

The Hare Krsna Controversy: Reactions from Mainstream America

This article shall discuss the persecution of the Hare Krsna movement in the United States during the mid 1960s through to the late 1970s. In order to fully understand the persecution of this group, one must first know its history as well as the socio-political climate of the United States during this time.

Overview of the Hare Krsnas

The International Society for Krsna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded by Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada. He was born in Calcutta and studied under Sri Srimad Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Gosvami Maharaja who instructed him to spread Krsna consciousness to the western world (Daner 15, 16). Swami Bhaktivedanta traveled to the United States and arrived in New York City - which along with San Francisco was a haven for members of the counter-culture - in 1965 (Daner 17). He taught in Manhattan's Lower East Side and gained several followers who became known as "Hare Krsnas" due to their *Mahamantra* [*Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare* (Daner 112)] (Daner 17-22). Swami Bhaktivedanta eventually traveled to San Francisco where he taught several icons of the counter-culture such as Timothy Leary [A professor of Psychology at Harvard University (1959-1963) Dr. Leary performed experiments dealing with the usefulness of mind altering drugs (such as LSD) using himself and several of his graduate students as test subjects, which ultimately cost him his position. After he was dismissed from Harvard Leary became an influential member of the counter-culture and a champion for the legalization of psychedelic drugs. He died on May 31, 1996 and is commonly remembered for his controversial statement, "Tune in. Turn on. Drop out." (Wuergler 274-276)] and the rock band the Grateful Dead (Daner 17). ISKCON was officially formed in July 1966.

The Counter-Culture

With the assassination of the American president John F. Kennedy in 1963 much of the optimism that America had in the 1950s was lost. As a result many young people began to feel alienated from mainstream American culture and began to rebel against society's traditional values. They held demonstrations for equal rights, protested the war in Vietnam and the abuse of the environment. Many began to search for inner meaning through Eastern philosophy and by taking narcotics (Stuessy 175-176). These youth embodied what has come to be known as the counter-culture. It was here that ISKCON found many of its followers. ISKCON was opposed to the accumulation of wealth. It encouraged non-violence [While ISKCON did not encourage violence it was not pacifistic. Unlike Gandhi, Swami Bhaktivedanta taught that violence is acceptable, and even necessary, so long as it is in defense. This view is based on Krsna's speech (known as the *Bhagavad-Gita*) to Arjuna on the eve of Battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas as told in the *Mahabharata* (Judah 117)], felt that the United States government needed to be reformed, and that the education system needed to be over-hauled as it devoted too much time teaching students how to acquire wealth (Judah 112-124), all of which appealed to the counter-culture.

The Mainstream

Throughout much of the Cold War the Western World feared everything communist, which included most everything foreign (McCloud 38-39) and were constantly watchful for any infiltrating communist ideology, including religious cults. Starting in the mid-1950s periodicals such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life* began publishing articles warning people of “fringe,” “offbeat” religions and “California Cults.” An article in the April 12, 1965 *Time* even described joining a “fringe” religion as a form of neurosis (McCloud 25-45). These articles continued

through the 1970s. Another article published in *Time* (in 1975) accused The Unification Church [The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity was founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon in Korea in 1954. The group's beliefs are based upon Christianity as well as Moon's biblical interpretations. Due to the group's strict communal living, group weddings, aggressive style of proselytizing and foreign origins it was a popular target for the American anticult movement. Members of the Unification Church are often referred to as "Moonies," a derogatory name referencing the group's founder. (McCloud 127-129)] of "psychological abuse" and "brainwashing" members (McCloud 127) which encouraged and elevated parents' fears that their children could be involved with a dangerous group. Eventually most every new religious movement was considered a dangerous cult which employed coercion and brainwashing on its members (McCloud 127-159). During this time the Hare Krsnas took a large amount of criticism. Members were visibly different from the average American (they shaved their heads and wore saffron robes) and they took vows of poverty and lived communally, practices in direct opposition to the American Dream. The Hare Krsnas were also considered to be promiscuous, sexual deviants, attitudes derived solely from the label that they were a "cult" (McCloud 173) and not grounded at all on the groups teachings, for ISKCON was and is opposed to premarital sex (Judah 124-125).

Brainwashing and Deprogramming

As with virtually all new religious movements of that period the Hare Krsnas were accused of using brainwashing to convert people. The notion of brainwash permeated almost all of the 1970s' culture; from the news to Saturday morning cartoons, brainwashing was everywhere. As with most organizations a number of members who had joined up earlier did leave ISKCON, for not all members of the counter-culture agreed with the group's communal nature, feeling that it hampered their individuality (Judah 13). According to Larry D. Shinn,

some of these former members may have provided “proof” of brainwashing as it is easier to say that they were coerced into joining the group than it is to admit that they chose to join (Gelberg 89-90). To “rescue” members from these cults a process called “Deprogramming” was employed. The *modus operandi* of the deprogrammer was to kidnap a member of a new religious movement and convince them that their beliefs were wrong (McCloud 137), essentially brainwashing the brainwashed. Interestingly, the media and mainstream religions that accused new religious movements of brainwashing converts did point out that deprogramming violated the right to freedom of religion. Although this may have been on account of the fact that many of Ted Patrick’s [News magazines such as *Newsweek* originally recommended Ted Patrick as a deprogrammer as he “removed hundreds of young converts from new religions”] (one of the most prominent deprogrammers of the 1970s) patients were members of small, Christian based groups that were similar to American mainstream religions (McCloud 138-141).

Before his death in 1977, Swami Bhaktivedanta appointed eleven disciples as his successors and instructed them to spread Krsna consciousness throughout the world. By the early 1980s they had established 130 temples outside the United States (Shinn 267).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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Related Topics for Further Investigation

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
Bhagavad-Gita
Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura Prabhupada
International Society for Krsna Consciousness (Hare Krsna)
Krsna
Mahabarta
Vaisnava

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

www.iskcon.com

<http://www.krishna.com/> The official Bhaktivedanta Book Trust web site containing information on Vaisnava philosophy and beliefs.

<http://www.krishna.org/Articles/2000/08/00066.html> An interview with George Harrison about his experiences with ISKCON.

<http://religion-cults.com/Cults/Eastern/E-CULTS.htm#hare> A modern day argument against ISKCON which is very similar to those put forth by the anti-cult movement in the 1970s.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hare_Krishna_Mantra

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISKCON>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._C._Bhaktivedanta_Swami_Prabhupada

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaisnavism>

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