It is a truism that religious movements and their organizational forms undergo change over the course of their histories. Many new religions burst onto the scene without fully articulated ideologies, established objectives, or stable organizational structures. But neither do these groups over time reach what might be thought of as developmental endpoints, unless, of course, they fail altogether. Rather the careers of new faiths are guided by a dialectical interplay between internal movement forces and external societal influences. While scholars recognize that change in “new” and “established” religions takes place, we know much less about the specific processes that promote social change in religious organizations. This case study of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (hereafter ISKCON), more popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement, attempts to extend empirical and theoretical understanding of how new religious movements develop in the American context.

Origins, American Beginnings, and Religious Beliefs

The presence of Hare Krishna in America comes from the inspiration of one man, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Bhaktivedanta, or Srila Prabhupada, as he is called by his followers, travelled to the United States from India in 1965, at the age of sixty-nine, to spread Krishna Consciousness to the Western world. One year after his arrival, Prabhupada founded ISKCON in New York City. Within a decade, Prabhupada and his followers had established a worldwide movement. Before his death in 1977, Prabhupada initiated nearly five thousand disciples into Krishna consciousness and attracted tens of thousands of other less-committed followers. Prabhupada was born in 1896 with the name of Abhay Charan De. His family adhered to a strict Krishna-conscious lifestyle. After graduating from the University of Calcutta with majors in English, philosophy, and economics, Prabhupada was employed as a manager in a chemical firm, where he worked until his retirement in 1954. In 1922, Prabhupada met his spiritual master, Bhaktisiddhanta, from whom he ultimately took initiation in 1933. Prior to Bhaktisiddhanta’s death in 1936, he instructed Prabhupada to carry the teachings of Krishna Consciousness to the West. In the years prior to his departure for America, Prabhupada met his spiritual master, Bhaktisiddhanta, from whom he ultimately took initiation in 1933. Prior to Bhaktisiddhanta’s death in 1936, he instructed Prabhupada to carry the teachings of Krishna Consciousness to the West. In the years prior to his departure for America, Prabhupada raised a family and continued to promote the teachings of Bhaktisiddhanta. During this period he started publishing Back to Godhead magazine, which he would later use to promote his movement in America. Prabhupada took the order of sannyasa at age fifty-nine,
E. Burke Rochford, Jr.

thereafter retiring from family life. Until his death, Prabhupada focused his energies on translating and writing commentaries on ancient Vedic scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Srimad Bhagavatam. His many books were published by ISKCON's Bhaktivedanta Book Trust in Los Angeles.

The historical roots of the Hare Krishna movement in America can be traced to Bengal, India, in the sixteenth century. While aligned with the more prevalent forms of Hinduism, the Krishna Consciousness preached by ISKCON's founder traces its beginnings to the Krishna bhakti movement founded by Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Caitanya revived the devotional form of Hinduism (bhakti yoga) emphasizing that love and devotional service to God were the means by which one could gain spiritual realization. Instead of seeing him as one of several gods, Caitanya and his followers made Krishna the supreme manifestation of God. In a major split from other forms of Hinduism, Caitanya preached that all people, regardless of their caste or station in life, could be self-realized through their activities performed in the service of Krishna.

Caitanya also developed another practice unique to Hinduism, which has proved a trademark of the Krishna movement in America. Growing out of his intense religious passion, Caitanya initiated sankirtana, a practice requiring his followers to venture out into the streets to dance and sing their praises of Lord Krishna. When Prabhupada began his movement in America, sankirtana (preaching, book distribution, and chanting in public) became the principal means of spreading Krishna Consciousness.3

The spiritual goal of Hare Krishna devotees is to escape birth in the material world and go back to Godhead. Because of material contamination, the soul is forced to assume a continuous succession of rebirths. To escape the laws of karma and break the cycle of reincarnation, devotees seek to perfect their spiritual lives by controlling their senses. This is done under the direction of a spiritual teacher, or guru. The bhakti yoga process involves a number of religious practices directed toward purifying the soul. Central to this process of self-realization is chanting the Hare Krishna mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. At the time of initiation from a guru, devotees commit themselves to chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra daily, on a string of japa, or prayer beads. They must also abstain from eating meat, illicit sex (sex other than for the propagation of God-conscious children), taking intoxicants (i.e., cigarettes, alcohol, tea, coffee, drugs), and gambling. Although no longer a mandatory requirement, many ISKCON devotees take part in a morning worship program beginning in the temple at 4:30 A.M. There they worship the deities on the altar, a spiritual plant Tulasi, and their founding guru Srila Prabhupada. One male devotee leads the others in singing various Sanskrit verses to the beat of music provided by devotees playing mrdanga drums and karatals (small hand cymbals). Men and women are strictly segregated in the temple, with men generally standing nearest the altar and women behind them. Between each of the four morning ceremonies devotees busily chant their daily rounds. Punctuating the end of the morning program is a class on Prabhupada's commentaries on the Vedic scriptures.

ISKCON's Growth and Development in America

The fortunes of the Krishna movement have changed rather dramatically since its introduction to America in 1965. From very humble beginnings in New York City, Prabhupada and his followers recruited thousands of members. Along with success, however, came public scrutiny and controversy. By the mid-1970s, ISKCON and other new religions of the period felt the effects of a countermovement of anticultists bent on halting what they saw as the "evil" influence of "sects." Under attack, and facing a downturn in its recruitment and economic fortunes, ISKCON began to decline as a religious organization. Prabhupada's
death, in 1977, further aggravated the movement’s growing sense of crisis. ISKCON's efforts to deal with its decline brought with it negotiation, compromise, and change.

GROWTH AND EXPANSION
The early history of the Hare Krishna movement in America mirrors in many respects the career of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. The war in Vietnam, and the peace movement that grew in opposition to it, sparked the growth of numerous social movements. American values and ways of life faced critical questioning by many young people who began experimenting with a range of alternative value systems and lifestyles. Studies of ISKCON have demonstrated how the movement's early growth in the United States was sustained by recruiting alienated youth from the counterculture. From the counterculture ISKCON attracted mostly Anglo-Americans in their late teens and early twenties from middle- and upper-middle-class families. But with the end of the war, the counterculture began to fade from the American landscape and ISKCON's growth leveled off; membership began to decline in 1974.

The Hare Krishna movement began modestly in New York City in 1965. Prabhupada, or the Swami as he was known by his early followers, turned his proselytizing efforts to the young people living on the Bowery on the Lower East Side. After Prabhupada was observed chanting in Tompkins Square Park word spread amongst the musicians and bohemian crowd of the area. Within a short time, several of Prabhupada's followers helped him establish a small temple on Second Avenue. During this first year in New York, Prabhupada initiated nineteen disciples.

ISKCON underwent radical change after Prabhupada relocated to the emerging hippie community in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Having located a temple in the heart of the district, ISKCON recruited an estimated 150 to 200 converts during its first two years. Because many of these new recruits had only recently migrated to the area, and were without permanent or stable residences, ISKCON's communal structure emerged as a means to hold the young countercultural youth being attracted to Krishna Consciousness. ISKCON's San Francisco organization served as a model for the many devotees who were deployed to other cities across America to establish Krishna temples and recruit members. Being a missionary movement, ISKCON was opportunistic in its recruitment strategies, successfully recruiting in public places and through social networks. By the end of 1975, ISKCON had established nearly forty communities and preaching centers in North America and many more worldwide.

Economically, ISKCON was largely supported by sankirtana, the public distribution of religious literature. During the late 1960s and early 1970s devotees distributed incense or Back to Godhead magazines to the public in exchange for donations. The economics of sankirtana changed greatly in 1971 and 1972, as devotees began to distribute Prabhupada's books in public locations, first in shopping malls and parking lots, and then at major American airports. Book distribution expanded yearly through 1978 and provided large sums of money to bankroll ISKCON's worldwide expansion. One conservative estimate is that ISKCON's communities in North America grossed over thirteen million dollars between 1974 and 1978 on hardback books alone.

Along with ISKCON's successful expansion came charges of brainwashing by anticultists. Although social science evidence provides little or no support for brainwashing explanations of conversion to new religions, such charges did have an impact on ISKCON's American development. Anticult propaganda, widely disseminated by the media, helped reshape the public's definition of Hare Krishna; from a peculiar, but essentially harmless movement, ISKCON came to be identified as threatening and dangerous. Defined as a dangerous cult, ISKCON found it all the more difficult to attract new members and to secure the economic resources necessary to sustain its communities.
DECLINE AND POLITICIZATION

The late 1970s and the 1980s was a period of decline, conflict, and change within ISKCON. Recruitment declined significantly and ISKCON witnessed a sharp downturn in its economic fortunes. Prabhupada’s death, in 1977, only intensified ISKCON’s decline as the movement faced years of conflict and instability in America. By 1982, the level of ISKCON’s North American book distribution was less than half its 1978 peak. The corresponding decline in sankirtana revenues had a devastating effect on ISKCON’s communities. In an effort to bring much-needed revenue into its communities ISKCON developed a number of alternative economic strategies in the late 1970s. In addition to distributing books in public places, devotees began selling record albums, artwork, candles, food, and various buttons supporting sports teams and rock bands. During the Christmas season, ISKCON members dressed as Santa Claus and solicited donations from an unsuspecting public. Book distribution declined sharply when these new and highly profitable forms of enterprise gained favor among most ISKCON leaders. While profitable, these practices also proved controversial both within and outside of the movement. The movement’s critics interpreted these changes as evidence of a basic transformation in ISKCON’s purpose in America: finances and maintenance concerns had come to replace the goal of expanding Prabhupada’s Krishna Consciousness movement.

The death of a charismatic leader is often a turning point in the history of any religious movement, and ISKCON is no exception. Prabhupada’s death brought about widespread factionalism, substantial defection, and schism. In the months preceding his death Prabhupada appointed eleven of his closest disciples to serve as initiating gurus for ISKCON. Following his death, ISKCON’s new gurus took spiritual and political control over specific areas of the world. Each was responsible for initiating disciples in his zone. Beginning in 1978, ISKCON faced a series of guru controversies that threatened to splinter the organization entirely. ISKCON’s political stability was also jeopardized by a growing number of ex-ISKCON members who challenged the very idea that Prabhupada had actually appointed successor gurus.

In 1982, Jayatirtha, the ISKCON guru in England, defected with as many as one hundred of his disciples, after a failed attempt to have one of Prabhupada’s Godbrothers from India brought into ISKCON as an initiating guru. Other leading devotees also left ISKCON to join Sridara Maharaja in the early 1980s; some of these established communities in America. In 1983, after years of controversy that included allegations of drug use and weapons violations in the Berkeley Temple, the guru Hansaduta was expelled from ISKCON. During 1986 and 1987, three other gurus were forced to resign their guruships after charges of sexual misconduct were brought against them. In a well-publicized legal case, ISKCON’s West Virginia farm community, New Vrindaban, witnessed murder and a resulting state and federal investigation. In 1987, ISKCON excommunicated New Vrindaban’s leader Kirtanananda, and no longer recognized his community as part of ISKCON. The community now blends Krishna conscious theology with Christian millenarianism.

After years of controversy, a reform movement emerged in America during the fall of 1984 in an effort to change the existing guru system. The reformers were senior Prabhupada disciples, many of whom were temple presidents in North America. Finally, in 1987, changes were made to the then-existing guru system: ISKCON’s international governing body ruled that all qualified ISKCON members could become initiating gurus and that henceforth gurus could no longer control exclusive geographical zones over which they exercised total political and spiritual authority. The latter arrangement had effectively undermined ISKCON as the appointed gurus were essentially leading their own movements more or less independently of ISKCON. By the end of 1993, ISKCON had more than seventy initiating gurus worldwide. Although reform of the guru system quieted protest throughout much of the movement, controversy remains. An ou-
spoken minority of Prabhupada disciples hold the position that since none of the new gurus are actually maha-bhagavata (qualified gurus) they should initiate disciples only on Prabhupada's behalf. Newly initiated devotees should be considered Prabhupada disciples, rather than disciples of any one of the present gurus.14

NEGOTIATION AND ACCOMMODATION

ISKCON's declining position in America resulted in a number of strategic decisions by the leaders to bring much-needed resources into the movement and its communities. ISKCON faced the need to find a new constituency from which it could enlist new members and mobilize financial support. Without adequate finances, ISKCON also found it difficult to sustain its totalistic communal world: Exclusivity gave way to more flexible and inclusive boundaries as the movement sought negotiation and compromise with the conventional culture.

With declining financial resources available to its communities ISKCON faced a significant turning point in its North American history. No longer could ISKCON afford to maintain its communal lifestyle: Lacking a viable means of internal support most ISKCON members had little choice but to seek outside employment. A 1992 survey of 271 ISKCON members in the United States revealed that over half were employed by non-devotee businesses, or were self-employed. Fewer than a third worked for an ISKCON business, or for a local ISKCON community. Fewer than 5 percent distributed books, or sought donations in public locations. Having outside jobs, many, if not most, devotees have become increasingly independent of ISKCON. Two-thirds of the surveyed devotees resided in housing outside of an ISKCON community, although many did live nearby. Findings from the survey also revealed that ISKCON members employed in outside jobs, as compared to those working in devotee environments, were less likely to regularly chant their rounds, attend religious functions at the temple, or to contribute time working in their local ISKCON community. More than two-thirds reported that work and/or family obligations made it difficult for them to commit more time toward these activities. As these findings suggest, ISKCON's previous sectarian lifestyle and purpose has given way to domesticity: Jobs, family responsibilities, educating children, and the like now largely define the daily concerns of the average ISKCON devotee. This everyday reality has forced ISKCON members to recraft their identities to reflect their involvement in two social worlds previously experienced as hostile to one another. As this has occurred at the individual level, ISKCON's social organization has changed accordingly from a monastic lifestyle to the creation of broad-based, pluralistic communities.

ISKCON has also changed in recent years because of the growth of its East Indian congregation. During ISKCON's early days in America, Prabhupada made little effort to involve East Indian immigrants in his movement. He sought to avoid ISKCON's becoming identified as an ethnic Hindu movement. Prabhupada's goal was to reach out to a wider audience, though, in the end, his movement in America appealed largely to white middle-class youth. The first significant involvement of East Indians occurred in the face of efforts by anticultists to suppress ISKCON in the mid-1970s. For strategic purposes, ISKCON had sympathetic Indian people come forward to counter anticultists' claims that ISKCON was a dangerous cult. Members of the Indian community effectively argued that anticult efforts to suppress ISKCON represented little more than overt acts of persecution against all Hindus in America. Thereafter, ISKCON made a more concerted effort to encourage the involvement of East Indians. ISKCON's temples became places of worship for many thousands of East Indians in America, though few in fact have become initiated disciples of any of ISKCON's gurus. Most limit their involvement to attending the Sunday program at a local ISKCON community where they worship and socialize with other Indian people. Most importantly for ISKCON, its East Indian congregation contributes significant funding to help support local
temples. In a few locations (e.g., Houston, Detroit, Vancouver), Indian people have taken on leadership positions as temple presidents. It is likely that the present “Indianization” of ISKCON will continue in the future, with the possibility that some ISKCON temples in America will become ethnic churches.

Conclusion

Throughout much of ISKCON’s North American history the movement has found itself in a relatively high state of tension with the surrounding conventional society. During the 1970s and early 1980s the general public was suspicious and even outwardly hostile toward ISKCON and some other new religious movements of the period. As a result, ISKCON faced difficulty in mobilizing the resources (i.e., people, power, and money) required to underwrite its expansionary aims. Facing decline, ISKCON undertook a number of strategies requiring it to alter its relationship with the surrounding culture. Without its own economic institutions in place, ISKCON relaxed its formerly rigid boundaries to allow its members to seek outside employment. It also went about the business of building a congregation of East Indian members. By changing in these ways, ISKCON became inclusive and pluralistic, its members as much involved in the conventional society as within ISKCON.

It seems likely that ISKCON’s future development will involve still further changes and growing secularization. ISKCON’s congregation (i.e., lay as opposed to full-time membership) seems destined to expand as the movement’s second generation shows little interest in taking up a monastic lifestyle. This and related trends seem destined to further erode ISKCON’s sectarian purposes and lifestyle. As a result, ISKCON’s uniqueness and overall mission may be threatened. As Rodney Stark reminds us, “To succeed, a new religious movement must not make its peace with this world too rapidly or too fully. A faith too accommodated to worldliness lacks power for continued conversion.”

Notes


2. The question of change in religious organizations is of longstanding interest to scholars of religion. Much of this inquiry has focused on how sects become institutionalized as churches, or more precisely denominations. See, for example, Max Weber, The Sociology of Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Meridian, 1929). For an application to ISKCON, see E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Hare Krishna in America (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 214–20.


7. See E. Burke Rochford, Jr., “Recruitment Strategies, Ideology, and Organization in the


**Suggestions for Further Reading**


