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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HINDU-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE DISCUSSES THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

WASHINGTON—The fifteenth annual meeting of Vaishnava Hindus and an ecumenical body of Christians convened to discuss the hiddenness of God as it is understood in the Hindu text *Bhagavad Gita* and the Christian classic the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Areopagite. The meeting was held in Potomac, Maryland on April 13-14.

The first presentation addressed the hiddenness of God from the Christian perspective. Edward Shirley, Ph.D., professor of religion at St. Edward's University in Austin, TX, identified a common thread in the Christian mystical tradition, namely, that while the essence of what God *is* remains utterly unknowable to unaided reason, God emerges out of his infinite silence to make himself known in creation. In the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite, this conveyance of God to humanity is understood as a progressive unfolding of God's own self in creaturely being, which is only dimly perceivable until God's concrete appearance in the Incarnation. For Dr. Shirley, this understanding of God's relation to the world and humanity, which extends from Dionysius the Areopagite to Francis of Assisi and Bonaventure, is a tacit celebration of the creation as the locus of man's encounter with God.

The second presentation addressed the hiddenness of God from the perspective of Vaishnava Hinduism. Dr. Graham Schweig, professor of religion at Christopher Newport University, began the conversation with the assertion that the Great Secret of the Hindu sacred text is the passionate love that God has for his creatures and the longing God has of receiving a return of this love. The entirety of the *Bhagavad Gita* is an attempt to explicate this unfolding love story, this Great Secret of God to humanity. However, God's relationship to the world—a relationship that is presented to the world in hiddenness—is the occasion of very real pain and sorrow. This concealment of God, which is similarly expressed in the Christian mystical tradition, produces in humans a yearning for ever greater disclosure and, ultimately, union.

One key point of intersection between the Christian mystical tradition and Vaishnava Hinduism identified by the group is precisely the shared belief that the mystery of God is hidden but, paradoxically, that hiddenness is perceivable in creation as a mysterious presence that instigates a yearning in the human knower, especially as one encounters, or rather is encountered by beauty in creation. For both Hindus and Christians, creation holds a great secret—the presence of a passionate God, a God who is the hidden love poured forth into creaturely being and that, by means of creation, reaches out as it were to man who is both gifted to perceive this “presence” and beckoned to return this love to God.

Another perceived convergence between the groups was the realization that such “presence” in creation is simultaneously joyful and painful—the latter being apparent in our inability to “seize” this delightful, elusive One. This last point raised the question of God’s relationship to suffering—a topic brought into informal group session following the presentations.

The Vaishnava Hindu dialogue, which is attended annually by the Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is sponsored by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), whose communications director, Anuttama Dasa, serves as host.

The following attended the meeting: Kenneth Cracknell, Susan White, James Wiseman, James Reddington, Jon Pahl, Edward Shirley, Samuel Wagner, Ravindra Svarupa, Ravi Gupti, Rukmini Walker, Ananda Vrindavanesvari, Dvija mani Dasa, Anuttama Dasa, Graham Schweig, Sraddha Dasi, D.C. Rao.

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