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We Are Not These Bodies:  
Identity and Transcendence among American Devotees of Krishna

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## **Content and Purpose of this Paper: The Devotee's Identity as Spirit-Soul**

This study focuses on the beliefs and practices of American members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly called the Hare Krishnas. Many Americans misunderstand the history and beliefs of the Hare Krishnas. Particularly in the early years of ISKCON's presence in America, many concerned “anti-cultists” reacted against what they viewed as a dangerous cult and threat to American values. While this paper is not an overt attempt to negate these ugly stereotypes, I do hope to demystify the beliefs and practices of a school of thought that has inspired American truth-seekers for more than fifty years.

The devotees I researched live in the Cleveland metro area in the United States, but many of their beliefs and activities center around a philosophy expounded by ISKCON's founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, born in Calcutta, India in 1896. Prabhupada arrived in the United States in 1966 to preach a philosophy based on thousands of years of writings passed down through the Vedic tradition of India. ISKCON is unusual, therefore, in that its founder left India to become a missionary in the West.<sup>1</sup> While most Americans are familiar with the concept of (usually Christian) missionaries leaving the U.S. to preach in Asia, few of us pay attention to the Asian theologians who have arrived in the West to share their philosophies with us.

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I am aware of the rejection, by Edward Said and others, of the simplistic East-West/ Orient-Occident dichotomy. I use the term “West,” without the scare quotes, because Prabhupada and other insiders also use such terms in their conversations and writings. Insider's use of East-West dichotomies has little to do with Said's concern over “Otherizing” a foreign people.

Accusations of cultism aside, some Americans have also voiced the concern that Krishna and His cult belong to India, and consequently Americans can never fully understand Him. Efforts by Americans to understand and, more deeply, to love Krishna may be interpreted as cultural appropriation or an attempt to seem cosmopolitan. Allow me to demonstrate the issue with a story from personal experience.

During my junior year of college, I lived with a second-generation Taiwanese-American student deeply affected by white privilege and institutionalized racism in the United States. At that time, I had several posters of Krishna from India, as well as some hand-drawn pieces, hanging above my bed. The student and I rarely talked about spirituality, and I was surprised to discover, at the end of the year, that my posters had offended him. He argued that, because I am not Indian, I cannot fully understand an Indian god. He said, “Krishna isn’t Jesus,” implying that I was adhering to Western understandings of God, simply dressed in the Indian form of Krishna. In his opinion, the Krishna posters on my walls were a form of cultural appropriation.



*Illustration 1: One of my hand-drawn pictures of Krishna with His female consort, Radha.*

ISKCON members disagree with my roommate’s claim, and while acknowledging that the issue of cultural appropriation cannot be dismissed lightly, this paper seeks to understand

their perspective. I attempt to do so by detailing how Cleveland ISKCON practitioners, many of whom are not what most people would consider “Indian,” understand the relationship between their social identities and religious practice. I wanted to discover whether the local devotees would identify as Americans, as Indians, or as Hindus. In the end, I realized that understanding devotee's identity actually involves thinking outside, or transcending, such boundaries between nations and between religions. Prabhupada says in his writings that “we are not these bodies,” and devotees often repeat the maxim, which is very important within ISKCON. This paper discusses the meaning of “body” within ISKCON as well as the methods for transcending it. Since American, Indian, and Hindu are considered by ISKCON members to be designations for the material body, many devotees work to eliminate such terms from their thinking altogether. By identifying with their spirituality instead of their material surroundings, devotees believe they can sever the bonds that trap souls in the world of illusion.

This paper suggests, then, that while outsiders speak of the Krishnas in terms of Indian-American and Hinduism-cult dichotomies, the devotees themselves support a transcendental philosophy that erases group boundaries of nation, religion, and even species. I discuss devotees' attempts to transcend group distinctions by viewing themselves as immortal souls transmigrating from one species of life to another, birth after birth. In particular, I focus on the connections between religion and nation-states, the boundaries that nationalist and sectarian thinking create between groups, and the attempts of Cleveland-area devotees to transcend such boundaries. My analysis is grounded not only in the reading of Krishna texts, but also in my personal experiences with local devotees.

### **Methods: Literary and Participatory Experiences with Krishna Consciousness**

I initially became interested in Krishna consciousness while studying abroad in India the

spring semester of my sophomore year, because one of the American girls in my program was a devotee of Krishna. At that time I was unfamiliar with the American stereotypes of the Krishnas. I attended my first Krishna *kirtan* in India, completely unaware that Krishna temples in the United States had been offering similar services for almost fifty years.

One year after I returned from India, I saw posters around Oberlin College advertising its first-ever Bhakti Yoga Society (BYS) gathering at Fairchild Chapel. The Society was founded by a fourth-year Oberlin student who had been engaged in Krishna worship since high school. I enthusiastically began attending meetings, and when it came time to apply for honors, I knew that I wanted to craft my thesis around Krishna devotion in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of my research for this project, I have visited three ISKCON temples and three pan-Hindu temples in the United States. In particular, I have regularly attended the “Wednesday program,” a weekly event that includes *kirtan* (singing/chanting), lecture, and *prasadam* (spiritualized food), at Prabhupada Manor in Cleveland. My attendance at this program has been made possible by the generosity of the many devotees who offered me rides between Oberlin and the Cleveland temple, at least thirty minutes each way. I have also attended nearly every BYS Sunday service since the Society's inception in the spring semester of my junior year. My field research comprised hundreds of informal conversations with devotees as well as outsiders. I kept intensive field notes, making an effort to record my observations and conversations as quickly and thoroughly as possible following the field experience.

Aside from this fieldwork, I have read dozens of books on the subject of Krishna consciousness. Many of these were books written by Prabhupada, but I also took ample

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I am greatly indebted to Nārāyaṇa, the adult devotee who leads Oberlin's BYS programs, for his insights into the Hare Krishna Movement, as well as for his willingness to proof-read my thesis for factual errors.

advantage of secondary sources, including ethnographies, personal memoirs, histories, and ancient Hindu texts translated by scholars other than Prabhupada. Some of the books I read about Krishna were not affiliated with ISKCON. Many of these, such as the brilliant works of Swamis (teachers) Vivekananda and Ramakrishnananda, were written before ISKCON's creation in the 1960's. I have also obtained information from literary sources other than books, including websites, newspapers, films, and pamphlets or handouts from ISKCON gatherings.

When I talk to friends and family about my project, I am frequently asked, “Are you a Hindu?” or, “Are you a devotee?” or, “Well, do you believe it?” These questions reflect the postmodern concern with the position of the observer, in this case the anthropologist.<sup>3</sup> Though I do not self-identify as a devotee of Krishna, many devotees have interpreted my reluctance to classify myself as spiritual humility and continue to see me as an ISKCON member. I practice with them regularly and occasionally chant or offer *prasadam* on my own, and among ISKCON members practice matters more than belief. I by no means, however, follow all of the procedures that ISKCON requires for the spiritual growth of its members. This does not necessarily disqualify me from membership, because many, perhaps even *most*, spiritual seekers do not follow all the rules of their religion. In the paper I attempt to be as honest as possible about myself and my experiences. The reader may decide for him or herself whether I qualify as a devotee of Krishna.

## **ISKCON History and Philosophy**

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In addition, these questions reflect sectarian thinking that assumes Krishna consciousness to be mutually exclusive from other religions or philosophies. They also assume that one cannot hold two conflicting beliefs at once. This paper argues that an exclusive, sectarian understanding of Krishna consciousness does *not* reflect devotee's understanding of their beliefs and practices.

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in the United States in 1966, but the philosophy of ISKCON extends back to Krishna’s lifetime some 5,000 years ago, according to devotees. Krishna’s life had two main phases. As a child, He lived with His aunt Yasoda and uncle Nanda in pastoral Gokula (Ramakrishnananda [1898]:11). Everyone in Krishna’s village, most of whom were cowherds, thought of Krishna as an ordinary child and loved him as their own friend or kin. According to Swami Ramakrishnananda, “their natural affection towards him made them frequently forget his superhuman character,” and today’s devotees also privilege their personal, loving relationship with Krishna above the awe inspired by His infinite power (Ramakrishnananda [1898]:25). Krishna frequently performed miraculous feats, however, thereby proving his status as “the Supreme Personality of Godhead,” as many ISKCON members call Him. Such miracles include the slaying of multiple demons, lifting of Govardan Hill, and revealing of the entire universe in His mouth.

The young version of Krishna is also famous throughout India and elsewhere for His tendency to steal butter and milk from the *gopis*, or the cowherd women of Gokula. In His adolescence, He performed amorous pastimes with the young *gopis* in the forest outside of the village. Krishna was a naughty, playful, but much beloved child, and though we human beings should *not* imitate many of His behaviors, His relationships in Gokula provide us with examples



*Illustration 2: Young Krishna in Gokula, courtesy of Krishna.com*



of personal, intimate relationships that we can form with God. Scholar David R. Kinsley talks about Krishna's "divine play," remarking that "God, like the child (in this case, as a child), belongs to a world that is not bound by social and moral convention, a world where fullness and bounty make work superfluous" (Kinsley 1975:15). God is seen as a trickster, a lover, belonging to a "joyous realm of energetic, aimless, erratic activity that is pointless, yet significant" (Kinsley 1975:15). In the same way does God create the universe in which we live; our universe is His eternal play. It is "pointless, yet significant" in that God's actions are not bound by reason as are human actions, yet we must not disregard His creation for its lack of purpose.

During the second phase of his His life, Krishna ruled over the Yadu kingdom of Dvārakā. He had 16,108 queens and maintained each of them in her own palace (Prabhupada 1996 [1970]:65). As a king, Krishna advised his cousin Arjuna on the battlefield of Kuruksetra in a dialogue that would eventually become the famous *Bhagavad-gita*, one of the most popular scriptures in India. In Prabhupada's words, the *Bhagavad-gita* teaches "five basic truths," namely "what God is, what the living entities are, what [material nature] is, what the cosmic manifestation is and how it is controlled by time" (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:7). The *Bhagavad-gita* is probably the most important text for ISKCON members, with the lengthy *Srimad Bhagavatam*, which includes a description of Krishna's youth in Gokula, as a close second. These two scriptures belong to a larger Hindu literary tradition called the *Vedas*.

Several thousand years after Krishna's disappearance from this earth, Lord Sri Krishna Caitanya Mahaprabhu was born in 1486 in Bengal (Prabhupada 1989:23). Devotees believe that Lord Caitanya was Krishna Himself, come to preach a philosophy of devotion for the modern age (called *Kali-yuga* in the Hindu time cycle). Caitanya promoted a process called *sankirtana*, or the devotional, congregational chanting and singing of Krishna's names. The most famous

chant within ISKCON today is the *Maha-mantra*, which includes only three words: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Devotees will chant these words over and over on a string called *japa* beads, much like the Christian rosary. One-hundred and eight chants equals one “round,” and initiated devotees are expected to chant at least sixteen rounds a day, a process taking anywhere from two to three hours. The *Maha-mantra* is also sung communally during temple services.

Caitanya’s message, according to ISKCON members, was carried down through *parampara*, or disciplic succession, until it reached the aforementioned teacher, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Prabhupada was born in Calcutta, India in 1896 (Prabhupada 1984:139). He was initiated by his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Gosvami Maharaja, in 1933 (Prabhupada 2006 [1972]:5). Three years later, just days before his death, Bhaktisiddhanta Swami asked Prabhupada to spread Krishna consciousness in the West (Prabhupada 2006 [1972]:5). Prabhupada waited three decades to fulfill the mission of his spiritual master.

In 1965 and at the advanced age of seventy, Prabhupada arrived in the United States for the first time in his life. He had no more than a few U.S. dollars and practically no contacts in the States. By mid-1966, however, he had accumulated enough friends and students to open his first temple in New York City. The now-famous temple on Second Avenue in New York's Lower East Side was originally a shop called “Matchless Gifts” (Squarcini 2004:8). Young Americans began to congregate at the Second Avenue temple for *kirtan* (singing/chanting), discussion, and *prasadam* (spiritualized food).

Later in 1966, a group of newly converted devotees moved to San Francisco to open the first ISKCON temple on the West Coast (Squarcini 2004:9). A few years later, Prabhupada sent

some devotees to London to open another temple there. As fortune would have it, the devotees met The Beatles in London, and the famous rock band helped the “Hare Krishnas” gain popularity. They also helped to finance temples in England. In only a few years, Prabhupada's movement had become international. Today there are around fifty ISKCON centers and rural communities in the United States alone, and many more scattered throughout more than eighty different countries (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:716-17).

Undoubtedly, ISKCON experienced many setbacks as well as successes in its early years. During the 1970's and 80's, the Hare Krishna Movement fell victim to what anthropologist Larry D. Shinn calls “the great American cult scare” (Shinn 1987:13). Anti-cultists Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman listed the “Hare Krishnas” as one of the “largest and most dangerous cults” in the United States, along with the Moonies, the Way, the Divine Light Mission, and Scientology (Shinn 1987:18). ISKCON was accused of “brainwashing” its members into mindless “robots” or “zombies” through hours of repetitive chanting<sup>4</sup> (Shinn 1987:19).

Some concerned Americans, most famously Ted Patrick, kidnapped devotees from the temples and forced them to undergo a process of “deprogramming” in which devotees were submitted to “physical restraint, sleep deprivation, stripping of all vestiges of cult dress and artifacts, and intense interrogations [and] sometimes food deprivation, physical abuse, and threats of harm” (Shinn 1987:155). One of the most striking cases, to me, involved a kidnapped devotee who was forced to eat hamburgers and french fries during deprogramming, despite ISKCON's avowed vegetarianism. The labeling of ISKCON as a “cult” fueled the ignorance and stereotyping already associated with an imported, and consequently foreign and unusual,

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Detractors failed to realize that chanting is one of the most common meditative practices in India, even outside of ISKCON. The accusation of “brainwashing” through chanting is ethnocentric, privileging Western spiritual practices above those of India.

religion. Shinn's book, *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America*, discusses the cult scare in greater detail and attempts to negate the negative stereotypes associated with the Hare Krishnas.

On top of the cult stereotypes, ISKCON members faced much distaste from the American public due to their money-raising techniques. In fact, when I tell American adults that I am studying the Hare Krishnas, the most common reaction is something like, "Oh, those people who used to harass us in airports!" While ISKCON's presence in airports and other public places originally began as an attempt to raise spiritual awareness through book distribution, tactics changed when the organization faced financial problems (Rochford 1985:186). Eventually, many ISKCON members were forced to lie about their identities (i.e. dress in Western clothing) and to sell goods unrelated to ISKCON's mission, all in the name of raising funds. Ex-devotee Nori J. Muster discusses the reluctance with which many ISKCON members collected funds in her autobiography, *Betrayal of the Spirit*. She laments the various tactics used to increase revenue, including the wearing of wigs and Western clothing, guru-sponsored "marathons" which devotees could win by collecting the most *lakshmi* (money), deception and even, for the female devotees, flirtation (Muster 1997:35-36).

The unsavory money-raising practices of American devotees grew to such monstrous proportions that the airports and other public places began to file lawsuits against ISKCON. In 1978 O'Hare International Airport in Chicago was closed to devotees attempting to raise money, and in 1981 the U.S. Supreme Court (*Heffron v. ISKCON*) ruled that devotees could no longer distribute literature or solicit donations at state fairs (Rochford 1985:187). The bad press did little to remedy ISKCON's already tenuous reputation.

In 1977 in Vrndavana, India, Prabhupada died, leaving behind, as Squarcini and Fizzotti

eloquently put it, “5,000 initiated disciples, thousands of sympathizers, about a hundred centers throughout the world, impressive temples, and a deep and burdensome spiritual legacy” (Squarcini 2004:12). His legacy was “burdensome” not only because of the brewing anti-cultist sentiment and corrupt money raising practices in the United States, but also because Prabhupada's death sparked a guru succession crisis in ISKCON that lasted more than a decade.

A few months before his death, Prabhupada authorized eleven *rtviks* (officiators) to perform initiation ceremonies in the event of his absence (Squarcini 2004:13). Though he requested they act as his representatives, *not* his successors, after Prabhupada's death the eleven disciples began to reign over their respective constituency with a strict, often corrupt, authority. The book *Monkey on a Stick* provides a thorough account of the corruption and illegality within ISKCON during the 1970's and 80's, and its publication in 1988 caused a stir among outsiders and devotees alike. A brief list of the offenses committed by the elevens *gurus* and their devotees at this time includes drug dealing and consumption, illicit sexual activity, child abuse, and even murder.

None of these activities are condoned by ISKCON, as Prabhupada encouraged strict self-discipline during his lifetime. His devotees were expected to refrain from sex, even within marriage (except for procreation), and intoxicants of all kinds, including caffeine. The *guru's* abuse of power led to the “guru reform movement” of 1984-1987 (Squarcini 2004:17). Today, there are many more *gurus* in ISKCON, and none of them have the same power or authority as Prabhupada, whom they regard as the greatest recent teacher of Krishna consciousness.

Today ISKCON appears in the news much less frequently than it did in its first twenty years in America. Among outsiders of my own generation, I am much more likely to hear, “The Hare Krishnas... those people who cook the really good vegetarian meals!” than the frustrated

quips about airport solicitation. Devotees now generally raise money through their day jobs as opposed to fundraising, and in 2004 Squarcini and Fizzotti estimated that some three quarters of devotees internationally “adhere to ISKCON principles from an external lay position” as opposed to a monastic lifestyle in the temples (Squarcini 2004:34). The devotees I know in Cleveland and elsewhere are all “householders” with professions and family lives just like other Americans. They attend “programs,” meetings with other devotees, when they can, and they try to chant sixteen rounds of *japa* each day, read Prabhupada’s books regularly, and maintain a vegetarian, intoxicant-free diet.

### **Anthropological Discussions of ISKCON**

The handful of anthropological and sociological studies written on the Hare Krishnas, while informative and relatively unbiased, in my opinion fail to address the spiritual essence of Krishna consciousness: its focus on transcendence. I have already mentioned Larry D. Shinn's *The Dark Lord*, which attempts to negate outsider's accusations of ISKCON as a cult. E. Burke Rochford, Jr.'s *Hare Krishna in America* also discusses ISKCON in relation to prevailing accusations of cultism. It also focuses on recruitment strategies. Francine Jeanne-Daner's *The American Children of Krsna* also discusses recruitment, viewing youth's conversion to Krishna consciousness as a rejection of the “materialism, rationalism, and the almost religious acceptance of science espoused by their parents” (Daner 1974:1).

While the aforementioned ethnographies effectively address issues of social concern, I suspect that many devotees would feel these books have rather missed the point. The devotees I know would explain their conversion not as a rebellion against the ethics of their parents. They joined because they believed that Prabhupada's words were true. They seek not to react against contemporary culture, but to transcend it.

Cleveland devotees have used the expression, “the proof is in the pudding.” In their minds, scholarly discussion means little compared to the feelings of bliss experienced during chanting and singing. David R. Kinsley's *The Sword and the Flute* attempts to transmit the feeling of Krishna devotion to his readers, but unfortunately his book makes no mention of ISKCON in the United States. Kinsley privileges religious emotion above rational, academic argument, and consequently his approach more closely approximates the experiences of religious practitioners themselves.

In my opinion, it is time to move beyond outdated stereotypes about the Hare Krishnas and to start listening to the rich, thought-provoking theology that ISKCON has to offer. In her essay *Fear of Religious Emotion versus the Need for Research that Encompasses the Fullest Experiences*, Edith Turner discusses the anthropological taboos against scholarly belief in magic, spirits, gods, ghosts, and healing. Turner also mentions her own experiences of being healed by non-biomedical treatments and even goes so far as to declare, “There *is* energy healing” (Turner 2003:116). She encourages anthropologists to retain their rational outlook but not to be so skeptical as to deny the reality of their own firsthand experiences. Agreeing with Turner, I have conducted my field research with the assumption that the beliefs of the Hare Krishnas *could be true*, either entirely or in part. I make no attempt to rationalize or “explain away” their beliefs.

### **Identity and Transcendence among the Hare Krishnas**

*The meaning of “immortal spirit-soul...”*

Krishna devotees will fondly echo Prabhupada's phrase that “we are not these bodies,” and indeed the concept of bodily transcendence may be one of the most important in Krishna consciousness. Some Americans may find, however, that they define the “body” differently than do Prabhupada and many of his followers. In the ISKCON understanding, the “material body” is

composed of two parts: a gross or physical body made out of matter and a “subtle body” which Prabhupada describes as “the mind and psychological effects” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:529). Many Western peoples have a tendency to think of body and mind as a dichotomy, but ISKCON lumps body and mind together, distinguishing them from the immortal soul. Prabhupada explains that in the material world “the spirit soul remains covered by the gross and subtle material bodies” (Prabhupada 1984 [1961]:43).

The subtle body, though not necessarily composed of matter as defined by modern science, is considered “material” as much as the physical one. Devotees attempt to transcend both the gross and subtle material bodies in order to experience the spirit-soul which lives within them. The same type of inner soul sought by devotees is believed to exist also in the lower species. In fact, through the process of reincarnation, or transmigration, one soul continually takes on new bodies, so the spirit soul with which the devotee attempts to connect has actually “worn” other bodies—demigod, demon, human, animal, and plant—in its past lives. The principle of transmigration makes sense only if the soul (the part that transmigrates) differs from the mind. Otherwise, plants and animals would have thoughts and feelings just like humans. Within ISKCON, the mind is understood as an aspect of the material body, and it is the soul which migrates to a different body-with-mind at death.

On the battlefield of Kuruksetra, Krishna expands upon the concept of soul when He reminds Arjuna that those who “die” in battle will actually merely change bodies, with the most God-conscious of the soldiers achieving “spiritual bodies” with which they can live in bliss. Krishna explains, “As the embodied soul continuously passes, in this body, from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into another body at death” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:75). The soul remains unchanged though a person's body changes from youth through old



age. A person's beliefs, attitudes, personality, tastes, and behaviors all change throughout his life, but none of these things should be equated with the eternal, unchanging soul.

But if the soul is neither body nor mind, what *is* it? The question is difficult to answer, even for devotees, and may in fact require a mystical perception to understand fully. We find many clues, however, in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. First of all, the soul is *sanatana*, eternal. Everything else in the material world “comes into being, stays for some time, produces some by-products, dwindles and then vanishes” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:16). In contrast, “the living entity is never born and he never dies” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:17). Readers may note that “eternal” means not only that which stretches on into the future forever, but also that which was “never born” and has always existed, which stretches back into the past forever as well.

In addition to its eternality, the soul has a consciousness similar to that of Krishna (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:9). Devotees say that consciousness is the symptom of the soul which inhabits our bodies, and no body can continue to live after its soul has left. In the material world, however, pure consciousness is covered by material, temporary circumstances “just as light reflected through colored glass may appear to be a certain color” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:10). In ISKCON cosmology, the “material nature” which covers and tints our consciousness has three varieties: ignorance, passion, and goodness. People who act in the mode of goodness will achieve higher birth in their next life, but they will not necessarily achieve Krishna’s eternal abode, which is transcendental to all three varieties or “modes of material nature.”

Prabhupada explains that “when the living entity [soul] now covered by the modes of material nature is freed from ignorance, passion, and so-called goodness, he becomes one with the Absolute Truth” (Prabhupada 1984 [1961]:79). The way to free oneself from material nature is through pure devotion to Krishna, which is always considered transcendental. Even though

devotional service involves practices which appear material—singing, dancing, eating, etc.—devotees believe that when such practices are done only to give Krishna pleasure, they become transcendental. Devotional service, consequently, is believed to restore our consciousness to its original, pure state of love for God. Pure consciousness, because it thinks only of Krishna, is always blissful.

Devotees sometimes talk about the material body in creative ways that refuse to equate body with selfhood. For example, one devotee who was suffering from a cold told me, “My body is sick today.” Another described a man as “having a black body.” To say “I am sick” or “he is black” would imply that the eternal soul could fall ill or could have a color. This paper addresses the ways that American devotees craft their personal identity. When I discuss the selfhood of devotees, I refer not their bodies, but to their immortal spirit-souls. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* souls are also called *jivas* or, simply, the living entities.

During one Oberlin BYS program, Nārāyaṇa demonstrated the ISKCON understanding of selfhood through a trick that Prabhupada used to use. He asked the students to point to different parts of their bodies, like their hands, legs, head, etc. Then he said, “Alright, now point to *you*.” The students were uncertain where to point and consequently did not move. Nārāyaṇa then explained that we speak about our bodies as though they were objects that belonged to us, because *we are not these bodies*. Writer and devotee Steven Rosen explains selfhood in a similar way:

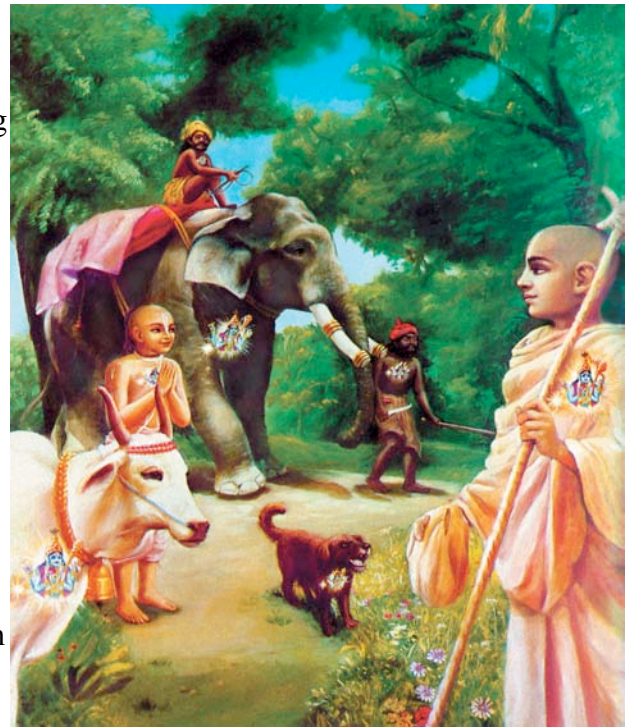
Now, can the body be conscious of itself? The immediate answer is no. My body cannot be conscious of itself; rather, *I* am conscious of *my* body. This simple reflection on the nature of consciousness makes it clear that there is a separation between the body and the self, the living being within who is conscious of the body.

To extend this idea, let us admit that we do not really know if the body is conscious of itself. *We do not know because we are not the body* (Rosen 1997:10).

Rosen’s argument belongs to a large body of philosophical literature dealing with the nature of

consciousness. Devotees use arguments like the one above to justify their beliefs about selfhood. Philosophers and scientists are still debating the origins and nature of consciousness, and of course this paper offers no attempt to prove or disprove the non-materiality of consciousness as supported by ISKCON. Instead I argue that, for many devotees, consciousness is distinct from the body and mind, and this belief affects their behavior in the world.

One image, popular in the ISKCON literature, illustrates the Krishna conscious understanding of soul. In the picture, a sage confronts an assortment of different bodies, including humans, a cow, an elephant, and a dog (Prabhupada 1972:plate 20). Atop each creature's chest, a four-armed, gold-bedecked Ksirodakasayi-Vishnu stares peacefully outward. This glistening deity represents the Supersoul, or the godly element which sits beside the individual soul, within the different animals' bodies. One of the humans stands with his palms pressed together, honoring the sage,



*Illustration 3: "The humble sage sees with equal vision." (Prabhupada 1972:Plate 20)*

while the dog barks menacingly, yet the deity within their hearts looks exactly the same. The caption of this image is, "the humble sage sees with equal vision" (Prabhupada 1972:Plate 20). He sees the soul and not the bodies, so the human being and the barking dog appear equal to him.

*The uniqueness of man...*

According to Prabhupada, the material world contains 8,400,000 different types of bodies through which a soul can transmigrate, from the body of a cat or dog to that of a human being (Prabhupada 1984:14). Our tastes and preferences, as well as our pleasure and suffering, depend upon the type of body we inhabit. According to Prabhupada all animals, including humans, engage in “eating, sleeping, defending, and mating” (Prabhupada 1990:6). Humans differ from animals, however, in their ability to understand and practice religious principles. Of the millions of “material forms” available to spirit-souls, the human form is most conducive to God-realization (Prabhupada 1990:6). Many devotees agree with Prabhupada that the human form is particularly well-suited for the cultivation of God-consciousness, and consequently one must take to devotional practice while he still has the good fortune of wearing a human body.

Over the summer I attended a *Ratha Yatra* festival in Chicago's Loyola Park, where an ISKCON member (with a middle-aged, Indian body) approached me. He assumed that I was unfamiliar with ISKCON, and he used the concept of human uniqueness as a recruitment strategy. He asked me about the differences between humans and animals, and then he explained the human body's special constitution for religion. The fear of failing to use the human life to one's advantage, as well as rebirth in the animal kingdom might inspire neophytes to adopt ISKCON principles, particularly the practice of chanting.

Prabhupada argues, however, that religious practice has declined in this modern age of *Kali-yuga*, the last and most degenerative stage in the Hindu time cycle. Instead of using the human life to worship Krishna, many people are simply finding methods for improving upon the animal activities of eating, sleeping, mating, and defending. Prabhupada critiques modern “progress,” therefore, by comparing it to animal life. He jokes, “A dog is running here and there

on four legs, and you are running on four wheels. Is that progress?" (Prabhupada 1990:5).

Prabhupada says that those who believe themselves at the height of material progress are in fact no better than dogs, because they manipulate the material world to live comfortably while completely ignoring spiritual progress. Why waste this potential to return to Krishna, instead behaving like an animal?

Though animal souls are equal to those of human beings, their bodies are (in most cases) inferior. Prabhupada continues, in *Civilization and Transcendence*, to elaborate upon the ways in which modern humans resemble animals as they pursue food, sleep, sex and defense. He argues that "my sex pleasure and the dog's sex pleasure is the same. Of course, a dog is not afraid of having sex on the street, in front of everyone. We hide it in a nice apartment" (Prabhupada 1990:7). Prabhupada's point is that we need not waste the human form in pursuance of sexual pleasure, because even dogs can enjoy sex. The cultivation of God-consciousness, however, is a higher pleasure than sex, because animals *cannot* enjoy devotional service.

Of the sensual pleasures of fine food, Prabhupada continues, "a pig has a certain type of body, and his eatable is stool...! Let the pig eat *halava* [an Indian sweet]! That is not possible...Can anyone, any scientist, improve the standard of living of a pig?" (Prabhupada 1990:7). A pig with a taste for *halava* is, nevertheless, still a pig. Human beings who eat expensive, fancy foods and live in big houses, similarly, are no better than humans who do not enjoy such finery. In *Kali-yuga*, scientists have helped raise the human standard of living: we now eat more and nicer foods, live in big and fancy homes, sleep in warm beds, etc. While these are material improvements, many devotees consider them spiritual regressions. The difference between a "first-class man," as Prabhupada would say, and his inferiors, is not a matter of wealth

but of spiritual progress.

Though animals cannot understand Krishna consciousness in the same way as human beings, they *can* benefit from interactions with human devotees. Many Cleveland area devotees not only keep house pets, they also give them Sanskrit names and attempt to promote their spiritual growth by chanting around them, feeding them *prasadam*, and even smearing them with *tikal* powder. They generally do not allow animals in their temple rooms, however, as advised by Vedic injunctions translated through Prabhupada. In addition, they refrain from eating meat in order to avoid violence, as recommended by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

During a BYS program at my apartment in Oberlin, my cat Gopal joined our party, curiously sniffing Nārāyaṇa's robes and *mridanga* (drum). I commented that my cat wanted to kiss the "lotus feet" of a pure devotee, but Nārāyaṇa reminded me that Gopal probably just smelled his own cats on his belongings. When I asked if Gopal would receive benefit from hearing our chanting, he responded that any animal that eats Krishna *prasadam* will at least attain human life in its next birth. Many devotees scatter their leftover *prasadam* outside for the benefit of passing birds and squirrels.

A devotee couple outside Cleveland maintains, at last count, around forty alpacas, six birds, five cats, two dogs, and a turtle. Since neither of the pair has joined the renounced order, the last stage of life in which intimate bodily processes like birth and sex are avoided, both devotees excitedly assist their female alpacas in giving birth. The couple will then promptly provide the baby alpaca with a spiritual, Sanskrit name recalling Krishna's life and teachings. These alpacas will never be sold for meat, though some will attend "shows" where they may receive awards for the quality of their fur. I have heard the husband refer to his alpacas fondly as his "kids," and I know that the animals inside the house—the birds, cats, dogs, and turtle—

receive the same care and affection.

Naturally, each of the different animals receives a different type of care, and none of them are treated like humans. The alpacas, of course, must live outside in accordance with their body's warm fur, designed for cold climates. The indoor animals live with humans, but they do not consume human foods (except for the occasional morsel of *prasadam*), attend human functions, or enter the temple room. In terms of their gross and subtle material bodies, the animals are not equal to humans. Only in terms of their immortal souls are the animals equal. According to Prabhupada, we (our spirit-souls) have all “worn” animal bodies in past lives, but the human body is perfect for achieving God-realization.

Mukunda Goswami, one of the earliest American converts to Krishna consciousness, tells the story of the first time that Prabhupada visited his home in New York, in 1966. During the visit, Mukunda's cat Scuzzlebrunzer jumped into Prabhupada's lap, a move which Mukunda, proud that his pet could “perceive such peace in a stranger,” found “quaint.” Mukunda continues:

But the swami pushed him away. Later, when I finally visited India, I thought back to this incident and realized the vast cultural differences between Western and Eastern perceptions of animals. In India, while most people respect animals as spiritual equals, they do not intimately associate with them. Dogs and cats, in particular, are street animals that are considered dirty and generally are not allowed to enter homes or temples (Munkunda 2011:38).

My experiences while studying abroad in India support Mukunda's assessment. Though I met some Indians with dogs as pets, I have never seen an Indian house cat. The vast majority of cats and dogs that I spotted in India were rummaging through garbage in the streets, searching for food. Apparently they weren't having much success, because their frail, thin bodies offended my American sensibilities and filled me with compassion.

Prabhupada's apparent disgust toward animal bodies does not, however, give his devotees

license to mistreat animals. A Krishna devotee will avoid eating meat, fish, or eggs, which are “saturated with the modes of passion and ignorance” (Prabhupada 2004:43). In addition, these foods should *never* be offered to Krishna; they cannot become *prasadam*. Prabhupada explains, “a person who eats these foods participates in a conspiracy of violence against helpless animals and thus stops his spiritual progress dead in its tracks” (Prabhupada 2004:43). Of all the rules and regulations of Krishna consciousness, the ban on meat-eating seems to me one of the most fundamental. I have never seen a Krishna devotee, under any circumstances, eat non-vegetarian food.<sup>6</sup>

In his *Bhagavad-Gita* purports, Prabhupada explains that the principle of transmigration does not condone meat-eating, or any form of violence for that matter. “The Vedic injunction is...never commit violence to anyone,” says Prabhupada, “Nor does understanding that the living entity is not killed encourage animal slaughter. Killing the body of anyone without authority is abominable and is punishable by the law of the state as well as by the law of the Lord” (Prabhupada 1974:82). Though Krishna puts death in perspective by reminding Arjuna that the soul can never be killed, still one must not condone the slaughter of “helpless animals.” Such violence would inhibit the devotee's soul from transcending materiality and achieving eternal bliss with Krishna.

By “the law of the Lord,” Prabhupada refers to the Hindu concept of karma, whereby the actions of one's body in this material world determine his pleasure or suffering in future lives. A

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Prabhupada's promotion of vegetarianism conforms to a tradition that Hindu Brahmins have carried for hundreds of years. During my study abroad in India, I recall learning, with much surprise, that vegetarian food was not for those too poor to afford meat, but rather for the highest castes, especially the Brahmins or priestly caste, who avoid meat, fish, and eggs for spiritual reasons. The Hindu conception of food and its effects on the human body and soul is too complicated to explain fully here, but suffice it to say that the karma which adheres to foods, whether it come from the growers, producers, or the foods themselves, affect the subtle and gross material bodies in ways which bind the soul to *maya*, or the material world. For more information on Hindu food practices, see Khare 1992 and Toomey 1994.



plate in Prabhupada's 1974 *Gita* contains a rather terrifying image of a man with a cow's head raising a bloody ax to slaughter a cow with a man's face, and Prabhupada explains that “animal killers do not know that in the future the animal will have a body suitable to kill them” (Prabhupada 1974:542). According to the Hindu conception of karma, or in Prabhupada's words, “the law of nature,” those who slaughter animals vicariously through meat-eating will pay for their misdeeds in subsequent lives by inhabiting animal bodies themselves. In this unfortunate position, they themselves are liable to be killed and eaten by humans.

To recap, though devotees believe that the human form is most conducive for Krishna consciousness, they treat animals with kindness, acknowledging the spirit-soul within each living being. Their behaviors are influenced by the ISKCON concepts of karma, transmigration, the material superiority of human beings, and the spiritual equality of all creatures. These same concepts affect the ways in which devotees treat other human beings. On the one hand, devotees believe that all humans contain a spiritual spark exactly equal to that within their own bodies. An American might have been Indian in his past life, and an Indian might have been an American. On the other hand, they also believe that their own practices are the most superior methods for God-realization. Humans who support modern progress are compared to dogs (running on four wheels), and humans who refuse to utilize their superior bodies for religion are considered to be lost in illusion, specifically in the three modes of ignorance, passion, and goodness. As I begin to discuss transcendence of nationality and religion, I analyze different bounded groups. Instead of animal and humans, I discuss Indians and Americans, Hindus and Christians. Yet the concepts—the devotee's identity as “immortal spirit-soul”—remain the same.

*The nationality of God...*

Having explained the differences between body and soul, I would like to return to the perspective of ISKCON members regarding the issue of cultural appropriation. First let us consider certain foundations of thought laid during the colonial era, when European powers seized regions not only in India, but all throughout Asia, Africa, and North and South America. As colonizers began to penetrate foreign lands, they encountered different ways for discussing, worshiping, and communicating with God.

West African scholars J. Omosade and P. Dopamu argue that these colonizers believed that Africans worshiped a different God from their own. In order to separate the Christian God from the supposedly false deities of Africa, the term “high-god” was coined “by the Westerners to show that God as conceived by the West African peoples cannot be the same as the Supreme Being of the Bible” (Omosade 1979:13). Rather than understanding unfamiliar practices as different methods of approaching the same God, the God of the entire world, Europeans began to speak of “savages” and “pagans” who could be converted through missionary intervention or, at least, colonial subjugation. Omosade and Dopamu note that, rather than speaking simply of God, we now “have the Christian God, Muslim God, the Western God, the African God, or ‘the primitive God,’” and we speak of these as though they are all different personalities (Omosade 1979:13). But, the authors argue, “West African peoples know that there is only one God of the whole universe” (Omosade 1979:14). Many American devotees of Krishna would agree that God cannot be divided according to one’s religion or nationality.

From a model that assumes there truly is “an American God” and “an Indian God,” the worship of the Indian God by Americans is much more problematic. However, the ISKCON literature and the devotees themselves maintain that Krishna is objectively real. He exists eternally and cannot be confined to a single spacio-temporal arrangement. Moreover, Krishna’s

history and teachings must not be “explained away” as simply another facet of “Indian culture.” Krishna is seen as the Supreme God of *everyone*. Regardless of the name that one uses to call on God, it is indeed Krishna who responds. Krishna says in the the *Bhagavad-gita*, “those who are devotees of other gods and who worship them with faith actually worship only Me” (Prabhupada 1972:380). Krishna's devotees, therefore, agree with the West Africans that “there is only one God of the whole universe,” and everyone who worships God worships Him.

The only relevant dichotomy for devotees is that between the material and the transcendental, and a person's nationality most certainly falls within the “material” category. Prabhupada clearly reiterates my thesis in a pamphlet entitled *Kṛṣṇa: the Reservoir of Pleasure*: “If I identify myself as an American, as an Indian, or this or that, then I am on the material plane. We should identify ourselves as neither Americans nor Indians, but as pure consciousness” (Prabhupada 1989:13). Furthermore, Prabhupada explains that:

Now, if I say, ‘Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Lord,’ you may say, ‘Why is Kṛṣṇa the Supreme Lord? Kṛṣṇa is Indian.’ No. He is God. For example, the sun rises first over India, then over Europe. But that does not mean the European sun is different from the Indian sun. Similarly, although Kṛṣṇa appeared in India, now He has come to the Western countries through this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement (Prabhupada 1990:67).

In this passage, Prabhupada remarks that to call God “Indian,” to assign a nationality to the primordial being, is nonsense. At one time, few people outside of modern-day India had heard Krishna’s name, just as “the sun rises first over India,” but now knowledge of Krishna has spread across the world. We need not associate Krishna with India, when devotees claim that He intended to educate *all people* in the methods of God-realization.

Only several thousand years after Krishna’s disappearance<sup>7</sup> did the Hare Krishna

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Devotees use the word “disappearance” instead of “death,” because they believe that Krishna's body does not undergo birth and death, unlike the bodies of *jivas*.

Movement reach international proportions. Though many humans would consider 5,000 years almost an eternity, this span is but an instant in cosmic terms.<sup>8</sup> The material universe is said to endure for the lifespan of its highest lord, the demigod Brahma, or “by earth calculations” some 311 trillion and 40 billion years (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:340). At the end of Brahma's life the universe dissolves, only to reappear after another 311 trillion and 40 billion years. Prabhupada says that “the life of Brahma seems fantastic and interminable, but from the viewpoint of eternity it is as brief as a lightning flash” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:340-341). From the perspective of the Supreme Lord Krishna for whom trillions of years appear as a “lightning flash,” the 5,000 year gap between Krishna's appearance and His spread across the globe seem negligible.

Only five hundred years ago, Lord Chaitanya predicted that Krishna’s name would one day be “sung in every town and village of the world,” yet “no one could understand what it meant—until Prabhupada arrived” (Rosen 1992:9). With the creation of ISKCON, Krishna's name did in fact spread across the globe, as predicted. In only fifty years, hundreds of temples have been built, scattered across every continent except Antarctica.<sup>9</sup> Today, the movement boasts some 15,000 full-time devotees and 500,000 congregational members outside of India, 350 temples, 40 rural communities, 26 schools, and 75 restaurants in 85 different countries (Prabhupada 1977-2012:342).

Prabhupada refers to ISKCON practices not as “Indian,” but rather as a “spiritual culture”

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For more information on time dilation in the Vedas, see Thompson 1993:302-306.

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For a complete list of ISKCON centers around the world, see Prabhupada 1972, 1983:716-720.

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intended for all living entities. Though such spiritual culture has existed for millennia in the wisdom of the Vedas, including the *Bhagavad-gita*, Prabhupada argues that “this culture of Kṛṣṇa consciousness...had not been preached properly. Everyone had interpreted *Bhagavad-gita* in his own way, to satisfy his own whims” (Prabhupada 1990 [1976]:75). He claims that his own translation of the *Bhagavad-gita* provides readers with access to the scripture “as it is,” and consequently Krishna's teachings are only now being accepted all over the world. Prabhupada says, “Kṛṣṇa had been unknown in the Western countries. Even though we have been attempting to introduce Him for only a few years, still, because it is reality, Kṛṣṇa consciousness is being accepted” (Prabhupada 1990 [1976]:75). Prabhupada's writings promote Krishna as the absolute reality, untouched by national culture, not reducible to an “Indian god.” Moreover, devotees promote a culture found in the lives of Krishna and Lord Chaitanya and as explained in the *Vedas*, not that of modern India.

Devotees consider Krishna to be the ultimate object of worship for all people, even people who call God by different names and worship Him in different ways. However, they still allow for unsanctioned, or downright incorrect, practices within ideologies outside of ISKCON. The following section discusses Krishna's universality through the lens of devotee attitudes toward Christianity. Many people still consider the United States a Christian country, and when ISKCON arrived it had to contend with a Christian worldview that had gained great popularity among Americans. Though many Christians viewed ISKCON as a threat to their spirituality, as we shall see in the following section, Prabhupada consistently maintained that Krishna consciousness and Christianity were compatible.

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See Prabhupada 1984:56, 95,97, 100; and Prabhupada 1972, 1983:50, 127.

### *Krishna meets Jesus...*

During one BYS program at Oberlin, a student asked if he could simultaneously practice both Krishna consciousness and Christianity. He had been attending BYS *kirtans* for a while and usually felt welcome despite his Christian background, yet a few days prior to his question, the student had attended a lecture on spiritual commitment at Prabhupada Manor's Wednesday program. The lecturer had stated that devotees of Krishna ought to accept the philosophy as a whole. They should not merely accept and apply the parts they like, but rather must make an effort to follow *all* aspects of Prabhupada's teachings. The lecturer had used Prabhupada's metaphor of a chicken that provides eggs but must be fed. We cannot simply cut off the chicken's head merely because we do not want to feed it, or else the (dead) chicken will no longer produce eggs for us (Prabhupada 1977-2012:119). Similarly, said the lecturer, we cannot only accept the parts of Krishna consciousness that appeal to us.

The Oberlin student inferred that since much of Krishna consciousness contradicts Christianity, the devotees would discourage his affiliation with the Christian church. On the night that the student asked this question, the mood in the chapel became very serious. The two devotees present, both regulars at the Prabhupada Manor Wednesday program, looked eager but waited for Nārāyaṇa, the leader of the weekly *kirtans* at Oberlin, to speak first. After a brief pause, Nārāyaṇa responded, “Actually, Lord Jesus Christ was a pure Vaishnava.”

The devotees and students present breathed a sigh of relief. We all knew that “Vaishnava” was a title of respect. In *The Science of Self Realization*, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust defines a Vaishnava as “a pure devotee of the Lord,” and Prabhupada himself states that Jesus, who embodied the Vaishnava qualities of tolerance (*titikṣa*) and compassion (*karuṇa*), was “preaching God's glories [and therefore] must be accepted as a guru” (Prabhupada 1977-

2012:124). When Nārāyaṇa called Jesus a “pure Vaishnava,” he affirmed that the Christian teacher was indeed receiving knowledge and power from Krishna.

In order to understand Nārāyaṇa's response to the student's comment, we must first abandon the idea of different world religions as concrete, bounded entities, or as objective realities. In fact, many devotees of Krishna, of whom Prabhupada and Nārāyaṇa are two examples, view religious identification as fluid at least, and often even irrelevant. They emphasize practice—how a person behaves—above that person's beliefs or membership to a certain religious organization.

This more open, practice-oriented approach to religion also occurs among the Hindus of India. Shaunaka Rishi Das, a Hindu priest, offers a wonderful anecdote about the Hindu understanding of Jesus Christ. He recalls a friend who moved from India to England at the age of seven, who was asked by his schoolteacher to tell the class about his favorite Hindu saint:

Enthusiastically he began to tell the story of the saint called Ishu, who was born in a cowshed, was visited by three holy men, performed many amazing miracles, walked on water and spoke a wonderful sermon on a mountain.

Of course, he was telling the story of Christ. But he was bewildered to hear that the teacher laid claim to Ishu for herself and her friends and she let him know that this was her Lord and her story, not his. He was very upset about this, because Ishu's tale was his favourite story (Rishi Das 2009).

In the above vignette, the Hindu boy from India fails to understand his British teacher's conception of religions as closed, bounded systems. He was upset to learn that many Christians in England claimed Jesus for themselves, thinking that their version of Christ's story was the *only* way of understanding the great teacher.

Rishi Das goes on to explain how Hindus see spirituality in terms of “behavior and practice” rather than belief (Rishi Das 2009). Because Jesus was “humble,” “tolerant,” “non-violent,” capable of controlling his senses, and compassionate toward the suffering of others, Hindus accepted him as a *sadhu*, or holy man. The young boy who immigrated to England

viewed Jesus as a Hindu saint. Prabhupada, as we shall see, also measured spirituality by behavior and practice, viewing mere belief as an insignificant qualifier. If Christians believe in the teachings of Christ but refuse to follow them, or similarly if devotees believe in Krishna but do not behave as He instructs, then their spirituality is still weak and useless.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the earliest Hindu missionaries in the United States, preached tolerance of other faiths for followers of Bhakti Yoga more than fifty years before Prabhupada's arrival. Vivekananda held many of the same beliefs of his ISKCON successors, though he did not necessarily privilege Krishna as the supreme form of God. Vivekananda speaks about *bhakti*, or the path love and devotion followed by ISKCON devotees, this way:

The one great advantage of Bhakti is that it is the easiest and the most natural way to reach the great divine end in view; its great disadvantage is that in its lower forms it oftentimes degenerates into hideous fanaticism. The fanatical crew in Hinduism, or Mohammedanism, or Christianity, have always been almost exclusively recruited from these worshipers on the lower planes of Bhakti. That singleness of attachment to a loved object, without which no genuine love can grow, is very often also the cause of the denunciation of everything else. All the weak and undeveloped minds in every religion or country have only one way of loving their own ideal, i.e. by hating every other ideal (Vivekananda 2006:4).

Vivekananda states that Hinduism and Christianity alike have the potential to deteriorate into ugly fanaticism, but his philosophical work, *Bhakti Yoga*, goes on to explain that these religions, if followed correctly, can also both lead to God. Though Hindus and Christians often *say* contradictory things, both religions have the potential to lead their followers to the ultimate goal, a God who transcends language. Vivekananda views God largely as an experience, or “one single moment of the madness of extreme love to God [which] brings us eternal freedom” (Vivekananda 2006:3). Different religious paths lead to the same experience of God, who lies beyond language and even human comprehension.

Vivekananda claims that one who has truly experienced God looks upon all men equally, regardless of their religion. Prabhupada taught the same philosophy of *bhakti* during his mission



in the United States and abroad. In the *Teachings of Lord Caitanya*, Prabhupada lists some qualities of a pure devotee. A true follower of Krishna will always be “equal to everyone...always kind to everyone, and he does not pick quarrels” (Prabhupada 1988:121). He will also have no enemies. Note that language, such as the language used during “quarrels,” can also be a form of practice. The recitation of the Hare Krishna *Maha-mantra*, for example, is probably the most important practice within ISKCON.

Moreover, humility is considered one of the most important qualities for a devotee. One lecture in ISKCON Columbus discussed the important *Srimad-Bhagavatam* verse that advises devotees to be “lower than a blade of grass” and “more tolerant than a tree.” The lecturer mentioned that trees do not even react when dogs urinate on them. For a devotee, this same degree of tolerance and humility is required. I can hardly imagine a devotee of such humility judging Christians or attempting to convert them. I recall an instance when, after having emailed Nārāyaṇa a section of my thesis for his review, I thanked him for his useful comments, and he said he simply hoped he could be of some service. I said, “Of course you are! You know a thousand times more about Krishna consciousness than I do.” In great humility, Nārāyaṇa responded, “All I know is ‘chant Hare Krishna.’” Though Nārāyaṇa and I both know that his knowledge of Krishna greatly surpasses my own, he continually acts as my “servant,” a behavior which further proves his understanding of Prabhupada’s teachings.

Though ISKCON shares similarities with Hinduism in its approach toward Christianity, it is important not to equate ISKCON with Hinduism, nor even to consider ISKCON a sect within Hinduism. While generalizations about the Hindu worldview can help us to understand ISKCON’s outlook on alternative world philosophies, the ISKCON understanding of “Hinduism” is much more complex than that of the average American. In fact, in his 1976

response to a questionnaire from *Bhavan's Journal*, Prabhupada argues that “Hinduism” does not exist as a coherent entity at all. He says:

the very term 'Hindu' is a misconception. The Muslims referred to the Indian people, who lived on the other side of the river Sind, as 'Sindus'--actually, due to the peculiarities of pronunciation, as 'Hindus.' In any case, the Muslims called India 'Hindustan,' which means 'the land on the other side of the river Sind, or 'Hind' (Prabhupada 1990 [1976]:18-19).

My Indian teacher of Hinduism provided the exact same explanation when I studied abroad in India. Like Prabhupada, he believed that “Hinduism” was a Persian word referring to the beliefs of any of the diverse groups of peoples living below the Indus [Sind] River. Before I traveled to India, I had considered Hinduism to simply be another popular world religion, much like Christianity or Islam. However, I failed to understand the complexities behind the word “Hindu,” such as the fact that many of the people often labeled as Hindus, like Prabhupada and my Indian religions teacher, hardly identify with the term at all.

Prabhupada’s writings quote what many would consider “Hindu” scriptures, most importantly the *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Srimad Bhagavatam*, but also the *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, and the later writings of Lord Chaitanya and his followers.<sup>11</sup> Prabhupada argues that these texts teach a “universal religion” (*sanatana-dharma*) for *all* living entities and “make no mention of such a thing as 'Hinduism'” (Prabhupada 1990 [1976]:5). My readers need not understand all the historical and theological background behind the term “Hinduism,” because this paper argues that for many ISKCON members such labels are irrelevant. To return to a point mentioned above, the most important qualification for ISKCON membership is practice: how a person behaves (including how, and about what, he speaks), not how the person labels himself.

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.See Prabhupada 1972, 1983:863 for a list of scriptures quoted in Prabhupada's most important translation, the *Bhagavad-gita*.

A few examples will serve to show Prabhupada's attitude toward the concept of "belief." In a 1975 interview with the Chicago Police Department media relations man Lt. David Mozee, Prabhupada claims that, "[People] are forgetting religion, taking it to be a kind of faith. Faith may be blind faith. Faith is not the real description of religion. Religion means the laws given by God, and anyone who follows those laws is religious, whether a Christian, a Hindu, or a Muslim" (Prabhupada 1977-2012:176). For Prabhupada, mere belief, or faith, in God means very little. He notes that faith can be "blind," so it is possible for a person to have faith in something that is not really God. In another interview, London Broadcasting Company interviewer Mike Robinson mentions belief in God, and Prabhupada interrupts him by saying, "It is not a question of belief. Do not bring in this question of belief" (Prabhupada 1977-2012:28). He then explains his point through a metaphor: if we do not "believe" in the laws of our state, that does not mean we can commit crimes without being punished. Similarly, human beings cannot violate God's laws and yet expect to attain God consciousness by virtue of their faith.

Prabhupada's understanding of belief has also affected his disciples. During one Wednesday program in Cleveland, the lecturer mentioned "New Age" meditation groups who simply "feel" their beliefs to be true. The speaker explained that such feeling was not enough; instead, our beliefs must be corroborated by the words of Krishna, the sages, and our spiritual master. ISKCON privileges the teachings of authorities above the individual's own speculations about God. Squarcini and Fizzotti claim that, for the Hare Krishnas, "proofs [of Krishna] are three: perception, inference, and authority" (Squarcini 2004:53). I have already mentioned authorities, like sages and Krishna Himself. Devotees can also infer Krishna's existence from the world around them, and they can perceive Him directly as a result of sustained devotional service. Faith is *not* mentioned as one of God's proofs.

For Prabhupada and many of his disciples, one's belief, as well as the labels which he applies to himself, matter much less than practice. In other words, Prabhupada expects his disciples to relinquish their identification with the material body, the body that makes artificial distinctions between groups, such as between "Hindus" and "Christians," and instead to see the spirit-soul within the body. If a soul desires to strengthen its love of God through devotional practice, it is qualified to participate in the Hare Krishna Movement. Prabhupada believed that Jesus Christ was one such loving soul.

Prabhupada spoke of Jesus with great respect, and he encouraged Christians to continue cultivating their love for God through Jesus Christ. One devotee explained that Prabhupada considered Jesus a "Shaktavesha Avatar" of Krishna, meaning an empowered incarnation who receives instruction directly from God. The devotee also considered Prabhupada to be a Shaktavesha Avatar, though of a lower caliber than Jesus. Rishi Das confirms that "for Hindus, Christ is an *ācārya*" like Prabhupada,<sup>12</sup> because "the Sanskrit word *ācārya* means 'one who teaches by example'" (Rishi Das 2009). So for both ISKCON members and the "Hindus" of India, Jesus Christ is considered a holy man whose life and teachings deserve respect.

Prabhupada called ISKCON "nonsectarian" and insisted that Christians could also benefit from practicing Krishna consciousness. In an introductory pamphlet and advertising tool, *On Chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa*, Prabhupada says that "since the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness is nonsectarian, any man, Hindu or Christian, etc., will become better in his faith by chanting the holy name of God and by hearing the *Bhagavad-gita*" (Prabhupada 2006:4). He implies that Christianity and Krishna consciousness are not mutually exclusive. Anyone who loves God or

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Devotees sometimes refer to Prabhupada as "the founder *ācārya* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness."

even *wants* to love God is welcome to chant and hear scripture with the Hare Krishnas.

When Prabhupada preached to beginners in the Hare Krishna movement, and especially when he preached to outsiders potentially hostile to the unfamiliar philosophy, he attempted to calm his listeners by mentioning similarities between Krishna consciousness and Christianity. In *Chant and Be Happy*, Prabhupada references many important figures from Christian history, including Jesus Christ, Saint Augustine, Thomas a Kempis, Francis of Assisi, and William James (Prabhupada 2010:65-66). He notes that all these Christian thinkers believed in an immortal soul that lies within mind and matter and that is inaccessible through reason alone. Prabhupada proves his claim by quoting scriptures from the New Testament, such as “the kingdom of God is within you” and “what profiteth a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?” (Prabhupada 2010:65).

Prabhupada focused on similarities between ISKCON and Christianity, without condemning the latter as ineffective. In the late 1960's, shortly after the establishment of the first Hare Krishna temple in San Francisco, Prabhupada had an opportunity to speak on the famous Les Crane Show. Crane, unbeknownst to Prabhupada, had also invited onto his show Dr. Daniel Morgan, the L.A. leader of the Campus Crusade for Christ. Apparently, Crane hoped that the two men, supposedly from opposing philosophies, would engage in a debate. When asked by Crane if “Jesus Christ can save souls,” however, Prabhupada imperturbably responded, “Oh, yes, certainly...Why not? He is son of God, isn't it?” (Mukunda 2011:271). Moreover, when asked if “anyone can go to heaven through the Bible,” Prabhupada answered immediately, “Yes...*any* word of God” (Mukunda 2011:271).

Dr. Morgan, conversely, stated that “[Jesus Christ] said we have to come to the Father through him,” implying that Krishna consciousness did not have the same power to “save souls”

as Christianity (Mukunda 2011:271). Prabhupada's appearance on the Les Crane Show, watched by millions of Americans, confirmed ISKCON's acceptance of alternative routes for reaching God. Based on Prabhupada's references to Christianity from other sources, we know that ISKCON's founder did not merely feign religious tolerance in order to look good on T.V. He actually believed that Jesus Christ could save souls.

Prabhupada's tolerance toward Christianity also extends to many of his followers. Krishna devotee and prolific author Steven Rosen argues in *The Reincarnation Controversy* for the compatibility of Christianity with the transmigration of souls. He claims that, though “the Bible does not explicitly teach reincarnation,” many popular Christian beliefs, such as Purgatory, also have no Biblical basis (Rosen 1997:71). He mentions Christian writer Edgar Cayce, who believed that Jesus reincarnated himself thirty times before arriving in the world as Jesus of Nazareth (Rosen 1997:70). He also remarks that many early Church Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and perhaps even Saint Augustine, believed in or at least entertained the possibility of reincarnation (Rosen 1997:78). Origen, who lived from AD 185-254, advocated for reincarnation most explicitly:

By some inclination toward evil, certain spirit souls come into bodies, first of men; then, due to their association with the irrational passions after the allotted span of human life, they are changed into beasts, from which they sink to the level of plants. From this condition they rise again through the same stages and are restored to their heavenly place (Rosen 1997:79).

This statement from Origen, arguably one of the most important early Christian thinkers, appears remarkably compatible with Krishna consciousness. Rosen's book attempts to persuade Christians to accept the transmigration of souls not through arguing his doctrine's superiority over that of Heaven and Hell, but by pointing to texts in their own tradition that support reincarnation. He concentrates on similarities between the world's religions, implying that their points of intersection evidence the doctrine's universal truth. Many Hare Krishnas have taken

this approach of discovering and celebrating mutual agreement.

George Harrison, one of the most famous Western devotees of Krishna, blends the Christian expression “Hallelujah” with the ubiquitous “Hare Krishna” of ISKCON in his hit “My Sweet Lord.” During a 1982 interview with Mukunda Goswami, Harrison explains that he used the word “Hallelujah” to “lull [his listeners] into a sense of false security...then suddenly it turns into 'Hare Kṛṣṇa,' and they will all be singing that before they know what's happened” (Prabhupada 2010:33). Harrison recognizes the hostility often expressed by outsiders toward the unfamiliar beliefs and practices of Krishna consciousness, yet he hopes to “trick” his audience into singing “Hare Krishna” right alongside the inoffensive “Hallelujah” (Prabhupada 2010:33). He clearly has no qualms blending the two religious traditions, though he expects that his listeners may have trouble accepting Krishna into their Christian worldview.

In the same interview, Harrison describes an experience with some Christian nuns who questioned the Krishna paraphernalia in his house:

When I first came to this house, it was occupied by nuns. I brought in this poster of Visnu [a four-armed form of Krishna]. You just see His head and shoulders and His four arms holding a conchshell and various other symbols, and it has a big *om* written above it. He has a nice aura around Him. I left it by the fireplace and went out into the garden. When we came back in the house, they all pounced on me, saying, 'Who is that? What is it?' as if it were some pagan god. So I said, 'Well, if God is unlimited, then He can appear in any form, whichever way He likes to appear. That's one way. He's called Vishnu.' It sort of freaked them out a bit, but the point is, why should God be limited?' (Prabhupada 2010:33).

Though the nuns understood Harrison's poster as a frightening “pagan” symbol, the Krishna devotee remarks that God, for whom all things are possible, can manifest Himself in any form He likes.

ISKCON members generally have a great attraction to Krishna's original two-armed form, but other forms also appear frequently in private and community worship. Harrison, though a devotee of Krishna, takes pleasure in his poster of four-armed Visnu that so alarmed the

nuns. Nṛsimha, the half-man, half-lion form of Krishna, also attracts many devotees of Krishna. One of the most popular songs in Krishna temples, *Sri Nṛsimha Pranama*, glorifies this lion form of God “whose nails are like chisels on the stonelike chest of the demon Hiranyakasipu” (Temple Bhajan Book). Most devotees I know have memorized this three verse song and can sing it in Sanskrit during temple worship. So although ISKCON promotes Krishna's two-armed form above all others, it does not have the same qualms about worshiping multiple forms as did Harrison's Christian nuns.

A 2011 article about Vaishnavas in Chicago's Bud Billiken Parade also reveals the willingness of Western Krishna devotees to worship God in His many forms, including the form of Jesus Christ. At this the largest African American parade in the country, thirty black devotees dressed in Indian garb pulled a cart containing a large Lord Jagganath deity, an ecstatic form of Krishna in his childhood home of Vrindavan. Though most bystanders enjoyed the devotee's song and dance, one woman disapprovingly began to shout, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!” In response, a devotee from the parade:

approached her and began chanting Jesus' name right along with her. He then began to chant, “Krishna, Jesus, Krishna, Jesus,” showing her that he had respect for both names of God. This instantly disarmed her, and she understood that the devotees loved God just as she did (Smullen 2011).

Though I cannot help but wonder if the reporter is being overly optimistic by claiming that the Christian woman “understood that the devotees loved God just as she did,” the parade story illustrates the ability of present-day devotees to react peaceably to Christian confrontation. The devotee who approached the Christian woman cheerfully incorporated Jesus' name into his chanting, much as Harrison combined “Hallelujah” with “Hare Krishna” in “My Sweet Lord.”

Yet while Prabhupada and his followers preach the efficacy of Jesus' teachings, they by no means offer unlimited support and acceptance to Christian practices with which they disagree,



nor do they consider Christianity equal to Krishna consciousness. In a conversation between Prabhupada and Cardinal Jean Danielou in 1973 in Paris, Prabhupada condemned animal slaughter and attempted to convince the Christian authority to become vegetarian. The cardinal argued that the commandment against killing refers only to the murder of other human beings and not to animals, which lack immortal souls. In response, Prabhupada listed some basic similarities between humans and animals, for example their need for food. He continues:

The cow eats grass in the field, and the human being eats meat from a huge slaughterhouse full of modern machines. But just because you have big machines and a ghastly scene, while the animal simply eats grass, this does not mean that you are so advanced that only within your body is there a soul and that there is not a soul within the body of the animal (Prabhupada 1977-2012:129).

Prabhupada also mentioned that those who desire to eat meat will become “tigers, wolves, cats and dogs” in their next life so that they can better fulfill their lust for flesh (Prabhupada 1977-2012:130). Importantly, he critiques the ways in which modern Christians practice Jesus' teachings, not the teachings themselves. Though the issue of animal slaughter concerns him greatly, he never suggests that Christians remedy such sins of killing by abandoning Christ. Instead, he encourages them to follow Jesus more thoroughly.

This theme—the acceptance of Christian teachings, so long as they are modified to fit Krishna consciousness—also applies to the terms by which we refer to God. Though Prabhupada consents that “God is known throughout the world by many different names, each of which describes some particular aspect of His glories and attractive features,” he also maintains that “the principle name of God is Kṛṣṇa” (Prabhupada 2010:71). All other names merely describe certain aspects of God, but Krishna, which means “all attractive,” describes God as a whole. Other names of God—like Jehovah, Allah, and Yahweh—are good, according to Prabhupada, but the name Krishna is best. In the same way, Krishna consciousness is of course

preferable, for Prabhupada, to alternative religious paths.

These examples serve to explain how ISKCON members can accept alternative religious paths without compromising their own moral and philosophical convictions. Nārāyaṇa has said that Krishna consciousness explains God and our relationship to Him in its entirety, while other religions merely focus on a single part or aspect. He claimed that though Jesus understood God holistically, he only preached the parts he knew his audience would understand. By understanding alternative views as mere pieces of a whole which ISKCON offers, it is possible for devotees to maintain the validity of all spiritual authorities while explaining apparent contradictions between different spiritual paths. As all other names of God reveal only one part and are included in the highest “sound vibration” that is “Krishna,” similarly are all other philosophies encompassed within Krishna consciousness.

This understanding of other “religions” has its foundation in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in which Krishna tells Arjuna, “Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice, O descendent of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I descend Myself” (Prabhupada 2010:180). In his commentary, Prabhupada adds that Krishna sometimes “descends personally, and sometimes He sends His bona fide representative in the form of His son, or servant, or Himself in some disguised form” (Prabhupada 2010:181). Prabhupada's reference to the “son,” it should by now be clear, refers to Jesus Christ. Since God's representatives come to the world whenever there is a “rise of irreligion,” the *Bhagavad-Gita* allows for multiple teachers or *sadhus*. Though Krishna declares Himself the source of all other manifestations and incarnations, He is by no means the *only* divine intervention in the human world.

All of the great teachers in human history can fit into this paradigm. When I asked Nārāyaṇa if Krishna devotees consider Jesus to be God, the way that Krishna was God, he

replied, “son of God.” He quickly explained, however, that Jesus was no ordinary man. Nārāyaṇa claimed that Buddha, conversely, was actually God, come down from the transcendental realm in order to re-establish religious principals, particularly the humane treatment of animals. Shankarācārya, an impersonalist philosopher mentioned frequently in Prabhupada's writings, according to Nārāyaṇa was an incarnation of Lord Siva, considered a great devotee of Krishna in the ISKCON tradition. So Jesus is just one of many great teachers accepted into the ISKCON pantheon.

Many of the devotees I know identified as Christians before being introduced to Krishna consciousness. The word “conversion” fails to describe their experiences of discovering ISKCON, because many simply saw Krishna consciousness as an extension or deepening of their earlier faith in the Christian God. One devotee grew up Agnostic and converted to Christianity at age nineteen. He was a militant “straight-edge vegan” who felt disgusted when his pastors ate meat and smoked cigarettes. In addition, he felt that his pastors could not explain the Bible thoroughly. Krishna consciousness, he discovered, could give him a more complete picture of the things he’d learned from Christianity. He said his “Catholic guilt” about worshipping Krishna initially caused him some distress, but he soon learned that devotional service within ISKCON only deepened and completed his understanding of God.

He explained that he had never understood the Trinity until he viewed it through the lens of Krishna consciousness. He now equates the Father with Krishna, the Son with the different spirit-souls, and the Holy Spirit with the localized *Paramātmā*<sup>13</sup> as explained in the ISKCON literature. He said that contradictions, such as those between Christian and Hindu theology, are “always material.” One can achieve God-realization through picking any bona fide path and

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The Supersoul who sits beside the *jiva*, spirit-soul, in Hindu cosmology.

following it to its conclusion, real love of Godhead.

Yet Prabhupada also states that “one is advised to associate with the holy devotees of the Lord and carefully avoid the association of unholy nondevotees” (Prabhupada 1988:122). He maintains that human beings *become* that with which they associate; therefore spending time with other devotees is very important. One who is not fully situated in Krishna consciousness ought to avoid contact with “unholy nondevotees,” especially those (men) who are a “playmate for women,” as they may cause the aspiring devotee to lose “all good qualities, such as truthfulness, cleanliness, mercy, gravity, intelligence, shyness, beauty, fame, forgiveness, [and] control of the mind and senses” (Prabhupada 1988:122). Nārāyaṇa said that the great devotees who Prabhupada calls “equal to everyone” see all human beings as devotees, but they still avoid “bad association” in order to set an example.

Initially I had some difficulty reconciling the ISKCON virtue of tolerance with the injunction to avoid contact with non-devotees. However, one night a group of devotees gathered for Nityananda Triyodasi, an ISKCON holiday commemorating the birth of Lord Nityananda, an associate of Lord Chaitanya, and one of the twice-initiated devotees began to talk about association. He explained that many people do not have a taste for Krishna consciousness due to their entanglement in the material world, caused by karma. If such people will not accept help in the form of books, instruction, etc., then they are not ready to be taught and ought to be left alone. If they want to suffer, the devotee explained, then we must let them suffer.

His comment reminded me that Krishna consciousness, despite its rapid spread across the globe, does not seek converts in the same ways as, perhaps, Western Christian missionaries might. This difference probably results from the different views on the afterlife found in each philosophy. While Christians often maintain that a failure to convert in this life may lead to

eternal damnation, devotees of Krishna believe in a cycle of death and rebirth that gives fallen souls yet another opportunity to achieve God-realization.

On the same night, I spoke to Nārāyaṇa's wife about the various offenses that she willingly commits, including consumption of eggs, caffeine, garlic and onions. Nārāyaṇa walked into the room during this conversation, and I joked with him, "Did you hear that? You'd better control your woman!" Nārāyaṇa replied good-naturedly, "It's her karma." Though his wife of several decades was not following the regulations of Krishna consciousness as strictly as he was, he maintained that her (minor) disobedience was due to karma and made little attempt to change her. I have witnessed this same acceptance among several married couples involved in ISKCON in the Cleveland area. More often than not, one of the partners takes initiation into ISKCON, receiving a new Sanskrit name and taking many oaths, while the other partner remains uninitiated but supports his or her spouse in their quest for Krishna consciousness.

I began to understand the restriction against association with non-devotees as a byproduct of a desire not to waste time preaching to people who won't listen. In fact, in many devotee's minds, the most important qualification for hearing about Krishna is enthusiasm, or the interest and desire to learn about God. Material factors, such as the listener's age, sex, and religious persuasion, matter much less than does an interest in spiritual matters. I remember an Oberlin student who used to attend BYS programs regularly. Though he apparently had little background in Krishna consciousness, he used to dance very enthusiastically when we sang the Hare Krishna *Maha-mantra*. Though I sometimes viewed his dancing as silly and over-the-top, he remained one of Nārāyaṇa's favorite students, and the BYS leader continues to ask after him often. The student's enthusiasm qualified him to chant and hear about Krishna.

ISKCON has a precedent for a refusing to categorize humans into airtight compartments

like “Hindu” and “Christian,” for viewing non-devotees as spirit-souls awaiting enlightenment, for a high degree of tolerance toward alternative paths for achieving God consciousness, but also for adamantly criticizing practices like animal slaughter, which they believe are objectively wrong. In the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this section, I discussed Nārāyaṇa's claim that “Lord Jesus Christ was a pure Vaishnava.” This claim may not initially have made sense to those Americans accustomed to separating different philosophies into opposing, mutually exclusive categories. In fact, the comment only makes sense within a “Hindu” framework that believes the world's great spiritual leaders belong to *all* humans.

### *Watering the root...*

I have already discussed the devotee perspective that refuses to call Krishna “Indian” or to accept Krishna consciousness as a religion meant only for Indians. Most importantly, Krishna is not considered Indian because He is God. But why don't devotees call themselves Americans? “American” is a designation for the material body, the body that will one day die and never return. Instead, devotees hope to identify with the spirit-soul, the aspect of the person that reincarnates into one body after another until it achieves God-realization. One may reincarnate into a body from a different country and even from a different species. For such a devotee, it would make little sense to support nationalist causes, which have no bearing on the fate of the eternal soul. And indeed, among Prabhupada and his followers, we see a refusal to involve oneself with nationalistic causes, warfare, or anything “material” that does not relate to Krishna.

Prabhupada began to deepen his understanding of Krishna during the Indian efforts for independence from Britain during the 1940's. Still a young man, Prabhupada argued that Krishna consciousness could wait until the war ended and India had achieved independence. His

spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, however, argued that one's relationship with God was a much more pressing matter (Vihari Dasa 2009:50). As Prabhupada matured spiritually, he began to agree with his spiritual master that no material problem should overshadow the fundamental issue of the spirit-soul trapped within the material universe.

When Prabhupada arrived in the United States in the 1960's, many of his students and early converts were protesting the Vietnam War. Prabhupada, however, discouraged their civic engagement, noting that the war would be irrelevant in a few years, but that the deep spiritual issues would be present always (Vihari Dasa 2009:51). Several years later, during the India-Pakistan tension in 1971, a reporter "pleaded with Srila Prabhupada to urge General Yahya Khan of Pakistan to stop the bloody war" (Vihari Dasa 2009:51). At that time, Prabhupada was firmly situated in an attitude of transcendence and responded, "Will you not die if there is no war?" (Vihari Dasa 2009:51). In his comment, Prabhupada refers to "the miseries of birth, old age, disease, and death" that will supposedly *always* plague the material world (Prabhupada 1972:338). The only escape from such pains is through the attainment of the Krishna's abode in the transcendental sky. Ending the "bloody wars" of our century can never prevent our fallible material bodies from dying eventually.

In another example, the Secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Relief Fund Committee of Hyderabad, India, writes to Prabhupada requesting funds from ISKCON to help ease the suffering of Indians affected by drought. His letter emphasizes the misery caused by lack of rainfall, and he remarks that "there are villages where drinking water is not available for miles... At least five to six million people are hardly having one meal a day. There are many who are on the verge of starvation. The entire situation is most pathetic and heartrending" (Prabhupada 1977-2012:191). This reader finds it difficult not to be moved by the secretary's plea, yet

Prabhupada refuses to send money for relief. Instead he says that “without pleasing the Supreme Personality of Godhead, no one can become happy,” and he requests that victims of drought satisfy Krishna by chanting (Prabhupada 1977-2012:192). He cites some examples where social and natural problems were, supposedly, solved through congregational chanting.

At first glance, Prabhupada’s approach to the drought in Andhra Pradesh appears, to me, a bit callous. Few outsiders will accept that the chanting of “Hare Krishna” can end a drought. However, Prabhupada’s response to the secretary’s letter demonstrates his unwavering belief in the importance of transcendence. In relation to the spirit-soul’s plight, its entanglement with the material world birth after birth, the hunger and thirst endured over a few years of drought seems negligible. If drought victims die, they will inevitably be reborn, perhaps into even worse conditions, unless they undertake the practice of chanting Krishna’s holy names. Prabhupada’s suggestions in his letter reflect an attempt to save spirit-souls, not bodies.

Moreover, Prabhupada's attitudes toward the aforementioned social and political issues reflect his conviction that Krishna is “the root” from which all else springs. Prabhupada says that “by watering the root of a tree one automatically distributes water to the leaves and branches, so by acting in Kṛṣṇa consciousness one can render the highest service to everyone—namely self, family, society, country, humanity etc.” (Prabhupada 1972, 1983:126). If this passage is true, as Prabhupada believes, then the best cure for personal misery is Krishna consciousness, not money. In addition, this verse posits that one can render the “highest service” to his country by worshiping Krishna. All other benefits will come naturally, so a devotee need not worry of anything besides pleasing Krishna.

I rarely hear devotees talk about politics. I do not know if my devotee friends are



Democrats or Republicans,<sup>14</sup> or even whether or not they vote. This is not to say that they are uninformed about social issues. On the contrary, they believe that social problems wrack the modern age of *Kali-Yuga*. The present age of *Kali* is the last and most degenerate of the four *yugas* of the Hindu time cycle. Prabhupada draws on descriptions of *Kali-yuga* from the *Srimad Bhagavatam* to identify the “symptoms” of our age: men gain prestige based on wealth instead of merit, married couples divorce when they lose sex attraction, smooth talkers with little real understanding are called “scholars,” crooks become political leaders, religious principles decline, and “the purpose of life will consist simply of filling one’s stomach” (Prabhupada 1978 [1974]). Prabhupada’s beliefs about *Kali-yuga* are also social critiques, and many devotees I know agree that the modern world suffers from materialism and mismanagement. However, no one attempts to change this ugly *yuga*. This is merely the last stage of a cycle that has been repeating since the beginning of time.

*Between two worlds...*

This paper addresses the views of those Americans who practice a philosophy considered “Indian” by some outsiders. At first glance devotees appear, in this sense, to adopt behaviors similar to those of second-generation Asian Americans, who also live in the United States but adopt some beliefs and practices from Asia. Recall that my roommate, who considered my posters a form of cultural appropriation, was Asian American. He was skeptical of devotee's attempts to incorporate (what he considered to be) Indian customs into their daily lives. Growing up in the United States with Taiwanese parents, my roommate never *chose* to adopt Asian customs. Along with the privilege of access to different cultural practices, he also experienced

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If devotees did label themselves in such a way, they would perpetuate the boundaries between groups which they aspire to transcend.

criticism and discrimination from Americans and, potentially, from family members from his parent's home country.

Understandably, some second-generation Asian Americans might feel frustrated by devotees who, like themselves, claim influences from two different cultures, but who accept such influences not as a birthright, but as a personal choice. Devotees, accordingly, may lack a fully contextualized understanding of the cultural practices they adopt, nor be sensitive to the discrimination that Asian Americans face.

Devotees choose to practice Krishna consciousness, while second-generation Americans did not choose their parents or the country of their birth. They have no option but to navigate between two (or more) different cultural worlds, that of their parents and family back in Asia, and that of the United States. Devotees, on the other hand, may have to confront ugly stereotypes and hostility from outsiders, but this differs from the identity conflicts endured by second-generation youth. I argue that, despite some interesting similarities between first-generation Krishna devotees and second-generation Asian Americans, devotees do not strive to situate themselves between the United States and India, but rather to transcend both nationalities and achieve spiritual bliss with Krishna.

Before I continue, I must note the inadequacy of speaking about “Indian culture” or “American culture” as monolithic entities. Both these massive countries claim citizens with diverse religious backgrounds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, class, gender, tastes, etc. This paper seeks to avoid the terms “Indian culture” and “American culture,” because I do not want to imply that all Indians or all Americans are the same. Unfortunately, such dichotomies are difficult to erase when discussing the phenomenon of globalization. People uprooted by diaspora may find

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themselves “between two worlds,”<sup>15</sup> and making distinctions between two or more cultures can be helpful when discussing the struggles undergone by second-generation Americans. I argue, of course, that the devotee project of transcendence fundamentally differs from the efforts of immigrants and their offspring to navigate between “two worlds.”

Anthropological literature has discussed the modern phenomenon of “displacement,” in which immigrants uproot themselves from the land of their birth and physically move into another, culturally distinct region (Narayan 2002:425). Indian author Kirin Narayan conducted extensive interviews with twenty second-generation South Asian Americans living in the Midwest and developed a theory of “emplacement” to explain her subject’s ability to construct their own unique identity (Narayan 2002:425-427). Through her subject’s personal stories, Narayan explains their “own sense of being suspended between Indianness or Pakistani-ness and Americanness, represented as polarities” (Narayan 2002:429). The interviewees have learned to negotiate between the expectations of their South Asian parents and of their American peers, though they often endure attacks either from relatives (for being too American) or from friends (for not being American enough). Ultimately, they must make their own decisions about their national and personal identity.

In one example, a second-generation girl uses a story from Hindu mythology to justify her own “American” rebellion against her parents. The story relates to Nṛsiṃha, the half-lion incarnation of Krishna, and is consequently very popular among Cleveland-area ISKCON members. In this tale, a great sage named Prahlad rebels against his demon father by worshiping God despite his father’s commands to abandon religion. Narayan’s interviewee, however, uses

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I first heard this phrase spoken by a Belizean Mayan who saw himself suspended between the traditional farming methods of his forefathers, and the “modern” monetary economy.

the story to justify her own resistance against her parent's injunctions to follow more "Indian" customs (Narayan 2002:436). Her unique interpretation of the story demonstrates her competency in both "worlds," but also shows a resistance to identifying as either fully Indian or fully American. She is, as Narayan explains, "suspended" between the two "polarities."

Second-generation Hare Krishnas, or the children of devotees, also lack choice regarding their upbringing in ISKCON. Like second-generation Asian Americans, they were not converted into either culture. Second-generation ISKCON members may share much with Narayan's South Asian Americans, as suggested by sociologist E. Burke Rochford Jr. in his essay *Education and Collective Identity: Public Schooling of Hare Krishna Youths*. Rochford interviewed second-generation Hare Krishna devotees who, as children, attended *gurukulas*, schools specifically designed for indoctrinating ISKCON youth into the values of Krishna consciousness. Many of the children had to switch to public high school during adolescence, and for most of them the transition was anything but graceful.

Many of them had never met non-devotees before and did not know how to behave. In Rochford's wonderful interview excerpts, second-generation devotees discuss their encounters with unfamiliar and often frightening public high school culture, including television, non-Sanskrit or "Christian" names, meat-eating, Physical Education class, and Michael Jackson (Rochford 1999:36-37, 41). The students were teased for their lack of knowledge regarding popular culture, and many were even stigmatized by teachers and other superiors.

Squarcini and Fizzotti remark that the "identity complex and alienation" found among second-generation devotees contributed to the demise of *gurukulas* in the United States (Squarcini 2004:64). Though Prabhupada valued a Krishna conscious education for youth and the United States had amassed a dozen *gurukulas* by 1978, the 80's saw a gradual closing of the

Hare Krishna schools until, in 1986, the two remaining American *gurukulas* shut down (Squarcini 2004:64). Today, some devotees still opt for alternatives to public education for their children. One Cleveland devotee mentioned a large Hare Krishna community in Florida that boasted a private school for second-generation devotees. However, public education has also become exceedingly common. Children who connect with non-devotees from an early age will, I suspect, lack the sense of culture shock that many of Rochford's *gurukula* kids experienced.

In both Narayan's second-generation Asian Americans and Rochford's second-generation devotees, we see a struggle to build an identity between two different, often oppositional cultural worlds. The struggle endured by first-generation ISKCON members, however, is of an entirely different sort. Their philosophy locates them not between the United States and India, but between the material and the transcendental worlds. First-generation devotees of Krishna strive toward a "spiritual culture" which transcends the distinctions between nation-states. Their identity-building practices seek not to situate them between "Indianness" and "Americanness," both of which are bodily designations, but rather to remind them of their eternal position as spirit-soul.

My research suggests that Cleveland-area devotees do not behave as though Indian and American cultures are "polarities," nor do they find themselves forced to choose one culture over another. They see themselves neither as Americans nor as Indians, but only as devotees of God. Recall that India the nation-state is easily separable from the spiritual culture propagated by Krishna and, thousands of years later, by Lord Chaitanya. I think it is natural to question the cultural identity of American Krishna devotees. In fact, it was this question ("Do American devotees think of themselves as Indians?") that originally guided my research. But devotees are considerably less interested in this question than are anthropologists. In my experience, their

question is simply, “How can my spirit-soul return to Godhead?”

*The children of Krishna devotees: a case study...*

I first met Balarama, the four-year-old only son of two Cleveland devotees, at a Prabhupada Manor Wednesday program. This program was particularly special because Bhaktimarga Swami, a *sannyasi* [man of the renounced order] and Krishna guru from Canada, was visiting the Manor. Toward the end of the program, after we had all eaten *prasadam*, I was talking (rather nervously) with the *swami* when Balarama approached, pushed forward by his mother. Bhaktimarga excused himself for a moment and turned smilingly to the child. With interest, I witnessed the following interaction.

“Balarama,” said the mother, a sweet young devotee with whom I later became friends, “Tell the *swami* your favorite character in the *Ramayana*.”<sup>16</sup>

The child shyly retreated into his mother's skirt, but the *swami* just chuckled and repeated the question kindly. Balarama still refused to answer, apparently as nervous as I was around the stranger.

“Let me guess,” said Bhaktimarga, pretending to think, “Is your favorite character... Hanuman?”

Hanuman, the noble monkey-king who helps King Rama to conquer demons, makes a lovable role model for young children. For example, a children's book entitled “Where's Hanuman?” plays off of the famous “Where's Waldo?” and kids can search through pages of *Ramayana* scenes to locate the muscular, crowned monkey.

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16

An ancient Hindu epic describing the life of King Rama

Balarama turned from his mother and sputtered, “Yes! And also Rama...”

This brief interaction intrigued and, I must admit, impressed me. Balarama's parents had educated him with stories from ancient Hindu epics, despite their never having visited India. I had naively assumed that American stories were for Americans, Indian stories for Indians.

In the following months I formed a more personal relationship with Balarama's parents, and around Christmas-time I had the pleasure of visiting their home. Balarama's family had arranged a Christmas tree and several colorfully wrapped gifts in their living room. When I questioned his mother on this she replied, without a trace of indignation, that Balarama's preschool hosted Christmas-themed games and events, and his parents didn't want him to feel left out.

After the adults sang *kirtan* in the devotees' temple room, we gathered in the living room to honor *prasadam*, and Balarama joined us. I asked him if he liked Indian food. Balarama thought for a moment and then said he'd never tried it. His mom laughed and said that he doesn't distinguish between American and Indian food, but he barely eats anything besides macaroni and cheese, and rice with dahl.

Balarama attends public school, but unlike many American schoolchildren, he can converse about the history and mythology of ancient India. He often hears his parents chanting and singing “Hare Krishna,” yet he celebrates Christmas with a tree and gifts. Neither Balarama nor his parents speak of “Indian culture” as directly opposed to “American culture,” as did some of the second-generation South Asian Americans whom Narayan described as “suspended between polarities.” For Balarama and his parents, the national affiliations of their food and literature matter little. Rochford's discussion of second-generation devotees who attended *gurukulas*, however, reminds us that not *all* children of devotees have managed to avoid the

struggle of finding a strong personal identity between “polarities.”

*Second-generation look-alike...*

In my experience the *mridanga*, a two-faced drum from India, plays an important role in Krishna *kirtan* in the United States. Nārāyaṇa, an expert *mridanga* player, finds the instrument so important that at the end of our *kirtans* he sometimes calls out in Sanskrit, “*brihat mridanga ki jai*,” and the Oberlin BYS students respond, “*jaya!*” meaning, “success for the *mridanga* drum!” Prabhupada’s predecessor, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur, referred to the printing press as *brihat-mridanga*, or “the great *mridanga*,” because “an ordinary *mridanga* can be heard for only a couple of blocks but the printing press can be heard around the world” (Rosen 1992:4). Clearly, this drum from India has much symbolic significance in the Hare Krishna Movement. Yet its importance and prestige, I argue, results not from its Indian-ness, but rather from its association with the *sankirtana* movement of Lord Chaitanya and with Prabhupada and his predecessors.

Mukunda Goswami, one of the earliest Krishna devotees in the United States, remembers the day when Prabhupada’s early group of followers received their first *mridanga* from India. The drum arrived at the newly opened San Francisco temple in 1967 and was greeted enthusiastically by several American devotees (Mukunda 2011:162). That afternoon, as Prabhupada beat the *mridanga* for the first time since arriving in America, he told Mukunda, “When I was a child my father insisted that I learn *mridanga* from early age. He would have let me play all day, every day. Except for my mother, I would have missed school altogether” (Mukunda 2011:164). During the following morning’s *kirtan*, Mukunda contemplated the importance of the *mridanga* during Lord Chaitanya’s time and felt that the drum added “another dimension to the chanting” (Mukunda 2011:168). Mukunda never mentions the Indian origins of



the drum as a reason for its effects, but he instead recalls its association with Lord Chaitanya, undoubtedly an extremely important figure in his spiritual life.

Though instruments from India play a prominent role in American *kirtans*, the devotees I know also incorporate more familiar instruments into their song and dance. When the Oberlin Bhakti Yoga Society met at Oberlin's Fairchild Chapel, originally a Christian church and still replete with an old organ, students occasionally accompanied *kirtans* with improvised organ music. Nārāyaṇa also encouraged students to bring guitars or any other instruments they knew how to play. He once described to me, with much pride, a *kirtan* in which one student played the piano. Devotees don't separate their instruments into categories of "Indian" and "American," but rather welcome any instruments with which they can praise God.

Devotees also transcend regional boundaries through their eating habits. I have already mentioned young Balarama's appreciation for rice and dahl, a staple dish at many temples across the United States. Most temple services I have attended have served Indian foods for *prasadam*, but not only Indian food can be offered to Krishna. Non-Indian temple *prasadam* I have eaten includes soup, bread and butter, salad, steamed broccoli, lasagna, vegetarian chili, biscuits, macaroni and cheese topped with cornflakes, cookies and cakes. Only foods containing meat, fish, eggs, garlic, onions, mushrooms, or caffeine cannot be offered to Krishna. I was once given a Hare Krishna cookbook called *The Higher Taste* which included recipes from India and other parts of Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Greece, and Latin America (Prabhupada 1983, 2006). This book seeks to cater to the different tastes of the international Hare Krishna community, and the foods in the book qualify as "Hare Krishna recipes" because they are vegetarian and consequently "karma-free" (Prabhupada 1983, 2006:cover). The food eaten by devotees, by virtue of its having been offered to Krishna, is considered transcendental.

Just as devotees promote “spiritual culture” through materials like dress, instruments, and food, so do they attempt to follow the ideologies Krishna consciousness. Some of the values expounded by Prabhupada conflict with those of what I will call, with much reservation yet for lack of a better term, “American culture.” Prabhupada described the United States as a “terrible place” where “most of the population [is] covered by the material modes of passion and ignorance” (Prabhupada 1977-2012:242). He questioned American consumerism, promiscuity, and pleasure-seeking, and he requested that ISKCON members correct such behaviors through certain rules and regulations.

Many American devotees cannot adhere to all of the strict ideals expounded by Prabhupada, but such weaknesses do not disqualify them from serving God, nor from ISKCON membership. One devotee explained that he had seen others abandon Krishna consciousness in the defeatist attitude that they would not be able to execute all of Prabhupada’s instructions. He said that an inability to follow regulations was a poor excuse for abandoning the movement altogether. Devotees are not expected to adhere to all of Prabhupada’s suggestions immediately, but they believe that if they continue their service to Krishna—even just a little service each day—He will eventually enable them to naturally lose attraction for customs incompatible with God consciousness. The example of devotee sexuality demonstrates the conflict between spiritual culture and what I loosely call “American culture.”

Marriage, for Prabhupada, serves to regulate the devotee’s sex life, helping him to concentrate on returning to Krishna. Even within marriage, devotees should not simply have sex whenever they desire. Prabhupada encourages his followers to adopt the “four regulative principles,” restrictions against certain behaviors that limit spiritual progress by increasing one’s attachment to the material world. The four regulative principles are: no eating of meat,

fish, or eggs; no intoxication, including cigarettes and caffeine; no gambling; and no illicit sex (Prabhupada 1977-2012:116). Prabhupada defines “illicit sex” as “sex outside marriage or sex within marriage for purposes other than procreation” (Prabhupada 2004:43-44). Married devotees who desire to follow Prabhupada’s instructions exactly will refrain from sex unless they are trying to conceive and raise God-conscious children.

During initiation, the process whereby serious devotees pledge their commitment to Krishna and receive a new Sanskrit name, devotees promise to follow the four regulative principles. Does this mean that initiated devotees never have sex with their spouses, save for purposes of procreation? One devotee explained to me that initiates pledge to refrain from “illicit sex,” but they define “illicit” differently depending on their orthodoxy. Of course, some devotees adhere to Prabhupada’s definition and indulge in sex only in order to have children. Others might have a sex life with their spouse, but they restrict themselves to one night per week or per month. Devotees who define “illicit” more loosely recognize that too much regulation might cause them to become frustrated and to turn away from Krishna consciousness. Rather than relinquish their devotional practice altogether, they make compromises and pray that Krishna will help them to develop a “higher taste,” a preference for God over sex.

These types of compromises remind us that, though devotees aspire toward a “spiritual culture,” very few have actually shattered the bonds of their everyday social world. Undoubtedly, we humans find it difficult to step outside of our particular material culture. One of my devotee friends says, “God isn’t cheap.” One cannot achieve transcendence overnight, but rather must work tirelessly to put all his activities to the service of Krishna. My own challenge of writing this thesis without slipping into an “American culture/ Indian culture” dichotomy is proof of the influence of the nation-state concept on my own thinking. Prabhupada himself says,

“I am Indian. It is not very easy to at once think that I am not Indian, but pure soul. Similarly, it is not an easy task for anyone to end his identification with these bodily designations”

(Prabhupada 1989:11). I have never read or heard an ISKCON member call the process of transcendence easy.

### *The Hare Krishna uniform...*

When I first began visiting ISKCON temples in the United States, I was stunned to see American women, both white and black, dressed in what I considered Indian garb. I had occasionally worn *saris* myself while studying abroad in South India, and inevitably Indian strangers would approach me wanting to comment on my outfit. Many had never seen a tourist dressed in such a way. But after returning to the United States, I would not have dreamed of wearing a *sari* in public. Seeing American devotees in Indian dress was, perhaps, as shocking for me as it was for the Indians who couldn't help but notice my own *sari* in India. I knew that plenty of Indians wore Western dress, but I had never seen an American woman in a *sari*. I had failed to recognize the multi-directionality of cultural flows and, more importantly, still viewed devotees as “Americans in Indian dress.” A few experiences in the field, however, reminded me that my understanding of devotee behaviors as “Americans acting like Indians” was too simplistic to explain the motives behind *sari*-wearing in the United States' ISKCON temples.

During Chicago's *Ratha Yatra* festival in the summer of 2011, I had the opportunity to learn about women's clothing choices within ISKCON. Many devotees had shown up to help pull a cart containing the Jagganath Deities through the streets of Chicago, and most of them had worn their best dress. The golden-skinned Indian women, who composed some ninety percent of the women present, looked radiant in their colorful *saris*, gold jewelry, and *bindis*, the decorative dot between the eyes. But they were not the only ones in such spectacular dress;

several white women had also worn *saris* to the *Ratha Yatra* parade. I felt conflicted: was this cultural appreciation, or culture appropriation?

During the festival, I had the pleasure of meeting a middle-aged Indian woman who kindly indulged my inquiries into the matter. We met in line for a meal of *prasadam* and proceeded to spend the next several hours together. Since I felt comfortable around her, I asked her opinion on the white women wearing *saris*. Was she offended? The woman thought for a moment and then responded that, no, she was not offended. She remarked that many Indians were now adopting Western dress, and in fact European and American culture had been affecting India for hundreds of years. She said that the Americans' adoption of Indian dress flattered her, as it showed an appreciation for her home culture. She had understood the multi-directionality of cultural flows and believed that the *sari*, a beautiful garment in its own right, need not be confined to its country of origin.

One "karmi," or outsider to the Hare Krishna Movement, asked why American devotees, whom I claim attempt to transcend cultural boundaries, do not wear clothing from regions outside of India or the United States. When I posed this question to Nārāyaṇa, he responded that ISKCON members wear a "uniform" that identifies them as devotees, much as a policeman wears a uniform so that outsiders can recognize him as such. Indeed, in the United States the *saris* and *dhotis* command attention for the devotees who wear them. Even within India, where the *sari* is commonplace, Indians can recognize American ISKCON members by certain markers, such as yellow *tikal* and, for the men, nearly-shaved heads with a tuft of hair in the back.

Nārāyaṇa said that, when he visited India, Indians identified him as a holy man by this uniform. Many Indians, according to custom, attempted to touch his feet in hopes of passing

their karma onto him. One woman actually succeeded in touching Nārāyaṇa's feet, and he quickly ran to the Ganges to "take bath." Nārāyaṇa considered the Ganges, a holy river in India, capable of ridding him of the woman's sins. Nevertheless, he fell ill a few days later, attributing his (body's) sickness to the stranger's karma.

Nārāyaṇa mentioned the irony that many Indians were learning about a philosophy with roots in their soil via the teachings of American devotees (who, of course, are merely transmitting Prabhupada's teachings). He referenced a "program" he used to lead in Akron, attended mainly by devotees from India who lived in the United States on work visas. I attended one Akron program last year, but unfortunately the *kirtans* and lectures were discontinued before the start of my field research, as many of the Indian devotee's visas had expired. At the one program I did attend, the Indian devotees sincerely asked Nārāyaṇa questions regarding their progress in Krishna consciousness, and no one questioned his authenticity based on his white skin. On the contrary, his knowledge of Krishna qualified him to teach the other devotees.

Thus, while American ISKCON members wear what appears to be "Indian dress" to many Americans, Nārāyaṇa identified this costume as a Vaishnava "uniform," a particular type of dress that marks wearers as devotees of Krishna. Both American and Indian devotees may wear the uniform to remind themselves and others of their Krishna consciousness. From this perspective, ISKCON members are not "Americans in Indian dress," but rather devotees of Krishna with bodies from India, America, or elsewhere, in a type of dress that identifies their devotion to God.

Very few devotees that I know, however, wear their uniform consistently. Instead, they tend to wear Western dress to their jobs in the "material world," and they don varying degrees of the full devotee uniform during temple worship and Vaishnava holidays. Many Americans

remember the days when female devotees consistently dressed in *saris*, the men in saffron robes, but now the devotee dress code has become as diverse and variable as the practitioners themselves.

At the Hare Krishna temples in Cleveland and Columbus, one finds women dressed in anything from *saris*, to long skirts and modest tops, to T-shirts and jeans. Men of the renounced order continue to wear saffron robes, while the other male devotees opt for white *dhotis*, a skirt-like garment worn by men in India, or simply for Western dress. Both men and women wear T-shirts with images of Krishna and His associates. Oberlin students whom I have taken to *kirtans* the first time often ask me what they should wear, but no one mode of dress dominates the ISKCON temples I have visited. I only advise female newcomers not to wear tight-fitting or revealing clothes, as immodest dress might distract the other devotees from their meditation on God.

Perhaps different devotees make different dress choices depending on their orthodoxy, just as devotees define “illicit sex” in different ways. Newcomers and neophytes might not feel as comfortable in *saris* and *dhotis* as those for whom the uniform is no longer a novelty. Of course, each devotee will have his or her own reasons for choosing one type of dress over another. They will also have their own reasons for choosing different blends of cuisines, of music, of literature, etc. I cannot pretend to know the internal motivations for all devotees, but I do suggest that motivations generally center around transcendence, not around crafting a material identity between polarities. The devotees I know speak constantly of Krishna, hardly ever of modern material culture in India.

*Summary...*

Returning to my Taiwanese-American roommate’s critique, we find that outsiders may

see American ISKCON members as Americans trying to be Indians, but the devotees I know see themselves as spirit-souls trying to remember their original position in the transcendental realm. Theirs is a struggle of an entirely different sort than that endured by second-generation Asian-Americans and by some second-generation Hare Krishnas. Whereas the latter attempt to find their identity between two material cultures, American devotees attempt to transcend material culture altogether. Their difficult task has little to do with nation-states. Rather, it is fundamentally spiritual. And their spirituality, by virtue of its applicability to *all* people, need not confine itself to modern-day India.

Lines from a poem called *Samsara Blues*, written by Prabhupada's American disciple Hari Das Brahmachary (Harvey Cohen), summarize devotee attitudes toward nationalism nicely. *Samsara* refers to the cycle of death and rebirth that ISKCON members attempt to halt through their devotion to God. Politics, nationalism, and national culture all belong to Krishna's *Maya*, His external energy which composes the material world, the world of *samsara*. Brahmachary says, "Fixed up in Krishna Consciousness/ Who cares about this Maya mess?/ So forget that Uncle Sam Thing/ Just keep chanting, chanting, chanting" (Brahmachary 1967). Brahmachary urges readers to "forget" their loyalty to the United States and to take to Krishna consciousness instead. The material world is not something to change or fix, but something to leave behind altogether. In Brahmachary and many other devotee's minds, the most pressing problem of our age is the relative lack of focus on God, a problem that must be resolved by each individual through the process of "chanting, chanting, chanting."

### **Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Further Research**

This paper discusses the American devotees of Krishna who attempt to identify with their spirit-soul instead of the body. They define the spirit-soul not as the mind, as some Westerners



are prone to do, but rather as eternal, blissful consciousness. I have learned a lot by working with the Hare Krishnas, and I owe them my sincerest thanks. For one, ISKCON's transcendental philosophy has inspired me to see myself in terms of a much, much larger cosmic situation. If I have already endured an infinite number of past lives, somehow stressing out over my homework seems a bit silly. I am ever fascinated by the vastness of the Krishna worldview, and I try to remember it whenever my minor personal problems seem insurmountable.

Moreover, the devotees that I met through field research have redeemed my view of religion. In a world where “holy wars” make newspaper headlines, where the hatred of gay marriage and abortion sometimes overshadow actual love of God, the earnest and nonjudgmental attitude of Cleveland-area Krishna devotees has renewed my faith in the value of spiritual practice. The devotees encourage questions during *kirtan* programs, and they eschew blind faith. They usually had logical and well-formed answers to my questions, and they made me feel comfortable asking anything.

My research hints at the potential for a genuinely spiritual motivation behind religious practice. Most of the devotees I have met appear to practice Krishna consciousness not for social reasons—not to fit into a community, not out of superstition or obligation, not out of fear of death, and not to gain social capital—but out of a burning desire to see, touch, and experience God. At first, I attempted to explain Hare Krishna practice through concepts like culture, nation-states, and mutually exclusive religions, but I realized that in order to do so, I would have to seriously warp the devotees' speech and behaviors I observed during field research. I finally realized that their belief in an eternal, nondenominational spirit-soul could easily explain my observations in the field, and that realization spawned the current essay.

Though the current essay focuses on modern, living devotees operating within the fifty-

year history of ISKCON, readers must not forget the developments in Krishna worship that took place in India hundreds of years before ISKCON's arrival in the United States. I have hardly mentioned the books of Prabhupada's predecessors in this essay, but they no doubt warrant further study. Moreover, many different cults have developed in India for worshiping Krishna, and these alternative paths offer even more material for research. For some Americans, ISKCON has acted as a stepping-stone toward a different type of Krishna worship that is less popular than ISKCON in the United States. One of my friends, for example, discovered Krishna through ISKCON but eventually abandoned the organization to pursue a more “Hindu” spirituality that allowed for multiple gods, one of her favorites being the goddess Kali.

Unfortunately, many Americans have little experience with religion outside of the Judeo-Christian paradigm. A more accurate understanding of theologies from the East, in my opinion, could transform the way we define “religion” and broaden our understanding of the world in which we live. For example, many of my American friends talk about religion and science as two diametrically opposed ways of thinking at war with one another, but I suspect that a more thorough understanding of Eastern spirituality would problematize the science/religion dichotomy and yield interesting links between empiricism and mysticism.<sup>17</sup> I have already mentioned that the Hare Krishnas talk about reality instead of belief, and they encourage one to test the truth of their claims through firsthand experience, not through faith.

Thanks again to the devotees who made this work possible. I sincerely hope that you may all one day achieve the love of God which you seek. Haribol!<sup>18</sup>

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See Capra 1983.

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A common greeting and goodbye among the Hare Krishnas meaning “Say Hare!” or “Chant the holy name!”

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