

Two Reviews of Steve Bohlert's Universalist Radha-Krishnaism: A Spirituality of Liberty, Truth, and Love

Reviewed by [Michael S. Valle](#) (Mesa, AZ) –

This review is from: **Universalist Radha-Krishnaism: A Spirituality of Liberty, Truth, and Love (Paperback)**

Brief Synopsis:

Universalist Radha-Krishnaism is the first attempt to articulate a "progressive" or "modernist" form of Vaishnava Hinduism. Drawing upon the resources of theological trends in Western scholarship, Steve Bohlert offers a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought that makes the heart of Radha-Krishna devotion fully accessible to Westerners who have no Indian background. This book fills a void and does it well. I anticipate that this book will emerge as a crucial impetus to further developments in this field.

Comprehensive Review:

In this review, I will first summarize the ideas in the text, then I will evaluate them from my own perspective.

Context of the Project: In Hinduism, there is a highly influential and popular devotional orientation that focuses on Krishna and his lover Radha as the supreme form of God. This branch of Hinduism became exceptionally popular in India in the wake of the life of Chaitanya, who flourished around 1500 A.D. This form of Vaishnavism has become fairly well known in the West since the sixties; in fact, George Harrison of the Beatles converted to it. It has been characterized by a fairly uncompromising fundamentalism, by which I mean that it is essentially committed to the literal truth of

the often fantastic mythology that is associated with Hinduism. Some examples that confront one early on include the idea that Krishna as a child held a massive hill above his head with his finger to protect people from Indra`s hailstones, that Krishna lived with 16,000 wives simultaneously, that Krishna was conceived without a sex act, and so on.

Many people, often Westerners but not exclusively, have been deeply attracted to the theology that accompanies Vaishnavism. They are attracted to its rituals, aesthetics, mythology, language, music, enthusiasm, and optimism. It "speaks" to them, but they find so much emphasis on fundamentalism that they eventually abandon this path. They also discover that Indian norms and customs are so strongly fastened to the path that they feel culturally disconnected. Bohlert, by the way, caters to this target audience by foregoing the complicated and often tedious terminology that often attends such literature and instead opts for exclusively English terms at the most comprehensive level of complexity.

Steve Bohlert has been through all of this, and the depth of his experience shows. His credentials in this arena are beyond impressive. This book is a systematic attempt to offer a spiritual/religious system called "Universalist Radha-Krishnaism" (URK) that does the following things, among others: sketches the history of Chaitanya Vaishnavism (CV), interprets Vaishnava mythology in a non-literalist way, asserts and defends the fundamentals of the CV conception of divinity, sketches the relation of divinity to the universe, asserts the necessity of communication between science and religion, and offers practical advice on how to put the theology into daily practice. Bohlert's approach is grounded in the work and practice of the well-respected theologian Bhaktivinoda Thakur, and of Bhaktivinoda's son, Lalita Prasad Thakur.

Summary of URK: The basic metaphysical view of divinity of URK

is as follows: Bohlert's view is explicitly "panentheistic", which means that God exists, is greater than the universe, and completely interpenetrates and includes the universe.

There is a hint of deism here, as when he writes that "[. . .] God-dess does not suspend [natural laws] to perform miracles [. . .]" (25), but he views God as far more personal and accessible than deists typically do, as when he writes "God-dess remains intimately involved with creation and creatures, rather than the distant High God who sets creation in motion and now lets it work according to natural laws with no further involvement" (82). He asserts that God urges us to seek a loving relationship, so connection and contact are always available to creatures.

Along the lines of Plotinus, Bohlert states that the universe itself is an expression of God's ever-expanding love, which is always seeking to love more and more. The universe is the means by which God accomplishes this desire. Bohlert also leans heavily on classical Platonic metaphysics, as when he writes, "The material universe exists as a temporary modification of the spiritual world" (103). His view also has a strong metaphysical idealist orientation (that incidentally reminds me of Berkeley's idealism): "God-dess' energy forms everything, and nothing exists separate from God-dess. Therefore, everything is ultimately spiritual" (104).

Bohlert sees God not as lacking any gender so much as being both genders fully, as when he writes, "God-dess exists as male and female counterparts [. . .]" (25). This explains his use of "God-dess", which emphasizes the two poles of divinity. These poles are personified as Radha the female and Krishna the male. All people participate more or less in one or the other, but we all need both to be complete. God is therefore "God-dess", the "Divine Couple", and "Radha-Krishna." We therefore have a kind of a unity in diversity, which characterizes much of Indian thought. Bohlert prefers "both-and" thinking to either-or and neither-nor.

Bohlert also strongly endorses the classical Chaitanya view that God has three levels of manifestation. Each level is progressively higher and includes the previous. The first is Undifferentiated Oneness (Brahman), the next is Cosmic Consciousness (Paramatma), and the final is the Supreme Lord (the Divine Couple, Radha-Krishna).

Because God-dess doesn't perform physical miracles, we cannot take scriptural stories and mythologies literally. They are symbols, metaphors, and allegories that point to higher realities. Bohlert believes in "progressive revelation", which is the idea that God-dess never ceases to prompt new religious visions and imaginings in us as we continue to explore this creation.

Reincarnation is real for Bohlert, but he does not feel the need to speculate about its exact nature. The essential idea is that souls develop through cycles and steps to attain the direct presence of God-dess. The goal of URK, and Vaishnavism in general, is not to become "one" with the whole (as in the case of Advaita schools of Hinduism, or as in the case of Buddhism), but rather to enjoy a kind of individuality in which one experiences the bliss of service to the Divine Couple in their love play, which is ultimately indescribable but which can be approached through mythologies, especially those of the famous Hindu text called the Bhagavata Purana. However, Bohlert feels free to adapt these ancient stories in the light of modernity in order to make them more accessible to different cultures and generations. He does this by re-imagining certain elements of the pastime narratives in ways that remove them from the ossification that is caused by limiting them to certain times, places, and cultures.

URK is "universalist", which is the idea that all legitimate religions can serve as vehicles for the advancement of the soul. Different people have different needs and so on, and God-dess makes Him/Herself accessible in a variety of different ways.

Bohlert advocates some traditional Vaishnava practices so that people can keep God-dess in mind at all times. These include chanting and visualization techniques. In Chapter Nine, he briefly summarizes the daily activities of Radha and Krishna so that the devotee can play a role in the Divine Play. Bohlert explicitly rejects the asceticism that often characterizes Radha-Krishna devotion. The world is good--it should be enjoyed without craving and attachment, while giving due consideration to those around us. He writes, "God-dess [. . .] may ask us, at the time of death, why we did not enjoy life more" (25).

Personal Reflections: I have studied the world's religions with a great deal of seriousness, and have experimented with many of them to one extent or other. I have a very deep history with atheism, and then was deeply affected by Christianity, Vaishnavist Hinduism, and the ancient European heathen religions now known as Asatru. There is no wonder that these systems of thought have persevered for so long and have meant so much to so many people--they all say powerful things and speak to powerful needs.

I have come to see a relationship with Divinity as essential in my life, and have found the narratives of the pastimes between Radha and Krishna to be the most powerful metaphor for the Divine love that is available in the world`s religious literature. I understand that others may disagree and may find other metaphors more powerful, and that's totally cool with me.

Steve Bohlert's systematic theology is a much-needed attempt to fill a deep void in religious thought. I know that it will speak powerfully to many people who find this view of God to be compelling, but who, under the influence of modernity, cannot view mythology as literal descriptions of physical reality. His URK system also has the benefit of focus--too many progressively religious people ("spiritual--not religious") follow what I would call the "smorgasbord" approach,

which has the devotee tasting from every dish but lacking the focus to eat an entire plate. This approach then becomes an ill-defined sense of "feeling good about the universe", but lacks many of the gifts that focused religion can bring. Bohlert's system has a focus and specific rituals that have a pedigree in the world's oldest religion.

Bohlert's theology is a novel revisioning of venerable theistic traditions. Although he uses terminology, like "God-dess", that might distract some, his theology is based in all kinds of classical theological and philosophical works. Most of his notions of the Divine are perfectly plausible to almost any religious tradition.

More controversial is his universalism, which is absent in most orthodox Christian and Islamic theology. The idea the God works through a variety of religions can be accepted in only a most attenuated form by a Christian or a Muslim, both of which will tend to believe that everlasting punishment attends those who willingly refuse the correct path. That's fine with me, as long as everyone understands that some differences in religious thinking are essential and cannot be reconciled. He writes, "[. . .] no one with a particular spiritual belief should go to other countries and preach that what their teachers taught is superior to all other teachings" (115). Generally, Christians and Muslims will see things differently, and, in all fairness to Steve Bohlert, I think that his beliefs are certainly superior to a fairly wide range of dangerous religious beliefs in the world that I've come across. Bohlert's modesty is nevertheless admirable.

Bohlert, in a perfectly legitimate manner that is common with many other universalists, expects and hopes that a commitment to a progressive theology will bear fruit in a progressive political orientation. Oddly for me, I am as conservative politically as I am progressive theologically (which is why my brief flirtation with the Unitarian Universalist church didn't last long). In any case, for the

overwhelming majority of those who would seek this book, this will not be a problem at all. Exhibiting love of God in one's life should be a goal of anybody who takes God seriously, and I sincerely admire the author for his passion. I hope God will respect our noble intentions, even if we end up wrong!

This book is, within the context of devotees of Radha and Krishna, no mere curiosity. It is, in fact, a groundbreaking book. Many already in the movement will be attracted to this approach, and perhaps many who feel the tension between fundamentalism and modernity will find this book to be nothing short of a God-dessend. I find that one of the greatest strengths of his approach is to elevate the truly religious and spiritual above the superstitious.

Bohlert offers a comprehensive theology in his book that combines classical Indian theology with modern philosophical developments. It will be interesting to see how his thought will progress from here. I eagerly anticipate those developments! This book is simply essential reading for anyone in its target audience.

There is a great deal in Bohlert's work that I have not mentioned, so if you are interested in this project, you will benefit greatly from reading the entire book.

Reviewed by [Nori Muster "Nori Muster"](#) (Mesa, AZ United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

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In Universalist Radha-Krishnaism, Bohlert speaks without the constraints of fundamentalism, re-imaging Radha-Krishna for the modern seeker. He cites the "evolution of thought" (p. 28) and the need to reinterpret religion in each new generation. Through his long education and practice, he learned that he can be part of the

process of religious reform. This book is his way of moving the conversation forward, mingling two divergent religious traditions, and making the supreme Hindu god and goddess accessible to his readers. He dubs Radha-Krishna "God-dess," which means god and goddess together.

Bohlert dismantles the fundamentalist notion that we come from original sin, that we were put in this material world as a punishment, that our flesh is evil, and that god is a menacing figure who sits in judgment. These fears played a part in the development of both Christian and Hindu theology, and may have helped to enforce discipline on people who lived in previous centuries. However, Bohlert argues in favor of universal love and freedom, which are common tenants of most new age religions. He writes that, "Like any good parents, Radha-Krishna want us to enjoy ourselves. This adds to their enjoyment." (p. 25) He explains that worldly fun and spiritual devotion co-exist when we learn to live in harmony with god and goddess, nature, and all beings.