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## At the Edge

*On this line of confrontation  
between two powerful political doctrines,  
the hope of world peace is precariously balanced.*

*by Suhotra dasa*

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From Autobahn 7, just south of the Hartz Mountain region near Gottingen, West Germany, one can turn east onto a winding country road and follow it over scenic pastoral hills and dales to the old medieval town of Duderstadt, with its cobblestone streets and thousand-year-old city hall. Just another picture postcard German city, one might think-it's seen its better days and is now more or less a tourist preserve for camera-toting outlanders who jostle noisily past the ageing local women tending their sidewalk vegetable stands.

Leaving Duderstadt and driving further east on a narrow farm route, one immediately notices how unkempt the countryside becomes, and how the few scattered roadside dwellings appear more and more run-down and lonely—something unusual for wealthy, populous West Germany, with its carefully manicured environs and standardized way of life. A strange quietness fills the air, and the dusty-tangy smell of cheap coal smoke suddenly wafts along with the spring breeze. Then you see it—a red and white sign with the warning ACHTUNG—GRENZGEBIET! and another in English, 50 METERS TO EAST GERMAN BORDER.

Cresting a hill, the road lies parallel to the infamous "Death Strip," fully visible in the glen below. It runs as far as the eye can see, through forests and across fields—a sixty-foot-wide ribbon of plowed earth, marked off by fences, barbed wire, and notices that read ACHTUNG! MINEN! ("Attention! Land Mines!"). In the distance, just visible over a far ridge, one can see a watchtower, looking something like an ugly cement UFO perched upon a smokestack. And in a wooded area a few hundred feet beyond the border strip, if you're careful you can just make out the three Communist soldiers in camouflage watching you, with guns at the ready.

It is here that "our world"—the Western Euro-American world of free and easy sensual enjoyment and sophisticated material opulence—comes to its abrupt end. Beyond it lies the forbidding East, with its drudgery, dullness, and totalitarian terror—where "free

thought" is not even the privilege of the wealthy few. The very idea of such a place provokes our minds to exasperation, bewilderment, fear. And this heavily guarded frontier region between East and West Germany—the line of confrontation between two powerful political doctrines in opposition—is the edge of stress upon which the delicate hope of world peace is precariously balanced. Should this edge of stress crumble, both sides will topple into nuclear war, and society as we know it may very well cease to exist.

Of course, back in Frankfurt, that, "most American of all German cities:" one can get back into the swing of things—plenty of clubs, disco halls, and night spots to lose yourself in. One just has to learn to overlook the big U.S. Army base smack in the middle of town, and the long convoys of military traffic clogging the autobahns out of the city, so as not to be reminded of the slender thread on which the revelry is hanging.

And even when you return to supposedly secure Stateside, where the good life abounds, the grim memory of the Death Strip and the threat which lies beyond it pop up again with the news reports about Afghanistan or Cambodia, about next year's defence budget and the draft. Yes, lately even in America the confrontation of East and West is raising the spectre of world war in people's minds.

"World war? Nobody wants it." Maybe that's true, but still its inevitability stalks us. From a Krsna conscious point of view, the accumulated societal sins of our global civilization make it almost unavoidable. Rampant animal slaughter, legalized abortions, terrorism, the brushfire wars that erupt almost monthly somewhere in the world—Sriila Prabhupada told his disciples as early as 1975 that the world could not continue in this way without succumbing to catastrophe. And from a strictly political and economic outlook, things aren't encouraging, either. The arms race, the oil crunch, and inflation—where will it all end? These days one doesn't have to be a crackpot to fear the worst.

If, as a recent Time poll indicated, seventy percent of Americans are worried about a major war in the near future, a natural question on their minds must be, "What are we going to do about it?" Unfortunately, experience from the previous two world wars teaches us that although people had ample warning, they either could not or would not do anything to prevent war and insure against its eventual recurrence. For instance, the fever that culminated in the First World War started in 1911, three years before the fighting actually broke out. Three years to wake up and avert disaster—but nothing was done. After that "Great War," statesmen of the world vowed it would never happen again, and they formed the League of Nations. But in 1938, with the Munich crisis, humanity was again poised on the brink of a major conflict, and again nothing was done. Hostilities broke out one year later, and the world plunged into the Second World War, which proved much more destructive than the first. And now, in 1980, world war is once more a dinner-table topic. What can we do?

Let us reconsider that border between East and West Germany, which in many ways represents the very knife-edge of the modern world dilemma. Here are some disarmingly simple questions: To whom does that land really belong? Who owned it before it was

divided? Who owned it before the German people settled it, and who owned it before the previous occupants, the Celts? Who put it there to begin with?

The sophisticated may scoff, "Uh-oh, here comes God into the picture. Spare us this theological moralizing." But please notice that when by our sophisticated scepticism or out-and-out atheism we attempt to avoid the question "Who really owns the land?" the logic of politics and war seems inevitable. It is then that the claimants break into arguments that diplomatic rules of order such as those of the U.N. have yet to succeed in containing.

The simple fact is that we human inhabitants of this planet cannot substantiate an absolute claim of ownership over anything-not over the land, the plants, the animals, other people, or even our own bodies-because we cannot independently produce anything. Remember, we are born here in a manner totally beyond our control. We interact briefly with this earthly environment, upon which we are completely dependent for our life's sustenance. And then we are forced to die, and whatever claims we have established are blown away by time. What right do we have to quarrel over things that don't belong to us?

And yet, in a remarkable display of self-assuredness, scientists and philosophers insist that the world belongs to mankind by default, because the ingeniously well ordered biosphere in which we live is a product of random chemical combinations, with no conscious creator to claim it. Such men envision a world government of many flags united by an enlightened scientific materialism. Their utopian suggestions, however, always seem to fall flat in a storm of unsatisfied political opportunism. The atheistic mentality of our modern leaders, whether in America, Russia, or elsewhere, is condemning us to devastating social violence. For all its semblance of rationality, our society is rooted in the ultimate irrationality-the belief that the intricate arrangement of nature, which defies the understanding of the greatest speculators, is produced from blind chance. When leaders of states admit no allegiance to the Supreme, idle theories will not save them from being consumed by their own lust, envy, and greed for power.

"But most of history's bloodshed has been caused by religious disagreement." If that be true, then it only further proves the point. Religion and God are not synonymous. If a religious process fails to provide realized knowledge of God due to faulty teachings, then God is not to blame-the leaders of that so-called religion are. God is more than just a vague or mysterious idea. He may have many names, but clearly He is one and only one person. And nothing can change that not even self-righteous designations like "Christian," "Jew," "Muslim," "Buddhist," and "Hindu." History may show that many wars have been fought between differing religious sects, but that in itself proves only that the adherents of these contesting religions were lacking in knowledge of the factual owner of everything.

If religion is to be successful in revealing God to man, it must offer a process of knowledge that leads one beyond sentiment and fanaticism to a mature understanding of the Supreme Being. The Vedic literatures of India stress the factual realization of God by

the process of *yoga* ("linking up"). *Yoga* fulfills the expressed purpose of religion, for it provides the science by which the tiny *jiva*, the eternal individual spark of life that animates each one of us, can rise above the temporary designations of the human species and re-establish its connection with the Supreme Soul, God. This very first step of *yoga*, the understanding that I am not the body but an eternal particle of consciousness, part and parcel of God, immediately dispels the confusion of opposing bodily conceptions like "man" vs. "woman," "black" vs. "white," "young" vs. "old," and "Catholic" vs. "Protestant," which are the source of so much strife in the modern world.

The essential teachings of the *yoga* system were revealed five thousand years ago by Lord Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, in the *Bhagavad-gīta*. And one verse of this great book has been singled out by the foremost *Bhagavad-gīta* commentator in our time, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupada. This, he says, is the "peace formula" for humanity at large:

*bhoktaram yajna-tapasam  
sarva-loka-mahesvaram  
suhṛdam sarva-bhūtanam  
jñatva mām santim rcchati*

"The sages, knowing Me as the ultimate purpose of all sacrifices and austerities, the Supreme Lord of all planets and demigods, and the benefactor and well-wisher of all living entities, attain peace from the pangs of material miseries." (*Bhagavad-gīta* 5.29)

Srīla Prabhupada further elaborates: "Under the spell of illusion, living entities are trying to be lords of all they survey, but actually they are dominated by the material energy of the Lord. The Lord is the master of material nature, and the conditioned souls are under the stringent rules of material nature. Unless one understands these bare facts, it is not possible to achieve peace in this world, either individually or collectively."

The philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness explains that the disturbances to peace we experience in the material world are due to ignorance of God, of matter, and of our own inherent spiritual nature. For the most part, living beings here are surrendered to God, determined instead to play God by grasping at His material energy. To realize this dubious end, they must forfeit the peace of their eternal spiritual consciousness and accept the endless discomforts of birth after birth in various species. Kṛṣṇa's material nature is known as *māyā*, or illusion, and *māyā* is the reward for those who choose to forget Kṛṣṇa. By *māyā's* influence, God seemingly becomes a myth, and the quest to dominate nature seemingly becomes reality.

While we play our false roles as kings and queens of the world, *māyā* assaults us with an insurmountable succession of miseries—birth, death, disease, and old age—which ultimately drag us down, dashing all of our hopes for mundane glory. In the kingdom of *māyā* we may find opposing regimes erecting fortifications, amassing military might, and vying for control of contested territories; but *māyā* can smash these aspirations at any moment and prove that neither party has the power to defy Kṛṣṇa's jurisdiction.

Actually, we are always poised at the edge of destruction, war or not, since none of us can foresee how long our life in this present body will last. We may make all sorts of physical preparations for World War III, digging bomb shelters or whatever, but we may not live to enjoy our handiwork, having died of a heart attack from the exertion. The most substantial preparation possible is to become God conscious—Krsna conscious—now.

Being Krsna conscious means we must learn to live out our lives in a way that will please the Lord. According to the Vedic teachings, this entails approaching a bona fide spiritual master and submissively inquiring from him about the science of Krsna. Such a spiritual master can engage one in *bhakti-yoga*, or service to Krsna, which begins with chanting the Hare Krsna mantra and following the basic regulative principles of spiritual life, namely abstinence from meat-eating, illicit sex, gambling, and intoxication. By these simple processes one can know the Lord in truth, cross over the miseries of this temporary world, and go back home, back to Godhead.

These teachings of Lord Krsna's peace formula, as explained by Srila Prabhupada and offered to everyone by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, are admittedly simple proposals for solving a complex problem. They have been available to the Western world since 1966, but they have been largely ignored by top-level policy makers, owing to our modern society's "secular" orientation. Godless politicians have not been able to afford even an experimental investigation into the application of these principles in society, and yet their own exertions seem to be offering us no relief from the dilemmas they are pledged to resolve. History has shown their attempts for peace to be nothing more than a flimsy charade of false promises.

However, the Vedic literatures themselves serve as testimony to the social efficacy of the Krsna conscious philosophy, since they were compiled at a time when the important civilizations of the world followed those principles. From the descriptions of the *Bhagavad-gita*, the most esteemed of the *Puranas* (Vedic histories), we find that by acknowledging the property rights of Lord Krsna, human society was decorated by His blessings in the form of wisdom, opulence, happiness, and peace, the natural conditions of life for devotees of the Lord.

Srila Prabhupada was convinced that it is not too late for us to alter the vicious course of modern history and return to the divine shelter from which we have wandered so far away. He called modern socio-political arrangements "decorations on a dead body," because the spiritual foundations of society have long decayed. Therefore, external adjustments to the social body in the name of "detente," "coexistence," "arms limitation," or "containment" cannot check social decline, any more than cosmetics can check the gradual withering of a corpse. But by spiritual inspiration through Krsna consciousness, civilization can regain its real life and purpose. For those who recognize the futility of a godless existence of quarrel, uncertainty, and meaningless death, Srila Prabhupada's teachings are not to be lightly dismissed.