SAC's paper on Sri Advaita Acarya's Deity

January 26, 2012

Listed below are evidences for both sides of the issue, our analysis and conclusion.

Pro-Beard Evidence (mainly from Srila Prabhupada's letters, lectures and conversations)

1) "The Panca-tattva can all be golden. The Deity of Lord Caitanya is very nicely done so there is no need to change the color. Yes, Srivas Pandit has sikha. Vaisnava must have sikha. ***Advaita Prabhu has a full white beard. He was an old man. He was practically older than the father of Lord Caitanya. He was an elder gentleman in the town of Navadvipa, elder of the brahmana community.***" (Letter to Govinda Dasi / 20 November 1971)

2) "According to Caitanya Mahaprabhu's sampradaya, they keep themselves clean-shaven. ***And only single instance is there, Advaita Prabhu. He had his beard. And Caitanya Mahaprabhu never asked Him to cleanse. Because one reason is that Advaita Prabhu was just contemporary to His father, so He did not like to dictate. But otherwise, all His disciples, they were clean-shaved.*** (Lecture / Cc Madhya 20.66-96 / 21 November1966)

3) "You see this picture, five learned brahmanas. In the center there is one picture who is Lord Caitanya. He started this movement when He was only seventeen years old, a boy. A boy only—a schoolboy. He was student, but He introduced this movement five hundred years ago, and some of the elderly men, as you see, ***one elderly man with beard***, He also helped Him, and the others…Actually this movement was originally started by young boys. Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Nityananda Prabhu, and Advaita Prabhu, They started. (Brandeis University Lecture / April 29, 1969)

4) "As far as wearing beards one class of men like ***Advaita Prabhu never wore clean shaven appearance but always had a beard***." (Letter to Murlidhara [BBT artist] / 7 March 1974 LA)

5) "You can also arrange for costumes and wig; one boy may be dressed as Lord Caitanya, another as Nityananda, as well as Gadadhara, ***Advaita with white beard*** and Srivasa with shaven head." (Letter to Hamsaduta / 3 March, 1968 LA)

6) "Yes, the Panca-tattva picture is standard, no need of changing." (Letter to Jadurani / 8 April 1968)

7) "Thank you for the nice photos. I saw one photo there of Bharadraja's doll studio along with the others. You can tell him that ***we want many Panca-tattva Deities*** made out of cement or plaster paris. They can be made the same size as the L.A. Gaura-Nitai Deities." (Letter to Kalacanda / 31 May 1975 Honolulu)

[NOTE: Here Srila Prabhupada does not say he wanted the Deities to be different than the instructions he had given for Deities and paintings of Advaita Prabhu. This may be taken as evidence that the instruction to Govinda Dasi did not refer to only one set of Deities.]

8) "As you have suggested I am instructing Bharadraja to immediately make a ***new set of Panca-tattva Deities for our Hawaii temple***." (Letter to Gurukrpa / 6 April 1977 Bombay)

[NOTE: In 1977 new Panca-tattva Deities were made for the Hawaii temple, according to the same standard as the first set, with Advaita Prabhu having a beard.]

9) "I have enclosed herewith some photos from the deity installation of Panca-tattva in Honolulu. I remember that you have good ability to do propaganda work, so I am entrusting that you will try for printing these photos in the big newspapers in Bombay. You can write that they are taken at the deity installation in our Honolulu ISKCON center on May 7, 1972." (Letter to Cyavana / 23 May, 1972 LA)

[NOTE: Prabhupada wanted the pictures of Advaita Prabhu with a beard printed in the newspapers in Bombay, India.]

10) Bhavananda: These are the remnants of old dioramas that we had.

Prabhupada: That means you have broken them?

Bhavananda: They were broken.

Prabhupada: Huh? Broken by?

Jayapataka: Time. They were clay. They started just falling…. No doll maker is here. After one year they started to fall apart.

Tamala Krsna: Is this last years' exhibit?

Bhavananda: From three years ago.

Tamala Krsna: Three years ago. Last years' are still good?

Prabhupada: No, they break.

Bhavananda: Some. The Panca-tattva and…

Jayapataka: They should have been put in the Ganges.

Prabhupada: No, how it breaks? They keep it for years, and you broke them?

How you…? How you broke? Automatically?

(Morning Walk / January 16, 1976, Mayapur)

[NOTE: This conversation indicates that there were Panca-tattva dioramas in Mayapur that Srila Prabhupada knew about. We assume that Advaita Prabhu in this Panca-tattva diorama was shown with a beard, as always in ISKCON. This diorama was obviously for display in Mayapur, and would have been seen by the local people, and not just ISKCON members. This could be investigated further. It is meager evidence, but it does offer some

indication.]

12) In the book *Gauradesa: A Devotional Guide to Navadvipa Dhama*, by Manjari Devi Dasi, there is on page 157 a photo of a painting of Lord Caitanya, Lord Nityananda, and Advaita Acarya speaking about the confidential pastimes of Lord Krsna. The painting shows Advaita Prabhu with a beard. The painting is in a small shrine at the house of Advaita Acarya in Santipura.

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Anti-Beard Evidence (from various sources)

1) Srila Sarasvati Thakura's Panca-tattva Deities at the Yogapitha in Mayapur: ***No beard***

2) Srila Sarasvati Thakura's Deities at Srivas Angam in Mayapur: ***No beard***

3) Sri Advaita Acarya Deity at Santipura: ***No beard***

4) *Gosvami-parivaras* insist that ***He did not have one***. (In their paintings they portray Him in a youthful form.) [*Gosvami-parivara* means a lineage of Gaudiya Vaisnavas, generally caste brahmanas]

5) *Advaitastakam* verse: *eka-anga tridha murti kaisoradi sada varam*

("All three of Them are one personality in three forms. ***Their forms are eternally youthful***".)

6) *Caitanya Bhagavata* purport by Srila Sarasvati Thakura [the verse itself could be taken as evidence for pro-beard, but see the commentary]

Sri Caitanya-bhagavata, Madhya 16.99

tarjje garjje acarya dadite diya hata

bhrukuti kariya nace santipura-natha

“The Acarya threatened and roared, placing his hand on his beard. That Lord of Santipura furled his eyebrows and began to dance.” (translated by Gopiparanadhana Prabhu)

Original Bengali commentary by Srila Sarasvati Thakura:

sri-advaita-prabhu sastracara-sampanna gumpha-smasru-kesadi-mundita chilena. dadi va cibuke ye unnata kesa (smasru) deya yaya; uhake sadharana bhasaya ‘dadi’ bale. taj-janya keha keha anabhijnata-vase ajna bauliyara vesa smasru-kesadir niyoga karena. kintu prakrta prastave tini mundita-kesa chilena. tanhake ‘nada’-sabde abhihita karaya mundita-keseri nirdesa bujha yaya.

Translation of Commentary

“Sri Advaita Prabhu was perfectly fixed in proper behavior according to scripture, and ***was clean shaven, without whiskers, beard and hair on his head***. A ‘beard’ or long-grown hair (*smasru*) found on the chin is called in the vernacular *dadi.* Therefore some people, swayed by their ignorance, try to ascribe to Him the dress of a foolish Baul and a Baul’s beard, hairy head and so on. ***But actually He had all His hair shaven. This is indicated by the word Nada, which refers to one who is clean-shaven***.” (translated by Gopiparanadhana Prabhu)

[NOTE: Srila Sarasvati Thakura seems to cross over the information in the verse to make his point. He is clearly concerned that no one accepts Sri Advaita Prabhu a Baul.]

Opinions from two ISKCON leaders:

7) H.H. Jayapataka Swami: “In this detail of iconography which Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura specifically said wasn’t bona fide, I can’t imagine that Srila Prabhupada would have maintained it if he was aware of these instructions.”

8) H.G. Krsna Ksetra Prabhu: “As for determining the weight of different *pramanas*, my understanding has always been that Srila Prabhupada

considered his books as decisive and normative for the Society, over and above particular comments he wrote to particular devotees in letters or made to specific devotees should there seem to be contradiction. *Mutatis mutandis*, we may consider, as he showed consistent concern to honor the instructions of his Guru Maharaja, he would expect an explicit instruction from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Thakura written in one of his published books to be honored by us. I think this can be a general guiding principle. But in a particular case there might be other considerations outweighing this one."

Observation of Evidence

It is clear that there are two views: one coming from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura and one from our Srila Prabhupada. How can we reconcile these two varying perspectives?

Analysis

One argument for a beardless deity of Advaita Acarya is that we should follow Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura. Certainly we should follow the previous acaryas. Sometimes, as in the case of Maharaja Priyavrata, the *param-guru* may override the decision of the *guru*. In this regard, Srila Prabhupada wrote, "The duty of a great devotee is to carry out the order of the spiritual master, or the spiritual master of the spiritual master in the parampara system. " (SB 5.1.20 purport) Unfortunately, neither Srila Prabhupada nor his Guru Maharaja is physically present with us. Srila Prabhupada also wrote, "In the Skanda Purana it is advised that a devotee follow the past acaryas and saintly persons, because by such following one can achieve the desired results, with no chance of lamenting or being baffled in his progress." (NOD Ch. 7)

A *guru's* authority is derived from the scriptures, and from Krsna Himself through the *parampara* of *sadhus*. Therefore, one must evaluate and apply the instructions of the *guru* in the context of these other two—*sadhu* and *sastra*. Yet, simultaneously, one understands *sadhu*, *sastra* and tradition, through the *guru*.

There are two dangers—one is to follow Prabhupada's literal instructions without reference to *sadhu, sastra* and tradition. Such following could easily become blind and condemned. This type of obedience runs the risk of preserving in stone, not eternal principles, but interpretation and application. Truth is then lost in institutional formula, so that hundreds of years from now, a "Sunday love feast" will become unquestionable canon.

On the other hand, if any difference or apparent difference between Prabhupada's instructions and tradition or other *sadhus* or *sastra* is decided in an opposite way as to what Prabhupada gave us, we run the risk of losing our identity as his followers. Our goals, values, and practices become so fluid that anyone can bring anything from the tradition and assert its place and superiority in our Society. There are reasons, albeit reasons we may not fully understand, for how and why Prabhupada did things. When those reasons are clearly or most likely circumstantial, then it is our duty to consider an issue fluid. When the reasons are not apparent at all, or the context is clearly applicable to all members for all times (such as *mangala aratrika* or sixteen rounds minimum) then we should cease to be ISKCON if we make a change of institutional policy, except in a very rare case or in a temporary emergency.

It would be easy if tradition, the examples of *sadhus*, sastric instructions, and the guidance of *guru* were always the same for everyone. However, such cannot be the case in a vibrant tradition that is rooted in eternal individuality as an element of absolute truth. Individuality directly implies different perspectives and decisions, even in the realm of transcendence which is freed from the bias of cheating and imperfect senses.

"So far as your question about controversy amongst the disciples of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Goswami Maharaja, that is a fact. But this controversy is not material. Just like in a national program, different political parties are sometimes in conflict and make propaganda against each other, but their central point is always service to the country. Similarly, amongst the disciples of Bhaktisiddhsnta Sarasvati there may be some controversy, but the central point is how to preach the mission of His Divine

Grace. If the central point is fixed up then there is no harm in such controversy. Every individual being must have his opinion; that is the significance of individuality, but all such differences of opinions must coincide in Krishna." (Letter to Mandali Bhadra / 28 July 1969)

"Wherever there are individuals there is bound to be difference of opinion." (Letter to Rupanuga / 14 February 1973)

There are many instances where great acaryas do not concur. "As for your question about Santa Rasa and the opinions of Rupa Goswami and Sridhara Swami, I don't remember. You can send me the appropriate passages. There is no reason why Acaryas cannot differ on certain points." (Letter to Upendra / 19 February 1972)

Sometimes this difference of opinion occurs due to what would appear to be a matter of objective facts, as in the following: "According to Sripada Sridhara Svami, the original commentator on the Bhagavatam, there is not always a devastation after the change of every Manu. And yet this inundation after the period of Caksusa Manu took place in order to show some wonders to Satyavrata. But Sri Jiva Gosvami has given definite proofs from authoritative scriptures (like Visnu-dharmottara, Markandeya Purana, Harivamsa, etc.) that there is always a devastation after the end of each and every Manu. Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti has also supported Srila Jiva Gosvami, and he (Sri Cakravarti) has also quoted from Bhagavatamrta about this inundation after each Manu." (SB 1.3.15 purport)

Where there exists such differences between our founder-acarya Srila Prabhupada and his *guru*, his godbrothers, anyone else in our Gaudiya tradition, other *acaryas* in other *sampradayas*, or statements of scripture, our first inclination should be to simply follow Srila Prabhupada because "a basic principle is that one has to accept a spiritual master. Exactly how one follows the instructions of his spiritual master is considered a detail. For example, if one is following the instruction of his spiritual master and that instruction is different from the instructions of another spiritual master, this is called detailed information. But the basic principle of acceptance of a spiritual master is good everywhere, although the details may be different."

(NOD Ch 6)

Overriding Criteria

To follow others' statements, even Srila Prabhupada's own *guru*, Srila Sarasvati Thakura, and override Srila Prabhupada's statements, there should be one or more of the following criteria:

- Srila Prabhupada stated that his instruction was based on time, place, and circumstance.

- Srila Prabhupada gave differing instructions on the same topic at different times, places, or to different individuals, showing implicitly that the instruction was relative.

- There is an emergency where life is in danger, such as preaching in a Muslim country.

- There is a unique circumstance which Prabhupada never encountered and there is ambiguity as to whether the instruction is general or relative due to its rarity of occurrence and/or unknown factors about the circumstances in which it was given.

- There is ambiguity as to the general or relative nature of the instruction, and to take a different course would greatly enhance the preaching. Such a decision should be with a consensus of a large body of strict followers of Srila Prabhupada. This ambiguity could be present if the instruction didn't occur in purports, or not in purports and public lectures, or was not generally practiced in ISKCON or was of a very peripheral nature to our basic preaching work. Consensus would exist if there were no marked controversy even among senior, strict followers who have a reputation for brahminical, independent thinking and are fluid and innovative in their preaching application. A greatly enhanced result does not exist where the proposed gain is uncertain.

In the case before us of whether or not to have a beard on the Deity of

Advaita Acarya, all of Prabhupada's instructions on the matter indicate that he wished for Advaita Acarya to be shown with a beard. All the paintings in ISKCON publications show Him this way, as do the Deities which Prabhupada personally directed in Hawaii. There is no evidence that Prabhupada intended these instructions to be relative. The negative evidences that he did not give these specific instructions for Mayapur, nor present them in purports and public lectures are not strong enough unless there are witnesses to the circumstances in Hawaii and with the artists to be unique in some way.

Argument

The statements of the two respected ISKCON devotees (7 & 8) above are basically that if Srila Prabhupada was physically with us today and read the quoted commentary by his Guru Maharaja in the *Caitanya-bhagavata*, then surely he would make an adjustment and withdraw the beard from the Deity of Sri Advaita Acarya. This is a possibility. He might just do that.

The Gaudiya Matha temples (1&2) referred to above present Deities of Sri Advaita Acarya without a beard. This also indicates the opinion and instruction of Srila Sarasvati Thakura, at least in regards to the *murti* of Sri Advaita Prabhu in Mayapura. This corresponds to and supports his *Caitanya-bhagavata* commentary.

Counter Argument

The statements of the senior devotees (7 & 8 above) make two assumptions that cannot be demonstrated:

1) **That Srila Prabhupada was unaware of the statement by Srila Bhaktisiddhänta Sarasvati Thakura.** In other words, he may have been aware of it. During the time of Srila Sarasvati Thakura, *Caitanya-bhagavata* was published and widely read by Gaudiya Matha devotees due to their *guru's* recommendation. It is also possible that Srila Prabhupada had already read that specific comment or at least was aware of the Panca-tattva Deities installed in the Gaudiya Matha temples.

2) **That if he was aware of it, he would have simply accepted it.** Although his acceptance is possible, it is also possible, however, that if informed of this Srila Prabhupada might reply, “Oh, my Guru Maharaja established the *murti* of Sri Advaita Acarya as such because . . .”

Further Reasoning

We cannot be cent percent sure of how Srila Prabhupada would have reacted to this issue. If we decide to alter the appearance of the Deity of Sri Advaita Acarya in one or more ISKCON temples based on the possibility that Prabhupada had not known about the *Caitanya-bhagavata* commentary, we do so at the risk of displeasing Srila Prabhupada.

We do know for sure that Srila Prabhupada directly instructed his disciple in Honolulu to present the Deity of Advaita Acarya with a full white beard. And in a letter dated 1974 to a BBT artist in regards to his own books he wrote, “Advaita Prabhu never wore clean shaven appearance but always had a beard.”

To propose that Srila Prabhupada did not see the Deities at the Yogapitha or did not read Srila Sarasvati Thakura’s commentary to *Caitanya-bhagavata* is also negative evidence, somewhat speculative and inconclusive at best. It is also possible that Srila Sarasvati Thakura’s commentary was due to relative circumstances.

Srila Prabhupada did not unequivocally state that his instruction to Govinda Dasi in Honolulu for installing the Deity of Advaita Prabhu should be applied in all future circumstances. However, there is also no indication that the instruction to Govinda Dasi should *not* be applied in future circumstances. Nor did Prabhupada ever ask that Advaita Acarya be shown in any other way. Moreover, the pro-beard references above (7-10) offer indications of future application the instruction to Govinda Dasi.

SAC’s Conclusion

We take shelter of *guru*, *sadhu* and *sastra* as our guidelines. Can we emphasize *guru* and overlook the other *pramanas*? That should generally

not be done. We must accept Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura's vision of Advaita Prabhu as one variant of the truth. In other words, one should not be considered a heretic if he presents Advaita Prabhu's Deity without a beard.

Ultimately, there are no opposing opinions between *guru* and *sadhu*, although at times *acaryas* may take positions that are in fact different. There is some transcendental reason for their taking a different position, temporarily. But ultimately, there is no difference among them. If there is, however, some apparent difference, then we should accept what our own *acarya* says while waiting for Krsna to reveal how there really is no difference. That is a reasonable approach to the question of *pramanas*.

In other words, siddhanticly speaking, both forms of Advaita Prabhu are acceptable by our *sampradaya*, but since our founder-acarya has specifically instructed us to present Advaita Prabhu with a beard in ISKCON, the SAC recommends the GBC to follow the instructions given to Govinda Dasi in 1974 by Srila Prabhupada. This should be generally followed when installing deities of Sri Advaita Acarya in ISKCON.

Rare Circumstances

In a very rare situation, e.g. in a location where it may be somehow unfavorable for ISKCON's preaching or for differentiating Gaudiya Vaisnavism from the Bauls or other deviant sects, we accept the possibility that an adjustment could be made according to time, place and circumstance. Such circumstances should be determined by the GBC. (A relative consideration such as preventing Bauls from authorizing their sect may be the very reason why Sarasvati Thakura installed the beardless *murti* of Sri Advaita Acarya and wrote his commentary to *Caitanya Bhagavata*.) Nevertheless, any possible local circumstances should be weighed against the impact of overriding Srila Prabhupada's directions.

Disclaimer

SAC's conclusion does not indicate that an ISKCON devotee may ignore the

instructions of Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura. It should be understood that there may sometimes exist a variety of bona fide instructions coming from different acaryas. We pray that Srila Sarasvati Thakura will accept our decision as proper for chaste disciples. Furthermore, our conclusion might possibly be read by some as ISKCON's stepping away from the wider Sarasvata Gaudiya tradition. This is not the case, and it should be clearly understood and explained if need be.

Mayapura: Relative Considerations (loka-vicara)

What reasons are given for installing a Deity of Advaita Prabhu without a beard in Mayapura? One is a concern that other Gaudiya members and organizations will criticize us otherwise. A second concern might be to not give credence to apasampradayas. Let us discuss the former reason.

Neighboring Gaudiya Matha devotees in Mayapur might criticize a Deity of Advaita Acarya with a beard. The small Panca-tattva, however, has been in Mayapur for years with a bearded form of Advaita Acarya. Still, Jayapataka Maharaja has maintained working relationships with the other Gaudiya branches there. Therefore it doesn't seem likely that our neighbors will get too upset about us having a bearded Deity of Advaita Prabhu.

Another example to illustrate this is the Ugra Nrsimha Deity. He is like nothing ever seen in Bengal. We have heard that this Deity provoked much curiosity among the local Gaudiyas. Often devotees from other mathas visited just to have a look at Him. The excitement gradually died down, as it eventually will do. So why does a concern for increased unity among the Sarasvati family mean quid pro quo we should install a Deity of Advaita Acarya in Mayapur without a beard?

There will be little or no gain from changing the Deity in Mayapur to be like those at the Yogapitha. With the present small Panca-tattva and Ugra Nrsimha, our relationships with the other Gaudiya Mathas seem to be good, fair, or poor depending on the specific individuals involved more than such differences. There are so many differences, and surely we are not going to imitate all the aspects of the mathas simply for public relations. Such was

not Prabhupada's general mood, though he made some accommodations to local customs.

The potential harm, however, from changing the form of Advaita Acarya is great. It would set a standard that when there is some difference between Prabhupada and other acaryas that we will choose the others if we feel we will gain some advantage. This mentality is prevalent in those who have left ISKCON, accepting other Gaudiya leaders as siksa-guru. When there is a disagreement between our Srila Prabhupada and their siksa-guru, they explain Prabhupada through the latter. We would want, instead, to understand these others through the medium of Srila Prabhupada. We risk creating a free-for-all where temples change things dramatically to accommodate local people. Such is already happening in some ISKCON centers, "Hinduizing" or "New Ageing" some places almost beyond recognition. An additional loss would be the loss of the good wishes of many of ISKCON's loyal members. On the other hand, very few ISKCON members will feel upset if a bearded Advaita Acarya is installed.

Again, after considering the relative situation, SAC recommends that the Deity of Advaita Acarya should be installed with a beard as generally done in ISKCON.

A Piece of ISKCON's History (as presented by HH Suhotra Swami)

Within ISKCON there is a beardless Sri Advaita Deity Who has been worshiped for17 years.

In 1986, the Harikesa Swami installed Panca-tattva Deities in Almviksgaard farm, which is an ISKCON community near Stockholm, Sweden. Some time previous to that installation, Harikesa had been informed by HH Jayapataka Maharaja that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura wrote that Sri Advaita should never be worshiped with beard.

As an ISKCON guru, Harikesa was sometimes carried away by his own ideas. It was due to this tendency that he finally departed ISKCON some five years ago and has become a New Age guru of sorts. This information

from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura's commentary inspired him to take an implacable position that the Sri Advaita Deity for Almviksgaard must be cast without a beard. Some of his Godbrothers in the zone tried to talk him out of it, but those were still de facto the zonal acarya days. Although by that time, the zonal acarya system was officially repudiated. His point of view was final. There was no reasoned discussion at that time; simply Harikesa took it that our Founder-acarya had made a mistake in establishing Sri Advaita with a beard as an ISKCON standard.

Thus the Sri Advaita Deity worshiped from 1986 to today at ISKCON Almviksgaard has no beard. He is not worshiped with a wig-hair beard. He has white hair but is as clean-shaven as the other four Deities of Sri Panca-tattva. This was recently confirmed by a Swedish devotee who was present at the 1986 installation.

Two points can be made here: 1) There is a precedent within ISKCON of the installation and worship of Panca-tattva with a beardless Sri Advaita. 2) With regards to Srila Prabhupada's own statements, the validity of this precedent is questionable; the decision at that time to install the Sri Advaita Deity in this form was whimsical.