

HARE KRISHNA

THE HISTORY OF THE HARE KRISHNA CULT

Hare Krishna cult is another popular Eastern cult active in Australia today and in other parts of the Western world. This cult became quite popular among many young people in the West in the seventies and eighties, although its popularity has declined somewhat in more recent years. This cult is a part of the Hindu religion, which has been modified slightly to make it more appealing to the Western mind. The Hare Krishna cult began operating in India in the fifteenth century A.D.²²¹ It was founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who was born in 1486. He showed a particular devotion to Krishna, one of the many gods of Hinduism, asserting that he was the chief god. He became a great holy man and was regarded as another incarnation of god.²²²

Krishna cult was first introduced into the Western world by A.C. Bhaktivedanta, Swami Prabhupada. He was born in Calcutta in 1896 and studied Philosophy, English and Economics at the Calcutta University. In 1922 he met a Hindu guru, Siddhartha Goswami, who taught him about Krishna Consciousness. Prabhupada became one of his disciples, and due to his encouragement began to write a commentary on the Indian spiritual classic - Bhagavad-Gita. Goswami encouraged Prabhupada to spread the knowledge of Krishna to the Western world. So Prabhupada left India in 1965 and began his missionary work in New York. His efforts proved very successful, he gained many followers particularly from among the hippies and young intellectuals. He set up headquarters in America in Greenwich village, New York. Among his more notable converts was George Harrison of the Beatles, who did much to popularise the Krishna cult, particularly with his song "My Sweet Lord."²²³ The Krishna cult had particular attraction for drug users. William Petersen says with regards to this:

"While the Swami left his mark on Greenwich Village, the Village also left its mark on Krishna Consciousness. Soon the Village Voice was carrying stories on the movement, and flyers were distributed on the streets, saying, "Stay high forever. No more Coming Down. Practice Krishna Consciousness. End all Bringdowns. Turn-on through music, dance, philosophy, science, religion, and prasadam [spiritual food]."²²⁴

the establishment of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) in 1965, this cult has spread rapidly through the Western world. Greatly encouraged by the popularity of this cult, Prabhupada started an experimental farming community in West Virginia U.S.A. Since that time many such farming communities have been established around the world, which promote the teachings of this cult. The spread of this cult has been quite remarkable. There are now Krishna temples in most of the major cities of the world. There are devotees of this cult in all the main cities of the Western world.

13.2 HARE KRISHNAS SOURCE OF AUTHORITY.

Hinduism's primary source of authority is the Indian Vedic Scriptures. The oldest book of these Vedic Scriptures is the Rig-Veda, which contains over a thousand hymns of praise. This book was written about 800 years before the birth of Christ and the hymns it contains are thought to be much older than the book itself.²²⁵ Among other important religious books in Hinduism are the Upanishads, which were written between 700-300 B.C. These books seek to explain the meaning of reality. They argue that the only true reality is Brahma, and the physical universe is to be regarded as essentially an illusion.²²⁶ Hindus believe that their Vedic Scriptures predate all other sacred writings in existence, including the Holy Bible. They believe that those who are serious about truth should learn the Vedic Scriptures, for in them is found true knowledge. Krishna's accept all these Hindu writings, but place special reverence upon the Bhagavad Gita, an eighteen chapter Hindu poem which tells the story of Krishna.

13.3 THE KRISHNA'S CONCEPT OF GOD.

The Krishna cult is simply a sect of Hinduism, and their conception of God is basically that of Hinduism, with slight modifications. Hinduism has three principal gods, Brahma- the Creator, Vishnu- the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer.²²⁷ The Ancient Hindu Vedic Literature teaches that Krishna is one of the nine incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Hindus believe that Vishnu has manifested himself in a number of forms, sometimes in animal form and sometimes in human form. In human form he has manifested himself as Rama, Buddha and Krishna. Pictures and statues of him show him as a man usually playing a flute. He has black skin, bluish hielotus eyes, blooming youthfulness and a pearly white smile. It is said by his devotees that he is the prototype and the source of beauty.

The Krishna cult differs from mainline Hinduism in a number of respects with its view of the nature of the gods. Unlike mainline Hindus, Hare Krishnas believe that Krishna is the supreme god. Chaitanya, who founded the Krishna cult,

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broke with traditional Hinduism, in declaring that Krishna, was not simply one of the many incarnations of Vishnu, but as supreme among all the gods. So the Hare Krishna cult regards Krishna as supreme over all other Hindu gods. Note what Prabhupada said of Krishna:

"He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. No living entity, including Brahma, Lord Shiva, or even Narayana, can possess opulence as fully as Krishna..... No one is equal or above Him. He is the primeval Lord And He is the supreme cause of all causes... the Absolute Truth."228

Not only do the Krishna devotees believe that he is the most powerful Hindu god, but they also break with mainline Hinduism in asserting that Krishna is a personal god. The Krishna cult is an exception in Hinduism, in stressing the personal relationship that may be had with Krishna. In this respect the Krishna movement lies closer to Christianity than other branches of Hinduism.

The Hare Krishna's acceptance of the existence of many gods, with Krishna as their supreme god is inconsistent with the teaching of the Bible. For the Bible does not teach the existence of many gods, but of the existence of the one true God. Isaiah said:

"This is what the Lord says - Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God". (Isa. 44:6)

There are not many gods, but there is One Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, who has revealed Himself through the Holy Scriptures.

13.4 HARE KRISHNA'S DOCTRINE OF SALVATION.

Hare Krishnas do not regard salvation in the same sense as Christians. To understand the way Hare Krishnas view salvation one must understand the Hindus conception of reality. Some Hindus conceive of god in a purely impersonal force. Such Hindus regard the world and the material universe as a grand illusion. Salvation in their view is freeing oneself from the false idea that the world is real. Among the traditional beliefs of Hinduism, is what is known as maya.229 According to this belief the world is an illusion and salvation is freeing oneself from the great deception that the world is real. The hope of Hinduism is to finally be free of the grand illusion and be absorbed back into Brahma. When this takes place the soul will lose its identity.

The other Hindu conception, of which the Hare Krishna sect is an expression, regards the world as an illusion. However, they do not believe that the gods are impersonal, and they believe that the soul is immortal; and their great hope is to achieve to the Krishna heaven, where their souls will remain forever in the presence of Krishna. As Pradhupada has said:

Persons who are led by the material conception of life do not know that the aim of life is realisation of the Absolute Truth..... Such persons are captivated by the external features of the material world, and therefore they do not know what liberation is.230

How can a person be liberated from this great deception of believing in the existence of this material world? How can the soul get to the Krishna heaven? Krishnas believe that the best way for the soul to find liberty from the body is by devotion to Krishna. The key to this liberty is gaining Krishna Consciousness. Krishnas demonstrate their devotion to Krishna by constantly chanting the names of Krishna. Through the constant chants of the various names of their god, the Krishna convert eventually goes into a state of trance-like ecstasy. He feels that he is liberated from his body and is suspended in a state of pure spirit. At this point, self is totally abandoned and the person is lost in god. In Hinduism this is called bhakti yoga, which is a method of achieving union with God through the discipline of devotion. This practice is thought to release the person from the illusion of the world. By this practice the Krishna devotee will eventually see the world to be simply an illusion. 231

Devotion to Krishna is also achieved by strict asceticism, as seen in the lifestyle of a Hare Krishna. There are four basic rules or prohibitions for Hare Krishna devotees. Maurice Burrell outlines them:

"Rule one forbids all forms of gambling, various sports, and conversations not associated with the development of Krishna Consciousness. Members of the sect do not readily engage in small talk!

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Rule two forbids the use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, tea and coffee. There is some relaxation in the case of drugs when they are prescribed by a doctor for medical purposes. Rule three forbids illicit sex. This prohibition is surprising, however, in that it not only forbids pre-marital sex, as we should expect, but also sexual acts between married couples except for the procreation of children. Moreover, even in the case of married couples wishing to have children, intercourse must be undertaken only at the prescribed time each month and with the prior permission of the couple's spiritual superior. Before such intercourse, husband and wife are expected to prepare themselves by special devotions and must take care to do their best not to enjoy the act itself.

Rule four prescribes vegetarianism. Meat eaters, the movement believes, will be reborn either as animals, or as human beings destined to meet a violent end. The devotee is therefore expected to live almost entirely on a diet of milk, nuts, yoghurt and fruit. As they eat this, Krishna's energy is believed to flow through them."232

It is perfectly evident that Hare Krishnas have a doctrine of salvation that is based on human effort. They have no need of a Saviour for under their system man is completely capable of securing his own salvation, by means of Krishna consciousness. How different is their doctrine from the glorious doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul so states the Christian view of salvation in his letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves it is the gift of God. (Eph 2:8)

13.5 HARE KRISHNAS BELIEVE IN REINCARNATION.

Hare Krishnas, in keeping with their fellow Hindus, believe in reincarnation. They believe that the soul of a person is reincarnated as something else after he dies. They believe in the law of karma. According to their idea if a person during their lifetime has gained Krishna Consciousness he will upon death be transferred to the Krishna heaven - Krishnaloka, where he or she will be spend eternity with Krishna. Prabhupada explained this belief in the following way:

"At the time of death, the consciousness he has created will carry him on to the next type of body. If he has made his consciousness like that of a cat or a dog, he is sure to change from his human body to a cat's or a dog's body. If he has fixed his consciousness on godly qualities he will change into the form of a demigod. And if he changes his consciousness into Krishna consciousness, he will be transferred to Krishnaloka in the spiritual world and will be with Krishna."233

13.6 LIFE IN THE HARE KRISHNA CULT

Before a person is allowed into the cult, he must prove himself worthy by demonstrating his devotion to Krishna. So there is a six month probationary period for the initiate, during which time he is required to live in a Hare Krishna commune. Life in this commune is very strict. The novice will be required to render perfect obedience to the one whom Krishna has set over him. He is set various daily chores to do. After successfully passing through this probationary period, the novice is then subjected to an elaborate initiation ceremony. Seven kinds of grain are thrown into the fire built in the middle of the room, and butter is poured on top. After chanting the prescribed mantra the initiate is then given a new name in Sanskrit and receives the holy beads, which he is expected to wear for the rest of his life. Six months later, the initiate is required to undergo another initiation known as Brahminical initiation. At this stage the initiate is given a sacred thread to be worn over his left shoulder and across his chest. He is also given a secret mantra, which he is required to chant three times a day, in addition to the regular Hare Krishna chant. For those who are particularly devoted they can go a step further, taking vows of poverty and celibacy. Such a devotee is also required to go around preaching and doing good works. At every level of membership in the Krishna cult, life revolves around the temple. Within this building all live under the strict surveillance of the temple president. There is complete segregation of the sexes in every aspect of temple life. In this cult men are regarded as superior to women, and women are expected to submit obediently to their menfolk. 234

13.7 A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE HARE KRISHNA CULT.

It is important for Christians to understand that there are major differences between the beliefs of the Hare Krishna cult and those of Christians. The most fundamental is that Christianity is monotheistic and the Hare Krishna cult is polytheistic. Prabhupada's commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita demonstrates that he believed in the existence of many gods. He refers specifically to Agni, the god of fire; to Brahma, the chief among the demi-gods; to Indra, the king of the heavenly planets; to Lakasmi, the goddess of fortune; to Manu, the father of mankind; to Shiva, the god of

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destruction, and Vivasvan the sun god.²³⁵ In contrast to this Christians affirm the existence of only one Almighty God, as so clearly taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

"There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgressions, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal most just and terrible in his judgments; hating all sin and who will be no means clear the guilty."²³⁶

Another major difference between Christianity and the Krishna cult is in their regard of the physical world. Prabhupada and his disciples follow the Hindu doctrine of maya, in that, they look upon the material world as an illusion. In their understanding man's great need is to rise above this grand illusion. In contrast Christians believe that God created the heavens and the earth. They do not regard them as illusions but as having real existence. Unlike Hindus, Christians do not confuse creation with God Himself, they regard God as infinitely above creation.

Christians and Krishnas also have very different ethical views. Christians, for example, do not support the view that sex in marriage is only proper when performed to produce children. Christians believe that sex is to be enjoyed by a married couple, irrespective of whether it may produce children. Thus, a man and woman may properly engage in sex after the woman is incapable of bearing children. Nor could it support the view that husbands and wives should make every effort not to enjoy sexual relations. Christians believe that sex is a gift from God, to be shared between partners within a loving marriage relationship. The Krishna view of marriage and sex is most destructive to a good healthy relationship between husband and wife.

²²¹William Petersen *Those Curious New Cults* Keats Publishing, Inc, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1973, p.140

²²²ibid p.144

²²³ Maurice C Burrell op cit pp. 108,109

²²⁴ibid p.141

²²⁵Johannes G Vos op cit p.33

²²⁶ibid p.33

²²⁷Maurice Burrell *The Challenge of the Cults* op cit p.110

²²⁸ibid p.111

²²⁹Maurice Burrell op cit p.112

²³⁰ibid p.112

²³¹William Petersen op cit p.144

²³²Maurice Burrell op cit p.114

²³³ibid p.113

²³⁴ibid p.117ff

²³⁵ibid p.120

²³⁶Westminster Confession of Faith (2:1) pp.25,26