

International Society for Krishna Consciousness/Hare Krishnas

By Jason Barker

Founder: Abhay Charan De Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

Date: 1966

Official Publications: Scripture and central teachings include Bhagavad-gita, *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, *Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Nectar of Devotion*, *Nectar of Instruction* and *Sri Isopanisad*. Periodicals include *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* and *Back to Godhead*.

Structure: Governed by the Governing Body Council (GBC) of thirty devotees, who meet annually to elect secretaries to govern geographic zones. Temples, preaching centers, and smaller operations are individually-governed units.

Unique Terms: Vaishnava, Acarya, Prasadam, Sankirtan, Govinda's.

HISTORY

The Krishna consciousness movement can be traced back to Chaitanya (1486–1534?), an Indian who was introduced by Isvara Puri to *kirtan*, chanting the names of God (this includes the Hare Krishna mantra, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.")¹ ISKCON members believe Chaitanya was the avatar, or physical incarnation, of the god Krishna from the Vedic scripture Bhagavad-gita ("As It Is").² The movement declined after Chaitanya's disappearance in 1534, but experienced revivals in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.³

One of the central movements of the nineteenth century revival was the Gaudiya Vaishnava Mission.⁴ The second leader of the Gaudiya Mission, Sri Srimad Bhakti Siddhanta Goswami, became the guru of a pharmaceutical manager named Abhay Charan De in 1922.⁵ Initiated into the Gaudiya Mission in 1933 and charged by Goswami to spread Krishna consciousness to the west,⁶ Charan De was given the name Abhay Charnaravinda ("One who fearlessly takes shelter at the feet of the Lord").⁷ In 1956, after a third vision of Goswami sending him to evangelize, Charnaravinda renounced family and possessions to spend his life in Krishna devotions; he then took the name A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.⁸ Prabhupada immigrated to the United States in 1965 at age 70.⁹ He was first noticed chanting in Tompkins Park in New York City; in 1966 he opened a storefront center and revived his religious magazine, *Back to Godhead* (initially printed in India during WWII, in 1952, and 1956).¹⁰ This marked the beginning of ISKCON in the United States.

The death of Prabhupada in 1977 generated an internal crisis in ISKCON; with no legitimate heir or power structure, the movement was quickly torn with inner conflict. While Prabhupada appointed eleven gurus to lead ISKCON several months before his death, the Governing Body Council was almost immediately in conflict with the gurus.¹¹ Legal and doctrinal conflicts led the GBC to suspend three gurus for one year, but these suspensions were soon lifted.¹² The veneration of gurus began to decline after the GBC moved to ensure that the majority of initiating gurus would be appointed by the GBC.¹³

The first serious internal crisis was generated by Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, leader of ISKCON of West Virginia and founder of the New Vrindaban community. Bhaktipada was attacked in 1985 by a former member; during his recovery, another former member who blamed Bhaktipada for the dissolution of his marriage was killed in Los Angeles (this individual

had previously brought a pistol to West Virginia and threatened Bhaktipada).¹⁴ During this period Thomas Drescher, a member of New Vrindaban, participated in the murder of a former member in St. Louis; Drescher was given a life sentence (he was also later convicted of racketeering).¹⁵ Bhaktipada was excommunicated by the GBC in 1987 after a federal investigation, and after child molestation charges against two New Vrindaban teachers.¹⁶ He was sentenced in 1991 to twenty years in prison for racketeering for amassing millions of dollars through a fund raising scam, and conspiring to murder two followers in 1983 and 1986; the sentence was reduced in 1997 to 12 years due to his failing health.¹⁷ The GBC recently readmitted New Vrindaban, subject to an annual review for two year.¹⁸

ISKCON is currently undergoing another serious internal crisis. E. Burke Rochford, Jr., a sociologist who studies the organization, recently published a study in *Krishna* exploring instances of child abuse at ISKCON *gurukalas* (boarding schools) in the 1970s and 1980s. ISKCON was forced to confront the situation in 1996 when ten former Krishna students testified that they had been beaten, sexually molested, and denied medical care while boarding at ISKCON schools.¹⁹ The most serious abuse allegedly occurred in Dallas, Seattle, and New Vrindaban.²⁰ ISKCON communications director Anuttama Dasa states that the organization is currently working to “repair the damage to the kids and show them we do care as a religious society.”²¹ ISKCON no longer operates *gurukalas* in the United States.²²

ISKCON has also endured several serious external crises. The most significant involves the 1983 case of *George v. ISKCON*. Robin George, a former member, filed suit against ISKCON in 1977, alleging that she had been brainwashed by the group;²³ the suit followed a period in which she was moved from temple to temple to avoid being deprogrammed.²⁴ George was initially awarded \$32.5 million by the jury; the judge cut the amount to \$9.7 million, and an appeals court further reduced it to \$3 million in 1987. The Supreme Court further reduced the damages to \$75,000.²⁵

The second major external crisis was ISKCON's loss in the *ISKCON v. Lee* case. The Supreme Court ruled in 1992 that airports are not public facilities, and ISKCON members can thus be prohibited by port authorities from soliciting donations.²⁶

DOCTRINES

Godhead: ISKCON denies the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. They also do not hope for union with Brahma or give devotion to Vishnu or Shiva, referred to by some Christians as “the Hindu ‘trinity.’”²⁷ The Hindus’ gods are simply expansions or forms of Krishna, the “Supreme Personality, the Lord, the complete whole...the Absolute Truth.”²⁸ ISKCON even teaches that Brahma contains only 78 percent of the attributes of the personal god Krishna.²⁹

There are three aspects to godhead in ISKCON thought: 1) Krishna, the ultimate personality, 2) the localized Krishna in the heart of all creation, and 3) the impersonal spirit Brahman.³⁰ The contradiction of an ultimate personality, Krishna, and the impersonal entity Brahman (union with which is the goal of classical Hinduism) is not problematic for ISKCON believers. The Bhagavad-gita teaches: “Contradictory traits in Krishna’s person are not at all surprising; one should not consider the characteristics of Krishna, the supreme personality of Godhead, to be actually contradictory. One should try to understand how these characteristics are employed by the supreme will of the Lord.”³¹

One of the ways in which Krishna employs these seemingly contradictory characteristics is through creation. Krishna is the creator of all that exists; even the gods worshipped in other religions (including Hinduism) are simply “plenary expansions or parts of [Krishna].”³² The creative act is ongoing because Krishna dwells in all creation. The Bhagavad-gita says of Krishna, “The Lord is all-pervading by the expansion of His partial representation, the Supersoul, who enters into everything that is.”³³ Everything is thus “part and parcel of the Supreme Lord.”³⁴

Jesus Christ: ISKCON teaches that Jesus, rather than being the eternal God, is instead one of the demi-god manifestations of Krishna.³⁵ In fact, “Jesus is the son, and Krishna the Father, and Jesus is Krishna’s son.”³⁶ Contrary to Christian doctrine, ISKCON teaches that Jesus only intended to serve as a guide to 1st-century Palestine:

God sent Jesus to be the spiritual master of particular people in a particular time and place...he did not claim (as others claim today) that He was the only Representative Agent of the Supreme Person ever to walk the earth in the past or future. ³⁷ Instead, because Jesus is merely the manifestation (son) of Krishna (the father), Jesus worshipped Krishna. ³⁸

The mediator between God (Krishna) and humanity is Prabhupada. Only Prabhupada is referred to as "His Divine Grace," ³⁹ and it is even said of him that "Prabhupada was a world-genius, greater than Jesus." ⁴⁰ He "is the ultimate standard of Krishna consciousness...[people] must give him the honor due to God, because the guru is the transparent *via media* or representative of God and is distributing unalloyed love of God." ⁴¹ Prabhupada is thus worshipped by devotees; *guru paja* involves offering flower petals to a wax likeness of the master (new members offer petals to a picture of Prabhupada). ⁴²

Scripture: ISKCON accepts as scripture all the Vedic literature of Hinduism, giving special preeminence to the Bhagavad-gita (which was translated into English by Prabhupada). ISKCON is widely considered to be a fundamentalist branch of Hinduism because they interpret the stories in scripture as literal historical facts. ⁴³

Prabhupada, when asked if it is acceptable to follow the Bible instead of Vedic literature, states, "There is no use arguing the merits of the Bible over Vedic literature. Both the Bible and the Vedic literature are scripture, and therefore they are in agreement not opposition. The only difference is that the Vedic literature contains much more specific information about God than you'll find in the Bible." ⁴⁴

Salvation: The central problem facing humanity is lust for temporal pleasures rather than love for Krishna. This lust keeps humanity trapped in the material world, ⁴⁵ rather than pursuing salvation through Krishna consciousness. ⁴⁶

Salvation is dependent upon the Hindu concept of karma, the universal law in which good deeds must atone for bad deeds. Just as in classical Hinduism, living entities undergo reincarnation in response to karma; it is possible to be reincarnated as many as 8,400,000 times. ⁴⁷ The caste system is thus integral to ISKCON – Krishna created the caste system, ⁴⁸ and an individual's current position in life is a direct result of actions in past lives: "If we're saintly, we'll get a saintly body next time, but if we're doggish, we'd better prepare ourselves for a dog's life after this one. This is the law of karma, which states that for every action we perform, either good or bad, there is an appropriate reaction to be reaped either in this life or in a future life." ⁴⁹

Salvation, i.e., escape from the cycle of reincarnation, is attained only through following the spiritual disciplines of ISKCON. If a devotee properly follows the disciplines, Krishna takes the individual's sins upon himself and thus atones for the negative karma. ⁵⁰ Prabhupada claims, "Krsna says, 'Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reaction. Do not fear.'" ⁵¹ Rarandhar, who served as Western Guru, elaborates, "There is not even an alternative. Alternative means you have a choice. There is no choice. Either Krishna consciousness or finished. That's all." ⁵²

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Salvation in ISKCON depends entirely upon the efforts of the individual to follow the spiritual practices of the religion. The Bhagavad-gita states, "Everything depends on one's performance of duties in an effort to control the senses and conquer the influence of desire and anger." ⁵³ These spiritual disciplines include:

Chanting: Chanting the "Hare Krishna" mantra is the central devotional activity of ISKCON. "In this age of quarrel and hypocrisy the only means of deliverance is chanting the holy name of the Lord. There is no other way." ⁵⁴ Devotees use a string of 108 prayer beads to assist in counting the number of times they have completed the chant; they are to chant sixteen rounds of the beads, spending an average of 1½ to 2 hours each day chanting. ⁵⁵ Chanting the sixteen rounds amounts to 1,728 chants per day, and 630,720 chants per year. Devotees can often be seen chanting publicly, practicing what ISKCON calls sankirtan. ⁵⁶

Arguably the most famous instance of sankirtan in the West occurs in the George Harrison song "My Sweet Lord."

Four Rules: The four rules of ISKCON are prohibitions against four degrading activities that cause humanity to submit to lustful materialism. These rules prohibit 1) gambling, 2) intoxication (prohibiting not only alcohol and drugs, but also caffeine and nicotine), 3) sexual activity outside marriage (and for any purpose other than procreation), and 4) animal slaughter (ISKCON is strictly vegetarian).⁵⁷ ISKCON adds 64 regulative principles to the four rules, including visits to a Vishnu temple, offering items to the deity, and accepting the jurisdiction of the ISKCON spiritual masters.⁵⁸

Sankirtan: Sankirtan involves more than public chanting; it also involves distributing ISKCON literature. Distributing ISKCON literature is essential in the spiritual life of most member.⁵⁹ Members are taught that receiving ISKCON literature can result in the salvation of both member and recipient.⁶⁰ The distribution of Back to Godhead magazine is so significant that the editor claims, "Talking about BTG is as good as talking about Krsna."⁶¹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

There is only one true God (Isaiah 43:10), who is distinct from His creation (Romans 1:20-23). Jesus Christ is also God, existing from eternity (John 1:1; 5:18; 20:28). Jesus, who humbled himself and took on human nature (Philippians 2:1-11), is not the son of Krishna.

Salvation is not earned by erasing karma through reincarnation; instead, humans live only once, and then face judgment from God (Hebrews 9:27). Repetition of a mantra will not result in salvation (Matthew 6:7), nor will following an extensive list of rules and rituals. Salvation is an act of God's grace, and cannot be earned through any human action (Ephesians 2:8-10).

RECOMMEND READING

A Guide to Cults and New Religions, by Ronald Enroth, et al, InterVarsity Press. The essays in this volume include a chapter on ISKCON. 215 pages.

The Kingdom of the Cults, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition, by Walter Martin and edited by Hank Hanegraaff, Bethany House Publishers. Contains a chapter on Eastern religions (including ISKCON). Comes with a CD-ROM for cross-referencing. 703 pages.

Notes

¹ *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, 232.

² *ISKCON: What is That?* <http://www.iskcon.org/main/iskcon/what.htm>.

³ *Encyclopedic Handbook*, 233.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Biographical Dictionary of American Cult and Sect Leaders*, 223.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Encyclopedic Handbook*, 234.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 222-24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 230-34.

¹³ *Encyclopedic Handbook*, 240.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Bad Karma." *One World* 12.31, 1997.

¹⁸ "New Vrindavana Rejoins ISKCON." *Hare Krishna World*, July-August 1998, 1.

¹⁹ "Hare Krishna Faith Details Past Abuse at Boarding Schools," *New York Times*, October 9, 1998.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *International Society for Krishna Consciousness* <http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/hare.html>.

²⁴ *Encyclopedic Handbook*, 240.

²⁵ *International Society for Krishna Consciousness* <<http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/hare.html>>/.

²⁶ *International Society for Krishna Consciousness v Lee*, 505 U.S. 672 (1992).

²⁷ *The Hare Krishnas Today*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*, 13.

³⁰ *Confronting Religions from the East, Part Four: Hare Krishnas*, 3.

³¹ *Bhagavad-gita*, 203.

³² *Srimad Bhagavatam*, First Canto, Part Three, 28.

³³ *Bhagavad-gita*, 538.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 704.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁶ *Jesus Loves Krsna*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁸ *The Deceivers*, 195-96.

³⁹ *The Strange World of the Hare Krishnas*, 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴¹ The Hare Krishna Movement." *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, 469.

⁴² *Hare Krishna in America*, 17-8.

⁴³ *Hare Krishna / ISKCON*, 4.

⁴⁴ "Declaring Our Dependence on God." *Back to Godhead* 11.7, 1976, 5.

⁴⁵ *Bhagavad-gita*, 209.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁷ *Confronting Religions from the East*, 7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁹ "Reincarnation." *Back to Godhead*, 11.1, 1976, 8.

⁵⁰ *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*, 12.

⁵¹ *Matras, Sikhas & KRSNA*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Bhagavad-gita*, 305.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁵⁵ *Hare Krishna in America*, 17.

⁵⁶ *ISKCON: The Means*

<http://www.iskcon.org/main/twohk/iskcon/means.htm>.

⁵⁷ *Confronting Religions from the east*, 20-21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁵⁹ Christ and the New Consciousness, 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "Sharing Good Fortune." *Back to Godhead*, 28.1, 1994, 3.

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