is the relationship between the subject of the text and the text itself (*sambandha*). Again, the answer to these basic context question will provide the analyst with the required information to know the level of purity in both the recipient of the content and the intermediary/commentator, translator, etc. in order to qualify to be exposed to the text [23: 204].

6.10. Eisegesis Checked

It is important to note that there is a great emphasis in MVH to avoid eisegesis. This need is clearly present in the delineation of MVH's conceptual frame (i.e. theory or principles and ethos or values, please refer to tables 7 and 15 for details) based on Jiva Goswami's *Tattva Sandharba* and also throughout the collection of Srila Prabhupada's quotes on interpretation, where it is understood that allegorical interpretations, impersonal interpretations, explanations that change the original meaning and interpretations that trivialize the glory of the Lord are not accepted as correct or real interpretations by MVH, on the contrary, they all are considered *misinterpretations* [23:16][24].

TABLE 14 - CONTEXT QUESTIONS

| Area | Tool | Content | pp. |
|---------|------|--|-----|
| Context | 24 | Anubandha-catuṣṭaya: Four Traditional Context Questions - 1. subject (viṣaya), 2. goal (prayojana), 3. intended listener (adhikārī), 4. genre and qualification of author (sambandha), may include historical context. Or: (a) Who is it for and what are the qualifications of the intended audience? (adhikāra), (b) What is it about? (abhidheya or viṣaya) (c) Why? What is it for? (prayojana or phala) (d) How does it go about teaching what it teaches? (sambandha, i.e., what is the relationship between the subject of the text and the text itself) | 204 |

TABLE 15 - MVH'S VALUES

| Hermeneutical values | Vaishnava values |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Discerning search for truth | Humility and service attitude |
| Honest and authentic conversation | Fidelity to the text and tradition |
| Openness to change and transformation | Benevolence and generosity |

6.11. Rules of debate

Furthermore, according to MVH for an exegesis to be valid, it needs to follow the well-established rules of debate of Mimamsa-nyaya that prevent the possibility of endless discussions and argumentations sometimes characteristic of modern philosophical exchanges. According to these rules, *vāda* is a real mutually benefiting exchange and among Vaishnavas, its best form is called *samvāda* (cultivate a devotional mentality in courteous discussions with the aim of pleasing the Lord and understanding truth), it involves proper questions and answers between a qualified teacher and student. The other two levels *jalpa* (the goal is to prove one's own superiority and *vitandā* (discussion for the sake of it without any intention to find neither solutions nor the truth) are to be avoided by Vaishnavas and are not part of the canonical ethos of MVH [29].

6.12. The As It Is Principle of Exegesis

Moreover, the very title of the first book published by Srila Prabhupada includes the whole thesis of the adaptation of Mimamsa school's injunctions to modern Vaishnava hermeneutics. The English expression "*as it is*" is actually one of the main principles of interpretation of the Vedas: *mukhya-vritti* or the highest form of understanding a text by its direct meaning, i.e., just as it is described in the *Upanishads* and the *Brahama Sutra* without misinterpretations caused by our defective senses and perceptions, because as Gupta explains: "Indirect interpretation is a violence against Vedanta sutra" [24]. *Mukhya-vritti* or the direct meaning is closely linked with the concept of *siddhanta* and the faithful adherence to it by the interpreter. *Siddhanta* means "truth that is eternal, universal and trans-contextual, it is also axiomatic because it does not depend on logic premises" [22] and that is explicitly presented by the acharyas.

6.13. Relation between ultimate conclusion and interpretation

Siddhanta is the conclusion of a sacred doctrine, text or school. It is considered the element that continues without changing its essence while at the same time adapting to *desa kala patra*: time, place and circumstances. Since "Siddhanta adapts to the context in order to change it" [24], this hermeneutical consideration allows *bhaktivedantis of all eras, cultures and social status to aptly apply the ethos and conclusions of the Vedas in an efficient and truthful way without affecting their functioning in external society.*

Following the tradition, Srila Prabhupada established nine points that condense the conclusion of the Bhaktivedanta theo-philosophical school, these are as follow:

- (1) Sri Krishna Is the Supreme Personality of Godhead.
- (2) Sri Krishna has His external, inferior or material energy (maya)
- (3) Sri Krishna also has His internal, superior or spiritual energy

- (4) Sri Krishna has His parts and parcels, the living entities, who are spiritual by nature
- (5) The living entities in the material world are conditioned by the external energy
- (6) The living entities in the spiritual world are liberated
- (7) Acintya bhedabheda tattva: simultaneous oneness and difference of the Lord and His energies
- (8) Love of God is the highest goal of life
- (9) To achieve love of God, one should practice devotional service
- (10) This knowledge can only be perceived by us through the disciplic succession

As expected, these injunctions are broad enough to serve as a frame of reference for interpretation of Vaishnava scriptures, regardless of time, place or circumstances; the dynamics between the work of an interpreter and siddhanta also form a hermeneutical circle as Figure 4 below attempts to show.



Figure 4: Hermeneutic Dynamic Conclusion of Vaishnava Doctrine and Place, Time and Circumstance (siddhanta and desa-kala-patra)

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to say that the ancient Mimamsa hermeneutical school of India, has reached the 21st century through the agency of the 16th century theologian Sri Jiva Goswami and the foundation of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada's mission the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) that has adopted and adapted various of the interpretative instruments provided by the ancient tradition to the interpretation of the Vedas in our modern context.

We have called this adaptation Modern Vedic Hermeneutics because unlike traditional Mimamsa, it is a *theocentric* interpretative tradition that while honoring the *aparauseya* attribute of the Vedas also recognizes the origin of them in the individual Supreme Being, called Krishna, also understood as the center of any of the hermeneutical circles developed by the philosophers over the years. This is the greatest difference between MVH and Western hermeneutics and also its foremost contribution to interreligious theosophical interpretation.

While Western hermeneutic circle has been widely discussed as the *sine qua non* process of interpretation of any given text, including religious ones, MVH focuses on highlighting and underlining the otherwise ignored center of that circle: *sarva karana karanam* or the origin of all origins whether it refers to knowledge, life or infinitude. This has very deep implications for the art of interpretation of sacred texts; while (even religious) exegesis of Abrahamic texts will try to establish the dynamic among part and whole, experience, contextualization and integration, attempting the understanding of religious situations within material time and history, for the MVH that material time and history are irrelevant in relation to the objective of the interpretation: transcend our limits and experience God Himself in the text.

For an educated Vaishnava reader, any interpretative endeavor has as main objective to know Krishna. The whole circle of understanding whirls around that center; whether the story or event happens in hell or heaven, in a context of freedom or slavery, between a dominating male and a subaltern woman or vice versa, part or not of a hierarchical society, in Europe or Pathaloka, among animals or vegetables, what is to be known from the text is how that specific event relates or connects or facilitates the communion of everyone -including us, today - with the Divine Person, His attributes and our final transcendence.

Under that light, as a topic review, the article has shown the theory, the method and the ethos proposed by Srila Prabhupada, applied by him and his followers in order to better understand the most conclusive books of the Vedas (*Bhagavad Gita*, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *Caitanya Caritamrta*, *Upadeshamrita*, *Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu* and *Sri Isopanishad*) under the *mhuktya vritti* principle: the direct meaning, just *as it is*. This review has also shown that in order to understand a Vedic text it is indispensable to read it under the light of the particular *siddhanta* that sustains it and makes it moldable to time, place and circumstance.

Furthermore, MVH is result of a long tradition concerned with the authoritativeness of the Vedas that extends to the *Srimad Bhagavatam* and therefore to the scriptures belonging to the Vaishnava tradition. That authoritativeness rests on the historically proven care put on the maintenance of the quality of the reception and transmission of sacred messages between the intermediary (translator, compiler, commentator, etc.) and the listener/reader; a care that shows the strictness put to prevent eisegesis and justifies MVH's emphasis on the axiological aspect of its hermeneutics.

The results of this review indicate that MVH is a bona fide and relevant interpretative school that can be properly and fruitfully used to analyze the interventions of feminine personalities in the Bhagavata Purana, by applying the elements of MVH's conceptual frame to this most important book of the Vedas. The resulting mapping of the field of Vedic interpretation and of the pertinent scholarly texts in the area, opens the possibility to further studies in the same integrative direction: how contemporary philosophers, intellectuals and scholars are revisiting Mimamsa school to understand ancient theological texts in contemporary times, how contemporary practitioners make sense of ancient Vedic injunctions for spiritual life. Also, to synthesize the status of research on Jiva Goswami's epistemological contribution to Vaishnava exegesis can also help to inspire deeper research on the institutionalized application of his hermeneutics on all the themes visited in the Vedas and specifically in the Srimad Bhagavatam, for example: time, material nature, female nature, death and transcendence. Finally, all this, unavoidably encourage the future exploration of cross-cultural application of MVH, intersubjective studies of religion and theology and the patient although tireless building up of a solidly grounded and informed East West reciprocal hermeneutics.

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