Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission in Western Context

A brief description of a religious group within the body of classical and contemporary sociological typologies[1]

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Introduction (settings)

The very beginning of the group I am going to depict here could be placed to 1995, when the center *Haribol* was opened in Brno. This center was established with intention to serve as a stable community center as well as a vegetarian restaurant with weekly spiritual programme for variety of audience. The head of the community was previously a member of the Czech branch of *International Society for Krishna Consciousness* (*ISKCON*). First few years the devotees stayed in touch with *ISKCON* farm community in Chotýšany near Prague.[2] In those days regular Sunday spiritual programme (often with presence of devotees from Chotýšany farm) and regular *sankirtana* in the streets of Brno were held. That was perhaps the highlight in history of this center, because the community started to fall into decline rather early.[3] After four years the community function of the center was gone. *Haribol* transformed into a commercial vegetarian restaurant with an occasional weekend spiritual programme and is owned by one of the co-founders of the early-days community.[4] Previous ties to Chotýšany as well as *ISKCON* are gone, instead of that new bonds to *Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir* temple in Vienna were established. The owner of *Haribol* restaurant was initiated along with the other devotees who are important for this paper. These devotees were not members of the core community in the very beginning of *Haribol*, although later on they started gradually collaborate on spiritual programmes and even other activities of *Haribol*. For the time being, their ties to *Haribol* are weakening.

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[1] This is a revised version of a paper presented for the first time during the Summer school of religious studies held in Szeged, Hungary, August 21–September 1, 2006. – My field research in the community took place from June till August 2006.

[2] A possible version of the story is that the founders of the *Haribol* were sent out to Brno by *Tutiya Dás*, the *ISKCON* head of one of the fractions which took part in Chotýšany schism. Afterwards there were at least two communities in Central Bohemia which came out from this schism – first one near Chotýšany, mostly inhabited by farmers, and second one in Zličín, consisting mostly of priests.

[3] This could be also seen as an outcome of the insufficient spiritual guidance, i.e. the absence (or lack of guidance) of *acarya* in the community, so the morale in core *Haribol* group members weakened more and more.

[4] His *harinám* (the very first initiation to the spiritual tradition) and later on *diksha* (rebirth as Brahman of apprentice tradition – *parampara*) took place in 2002 in a Vienna temple. Nowadays he lives as *grhastha* (married).

The core of the depicted group consists of three devotees initiated to the tradition.[5] There are also several participants, who did not undergo any initiation, but they regularly attend most of the activities (i.e. programmes in Brno, in Vienna, trips to India). Their regular meetings are arranged in the apartment of one of the devotees. These meetings are usually not open for wide audience. The programme of these meetings is prepared with the same intention – it consists of devotional singing and reading according to their tradition and of serving *prasadam*. After the "official" programme comes the informal dialogue – this could indicate rather strong ties among all invited participants who behave like regular members of a stable group. The structure of the group itself contrasts with these strong ties on informal basis, which gives us just a very slight hint of the true nature of the group. The point is that it is very difficult to judge whether this group can be treated like a stable religious community or if it is just an informal set of fellow devotees. That is because it is rather a small community and internally very loosely structured. For example, no formal distribution of power and strict roles within the group can be easily traced. And in questions of spiritual guidance the group is firmly connected to Vienna *Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir* temple, where they had been initiated into the tradition by the head of the whole *Sri Krishna Chaitanya* Mission – i.e. by *gurudev* Sri Srimad Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Goswami Maharaja from India.[6] And even all the devotees from the Vienna temple are disciples[7] of this *gurudev*.[8] The temple was established in the half on the 90's. Its founder had belonged before to the Swiss branch of the *ISKCON* movement. He decided to leave the *ISKCON* movement and seek a spiritual shelter in India. Later on he found the spiritual refuge in the personality of Sri Srimad Bhakti Vaibhava Puri Goswami Maharaja, the head of *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission*. He came back to Europe and founded the temple in the Vienna center which is in all spiritual matters dependent on *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* center in India. But it is worth mentioning that in all other concerns they are completely independent and fully self-supporting. The Vienna center organizes periodic programmes, often with the presence of "saints" from India. As far as I know, the community is also open for various spiritual lectures as well as discussions with everyone who belongs to the *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* and more widely for all *Gaudiya Vaishnavas*.[9]

In the case of future prognosis of the Brno community, we can hardly anticipate a fast (if any) growth of this group. Strict daily routine prescribed by religious tradition, as well as rituals and instructions from *šikša guru*[10] in the Vienna temple, render

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[5] On *diksha* level.

[6] From time to time they also visit friendly *Gaudiya Vaishnavic* community near Vysoké Mýto, which is used as a public spiritual center and the community of *grhasthas*. This community has friendly ties to the community in London, connected to *Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math* in India.

[7] The Vienna center is also a rather small community. Ten *brahmacaris* (seven men, three women and the *sannyasi* present the stable core of the community. Mind the absence of *grhasthas* in communities within this tradition.

[8] The English term of translation used for this person within the community is usually "saint".

[9] A reserved relationship could be seen just towards *ISKCON*.

[10] A guru who gives an everyday practical and even spiritual guidance to devotees, in Vienna it is the personality of *Muni Maharája*.

this almost impossible. The stress is put on regular meetings with this *šikša guru*,[11] so the spiritual message is impossible to mediate without a regular presence of a "saint". From another point of view it seems that the whole Mission has no clearly defined strategy for future and no well-developed hierarchical structure of power. There is also no cult bureaucracy as such.

Finally, among Western communities of this *Mission* there are no public activities like selling books, humanitarian aid and large-scale propagation of so called Vedic culture, which are well-established proselytizing practices of the *ISKCON* movement. And so *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* and its groups in Europe are communities for well informed and in some way very resolute devotees, which are able to meet the requirements of this tradition. Hence there is just a very small group of sympathizers and supporters (possible neophytes) around the core members (each community's cell unit).

Description

In order to create a proper image of this group and define correct terms for the description, let me compare *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* to the widely spread Western *Gaudiya Vaishnavic* movement *ISKCON*, which is usually classified as one of the so-called "new religious movements" (NRMs). Doctrinally, it comes from the Indian *bhaktic* tradition. The wide acceptance of this movement could be seen partly as a consequence of American *contra cultural movement* in the 60's and rising interest in everything originating in the East in the second half of the 20th century. Since the arrival of Srí Prabhupáda[12] to America, the movement underwent substantial changes.[13] The mammoth book publisher *Bhaktivedanta Book Trust* (*BBT*) was founded and the movement started to run commercial and humanitarian activities. *ISKCON* was born in Western-like hierarchical authoritative system of control and power. This system follows many habits of traditional Western churches. After Srí Prabhupáda died, the formal guidance of the whole movement was committed to *GBC* (*A Governing Body Commission*), but on the local level the spiritual power rests in the hands of local gurus, the leaders of each community. The crucial aspect seems to be the broken succession of spiritual guidance and the loss of connection to India – their original spiritual country. Nowadays there is no such succession of gurus in *ISKCON*. It implies a whole range of other consequences. To name just one: imagine being a neophyte, there is no chance for you to choose your own guru and even your fellow devotees. You only choose the movement (or community, in better case) and the rest is provided by your superior.[14] *ISKCON* thus has many important features (mainly on the level of organization and resource-management) resembling rather traditional Western-like religious systems than the original Indian traditions.

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[11] An important part of the tradition *sadhu-sangha* – i.e. to be in the presence of a "saint".

[12] The founder and *acarya* of movement in the West.

[13] These changes were initialy caused by the endeavour of Sri Prabhupada to pass down the tradition to as many people as possible. The doctrine body was thus temporarily reduced, but after his death never got back to original form.

[14] But from the *Sri Krishna Chaitanya mission*'s point of view, this is the crucial feature of the whole *Gaudia Vaishnavistic* practice – the free choice of *diksha* and *šikša guru*.

The position of *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* in the West is different in many aspects, which come from the characteristics of *Indian Gaudyia Vaishnavic* tradition. This doctrinal situation has many consequences. Firstly, very important is the institution of a guru who is giving a stable spiritual guidance. Secondly, groups representing this Mission in Western society feel no pressing need to increase the number of their members dramatically.[15] It follows from this that ordinary public issues of the Western society attract almost no attention of these devotees, in spite of their childhood spent within the Western society and culture.[16] Their contact with public is reduced to playing a social role necessary to gain material possessions, which are needed to their spiritual growth. But, of course, it differs individually. In case of devotees in Vienna *Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir*, these ties with surrounding society are even more shallow, because they are engaged in exclusive devotional practice. This is reflected also in public programme of Vienna temple. In general, there are no public programmes held for uninformed audience. There are just feasts and ceremonies and the public is invited just as an observer. These programmes are not supposed to provide general information about the Indian culture and their intention is not direct proselytizing activity.

For further discussion it is necessary to answer the question if *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission* could be treated like NRM as well as *ISKCON*. One of the general features of many NRMs is their recent formation in the Western culture. One could trace some other common features of these NRMs as well, but I believe that the boom of these movements and traditions could be better viewed in the light of specific processes which led to their acculturation within Western context.

One of the main processes that can be used to describe this situation is the so called *privatization*.[17] This frequently used term was introduced by Thomas Luckmann. Luckmann tells us that in fact this *privatization* includes several socio-structural phenomena, among others: (1) specialization of institutional domains, (2) pluralism of mass culture and (3) expansion of the world view market (Luckmann 2005: 257). Each of these above-mentioned factors can lead to an expansion of specific forms of religion. The enlargement of mass culture can support the development of syncretic forms of religions. The expansion of free market with various (religious) world views can also lead to the boom of *syncretisms*, *religion revivals* as well as *imported religions*. These imported forms of religion can be radically different from traditional religious landscape. I share my opinion with those who are ready to treat these imported forms of religion like representatives of new religious movements.

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[15] The groups rather concentrate on strict dogmatic issues. I was told (July 10, 2006, devotee T.H.): „... the whole system is changing and diversifying. Our doctrine isn't supposed to be accepted by a wide range of people. With this system it is not possible to establish a large organization ... instead it will split into several small self-sufficient groups ... there's no need to keep everyone under one roof ... it's nobody's wish to have thousands of devotees, who will be weak in their devotion and who will fall away very quickly ... there is no need for quantity but for quality."

[16] Because these communities are relatively young, there is no religious socialization (no second generation) within the communites.

[17] *Secularization* is another process that is supposed to help the new forms of religions to rise or acculturate into our society. York (1995: 253) claims that "the relativism and tolerance of cultural pluralism, which are concomitants of secularization, have greatly assisted the increased acceptability of these religious forms".

The problem is that this attitude still does not refer to any specific term suitable to label these particular forms of religion. It just gives us a possibility to treat this movement in a way we are ready to deal with any other NRM. For the purpose of this paper I do not intend to render a whole range of possible typological terms. But I would like to refer to just a few traditional or more contemporary typologies which can help us at least partially in possible description of this movement. Unfortunately, all these typologies can describe the group only partially.

First, we can start with the Colin Campbell's (1972) contribution to this discussion. He gives us the term *cultic milieu*. He says that the forms of religion well known as *cults* could be described by this term. His intention was to bridge two different and widely accepted aspects of *cult*, which are – (1) *mysticism* (the term comes from Ernst Troeltsch) and *social deviance* (term used by John Loflandand [2002]). It is obvious that Campbell's endeavour was to focus this term in the direction of a specific form of NRM, i.e. *New Age*. But this rather aims to the circle of sympathizers around a specific religious group instead of the core members. The term *cultic milieu* depicts this group of sympathizers as a permanent *society of seekers*.[18] This group of seekers is unstable in doctrinal matters, but is quite stable in the quantity of individuals. Campbell argues that this *society of seekers* is constantly present within the Western society. During my stay with the group, there were several participants of spiritual programmes who could be delineated this way. They usually differed in their specific world view and thus in the measure of identification with the group. Their spiritual life seemed to be rather syncretic than following any strict doctrinal tradition.

Frederic Bird (1979) developed a typology based on the relationship between the individual and the group, which reflects collective ties within the group – i.e. the personality of a guru or an abstract principle. Bird speaks about the (1) relationship of the followers to the masters; (2) relationship of the seekers to the sacred power they revere. We can distinguish three levels, depending on the depth of the bonds within the group: (1) devotee; (2) disciple; (3) apprentice. Bird's typology could be fruitful in some aspects, or at least it can cast light on the position of the individual within a religious group, but on the other hand it is just an expression of helplessness. That is because this typology is almost blind to doctrinal tradition, hierarchy and structure of the group. It doesn't reflect the relationship between the group and the surrounding society and last but not least it is ahistorical.

Widely accepted modern typology of religious groups comes from Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge (1985). Their system keeps the traditional dichotomy *sect-church* as well as category of *cults* (*audience cults*, *client cults* and *cult movements*). This category of *cults* – as opposed to the *church-sect* dichotomy – does not represent the factor of doctrinal schism with any tradition. We can see cults as products of: „either [...] a cultural innovation or a cultural importation."[19] The last point of the *cult movement* classification is among other features represented by very tight bonds among the members of the group. Hence, at first sight the term *cult movement* seems promising in the need to find a proper name for the religious group depicted in this paper. But there is still one crucial problem. It can be simply realized when we use the term *cult movements* for all the religious neologisms with very tight bonds

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[18]   See York 1996: 252.

[19]   *Ibid.*, 259.

among the members. That means for example even those that can be objectively considered pathological (where there are spontaneous suicides within the group, terrorist attacks etc.).[20] In this case, one term covers religious groups with completely different characteristics. There is always a question whether this could be solved with the help of detailed typologies of sects and cults, like the one provided by Keith A. Roberts.[21] But this way we are just copying and specifying earlier established terms, so the situation starts to be even more and more confusing.

Stark and Bainbridge contributed to this discussion also with a methodological objection to the all traditional typologies, which are usually treated as Weberian *ideal types*. Stark and Bainbridge are of the opinion that the ideal types do not provide us with sufficient instructions how to apply them. Stark and Bainbridge argue that: „multidimensional typological schemes [...] produce primarily unordeable mixed types."[22] So the relationship between ideal types and reality is not clear. There is one more trouble with ideal types that was noticed even by Max Weber: they are often mistaken for ideals with value judgments.[23] The confusion comes either from the process of scientific construction of terms or via spoken language.

We are witnesses of this situation in the usage of the term *sect*. In spoken language it has the meaning of doctrinal schism and it is consequently treated like a fragment of the original *church*. So it is very often judged as marginal or pathological, because it changes the traditional doctrine and attracts former church members.

From more general point of view, this *sect-church* dichotomy urges to recognize the frequent shortcomings of all these *monothetically* constructed terminologies.[24] This system of classification requires one initial point, the knot. In this case it is the traditional *church* which is the starting point for further description of the *sect*. All the other elements of classification are subsequently derived from this starting point. All the descended elements of classification comprise the essentials of superior elements. They simply specify the principle once stated in the superior point of the classification.

The question is whether we will be able to proceed further (and succeed) in the description of religious groups (and especially NRMs) using the *polythetic* system of classification instead of *monothetic* one.[25] Polythetic system gives up the effort

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[20] *Cult movement* by Stark and Bainbridge is represented by a high level of social tension with values of surrounding society which does not correspond with the position of *Sri Krishna Gaudiya Mission*.

[21] See typology of Keith A. Roberts in Václavík 2005: 55.

[22] See York 1995: 258. Stark and Bainbridge came up with the term *social tension* that comprises three different but one-scale and thus (as Stark and Bainbridge argue) measurable aspects. These are: *"difference, antagonism and separation"*. These aspects cannot be understood as complementary within *tension*. They are independent among themselves and can be freely compared with real-world processes. They measures level of contradiction between the religious group and the society.

[23] Weber describes this inconsistency. „Ideal types would like to be or they unwittingly are ideal not just in the *logical* but even in the *practical* meaning. They are the *ideals*, which – like in this case – describe what the Christianity should be and what it is essential about ..." (author's translation, cf. Weber 1998: 52)

[24] *Monothetic* classification comes out form Aristotelic definition. This system was later worked out by Porfyrios. This system of classification is based on one initial point. The other descendents are derived hierarchically. All the descendents comprises something from the previous superior term.

[25] In his essay "Fences and Neighbors: Some contours of early Judaism" Jonathan Smith (1988: 1–18) prefers the *polythetic* system of classification in effort to render the characteristics of early Judaism more properly.

of perfection, unity and difference defined with the help of only one attribute. The *polythetic* system of classification does not create a hierarchical system, where the neighbouring elements have something in common as in the case of *monothetic* classification.[26] In the *polythetic* system:

> [...] a class is defined as consisting of a set of properties, each individual member of the class to possess "a large (but unspecified) number" of these properties, with each property to be possessed by "large number" of individuals in the class.[27]

But some questions still remain. Who or what will set the array of features assigned to a single element in classification? Would it be constructed with respect for doctrinal characteristics, type of organization or the origin and development? The very process of classification is endangered by the effort to treat some of the religious tradition as unique and hence *sui generis*. These religious groups will then defy any attempt to be classified in the system and later on compared with other religious traditions.

If we are able to overcome all these problems, we could get a handy tool for comparing the religious groups within such a system of classification. Also, it could be useful even in the case of such cultural imports like *Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission*. There will be no more need to classify this group using the terms developed in respect to Judeo-Christian tradition. This system will be culturally and geographically transmittable. The only limits would be caused by our ability to distinguish the elements of the classification and its features.

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[26] The good example of this classification is encyclopedia, where the neighboring elements usually have nothing in common.

[27] See Smith 1988: 4.

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Konverzia: jej vedecká konceptualizácia a konštrukcia

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Konverzia predstavuje jednu z najfundamentálnejších tém viacerých sociálnych vied, no predovšetkým religionistiky. Svedčí o tom hlavne početnosť odbornej literatúry, mnohokrát veľmi zmätočnej, v ktorej sa zrkadlí množstvo prístupov a východísk jednotlivých autorov v snahe univerzálne uchopiť tento fenomén. Nasledujúce krátke pojednanie o konverzii sa venuje problematike jej vedeckého konštruovania a konceptualizácie. Jej cieľom je, na niektorých príkladoch, v krátkosti načrtnúť konceptuálne korene významnejších modelov konverzie a vyhodnotiť ich prínos a negatíva. Cieľom nie je úplná dekonštrukcia pojmu a konceptu (či konceptov) konverzie, ale poukázanie na niektoré úskalia, ktoré sa spájajú s jej štúdiom.

Potom ako sociálne vedy „vytriezveli" z predstavy, že nezaujate zaznamenávajú, uchopujú a študujú objektívnu, jednotnú a nemennú sociálnu realitu, od ktorej sú sami odrezaní, začalo sa na vedeckú činnosť pohliadať ako na istý typ interpretácie,