

**The Nectar of Translation:  
conversion, mimesis, and cultural  
translation in Krishna Consciousness**

Malcolm Haddon B.A. (Hons)

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# Abstract

This is a cultural anthropological study of The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), or the Hare Krishna movement. Data for this research derive primarily from ethnographic participant-observation, and include tape-recorded interviews with Hare Krishna informants as well as ISKCON literature collected during fieldwork.

Analysis focuses on Hare Krishna techniques (*saddhana*, or *yoga*) of religious transformation, including physical, aesthetic, and discursive practices involved in the pursuit of spiritual realisation in ISKCON. Conversion, mimesis, and translation are the three key conceptual themes which inform a critical analysis of the production and effect of cultural difference in Hare Krishna spiritual practice. Ethnicity and conversion emerge as parallel concerns as the involvement of diasporic Indian and Indo-Fijian Hindus at the congregational level of ISKCON's ministry in Sydney, Australia, is examined for its effect on Western converts' experiences of Krishna Consciousness. A new conceptual approach to the meaning of 'conversion' to ISKCON is developed from this account.

Recent sectarian developments in ISKCON's relationship with the Indian tradition of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism are also examined within a comparative theological framework. Hagiographic practices surrounding ISKCON's Bengali founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), and textual practices surrounding the founder's translations of Vaisnavite scripture, are both analysed as core features of Hare Krishna spirituality. The theological significance of these practices is directly correlated with recent sectarian tensions between ISKCON and the Indian tradition.



## **A Note on Transliteration and Naming**

Sanskrit terms used in the following thesis have been italicised only, without the use of diacritics even where these appear in cited originals. As this is not a technical thesis on Sanskrit language or phonetics, diacritics are not essential to the understanding of Sanskrit terms in this context.

Pseudonyms have been employed for the names of all informants except Narayana Maharaja, who is a figure of prominence and who has been referred to under this name in reference material cited in the thesis. Names of ISKCON devotees who are also authors of cited works have been retained, as have those of devotees referred to in cited literature.



This is to certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. All work contained within this document is original and my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Malcolm Haddon





## Introduction

# Representing ISKCON: spreading the message of Krishna Consciousness

### “Cultural anthropology, *ki jaya!*”: the *Gita* lesson

“Malcolm, what is it that you study?” inquired Govinda dasa, singling me out from amongst the dozen or so students attending his Wednesday night *Bhagavad-gita* class.

“*Cultural* anthropology,” I replied from my place on the floor.

Govinda seemed to enjoy putting me on the spot like this. By this stage of my fieldwork, though, I had become reasonably well versed in answering this particular question. I always emphasised the *cultural* when devotees inquired after my research interests: my reason-for-being-there at an ISKCON temple. Srila Prabhupada, the Founder-*Acarya* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, or the Hare Krishna movement), makes several damning references to the evolutionist theories of ‘anthropologists’ in his writings, including his introduction to *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* (Prabhupada 1986a), which is the ‘textbook’ for Wednesday night classes at the temple. Emphasising the *cultural* was a way of distinguishing myself from these other anthropological incarnations. I had also discovered that the *cultural* served to position my interests within the discursive context of Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’: an often-cited concept amongst Hare Krishna devotees, and one which was to become a thematic point of

departure for many of my inquiries. Prabhupada was quite the antagonist to Western, academic, or ‘materialist’ forms of knowledge, and I was repeatedly apprised by devotees about the impossibility of acquiring the ‘transcendental knowledge’ of Krishna Consciousness through ‘materialist’ methods of inquiry. But in the *cultural* I seemed to have found a workable medium for my fieldworking methods.

“So you’d be interested in next week’s verse then,” prompted Govinda, “it’s about society.”

I managed only a quick glance at the *Gita* laying in my lap before Govinda assigned to me the task of presenting the next week’s class on Chapter Four, Text Thirteen:

*catur-varyam maya srstam*  
*guna-karma-vibhagasah*  
*tasya kartaram api mam*  
*viddhya akartaram avyayam*

According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me [Krishna]. And although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable. (Prabhupada 1986a:238)

This was not the time or place to dispute my disciplinary borders (‘divisions of human society’ are not really my field), nor to clarify my perceived fieldwork intentions. As Govinda dismissed the class, he was obviously having fun at my expense.

“Cultural anthropology, *ki jaya!* [all glories!]” he exclaimed loudly, as I hurried over to express my reservations.

I waited for the class to disperse, then confronted Govinda about his instruction. I felt unqualified to present the lesson, I explained in confidence. I was also concerned that my presenting the lesson might be offensive – to the devotees, to Krishna – given my lack of devotion. (It is, I remembered, a recognised ‘offence’ in ISKCON ‘to instruct a faithless person about the glories of the Holy Name’ of Krishna. Like ‘feeding milk to a snake’ – which, the adage goes, only increases its venom – so the confidential knowledge of Krishna can be corrupted and made dangerous when revealed to, and subsequently (mis)represented by, a faithless person). So far during my fieldwork, my guarded agnosticism had not affected my eligibility to *receive* instruction in Krishna Consciousness, but I wondered whether I was yet sanctioned to *represent* Krishna Consciousness to others. Govinda was quick to dismiss my concerns, both about being ‘qualified’ and about committing ‘offences’. He gave some simple advice about preparing for the class during the week ahead: talk to the devotees, they would point me in the right direction. Read the relevant material by Prabhupada. The talk should only last five or ten minutes, “You’ll be fine.”

Besides constituting an act of spiritual instruction, or *siksha*, Govinda’s good advice about preparing for my *Gita* class was basic field methodology: talk to your informants, do as they do. And this I did. For the next week I discussed an array of complex issues arising out of *Gita* 4.13 with a range of devotees – especially with the four *brahmacaris* (male celibate students) with whom I was sharing a room in the upstairs ashram of the Sydney ISKCON centre. These discussions were certainly instructive and helpful in my preparation. The devotees also taught me some valuable lessons about researching Prabhupada’s voluminous lectures and commentaries. My self-conscious reservations about committing ‘offences’ and being ‘unqualified’ in representing Krishna Consciousness seemed to have been easily overcome, in this instance, by bringing them out into the open.

My *Gita* lesson was successful, too. I managed to clearly, seriously, and relatively comprehensively (for a ten-minute talk) represent the teachings of Srila Prabhupada on a matter of profound spiritual importance in ISKCON. Govinda seemed impressed.

“You’re a student,” he stated, after congratulating me on the lesson.

“I’m also a teacher,” I responded, thinking that perhaps my academic experience might explain my ability to effectively re-present the teachings of others.

“No. You’re a student,” rejoined Govinda. “You’re a student of transcendental knowledge.”

Later, after the lesson, my room-mates would concur:

“Malcolm’s a devotee” was the word about the ashram that evening.

### **Surrendering to a higher authority: disclaimer on representation**

At issue in this reflexive parable is the epistemological relationship between speech and belief. This an important issue to confront, I believe, at the outset of this study, before I can begin properly to represent – or to ethnographically ‘speak for’ – my Hare Krishna informants. Preaching Krishna Consciousness *back* to my Hare Krishna informants was by no means the only fieldwork situation I might have recalled to introduce this matter, but the peculiarity of this situation helps to make my point explicit: not only was I authorised to speak *for* Hare Krishna devotees in this situation, but to speak *as* a Hare Krishna devotee. Being slightly uncomfortable with this authority does not forestall the possibilities it affords. On the contrary, reflexive dilemmas are effects of ethnographic experience, and as such I believe they are productive of ethnographic knowledge.

The experience of being perceived by one’s ‘cult member’ informants as a ‘convert’ – or, firstly and more commonly, a ‘*potential* convert’ – is not a new predicament to

researchers of ‘cults’ in the West. Reports of such experiences are quite common in the sociological literature on ‘new religious movements’ (or ‘NRMs’ as they are known in the literature),<sup>1</sup> and some of these reflexive accounts will become subject to my analysis in Chapter One, where I explore critically some of the theoretical ambiguities and possibilities that emerge from this recurring methodological predicament. This same predicament can be read into our opening scenario as an unstated fear – one that I never expressed to Govinda dasa, or to the other devotees during the week of preparation for my *Gita* class – about my being placed in the position of ‘preacher’: a fear that this action of speech might be *misconstrued* as an outward sign of ‘belief’; a fear that was seemingly realised with the response to my presentation – “Malcolm’s a devotee.”

Perhaps this concern was generated, in some part, by a specious sense of ethics: I did not want to *deceive* any of my informants into thinking I had ‘converted’ to Krishna Consciousness, by speaking *as if* I were a devotee preaching the teachings of Srila Prabhupada. In retrospect, though, I recognise that my anxiety was really a defensive gesture of agnosticism. And besides, I would only convince myself, not my informants, of my lack of conviction. For from my informants’ perspective (which is, after all, what ethnography should be about), I was only *deceiving myself* when I openly denied their claims about my being ‘a devotee’.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘NRM’ was an attempt at a value-neutral sociological terminology, given the pejorative meanings associated with the labels ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ in public usage (Beckford 1985; Shinn 1987a). Bromley and Hadden (1993) advocate a return to the use of ‘cult’ and ‘sect’ as neutral sociological categories – the former referring to movements that arise through religious innovation or the importation of foreign religious traditions, the latter referring to schismatic movements that derive from established traditions. ISKCON would thus qualify as a ‘cult’ in the Western context, but a ‘sect’ in the Indian context. As I will show, ISKCON has long sought to dissociate itself from the label ‘new religious movement’ or ‘NRM’. In fact, ISKCON devotees have re-appropriated the word ‘cult’ from its negative or dangerous connotations, and proudly identify their movement as ‘the cult of Caitanya’ (the figure of Caitanya as understood in ISKCON is explained in what follows).

By what authority could or should I disclaim this conclusion? My own ‘subjective belief’? Perhaps, but my own beliefs are not the subject matter of this ethnography. Furthermore, to maintain from the outset that my act of preaching the *Gita* was ‘misconstrued’ by my informants, as I feared it would be, would mean missing the important ethnographic point of this lesson. It would suggest, for one, that I knew in advance what defined ‘a devotee’ – by relying on some prior yet unformulated notion of subjective belief to construct ‘a devotee’ as my ethnographic ‘other’ – before and even better than my devotee-informants who included me under this designation. The more appropriate and productive response is to ask what is was – in the productive, intersubjective *practices* which constituted ‘the field’ of my research in this particular ethnographic context – that qualified me as a devotee amongst devotees. Any effort to retrospectively *disown* the words I spoke while presenting my *Bhagavad-gita* class would further suggest that these words could, in fact, be owned by a speaking subject: that while problematic in my own case, similar words spoken by a Hare Krishna devotee, for instance, could be taken unproblematically as an objective signifier for a signified subjectivity – that is to say, as a sign of belief. But we cannot simply *presume* that this relationship exists in this unproblematic way, even before we begin representing the words of others as so much ethnographic evidence for a given thesis. What it actually means, ethnographically speaking, to represent or to appropriate the so-called ‘voice of the other’ is entirely dependent on the rules and value of ownership surrounding that voice.

Quite critical is not simply the extent to which actors are allowed to speak, the openness with which the original dialogues are reproduced, or the restoration of their subjectivity through narrative device, but what kinds of authors they themselves are. We need to have some sense of the productive

activity which lies behind what people say, and thus their own relationship to what has been said. Without knowing how they ‘own’ their own words, we cannot know what we have done in appropriating them. (Strathern 1987:19)

So (how) do Hare Krishna devotees ‘own’ their own words? What kind of ‘authors’ are they? The ‘productive activity which lies behind’ the words of a religious convert testifying to an outside observer is a complicated issue, especially when the observer is not only a target of proselytisation, but also (as I shall explore further below) a potential *means* of proselytisation.<sup>2</sup> Without explicating the in-depth process of doctrinal iteration which authorises a devotee’s testimony, and without acknowledging the intersubjective context in which this is revealed to the ethnographer, the reproduction of ‘original dialogues’ becomes a qualitatively hollow project.

I want to contextualise Strathern’s problematic by ‘appropriating’ the authoritative, ‘original’ words of one Hare Krishna devotee, the Temple President (‘TP’) of ISKCON Sydney. The following excerpt is taken from a class that TP presented on *Bhagavad-gita* one Wednesday evening at ISKCON Sydney. At this point in the lesson we are concerned less with the subject matter of *Gita* than with its authorised representation:

...and what is the qualification of the speaker? That he simply repeats what the previously qualified speaker said. And ultimately, of course, the original or ultimately qualified speaker is Krishna. So the guru is one who simply repeats what Krishna has already said. Krishna, He spoke *Bhagavad-gita*; Vyasadeva recorded *Bhagavad-gita*: therefore Vyasadeva is a guru because he is repeating what Krishna says. And then we are repeating what is written there in the *Gita*: so therefore we are

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<sup>2</sup> I would qualify Strathern’s worthwhile argument at this point, by questioning whether ‘the productive activity’ necessarily ‘*lies behind* what people say’ (my emphasis), and by stressing that ‘what people say’ is a ‘productive activity’ in its own right. This point is developed in my main argument.

also guru. If someone, however, introduces speculation according to their own imagination – and usually this is prefaced by the phrase “Well I think” or “I believe” or “It seems to me” or “Perhaps” or “Maybe this” – then immediately he is dismissed as a nonsense... One has to be able to refer to *sastra* [scripture], to the previously established authority, in order to be accepted as an actually qualified person. And, of course, one’s behaviour has to support the rhetoric – not that one can say all sorts of wonderful things and then behave like a nonsense. Of course, we could argue that although... example is better than precept, precept is better than nothing. And it’s a fact that oftentimes we see far in excess of our ability to act. But then we should be very humble and present it in an objective way – not that we are talking about ourselves, or trying to give the impression that we ourselves are on the platform of which we are speaking, but that we... give the impression very clearly that what we are speaking is the ultimate objective, which we ourselves are also aspiring to – not that we are on that platform. So it’s that honest position also [that] is effective in influencing people to Krishna Consciousness. So by one’s quality and one’s speech, one’s characteristics and one’s speech, the position can actually be understood. So spiritual realisation or qualification is not a matter of personal sentiment. It’s not a matter of subjective sentiment. It’s a matter of objective observation and analysis.

It was under precisely such ‘objective observation and analysis’ that my own *Gita* lesson received the response that it did. I ‘qualified’ as ‘a devotee’, but not because I presented evidence of a transformed subjectivity. Oftentimes – to repeat TP with one permissible adjustment – we *speak* far in excess of our ability to act. Of course, speech itself is also a kind of act, which is why it has the transformative or performative capacity to bring something into being, rather than merely signify an extant state of being. I was ‘qualified’ because my recitation and faithful representation of Prabhupada’s teachings constituted, in itself, a *spiritual act* with transformative potential.

In ISKCON, this transformative potential is realised not only when ‘one’s speech’ is ‘effective in influencing people to Krishna Consciousness’. As a ‘productive activity’ in itself, in Strathern’s terms, preaching or speaking about Krishna Consciousness does not



merely *reflect* an already completed ‘conversion’ to Krishna Consciousness and a desire to convert others to the same, but actually serves to *effect* a transformation by which ‘the platform of which we are speaking’ becomes a realisable spiritual objective for the speaker. Krishna Consciousness – as the ‘ultimate objective’ of the spiritual process in ISKCON, or ‘spiritual realisation’ itself – can only ever be realised through *the transformative process of speaking about Krishna Consciousness*. Attempting to disown the words I spoke during my *Gita* class could never really work to contradict the *possibility* of transformation facilitated by such an act. In ultimate reality, the transcendental Word holds its transformative power, and can be engaged to transformative effect, precisely because it does *not* belong to any material speaker or to any transitory moment of speech. For this reason, and perhaps also ‘because humility is the mark of great devotion to Krishna’ (Judah 1974a:9), my diplomatic disclaimer reinforced the perception that I exhibited all the makings of a qualified representative of Krishna Consciousness.

### **Conversion acts: the performativity of belief**

Judah (op.cit.), author of the first of the several monograph studies on ISKCON published to date, observes that ‘the devotee’s witness to his belief through public chanting and preaching in the streets’ is an ‘*instrument* toward complete faith’ (177; my emphasis). Whether witnessing occurs through preaching in the streets or, in our case, in the context of an ethnographic encounter, the process is not merely one of verbally expressing a subjectively secured belief, but of utilising that intersubjective verbal ‘instrument’ as a means of *realising belief*.<sup>3</sup> Judah acknowledges, then, that a devotee’s preaching cannot

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<sup>3</sup> Robbins et al. (1973) argue that the belief of cult informants is re-affirmed in the presence of an empathic outside observer. I address their argument more thoroughly in the next chapter.

automatically be taken at face value as a sign of total conversion. ‘Conversion and the consequent transformation in the devotee’s life are probably only *apparently* immediate. More generally it is a multifaceted process that continues over a long period, and that includes the validation of a way of life’ (178; original emphasis).

I take as axiomatic this partial definition of conversion as a transformative ‘*process* that continues over a long period’. Shinn (1987a) also points to the cumulative process of conversion in ISKCON when he argues that ‘psychoanalytic or social explanations that focus upon [the] *conversion decision* alone neglect the maturing *conversion process*’ (141; original emphasis). Rochford’s (1985) study of ‘recruitments and conversions’ (73) to ISKCON does not make this distinction. Like the majority of sociologists of new religious movements, Rochford is intent on gleaning the ‘hard data’ on the ‘reasons and motives’ (ibid.) behind devotees’ *original* conversion decisions, and he believes that ‘the movement’s rhetoric’ actually *obscures* this data by acting as an ‘*interpretive screen* used by members to reconstruct their own life stories’ (ibid.; my emphasis). Rochford, then, does not accept devotees’ testimonies ‘at face value’ (ibid.) as a contributing part of the conversion process itself. This is a different approach to the one suggested by Judah, which at least recognises that while, on the one hand, the rhetoric of belief might create the problematic impression for the listener of an ‘*apparently* immediate’ conversion, on the other hand this same rhetoric also functions *for the devotee* as an effective ‘instrument’ in the conversion process.

The rich *ethnographic* data that Rochford rejects as an ‘interpretive screen’ to be penetrated in the objectivist quest for ‘hard data’ is clearly only a problem if hidden ‘reasons and motives’ are our object of study (and it is no accident that sociologists’ findings in this quest have tended to privilege *sociological* motives over the complex

spiritual concerns of their informants).<sup>4</sup> But the value of this data is restored as soon as we shift our attention from the ‘conversion decision’ to the ‘conversion process’, which may or may not *need* a conversion decision as such, for it is invariably the case that ‘new cult behaviour *precedes* belief conversion’ (Shinn op.cit.:139; original emphasis). In this thesis I equate the conversion process with ‘cult behaviour’ or the *spiritual process* itself, which is surely inseparable from the process of ‘learning the movement’s rhetoric’ (cf. Rochford op.cit.).

I find a more eloquent statement on the subject of conversion from outside the specific context of conversion to ISKCON. For Viswanathan (1998), ‘conversion has a much more dynamic and creative meaning than is captured by the phrase “the conversion experience,” which signifies spiritual self-transformation primarily rather than a *knowledge-producing activity*’ (43; my emphasis). Without wholly rejecting the more traditional (Jamesian) sense of ‘conversion’ as a subjective, experiential ‘epiphany’ (4), Viswanathan grants to the convert a more critical sense of agency and creativity than is traditionally conveyed by the term, by arguing that ‘conversion is primarily an *interpretive act*’ (ibid.; my emphasis). ‘Interpretive act’ has a far more productive connotation than Rochford’s ‘interpretive screen’, and against Rochford I would argue that the ‘dynamic and creative’ dimensions of the conversion act are not lost on the Hare Krishna devotee who simply reiterates ‘the movement’s rhetoric’ or, following the kind of instruction offered by TP above, ‘simply repeats what the previously qualified speaker said’. Faithful repetition might be seen to deny the interpretive or knowledge-producing dimensions of conversion

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<sup>4</sup> In Chapter One I argue that sociological studies of ISKCON, like those of other NRMs, have generally interpreted NRMs as signs of a ‘crisis of meaning’ brought about by the secularising influence of Western modernity (e.g. Glock and Bellah 1976). NRMs are interpreted as both a symptom of, and a response, to this meaning-crisis. By seeking to prove this ready-made conclusion, and to reinforce this long-established myth about Western modernity (‘myth’ in the anthropological sense of this word, in the sense that this myth has a very real influence on patterns of *meaning-making* in the West), many of these studies pay scant regard to the

identified by Viswanathan, but I would stress that it is the context rather than the content of repetition which introduces these creative and transformative dimensions. This is why the same ‘rhetoric’ can produce ‘as many different conversion stories and timetables as there [are] devotees’ (Shinn op.cit.:131). I stress also that as an ‘interpretive *act*’ and ‘knowledge-producing *activity*’, conversion is as much a performative and practical process as it is an ‘inward or subject-centred process’ (Viswanathan op.cit.:85) of interpretation, knowledge-production, or decision-making. And like any act, the ‘interpretive act’ of conversion must be *repeatable* in different contexts, and its performance must be *witnessed* for its effect to be realised and validated. In its adaptability to context, proselytism is as much a part of this ‘productive activity’ (Strathern op.cit.) as it is a peremptory method of converting others.

### **Spreading the message (1): *sankirtana***

These preliminary observations on ‘the productive activity’ (ibid.) of what Hare Krishna devotees say in the preaching context, which originated in a reflection on my ethnographic participation in this same activity, actually point us to the very heart of the spiritual process in ISKCON.

As Knott (2000) has recently written, the ‘*communication* of Krishna Consciousness’ (153; my emphasis) is the ‘motivating principle’ of ISKCON (ibid.): it is ‘*both a theological end in itself, and a practical means to that end*’ (154; my emphasis). This is a complex theological statement, although Knott herself does not really communicate its complexity or theological significance. Compare Knott’s ‘theological end’ to Judah’s (op.cit.) early definition of salvation in ISKCON: ‘the Movement’s goal and way

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theological specificities of particular NRMs or to the unique spiritual experiences which they offer.

of achieving it is most simply defined as “the revival of the original consciousness, of the living being – the conscious awareness that one is eternally related to God or Krishna” (5).<sup>5</sup> The revival or realisation of the devotee’s original ‘spiritual consciousness’ – or ‘Krishna Consciousness’ – is also equated in ISKCON with the salvific return of the ‘spirit-soul’ ‘back home, back to Godhead’, or back to Krishna’s transcendental abode in ‘the spiritual world’. Chanting ‘Hare Krishna’ and preaching Krishna Consciousness have always been recognised as two of the core ‘practical means’ to this salvific end in ISKCON. But the distinction between means and end becomes blurred when Knott observes, quite correctly, that in ISKCON the process of *communicating* Krishna Consciousness is located at the *same* ‘theological end’ as Krishna Consciousness itself. This theology of ‘communication’ was most effectively communicated to me by one young *brahmachari* (male celibate student) from the ISKCON Sydney ashram: “Even if we could go back to the spiritual world today, we would still stay behind to carry on Prabhupada’s [missionary/communications] work.”

This critical theological point has never been accorded its due place at the very heart of Hare Krishna spirituality by academic observers of ISKCON, even as the ‘practical means’ of Hare Krishna proselytism have certainly been the core focus for those interested in the *sociological* mechanisms by which people first come into contact with the movement. Rochford’s (1982, 1985) work on ISKCON’s ‘recruitment strategies’ is the authoritative source on this latter topic, while Knott (op.cit.) provides a more current account of the way ‘changing demands in recruitment and public relations have led to the introduction of innovative methods of communication’ (154) in ISKCON. The underlying assumption for both of these authors is that the desired end or ultimate objective of the

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<sup>5</sup> Judah is citing *The Krishna Consciousness Handbook*, an important work of spiritual instruction in ISKCON

means of proselytisation is ‘recruitment’ – or, in Knott’s more inclusive terminology, ‘public relations’ and the ‘making available of what is held to be a universally relevant message’ (ibid.). At one level of analysis, these objectives might seem obvious. But this level of analysis effectively stops at what, for the so-called ‘recruit’, is really only the theological *beginning* or starting-point of the spiritual process. By focussing upon the sociological instrumentality of the ‘recruitment’ process, such analyses give us little sense of what proselytisation means for the preacher, and little insight into the theological complexity of the message being communicated – which, again, is not just a message *about* Krishna Consciousness but also a message *to communicate* Krishna Consciousness.

In Chapter Four I will explore the theological bases of this unique spiritual message in ISKCON, and show how it signals a significant theological innovation in the Vaisnava tradition that ISKCON devotees claim to represent. Knott concludes her paper by declaring that, despite ‘the introduction of innovative methods of communication’ (ibid.) in ISKCON, ‘ISKCON’s Vaishnavism has remained orthodox and orthoprax’ (163) in relation to its source tradition in India. This concluding comment on ISKCON’s fidelity to its Indian heritage reinforces a mode of legitimation which Judah (1974b) introduced, two and a half decades earlier, with the opening line of his first essay on ISKCON: ‘The Hare Krishna movement... is a Hindu religious sect imported into the United States in its same form from India’ (463). My argument in Chapter Four will properly test this conclusion, by drawing a theological comparison between ISKCON’s teachings and practices and those of other representatives of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. I will show that ISKCON’s unique emphasis on its ‘communications’ mission actually forms the theological basis for an emerging sectarian identity in ISKCON, a sectarian identity which has been reinforced in recent years *against*

the otherwise ‘orthodox and orthoprax’ expressions of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism to be found in India (cf. Brooks 1989). I argue that scholars who have sought to legitimate ISKCON doctrine and practice by first locating these somewhere in ‘India’s past’ (cf. Klostermaier 1980), and in relation to some prior orthodoxy called ‘Vaisnavism’, have tended to overlook much of what makes ISKCON unique as a religious movement. I would point out that to encounter ISKCON, as either a convert or an ethnographer, is not to encounter ‘Vaisnavism’ but its ‘communication’, its proselytisation, and its literal and cultural translation: and it is in these transformative processes that ‘ISKCON’s Vaishnavism’ (Knott op.cit.:163) is realised, for the convert and preacher, as the highest and truest form of Vaisnavism. More on this later.

For my present purposes it is enough to acknowledge what Knott understands of ISKCON’s theology of ‘communication’: that ISKCON is an ‘intrinsically evangelical’ (162) movement on a mission to propagate the devotional (*bhakti*) cult of Sri Krsna Caitanya (literally, ‘Krishna Consciousness’), the sixteenth century Bengali Vaisnava saint, or *avatara* (incarnation) of Krishna, who Himself instigated the movement to disseminate the Holy Name of Krishna ‘in every town and village’. Caitanya’s method of *sankirtana*, or the public performance of dancing, drumming, and chanting of the *mahamantra*, or ‘great mantra of deliverance’ – *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare* – is the spiritual practice most readily identified with the Hare Krishna movement in the West. *Sankirtana* is simultaneously a method of proselytisation, a munificent means of bestowing spiritual grace upon others, and a personal means of spiritual advancement, in which the ‘transcendental sound vibration’ of the Holy Name acts to revive the devotee’s dormant love of God – called *bhakti*, or ‘Krishna Consciousness’.

Knott leaves her only theological explanation as to how the performance of *sankirtana* also constitutes a ‘theological end in itself’ (154) to an endnote: ‘Hearing and singing the holy names are understood by devotees to be eternal activities of those who desire Krishna’ (163 n.1). More precisely, ‘hearing and singing the holy names’ are the eternal activities of Krishna’s companions in the spiritual world – they *are* the ideal state of spiritual realisation itself – and so also provide the paradigmatic ‘model’ for spiritual practice in the temporal context (cf. Haberman 1988).<sup>6</sup> ‘Hearing and singing the holy names’ in the temporal context of spiritual practice are the ‘practical means’ of dispelling one’s illusory identification with the material mind and body, and of realising or ‘remembering’ (*smarana*) one’s own original spiritual identity (*svarupa*) as an eternal companion of Krishna. Beck (1992) offers a more eloquent explanation: *sankirtana* is the ‘natural cry of the soul’ (277), which is why the ‘spiritual sound’ (*sabda brahman*) (262) of the *mahamantra* works to effect the ‘unfolding of one’s inherent spiritual nature’ (277). ISKCON devotees also understand that the Holy Name of Krishna is form of Krishna Himself. The Holy Name is ‘non-different’ to Krishna, which means Krishna Himself is present in the recitation of the *mahamantra*. Means and end are brought together in this process, for as a means of returning the devotee to Krishna’s spiritual world, *sankirtana* is simultaneously a means by which Krishna, and by (His) extension the spiritual world itself, are made manifest in the immediate context of spiritual practice.

Knott (op.cit.) also demonstrates that ‘hearing and singing the holy names’ are not the only means of ‘communicating Krishna Consciousness’ (154) in ISKCON. But while she appreciates that ‘the evangelical principle has remained constant’ (ibid.) in ISKCON

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<sup>6</sup> Haberman’s analysis of the ‘divine model’ and its performative ‘imitation’ in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism is explored in Chapter Four, where I establish the theological and sectarian differences which exist between ISKCON and other Gaudiya-Vaisnava sects. These differences relate specifically to questions surrounding the



with the ‘introduction of innovative methods of communication’ in its evangelical mission (ibid.), she does not acknowledge the *soteriological* innovation at work here. Engaging in ‘innovative methods’ of communicating Krishna Consciousness also effects the ‘unfolding of one’s inherent spiritual nature’ (Beck op.cit.), and for the same soteriological reason: these activities are also ‘non-different’ to the ‘eternal activities of those who desire Krishna’ (Knott op.cit.:163) in the spiritual world itself. From this perspective, innovation is intrinsically a process of *revelation*, as each new method of communicating Krishna Consciousness is understood to *reflect* another dimension of the eternal, paradigmatic activities of the spirit-soul. Revelation, I would stress, is a different theological process to the faithful reproduction of orthodoxy, and we do little justice to the unique revelations of Hare Krishna spirituality by representing these as merely ‘orthodox and orthoprax’ expressions of an established tradition.

In ISKCON, the term *sankirtana* and the theological significance attached to this term are also extended to a whole range of ‘communication strategies’ (162) employed in the pursuit of Caitanya’s proselytising mission. The most important form that *sankirtana* takes outside of (or in conjunction with) the context of ‘hearing and singing the holy names’ in public is ‘book distribution’: the sale and distribution of the books of translation and instruction by ISKCON’s Founder-*Acarya*, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.<sup>7</sup>

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‘divine model’ and its ‘imitation’ as a technique of spiritual transformation.

<sup>7</sup> Rochford (1985:171-189) examines some of the controversies surrounding this practice within ISKCON and the tensions it has created between ISKCON and the public. Many of the problems in the public view stemmed from dishonest sales tactics employed by devotees. Tensions within ISKCON arised when public solicitation began to turn away from its original proselytising principle and toward more financially-oriented practices: selling goods (like incense) which had no explicit function in spreading the message of Krishna Consciousness. Similar controversies continue to stir emotions within ISKCON (including ISKCON Sydney), especially when the term ‘*sankirtana*’ is used for fund-raising practices that do not serve any ostensible preaching purpose.

Srila Prabhupada, as he is affectionately known to his followers, first arrived in America from India in 1965 in order to establish his international preaching Society. With the opportunity presented in 1965 by the introduction of a new immigration bill in the United States, which allowed for previously barred immigration from Asia (Melton 1989:90; 1993:99; 1995:268; Shinn 1987a:38), Prabhupada arrived in New York under the inspired instruction of his spiritual master to preach the philosophy and practice of Caitanyite Vaisnavism (Gaudiya-Vaisnavism) to the English-speaking ‘Western countries’. Prabhupada’s story, as recorded in his ‘official biography’ *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* (Goswami, S.d. 1993), is a familiar one to observers of ISKCON. Prabhupada’s guru, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur, was the son of Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, a Bengali magistrate of the colonial administration, who is accredited with revitalising the Gaudiya tradition in the late nineteenth century. Bhaktivinode is also said to have prophesied that ‘people of all nationalities’ (Knott op.cit.:154) would be attracted to the message of Caitanya through the medium of the printing press – which he called the ‘*brhat mrdanga*’ or ‘great drum’ of the modern day *sankirtana* movement.

Bhaktivinode’s grand-disciple, Srila Prabhupada, was to see this prophecy fulfilled. Prabhupada arrived in New York a sixty-nine year old *sannyasi* (renunciate) with little money and few possessions other than the first volumes of his English translation of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (*Bhagavata Purana* – a core Vaisnava scripture). For the next twelve years, as his fledgling Western movement experienced rapid international expansion, Prabhupada continued his work of translating the core teachings of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. Prabhupada’s books were to become the foundation for Hare Krishna doctrine and practice as they were ‘distributed’ by his Western disciples through dozens of countries and languages.

‘Even on his sickbed before he died in the fall of 1977, Prabhupada continued to translate Krishna texts as his guru has instructed him. He viewed that as his special mission’ (Shinn 1987a:39). Devotees in ISKCON today understand that ‘the guru lives on in his teachings even after his body is gone’ (49): ‘Prabhupada’s translations, purports, letters, and direct personal instructions (“orders”) [have] become the substitute for his presence’ (52); or as the devotees say, ‘Prabhupada is embodied in his books’. Just as Krishna Himself is manifest in the recitation of His Holy Name, so is Krishna’s ‘pure representative’, Srila Prabhupada, manifest in the recitation of his writings – and in the telling of his story. These latter citational practices also work to effect the ‘unfolding of one’s inherent spiritual nature’ (cf. Beck op.cit.), and the ‘spiritual sound’ of *sankirtana* now reverberates around the world through the amplifying power of Prabhupada’s translations.

### **Spreading the message (2): scholarly devotion**

Prabhupada’s translations are not the only books involved in the ‘communication of Krishna Consciousness’ (Knott op.cit.). I want to draw attention to another of ISKCON’s ‘communication strategies’ which Knott notes, but does not explore in her paper. This ‘strategy’ has seen the involvement of ‘sympathetic scholars’ (156) who, by way of ‘emphasizing the value of [ISKCON’s] teachings and history, rather than its social and cultural abnormality’ (157), have actively participated in the ‘communication’ of ISKCON’s cultural and religious legitimacy in the public domain (Baird 1988:159-165; Michael 1989:195).

Certainly one of the most significant aspects of ISKCON’s development, from a scholarly point of view, is the fact that it has been under some form of scholarly

observation ever since Hare Krishna *sankirtana* parties first appeared on American college campuses in the late 1960s, as a colourful feature of the then countercultural scene (Judah 1974a). The sociological literature on ISKCON serves as a virtual chronicle of ISKCON's 'genesis and maturation' (Shinn and Bromley 1989:14) from this period. Indeed, as the sociology of new religious movements experienced its own 'genesis and maturation' as a new sub-discipline of the sociology of religion – during this exact same period – this emerged as one of its stated aims:

Studying new religions was... attractive because it offered the opportunity to observe the organization, growth, and development of a new faith as it was happening. The uniqueness of this situation may not have been immediately apparent to scholars, but many soon realized that there were few previous incidents in which social scientists were present to study a new religion as it developed. (Bromley and Hadden 1993:4)

Hopkins (1983) claims to have been 'one of the first outsiders to take a serious scholarly interest' in ISKCON (102). Unlike the sociologists of NRMs, though, Hopkins' interest was sparked not by the opportunity to observe the formation and development of a new cult, but by the 'prospect of... having access to someone [local] who knew about the Caitanya movement in Bengal' (103). In an interview with Gelberg (who is an ISKCON devotee, known in the movement as Subhananda dasa), Hopkins recalls how his expectations of finding a representative of Bengali Vaisnavism in New York City were disappointed on first visiting an ISKCON temple:

So in the spring of 1967 I went to New York to visit the temple at 26 Second Avenue. I approached a group of the disciples who were there at the time, and I said, "I'm here to try to find out something about Caitanya." And

I just got all these blank looks, and they said, “Caitanya? Who is Caitanya?” And I said, “Well, Caitanya was a saint in Bengal, a great religious leader.” “Oh, that’s very interesting,” they said, “we didn’t know about this.” So, I gave them a mini-lecture on Caitanya and the Caitanya movement... Back then, of course, all the devotees were very new – the movement was in its infant stages – and there wasn’t anyone who had much background in the tradition... (ibid.)

They didn’t really know anything about the Indian background. They didn’t know anything about Caitanya, they didn’t know anything about Bengal... At that stage everything was at such a minimal level that the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra was about all that most of them really knew... That was about it as far as ritual practice is concerned... Very few really knew at that point that there was a formal structure. No one really had much of a sense of what the India connection was. India was just a mysterious far-away place. The fact that Bhaktivedanta Swami had brought his teachings from India didn’t really connect, for most people, to the fact that there was a tradition in India that he represented...

So, that should give you some idea of the devotees’ level of understanding and involvement in Vaisnava culture in those earliest days, and where the movement was, in terms of its actual manifestation of that tradition – it hadn’t progressed very far. (105-106)

I find this account fascinating, not only for the glimpse it provides into the ‘infant stages’ of ISKCON’s development, but also for the role which Hopkins himself assumes in this particular situation as educator to ISKCON’s ignorant neophytes. Whether or not Hopkins’ authority to deliver his ‘mini-lecture on Caitanya’ was recognised or appreciated by the devotees present at the time, we do not know. But this same authority is called upon by Hopkins’ interviewer as a means of assessing ISKCON’s subsequent development as a religious movement in terms of a prior, original tradition called ‘Vaisnava culture’. Hopkins is one of the five ‘distinguished scholars’ interviewed by Gelberg for the book

*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West* (Gelberg 1983).<sup>8</sup> Gelberg is one ISKCON devotee who seems to recognise that ISKCON's claim to cultural legitimacy 'would be less convincing were it to come from a devotee than if it were to come from the mouth of a respected academic' (Baird op.cit.:163). Baird observes of Gelberg's volume that it 'leaves the distinct impression that there are reputable scholars who hold that ISKCON is a *bona fide* religion, a movement that is rapidly becoming more of a denomination than a sect, which has a strong mystical dimension coupled with a strong intellectual base and a long and illustrious history in India' (164). One of the recurring themes of Gelberg's interviews relates to the observation that 'ISKCON is not a cult, not even a 'new' religious movement', but is rather a 'legitimate religious tradition' (163). For his part, Hopkins presents ISKCON's claim to 'tradition' as *inherent* in its 'India connection' – a connection which he identifies in the person of Srila Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.<sup>9</sup> Even though the 'actual manifestation of that tradition' was not yet apparent to Prabhupada's disciples themselves in the early stages of ISKCON's development, Hopkins recognises, in retrospect, that the seed of 'Vaisnava culture' planted in America by Prabhupada only needed time to germinate. He cites an interim report he presented to a research committee in 1969, after his next visit to ISKCON's first storefront temple in New York:

The Society for Krishna Consciousness has changed and become a much more significant organization that it was even a year ago... Disciples in general now know far more about the Vaisnavite scriptures than they did a

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<sup>8</sup> The other scholars interviewed by Gelberg are Harvey Cox, Larry D. Shinn, A.L. Basham and Srivatsa Goswami (who is both a Vaisnava guru and scholar).

<sup>9</sup> As Hopkins implies, this connection was by no means immediate to Prabhupada's disciples. Daner (1976) notes that most of Prabhupada's disciples never actually met Prabhupada himself, and were initiated via mail (18). Judah (1974a) records that only twenty-five percent of disciples 'had even seen [Prabhupada] before

year ago, and their ritual practices have become much more complex and sophisticated. A major effort has been made to introduce and perfect the full range of traditional Hindu rituals associated with the worship of Krishna. Disciples now celebrate daily worship with morning *puja* to the image of Krishna in their temple shrine and with evening *kirtan*, celebrate Hindu holy days, perform regular daily chanting of rounds of Krishna mantras using their bead rosaries, have learned Indian musical styles and adopted Indian food and dress, and in an amazing way for such a short period of time have assimilated their living patterns to a Hindu model. (Hopkins, cited in Hopkins op.cit.:107)

Hopkins recalls being both ‘surprised and pleased’ (ibid.) by what he witnessed of ISKCON’s rapid Hindu-isation. These curious responses (for whom is Hopkins ‘pleased’?) are indicative of the kind of sympathy we find expressed in other scholarly representations of ISKCON. I suggest it is actually a patronising or paternalistic form of pleasure that Hopkins and other sympathetic scholars have enjoyed from observing ISKCON, for it derives from the authority of those whose knowledge of ISKCON’s parent ‘tradition’ is assumed to be greater than that of ISKCON devotees themselves. It is not a form of pleasure, or a type of knowledge, that derives from ethnographic participation, where the ‘child/anthropologist’ (Asad 1986:159) assumes his or her *own* ignorance and submits to a process of learning *from* a more ‘adept’ (ibid.) and knowledgeable ethnographic other. I, for one, was accepted by my informants as ‘a student of transcendental knowledge’, not as a teacher of religious history. The ethnographer does not, or at least should not, assume the prior authority to assess the ‘culture’ of his or her informants, even favourably, according to some extrinsic measure of value. More on this point shortly.

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they were converted to Krishna Consciousness’ (172).

Of course, outside the learning environment of ethnography, there exists an undeniable *political* value in ISKCON's appeal to 'sympathetic scholars' who can authoritatively attest to the movement's '*bona fide*' (Prabhupada was fond of this term) roots in India – and this is where scholars have most directly contributed to ISKCON's 'public relations' (Knott op.cit.:154) mission. For example,

the movement sent representatives to the 1976 joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Society for Biblical Literature and American School of Oriental Research in St Louis. There they acquired the signatures of almost 200 scholars on a petition that affirmed that the movement was a *bona fide* religion and should be afforded freedom under the First Amendment. (Baird op.cit.:159)

The motivation for scholars engaging in ISKCON's 'legitimation techniques' (Michael op.cit.) can certainly be defended from a political standpoint. A brief overview of the literature on ISKCON shows that scholars have made tangible contributions to the defence of ISKCON devotees' democratic rights to religious freedom. Written at the time of the Vietnam War, only a few years after ISKCON's genesis in the U.S., Judah's *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture* (1974a) records the author's personal involvement in defending the rights of ISKCON devotees: 'Because of their seriousness as ministers of their faith, they obviously deserve the same privileges as do ministers, priests, or rabbis of any faith. Therefore I was willing to intercede with their draft boards on occasion, in trying to to get deferments' (17). Judah also devotes a substantial first part of his book to explaining the place of sixteenth century Caitanyite Vaisnavism within the vast history of Hindu thought, beginning with the Vedas. The assumption is that, whatever countercultural ideals or experiences may have led them to it (which Judah covers after, and quite



separately from, his brief history of Hindu thought), Hare Krishna devotees are inheritors and modern day representatives of this great tradition, and it is here the observer should be looking first for the source of ISKCON's religious legitimacy.

Shinn's *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America* (op.cit.) belongs to a later period of ISKCON's development, when a battle of a different kind was confronting ISKCON devotees: the battle with the anti-cults. Shinn records that in the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, ISKCON was repeatedly forced to defend itself in court against charges of 'brainwashing'. Many devotees also found themselves defending their individual rights not to be kidnapped by anti-cultist 'de-programmers' – who were typically employed by the devotees' own parents, stirred as they were by public hysteria over 'the cults' into believing their (adult-age) children had fallen victim to the manipulative 'mind control' techniques of evil cult leaders.

Shinn served as an expert witness in such cases during the time of his research. Shinn's testimony, which I presume to find reiterated in his study, gives the distinct impression that if there is anything that should rightfully be feared as 'brainwashing' in relation to ISKCON, it is the abusive techniques of those who would seek to 'de-program' ISKCON devotees from their faith. Shinn's publication provides the most comprehensive critique available of the pseudo-scientific charge of 'brainwashing', and firmly establishes the immorality and illegality of de-programming tactics. Shinn contrasts the reputed mechanisms of 'brainwashing' to the devotee's genuinely religious 'search for meaning', which he universally identifies with the many and varied 'pathways to Krishna' he discovered while recording Hare Krishna 'conversion stories' (122-143; also Shinn 1989). Furthermore, and indeed right from the outset of his book, Shinn also establishes the cultural legitimacy of ISKCON itself, as 'an American Krishna tradition that [is]

authentically Indian and self-consciously so' (1987a:9). This appeal to 'authenticity' as the meaningful foundation of the devotee's conversion process is a theme we will find repeated in other accounts of conversion to ISKCON. Significantly, the authority to recognise the 'authentically Indian' is equally dependent on one's ability to discern the inauthentic: and so must Shinn establish ISKCON's authenticity, and hence justify its sympathetic representation, with the assertion that this special movement is quite definitely not 'just another quasi-Indian import' (10) or 'a watered-down Yoga or meditation practice to sell to Americans' (38).

If the 'Hare Krishnas have lived through their trial by fire' (Melton 1995:276) in cases of anti-cult persecution, this has not necessarily seen, as Melton optimistically suggests, the 'de-politicization' (ibid.) of the work of those studying ISKCON. The most recently published book on ISKCON, Nye's *Multiculturalism and Minority Religions in Britain: Krishna Consciousness, Religious Freedom, and the Politics of Location* (2001), takes up ISKCON's battle for religious freedom on a very different front. Nye explores the fifteen year legal dispute between ISKCON's Bhaktivedanta Manor in Hertfordshire, outside of London, and the local planning authority of the shire. ISKCON's 'Save the Manor' campaign erupted in 1981, after complaints in the local community about religious festivals held at the ISKCON centre saw authorities seek to close the centre to public worship. The centre's festivals were regularly attracting thousands of British Hindus from London, leaving the roads of the little 'Green Belt' village of Letchmore Heath, closest to the Manor, regularly obstructed by visiting vehicles (53-56). But what began as a local planning dispute later took on a more serious political dimension. With a massive Hindu support base in London, and with the help of both the British-based National Council of Hindu Temples and the Indian Hindu nationalist organisation Viswa Hindu Parishad (Nye

1996:46), ISKCON fought the battle for the Manor on a platform of minority religious and ethnic rights – a ‘strategy’ which eventually saw the case brought before the European Commission on Human Rights.

Both Nye and Knott were to become implicated in this dispute as expert witnesses in the local hearings on the case (Nye 2001:289). Nye explains the value of his expertise to the case:

...it fell to me to give an academic, and therefore politically ‘normative’ perspective that ISKCON are an established religious group who are derived from a certain cultural and sectarian strand of ‘Hinduism’, and thus are not necessarily a ‘freakish’ or dangerous ‘cult’. In such terms, I was therefore arguing that ISKCON should be viewed as much an ‘ethnic religion’ as a ‘new religion’, and that any decisions made by the jury and judge should be made on this basis. (290)

‘For years’, as Nye and others have observed, ‘ISKCON have striven to dissociate themselves from the label of ‘new religion’ (or NRM)’ (8). Like Hopkins, Judah and Shinn, Nye accedes to this desire in his analysis by recognising ISKCON as ‘part of an ancient religious tradition’ (ibid.). The involvement of diasporic Indian Hindus at the congregational level of ISKCON’s ministry has also been instrumental in this legitimisation process (Michael op.cit.), and in the transition of ISKCON’s public image from a ‘dangerous cult’ to a culturally and religiously authenticated expression of Hinduism.

Thousands of Hindu Indians attend weekly services at ISKCON temples, participate in traditional Hindu festivals, provide monetary support, and even send their children for religious instruction at ISKCON schools and summer camps. Some ISKCON centres are even beginning to resemble ethnic churches. As ISKCON has gradually begun to get the message of its

legitimate “ethnicity” across to the American public, it has begun to enjoy some of the polite respect (from government bodies, the courts, and the media) due ethnic minorities. (Gelberg 1987:190).

I find ‘ethnic churches’ to be a misleading description of ISKCON centres. ISKCON certainly caters for and ministers to the religious needs of many migrant Hindus and their families, perhaps even serving – as Zaidman (2000) argues in an American case – some form of ‘integrative’ function for these groups in a new multicultural milieu. But those who actually do the catering and the ministering do not themselves form an ‘ethnic minority’ in any legitimate sense of that term. In the Western context at least, the distinction between what might be called the laity and priesthood in ISKCON is notably marked by ethnicity (ibid.). This is where I take issue with Nye’s (2001) attempt to take ISKCON’s *strategic* appeal to ‘ethnicity’ as grounds for *conceptually* constructing ISKCON itself as an ‘ethnic religion’ within the sociological and postcolonial framework of multiculturalism (6). This seems to deny the crucial difference that exists between those who come to ISKCON *as* Hindu and for its Hindu-related services, and those ‘mainly ethnically white’ (ibid.) people who come as *converts* to this ‘certain cultural and sectarian strand of ‘Hinduism’’, and who only subsequently service local Hindu communities as religious officiants. To suggest that ISKCON is an ‘ethnic religion’ would imply that the ISKCON devotee has not only ‘converted’ to a religion, but to an ethnicity as well – which is patently not possible. Nye seems to think that the case of ISKCON dissolves the distinction between ethnicity and religion, when in reality – as I argue more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Three – it reifies it. This same problem ultimately undermines Shinn’s sympathetic observation that ISKCON is ‘authentically Indian and self-consciously so’ – for the sense of what Shinn calls ‘authentically Indian’ must surely be *experienced*

*differently* between the self-consciously ethnic Indian migrant, and the self-conscious convert. As I will show in Chapters Two and Three, this difference is reiterated and reinforced by ISKCON devotees themselves, and is what meaningfully defines the uniqueness of the ‘conversion’ experience, as opposed to the ‘migration’ experience (cf. Nye op.cit.), of religiosity in ISKCON.

None of this is to deny the value of ISKCON’s alignment with ‘Hinduism’ or the genuine support ISKCON receives from its Hindu laity. It is rather to emphasise the significance of those ‘differences within’ (ibid.) ISKCON which are undeniably traced along ethnic lines. The intention is to emphasise the strategic value of this alignment, and also to problematise the way scholars like Nye *participate* in this strategy at the conceptual level of their analyses. Rochford (1987) serves to remind us that it was only ‘as the level of tension between the movement and the larger society grew did ISKCON attempt to accentuate its Hindu roots. In the face of strong public opposition against it, ISKCON began actively to seek formal ties with the larger Hindu tradition’ (116; also Rochford 1985:270-1).

In contexts where the political or legal value of this alignment is not at issue – and I would stress that contexts where these *are* at issue are atypical – ISKCON devotees are quick to distinguish their movement from ‘Hinduism’ and also from the ‘ethnic Indian’ label. As I will explain in Chapter Three, both of these terms in fact convey pejorative connotations in ISKCON. The alternative and preferred terms used to describe ‘the spiritual life’ in ISKCON are, respectively, ‘Vaisnava’ and ‘spiritual culture’. I argue that the meaning of these terms should not and cannot be ascertained from sources extrinsic to devotees’ own spiritual practices – sources like, for instance, the history of Hindu thought, or some prior authority on what constitutes the ‘authentically Indian’ or the diasporic

Indian experience of ‘Hinduism’, or even a prior knowledge of Bengali Vaisnavism. To do so would be to deny the ethnographic value of these terms as we find them articulated and put into practice by ISKCON devotees themselves. It would also presume that the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness interprets his or her spiritual practices, and values their ‘authenticity’, in the same way as the historian of religion or the scholar of Hinduism.

### **Spreading the message (3): the sacred in translation**

If the ‘sympathetic’ approach to ISKCON finds value and validation in ISKCON’s ‘traditional’ Indian heritage, it evidently fails to appreciate the privileged place which ISKCON devotees accord their own movement in relation to this heritage. It fails to acknowledge one of the core hagiographic teachings in ISKCON, which tells of Prabhupada’s disillusionment with the insular, factional, culturally mired and spiritually stagnated state of his own tradition, while identifying the cultural translation and globalisation of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism in the form of ISKCON not only as a progressive and revitalising movement, but as the latest revelation of God’s own will, perfectly realised by Gaudiya-Vaisnavism’s only ‘world *acarya*’ – Srila Prabhupada. Suffice it to say that this assessment of ISKCON’s spiritual significance is not so easily legitimated by taking the Indian tradition as our measure of authentication. It also offers a different perspective on what Hopkins (op.cit.) calls ISKCON’s ‘India connection’ – the figure of Srila Prabhupada himself: for instead of tracing ISKCON’s significance backwards from this singular point to a prior history and culture, it looks forward with a sense of historic purpose to the fulfilment of Prabhupada’s global mission.

In Chapter Five I re-introduce the sympathetic representations of ISKCON’s scholarly observers as instances of Hare Krishna hagiography. The eulogies of

‘distinguished scholars’ are to be found not only in scholarly publications, but also on the covers of Prabhupada’s books of translation, where they extol Prabhupada’s traditional authority to potential buyers of ISKCON’s ‘transcendental literature’. ISKCON’s sympathetic observers have been effectively mobilised, in this respect, to the front line of ISKCON’s *sankirtana* or ‘communications’ mission (cf. Knott 2000). And it is right here, in the distribution of Prabhupada’s books, that the hagiographic narrative of Prabhupada’s mission to the West is ‘lived forward’ (Wyschogrod 1990:29) in the spiritual practice of ISKCON devotees themselves, as the very ‘*mechanism*’ (33; original emphasis) of spiritual progress. In Chapter Five I take up Wyschogrod’s argument that the ‘comprehension of a saint’s life understood from within the sphere of hagiography is a *practice* through which the addressee is gathered into the narrative so as to extend and elaborate it with her/his own life’ (xxiii; original emphasis). Prabhupada lives on in the telling of his story, and devotees themselves are ‘gathered into the narrative’ of Prabhupada’s life/work as they carry on his preaching mission. I argue that scholars misdirect the force of this narrative when they trace it backwards to ‘India’s past’ (cf. Klostermaier 1980). But by the same token, the historicist panegyrics of sympathetic scholars have been readily appropriated to hagiography, and we have already seen how ISKCON has engaged these in the work of cultural and historical legitimation.

In light of these considerations, the problem which I now want to introduce is whether scholarly studies of ISKCON can be understood to serve ISKCON’s *spiritual* as well as political purposes. This is not a new problem to sociologists of NRMs. Judah’s (1974a) pioneer publication on ISKCON introduces the dual predicament of being positioned by one’s devotee informants as both potential convert and potential *preacher* of Krishna Consciousness:

In the beginning of the research, the single-mindedness of the devotees made the task of collecting the information difficult. They wanted to talk about Krishna rather than about themselves. Analysis for the sake of learning about themselves was not wanted; their only reason for associating with outsiders has always been to spread Krishna Consciousness. Not even their parents have been an exception. So it did not take me long to realize that the main function of their splendid cooperation with me was twofold: first, to teach me more about Krishna, enabling me to become Krishna Conscious; second, to spread the knowledge of Krishna through the publication of my manuscript. (3)

Bromley and Hadden (op.cit.) believe that other cults subject to observation by sociologists may have had similar strategies in mind in letting themselves be studied:

...several groups exhibited more than casual curiosity in being studied. For some groups there was a sense that the sociologists were part of a providential plan that would facilitate the spreading of the word – that is, when the scholars [sic] studies were published, people would read them and be attracted to the group. However naïve, it was a posture that made it easier for scholars to gain entry to some groups. (5)

Why do Bromley and Hadden consider this type of motivation to be a ‘naïve... posture’ (ibid.) by cult informants? Is it because the ulterior motives of sociologists, or their methods of representation, would inevitably be incompatible or else unsympathetic to any ‘providential plan’ (ibid.)? Or is it because the readership attracted to the sociological literature on NRMs would be so paltry as to be worthless to any proselytising mission? Or is it, perhaps, because such a readership is just too smart to fall for any tacit preaching strategy? I am not so sure that answers to these questions would necessarily point to the



naivete of cult informants. I, for one, was indeed attracted to ISKCON after reading the overwhelmingly sympathetic portrayal of the movement in the sociological literature – and as I stressed at the outset, it would be a presumptive oversight to instinctively dismiss the *spiritual* significance of ethnographic participation on the basis of some higher notion of ethnographic *intention*.<sup>10</sup> And why should we presume that the ethnographic method of participation necessarily ceases as soon as the researcher leaves ‘the field’ and begins writing for publication? This last question actually places the reflexive concerns I introduced earlier about my own authority to represent Krishna Consciousness directly into the theological framework of ISKCON’s ‘communications’ or *sankirtana* mission (cf. Knott 2000). It also makes any attempt to ethnographically ‘communicate’ Krishna Consciousness a doubly implicated process: the problem is no longer simply a guilt-ridden one of knowing ‘what we have done in appropriating’ (Strathern op.cit.) the ‘voice of the other’, for the ‘voice of the ethnographer’ might just as well be appropriated to the purposes of those we study – even if these purposes are sometimes lost on the ethnographer. Daner (1976), for instance, records how her ISKCON informants were quite disinterested in her research intentions, and ‘simply said that any good publicity for ISKCON was a service to Krsna and would be considered good karma for me’ (4). Compare this situation to the way even an *unsympathetic* representation of ISKCON might be interpreted by a devotee: ‘So

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<sup>10</sup> In ISKCON, the person responsible for first introducing a devotee to the Holy Name of Krishna is called a *Vartmana pradarshaka guru*. Although he will never know it, I think it was Judah (1974b) who served as my *Vartmana pradarshaka guru*! For many devotees who joined ISKCON during the 1970s and 1980s, the recently departed George Harrison of The Beatles (“Bhakta George”, “Son of Hari”) functioned in this capacity, especially through the release of the hit single ‘My Sweet Lord’, which included in its lyrics the Hare Krishna mantra. It should be stressed that many devotees will attest that they did not realise *at the time* that Harrison’s songs would eventually lead them to ‘the spiritual life’ in ISKCON. It would make a fascinating research paper to analyse the overwhelming response in ISKCON to the death of Bhakta George, whose continued sympathies toward the movement were expressed in a large donation from his estate. Harrison donated the Bhaktivedanta Manor (the focus of Nye’s study (1996, 2001)) to ISKCON in 1973. Knott (op.cit.) notes the importance of the Beatles’ involvement with British Hare Krishna devotees in spreading the message of Krishna in the UK at that time. Needless to say, this was certainly a far more significant ‘communication strategy’ than the involvement of sociologists.

powerful is the name of Krishna, according to Prabhupada, that even a hostile newspaper report on ISKCON benefited readers spiritually because it contained numerous references to the “Hare Krishnas” (Gelberg 1987:200).

In relating this issue to the ethnographic task which lies ahead, and to the task of ethnography in general, I am prompted to consider whether Bromley and Hadden (op.cit.) might be right simply to dismiss the idea that scholarly representations of cults could ever really work, on behalf of cult converts, to effect any form of conversion in their readers. The question of *intention* would seem indispensable to this issue (notwithstanding the theological perspectives indicated above, which apparently transcend intention altogether), although *convention* is the other more determinative factor to take into account (Culler 1989). Even if ‘[o]utsiders, for their part, examine the tradition with all the vehemence of a convert’ (Rosen 1992a:2),<sup>11</sup> any chance of converting or translating this kind of scholarly ‘devotion’ (ibid.) into *de facto* proselytisation is quickly subverted by the disciplinary conventions of representation.

Asad (1986) reasons that the reader of an ethnographic ‘cultural translation’ is unlikely to undergo any form of cultural conversion, because the ‘[cultural] translation is addressed to a very specific audience, which is waiting to read *about* another mode of life and to manipulate the text it reads according to established rules, not to learn *to live* a new mode of life’ (159; original emphasis). The ethnographer, for his or her part, approaches

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<sup>11</sup> Rosen is another ISKCON devotee who publishes under his ‘*karmi*’ or birth name. His comment on scholarly devotion is representative of a concerted effort amongst some of ISKCON’s more erudite devotees to open up dialogue between ISKCON and the academy. Like Gelberg (1983), Rosen (1992a) has published a collection of interviews with scholars of the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition. Rosen’s interviews, some of which I cite at various stages of this thesis, contain more sophisticated theological discussions than we find in Gelberg, which is itself an indication of an increasing theological awareness of the Indian tradition amongst ISKCON devotees. I suggest that Rosen’s text also serves a legitimating function for the movement, although at times we also encounter revealing theological disagreements between Rosen and his interviewees. As I show in Chapter Four, sectarian tensions between ISKCON and its ‘tradition’ have only increased with the theological maturation of ISKCON devotees.

another cultural discourse, belief, or practice, with the intention of ‘explaining its *compulsiveness*’ (146; original emphasis), not with the intention of *compelling readers* ‘to introduce or enlarge cultural capacities, learnt from other ways of living, into [their] own’ (160). ‘It is plain that [Evans-Pritchard]’, for one well-known example, ‘is concerned to *explain* (in terms of Nuer social life), not to *justify* (in terms of Western commonsense, or Western values). The aim of this kind of exegesis is certainly not to persuade Western readers to adopt Nuer religious practices’ (150; original emphasis).

It should likewise go without saying that the aim of my exegesis is not to persuade readers to adopt Hare Krishna religious practices. But this is not as straightforward a disclaimer as it might seem. If we are to accept Asad’s argument that, to communicate the ‘coherence’ (145) and ‘*compulsiveness*’ (146; original emphasis) of another cultural discourse, the explanatory language of the ‘anthropologist-translator’ (147) must at some level submit to the intention of the ‘original’, we must allow that the ‘original’ discourse might itself involve an intention to persuade, compel, or convert others: ‘The language of translation can – indeed must – let itself go’, writes Benjamin, evoking a language of self-surrender that seems apposite to the task of ‘translating’ a language of conversion, ‘so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*’ (cited in Asad op.cit.:156; original emphasis). In taking up Benjamin’s ‘call to transform a language in order to translate the coherence of the original’ (157) to the ethnographer’s task of ‘cultural translation’, Asad reasonably assumes ‘the original’ to be an entirely foreign discourse or set of cultural practices. In such cases, the ‘*intentio* of the original’ is not in itself intended toward a Western readership: it is internal to the foreign cultural discourse, and there is presumed to be no prior process of cultural communication or ‘translation’

outside of the ethnographic process. The Nuer, to return to Asad's emblematic example, never intended to convert Evans-Pritchard and his kind to their religion.<sup>12</sup> If they had, hypothetically speaking, then Evans-Pritchard would surely have been obliged to 'give voice' to this intention in his 'cultural translation' – for the very '*compulsiveness*' (146; original emphasis) of a proselytising discourse is constituted in its intention toward the other.

The ethnographic trope of 'cultural translation' as explored by Asad takes on a productive new dimension when introduced to Benjamin's philosophy of translation.<sup>13</sup> It acquires another, unique dimension, however, as I try to contextualise my own ethnographic project in relation to ISKCON's theology of 'communication'. To this end, it is necessary to distinguish that form of 'cultural translation' which may or may not be willing 'to subject itself to [the] transforming power' (157) of a radically *other* cultural discourse, from my own task of ethnographically 'translating' a form of cultural practice *which is itself already a form of cultural translation* specifically intended toward cultural self-transformation. The task for the ethnographer of ISKCON, at least as I approach it in this study, is not the 'translation of culture' but the *translation of cultural translation*. That is to say, ISKCON is not a culture to be translated, but a culture of translation; or more precisely, it is a Western religious movement whose members actively engage in religio-cultural *translation practices* as the means (and end) of spiritual transformation. To 'translate' these practices into the explanatory register of anthropological theory requires a 'language' – rather than a reader or a writer – that can 'subject itself to this transforming

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<sup>12</sup> Asad records in this regard that 'Evans-Pritchard himself was a Catholic before and after his monograph on Nuer religion was written' (150). In fact, Evans-Pritchard converted to Catholicism whilst in the field (Beckett, J. personal communication 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Asad is well aware of the problems associated with applying the textual metaphor of 'translation' to culture. But he also points out that the task of the ethnographer is to 'translate' cultural experience into text – for no

power' (157) of translation. Of all the theoretical 'languages' that might be suited to this task, I find Benjamin's unique approach to translation and its transformative potential to be the most obliging. In my concluding chapters, therefore, I turn to Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' (1996 [1923]), and also to Derrida's (1985) thoughts on this seminal essay, not as a tool to think the ethnographic project, as Asad (op.cit.) has insightfully done, but as a way of explaining the compulsive power of cultural translation practices in ISKCON.

This analysis will offer a very different perspective on spiritual transformation in ISKCON than has otherwise been available through unproblematised applications of the 'conversion' concept. I distinguish this 'translation of translation' approach from that of 'sympathetic scholars' (Knott op.cit.:157) of ISKCON who, as I have demonstrated, have presumed that to explain the 'teachings and history' (ibid.) of Bengali Vaisnavism for the benefit of their Western readers is *ipso facto* to explain Hare Krishna spirituality. These scholars have uncritically accepted ISKCON to be a 'faithful reproduction' (cf. Benjamin op.cit.:259) of an authentic Hindu tradition, and 'conversion' to this identified tradition is the only form of religious transformation they seem to recognise. This approach, I argue, evidently fails to account for the transformative practices of cultural translation which bring this 'tradition' into the proximate reality of the Western practitioner's cultural and spiritual experience, and which simultaneously bring about a transformation *in the tradition* itself. Benjamin argues that the task of the translator is not the 'faithful reproduction' (ibid.) of the original, as traditional theorists of translation would have it, but 'a transformation and a renewal of something living', in which 'the original undergoes a change' (256). And the language of translation is transformed in this process as well, in 'allowing [itself] to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue' (Pannwitz, cited in Benjamin ibid.:263).

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other medium of expression has yet been deemed appropriate to ethnographic convention.

‘Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own’ (256).

Srila Prabhupada’s ‘special mission’ (ibid.), as I demonstrate in my account of ISKCON hagiography, can also be understood in this light. Devoted readers of Prabhupada’s translations understand that in ‘them the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding’ (255). Furthermore, the practice of reading Prabhupada’s books of translation – whether in private, in contexts of public proselytisation, or in ritual contexts of scriptural instruction like my *Gita* class – is a spiritual practice: a ‘practical means’ (Knott op.cit.:154) of ‘unfolding’ (cf. Beck op.cit.) or realising one’s innate spiritual identity. In Chapter Six I analyse ritual citation in ISKCON as a mimetic practice, in which the reader literally ‘gives voice’ to the revelatory act contained in Prabhupada’s word-for-word Sanskrit-English translations. Prabhupada’s ‘special mission’ is ‘lived forward’ (cf. Wyschogrod op.cit.:29), I argue, in the moment of reading, as the sacred promise of ultimate reconciliation in the Name, Word, and transcendental abode of Krishna. Krishna, and by extension Krishna’s abode, is ‘non-different’ to His Name and Word. To inhabit Krishna’s spiritual world, then, the devotee must aspire to inhabit Krishna’s ‘pure language’ (cf. Benjamin op.cit.:257) in pure ‘spiritual consciousness’ or ‘Krishna Consciousness’. The need for translation and repetition in citational practice necessarily reveals the ‘remoteness’ (ibid.) that exists between ‘material consciousness’ and ‘Krishna Consciousness’ – but this revelation is the indispensable condition for Krishna Consciousness itself, because without the ‘knowledge of this remoteness’ (ibid.) there could be no desire for spiritual progress.

For his devoted readers, then, Prabhupada did not merely translate traditional Hindu texts, but the language of God and the spiritual world. Furthermore, in Krishna Consciousness, the spiritual world is not only a place of spiritual sound, but also of spiritual form, taste, colour, pattern, and personality. Prabhupada did not merely represent a particular Vaisnava tradition from India – he embodied the very ‘culture’ of the spiritual world: ‘spiritual culture’, or ‘Krishna culture’. As an emissary of Lord Krishna sent directly from the spiritual world itself, Prabhupada’s divine mission was to ‘translate’ ‘spiritual culture’ so that it might be known throughout this material world. Sanskrit is the phonetic ‘nectar’ of God, but the sensory and aesthetic ‘tastes’ of the spiritual world are also made available to the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness in the form of Krishna’s image and His food leftovers (*prasadam*), and even in the styles of dress and comportment which Prabhupada imparted to his disciples as essential techniques of spiritual transformation. As the language and ‘culture’ of the spiritual world, ‘spiritual culture’ is both the means and end of self-realisation in ISKCON – and so too, as I have emphasised throughout this introduction, is its ‘communication’ and its ‘translation’ to others. For it is in translation that Prabhupada’s promise and revelation is extended to the world, and to the preacher of Krishna Consciousness as well.

The question as to whether or not my analytic ‘translation of translation’ can also be considered a form of spiritual practice with similar revelatory potential is one I am prepared to leave unanswered and open to possibility. My only intention is to communicate the ‘*intentio*’ of spiritually transformative translation practices in ISKCON – and as Asad (op.cit.) notes, in re-figuring the ethnographic trope of ‘cultural translation’, it is ‘for the reader to evaluate that *intentio*, not for the translator to preempt the evaluation’ (156; original emphasis).





## Chapter One

### **“Easy journey” to another planet: fieldwork, culture conversion, and the location of the spiritual<sup>1</sup>**

I chanted with the Hare Krishnas... I became a participant, not because I thought there was actually something in it for me, but because I wanted to nourish my capacity for empathy. I wanted to find out what I could about the lure of the East on the visceral level...

Then something I had not expected happened. I discovered that when someone is studying beehives up close, regardless of how much inner distance is retained there is still a distinct possibility that the investigator can be stung.

– Harvey Cox, *Turning East* (1977:13-14)

#### **Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, “Embassy of the Spiritual World”**

An unassuming two-storey building which stands on one corner of a busy North Sydney intersection has served for over a decade now as a local Temple and Cultural Centre for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Before four-thirty every morning, at the most ‘auspicious’ time of day before the sun and the morning

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<sup>1</sup> *Easy Journey To Other Planets* (1970a), by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (the Founder-*Acarya* of The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), is a small book widely distributed by Hare Krishna devotees. ‘Dedicated to the scientists of the world’, it outlines the futility of man’s scientific endeavors to travel to other planets (including the moon) and points to the perfect knowledge of the Vedas, and to the path of *bhakti-yoga*, as the sole means of returning to the spiritual planet of Krsnaloka (elsewhere referred to as Goloka Vrindavana), the ultimate destination of the spirit-soul. My title is a direct appropriation of Prabhupada’s.

traffic have yet to break upon this little corner of the world, Hare Krishna devotees dressed in Indian *dhotis* and *saris*, and displaying on their foreheads the freshly applied *tilaka* (mud-paste) markings of Vaisnavas, emerge from several flats in the near vicinity and converge upon the centre's temple room. There they join the other devotees from the centre's ashrams, and begin chanting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* upon their strings of wooden *japa* beads: '*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare...*'

Each devotee chants quietly to himself or herself during *japa*, but put together the varying pitch and rhythms of each devotee's chanting fills the room with a collectively sustained vibration. This chanting continues until the *pujari* – the altar officiant who will make the first of the daily offerings to the temple deities – sounds the conch-horn and draws back the curtains of the shrine to reveal Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha, the presiding deities of ISKCON Sydney. At the sounding of the horn, all the devotees prostrate themselves fully across the polished marble floor, chant *mantras* to the guru, then rise to greet the deities.

The four-thirty *mangala-arati* which follows is the first of eight daily *aratis*, or offerings to the deities, that are performed in ISKCON temples throughout the world. During *mangala-arati* 'the deities' – who are Radha and Krishna incarnated in worshippable form (*arca-vigraha*) – are wearing their sleeping robes, and are gently awakened from their evening's slumber by the affectionate singing of their devotees. Each of the eight *aratis* on the temple's daily program corresponds to one of the eight principle transcendental pastimes (*asta-kaliya-lila*) that Radha and Krishna, the Divine Couple, eternally play out in the forest of Vrindavana, attended to by their devoted young friends, the cowherds (*gopas*) and cowherdresses (*gopis*) of Vraja ('Gopinatha', or 'Master of the

*gopis*’, is the name given to Krishna in his deity-form at ISKCON Sydney). These ‘transcendental pastimes’ (*lila*), which were manifested on Earth five-thousand years ago in the north Indian region of Vraja, occur eternally in the spiritual realm of Goloka Vrindavana, and are repeated daily in ISKCON temples during *arati* worship, where Radha and Krishna are attended to by *pujaris* and other devotees offering *kirtana*: dancing and chanting the Names of the Lord. As the place in which Radha and Krishna appear together in deity-form to receive devotional service, a temple is itself ‘non-different’ to Goloka Vrindavana, the highest of the spiritual planets.<sup>2</sup> As an ‘embassy of the spiritual world’, a temple is ultimately transcendental to the laws governing material existence on Earth. To enter the space of a temple for the first time is a rare and ultimately auspicious event for the individual living entity (*jiva*) – a cumulative result of lifetimes of *karmic* evolution. Most significantly for the devotee of Krishna, to enter the space of a temple means that Srimati Radharani, or Radha, has invited you to witness her intimate *lila* with Krishna in the spiritual world.

### **The nectar of ethnography; or, “You can’t taste the honey by licking the outside of the jar”**

I want to introduce this chapter on methodologies, ethnographic and spiritual, via a less hazardous approach to the allegorical ‘field’ than that provided by Cox’s ‘beehive’ metaphor in my opening citation. ‘You can’t taste the honey by licking the outside of the

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<sup>2</sup> Devotees often refer to a temple as ‘Vaikuntha’ rather than ‘Goloka Vrindavana’ to designate that space as being ‘non-different’ to ‘the spiritual world’. ‘Vaikuntha’ is often used as a generic name for the spiritual realm, whereas ‘Goloka Vrindavana’ refers to the highest location within that realm which is directly presided over by Radha and Krishna. Technically, Vaikuntha is presided over by Krishna in the form of Narayana (Visnu) and His consort Laksmi, and is associated with different ‘transcendental pastimes’ or *lila* to that of Goloka Vrindavana. After discussing these theological points with devotees I have sided with the opinion that as it is Radha-Krishna, and not Laksmi-Narayana, who appear in ISKCON temples, ‘Goloka Vrindavana’ is

jar’ were the words of advice offered me by several Hare Krishna informants as I made my inquiries and performed my fieldwork at Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, North Sydney. This is a safer methodological metaphor to unpack, I should think. In Hare Krishna terms, I will always be on ‘the outside of the jar’, unable appreciate the ‘transcendental’ content of life in ISKCON, as long as I approach the subject from the ‘materialist’ perspective which informs my academic project. ‘You can’t taste the honey by licking the outside of the jar’ was also a provocation to convert, to surrender my attachment to ‘material knowledge’, to surrender to Krishna the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and to thereby ‘taste’ the ‘nectar’ of devotional life in ISKCON.

In ethnographic terms, this provocation resonates for me with Jackson’s (1983) call to surrender the ethnographic ‘ulterior motive’ in pursuit of an ideal state of ethnographic presence:

...it is necessary to adopt a methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of another person: *inhabiting their world*. Participation thus becomes an end in itself rather than a means of gathering closely observed data which will be subject to interpretation elsewhere after the event. (340; my emphasis)

Jackson’s methodology suggests a peculiar possibility for an ethnographic process of conversion. Although Jackson’s motiveless strategy for ‘literally putting oneself in the place of another’ may be quite removed from any usual sense of the term ‘conversion’ conveyed in popular usage, and certainly from any sense conveyed in the sociological literature on ‘cult conversion’ which I shall be addressing shortly, bending this term to

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an appropriate designation, but either term would suffice to make the point that the sacred space of a temple is in ultimate reality a transcendental space.

Jackson’s ethnographic ‘experience of the other’ (ibid.) provides a useful juxtaposition by which *fieldwork* and *conversion* can be established as the parallel concerns of the present chapter. This juxtaposition can be introduced with two questions. First, what would Jackson’s notion of ‘inhabiting their world’ imply for the ethnographer of a conversion-oriented cult? And second, does an ethnographic ‘experience of the other’ actually imply some form of subjective ‘conversion’ to the other?

This chapter seeks to explore both these questions not only for their methodological implications, but also as a way of approaching the particular ‘experience of the other’ which is characteristic of Hare Krishna spirituality itself, and which Hare Krishna devotees ultimately made available to me as well, as I participated both as ethnographer (from my point of view) and as potential convert (from the point of view of my potential converters) in ‘the spiritual life’ in ISKCON. Juxtaposing ethnographic and conversion experiences also seems appropriate in the Hare Krishna context if we are to accept, however tentatively at this stage, that the spiritual experience in ISKCON is something generated in the context of a *cultural* as well as a religious encounter between the Western ‘convert’ and a unique form of Bengali Vaisnavism. Ethnographers, after all, are not the only class of people to claim or to seek out a special cultural ‘experience of the other’. ‘Motive’, it might well be objected, would surely be a basic point of differentiation here. But this would assume from the outset that either cultural or spiritual experience (or both simultaneously, as the case may be) is ultimately mediated by consciousness, intention, or (by implication) ‘belief’. The juxtaposition which I have introduced, and will now proceed to explore, is intended to problematise this very assumption and its implications for a study of Hare Krishna spirituality.

In the brief passage which opens this chapter, I have sought to evoke the *otherness* of Hare Krishna belief by introducing my key field-site – the ISKCON temple at Sydney – as an *otherworldly* space. For the moment I want to suspend inquiry into all the aesthetic features of cultural otherness that undoubtedly work to evoke this sense of otherworldliness for the Western observer of (and participant in) this scene: the images, sounds, and smells of temple ritual, the aesthetics of Hindu devotional dress and body markings, the foreignness of Sanskrit terms and *mantras*, etc. Instead, I want to draw attention to the fact that, by entering ‘the field’ at Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir, I have not only entered a ‘cultural’ space, but a spiritual and cosmological framework in which the question of ethnographic ‘ulterior motive’ (Jackson op.cit.) ultimately becomes (dare I say it) academic.

In Hare Krishna terms this question is ‘material’. While exhortations like ‘You can’t taste the honey by licking the outside of the jar’ may seem to have enforced an insider/outsider dichotomy premised on my confessed lack of belief, my participation in spiritual practice was nevertheless welcomed by Hare Krishna devotees, and I was repeatedly assured that my exposure to the transcendental presence of Krishna at the temple would eventually develop into a ‘taste’ for devotion. For my informants, it seemed, my entering the transcendental space of the temple signified in itself at least a partial dissolution of the insider/outsider distinction, and my participation seemed to confirm this process. If the ethnographic terms of my presence and participation at the temple were motivated by a ‘material consciousness’, this did not prevent them from becoming readily subsumed and subverted by the ‘transcendental’ terms of Hare Krishna spiritual discourse. My motives only inhibited my realisation of the spiritual fact that, *whether I realised it yet or not*, my fieldwork signalled the start of my spiritual life.

“You’re being brainwashed,” Govinda dasa once said, in a conversation about what had ‘attracted’ me to studying the Krishna Consciousness movement. Interestingly, this admonition was also a response to my attempt at explaining to Govinda the sociological critique of the pseudo-psychological ‘brainwashing’ model of cult conversion (see Bromley and Hadden (1993:29-33); Richardson (1993); Shinn (1987a,1989)). To fully appreciate Govinda’s wry appropriation of this term, I suggest, is to take an initial step towards understanding the ‘transcendental’ significance which Hare Krishna devotees accord *any* individual’s contact with their movement. Anyone exposed to the *karma*-cleansing spiritual energy in which Hare Krishna devotees immerse themselves is understood to have incurred a purification of consciousness – Govinda’s ‘brainwashing’ – a process which is also said to signal the start of spiritual life for that individual. As ‘the spiritual life’ is something measured over multiple lifetimes, the kind of *karmic* efficacy involved here is actually impossible to understand on the level of incarnate or ‘material’ consciousness. My persistent identification with my ‘material’ ethnographic subjectivity was often treated by my informants with the same knowing sense of amusement displayed in Govinda dasa’s brainwashing comment.

*catur-vidha bhajante mam*

*janah sukrino ‘rjuna*

*arto jijnasur arthartha*

*jnani ca bharatarsabha*

O best among the Bharatas, four kinds of pious men begin to render devotional service unto Me [Krishna] – the distressed, the desirer of wealth, *the inquisitive*, and he who is searching for knowledge of the Absolute. (Prabhupada 1986a:388; my emphasis)

This quote from the *Gita* served on several occasions to submit my ethnographic inquisitiveness to the verdict of doctrine, and my fieldwork methodology was appropriated just as readily. Participation and observation though, if I may concede for the moment something of the anthropological claim on these terms, are open to anyone who comes to an ISKCON temple with sincere questions and a willingness to experiment with prescribed spiritual practice. Importantly, trial participation in the temple program is recommended practice for all serious inquirers into Hare Krishna spirituality. As well as including the more overtly ritualistic elements of spiritual practice like chanting, deity worship, or learning scripture by rote, such participation also involves essential practical lessons like learning how to dress like a devotee, how to eat, cook and clean with the devotees, adjusting sleeping patterns to accommodate the pre-dawn program, and a myriad of other details that comprise ‘the spiritual life’ in the temple. Devotees will warn newcomers that the temple program is intense, not only for its physical rigor but also for one’s continual exposure to Krishna’s transcendental energies. The first time I performed a three week stint of fieldwork at the Sydney temple, I was commended on my commitment to a serious understanding of devotional life, a seriousness evinced not only by my questions, but also by my willingness to engage in ‘service’ like washing-up huge piles of pots and pans and chopping masses of vegetables in the kitchen. I was also offered the friendly warning that three weeks is the usual trial period for new *bhaktas* (neophyte devotees) wanting to live full-time in the ashram as *brahmacaris* (celibate students), and that if I was to survive the full stay, there was a dangerous possibility that I would not want to leave.

But I did leave. And I did return, intermittently. Given that my ‘field’ is only a train and a bus trip away from ‘home’, this possibility for intermittent fieldwork continues as I write my thesis. One month after my initial three week stay, I returned to the temple for one



of its regular Sunday Feasts (the subject of the following chapter). Govinda dasa, witnessing my return, boisterously demanded: “Malcolm! Where’ve you been?”

“I’ve been off in the material world,” I replied, trying to balance my limited familiarity with the discourse with an effort at self-deprecating humour.

“You don’t live in the material world, Malcolm,” was Govinda’s enigmatic response, and I have yet to fully locate its meaning.

Was Govinda telling me that, like all spirit-souls, I have never really left the spiritual world, and that my identification with the material world is a product of illusion? Was he telling me that all my time spent thinking and occasionally writing about Krishna and the devotees somehow sustained my contact with the transcendental presence of Krishna, despite my absence from the temple itself? Was ‘inhabiting their world’ – in Jackson’s (op.cit.) methodological terms – something I could somehow maintain outside ‘the field’ as such?

I never interrogated Govinda about his comment, perhaps so as to conceal my ignorance. On other occasions, like the time I quite successfully presented a Wednesday night *Bhagavad-gita* class, Govinda and several other devotees would make the straightforward assertion: “Malcolm’s a devotee.” At times during my fieldwork, I am sure, I have felt like a devotee. Reflecting on these experiences from the relative distance of ‘home’, my ulterior motives always win out. But Govinda’s enigmatic observations and my own experiences ‘in the field’ will remain as points of reference if ever I were to take up the spiritual life in ISKCON, and in retrospect my fieldwork would indeed have signalled the start of this life, the narrative beginning of a conversion process.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rochford (1985), who I discuss in more detail shortly, argues that retrospective conversion narratives pose a problem for sociological analysis: ‘To accept uncritically members’ accounts of the factors influencing their recruitments and conversions neglects the ways in which people’s autobiographical stories are constantly

Importantly too, the intermittent nature of my contact with the temple is not unique in terms of individual life trajectories within the Hare Krishna ‘movement’, especially in urban centres like Sydney. To a significantly greater degree than ISKCON’s rural centres, which are generally supported by householders (*grhasthas*) and their families, the ISKCON centre at Sydney is a space of transition. As an ‘embassy of the spiritual world’, a temple is not only a transcendental space but also a contact point between the transcendental and material worlds. The material world circumscribes the transcendental space of Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir at North Sydney in the form of traffic-congested arterial roads, but devotees also convey the transcendental presence of Krishna outside the temple whenever they chant His Name in the streets, raise money at traffic lights, or preach to students on university campuses. Urban centres like the one at Sydney are bases for proselytisation, preaching fronts in a spiritual battle against material illusion, but they also see a lot of traffic in the form of new *bhaktas* coming and going according to the diverse contingencies of their lives, aspiring devotees moving in and out according to fluctuating turns of spiritual determination, or as part of their ongoing transit between centres (often motivated by personal or political (dis)affiliations),<sup>4</sup> and in the form of generally *inquisitive* people, like myself, who for the most part don’t stick around. On Sunday afternoons (as I shall show in the next chapter) the temple regularly becomes crowded with Hindu families receiving *darsana* (seeing and being seen by the deities) and *prasadam* (Krishna’s mercy in the form of sanctified food offerings), but these congregational members, like the more

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being revised, redefined, and reconstructed to accord with their present experiences. Accepting such explanations at face value overlooks the way in *which reasons and motives inevitably and necessarily reflect present circumstances*’ (73; my emphasis). The search for *original* motives, then, would mean neglecting ‘present circumstances’ (which is the context of ethnography) and the discursive practices involved in defining and constructing *future possibilities*. I do not know what will be my future circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The persistent practice of most Krishnas to move from center to center at numerous intervals during their life in ISKCON’, observes Shinn (1987a), ‘reveals clearly the extent to which devotees march to their own drum as often to that beaten by their leaders’ (68).

occasional visitors to the Sunday Feast, rarely take up full-time devotional life in the temple.

When preaching, devotees will often promote the spiritual life in ISKCON as an easy process, as the joyous cultivation of ‘love of God’ (*bhakti*) through singing, dancing, and eating *prasadam*. In a more personal context though, many devotees indicated to me that the life of devotion is an intense and difficult undertaking, a constant struggle against material identification with the mind and body. Several devotees variously described the Sydney centre as a hospital, a psychiatric ward, a train station. These complaints about the transitory, even pathological character of life in the centre, however, did not undermine the devotees’ acceptance of the transcendental quality of temple life. Any advancement made in spiritual life is said to leave a permanent *karmic* impression, such that if someone ‘falls’ from the spiritual path, the opportunity always exists to pick up where one left off. Most ‘devotees’, in fact, modestly denied that designation, referring to themselves instead as ‘aspiring devotees’. Aspiring devotees immerse themselves in temple life in order to redirect their desires away from the material world and onto the transcendental forms of Krishna. To really see that a temple *is* the spiritual world itself, however, requires Krishna Consciousness, and within ISKCON only Srila Prabhupada, ISKCON’s Founder-*Acarya*, has ever been accredited with this highest of spiritual states. For everybody else, the development of Krishna Consciousness is a life-long process, and against that process the material world, including all our encultured and ‘material’ subjectivities, is ever-pervasive as a powerfully seductive illusory force.

**Cult and culture: anthropological metaphors and the methodology of distance in the sociology of new religious movements ('NRMs')**

'Even though I thought the American Hare Krishnas were not apt to be authentically Indian', writes Shinn (1987a:9) at the outset of *The Dark Lord*,

I assumed that to listen to the stories of young persons attracted to a faith so different from their family traditions would provide valuable insights into the religious conversion process. I was only half right.

What I found in my three weeks of interviewing and observation in the Krishna communities in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berkeley was an American Krishna tradition that was *authentically Indian and self-consciously so. To step into the Krishna temple in Berkeley or Dallas is to enter a world* of images, cuisine, and activities that can be found throughout northern India in homes and communities devoted to Krishna. Consequently, the first surprise for this investigator was the authenticity of the Krishna tradition I had thought was little more than just another quasi-Indian import... (9-10; my emphasis)

Shinn's motives and expectations were only 'half right' because he actually got double what he bargained for: a study of the 'religious conversion process' and an already implicit model for interpreting conversion to ISKCON, based on his own authoritative perception and experience of cultural 'authenticity'. The dichotomy between the 'authentically Indian' and the 'quasi-Indian' sets the basis for Shinn's sympathetic representation of conversion to ISKCON, for already Shinn can understand the cultural appeal of the 'authentic', and it is from this basis that 'taking the Krishnas seriously' (Shinn 1989:117) becomes a justifiable position to take for the serious scholar of Hinduism like Shinn.

I want to draw critical attention to the way Shinn’s dichotomy is structured around a *spatio-cultural difference* between the ‘import’ – which is not ‘authentically Indian’ because it is merely ‘domesticated for local...use’ (Said 1978:4) within an homogenising Western cultural territory – and the ‘world’ of cultural authenticity that Shinn finds behind the doors of the ISKCON temple. Implicit in this construction is a model of conversion to ISKCON as *culture conversion*. To cross the spatio-cultural threshold of an ISKCON temple ‘is to enter a world’ surprisingly removed from the homogenising Western influence of the world outside. To convert to ISKCON is then to *inhabit* another cultural world: it is to have *become* ‘authentically Indian’ oneself through a seemingly literal movement from *outside* to *inside* the ‘world’ of Hare Krishna. The Krishna temple or the Krishna ‘community’ (Shinn is referring here to ISKCON’s rural farm communities) is the literal spatio-cultural locus of another, wholly inhabitable, cultural reality.

Rochford (2000), who has been studying ISKCON for over two decades now, has paradoxically reinforced this image of ISKCON as a spatio-culturally bounded ‘reality’ by addressing the shifting categories of ‘insiders and outsiders’ over the course of ISKCON’s development:

In 1975, when I began researching ISKCON in North America, it was common to hear devotees refer to outsiders as “demons”. Such a term dramatically distinguished outsiders, reifying communal boundaries. By the late 1970s, as some devotees began taking jobs outside the movement, and establishing independent households, outsiders were more commonly referred to as “karmies”. Although still derogatory and boundary affirming, “karmie” held far less pejorative connotations than “demon”. When large numbers of North American householders began to move outside the communal fold, in the early and mid-1980s, terminology changed yet again. “Karmies” became “non-devotees”. In devotees’ having to make peace with

the world to support themselves and their families, “karmies” were no longer distasteful outsiders, who had to be either preached to or avoided.

As terminology used to describe “outsiders” changed, so too did notions of “insiders”. The term “devotee” increasingly became imprecise and a source of confusion in everyday conversation. During the movement’s early years, a “devotee” was anyone who lived within the communal context. ISKCON members who chose to live outside an ISKCON community were known as “fringies”, signifying their dual commitment to ISKCON *and* the surrounding secular culture. Nowadays, this term has fallen out of use since it describes the largest portion of ISKCON’s membership. From a dichotomous world of virtuous devotees and ignorant and sinful demons has emerged one defined by shades of grey, and the blurring of insider and outsider distinctions. (Rochford 2000:179; original emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

Instead of interpreting these developments as naturally progressive signs of ISKCON’s maturation as a religious movement, Rochford characterises the overall effect of these changes as ‘the *disintegration* of ISKCON’s traditional communal structure’ (175; my emphasis). That the ten or so years between ISKCON’s formation in New York in 1966 and Rochford’s observed process of ‘disintegration’ beginning in the late 1970s can have allowed for anything resembling a ‘traditional communal structure’ is the first problem I would want to raise with Rochford’s characterisation. ‘In the case of a new religious movement like ISKCON, the production of a *stable cultural space*, and the maintenance of

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<sup>5</sup> Rochford doesn’t provide any wider sense of discursive context for the terms he has highlighted here. ‘Karmie’ refers to those who are subject to the effects of *karma*, that is, they suffer the consequences of non-devotional fruitive activities (including work). Devotional actions are not subject to *karmic* reaction, and can even nullify previously accumulated karma. ‘Karmie’ can also apply to practitioners of *karma-yoga*, the spiritual path of pious activity (which allows for work). Devotees are ‘bhaktas’ because they practice *bhakti-yoga*, the path of devotion. I was sometimes referred to as a ‘jnanie’, from *jnana-yoga*, the path of knowledge. I was once given an insight into the term ‘demon’ which seems to correct the kind of usage noted by Rochford in ISKCON’s early days. During *Satya-yuga*, the first and most pious of the cosmic cyclical ‘ages,’ demons lived separately from humans on different planets. In *Treta-yuga*, they lived in separate countries. In *Dvapara-yuga*, they lived within the same country. In *Kali-yuga*, this present and most degraded of ages, demons are not separate entities but live within the one person. The term ‘aspiring devotee’ furthers blurs the

group boundaries, represent a formidable task’ (173; my emphasis). Formidable indeed. Given Rochford’s criteria for a ‘community’ or a ‘stable cultural space’, ISKCON’s ‘disintegration’ was inevitable. He takes his definition of community from Kai Erikson: ‘each has a specific territory in the world as a whole, not only in the sense that it occupies a defined region of geographical space but also in the sense that it takes over a particular niche in what might be called cultural space and develops its own “ethos” or “way” within that compass’ (Erikson, cited in Rochford *ibid.*). ISKCON failed to develop a ‘culture’, according to Rochford, because it could not provide its own stable internal structures for families, children’s education, and communal employment, the latter leaving many of its members no choice but to search for work in the ‘outside culture’ (179). ‘Having failed to integrate the emerging families into its communities, the majority of ISKCON’s members moved to the margins of the movement, both *spatially and culturally*’ (175; my emphasis).

That a majority can be delineated as marginal is the second problem I would want to raise with Rochford, although I must restrict my critique at this point (in Chapter Three I offer a fuller perspective on ISKCON’s so-called ‘marginal’ members). For now I want to draw attention to the remarkably symmetrical *reversal* of the conversion process which Rochford suggests when, citing Berger and Luckmann, he observes that ‘ISKCON members who work outside the movement’s communities face an environment that is “reality disrupting” and even potentially “reality transforming”’ (177). The transformation, or conversion, of an individual’s sense of ‘reality’ is here directly correlated with a *spatial* and *cultural* movement from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’, and then back outside again for those less integrated Hare Krishna devotees. But one wonders if the blurring of distinctions between outsiders and insiders, which Rochford has noted above, is more problematic for the Hare

Krishna or the sociologist. Rochford's repeated conceptual reification of outsides and insides works to deny any sense of the 'fluid and imprecise' which he has identified in relation to ISKCON's 'boundaries' (179).

In Rochford's (1985) monograph, *Hare Krishna in America*, in a notably candid chapter about his early fieldwork experiences with ISKCON, the subject of insiders and outsiders became problematic for the sociologist on a personal rather than a purely conceptual level. Rochford's reflexive account begins with his early attempt to establish an 'observer' role by not participating in spiritual practice with the devotees, 'fearing that such participation would only increase the strain and pressures I was feeling' (23). Giving in to the pressure placed upon him by devotees to participate, however, soon opened up productive avenues for his research (a revelation!), although Rochford notes his early concern that this new research strategy was being misread by his informants: 'No doubt many of the devotees observing my actions thought that I was beginning to 'surrender to Krishna'' (Rochford, cited in Rochford *ibid.*:25). Negotiating a research role gradually became easier, though, as 'fringe' membership became an acceptable category within ISKCON, and as Rochford himself became more sympathetic to the spiritual aspirations of ISKCON devotees. But participating as a fringe devotee carried its own problems. Friends, family, and colleagues all expressed their fears that Rochford might have become too subjectively involved in a deviant cult. Being positioned in relation to internal politics within ISKCON also created problems and restricted access to certain groups of informants: 'To take on a membership role necessarily involves making choices about what sort of member the researcher wants to be' (41). The final dilemma for Rochford, however, occurred once he had 'left the field' (38), and he began to question his research motives:



...by now I was unsure and confused about exactly what my true feelings toward ISKCON and Krishna Consciousness were. If I was a member with any conviction at all, shouldn't I be attending *arati* and other functions at the temple? Had I been lying to myself all this time? Had I really been sincere about my interest in Krishna Consciousness, or had I simply tricked myself into believing that I was for the sake of research? (39)

This is the most heartfelt and revealing moment of reflexivity I have encountered in the sociology of new religious movements. Rochford's sense of personal injustice towards his informants led him to avoid further contact with the devotees (although obviously he made contact again, as his research has continued to the present). The process of removing himself 'spatially and culturally' (cf. Rochford 2000:175) from his 'field' seems to bring about a disruption in his own sense of reality which almost directly parallels the process he later identifies with ISKCON's marginal members. Of particular interest from a methodological perspective is the sense in which Rochford's ulterior motives for participating in ISKCON seem to have been forgotten whilst he was 'in the field'. But when Rochford asks 'had I simply tricked myself into believing...?' the question is not *simply* methodological. Rochford's dilemma is also *spiritual*, and the unfortunate consequence of his distancing himself from 'the field' is not that it allowed him to develop his more critical perspectives on ISKCON (the cause of his guilt), but that it provides a reflexive narrative which serves to conceptually distance his own sense of crisis from the complex and heterogeneous spiritual careers and crises of his informants. I would suggest that the conceptually spatialised and circumscribed category of 'the field' has provided this necessary sociological distance. When this circumscribed space is also directly correlated with a *cultural* space (as in Rochford 2000), a familiar ethnographic category is called on to reify 'belief' in the figuratively spatial terms of insides and outsides.

In the 1970s, when the sociology of new religious movements ('NRM') was first establishing itself as sub-discipline within the sociology of religion, ISKCON was always numbered amongst the handful of favourite exemplars of the cult experience.<sup>6</sup> Against the public backdrop of a media-fuelled 'cult controversy' (see Beckford 1985; Shinn 1987a), highly visible proselytising movements exhibiting highly regulated, exclusivist criteria for membership became the mainstay of this new field of research. In the sociologists' attempts to counter sensationalist and anti-cultist propaganda with more sympathetic insights or 'insider' perspectives, several commentators within the sociology of NRMs found a claim for a direct disciplinary affiliation with *anthropology*, in an apparent sympathy with the latter discipline's perceived objective to make familiar otherwise exoticised cultural domains. This imagined affiliation draws upon a figurative *spatiality* which allows exoticised 'cults' to be circumscribed *culturally*, simultaneously as objects of study and as sites of research:

To some degree, the sudden availability of a multitude of esoteric movements has had the effect of "anthropologizing" the sociology of religion by providing abundant field work settings and opportunities for *comparative studies*, and the impetus for the use of "anthropological" methods such as participant-observation and linguistic analysis as well as related perspectives such as phenomenology and structuralism... The "anthropologizing" of the sociology of religion has meant that a young doctoral research candidate can now go out and study a "cult" in somewhat the manner in which yesteryear's aspiring anthropologist might embark on the study of a primitive tribe. What is significant here are the methodological and epistemological consequences of confronting an array of seemingly esoteric "cultures". (Robbins 1988:14; original emphasis)

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<sup>6</sup> ISKCON, the Unification Church (or the Moonies), The Church of Scientology, The Children of God (or The Family), are some of the favourites which often get collective mention in the literature.

‘Cult is culture writ small’ (Bainbridge, cited in Robbins *ibid.*) is a heuristic which informs both theoretical and methodological concerns in the sociology of NRMs. It is worth noting that Robbins made this disciplinary overview of research into cults after Rochford had already published his reflexive fieldwork account, an account which was only made possible in terms of ISKCON’s already ‘fluid and imprecise’ cultural boundaries. But Robbins’ formulation of the study of cults as ‘confronting an array of seemingly esoteric “cultures”’ leaves little room for the more complex ‘methodological and epistemological consequences’ involved when cults are not conceptually isolated from the researcher, or from their broader cultural contexts, in the same sense in which ‘a primitive tribe’ might have been isolated in traditional ethnographic representations. Robbins’ claim for an affiliation with anthropology also comes at a time when increasingly critical attention, both within and beyond anthropology’s own disciplinary boundaries, had been directed towards the discursive construction of ethnographic authority, and to that crucial narrative figure in this construction of the ethnographic ‘outsider’ who travels to a distant and exotic ‘field’ to study ‘a culture’ or ‘a primitive tribe’ (see, of course, the collection of essays in Clifford and Marcus (1986)).

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have more recently taken up this disciplinary self-critique in their discussion of ‘the field’ as both site and method in anthropology. They argue that the spatialised category of ‘the field’ as a site of research has been synonymous with the construction of ‘cultures’ as circumscribable totalities, and point to the narrative trope of arrival and departure from ‘the field’ in ethnographic writing in their analysis:

...the passage in and out of “the field” rests on the idea that different cultures inhere in discrete and separate places. Therefore to go into “the field” is to travel to another place with its own distinctive culture, to live

there is to *enter another world*, and to come back from “the field” is to leave that world and arrive in this one – the one in which the academy is located. (35; my emphasis)

In the same volume, Passaro (1997) has argued that the ideal construction of ‘the field’ as a discrete and ethnographically manageable (or mappable) place has also persisted in anthropological projects ‘at home’. In response to a colleague’s protest that “‘You can’t take the subway to the field!’” Passaro argues that ‘village epistemologies’ and an ‘epistemology of distance’ have informed the practice of ‘ethnography at home’, such that workable fieldwork has become equated with specifiable, delineable field sites which are also, preferably, ‘socially distant’ from the world inhabited by the ethnographer (152).

I would suggest that Shinn’s characterisation of an ISKCON temple as a ‘world... that can be found throughout northern India in homes and communities devoted to Krishna’ (Shinn 1987a:9) clearly appeals to the kind of ‘village epistemology’ identified by Passaro. Other sociologists of NRMs have managed to reinforce a sense of ‘social distance’ in their writings by constructing methodological self-representations based on romanticised notions of the anthropological method (‘the field’ and fieldwork) and anthropological subject matter (‘esoteric cultures’). My argument is that this theoretical and methodological construction of a social or spatio-cultural ‘distance’ has had an identifiable influence on models of cult ‘conversion’ offered within the sociology of NRMs. One such influence can be traced to the fact that by distancing *themselves* from any subjective ‘conversion experience’, sociologists already provide us with an implicit model of what must be involved, in their view, in succumbing to *culture conversion*.

Ayella (1993) continues the methodological comparison between fieldwork in cults and fieldwork in other cultures when she likens the cult researcher’s experience to

‘anthropologists’ dealing with culture shock’ (112). But while overcoming ‘culture shock’ is presumably a desired outcome of participant-observation, Ayella’s warning that ‘overrapport may hinder objectivity’ (ibid.) also stresses the methodological distance these researchers feel to be necessary when dealing with cults. Indeed, having claimed an ‘anthropologized’ perspective by defining cults as the culture-worlds of its inquiry, the sociology of NRMs seems also to have developed its own unique take on the archetypically ethnographic hazard of ‘going native’. ‘Going native’ in the case of cult research, whether construed as ‘overrapport’ or an ethnographic ‘conversion’ to the other, has a particular connotation when the ethnographer is the target of conversion attempts. The ‘pressures’ to participate that Rochford felt in the early stages of his research into ISKCON thus provide one example of a recurring theme in the sociology of NRMs. Often arising in the reflexive moments of cult ethnographies, this theme relates to a felt tension between the subjective position of the fieldworker as objective outsider or observer, and the position imposed upon the fieldworker as potential convert. ‘Social distance’ is maintained by this tension, although this distance is sometimes produced more through a sense of psychological resistance than it is by a spatialising metaphor like ‘the field’ as I have been exploring it so far.

Interestingly, some early attempts to overcome the methodological barriers produced by this tension led some sociologists to employ the covert strategy of infiltrating cults as fake converts. Presumably this method would never get past any contemporary ethics committee worthy of the name, but it was known to occur in the early stages of cult research. A classic example is Lofland’s (1966) study of a *Doomsday Cult*<sup>7</sup>, during which (he explains in an appendix), he employed two of his students to undertake clandestine

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<sup>7</sup> Lofland’s cult was the Unification Church, or Moonies, in an early stage of its development in the U.S.. He

research as converts, a strategy he employed after his own failure to convert made his continued presence as participant-observer unworkable. Barker (1987) warns against such covert tactics, citing not only her own ethical concerns, but also a concern that covert researchers 'may undergo considerably more psychological pressures than those endured by the overt participant-observer, and that these pressures may affect their capacity to carry out the research' (140). In her example, these psychological pressures are directly correlated with the pressures of conversion:

One student, who was an avowed atheist doing covert research into an authoritarian movement which had grown out of the 'Jesus movement', told me how, when rejected by a woman to whom he was trying to sell some of the movement's literature, he had found himself convinced that Satan had invaded her. At that point he took himself off to a psychiatrist who advised him to change his thesis topic. He did not take that advice, but he did make sure that he could find some pretext to escape every few days in order to reassert his own picture of reality. (ibid.)

Lofland's failure to convert in the eyes of informants, which later led him to employ the covert strategy, is an example of another related predicament that has repeatedly arisen in cult ethnographies. Robbins et al. (1973) provide several examples of this predicament (which they source from various researchers' field notes), where an extended period of involvement with a movement has failed to produce signs of conversion in the stubborn fieldworker, and informants have become increasingly uncomfortable with or antagonistic toward the idea of further accommodating outside investigation. Robbins et al. analyse this situation in terms of 'the limits of symbolic realism' (259). They point out that the research strategy of 'empathic field observation' implies a concession on the part of the researcher to

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never revealed the name of his cult but its theology could not be easily disguised.

the reality of cult world-views (ibid.). Assertions of belief by informants are in fact strengthened or re-affirmed by the presence of an empathic listener, all the more so when outside societal scrutiny is usually associated with dismissive or even hostile reaction. But if, after apparently conceding to the reality of a world-view, the researcher then fails to exhibit any subjective inclination toward belief, this process of affirmation is undercut, and the research effort can instead be construed as an attempt to threaten or invalidate belief.

In this situation, the problem of *not* ‘going native’ presents itself as an interesting twist on the reflexive predicament. But without underestimating some of the genuine methodological (or spiritual) problems that can arise for researchers from the pressure to convert, the sociologists’ self-imposed pressure to distance themselves from their object of study needs to be examined for its theoretical and representational consequences. In the analysis provided by Robbins et al., the continued presence of a non-believing participant-observer is seen to create ‘cognitive dissonance’ (265) in the minds of informants. Such a perspective can greatly overestimate the sociologist’s impact on the faith of informants. As Snow and Machalek (1982) have pointed out, it is a perspective oriented by ‘the presumed fragility of unconventional belief’, where the sociologist’s own sense of cognitive dissonance in relation to a set of beliefs can be projected onto those beliefs themselves. Conversion itself becomes construed as the product of a fragile psyche, and I would argue that the objectivity or objective ‘distance’ of the sociologist is reaffirmed through the assertion of his or her psychological resistance or fortitude. The process of affirmation which Robbins et al. identify grants an objectifying power to the sociologist. Where the intersubjective contexts of fieldwork might well be interpreted, I would suggest, as facilitating a form of affirmation, a kind of testimony that is simultaneously a process of

proselytisation and spiritual practice, Robbins et al. see in this productive space a potential fissure, a dissonance which threatens the very object, but never the objectivity, of research.

Another related consequence of the sociologists' reflexive sense of distance is that it tends to obscure an actual lack of social distance between researcher, potential convert, and convert. The very possibility of passing as an 'insider' in the covert approach is of course indicative of the fact that researchers are often, in reality, not far removed from their informants in terms of shared socio-cultural space. And as was my own experience, openly stating one's academic intentions will not necessarily mean that a researcher will be differentiated from any another potential convert who encounters a religious movement.<sup>8</sup> This being the case, I find it significant that the psychological and methodological 'pressures' that have been revealed in these crucial moments of cult ethnographies have had so little bearing on theoretical insights into conversion, a phenomenon which has always preoccupied theoretical interest within the sociology of NRMs. The fear or perception of 'cognitive dissonance' establishes a kind of psychological distance from this question which seems significantly at odds with the otherwise sympathetic orientations of researchers as to the *sociological* predicament of new religious converts.

From its earliest phases, the sociology of NRMs has been concerned with the question of why people join NRMs. Opposing popular anti-cultist images of cult converts as helpless victims of the manipulative, ultra-rational, 'powerful psychotechnologies available to cult leaders' (Bromley and Hadden 1993:28) – that is, as victims of 'brainwashing' – sociologists focussed on the convert as a rational individual who joins a cult group for sound and identifiably sociological reasons. The shift of emphasis here was not toward the rational individual as such, however, but toward a rationality of conversion

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<sup>8</sup> Barker (1983) and Beckford (1983), however, point to some of the very specific problems that can arise for



grounded in the macro-sociological, metanarrative terms of the meaning-crisis of modernity (an influential early example is Glock and Bellah (1976)). The sympathetic portrayal of cult converts can in this sense be correlated with a classic sociological tendency to lament the loss of religion in a supposedly secularised and disenchanted modern society. In cults and their converts, the sociology of NRMs can be seen to have discovered an ‘alternative’ to the modern crisis which satisfied the ‘pervasive romantic style of cultural critique’ which Marcus and Fischer (1986:114) identify with liberal social thought, and which they also also identify with anthropology’s traditional search for cross-cultural alternatives to the crisis of Western modernity: a style of cultural critique which ‘worries about the fullness and authenticity of modern life and idealizes the satisfactions of communal experience’, and which sees behind the growth of modern institutions ‘a decline of community and of that sense of individual self-worth necessary to mental health’ (ibid.).

Mary Douglas (1982), in a scathingly eloquent critique of this pervasive assumption about the effects of modernisation on religion, points out that this tendency is generally supported by a notion ‘that religion is good for the human psyche’ (26). This assumption, which effectively psychopathologises modernity, underpins the sympathetic tone in the sociology of NRMs, and provides a useful sociological defence against the pathological or deviant status of cult converts. It also informs the development of theoretical paradigms which equate the proliferation of NRMs in the 1960s and 1970s with a revitalisation of religiosity, a religious resurgence arising out of the relative deprivation of ‘meaning’ suffered by the modern subject. The most systematic and influential of these paradigms is the ‘rational choice’ theory of cult conversion, which took inchoate form in Lofland and Stark (1965), but developed into a large-scale research project after Stark and Bainbridge

(1985). The utilitarian basis of this theory posits the conversion process as the rational pursuit of ‘rewards and compensators’. Taken in the macro-sociological context of a ‘religious economy’, the proliferation of NRMs provided evidence that secularisation is in fact a ‘self-limiting process’ (454) which periodically gives way to the generation of new sources of religious ‘supply’. While on one level this theory may provide a useful critique of the usual linear-historical model of secularisation, it is difficult to imagine its economic paradigm offering much in the way of qualitative insight into conversion. By abstracting notions of religious experience and meaning to the level of utilitarian ‘rewards’ and ‘general compensators’,<sup>9</sup> this theory inherently restricts any kind of detailed cultural analysis. Abstracting these concepts also only perpetuates – in the new terms of a surprisingly anachronistic discourse of laissez-faire liberalism – that romantic style of thought which sees religion as the only ‘supply’ which can satisfy the essential human demand for meaning and authenticity in life. Coupled with a concept of a utilitarian subject surveying a market-place of religions, this theory also suggests a kind of a-cultural realm of ‘choice’ (a realm defined by its inherent lack of cultural meaning) from which the convert strategically moves into the meaningful, spatio-cultural world of a religious movement.

It is in this sense that I suggest the search for a theory of conversion in the sociology of NRMs has been a necessary counterpart to the so-called ‘anthropologized’ (Robbins op.cit.) construction of cults as discrete, bounded culture-worlds. The idea of conversion assumes a *meaningful religious experience* (whatever the conceptual terminology), and both religion and the authenticity of life and experience that religion is thought to provide have traditionally been located ‘outside’ the cultural experience of Western modernity. The

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<sup>9</sup> ‘General compensators’ sounds a bit like a general anaesthetic, a Marxian opiate of the people which disguises the experience of alienation. ‘Religious economy’, of course, is not a very Marxian concept, and rational choice theorists tend to neglect the question of class.

insider/outsider dichotomy constructs the ‘outside’ modern world as unsafe, unstructured, uncultured, and disruptive; while the ‘inside’ world of a cult is a safe haven, structured, cultured, and secure. Cox (op.cit.) encapsulates this spatialised dichotomy when he argues that the ‘turn East’ amongst many educated Westerners of his generation provided ‘a way for people to live in spite of the illness [of modern culture], usually by providing them with an alternative mini-world, sufficiently removed from the big one outside so that its perils are kept away from the gate’ (105). Similarly, for Judah (1974a), ISKCON is an ‘alternative culture’ (17), and for Daner (1976) it is a ‘social situation’ which ‘[eliminates] much of the ambiguity which is generated by modern society’ (12).

The fears and uncertainties surrounding ‘empathic field observation’ (Robbins et al. op.cit.) which sociologists of NRMs have revealed in their moments of reflexivity have never affected the generally sympathetic theoretical orientation of the sub-discipline toward cults in this regard. If conversion is the product of a fragile psyche, it is also ultimately a remedy, or at least a compensation, which promises psychological and communal integration in defiance of modernity’s disintegrative forces. But in the sociologists’ own resistances to conversion in the field, and in their repeated reassurances to readers of their objective ‘outsider’ status, a certain immunity to the conditions of modernity are granted to the sociologist by the very possession of a objective sociological paradigm, of a sociological ‘ulterior motive’ (cf. Jackson op.cit.) both in and out of the field. Where ‘the field’ has been delineated as space of cultural otherness (where the cult represented as another ‘culture’) conversion has been correlated with a spatial and cultural movement from outside to inside, and in this spatio-cultural movement, conversion is presented as a process of culture change. But if it is precisely at the point of conversion that the boundary between insider and outsider is presumed to become manifest, then the ‘psychological

pressures' (Barker 1987:140) associated with the sociologists' resistances to conversion in the field remind us that conversion is also a point of psychological change, an internal transformation that can be resisted (or succumbed to) despite external pressures. In relation to my previous suggestions about the metaphoric spatiality implicit in the insider/outsider distinction, the interiority of conversion here takes on a metonymical quality, where the internal psyche of the insider or convert comes to stand for that 'other' domain just as a cult group had come to stand for a discrete spatio-cultural 'world' of otherness in the 'anthropologized' representations of cults as 'esoteric cultures' (Robbins op.cit.). Thus despite the influence of anthropological fantasies on the sociology of NRMs, a classic psychology-of-religion perspective on the 'conversion experience' itself returns by way of the sociologists' own sense of objective psychological integrity. As objective distance is maintained through the strict avoidance of any internal subjective experience of conversion, such an experience becomes the very definition of the cultic other.

To question these assumptions is not to deny that new religious converts (like many social scientists) may have experienced a very real sense of meaning-crisis – for people everywhere (in every culture and every historical period) have their crises of meaning. I would suggest instead that by taking these experiences, as they often appear in personal conversion narratives, as the starting-point of qualitative analysis, and not as a conclusive end-point justified in metanarrative terms as a solution to the modern crisis of meaning, we might begin to take converts seriously (and not merely sympathetically) on their own terms. By 'taking the Krishnas seriously', to appropriate Shinn's (1989:117) expression, we are forced to suspend these kinds of macro-sociological explanations and look instead to the theological and spiritual concerns of serious spiritual practitioners. Suspending the sociological motives of the 'why join?' question also implies a shift in representational

categories, a shift which would allow for a qualitative analysis which looks to the *process* of conversion as a creative meaning-making endeavour, rather than as a merely defensive psychological mechanism against the hostile tide of modernity.

I would invite such a perspective on the *creativity* of the ‘conversion process’ (Shinn 1987a:141) – which I would oppose to the wholly uncreative ‘rational choice’ paradigm of the ‘conversion decision’ – by appropriating Gebauer and Wulf’s (1995) valuation of art and aesthetic experience and re-applying it to the domain of religious experience: by suggesting, first of all, that the pursuit of eternal participation in Krishna’s transcendental *lila*, for instance, might ‘offer more and something other than a satisfaction of consumer expectations that arise as compensation for the deficiencies of the world of work and of prevailing relations of domination. If the task of [religion] consisted merely in compensation, the effect would be its functionalization in favor of goals that are extrinsic to it’ (291). Turning our attention to ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ people engage in spiritual practices also invites qualitative investigations that move beyond the first-stage analyses of ‘recruitments and conversions’ (Rochford 1985:73) that have traditionally occupied sociologists of NRMs, and instead lead us into the realms of the new possibilities and religio-aesthetic experiences offered by particular new religious techniques.

### **Fieldwork, culture conversion, and the *yoga* of phenomenology**

At the outset of this chapter I introduced the problem of methodology by citing Jackson’s ‘methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of another: inhabiting their world’ (ibid.). Jackson’s strategy would be sure to make some cult researchers re-think their anthropological affiliations. As I have demonstrated, sociologists of NRMs have been sure to assert their sociological

motives and keep their methodological distance from the cultural and psychological ‘world’ of the cultic other. But Jackson suggests that a theoretical or objectivist ‘ulterior motive’ of this sort is likely to mediate or obfuscate our understanding of the other. Jackson believes that ‘ulterior motive’ can and must be surrendered in the ethnographic quest for an *unmediated* ‘experience of the other’ (ibid.).

But would Jackson’s method of ‘inhabiting their world’ necessarily imply an experience of ‘conversion’ in the ethnographic context of cult research? As I demonstrate in what follows, Jackson’s ‘experience of the other’ does not operate at the interior, subjective level of conscious belief – which is the level at which ‘conversion’ is presumed to operate according to sociologists of NRMs. But Jackson’s ‘experience’ is not wholly independent of conscious intention either, if we are to follow his suggestion that ‘ulterior motive’ can actually make ‘the place of another’ (ibid.) inaccessible to one’s self-experience. The ‘experience of the other’ seems dependent for Jackson on the ethnographer’s personal capacity for *self-surrender*: ‘their world’ is not made available simply by ‘being there’ in the spatio-cultural ‘field’.

‘To enter a Krishna temple’ may be ‘to enter a world’ (Shinn 1987a:9), from this perspective, but is clearly not the same thing as ‘inhabiting their world’ (Jackson op.cit.). Yet I remain attentive to the fact that my fieldwork methodology was accepted by ISKCON devotees as a form of spiritual practice, without any apparent requirement on my part to ‘convert’ to Krishna Consciousness, and without my ‘ulterior motive’ seeming to influence the efficacy of my actions at a ‘transcendental’ level beyond ‘material’ experience as such. Jackson’s phenomenology does not incorporate immaterial forces, but it does nevertheless open up the ethnographic experience to the kind of *receptivity* which was extended to me by my own informants. Furthermore, ‘the spiritual’ is not wholly removed from

phenomenological experience in ISKCON. Out of Lord Krishna’s mercy, ‘the spiritual’ is given form and substance and so made accessible to human participants in Krishna worship. The ‘images, cuisine, and activities’ in which Shinn (1987a:10) locates ISKCON’s cultural authenticity are the same forms which embody Krishna’s *transcendental presence*. To see, hear, consume, and participate in these ‘authentically Indian’ (ibid.) forms is also to be exposed to Krishna’s spiritual energies. These are the practical means which practitioners engage in the pursuit of Krishna Consciousness. But, I argue, as long as these forms are self-consciously engaged as a spiritual methodology, they also retain their essential *sense of otherness* for practitioners themselves, and so cannot be said to constitute ‘their world’ as such.

As I demonstrate in following chapters, the form and substance of ‘the spiritual’ in Krishna Consciousness are understood by devotees to originate in ‘the spiritual world’ itself. But the practitioner who engages these forms in spiritual practice does not yet *inhabit* this otherworld. For the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness, there always exists an intrinsic difference between ‘material’ self and ‘spiritual’ other within the space of otherworldliness circumscribed by an ISKCON temple: intrinsic because without this sense of difference – a sense *felt* at the experiential level of embodied practice – there could be no desire for continued self-transformation. Once we introduce this intrinsic *displacement* in the relationship between *space* and *identity*, or *site* and *experience*, in Krishna Consciousness, it becomes more difficult to reify any extrinsic difference between ISKCON and the ‘outside culture’ (cf. Rochford 2000:179), or the culture of the ‘insider’ from that of the ‘outside’ observer. The juxtaposition between spiritual and ethnographic methodologies to which I now return explores this experience of displacement between

space, culture, and identity as something intrinsic both to the ethnographic experience and to the spiritual experience of Krishna Consciousness.

Jackson's ethnographic 'experience of the other' is a bodily experience, 'generated by an innate and embodied principle... the mimetic faculty' (335). 'Mimesis, which is based upon a bodily awareness of the other in oneself' (336), operates at the level of shared physical experience, embodied practice, and habitual 'knowledge' – which Jackson contrasts to the level of conceptual knowledge, conscious 'motive' and, we can extrapolate, conscious 'belief'. Jackson has developed his phenomenological anthropology as a trenchant critique of Cartesian dualisms applied to the domain of cultural experience. He attacks cognitive and symbolicist theories in anthropology which would abstract 'culture' to a system of beliefs and their symbolic expressions. When in the field, Jackson seeks to 'break [the] habit of seeking truth at the level of disembodied concepts', preferring instead 'to participate bodily in everyday practical tasks' (340). As a methodological process, 'practical mimesis'<sup>10</sup> (ibid.) involves the 'cultivation and imitation of practical skills' (ibid.) employed in the work-a-day lifeworld of the ethnographic other. This simple yet 'creative technique' (ibid.) can, according to Jackson, afford the ethnographer a unique and genuine 'experience of the other': for to 'recognise the embodiedness of our Being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one' (ibid.).

Getting in touch with this 'common ground' through the ethnographic method of 'practical mimesis' would seem to mean turning away from the more consciously motivated realms of human life associated with religious belief and experience. And yet, by the conclusion of 'Knowledge of the Body', Jackson's ethnographic quest for an

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson borrows the concept of 'practical mimesis' from Bourdieu (1977).



experiential *oneness* with the other seems to have been elevated above the 'everyday' realm of practice, to a positively *spiritual* level of annunciation:

While words and concepts distinguish and divide, bodiliness unites and forms the grounds of an empathic, even a universal, understanding... And, because one's body is 'the nearest approach to the universe' which lies beyond cognition and words, it is the body which in so many esoteric traditions forms the bridge to universality, the means of yoking [sic] self and cosmos (341).

I wonder if Jackson would class the project of anthropological fieldwork as such amongst the world's 'esoteric traditions'. Perhaps not, but anthropologists have nevertheless taken a traditional interest in *other* 'esoteric traditions', and the spiritual or universalist possibilities which Jackson here identifies with so many esoteric techniques of the body would appear, following his methodology, to be open to the 'creative' and 'empathic' ethnographer also: as long as he or she is capable of surrendering 'ulterior motive' and suspending 'inquiry into the hidden determinants of belief' (Jackson 1996:11), and presuming that the ethnographic self can be mimetically 'yoked' to an ethnographic other who is, in turn, capable of '[yoking] self and cosmos' (Jackson 1983:341). Under these conditions, Jackson's mimetic 'experience of the other' would presumably facilitate not only an ethnographic transcendence of consciousness ('motive', intention, or belief) and culture (the ethnographer's own culture), but self-transcendence proper.

Jackson raises a distinctively *yogic* notion with the term 'yoking'. The Sanskrit word '*yoga*' means, literally, 'to yoke', and it would seem that this meaning is not far from Jackson's mind either when, earlier in his paper, he points to the recognisably *yogic* technique of 'yoking' the mind through manipulation of the body: 'altered patterns of body

use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas, as when a regulation and steadying of the breath induces tranquillity of mind, or a balanced pose bodies forth a sense of equanimity' (ibid.). Jackson provides further New Age-ist examples of the power of matter over mind when he refers to 'hypnotherapy and Reichian bioenergetic analysis' (328). Mauss (1973 [1935]), who Jackson acknowledges briefly in his paper, used virtually identical examples at the end of 'Techniques of the body', the paper which adapted the term *habitus* to phenomenology (this term is now most commonly associated with Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977)). After drawing our attention to the everyday techniques or socially acquired 'habits' of walking, running, and swimming, Mauss concludes his short treatise on the 'education' of the body by drawing our attention to 'reflex therapy', to 'the techniques of Taoism, its techniques of the body, breathing techniques in particular' (86-87), and then finally to the 'mystical' practices of Indian *yogis*:

I have studied the Sanscrit texts of Yoga enough to know that the same things occur in India. I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied, but which were perfectly studied by China and India, even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into 'communication with God'. Although in the end breath technique, etc., is only the basic aspect in India and China, I believe this technique is much more widespread. (ibid.)

The examples of *yogic* breath technique employed by Mauss and Jackson are intended to support the phenomenological claim that thought and cognition (or states of mind) are not prior to or independent of patterns of body use. Asad (1993) writes that with Mauss's suggestion about 'biological means of entering into 'communion with God'' (cited

in Asad *ibid.*:76),<sup>11</sup> ‘the possibility is opened up of inquiring into the ways in which embodied practices (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies. “Consciousness” becomes a dependent concept’ (76-77).

For fear of reducing the phenomenological relation between action and consciousness, or practice and belief, to a purely causal mechanism, however, Asad also offers an important point of clarification regarding Mauss’ ‘biological’ ‘precondition for varieties of religious experience’ (76):<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the intellectual appeal of a phenomenology of the body, it seems to me that Mauss’s approach also runs counter to the assumption of primordial bodily experiences. It encourages us to think of such experience not as an autogenetic impulse but as a mutually constituting relationship between body sense and body learning... Thus, from Mauss’s perspective, an experience of the body becomes a moment in an experienced (taught) body... discourse and gesture are viewed as part of the social process of learning to develop aptitudes, not as orderly symbols that stand in an objective world in contrast to contingent feelings and experiences that inhabit a separate subjective one. (77)

Significantly, when Jackson (*op.cit.*) writes that ‘altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas’ (341), he is not referring to a purely

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<sup>11</sup> Asad’s reference translates Mauss as writing ‘communion with God’, whereas my version of ‘Techniques of the Body’ has ‘communication with God’.

<sup>12</sup> It is a recognised theological ‘offence’ in ISKCON to interpret the transcendental effect of the *mahamantra* as a physiological response to repetitive breathing cycles, which are the natural consequence of rapid chanting during *japa* meditation. Such an interpretation would ultimately contradict the core teaching in ISKCON which states that the Holy Name of Krishna is a form of Krishna Himself, a wholly transcendental presence in its own right, and would instead grant a higher priority to what is merely a mundane, transitory, physical sensation. Practitioners of the more popular *yogic* techniques in the West are frequently dismissed by ISKCON devotees as being self-centred rather than God-centred, and as being ‘materialistically’ concerned with the pursuit of such transitory bodily experiences.

developmental, accumulative, or productive process of acquiring new experiences, but to a process of *disruption* in already acquired patterns of experience. Jackson's example of *yogic* breath technique is offered to show that 'the habitual or 'set' relations between ideas, experiences and body practices may be broken' through 'altered patterns of body use' (334). These 'habitual or 'set' relations' are what constitute the habitus, and in the terms of Mauss' early definition, they 'do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges' (Mauss op.cit.:73). Ordinarily, according to Jackson (op.cit.), 'habitus constrains behaviour, and... when the bodily unconscious is addressed openly it answers with forms and features which reflect a closed social universe' (336). But Jackson's suggestion that the 'set' relations of the habitus can be 'broken', and that a 'disruption in the habitus' (334) may be effected by 'altered patterns of body use' (such as regulated breath technique) which in turn 'may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas' (ibid.), would seem to offer a possible way out of a 'closed social universe'. This possibility is implicit to Jackson's *methodological* argument, of course, because without the 'disruption' in the ethnographer's own habitus brought about by the fieldwork experience and the methodological technique of 'practical mimesis', the ethnographer could never be open to the 'experience of the other'. We would have to assume that this possibility, at least, must also exist for practitioners of alternative techniques of cross-cultural mimesis – techniques alternative to the disciplined *yoga* of ethnography.

In order to gain further insights from this juxtaposition of cross-cultural methodologies, ethnographic and spiritual, the kind of 'disruption in the habitus' which Jackson experiences through the cross-cultural method of ethnographic mimesis needs to be distinguished from another kind of 'disruption in the habitus' which Jackson allows *within*

a ‘closed social universe’, and which he calls mimetic ‘play’ (Jackson op.cit.:335). Mimetic ‘play’ involves ‘embodied yet latent possibilities’ or ‘possibilities of behaviour which [people] embody but are not ordinarily inclined to express’, but which only require ‘an altered environment to ‘catch on’ and come into play’ (335). Jackson’s ethnographic instance of such mimetic play comes from the ritual context of Kuranko initiation, during which he observed women performers imitate the roles and demeanors of men, wear men’s clothes and carry their weapons, and in the process ‘enjoy a free run of the village’ (334) in a manner normally unbefitting the gendered dispositions of Kuranko women. Jackson observes: ‘Initiation rites involve a ‘practical mimesis’ in which are *bodied forth* and recombined elements from several domains, yet without script, sayings, promptings, conscious purposes or even emotions. No notion of ‘copying’ can explain the naturalness with which the mimetic features appear’ (335; my emphasis).

Jackson’s notion of *bodying forth* holds the key to understanding the ‘naturalness’ of mimetic play. Rather than self-consciously imitating or acting like men under the direction of some ritual ‘script’, Kuranko women *body forth* male dispositions from the ‘bodily unconscious’, which emerges as a kind of bodily store of mimetic memories or ‘latent’ dispositions incorporated unconsciously during the embodied process of enculturation or primary socialisation. From this perspective, Kuranko women unconsciously embody the gendered dispositions of both women *and* men, but it is their socially defined environments of practice that ordinarily restrict the *expression* of ‘latent’ gender dispositions. In this sense, mimetic play emerges as a form of *anamnesis* operating at the level of repressed bodily memory. The ritual context provides an ‘altered environment’ in which latent dispositions are temporarily extricated from their usually restrictive social contexts, and so are given the opportunity to “‘catch on’ and come into

play'. The distinction between 'latent' embodiment and its physical 'expression' thus forms the basis for Jackson's unique phenomenological analysis of ritual practice.

But such cannot be the process at work for the non-native participant in the 'altered environment' of an ethnographic 'field', or (in our case) for the Western practitioner of a foreign religious tradition. Neither of these figures can conceivably have any store of 'latent' cultural dispositions from which to 'body forth' the behaviours appropriate to a given practice or ritual. The only way cross-cultural mimesis could be said to operate at the level of the 'bodily unconscious', free from any unnatural influence of conscious 'motive' or intentional action, would be to accept a universalist conception of the body that ultimately transcends difference as such – subjective, cultural, racial, gendered, or otherwise. We already know that Jackson does indeed accept this 'common ground where self and other are one' (340), and that he recognises a universalist *spiritual* potential in tapping into this 'terrain of experience' (Desjarlais 1996:72). Desjarlais (ibid.), alternatively, offers a significant theoretical challenge to phenomenologists like Jackson when he questions that 'experience' itself can be taken as the ontological 'common ground' in anthropological theory and practice:

The problem with taking experience as an uniquely authentic domain of life is that one risks losing an opportunity to question either the social production of that domain or the practices that define its use. Connotations of primacy and authenticity lend legitimacy to the anthropologist's craft, but they can simultaneously limit enquiries to descriptions of the terrain of experience when what we need are critical reflections on how that terrain comes about. (ibid.)

Desjarlais (1994) has also questioned the kind of method which presumes that the 'native' experience can be that of the ethnographer. Reflecting on his ethnographic and trance-induced experiences as an apprentice to a Yolmo shaman in Nepal, Desjarlais calls into doubt other anthropological studies of trance in which 'one gets the sense that the visionary world of the native can be that of the anthropologist: what the outsider experiences of trance reflects what local healers or participants experience' (14). In the process of learning Yolmo shamanic techniques, Desjarlais had employed what appears to be the same logic of 'practical mimesis' recommended by Jackson, believing that only by learning the more everyday techniques of Yolmo practice would he be able to 'body forth' the appropriate symptoms in trance:

I first had to learn something of the basic tenets of Yolmo experience, ways of using the body and interacting with others, that would then enable me to learn how to be a proper shaman... By busying myself with these activities, gleaning how to eat a bowl of rice with style or greet an elder with grace, I learned how to use my body in a way that was conducive to my more ritualized efforts. (17)

These techniques worked for Desjarlais, but even at the level of purely bodily experience, he *felt* that he only ever achieved what amounted to a *partial experience* of the Yolmo lifeworld: 'I felt that my body developed a partial, experiential understanding of their world' (13); 'I found that one cannot adopt cultures as readily as one puts on clothes' (17).

Unlike Jackson, then, for whom 'putting oneself in the place of another' is a practical, experiential possibility, Desjarlais believes that 'the process of *cultural conversion or translation* is not so clear cut' (15; my emphasis). Rather than a *cultural*

*convert*, he sees his ethnographic self in retrospect as ‘a strange hybrid, caught in a no-man’s-land betwixt and between cultures, learning something of a visited way of life yet relying heavily on my own’ (18). Rather than a failure of method, however, Desjarlais restores this ‘hybrid’ experience to a methodological paradigm:

But perhaps it is the clash between world-views, in the tension between symbolic systems (how reality is defined, the body held, or experience articulated), that some anthropological insights emerge. One learns of another way of being and feeling through contrast, noting the differences that make a difference. (18-19)

Desjarlais’ challenge to ‘cultural conversion’ as an ethnographic method is especially suggestive in terms of the juxtaposition I have raised between fieldwork and a theory of conversion. When he observes that ‘the process of cultural conversion and translation is not so clear cut’, he implicitly questions the idea that cultural conversion (or cultural translation) would imply a symmetrical substitution of terms, the self become other through a transformative conversion experience. By re-evaluating the ethnographic experiences of difference (of ‘how reality is defined’), of awkwardness (‘the body held’), of dissonance (‘experience articulated’), Desjarlais also suggests a conceptual and methodological alternative to Jackson’s ‘experience of the other’ as a realised state of primacy, authenticity, and oneness. The ‘experience of the other’ has become refigured here as an experience of *otherness* – but this is not to say that anything essential is lost in the ethnographic process. While Jackson’s experience of oneness (of self, other, and world) dissociates ‘experience’ from the ‘reflexive interiority’ (Desjarlais 1996:73) of consciousness, and even from the unitary body conceived as an integrated ‘container of experience’ (74), the presupposed primacy and authenticity of experience are never



questioned. As Desjarlais again argues, ‘the emphasis on felt realities rather than cultural categories’ which motivates the type of humanist and phenomenological method proposed by Jackson, operates according to logic in which ‘(t)he sensate begets immediacy which, in turn, begets authenticity’ (72). This logic, he argues, ‘is haunted by a unique but problematic collapse of ontology and epistemology, in which the primary ontic nature of experience translates into supreme facticity’ (ibid.).

Desjarlais’ ethnographic experience cannot be translated as an ‘equivalent’ to Yolmo experience, because this experience is already produced through a metaphoric ‘translation’, through a productive ‘tension’ which extends, but never replaces, the terms of the ethnographer’s own experience. In the same sense, this ‘hybrid’ experience is not a ‘cultural conversion’ if this is taken to imply only a substitution of the cultural terms of experience. But it *could* be considered as a form of ‘cultural conversion’, I suggest, if this term could be extended to incorporate the ‘differences that make a difference’ and that are productive of subjective ‘insights’. Presumably Yolmo healers never ‘converted’ to shamanism as such. Conversion, I would stress, is entirely dependent on a *sense of difference*. Jackson’s dissolution of the self-other divide could never really constitute a cultural conversion in this sense, and neither could a complete transformation of self into other, because both would imply the disappearance of difference. If either of these mystical states were ever to be realised, gone would be the sense of wonder and mystery which makes the other worth pursuing, and which also makes the other worth reporting or preaching about to one’s own kind.

*Mimesis* – the mystical-phenomenological concept which Jackson places at the centre of his ethnographic methodology and his analysis of ritual practice – need not signify a realised state of universalist fulfilment in the other. If such indeed is the ultimate ideal, in

either an ethnographic or a spiritual sense, it is in the journey to this ideal point, rather than its realisation, that the lessons are learned and the insights attained. This journey is always a struggle, too, for the closer one gets to the realisation of sameness with other, the more significant and pronounced become the 'differences that make a difference'. As long as the mimetic circuit between self and other remains partial and incomplete, mimesis or conversion will be fraught with struggle, ambivalence, and the need for repetitive practice. Partiality does not simply imply failure, though, for if failure is measured by the space of difference between partiality and completeness, then this is the same space in which progress is measured and the promise and possibility of success are realised.

### **Culture conversion as mimetic excess**

Desjarlais' 'partial' or 'hybrid' ethnographic experience cannot be measured against Jackson's mimetic experience of 'oneness' with the other simply in terms of lack. Nor should it be understood as the product of a particular amalgamation of two distinct 'cultures', each contributing its own 'part' to a new syncretised experience, which is the way the concept of 'hybridity' is most commonly misapplied in contemporary theoretical discussions of cultural experience. Bhabha (1994), whose work I am compelled to visit now that 'mimesis' and 'hybridity' have together entered the conceptual framework of this methodological argument, makes it quite clear that his concept of hybridity 'is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures' (113):

...hybridity is not a *problem* of genealogy or identity between two *different* cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism... What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid... is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as

objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated. (114; original emphasis)

To apply Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to the experience of ethnographic presence would mean problematising the ‘rules of recognition’ (110-1) by which the ethnographic other is seen as ‘the cultural’ object of anthropological contemplation. Even Jackson’s ideal of a non-contemplative ‘experience of the other’ assumes that this experience is recognisably ‘there’ first as an object of cultural desire, to be subsequently resolved in the desiring body of the ethnographer in the ‘putting oneself in the place of’ movement of ethnographic presence. ‘The field’ serves as an ethnographic *symbol* which reifies the spatio-cultural there-ness of the other, prior to any actual bodily engagement with the other, and which stands for a cultural essence – a cultural *experience* – which is already located non-arbitrarily within that symbolic domain: ‘their world’. But the presence of the ethnographer introduces a displacement in the value of this spatio-cultural symbol, or in the imagined, unitary cultural identity of *site* and *experience*. For in this case, cultural experience is no longer an ‘immediate mimetic effect’ (ibid.) produced by the mere fact of ‘being there’, ‘in the field’ of cultural practice, but must actively be produced through the mimetic labour and methodological strategies of fieldwork. For Jackson to seek out such an ‘immediate mimetic effect’ or a cultural ‘experience of the other’ *unmediated* by signs – in a manner emulating the ‘naturalness’ which he sees in the mimetic play of Kuranko initiates – is actually to displace such ‘naturalness’ into a semiotic play of difference, as the very sign of ‘the cultural’. Mimetic ‘naturalness’ becomes an object of cultural *desire*, an ‘experience’ to be had: but how can ‘naturalness’ ever be ‘experienced’ as such, unless it is arrived at through the mimetic ‘slippage’ (86) of *unnaturalness* or awkwardness such as Desjarlais experienced in his own mimetic adventure as shaman’s apprentice? In fact, the

one produces the other, for as the ethnographic method produces such hybrid effects as awkwardness and partial presence, so too is ‘the cultural’ itself *bodied forth* from the ethnographer as the experience of ethnographic desire for the other. ‘Cultural conversion’ – our metaphor for ethnographic presence – *produces* an experience of ‘the cultural’, which is essentialised to a point of self-consciousness and which necessarily *exceeds* any natural mimetic identity between practice and experience.

Bhabha’s concept of hybridity can also offer us an entirely different perspective on the spatio-cultural metaphors for ‘conversion’ that I identified earlier in this chapter. As I have argued, these ‘anthropologised’ metaphors construct conversion to ISKCON as a spatio-cultural movement, in which to convert ‘is to enter a world’ (Shinn 1987a:9) of new religious experience which is ‘spatially and culturally’ (Rochford 2000:175) distinct from the ‘outside culture’ (ibid.:179) of Western modernity. The cult experience is constructed as a *cultural alternative* to the experience of Western modernity: it is defined by this fundamental point of difference, as if conversion was ‘an oppositional act’ or the ‘negation or exclusion of the ‘content’’ of one cultural reality in favour of another, ‘as a difference once perceived’ (Bhabha op.cit.:110). Bhabha’s concept of hybridity problematises this kind of construction: first by showing that the contents (or ‘beliefs’) of ‘*different* cultures’ (114; original emphasis) are not ‘there’ to be seen as visible, viable alternatives to each other prior to or outside of ‘the production of cultural *differentiation*’ (ibid.; original emphasis); and second, by emphasising that the most significant difference produced out of hybridisation is not the effect of opposition, but of the quest for sameness. In Bhabha’s case, the colonial hybrid is a mimetic effect, a product of the incompleteness of mimesis, ‘*a subject of difference which is almost the same, but not quite*’ (86; original emphasis). For again, it is in the ‘not quite’ that, in Desjarlais’ terms, ‘the differences really make a

difference’. In Bhabha’s case, the real difference is not between being English and being Indian, but between being English and being *Anglicised*: the colonial hybrid ‘is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English’ (87; original emphasis). To apply a ‘bastardized repetition’ (113) of this insight to the experience of conversion to ISKCON, I want to stress in what follows that to be Indianised is *emphatically* not be Indian, and to be Hindu-ised is *emphatically* not to be Hindu. From this perspective, the experience of conversion to an ‘authentically Indian’ form of religiosity is not constructed primarily in opposition to the convert’s ‘prior’ Western cultural experience, but in relation to the already ‘authentically Indian’. From this perspective, the conversion experience is neither oppositional, nor compensatory, nor indeed lacking in its ‘identity effects’ (112), but excessive: it *exceeds* the experience of the non-convert Hindu. It is this kind of zealous ‘excess’ (86) that *makes the difference* between the convert and the non-convert ‘Indian’.

At the beginning of the next chapter I ‘step into the Krishna temple’ at North Sydney again, to see what happens when we *re-enter* ‘a world of images, cuisine, and activities that can be found throughout northern India in homes and communities devoted to Krishna’ (Shinn 1987a:9; my emphasis) to find there are actually ‘authentically Indian’ Indians present. Does the presence of Indians at an ISKCON temple in Sydney make this space more ‘authentically Indian’ than it would be if it were only attended by Anglo-Australian Hare Krishna devotees? I will be raising this question in a critical light at several points over the next two chapters, in response to those sociologists who have unquestioningly answered in the affirmative. In the process I will explore in more detail the mimetic tools of Krishna Consciousness – ‘*the images, cuisine, and activities*’ of ‘spiritual culture’, to see how these techniques of the body become imbued with a sense of spiritual

efficacy which ultimately *transcends* any ‘material’ sense of ‘authenticity’ based on *prior* notions of what qualifies as ‘Indian’, ‘Hindu’, or – as I will proceed to explore in Chapter Four – ‘Gaudiya-Vaisnava’.

To effect the transformation of ‘material consciousness’ into ‘spiritual consciousness’, ISKCON devotees must work to extricate the senses from the objects of material desire and re-direct these to the transcendental forms of Krishna: the sound of His Name, the image of His deity, the taste of His consecrated food leavings. Material desires are, of course, culturally embodied, and in a sense practitioners of *bhakti-yoga* might be understood to recognise this fact, for the spiritual process seems to be a means of self-consciously inducing what Jackson (op.cit.) calls a ‘disruption in the habitus’ in order to break the ‘materialistic’ habits of Western subjectivity. But while much of Hare Krishna practice is certainly reinforced by the discursive negation of all things ‘Western’, spiritual transformation is also effected by a positive, rather than purely disruptive, ‘cultural’ methodology.

As we shall see in relation to Krishna’s consecrated food offerings (*prasadam*) in the next chapter, matter or ‘materialistic’ means can be transformed into spiritual energy, once put to the service of Krishna. Similarly, ‘material consciousness’ is to become gradually spiritualised through the process of engaging one’s body, mind, and senses in ‘devotional service’ to Krishna. To engage oneself in the service of Krishna is to effect a spiritual transformation, a transformation which is not so much the creation of a new identity as the gradual ‘remembrance’ (*smarana*) or recovery of one’s own original spiritual self (*svarupa*, or ‘spiritual body’). This is a process of *anamnesis*, in which the forms and features of Krishna worship work to dispel the illusion of forgetfulness conjured by material identification with the physical and enculturated body. Of particular interest in this

process – of seeking to ‘remember’ the transcendental Other, Lord Krishna, and one’s own original identity on ‘the spiritual platform’ – is that it requires the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness to engage in bodily techniques that are self-consciously defined and engaged in as *culturally* other. But these techniques are not effective just because they are ‘non-Western’: the unique forms and features of cultural otherness which characterise spiritual practice in ISKCON only ‘work’ because they reflect the true and original form of the spirit-soul in the spiritual world.

The association between transcendental otherworldliness and cultural otherness is made explicit in the Hare Krishna term ‘spiritual culture’. The physical techniques and cultural aesthetics of ‘spiritual culture’ are the only effective mnemonic tools in the spiritual process of ‘remembrance’, because ‘spiritual culture’ ultimately derives from the spiritual world itself, the original home and ultimate goal of the spiritual practitioner in ISKCON. In spiritual terms, to ‘step into the Krishna temple’ is not, in Shinn’s (1987a) already problematic terms, ‘to enter a world of images, cuisine, and activities that can be found throughout northern India in homes and communities devoted to Krishna’ (9-10) – but rather to enter a world of images, sounds, smells and tastes which in ultimate reality are ‘non-different’ to those of the spiritual world itself. This does not mean, however, that simply by crossing Shinn’s spatio-cultural threshold the devotee actually *experiences* an ISKCON temple as the spiritual world itself (any more, in fact, than one could actually experience ‘northern India’ by visiting the ISKCON temple in Sydney), for this experience is only available to the fully-realised soul, and no ‘aspiring devotee’ can yet claim this most elevated of spiritual states.

For the ‘aspiring devotee’, the threshold between worlds is a goal to be attained, a point to be reached, not a ‘step’ that is taken in some transformative moment of a conscious

act or ‘conversion decision’. Krishna Consciousness as a *method* – rather than as a realised state of being – requires the practitioner to evoke and to mimetically engage the aesthetic forms and religious techniques of spiritual/cultural otherworldliness in spiritual practice. But this does not mean that the practitioner yet *inhabits* (to appropriate the terms of Jackson’s methodology) the otherworld as such. Crossing the imagined spatio-cultural threshold either literally, by entering an ISKCON temple, or through a metaphorical movement of ‘conversion’, does not mean that one’s place in the spiritual world is secured, nor that one’s culturally acquired subjectivity has been left at the door, so to speak, and replaced by a new spiritual-cultural self. This requires work and life-long training in the spiritual techniques of Krishna Consciousness. If the practical means of mimetically engaging oneself in the elements of Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ can be understood, in Jackson’s terms, to effect a ‘disruption in the habitus’, this is not to say that the habitus has yet been shed and replaced. ‘Material consciousness’ remains for all devotees an ever-present impediment to a complete or unmediated ‘experience of the other’ in the spiritual-cultural world of Krishna.

I want to resolve the juxtaposition between fieldwork and conversion which I have raised in the present chapter by stressing again that the Hare Krishna devotees I have met do not inhabit another world. Rather, they self-consciously engage with another world as a method, as a technique or *yoga*, with the intention of attaining spiritual insights. My intentions at the ISKCON temple may have been different, but ultimately my method of engagement was not different at all. My ethnographic taste for difference has already given me a ‘taste’ of Krishna Consciousness, and on a transcendental level intention is not especially relevant. Intention, or ‘ulterior motive’, is a ‘material’ issue.



## Chapter Two

### A taste for Krishna: aesthetic theology and the transubstantiation of culture

For us [Western academics], dry first principles are generally more important than mouth-watering aromas.

– Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989:7)

#### Lunch in Vrindavana: an ethnographic entrée

Vrindavana: a holy *dhama* located in the north Indian region of Vraja; the original location of the forest in which, five thousand years ago, Krishna revealed his eternal *lila* (‘transcendental pastimes’) with Radha and the *gopis* (cowherdresses) of Vraja.

It was here, in the well-manicured garden of an ISKCON pilgrims’ *bhavan*, that I experienced what was surely the culinary highlight of my fieldwork: *tali hui paneer* (pan-fried seasoned cheese), *paneer sak* (steamed spinach and fresh cheese), *masala bhindi sabji* (seasoned okra and coconut), *pakora* (vegetable fritters) and *dokla* (steamed lentil flour and yoghurt). And just when I thought I couldn’t possibly eat another mouthful, *khir* (sweet rice) and *gulab jamun* (deep-fried milk balls in rose-water syrup). According to Srila Prabhupada, a meal of *prasadam* (Krishna’s ‘mercy’ in the form of sanctified food offerings) is never complete without sweets.

The *bhavan*, or pilgrim's accommodation, is operated by an influential German Prabhupada-disciple named Naresvara dasa Adhikari for the benefit of his visiting disciples. Naresvara had invited me to this sunny afternoon lunch after we had been introduced by one of his disciples, a young Canadian ex-university student, who thought I should interview his spiritual master. In a manner more convivial than insistent, Naresvara suggested I leave my tape-recorder switched off until we had finished our *prasadam*, so that we might get to know each other in a relaxed rather than a professional context. Over the course of our introductions, Naresvara's disciple would emerge again and again from inside the ashram with the next dish inspired by his training in ISKCON's kitchens. By the time the tape-recorder was to be switched on, both Naresvara and myself were lying on our sides on the shaded grass, digesting our spiritual fare as I pondered the fact that the best food I had tasted in India had been prepared by a twenty-five year old white male Canadian. Naresvara himself was exhausted: the interview would have to be postponed until the next day. Instead, he suggested, I should go into the kitchen and watch his talented disciple make butter from buttermilk, sourced that day from ISKCON Vrindavana's *gosala* (cow shed).

### **The Sunday Feast**

Sydney: Australia. The Sunday Feast at Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir is a crowded affair. After a quiet Sunday evening bus-ride through the vacated corporate district of North Sydney, to the subdued outskirts of the residential North Shore, the level of activity in and around the ISKCON centre always seems in itself enough to signify my recurrent 'field' as a site of difference. At the front entrance to the centre, the muffled sounds of *mrdanga* drums and *karatalas* (hand cymbals) coming from inside the temple

room means a *kirtana* (congregational chanting and dancing) is already working the devotees into a typically energetic state of spiritual devotion, while the hundreds of pairs of shoes piled up outside the foyer means the room will also be packed with congregational worshippers.

Finding a place for my shoes where I might hope to find them again is usually the first thing on my mind when I make my Sunday evening visits to the temple. I reckon over ninety-percent of the shoes piled up outside the centre each week belong to Indian and Indo-Fijian members of ISKCON Sydney's congregation – those who only attend the temple on Sunday evenings, or for special events relating to the Vaisnava calendar. On any other day of the week, a well-timed visit to the centre might occasion a lengthy conversation with one of its residents, whose numbers tend to fluctuate between a dozen and twenty or so Anglo-Australian Hare Krishna devotees. Sunday evenings, however, are not very conducive to such meetings. Devotees not engaged in sustaining the energetic *kirtana* in the temple room are most likely busy making preparations for the main feature of the Sunday evening program: the Feast. The centre is otherwise peopled by its Sunday guests: Indian migrants and their families, with perhaps only a dozen or so non-Indian visitors with a taste for Hare Krishna cuisine.

Outside in the centre's carpark, the children of Indian congregants run around with the children of (non-resident) Anglo-Australian devotees. Just inside the foyer, Indian women dressed in colourful *saris* chat amongst themselves, or with their husbands (neatly presented for the occasion in shirts and trousers), or perhaps with some of the female devotees, who are similarly attired in *saris*. The Krishna kids outside are distinguishable from their playmates not only by skin-colour, but also by their shaved heads and *sikhas*, by the *tilaka* on their foreheads, and by the *tulasi* beads around their necks. For the boys and

for the male devotees, the *sikha* is the tuft of hair left unshaved at the top of the head, signifying a devotee's attachment to Krishna and to the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition. Girls and female devotees keep their hair long (parted in the middle, and covered by their *sari* when inside the temple room), but all devotees wear *tilaka* and *tulasi*, especially when attending temple functions. *Tilaka* is a pale mud-paste sourced from the Ganges and used to make the distinctive 'V' and leaf-shaped symbol, which is applied to the forehead and bridge of the nose, and also, less visibly, to the torso, arms and legs. As I learned during my spiritual 'training' in the centre's (male) ashram, *tilaka* is not only applied manually, with fingers and paste, but also verbally, with a *mantra* for each corresponding location of the body, each *mantra* invoking a different name of Lord Visnu.

Having learned practically to apply the signs of Hare Krishna otherness to my own body during fieldwork, I remain attentive to these signs and to their symbolic significance as I enter the Sunday devotional scene, symbolically unadorned. Like the three rows of wooden *tulasi* beads worn around the neck (*kanthi-mala*), for instance, I know the *tilaka* symbol is again an identifying mark of a Gaudiya-Vaisnava. The 'V' marked in *tilaka* on the forehead is said to stand for 'Vaisnava' (a devotee of Visnu, who is Krishna), while the connecting leaf-shaped mark on the bridge of the nose symbolises the leaf of the *tulasi* tree (an Indian basil plant). Significantly, the substance of these symbols is indissociable from their symbolising function. The *tulasi* tree provides the wood for *japa-mala* (beads for chanting upon), and the smaller *kanthi-mala* worn around the neck. The *tulasi* tree is an incarnation of Tulasi devi, also known as Vrinda devi, the *gopi* (cowherd girl) who facilitates the sacred tryst between Radha and Krishna in her 'forest of Vrinda (Tulasi) trees' – Vrindavana. For her special part in the divine *lila*, Tulasi devi receives a special place in the worship practice of Gaudiya-Vaisnavas. As Tulasi facilitates the *lila* of the

Divine Couple in her sacred forest, so her touch empowers a devotee's chanting, as the Hare Krishna *mantra* passes the necklaced throat and is counted upon *japa* beads in a devotee's right hand. An essential part of the early morning program of worship in ISKCON temples involves the worship of Tulasi, who takes the form of a potted *tulasi* plant and is offered consecrated water by each of the devotees. A *tulasi* leaf is also added to food preparations offered to Krishna before being consumed by devotees as *prasadam*, or Krishna's 'mercy'. Ritual worship of Tulasi does not feature in the Sunday Feast program, but Tulasi herself is substantially present in many of the symbols of devotion, even in the Feast itself.

Each Sunday, Partha-sarathi dasa – a French devotee who lives and works on ISKCON's New Gokula farm near Cessnock, two hours drive from Sydney – occupies one corner of the centre's foyer with a table stacked with milk, cheese and yoghurt brought from the farm and offered for sale. "Milk," Srila Prabhupada is often quoted as saying, "is liquid religion" – and Partha-sarathi works closely to this principle in his service to ISKCON's Cow Protection Program. A colourful poster display explaining the principles of Cow Protection in ISKCON adorns Partha-sarathi's stall: this is the first piece of information about ISKCON to greet Sunday visitors as they enter the Sydney centre. Cow Protection and the dairy culture surrounding it are central to the life of ISKCON's rural communities. The cow, 'the mother of everyone' in its milk-giving capacity, is also very dear to Krishna the cowherd boy. Cow's milk is entirely 'in the mode of goodness' (*sattya-guna*), and serves to enhance spiritual progress and sustain detachment from the detrimental modes of ignorance (*rajo-guna*) and passion (*tamos-guna*).

Like the rest of the male devotees, Partha-sarathi dresses in his *kirtah* and *dhoti*: the loose, collarless cotton shirt and long skirt/pants formed by a length of material wrapped

around the waist and between the legs. Partha-sarathi dresses in white, signifying him as a *grhastha*: a married householder with independent obligations to his family. Selling surplus dairy from the farm helps Partha-sarathi meet his financial needs. Other male devotees who intend on marrying, or who have ‘retired’ from married life (*vanaprastha*), also wear white. The *brahmacaris* (male celibate students) who live in the centre’s ashram upstairs wear saffron-coloured robes, signifying their commitment to celibacy and renunciation. The *brahmacarinis* (female celibate students) and other *matajis* (all female devotees, independent of age or marital status, are referred to respectfully as *mataji* – ‘mother’), all wear *saris*.<sup>1</sup> Hare Krishna children wear these recognisably Indian styles too, perhaps especially when attending temple functions, but loose-fitting trousers (*‘bhakta pants’*) and T-shirts emblazoned with ISKCON logos are also common.

Next to Partha-sarathi’s stall, the little Temple Shop run by Varadaraja dasa does a brisk trade on Sunday nights, selling a full range of devotional requirements, from ISKCON literature and *tulasi* beads, to incense burners and *saris*. Towards the back of the incense-filled shop, I find shelves stocked with hundreds of books by Srila Prabhupada and some of his more literary-minded disciples. I quite often devote time during these visits to perusing the available titles. It was in this way that Varadaraja – an Australian devotee in his early thirties – became one of my regular points of contact with the devotees. Prabhupada’s books provided the ideal starting point for many in-depth conversations on Krishna Consciousness and the spiritual life in ISKCON. While directing me to the most essential introductory works of Srila Prabhupada, Varadaraja’s questions and recommendations have also been sympathetically addressed to the academic and ‘cultural’

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<sup>1</sup> I explore the significance of the four different *asramas* – or spiritual life stages – in the next chapter, with a particular focus on issues of gender and marriage. At this stage, I am simply concerned with portraying the aesthetic appearance of devotees.

interests I had expressed during our first conversation in his shop. As well as selling ‘transcendental literature’, Varadaraja’s shop supplies many of the most essential ingredients of Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ to the Sydney devotees and their associates. The shop is periodically restocked after Varadaraja’s combined business and pilgrimage trips to India.

The door to the SRI-SRI RADHA-GOPINATHA TEMPLE ROOM is marked by a brass plaque, and by the door hangs a brass bell which the devotees chime each time they enter the room – as a way of announcing their entrance to the deities’ ‘palace’. Each time the door swings open, the sounds of the *kirtana* rush through to the front rooms of the centre: the gradually intensifying three-beat tempo of *mrdangas*, *karatalas*, and the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* – *HARE KRISHNA, HARE KRISHNA, KRISHNA KRISHNA, HARE HARE, HARE RAMA, HARE RAMA, RAMA RAMA, HARE HARE!*

On entering the temple room, congregants typically genuflect on both knees, with head and hands to the white marble floor. Devotees perform *dandavats* – full body prostration – crossways on the floor in front of Srila Prabhupada, who sits permanently cross-legged upon his raised *vyasasana* (seat of the spiritual master) at the rear of the temple room, surveying the *kirtana* in the form of his *murti*: the life-size and very life-like statue that is worshipped as a direct embodiment of ISKCON’s beloved Founder-*Acarya*. Prabhupada sits in this same position in every ISKCON temple, watching over the devotees’ worship and permanently facing forward to where Radha and Krishna are embodied as the deities (Radha-Gopinatha in Sydney) housed at the front of the temple room. Each day, devotees bath, dress, and worship Srila Prabhupada in the form of his

*murti*.<sup>2</sup> Each time a devotee enters the temple room and prostrates before Prabhupada, he or she quickly and quietly recites the *Srila Prabhupada Pranama*:

*nama om visnu-padaya*  
*krsna-presthaya bhu-tale*  
*srimate bhaktivedanta-*  
*svamin iti namine*

*namas te sarasvate deve*  
*gaura-vani-pracarine*  
*nirvisesa-sunyavadi-*  
*pascatya-desatarine*

(I offer my respectful obeisances unto His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who is very dear to Lord Krsna, having taken shelter at His lotus feet.

Our respectful obeisances are unto you, O spiritual master, servant of Sarasvati Gosvami. You are kindly preaching the message of Lord Caitanyadeva and delivering the Western countries, which are filled with impersonalism and voidism.)

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<sup>2</sup> This practice is called *guru-puja*. *Guru-puja* is also performed, though less often and less publicly, by disciples for their own individual living spiritual masters. Of the resolutions presented at the Annual Meeting of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC) in Mayapur, March 1999, one was passed which stressed that *guru-puja* for living gurus should only take place in private. The resolution was in large part a response to a succession of abuses of guru power (see Goswami, T.K. (1998a) for an insider's account of some of the guru problems in ISKCON arising since the death of Srila Prabhupada). The resolution reinforced an institutional project to rectify these past abuses by 'Putting Prabhupada Back in the Centre' of ISKCON worship and practice. *Guru-puja* of Prabhupada's *murti* is one important medium for the expression of Prabhupada's sustained presence and authority in ISKCON.





**Picture 1 *Murti* of Srila Prabhupada**

Inside the temple room, a few older Indian women sit beneath brightly painted depictions of Radha-Krishna and Lord Caitanya enjoying their respective *lila*, or ‘transcendental pastimes’. The women chant upon *japa* beads or along with the *kirtana*. The rest of the congregation stand and clap or sing along with the devotees, who energetically swing each other around in circles or jump up and down to the rising tempo. The *kirtana* will go through several rises and falls of tempo, building to a crescendo before returning to a slower and quieter call-and-response chant, with the devotees then slowing to a more gentle, swaying step (‘The Swami Step’, after Srila Prabhupada Swami). The male devotees are typically more energetic than the females during the high points of *kirtana*, although the *matajis* (female devotees), who as a rule occupy the back half of the temple floor, can be just as enthusiastic.<sup>3</sup> The congregation in general is more subdued than the devotees, and when the devotees perform some of their more flamboyant movements people often need to stand aside. Lack of space, however, can restrict these devotional exuberances. Lack of ventilation, body heat, and a small crowded room can also leave the

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this spatial gendering along with other gender issues in the next chapter.

devotees sweating profusely (especially in summer), and the rest of the room in a comparable state of humidity.

During the *kirtana*, the curtains to the shrine at the front of the temple room remain drawn until the *pujari* (altar priest) emerges with the conch shell. At the sounding of the horn the *kirtana* stops, and everyone prostrates themselves as the curtains are drawn back to reveal Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha – freshly adorned in exquisite robes and jewellery – and their accompanying deities on the shrine.<sup>4</sup> Finding room to kneel sometimes requires a bit of shuffling, but everyone seems to manage. Coming to their feet again, members of the congregation press their palms together in the respectful Hindu gesture of *namaskara*,<sup>5</sup> while the devotees throw their hands into the air in surrender to the deities, then restart the rhythmic cycles of the *kirtana*, facing the deities for *darsana* (‘sight’ of the deities) while progressively moving their bodies towards and then away from the deities in collective waves of devotion. As the *kirtana* proceeds, the *pujari* performs the intricate *pancaratrika* ceremony for the deities, with offerings of burning ghee lamps, water, incense, flowers and *mantra*.<sup>6</sup> After being offered and seen by the deities, a ghee lamp is then conveyed

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<sup>4</sup> In ISKCON the worshipping image or form (*arca-vigraha*) is called a ‘deity’, and the ‘deity’ is ‘non-different’ from the Deity or God. The other ‘deities’ on the shrine are other incarnations of Krishna and His companions: Gaura-Nitai (Lord Caitanya and Nityananda), Lord Jagannatha with Baladeva and Subhadra, Lord Nrsimhadeva. The shrine also houses images of the Panca-tattva (Caitanya with His ‘plenary expansions’: Nityananda Prabhu, Sri Advaita, Gadadhara, Srivatsa), the Six Goswamis of Vrindavana, and the *parampara*, or disciplic succession (beginning with the *pujari*’s own spiritual master, then Srila Prabhupada (future generations of *pujaris* will include grand-disciples of Prabhupada in the *parampara*), Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur, Gaurakisora dasa Babaji, Bhaktivinode Thakur).

<sup>5</sup> Fuller (1992:3-4) provides a clear account of the religio-cultural significance of the Hindu *namaskara* gesture.

<sup>6</sup> Nye (2001) records that the *arati* ritual in ISKCON follows ‘the principles set down in the sixteenth century by Sanatan Goswami (a follower of Caitanya) in the work called *Hari Bhakti-Vilas*, which was itself based on the classical scripture called *Narada Pancaratra*’ (13). The *arati*, or *puja*, follows a structural format compatible with Fuller’s (op.cit.) composite account of formal Hindu *puja* (57-69), though with some important points of difference. Perhaps the most important of these is that Krishna is not ‘invoked (or invited to enter the image)’ (67) with each new *puja* (as is the case in Fuller’s more Saivite-oriented account), but is rather ‘awoken’ from sleep, or aroused from rest: Radha and Krishna are still present in their deity-forms in between each *puja*. This latter point is consistent with Fuller’s note that Vaisnavites often differ from Saivites in their ‘tendency to play down the distinction between container and contained, so as to equate an image with the deity [god] of which it is a form... the image is fully a form of the deity’ (70). As a strictly Vaisnavite

throughout the *kirtana* and congregation, with participants waving the flame towards their eyes as it passes by.<sup>7</sup> The water offerings are also sprinkled over the overheated crowd as *prasadam*, Krishna's divine 'mercy' or grace.

Besides the *arati* offerings, the *kirtana* itself also constitutes a devotional offering to Krishna. *Kirtana* is a *yajna*, or sacrifice, which Krishna receives through the eyes and ears of His deity-form. *Darsana* in the temple is one way in which Krishna reciprocates this offering.



**Picture 2 Pujari performing arati**

*Darsana* is a process which not only allows the devotee 'to see' Krishna in the form of His deity, but also 'to be seen' by Krishna in this form.<sup>8</sup> Krishna bestows His mercy upon the

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ritual, this *puja* also lacks the typically Saivite offering of ash described in Fuller's *puja*, and all the mantras are strictly *pancaratric* (see Gupta 1989).

<sup>7</sup> 'By this means', as Fuller (op.cit.) writes of the Hindu *arati*, 'the deity's power and benevolent, protective grace, now in the flame, are transmitted to the worshiper and absorbed through the eyes' (ibid.:73). The flame is a devotional offering in the ISKCON Vaisnavite ritual – there is strictly no 'merging' of deity and devotee symbolised by the intangibility of the flame, as there is in Fuller's account of a Saivite *arati* (ibid.). The deity's power is present in the flame in the same way as it is present in all the other offerings: by being received by Krishna and then shared by him as *prasadam* – Krishna's grace (I explore this concept in relation to sanctified food offerings shortly).

<sup>8</sup> Accessible accounts of Hindu *darsana* are available in Fuller (op.cit.:59-60), Eck (1981); and Babb (1986:75). Babb refers to *darsana* as the 'most intimate kind of communion with the Supreme Being' (ibid.:79), and aptly conveys the sense of substantial force attributed to the gaze of the deity by referring to it as 'an eyeborne extrusion of benevolent power' (ibid.)

devotee through His reciprocated gaze. As Krishna receives His devotional offering through the eyes of His deity, so the devotee receives Krishna's mercy by establishing eye contact with the deity. Maintaining this visual contact from within the crowd can require some effort on the part of the devotee. Jumping up and raising one's hands into the air are standard moves in the *kirtana* 'dance', but they are also means of both seeing and being seen by the deities. As I have indicated above, Indian congregational participants tend not to participate in these more exuberant movements, being content to catch the available glimpses of the deities.

The *kirtana* continues until the evening lecture on *Srimad Bhagavatam* (*Bhagavata Purana*) is due to begin. If a visiting *maharaja* (guru, or spiritual master) is present, the Temple President will usually invite him to give the lecture. A *maharaja* who is associated with a certain pre-eminence or respectability within the movement can potentially draw a larger than normal crowd to the Sunday Feast. Some devotees, who live outside of the Sydney centre either independently (as *grhasthas* – married householders – or as single independent devotees) or in another centre like Newcastle or Cessnock, may be more inclined to travel to Sydney if a *maharaja* is present. Many congregational members are also aware of the special import of a visiting *maharaja*, and might also be inclined to invite more friends or family. Amongst the crowd of devotees and congregational members, the presence of a *maharaja* is unmistakable. Even when devotees are not prostrating themselves before or beside the spiritual master whenever he passes them by, his entourage of devotees requesting an audience or spiritual guidance, and his ever-present disciple/assistant taking his requests, mark him as a devotee of distinction. As a *sannyasi* – a renunciate dedicated to a life of preaching, travelling, and initiating new disciples – the spiritual master dresses in saffron, though his dress is distinguishable from that of a

*brahmacari* (celibate male student) because he also carries a *danda* (a tall staff wrapped in saffron cloth, sometimes carried by his assistant).

At the end of the *Bhagavatam* lecture,<sup>9</sup> everyone seated in the temple room shuffles around to form rows for the serving of the *prasadam* Feast – Krishna’s ‘mercy’ in the form of His consecrated food offerings. Devotees move expeditiously up and down the aisles of people placing paper plates and plastic cups on the floor in front of everybody present. Given the limited space in the temple room, the rows of people also extend out into the foyer, into the restaurant, sometimes even into the outside front entrance. On bigger occasions, a marquee will be erected in the carpark and the rows will continue out there. Following the cups and plates, devotees with large metal buckets scoop out serves of *lassi* (yoghurt drink), then aromatic rice, *sabji* (vegetable curry), *dhal* (lentil curry), *pakor*as (vegetable fritters), chutney, *pappadums* or *puris*, or any of the many other possible variations of Hare Krishna cuisine that may have inspired the Feast cook that afternoon. Often before everyone has finished, the devotees then come around with *khir* (sweet rice) and *halava* (semolina pudding), and possibly another sweet to complete the meal.

Each of the dishes makes several trips up and down the aisles, so there is little chance of anyone present remaining hungry. Some members of the congregation also bring along plastic containers, so that a portion of the transcendental Feast may be taken home to friends or family members unable to attend. After eating, people dispose of their plates in the bins outside, wash their hands, and start making their way home. As the congregation disperses, a few devotees quickly mop the temple floor in time for the seven o’clock evening *arati* (*sandhya-arati*). By this time, the temple room has generally been cleared of

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<sup>9</sup> I postpone describing the *Bhagavatam* class format until Chapter Six, where I can give it due analytic treatment.

its weekly visitors, and reclaimed by the devotees – or at least by those few who are not too busy cleaning up in the kitchen, or too exhausted to participate.



**Picture 3 The Sunday Feast**

### **Krishna's grace: same plate, different tastes**

The Sunday Feast has been a tradition in ISKCON ever since Srila Prabhupada opened ISKCON's first temple in a little store front on New York's Lower East Side. In 1966, one year after he first arrived in America to spread the teachings of Krishna Consciousness to the English-speaking world, Prabhupada established the Sunday Feast program as way of attracting newcomers to his newly founded Society. Proselytism was always, plainly, the purpose of the Sunday Feast. Today, in Sydney, invitations to the free Feast, often in the form of flyers handed out during *sankirtana* – the public chanting of the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* – are still extended to anyone who stops to talk to devotees in the street, or who simply accepts one of their flyers. On the several occasions that I participated in *sankirtana* parties through the streets of Sydney, it was my designated task to distribute the flyers and invitations to the Feast.

Devotees have often suggested to me that converts to ISKCON commonly received their first ‘taste’ for Krishna in the form of *prasadam*. In an American study, Singer (1984) also records that ‘[w]hen asked what attracted them to ISKCON, many devotees will reply, “the food.”’ (211).<sup>10</sup> Singer also notes that the ‘distribution of *prasadam* to the public is one of the major means of proselytizing. It is believed that any contact with *prasadam* will create a magnetic attraction to Krishna which will lead, in this lifetime or another, to salvation’ (211-212).

As I have indicated above, the vast majority of people who are in fact ‘attracted’ to the Sunday Feast program at Sydney are Hindu congregational members. This kind of lay involvement has been a growing trend in ISKCON temples worldwide, at least in urban centres catering for diasporic Indian Hindu populations (Carey 1983,1987; Nye 1996,2001; Zaidman 2000). Nye (2001) has recently observed that ‘the perceived high standards of service by devotees’ to the deities installed at ISKCON’s Bhaktivedanta Manor in Hertfordshire, near London, ‘has made the temple a very significant place for many Hindus’ (13). This same observation may be applied to the worship of Radha-Gopinatha at the ISKCON Sydney temple too, although the comparison raises an obvious difference between the comparative sizes of Hindu populations from which British and Australian congregations are drawn: where ISKCON Sydney attracts local Hindus in their hundreds to its festivals and Sunday Feasts, literally thousands of British Hindus attend major Vaisnava celebrations at Bhaktivedanta Manor (57).

Nye also points to another of ISKCON’s significant attractions for Hindus. ‘The ethnicity of white western devotees also proved an ironic attraction. The fact that these people had actually taken the trouble to *become* Hindus proved a challenge to the Indian

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<sup>10</sup> In his early study of the movement in America, Judah (1974a:153) records that 30% of devotees gave

visitors' (26-27; original emphasis). This highly suggestive notion that ISKCON's 'attraction' for Indian Hindus derives from 'high standards' of Hindu worship *combined* with the special fact that this worship is being performed by 'ethnically white' (6) devotees is not taken up further by Nye. Instead, Nye argues that the involvement of Hindus in ISKCON means that, for analytic purposes, 'ISKCON steps over [the] divide' which has traditionally separated the sociological study of 'NRMs' – or new religious movements whose memberships are generally assumed to be comprised of 'mainly ethnically white' (ibid.) converts – from the study of 'minority ethnic' religions whose memberships tend to reflect international patterns of migration (ibid.). Given that the involvement of Hindu migrants in ISKCON seems to defy this 'apartheid distinction' (ibid.), Nye argues, ISKCON itself should now be accepted within the conceptual category of 'ethnic religion', and the 'most obvious framework which this could be placed within is that of multiculturalism' (ibid.).

I find Nye's conceptual framework far from obvious, especially as it seems to elide the very real and significant 'differences within' (ibid.) ISKCON which are formed along ethnic lines. The differences between Western convert and migrant congregant participation in ISKCON is visibly marked at the Sunday Feast program at Sydney: by the signs of Hare Krishna otherness which mark the bodies of 'ethnically white' (ibid.) Western devotees, but not Indian congregants; by different roles played in worship (devotees do the *puja*, preaching, and lead the *kirtana*, whereas Indian congregants tend to remain spectators to these events); and by the fact that when the Hindu congregants go home, the devotees stay to clean up, continue worship, and wake again before dawn the next morning for further worship. Rather than being made more 'fluid' (ibid.) by Hindu participation in ISKCON, as

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'*prasadam*' as the reason for their 'attraction' to ISKCON.



Nye tries to argue, the difference between the ‘conversion’ and the ‘migration’ experience of ‘Hinduism’ (ibid.) actually and meaningfully *defines* the uniqueness of ISKCON not only for the Hindu migrant congregant – as suggested by Nye’s point about ISKCON’s ‘ironic attraction’ for Hindus<sup>11</sup> – but also, I argue, for the Western convert to ISKCON. Hindus, it must be pointed out, cannot ‘*become* Hindus’ (27; original emphasis), and it is the possibility and promise of *becoming other* that ultimately compels the spiritual process for Western devotees in ISKCON. The very possibility of *becoming* ‘Hindu’ through a process of ‘conversion’ is something that must ultimately be defined, therefore, not against the ‘majority’ cultural experience of Western non-Hindus (for whom this possibility always, at least philosophically, exists), but against the ‘ethnic minority’ (ibid.) experience of those who are *already* Hindu and who are, for this simple reason, effectively *unconvertible*.

‘Participation in *puja* plainly expresses and constructs relationships between powerful deities and their worshipers, and also among worshipers themselves’, observes Fuller (op.cit.:81) of Hindu temple worship in India. Nye (op.cit.), Carey (op.cit.), and Zaidman (op.cit.) all share an interest in the way that, for diasporic Indian congregants, ‘the constitution of social groups as communities with shared qualities and interests is itself significantly shaped by their common participation in worship’ (ibid.) in ISKCON temples. Fuller’s observation about temple communities within India is appropriately applied to the constitution of diasporic Indian Hindu identity through community temple worship outside of India as well. But then so too is Fuller’s point that ‘different sets of social relationships

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<sup>11</sup> I would further argue that this ‘ironic attraction’ has also been an instrumental factor in ISKCON’s success in India itself, but as this is an entirely different cultural context, this argument would need to be grounded in another ethnographic study. Brooks (1989, 1990) examines some of the ‘symbolic interactions’ between Western ISKCON devotees and local Vaisnavas in Vrindavana, a central Krishna pilgrimage site in north India (a site at which I spent I mere two weeks ‘on pilgrimage’ with ISKCON devotees from Sydney). I take issue with some of Brooks’ conclusions in Chapter Four.

among priests, lay worshipers, and devotees are reflected, expressed, and constructed through worship' (75). This latter point has a particular significance when applied to the relationships between devotees and congregants in ISKCON. The fact that *ethnicity* so obviously distinguishes ISKCON's laity from its 'priests' and devotees is not only of crucial relevance to the study of ISKCON's Hindu community congregations, but also to the study of ISKCON's 'ethnically white' (Nye op.cit.) Western devotees. That my interest in the latter led to fieldwork experiences involving remarkably little personal interaction with ISKCON Sydney's Hindu congregants only reinforces this crucial difference.

My interest in devotee-congregation relations differs from previous studies in which the 'integration' of Indians into ISKCON has been addressed primarily in relation to Indian perspectives. Carey (1987), for example, refers to the 'Indianization' of ISKCON in Britain with the increasing involvement of Hindu immigrants from East Africa. His study is noteworthy because it looks not only to Hindu migrants who have become congregational participants in ISKCON temples, but also to their children. This second generation appear to be much more likely than their parents to move from the congregation into full-time devotional life in ISKCON, although such occurrences are hardly common. Whether this process should be conceptualised as 'Indianization' is, I think, a debatable point, but I cannot debate this issue here. I will suggest, though, that successful proselytisation to the children of Hindu migrants is unlikely to be considered 'Indianization' by ISKCON proselytes themselves – no more so than the successful preaching efforts of ISKCON gurus in India itself.

Zaidman's (2000) more recent study of ISKCON Philadelphia's Indian congregation is offered as a case study of Indian immigrant 'integration' in the American diaspora. Zaidman summarises her findings by positing that 'ISKCON temples were co-

opted to become agents in the formation of Indian ethnic identities’ (217). She observes that the ISKCON temple ‘is perceived by the immigrants as the place of the community’ (210), and ‘as an arena in which cultural activity for the purpose of strengthening the Hindu tradition should take place’ (211). Zaidman also points out, however, that this is *not* the view of temple residents, for whom the ‘main objective of the ISKCON temple is to serve God, not to be a center for any community’ (212).

Zaidman’s study clearly indicates the ways in which this difference ‘between ethnic Hinduism (in which the community of worshippers is at the center) and the form of Hinduism which is practiced in ISKCON (in which a monastic order completely dedicated to God is at its center)’ (212) informs structural divisions of participation both in and outside of the temple. Like Carey (1983,1987), Zaidman notes that the majority of the Indian congregants she surveyed accepted the religious validity of other forms of Hindu worship – that is, forms of worship other than the Krishna-*bhakti* practiced in ISKCON (op.cit.:212). The kind of ‘all-India’ Hindu ecumenicism in which Saivite *bhakti*, Vaisnavite *bhakti*, and Advaita Vedanta are all accepted as equally elevated traditions is characteristic of the religious expressions of diasporic Hindu communities (ibid.; Burghart 1987; Carey 1983,1987). Most members of ISKCON’s Indian congregations observe other Hindu practices and celebrations within the home or in other Hindu temples. But forms of Hinduism other than the strict Gaudiya-Vaisnavism practiced in ISKCON are not permitted within the context of ISKCON temples.

Importantly, Zaidman found that her Indian informants consulted non-ISKCON ‘brahmin priests’ for the performance of life-cycle rituals like marriage, because ‘the majority of the immigrants do not accept converts as priests’ (op.cit.:215). ‘They do not accept ISKCON residents as monks, and they do not see themselves as responsible for the

residents' support. Indian followers do not accept the religious authority of the temple priests unless they were born into an Indian family' (216). 'In other words, temple residents, in spite of their conversion to the belief and practices of a Hindu sect, and in spite of their rigid *saddhana*... are perceived as westerners' (215).

Zaidman's study is useful in presenting both the perspectives of Indian congregants and those of temple residents (devotees). Zaidman points out how religious differences and the lack of religious authority granted to devotees by Indians affect interactions between the distinct groups, and also how these interactions affect the attitudes of devotees themselves:

Some 40 percent of temple residents with whom I talked said that they had no relationship with Indian visitors except saying "Hare Krishna" on Sundays. The other 60 percent, including devotees in high positions in the temple, were very bitter and highly critical of the immigrants. They argued that the immigrants do not accept them as devotees; that is, as people who make efforts to advance spiritually. (215)

These attitudes are consistent with those I encountered amongst devotees at ISKCON Sydney, and it is these attitudes which I examine in the next chapter. There, as here, my concern is less with questions of diasporic Indian community 'integration' into ISKCON (cf. Zaidman op.cit.) – or into wider 'multicultural' Western societies through the religious medium of ISKCON – than with the meanings that ethnic 'differences within' (Nye op.cit.:6) ISKCON hold for my 'mainly ethnically white' (ibid.) Western devotee informants. The distinction between convert and congregant experiences of Hare Krishna spirituality is one that my 'ethnically white' Western devotee informants frequently enforced – usually by invoking Srila Prabhupada's sustained critique of 'Hinduism' as an ethnic, cultural, or religious category of identity. I give specific examples of this critique

and its contexts of articulation in the next chapter. I show that while ISKCON devotees at Sydney recognise and ultimately accept that their temple is being used by ‘the Hindu community’ for ‘Hindu’ religious purposes each week, the devotees’ own purposes are seen as wholly ‘transcendental’ to the ‘materialistic’ identity claims of this ethnic religious minority.

For devotees, the problem with Hindu congregants seeing the temple as a place of Hindu community worship – as they indeed seem to want to do – is that there is no incentive for these congregants to become ISKCON devotees themselves. This is why the Temple President of ISKCON Sydney informed me that Hindu congregations in ISKCON were, he believed, a sign of the movement’s *failure* in pursuing its proselytising mission. The suggestion is that there must be some enthusiastic *sense of difference* between *inherited* and *acquired* cultural and spiritual ‘tastes’ before someone will personally take up ‘the spiritual life’ in ISKCON. Nye, Carey, and Zaidman can all confirm that Hindu congregants participate in ISKCON as part of a broader project of ‘strengthening the Hindu tradition’ (Zaidman op.cit.:211) for diasporic Indian communities. But this is a project engaging a communal sense of inherited identity, whereas the devotees are engaged in a project of consciously acquired otherness.

Significantly, then, ISKCON devotees at Sydney typically do *not* regard their Hindu congregants as ‘potential converts’ in the way that a non-Indian visitor – like myself for instance – may be regarded (that is, in a way comparable to my own experience as a perceived ‘potential convert’, as I explored this experience in the previous chapter). This attitude seems justified, I would grant, given that none of ISKCON Sydney’s Hindu congregational members have yet taken to full-time spiritual life in the temple ashrams. Even if it is only occasionally that an ‘ethnically white’ Australian visitor to the temple

actually takes up the spiritual life in ISKCON, the *possibility* is seen to exist and hopes are therefore greater for such a visitor than for one of Indian descent. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the interesting situation that arises from the seeming impossibility of making Hindu migrants ‘convert’ is that it also provides the opportunity to further define, reify, and continually reiterate the Western convert’s religious virtuosity.

I raise these matters here partly as prelude to the topic of ISKCON’s discursive critique of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘caste brahminism’ which I address later in the next chapter. But it was also imperative to acknowledge the matter of ethnic difference at ISKCON Sydney before introducing, in the remainder of the present chapter, what I refer to as ISKCON’s *cultural aesthetic of otherworldliness*: an aesthetic that is produced, ‘consumed’, practiced, and promoted by ISKCON devotees as ‘spiritual culture’. It is my observation that the ‘spiritual’ qualifier to this so-named ‘culture’ presupposes a spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity to the cultural *difference* of Hare Krishna practice, and my ‘ethically white’ Western informants frequently *denied* the existence of such a spiritual sensitivity among Indians *already familiar* with the religious practices and cultural aesthetics of Krishna *bhakti*. The spiritual appeal and proselytising effect which devotees attach to ‘spiritual culture’ seems to presume a sense of – or a ‘taste’ for – its cultural otherness. This sense of otherness is figured against a presupposed cultural ground of experience belonging to the non-Indian, Western convert or ‘potential convert’: and this is an *emphatically* different sense to what the Indian Hindu might experience in constituting an ‘ethnic minority’ self-identity in relation to a majority Western multicultural milieu.

*Prasadam* – the sanctified food offerings distributed at the Sunday Feast and consumed daily by devotees as Krishna’s ‘mercy’ – is one fundamental feature of Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ which literally engages the Western convert’s ‘taste’ for

otherness. The fact that Hare Krishna *prasadam* attracts such a significant base of Hindu consumers each week certainly adds another dimension to the play of cultural differences in this context, but my fieldwork experience amongst the Western devotees at ISKCON Sydney suggests that cultural and ethnic differences are accentuated – not made more ‘fluid’ (cf. Nye op.cit.:6) – by Hindu participation at this level. Suffice it to say, in summary, that while ethnic Indians and white Australians at the Sunday Feast all eat from Krishna’s plate, this event nevertheless caters to quite different cultural and spiritual tastes.

**“Kitchen religion”: *prasadam* as spiritual praxis**

Despite cultural demographic changes in its attendance, the proselytising function of the Sunday Feast has been retained since its inception. The Sunday Feast is still intended to encourage newcomers to the temple, where they will hopefully receive a ‘taste’ for Krishna which will eventually develop into a full-time commitment to devotional life. Although it is hardly a common occurrence for visitors to make any such commitment, it is nevertheless to this ultimately salvific end that *prasadam* is distributed by devotees at Sunday Feasts, at public festivals, at Hare Krishna food stalls or restaurants (where it is sold), and at Hare Krishna Food for Life centres (where it is distributed free of charge). Hare Krishna Food for Life is an international program aimed at fulfilling one of Prabhupada’s key missions – that no person should go hungry within a ten-kilometre radius of an ISKCON temple. But the charitable mission behind Food for Life is ultimately secondary to its proselytising mission, for *everyone* can be considered hungry for spiritual nourishment.

ISKCON Sydney operates its Food for Life centre in Newtown, an area of Sydney with a significantly higher population of homeless people, and hungry university students, than North Sydney (the more subdued and wealthy neighbourhood where the temple is situated). At the Newtown centre, around two hundred free meals of *prasadam* are served each day to the homeless and hungry, or to anyone who happens to appreciate the distinctive, vegetarian Hare Krishna fare. One of the new young *bhaktas* (neophyte devotees) with whom I shared a room in the male ashram in North Sydney had been living rough on Newtown's streets, and battling serious drug problems, before receiving charity from the Newtown centre and subsequently taking to (and struggling with) the spiritual life. This is a common enough story in ISKCON, but it is far from generalisable as a biographical profile of the 'potential convert' to ISKCON. As a point in contrast, another new recruit in the ashram came from a stable life in the relatively affluent North Shore neighbourhood surrounding the ISKCON temple, and had begun his spiritual life as a curious visitor to the Sunday Feast.<sup>12</sup>

A significant component of my spiritual training (i.e. fieldwork) in ISKCON involved 'service' in the temple kitchen, where every day Bhakta Anand and I prepared

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<sup>12</sup> I am not attempting to present any demographic account of recruitment to ISKCON in this thesis. Shinn (1987a,1989) provides the best biographical evidence of the real diversity of 'conversion stories' within ISKCON. For a more detailed statistical picture of types of contact between new 'recruits' and ISKCON in its earlier days in America, see Rochford (1982). Rochford highlights the importance of 'movement sympathisers' (404) in attracting new recruits. His analysis presents a move away from the question of 'why' people join NRMs, and from the answers to this question which tend to simplistically identify 'sources of distress' (ibid.) as the cause of conversion, moving instead towards an analysis of ISKCON's 'recruitment strategies' (402). He concludes that 'opportunistic exploitation of local conditions, rather than ideology or structure, has been responsible for the growth of the Hare Krishna movement in the United States' (399). My concern is that neither of these sociological interests – in 'sources of distress' or 'recruitment strategies' – can do justice to the experiential or phenomenological dimensions of the encounter with Hare Krishna otherness. This is why I am privileging a descriptive rather than analytic or statistical mode of presentation in this chapter. And rather than simply provide a descriptive account as simply so much evidence of the existence of 'ideology and structure' (399; cf. Daner 1976:12) in ISKCON, I hope to rescue something of the rich aesthetic experience of Hare Krishna practice from the 'dry' analytic interests of sociologists (cf. Stoller 1989:7). Perhaps the driest of these approaches can be found in the 'religious economy' type analysis of recruitment to NRMs through social networks, as may be found in Stark and Bainbridge (1985).



buckets-full of *prasadam* for the Newtown Food for Life centre. Following the morning program of worship in the temple room, we two headed for the kitchen, while other *brahmacaris* from the ashram went out ‘on the pick’ – soliciting donations for the Food for Life Program from motorists at busy traffic intersections. This latter practice constitutes the primary economic activity and source of income for ISKCON Sydney. The funds raised by this method far outweigh those actually spent on feeding Newtown’s homeless, but they also maintain the North Sydney temple, feed the resident devotees as well as the guests at the Sunday Feast, and finance public festivals and other preaching activities, including a mail-out book distribution program. It is in view of this broader proselytising function that devotees refer to being ‘on the pick’ for Food for Life as *sankirtana* – a term normally reserved for the public chanting of the Holy Name or the public distribution of Prabhupada’s books.<sup>13</sup>

Govinda’s Restaurant and Movie Room is another agent for the distribution of Krishna-*prasadam*. Govinda’s – something of an underground culinary institution in inner-city Sydney – was once attached to an earlier incarnation of the ISKCON Sydney temple, before the temple relocated and Govinda’s was leased to independent operators. This change saw a marked reduction in proselytising activity within the restaurant (the adjoining cinema currently screens mainstream films), but the place itself is still widely recognised as a Hare Krishna venue selling ‘Hare Krishna food’. The current operators are ISKCON sympathisers. A recently printed business card for the restaurant takes up the preaching mission by cleverly advising: ‘For all earthly enquiries phone 9-----; For all Other World

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<sup>13</sup> This practice – and the use of the term ‘sankirtana’ to describe it – is a controversial issue for many devotees, and occasionally for the public (Rochford 1985:171-189). One of the older devotees at the Sydney centre referred to it as a sign of the ‘corporatisation’ of ISKCON, and refused to participate. Interestingly, during the 1980s this same devotee was recognised as one of ISKCON’s greatest book distributors: a practice which in that era brought ISKCON into widespread public disrepute after the use of deceptive selling techniques was exposed. Naresvara dasa, who I introduced in the opening of this chapter, referred to these

enquiries call the Supreme Operator on Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, to lift off to a transcendental eternal world full of bliss, love and infinite knowledge'. The front of the card also advertises an image of Krishna as Govinda the cowherd. Govinda's employs many transitional devotees – those residing outside or in-between ISKCON centres – as cooks, kitchenhands, and waiters, and food preparation still follows the techniques, religious protocols, and culinary style which, as I will detail below, make Hare Krishna *prasadam*.

*Prasadam* can be seen as fundamental to the economic life of the temple and individual devotees, and also to ISKCON's proselytising mission. In terms of devotional life within the ISKCON temple, also, the centrality of *prasadam* is difficult to overstate. Devotees only ever consume food that has been offered first to Krishna: '*prasadam* is the leftovers of God... [Krishna] takes the material substance and sanctifies it. *Prasadam* is spiritual food; to eat it is a holy act' (Singer op.cit.:197). New *bhaktas* (neophyte devotees) are encouraged to feast upon piled-up plates of *prasadam* as a way of removing the accumulated effects of *karma* and of purifying the body for its service to Krishna. *Bhaktas* learn that *prasadam* is 'non-different' to Krishna's 'mercy': it is one of Krishna's own 'internal potencies'.

Neophyte devotees learn about the transcendental qualities of *prasadam* and *prasadam* distribution while also being instructed in the practical skills required for its consumption. Devotees learn to eat *dhal* or *sabji*, for instance, with the bare right hand whilst sitting cross-legged on the floor. They learn to drink '*brahmana* style', with the vessel held away from the lips; to always wash one's hand and mouth after the meal; to lie on one's left side in order to aid digestion of those huge platefuls; to serve *prasadam* to the

other devotees, only before eating or after washing, and without touching their plates with the ladel. To serve Krishna's devotees is pleasing to Krishna, and is itself a highly beneficial spiritual act. Offering *prasadam* to others has the effect of enhancing one's own appreciation of its transcendental qualities. By performing 'devotional service' in ISKCON's kitchens, devotees also learn some of their most important lessons about *prasadam*. Learning how to cook vast quantities of Indian vegetarian food is an important lesson in itself, but it is also in the kitchen that devotees learn not to relish or desire a preparation at any stage before it is offered to Krishna. Sense gratification, the desire to possess or consume for oneself, is the cause of our illusory condition, our false identification with the material body. 'Devotional service' means doing everything for the pleasure of Krishna, the Supreme Enjoyer, and cooking for Krishna is one of the most important of devotional services.

All of the skills required for the production and consumption of *prasadam* are acquired by devotees within a context of explicit spiritual instruction. Devotees learn not only about etiquette, hygiene, and culinary technique, but also about a whole spiritual and cosmological framework in which these lessons acquire a specific and 'practical' significance in spiritual terms. *Muci* – uncleanliness, impurity, as opposed to *suci* (clean, pure) – 'travels like electricity'. Making one's body fit for devotional service to Krishna, and for its continual exposure to the transcendental presence of Krishna in temple life, requires continual attention to the details of devotional life. All of these details are designed to purify the body and mind (or 'subtle body') of the modes of ignorance and passion (*tamo-guna* and *rajo-guna*), and to immerse them in the mode of goodness (*sattva-guna*). These three *gunas*, or modes of material existence, which are Krishna's external or inferior energies (*prakṛti*), are the substance of the illusory or material world and of all its species,

and all three must ultimately be transcended in order to achieve any possible state of liberation from rebirth. Confined by their material condition, however, the devotees can only strive to perform their devotional service in the mode of goodness, the ‘brahminical’ mode which alone facilitates spiritual development. *Pujaris*, the initiated *brahmanas* who directly serve the temple deities, must undergo a strict process of ritual purification before approaching the altar, but all devotees are engaged in a kind of continual, daily-repeated process of purification – a process which is an essential and even defining component of spiritual development itself. Chanting the minimum sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* per day is the most important part of this purification process. Equally fundamental, though, is the observance of the *regulative principles*: no meat, fish, or eggs; no intoxicants (including alcohol, tobacco, caffeine); no illicit sex (that is, sex which is not for the specific purpose of raising Krishna Conscious children); no gambling or frivolous sport. Without the observance of these four regulative principles, the spiritual efficacy of the *mahamantra*, and hence a devotee’s spiritual development, is compromised.

Eating *prasadam* is a transcendental activity. As a spiritual practice in itself its value for the devotees lies more directly in its *karma*-destroying and consciousness-raising potency than in its accordance with the first regulative principle, although the latter is a necessary consequence. Only foods that are in the mode of goodness (*sattya-guna*) may be offered to Krishna. Only these foods will be accepted by Krishna as offerings and thereby converted into *prasadam*. Not only does this exclude meat, fish, or eggs, but also garlic and onions, which are in the mode of passion, and mushrooms, which are in the mode of ignorance.<sup>14</sup> Curd, or *paneer*, is often the most sought after ingredient for the preparer of a

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<sup>14</sup> In the *Bhagavad-gita*, Chapter 17, Texts 7-10, Krishna specifies the types of foodstuffs that He will accept as devotional offering (Prabhupada 1986a:776-77). Barker’s (1987) reflection on fieldwork in new religious movements, entitled ‘Brahmins don’t eat mushrooms’, reveals her embarrassing lesson in Hare Krishna food

*prasadam* dish. This fresh cheese is sourced of course from cows, which are themselves entirely in the mode of goodness and very dear to Krishna the cowherd boy. Devotees often like to explain that they are ‘vegetarian by default’: it is neither out of their own sense of taste nor ethics that they consume vegetarian fare, but out of a desire to please Krishna, who will only accept these types of offerings. Avoiding meat, fish, and eggs, and any foods in the modes of ignorance and passion is certainly a way of avoiding harmful *karmic* reactions from eating. But by offering acceptable, pleasing foods to Krishna, and then consuming Krishna-*prasadam*, devotees can actively negate *karma* previously accumulated in this life or in past lifetimes, and thus hasten the purification and consciousness-raising process. Avoidance of *karma* is also possible by fasting on certain auspicious days on the Vedic calendar. On the eleventh day after the full moon and the eleventh day after the new moon each month, devotees are instructed to observe *Ekadasi* by abstaining from grains and legumes, the usual staple and source of protein in the Hare Krishna diet. In his introduction to *The Hare Krishna Book of Vegetarian Cooking* (1989), Adiraja Dasa espouses the benefit of the *Ekadasi* fast with an English translation from the *Brahma-vaivarta*: ‘One who observes *Ekadasi* is freed from all kinds of reactions to sinful activities, and thereby advances in pious life’ (55).

‘Kitchen religion’ is an expression commonly employed by devotees to convey the centrality of *prasadam* – its preparation, distribution, and consumption – as spiritual practice within the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness. Hare Krishna cookbooks, like the one published by Adiraja dasa (op. cit.), are not only a source for recipes, they also detail the philosophy of Hare Krishna vegetarianism, explain the *Ayur-vedic* principles of healthy eating, and present the reader with the Sanskrit verses to be recited when offering dishes to

Krishna deities at home.<sup>15</sup> Adiraja dasa dedicates his cookbook to his spiritual master, ‘His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who devoted his life to elevating humanity by spreading Vedic culture all over the world’. Kurma dasa, an Australian Prabhupada-disciple who has made a career out of writing popular vegetarian (Hare Krishna) cookbooks, dedicates his second cookbook to Srila Prabhupada, ‘who encouraged me to cook by enjoying my *poories*’ (1998). Above his dedication, a colour photograph shows Srila Prabhupada earnestly slicing tomatoes. Kurma’s dedication may seem less grandiose than the one offered by Adiraja, but it is important to note that the ‘Vedic culture’ celebrated by Adiraja is a concept inclusive of all the myriad details of practice that Prabhupada taught to his disciples as essential ingredients of devotional life, including how to make *poories*. Prabhupada’s mission to the West is conceived not merely as the transmission of a doctrine or philosophy, but of a philosophy practiced through a way of life, the ‘Vedic’ or ‘spiritual culture’ which Prabhupada demonstrated to his disciples through his own example.

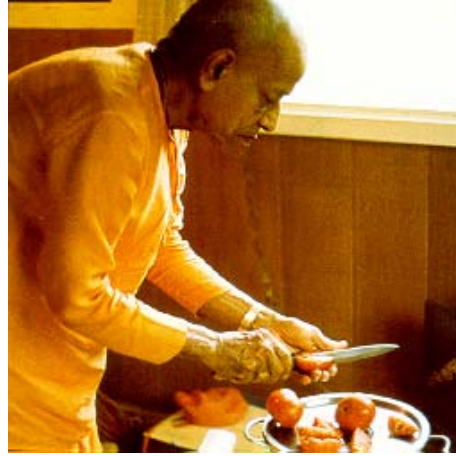
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<sup>15</sup> Beginners are advised simply to chant the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* three times as a way of offering food to Krishna. Initiated ISKCON devotees – whether cooking in the temple kitchen, or at home – chant three times the *Guru Pranama mantra* for their own spiritual master – for Krishna may only be approached via the spiritual master. Uninitiated devotees chant the *Pranama mantra* for Srila Prabhupada (cited earlier in this chapter). After the *Pranamas*, the following prayers are chanted three times each:

*namo maha-vadanyaya  
krsna-prema-pradaya te  
krsnaya krsna-caitanya-  
namne gaura-tvise namah*

*namo brahmanya-devaya  
go-brahmana-hitaya ca  
jaga-hitaya krsnaya  
govindaya namo namah*

(Trans.: O most munificent incarnation! You are Krsna Himself appearing as Sri Krsna Caitanya Mahaprabhu. You have assumed the golden color of Srimati Radharani, and you are widely distributing pure love of Krsna. We offer our respectful obeisances unto You./ Let me offer my respectful obeisances unto Lord Krsna, who is the worshipping Deity for all brahminical men, who is the well-wisher of cows and *brahmanas*, and who is always benefiting the whole world. I offer my repeated obeisances to the Personality of Godhead, known as Krsna and Govinda.) (cited in Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1998:39).



**Picture 4 ‘His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who encouraged me to cook by enjoying my *poories*’ – Kurma Dasa. From The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust Int’l © 1998**

*Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, the official biography of Srila Prabhupada (a text central to my analysis of hagiographic practice in Chapter Five), records a rare encounter between Prabhupada and his Sydney-based followers on May 9 1971, in which Prabhupada demonstrates his exemplary knowledge of ‘kitchen religion’ for the benefit of his untrained disciples:

A devotee brought Prabhupada his lunch, poorly cooked – the *capatis* half burned, half raw, the vegetables wrongly spiced. Prabhupada rebuked the cook, “If you didn’t know how to cook, why didn’t you tell me? I can show you.” And he went into the kitchen. One of the cooks had tried to make *kacauris* and had failed. Although she knew that the dough had to be rolled thin, the filling put in just right, and then the edges folded over precisely, neither she nor any of the other devotees had been able to do it. Prabhupada, using the same dough and filling, demonstrated the art and made perfect *kacauris*.

The devotees explained their difficulty in making *capatis*. There was no flame on their electric stove. The *capatis* always came out dry or raw or burned and never puffed up. The excuse only annoyed Prabhupada, however, who showed exactly how to make *capatis* that puffed up every time – even on an electric burner. Then he taught the cooks a simple

vegetable dish, advising as he cooked. After he left the kitchen, the devotees tried the *capatis* again. They wouldn't puff. It seemed a magical art only Prabhupada knew. (Goswami, S.d. 1993:200[vol.3])

This account paints an unflattering picture of the early Sydney temple, but the devotees were not to blame for their lack of aptitude in devotional service: 'an entire temple of inexperienced devotees had been virtually left on its own' (199). The devotees' prospects were not entirely dim, however. 'Sincerity they had. They only lacked training' (200). Somewhere down the line, Prabhupada's example – undoubtedly conveyed by stories much like this one, told over hot stoves and the aroma of cooking *capatis* – was to be passed on and eventually realised by the devotee-cooks at ISKCON Sydney. Judging by the quality of *prasadam* presented each week at the Sunday Feast today, it is an example well followed.

"Prabhupada taught us everything, he even taught us how to eat and sleep," an influential Scottish Prabhupada-disciple once told me. Prabhupada also taught his disciples how to cook, what and when to cook, how to offer the result to Krishna, and as I have already mentioned, how to serve and the benefits of serving *prasadam* to devotees, as well as how to physically eat and even digest Krishna's offering. The transcendental qualities of *prasadam* make all of these details of devotional cooking and consumption essential ingredients of spiritual practice in ISKCON. And the stories of Prabhupada's *siksa*, or instruction, which accompany each and every one of these details are equally essential to the devotee's spiritual practice.

In the context of temple life, the issue of when to eat, and also of when to sleep, is determined by the daily ritual cycle. The devotees eat only after Radha and Krishna have eaten, and sleep only when the Divine Couple has retired for the night. Devotees must be awake, bathed, and dressed in time for the 4.30 am *mangala-arati*, when the deities



themselves are gently awoken. Breakfast is not offered to the deities until 7.30, with the devotees accepting *prasadam* at 8.30 – that is, unless they manage to stand outside the door to the deities’ kitchen early enough to receive some *mahaprasadam*, or ‘maha’: the most prized form of *prasadam* which has come straight from the deities’ plate (*maha* means ‘great’, as in *mahamantra*, ‘the great *mantra* of deliverance’). In the morning, a small quantity of milk sweets is offered to the deities before breakfast and consumed by a lucky few devotees as ‘maha’.<sup>16</sup>

The deities’ kitchen is directly connected to the shrine room, and is separate from and more restricted than the main kitchen in which *prasadam* is produced in bulk quantities. Only initiated *brahmanas* (a qualification I examine in the next chapter) may enter the deities’ kitchen, and the small dishes which are offered wholly to the temple deities are prepared with the utmost care and attention to ritual purity. When *prasadam* is produced in bulk, only a small sample from each dish is offered to a small set of deities (which are kept in the main kitchen for that purpose), and this sample is then mixed back into the original preparation, converting the *bhoga* (ordinary food) into *prasadam* (Krishna’s mercy).

This process of transubstantiation is then metonymically extended to the devotee, who consumes *prasadam* as a means of gradually transforming ‘material consciousness’ into ‘spiritual consciousness’. As a ritual device for transforming the ‘material’ into the ‘spiritual’, creating and eating *prasadam* stands as a vital metonym for the transformative spiritual process of Krishna Consciousness itself. It is therefore to this process of transformation that I now direct my attention.

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<sup>16</sup> As I indicated in the last chapter, the ritual cycle of temple worship follows the daily cycle of ‘pastimes’

### Higher taste: the cultural aesthetics of otherworldliness

Toomey (1990) provides an account of Vaisnavite food ritual and symbolism in Vraja (the North Indian ‘home’ of Krishna the cowherd and regional centre of Krishna pilgrimage and worship) which can be appropriately applied to the theological principle of transubstantiation underlining Krishna-*prasadam* in ISKCON:

Food offerings are present in nearly all Vaishnavite worshipping, from the intimacy of the household shrine to the more public setting of the temple. The central transformation in food ritual occurs when food, called *bhoga* (literally, pleasure or sensual enjoyment, anything that can be enjoyed by the senses), is set before Krishna’s image and Krishna himself is believed to consume it, usually through the image’s eyes. In this act of consumption *bhoga* is metonymically transformed into more love-laden *prasada* or consecrated food...

...the food-love metonymy substantiates the circular process underlying devotional experience: Krishna, it is believed, creates devotees through his grace, in order that he might reflexively experience through their loving feelings his own blissful and loving nature (*ananda*). (164)

Toomey points to the importance of the act itself, of offering food and receiving *prasadam*, as being constitutive of the significance of *prasadam*: ‘the food offering reconstitutes the central importance of the devotional act itself and the devotees who perform it. Food offerings therefore make substantial the spiritual intentions behind devotional acts; concomitantly, consumption of these offerings is believed to sustain devotees in further acts of community worship’ (171). Hawley stresses that Krishna Himself does not *need* to eat His food offerings, but ‘allows us the game of feeding him for

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eternally played out in the *lila* of Radha and Krishna in the spiritual world.

our benefit; it is symbolic action and would have no value but for the belief, the mood with which it is infused. God dines on our love, not our food’ (cited in Fuller op.cit.:71).

According to Babb (op.cit.), a relationship of ‘hierarchical intimacy’ between the devotee and God is constituted through the practice of ‘ingesting’ God’s ‘leftovers’ or ‘food leavings’. Ingesting *prasadam* is a ‘powerful image’ throughout Hindu religious culture, he writes, and is ‘a nearly invariant feature of Hindu liturgical usage’ (210). But whereas Hawley stresses that ‘symbolic action’, ‘belief’, and ‘mood’ constitute the value of *prasadam*, Babb offers an alternative to such ‘disembodied’ notions by highlighting the ‘transactional-substantialist idiom’ (211) of *prasad*-taking:

Instead of ‘eating delusion’ (as we normally do), devotees change their natures for the better by eating, drinking, and in other ways assimilating this higher nature, imaged as higher awareness (chaitanya), into their own. Here redemptive awareness is not a property of disembodied psyche, but seems to be a quasi-physical current that can be mingled into a devotee’s own inner nature. But there is an apparent reciprocity to this process. Devotees take, but they also give, and in giving they give themselves to the Supreme Being. In so doing, they are ‘purified’ by the Supreme Being, their attachments and karmic residues stripped away by his superior powers of discrimination and transformative alimentation. (ibid.)

The connection Babb highlights between the ‘substantial’ and ‘transformative’ dimensions of *prasadam* is a vital one. In Hawley’s observation that *prasadam* is only constituted in its value by a prior ‘belief’ or ‘mood’, and in Toomey’s suggestion that food offerings externalise or ‘make substantial the spiritual intentions behind’ them, there is no real question of a *subsequent* transformation effected by the ingestion of Krishna-*prasadam*. For Hare Krishna devotees, at least, the very substance of *prasadam* is imbued

with a causal, transformative potential to *instill* – not merely to *express* – the devotional ‘mood’ or ‘love’ of God. To reiterate Singer’s (op.cit.) observation which I cited earlier, ‘any contact with *prasadam*’ – including contact ostensibly lacking in devotional ‘mood’ or salvific intention – is believed to ‘create a magnetic attraction to Krishna which will lead, in this lifetime or another, to salvation’ (211-212). That is, *prasadam* is understood to work its transformative effect even when there is no accompanying, conscious affirmation of ‘belief’ about this effect. Of course, conscious affirmations about the transformative effects of *prasadam* certainly occur. Lectures preceding Sunday Feasts, for example, often contain some mention of the Feast’s transcendental power. Also, for food to be transformed into *prasadam* as such, it must be consciously, ritually, and lovingly offered to Krishna. But Hawley’s suggestion that ‘God dines on our love, not our food’ potentially denies any value to the substantial, and also to the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of actual food offerings and *prasadam* consumption. These elements must ultimately precede ‘belief’ if we are to accept the testimony of ISKCON devotees that ‘the food’ in itself may be an initial source of ‘attraction’ to the movement.

Beyond the generic ‘substantialist idiom’ (cf. Babb op.cit.:211) surrounding *prasadam* as spiritual substance, there are also sensory and aesthetic elements to *prasadam* production and consumption in ISKCON that must be contextualised both within the specific theological framework of Gaudiya-Vaisnava *bhakti*, and also within the non-Hindu cultural milieu in which *prasadam* is produced, consumed, and distributed by Western Hare Krishna Vaisnavas. The first theological point to emphasise is that *bhakti* – ‘love of God’ – is an ideal religious state which is described and evoked by Gaudiya-Vaisnavas through the intricate use of images and aesthetic metaphors of sensual beauty. The sense of *taste*, in both its physiological and aesthetic senses, has a special place in both the

symbolism and spiritual techniques of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. *Rasa* – as the highest state of Krishna *bhakti*, in which the spirit-soul has regained its lost memory of an original, emotive intimacy with the Godhead – is a term which evokes both of these senses of taste:

[T]he term *rasa* itself means juice, sap, or liquid. In the broad semantic sense, *rasa* refers to the flavour, taste, or essence of something that can be extracted and experienced in various ways. Devotees consistently make statements of the sort, “I hunger after the sweet nectar of devotion.” Here a simile likens devotional experience to a fruit filled with nectar (*rasa*) that is drunk by those connoisseurs (*rasika*) who have acquired a taste for the beautiful (*bhavuka*). (Toomey op.cit.:162)

Toomey notes some other important Vaisnava food metaphors for devotion:

...in Krishna myths and legends the spontaneous outpouring of love between Krishna and his devotees is frequently symbolized by milk, a signifier of *rasa*... Another more common metaphor likens the devotional path to a churning process, wherein the devotee’s constant faith is transformed into *sattva* (defined as essential spiritual purity), in much the same way that butter and curds are churned from milk. (ibid.:163)

It is important that we do not interpret these food metaphors as purely symbolic, conceptually ‘disembodied’ (cf. Babb op.cit.:211) representations of the devotional ‘mood’. Food, as *prasadam*, is obviously also vital to the devotee’s embodied spiritual practice. *Prasadam* does not merely symbolise but literally sustains the spiritual life. Significantly, the metaphors which Toomey highlights do not so much stand for realised states of spiritual awareness as they do for processes of spiritual transformation – *acquiring* ‘taste’, *transforming* ‘faith’. In practice, these processes literally engage a devotee’s senses – not

least the literal and aesthetic senses of taste – in the development of the devotional mood towards Krishna.

In ISKCON, the transformation of *bhoga* into *prasadam* is often cited as an example of the way in which a ‘material’ substance can be transformed into ‘spiritual’ energy through contact with Krishna. In this case, contact is established through the eyes of the deity: Krishna ‘tastes’ by seeing the offering placed before Him. When a devotee literally consumes *prasadam* – which is of course another form of sensory contact and a ‘most intimate form of communion with the Supreme Being (cf. Babb op.cit.:79) – a transformation of the same kind, albeit of a different degree, is also understood to take place: ‘material consciousness’ is gradually purified and transformed into ‘spiritual consciousness’. ‘Thus, as the devotees eat food transformed into *prasadam*’, observes Singer (op.cit.), ‘they are themselves transformed into devotees’ (212). But the act of eating *prasadam* is not in itself a symbol for a transformation already effected, or a ‘conversion’ already completed at the level of a devotee’s consciousness. Devotees eat *prasadam* every day as a continual and repeated process of purification and transformation. Devotees often say that Krishna gives one a transcendental ‘taste’ of what the spiritual life can be like when first encountering ISKCON. But once acquired, this taste must still be developed, continually re-awakened or ‘remembered’ through repeated spiritual practice.

The spiritual process is developmental, and Gaudiya-Vaisnavism presents a highly elaborate aesthetic language for describing the incremental stages through which the taste for Krishna ascends to the ‘higher taste’ of Krishna-*rasa*. This language has been made most cogently available to ISKCON devotees in text of Srila Prabhupada’s *The Nectar of Devotion* (1982 [1970]); an English language ‘Summary Study’ of the sixteenth century *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* by Rupa Goswami). This language itself is not removed from

actual aesthetic experience: even the words of Prabhupada's Sanskrit-English translations are phonetic 'nectar' to be savoured again and again on the tongue of the reader and in the ears of the listener (I explore some of the phenomenological dimensions of textual practice in ISKCON in Chapters Five and Six). Devotees also engage their senses in the sensuous beauty and transcendental presence of Krishna in the forms of His image (deity), sound (Name and instruction), and taste (*prasadam*, including offerings other than food, like incense and fire, which appeal to the senses of smell and sight). Krishna Himself, through different aspects of His substantive divine energy, is understood to be manifest in these various forms. By exposing the senses to Krishna's transcendental presence in this way, consciousness becomes gradually spiritualised, making it possible for the devotee to gradually 'remember' (*smarana*) Krishna and his or her own original identity as spirit-soul. Far from serving a merely symbolic function, then, the aesthetic elements of spiritual practice actually manifest Krishna's transcendental presence for the devotee. It is in this 'substantialist' capacity that the aesthetics of Hare Krishna practice also serve as mnemonic tools for the recovery of one's lost spiritual consciousness.

Krishna should occupy all of a devotee's senses as much as possible. When he counts his beads while reciting the *mahamantra*, he is remembering Krishna through his sense of touch. When he listens to the reading of Krishna's pastimes, the taped lectures of Swami Bhaktivedanta, the chanting of other devotees, or an explanation of the philosophy regarding Krishna, he becomes aware of Krishna through the sense of hearing. Eating *prasadam*, he remembers Krishna through his sight [and taste, of course]. Finally, when he smells the incense burning in the temple, he remembers him through the sense of smell. (Judah 1974a:90-91)

In Chapter Four I explore in more detail the relationship between *rasa* theology and *rasa* aesthetics, with a particular focus on the underlying principle of spiritual transformation (as ‘remembrance’, or *smarana*) which informs aesthetic practices in ISKCON. In that chapter I develop a comparative perspective on the spiritual process in ISKCON, by highlighting the significant differences between this process and the various spiritual techniques employed by contemporary practitioners of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism in India. For now it is enough simply to indicate the theological significance of aesthetic and sensory experience to practitioners in ISKCON – although one fundamental point of difference between the aesthetic experiences of Western practitioners of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism and those of their Indian counterparts can be elaborated at this point.

The very ‘Indian-ness’ of Hare Krishna aesthetic practices means that Krishna’s transcendental presence – His sights, sounds, and tastes – is not only imbued with a sense of *otherworldliness*, but also with a sense of cultural *otherness* that must logically be absent from the aesthetic experience of Indian practitioners.

[L]ike devotional costume, setting, and accent, *prasadam* is borrowed from India. This is not to suggest that ISKCON can be explained as an aberration of Indian culture, but the adoption of Indian customs does remain one of its significant cultural attributes. It provides a sense of legitimacy and tradition to what would otherwise be a displaced phenomenon. More importantly, since Krishna is identified with India and its lifestyle, an Indian way of life juxtaposed to American surroundings helps to assert the distinct identity of the Krishna devotees and their unity with Krishna. For ethnic and regional groups, identity formation is an end in itself; for ISKCON, identity formation is a means towards a cultural end – that of achieving Krishna Consciousness – and the uniqueness of the cuisine is a way of inducing the devotees to think of Krishna. This is why it is crucial that all food products be those traditional to India and not merely vegetarian. For this reason the



Indian nature of the food is accentuated; the hot foods are very hot, the sweet foods very sweet, and the rare specialities necessary for authentic Indian cooking – e.g. tamarind, *urad dhal*, *poppers* – always purchased regardless of expense. (Singer op.cit.:209)

Singer's observations are not entirely accurate. The 'sense of legitimacy and tradition' (my emphasis) attached to the 'cultural attributes' of Hare Krishna practice is certainly one of their significant *aesthetic effects*. But, as I have already suggested and will further reveal in the next chapter, 'legitimacy and tradition' are defined not only against the devotees' Western cultural 'surroundings' (which is as far as analysis has proceeded in the sociological literature on ISKCON), but also against 'Indian culture' – conceived by devotees as an 'aberration' of the eternal 'spiritual culture' (*varnasrama-dharma*) idealised and advocated by Srila Prabhupada. The cultural aesthetics which become manifest in the particular sights, sounds, and tastes of Hare Krishna spiritual practice do, certainly, evoke a certain generic sense of 'Indian-ness' (generic enough even to satisfy the tastes of diasporic Indian Hindu congregants once a week). But we cannot simply accept 'Indian-ness' to be one of ISKCON's 'cultural attributes' without also understanding how an aesthetic sense of the 'cultural' is uniquely figured in the theological discourse and practice of Hare Krishna spirituality.

Singer points us to the theological significance of the 'cultural' for Hare Krishna devotees by referring to 'Krishna Consciousness' – being the ultimate state of spiritual realisation itself – as a 'cultural end' (ibid.). He also recognises that as a means of 'inducing the devotees to think of Krishna' (ibid.), a unique taste for 'Indian' otherness is intrinsic to the spiritual pursuit of this ultimate end. From these two points, I would think it crucial to ask: how does 'culture' figure simultaneously as the *means* and *end* of spiritual practice in

ISKCON? Singer obscures this *theological* question by introducing an ostensibly anthropological terminology for interpreting *prasadam* as the ‘primary symbolic vehicle’ (206) for the ISKCON devotee’s ‘re-enculturation’ (196) – a term Singer employs to interpret conversion to ISKCON as a process of *culture conversion*. Confusion arises in Singer’s use of the term ‘re-enculturation’, for while on the one hand it appears as a synonym for the conversion process, on the other it appears to be an equivalent to *salvation*: ‘enculturation into ISKCON in the fullest sense is isomorphic to becoming Krishna conscious’ (205). In other words, ISKCON devotees only succeed in becoming fully ‘re-enculturated’ once they have achieved salvation, or Krishna Consciousness proper. But neither ‘conversion’ nor ‘enculturation’, I suggest, make very useful interpretive paradigms once they both become ‘isomorphic’ with a realised, otherworldly state of salvation. Conflating these two ambiguous concepts also denies a crucial point of distinction: where ‘conversion’ signifies at least some minimal notion of a conscious engagement with the new and different, ‘enculturation’ must surely imply more unconscious processes, operating more at the level of embodied habit than of deliberate religious technique.

The unique aesthetic flavours of Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ may satisfy newly acquired tastes for the foreign and spiritual, but they do not constitute a ‘culture’ to which a devotee may ‘convert’, in the process abandoning some prior, culturally constituted identity. As the practical means of ‘inducing the devotees to think of Krishna’ (209), ‘spiritual culture’ is self-consciously engaged by devotees in spiritual practice, but it is never *inhabited* by practitioners as an habitual domain of cultural practice (or *habitus*). Singer rightly observes that ‘no matter how hard [devotees] attempt to focus their senses on Krishna by filling their world with Krishna imagery – the paintings on the wall, the sounds

of singing and chanting, the smell of incense, the taste of *prasadam* – myriad sensory desires and attachments remain’ (ibid.). These ‘myriad sensory desires and attachments’ are those of the already enculturated body. To transcend these is to achieve transcendence proper, and no devotee in ISKCON claims to have achieved this ultimate state.

So what then is the theological relationship between ‘spiritual culture’ as a religious *means* of engaging Krishna’s transcendental presence, and the ‘cultural end’ of Krishna Consciousness hinted at by Singer? This relationship is fundamental to ISKCON’s theology of ‘spiritual culture’. For Hare Krishna devotees, ‘spiritual culture’ originates in ‘the spiritual world’ itself, the original home and ultimate destination of the spirit-soul. Performing devotional service to Krishna through the medium of ‘spiritual culture’ is a transcendental activity: *it is ultimately the same activity performed by fully realised souls in the spiritual world*. Physically engaging in and developing an aesthetic ‘taste’ for ‘spiritual culture’ is thus a practical, embodied technique of ‘remembering’ Krishna and one’s own original and eternal role as a servant of the Lord in the spiritual world. The aesthetics of Hare Krishna ‘lifestyle’ are therefore intimately related to its soteriology and cosmology: they are the colour, pattern, sounds and transcendental tastes of the spiritual world itself. This is how ‘achieving Krishna Consciousness’ can be thought to constitute the ‘cultural end’ of spiritual practice in ISKCON – but again, this is a soteriological ideal, not a ‘culture’ in any mundane anthropological sense of the term.

It is important to remember in this respect that the spiritual aesthetics of *rasa* theology are intended to evoke ‘the *essence* of something that can be extracted and experienced in various ways’ (Toomey op.cit.:162; my emphasis). Extracted ‘essence’ is a useful metaphor to keep in mind, I suggest, when addressing the cultural aesthetics of spiritual practice (or the aesthetic practices of ‘spiritual culture’) in ISKCON. Rather than

‘filling their world’ (Singer op.cit.:209) with a sensory overload of cultural and religious ‘imagery’, ‘spiritual culture’ in ISKCON offers the devotee practical tools for extracting a spiritual ‘essence’ from a life otherwise lived amongst all the other available ‘desires and attachments’ (ibid.) of cultural existence. Also, the spiritual and aesthetic appeal of these cultural elements for the Western devotee surely lies in their *essentialised* foreignness, otherness, or ‘Indian-ness’: in the very fact that these elements remain explicitly *other*, are consciously articulated and even bodily experienced as other, and do not become fully ‘enculturated’ elements of the Western devotee’s sense of self until the ultimate point of spiritual realisation or salvation. Like any cultural construction of otherness, Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ is essentialised to a refined degree, to a point far too conscious and definitive to be associated with ‘enculturation’ in any primary anthropological sense. ‘Spiritual culture’ is ‘spiritual’ precisely to the extent that it is extracted and essentialised from the everyday processes of cultural life. One effect of such an essentialised construction of cultural otherness is the stylisation and hyperbolisation of certain key aesthetic elements: elements, like ‘the food’ for instance, that serve to evoke a sense of ‘the spiritual’ precisely because they are extracted from all the superfluous material that might imbue the other with any mundane, insipid sense of cultural reality. It is in this respect that devotees claim that ‘spiritual culture’ transcends culture as such, that it operates at a level over and above any ‘material’ category like ‘Indian-ness’.

Taking *prasadam* as way of introducing the Hare Krishna practice of ‘spiritual culture’ has been useful for a number of reasons. First, as I have indicated, *prasadam* is a core component of spiritual practice in ISKCON. For ISKCON devotees, ‘spiritual culture’ is the medium and method of spiritual practice. It is the method by which devotees strive to engage their bodies, senses, and minds in the service of Krishna’s own transcendental

tastes. ‘Spiritual culture’ is foremost for Hare Krishna devotees a practice, a method, or *yoga* – the *process* of Krishna Consciousness itself, and as such is something more than a *merely* aesthetic, external, or ‘material’ sign of cultural difference. As I have indicated, the aesthetics of ‘spiritual culture’ prove to be intrinsic to Hare Krishna theology itself. Rather than serving as external symbols for an internally transformed (‘converted’) identity, the aesthetics of ‘spiritual culture’ are themselves intrinsic to the transformative process by which the devotee’s ‘taste’ for Krishna is ideally developed into a ‘higher taste’ culminating in Krishna-*rasa*, the ultimate relationship with the Godhead.

Taken as a ethnographic sample of ‘spiritual culture’, *prasadam* and the practices surrounding its production, distribution, and consumption, provides some insight into the kind of practical detail involved in living ‘the spiritual life’ in ISKCON. It also provides a demonstration of what, in the preceding chapter, I referred to in more conceptual terms as the *mimetic excess* of Hare Krishna spirituality. While the aesthetic details of spiritual practice can be superficially identified with a sense of ‘Indian-ness’, the difference between the ‘Indian’ and the ‘spiritual’ is explicitly and emphatically reiterated by ISKCON devotees. ISKCON devotees mimetically engage ‘spiritual culture’ as an embodied technique of spiritual transformation – not as a ‘symbolic vehicle’ of ‘enculturation’ into ‘an Indian way of life’ (cf. Singer op.cit.:209). As I will further demonstrate in the following chapter, the difference between the ‘Indian’ and the ‘spiritual’ becomes reified for Western devotees in contexts which ostensibly ‘integrate’ diasporic Indian congregations into the devotional scene of temple worship in ISKCON. It is in precisely such contexts that the essentialised ‘cultural attributes’ (ibid.) of Hare Krishna spirituality can be understood to exceed their own ‘Indian-ness’.

### **Tongue-scrapers: the details of devotion**

‘Spiritual culture’ is a lifelong practice or spiritual discipline in ISKCON. Significantly, when neophyte devotees are developing their first ‘taste’ for Krishna, it is the *tongue* that must be disciplined first of all:

*sarira abidya-jal, jodendiya tahe kal,  
jive phele visaya-sagore  
ta’ra madhye jihwa ati, lobhamoy sudurmati,  
ta’ke jeta kathina samsare*

O brothers! This material body is a network of ignorance, and the senses are one’s deadly enemies, for they throw the soul into this ocean of material sense enjoyment. Among those senses the tongue is the most voracious and uncontrollable; it is very difficult to conquer the tongue in this world.

*krsna baro doyamoy, koribare jihwa jay,  
swa-prasad-anna dilo bhai  
sei annamrta pao, radha-krsna-guna gao,  
preme dako caitanya-nitai*

O brothers! Lord Krsna is very merciful and has given us the remains of His own food just to control the tongue. Now please accept the nectarean Krsna-*prasada* and sing the glories of Their Lordships Radha and Krsna, and in love call out “Caitanya! Nitai!”

This *mantra*, *Prasada-sevaya* (honouring *prasadam*), offered as a prayer before devotees partake in *prasadam*, emphasises the importance of control over the tongue.

Consuming *prasadam* and chanting *mantras* are equally essential in this disciplinary process. The tongue, the sensory receptor of taste, serves as a metonym incorporating simultaneously the aesthetic, the bodily, and also the verbal or citational aspects of spiritual practice in ISKCON. Krishna Himself dances on the tongue of the devotee who chants His Name. By reciting *mantras* and narratives about Krishna contained in Prabhupada's books of translation and instruction, devotees also taste the 'nectar' of Krishna's transcendental sound vibrations. Krishna's transcendental presence is also made manifest on the tongue of the devotee whenever he or she ingests *prasadam*.

The tongue as metonym in fact subsumes distinctions between the aesthetic, bodily, and textual elements of spiritual practice in ISKCON. I remember Varadaraja dasa, the manager of the Temple Shop at ISKCON Sydney, subverting any distinction between text and body while addressing one of his potential customers. Varadaraja had set up a stall at a festival held at New Gokula, the Cessnock farm. He was selling a range of devotional products including Prabhupada's books, Hare Krishna T-shirts, incense, and even stainless-steel tongue-scrapers, which devotees use after brushing their teeth to aid oral hygiene. One of his potential customers was the mother of a young devotee, a woman patiently coming to terms with her daughter's newly found spirituality. The woman was perplexed by the array of objects being exhibited by Varadaraja, and failed to see why he would be displaying *tongue-scrapers* right next to Srila Prabhupada's transcendental literature. "We're selling spiritual culture," explained Sraddavana, failing to see any need to categorise his products.

The finer details required for living the spiritual life in ISKCON – even details like tongue-scraping – are modelled upon Srila Prabhupada's own personal example. Prabhupada is the literal and singular embodiment of 'spiritual culture' – he is the simultaneously physical and transcendental medium by which 'spiritual culture' became

communicable to his Western disciples. Prabhupada's example is passed on to his disciples, and from there on to every new aspiring devotee, in explicit contexts of spiritual instruction. A devotees' *mimetic* relationship to Prabhupada himself, I suggest, is lived through the details of devotional life *and* through the processes of their explication: teaching and learning how to cook *capatis* like Prabhupada used to do, for example, or helping an ethnographer to tie a *dhota* and apply *tilaka* before *mangala-arati*.

When devotees say that Prabhupada is 'present' in his books, they implicitly recognise too that their spiritual relationships with Prabhupada through the medium of text or doctrine are no less a form of mimetic practice than these other more overtly embodied practices. While I have devoted separate chapters (Five and Six) to my analysis of Hare Krishna textul practices, I must stress that in so doing it is not my intention to distinguish embodied and aesthetic 'practice' from the textual or doctrinal aspects of Hare Krishna 'belief'. As I have indicated, citations of Prabhupada's instruction accompany every stage of the neophyte's induction into spiritual practice, and are ultimately inseparable from the embodied realisation of Prabhupada's teachings. Prabhupada's collected writings are championed as 'the law books for the next ten thousand years': they contain everything anybody need ever know about the spiritual path 'back to Godhead', and even more, they lay out in detail everything that is required for the institution of a Krishna-centred society designed to elevate humankind. The multi-dimensional term 'spiritual culture' thus ranges in its application, from the finer details of cooking, eating, or dressing, to the developmental, 'scientific' process of *bhakti-yoga* itself, to the grander-scale concept of *varnasrama-dharma*: Krishna's divine pattern for humanity's social and spiritual existence. While the spiritual ambition of all ISKCON devotees is to return 'back to Godhead', or back to the spiritual world through the personal practice of 'devotional service' and the



aesthetic mechanism of ‘spiritual culture’, the global institution of *varnasrama-dharma* is understood by many devotees to be the greater task assigned by Prabhupada to his disciples: through its institution, the whole world can go back to Godhead. In the next chapter I further explore this grander-scale concept of ‘spiritual culture’ as *varnasrama-dharma*, as it practically influences the processes and experiences of spiritual discipline in ISKCON.



## Chapter Three

### Spiritual culture: *varnasrama-dharma* and brahminical training

...So when you come to the system of *varnasrama*, this is by nature. It is creation of God, just like in your body there are four divisions – the brain, arms, belly and legs divisions. So how can you avoid? This is natural. Unless you have got brain, if your head is cut off from the body, then what is the value? It is dead body. Similarly, at the present moment there is no brahminical culture. There may be very strong arm department, there may be very well-equipped economic department or labor department, but because the head is not there, it is a dead body. Therefore the whole society is suffering; there is no *brahmana*, or the head. We are creating *brahmanas* so that the society may be saved.

– Prabhupada, from a public lecture on *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 16/8/1972

(cited in Airavata dasa, *Vedic Sociology Part One: Prabhupada on*

*Varnasrama* (1997:21))<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Airavata's text is a compilation of hundreds of quotations from Prabhupada's lectures, conversations and purports on *varnasrama*. I met the compiler, Airavata dasa, while he was selling the various studies and compilations of the Bhaktivedanta Institute of Vedic Studies from a stall outside the Chandrodaya Mandir in ISKCON's headquarters, Mayapur, during the Gaura-Purnima festival of 1999. The text is a fairly rudimentary spiral-bound publication with no official notice of copyright, and Airavata makes no written contributions himself other than a structure of contents. I found similar quotes by Prabhupada in other ISKCON publications during my fieldwork, and spoke to many devotees who were familiar with Prabhupada's arguments on caste, which I explore later in this chapter. Airavata's compilation is useful because of its thematic organisation of Prabhupada's arguments on *varnasrama*.

**“We are creating *brahmanas...*”: *varna*, *asrama*, and brahminical training**

...the *rasa* is the source of the activity. The Lord, He is omnipotent, omnipresent, the one Lord, source of everything, complete in... everything. So He is there as *atmarama*, with all His energies, everything, ...and He is satisfied, He is happy. But with seek [?] to increase that happiness, He expands His energies, and then what does He do with those energies? Then they exchange, there is exchange between them based on their particular attraction or love for Krishna, their *rati*, their attachment. So Krishna has expanded activities to increase His pleasure. That means that the purpose of activities is to give pleasure to Krishna. There is no other purpose to activities, there's no other... purpose. So now with this we see that the activities, that they're done in a particular way, then they're appreciated by Krishna, and if they're not done in a proper way then that is called *rasa-basa*: it is against *rasa*. So in the spiritual realm the basis of this pure love and that exchange is based on that pure love. So whatever best brings out that pure love then that is *rasa* and whatever's against that is *rasa-basa*. Okay, so now this is the origin of culture. (Gurukula Maharaja, from a lecture on *Daiva varnasrama*, ISKCON Mayapur *gurukula*, 23/2/1999; transcript)

Gurukula Maharaja sat semi-cross-legged in one corner of his hut, the largest of the sturdy bamboo and thatch structures occupying the immaculate grounds of his school, or *gurukula*,<sup>2</sup> at ISKCON's international headquarters in Mayapur, West Bengal. From this position, for two hours every morning over the course of a week, he delivered a series of lectures to around fifty or sixty attentive devotees from various parts of the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ‘*Gurukula*’ is the name given to a Hare Krishna boarding school. Many children of ISKCON devotees are sent to *gurukulas* all over the world in order to study both ISKCON teachings and state-sponsored curricula. ‘Maharaja’ is a title of respect given to all spiritual masters within ISKCON. ‘Gurukula Maharaja’ is the title given to the headmaster of the *gurukula* in Mayapur, who is also an initiating spiritual master and (American) disciple of Srila Prabhupada. He is also referred to by another title and name, but I will withhold this name and continue referring to him simply as Gurukula Maharaja.

<sup>3</sup> Lectures by an array of ISKCON's spiritual masters and other specialist devotees were taking place over the second week of the Gaura-Purnima festival in ISKCON headquarters in Mayapur, during my field trip there in February/March 1999. The lectures ranged in subject matter, from Gurukula Maharaja's in-depth theology of ‘spiritual culture’, to one American devotee's survivalist preparations for the encroaching Y2K disaster... Most of the devotees attending Gurukula Maharaja's lectures were ‘Westerners’, Europeans and Americans, although as was the case generally at the Mayapur festival, a significant proportion (about one fifth) of the

Propping myself up by the bamboo column nearest the front of the class, one leg stretched out under the low edge of the thatched roof and my microphone wires stretching out towards the Maharaja, I listened to and recorded all six of Maharaja's lectures on the topic of '*Daiva varnasrama*': 'divine *varnasrama*', or 'spiritual brahminical culture'. These theologically sophisticated lectures dealt with the origins and original purpose of 'spiritual culture' as the practical means of cultivating *rasa*, or loving relationship with Krishna, and also outlined some of the finer points about applying the social system of 'spiritual culture', or *varnasrama-dharma*, in the lives of ISKCON devotees. I will be referring to sections of Maharaja's lectures at various points through this chapter. For the moment, though, I want to draw attention to their immediate context rather than content. The setting for these lectures was as interesting to me as their subject matter, and also directly related to it, which is why I introduce it here.

My only interview with Gurukula Maharaja took place inside his hut on the day before his first *varnasrama* lecture. Our immediate surroundings provided our conversation with a thematic point of reference. Maharaja explained to me, for instance, how in 'Vedic times' the low entrance to a *brahmana*'s hut was designed especially so that even if a king were to enter, he would be forced to bow down before the *brahmana*.<sup>4</sup> A gap at least a metre high runs between the low edge of the roof and the floor around the perimeter of Maharaja's hut, so an 'entrance' as such was difficult for me to discern. I couldn't help asking Maharaja, given this lack of enclosure, how he coped with the ubiquitous Bengali

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audience was made up of Russian devotees, one of whom performed verbal translations for his companions throughout the lectures.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Vedic period is held by devotees to form the latter part of the age previous to this one, Dvarapa yuga (about 5000 years ago)' (Knott 1996:109). Echoing Knott, I simply want to make note at this point that an academic or historical concept of the 'Vedic' 'might signal something rather different to that perceived by Hare Krishna devotees' (ibid.).

mosquitoes of a night. In accordance with the ancient and effective technique, he explained, smoky fires were lit inside to keep them at bay.



**Picture 5 The Mayapur *gurukula***

Maharaja's hut functions as his master classroom, his austere sleeping quarters, and also as a shrine, all in one. It was designed by Maharaja himself, like the rest of the *gurukula*, in accordance with 'Vedic' requirements. These requirements he largely taught himself through his extensive study of Vedic texts. It seemed as if every feature of the *gurukula* was explainable in terms of its objective 'Vedic' function. Maharaja could also explain, for instance, a peculiar practice I noticed while wandering the grounds of the *gurukula*, waiting for my interview. All around the paths and courtyards of the *gurukula*, young students would be mopping the ground with a diluted solution of cow manure. Students of the *Ayur-veda* have long been aware of the antiseptic qualities of cow dung, Maharaja explained to me.<sup>5</sup> This technique was employed to maintain cleanliness. Cows

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<sup>5</sup> Prabhupada makes reference to the pure qualities of cow dung in the introduction to his translation of *Sri Isopanishad* (1974 [1969]:3). 'If you smear cow dung in an impure place, that place becomes pure' (ibid.). Prabhupada asserts that this ancient knowledge is only now being verified by modern science: a type of claim that underpins much of Prabhupada's writings.

and cow dung are also both associated with *sattya-guna*, the mode of goodness. Cleanliness and goodness are both vital qualities in ‘brahminical’ life.

At another point, my interview with Maharaja turned toward three of his students, who had entered the hut while we were speaking and had begun performing oblations for the deities on the shrine. The students, or *brahmacaris*, were all boys of about eight or nine years of age. Two of them were Indian and the other a white child, of American devotee parents. As we observed the boys burning camphor and chanting *mantras*, Maharaja commented on how their youth gave them a certain advantage in delivering the right pitch and resonance with their *mantras*. Maharaja – who maintains his New Yorker accent when preaching and conversing in English – has been developing this shrill technique of pronouncing Sanskrit *mantras* with his own chanting over many years, and encourages it in all of his students.



**Picture 6 Inside Gurukula Maharaja's hut. Devotees from all over the world attend to Maharaja's lectures**

Gurukula Maharaja, by all appearances, is a perfectionist when it comes to ‘brahminical culture’. His *gurukula* is his own project, his own ‘service’, designed to provide ISKCON with the most qualified of devotees, true *brahmanas* raised in ‘spiritual

culture’ from earliest childhood, who will not only act in the capacity of *pujaris*, knowing precisely every procedure for all the *pancaratric* rites of deity worship, but in whom will lie all the cultivated ‘Vedic’ knowledge required for the successful guidance of ISKCON as a spiritual society. In this service, Maharaja participates in the mission of his own spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, who envisioned ISKCON as a society engaged in training a class of *brahmanas*.

In his grand-scale vision for an entire human society dedicated to the service of Krishna, Prabhupada had designated ISKCON *brahmanas* as the ‘head’ or ‘brains division’ of the fourfold social divisions of *varnasrama*. As the intelligent class of teachers and spiritual instructors, the *brahmanas* would instruct and advise the other three *varnas*: the *ksatriyas*, who are the ‘arms’ of the social body, providing administration, leadership, military and policing; the *vaisyas*, who as the ‘belly’ of the social body provide food through agriculture, protection to the cows, and the trade of surplus foodstuffs; and the *sudras*, the ‘legs’ or labourers of society. The *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, and *vaisya* varnas are all *dvija*, ‘twice-born’, or born into ‘culture’. *Sudra* is the unintelligent and uncultured class of men. These four *varnas*, combined with the four ‘stages’ of spiritual life, or *asramas*, form the core of the ‘Vedic’ social system of *varnasrama*. The implementation of *varnasrama* is regarded by many Prabhupada disciples (and disciples of his disciples) as the most important on-going mission of ISKCON. The spiritual community at ISKCON Mayapur (including Maharaja’s *gurukula*) is regarded as the vanguard of this great experiment. Larger rural ISKCON centres in Western countries are also ideally striving for the implementation of *varnasrama* within their communities. Devotees acknowledge, however, that even in Mayapur, Prabhupada’s vision for a functioning ‘Vedic’ society, with all its co-operative divisions, is far from being fully realised.



The Mayapur *gurukula* and its young students introduce an especially focussed image showing the seriousness with which *brahminical training* is taken in ISKCON. The primary focus of this chapter is the ISKCON concept of *varnasrama* as ‘spiritual culture’ and the closely associated idea of ‘training’ *brahmanas* in ISKCON. This chapter will also explore how the ISKCON category of *brahmana*, as well as the other *varnas*, is distinguished from the idea of caste or ‘caste brahminism’ by the concept of training or qualification. ‘Brahmana by qualification’ rather than ‘brahmana by birth’ is the key distinction here. As I shall make clear, ISKCON devotees identify ‘caste brahminism’ with Indian ‘Hinduism’, and explicitly define the ISKCON concept of *varnasrama* against what Prabhupada regarded as India’s false and materialistic implementation of the *varnasrama* or ‘caste’ tradition. This point of contrast with ‘Hinduism’ is also essential to what means to be both ‘Vedic’ and ‘Vaisnava’ in ISKCON. At the same time, of course, the language and aesthetics of ISKCON’s ‘spiritual culture’ are dependent on a very specific sense of ‘Indian-ness’, where the main point of contrast is not Indian ‘materialism’, but ‘materialism’ manifested as ‘Western culture’. The Mayapur *gurukula* is one environment which pointedly illustrates how these cultural oppositions have pragmatic as well as aesthetic and discursive applications in ISKCON.

These cultural oppositions are the subject of the latter half of this chapter, where some of the themes of Gurukula Maharaja’s lectures are taken up in the quite different ethnographic context of devotee-congregation relations at the ISKCON Sydney temple. The focus there will be the ISKCON concept of *varna*, particularly as this term is applied in opposition to the ‘caste brahminism’ which devotees associate with their own Hindu congregational members. The tensions and oppositions which my devotee informants expressed in relation to their ‘materialistic’ Hindu congregation provide a crucial insight

into the way Hare Krishna spirituality is formed and formulated through practices of cultural difference. While sociologists have supported the notion that ISKCON's Hindu congregations provide the movement with a source of cultural and religious legitimacy in the public or secular domain, devotees' attitudes regarding the spiritual *illegitimacy* of 'Hinduism' reveal another side to the cultural dynamics at work between converts and congregants as two distinguishable, yet culturally interdependent, groups. The sympathetic tendency of ISKCON's sociological observers has led to the problematic *theoretical* legitimization of ISKCON as a cultural alternative to secular Western modernity – problematic in part because it overlooks *Indian* modernity – confronted weekly by devotees in the form of a diasporic Indian Hindu congregation – as an equally important point of cultural opposition for Western devotees.

Before this, however, I need first to identify the four 'spiritual divisions' of *asrama* (*brahmacarya*, *grhastha*, *vanaprastha*, *sannyasa*) which complement the four 'social divisions' of *varna* (*brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, *sudra*) which I have introduced, and relate these to practices of 'brahminical training' in ISKCON. By the end of this chapter we should have some insight into the way ISKCON's *varna* and *asrama* categories are articulated and practiced by Hare Krishna devotees as 'spiritual culture'.

### ***Brahmacarya: the training ground***

All devotees, unless they join ISKCON already married, will begin spiritual life in the *brahmacarya* or 'student' *asrama*. Many children of devotee parents attend ISKCON *gurukulas* as *brahmacaris* (male students) or *brahmacarinis* (female students), where they can be properly trained in *saddhana* (spiritual practice), and where they also receive a state education as required by particular state curricula. Devotees who join ISKCON (that is,

who are not born into it), also begin spiritual life in the *brahmacarya asrama*, but their training generally takes place while living full-time at an ISKCON centre, like the one at Sydney. New, uninitiated *brahmacaris* are usually referred to as ‘*bhaktas*’ (‘*bhaktins*’ for women), and their initial training period in a temple is known as ‘the Bhakta Program’. During my stay at ISKCON Sydney I was enlisted in the Bhakta Program of spiritual training, and I was frequently introduced as ‘Bhakta Malcolm’. There is no practical difference between *bhakta* and *brahmacarya* life in the temple. For many devotees, *brahmacarya* life in the temple represents the ideal, and also the most intensive, form of practice available for spiritual advancement.

‘Although the Sanskrit term *brahmacharya* is most often translated as “celibacy”’, writes Khandelwal (2001) of the religio-cultural practices surrounding *brahmacarya* in India,

the English term does not come close to conveying the complex meanings of its practice. First, *brahmacharya* means much more than abstaining from sex... Sexual abstinence is one essential ingredient of an overall lifestyle that usually includes a strict vegetarian diet, the avoidance of most stimulants and intoxicants, and the practice of meditation or some other variety of spiritual discipline. (157)

Khandelwal’s general definition translates well into the ISKCON language of *brahmacarya*. As I indicated in the last chapter, getting ‘trained up’ in Krishna Consciousness involves a lot more than chanting and scriptural instruction. To expand upon Khandelwal’s apt term, the ‘spiritual discipline’ of temple life in ISKCON is as much defined by practices of abstinence, or by strict adherence to the *regulative principles*, as it is by any other form of doctrinal or ritual adherence. The kinds of details which I provided

in that chapter of Hare Krishna cooking and eating practices are just a part, albeit a vital part, of the education in ‘spiritual culture’ undertaken by all in the *brahmacarya asrama*. Spiritual advancement begins precisely at the vital level of bodily discipline – and as we saw, it is the *tongue* which must be trained first of all. Khandelwal observes that in ‘the context of controlling passions, it becomes clear why control of the palate is so important to the practice of brahmacharya: not only is gustatory pleasure a metaphor for sexual pleasure, but also certain (“hot”) foods, like onions, garlic, strong spices, meat, and alcohol, are felt to increase passions metonymically’ (168-9).

The spiritual ‘aptitudes’ (cf. Asad 1993:77) acquired through *brahmacarya* training in ISKCON form an essential platform for a devotee’s subsequent movement through all the other *asramas*. *Grhastha* is the ‘householder’ *asrama*, entered into by devotees seeking marriage and children, where devotees must establish financially independent households (that is, outside of the ashram accommodation and other forms of support provided by temple life). Though they may live outside the strict disciplinary framework of the temple, *grhasthas* are still expected to follow strictly all of the regulative principles, including the proscription against ‘illicit sex’. Sex is deemed appropriate only for the procreation of children who are to be raised in a Krishna Conscious household, and requires even more disciplinary and ritual observances than mere abstinence. *Vanaprastha*, or ‘retirement’ from householder life, is the *asrama* reached when children are grown up and parents can concentrate on other forms of devotional service and spiritual advancement. *Sannyasa* is the ‘renounced’ order, requiring a special initiation and a proven capacity for total renunciation.

Generally, only qualified devotees who have taken vows of *sannyasa* can become spiritual masters in ISKCON, although I met one *grhastha* who had taken on disciples of

his own. I am only aware of the existence of male spiritual masters (or *diksa gurus*: those who may initiate new disciples) within ISKCON, but this is not to say that older female devotees do not become important sources of spiritual instruction (as *siksa gurus*), especially to younger female devotees. Male devotees in the *brahmacarya* and *sannyasa asramas* both wear saffron clothing, signifying celibacy and renunciation, although *sannyasis* are also distinguishable by their *danda* (a tall staff wrapped in saffron cloth). Male *grhasthas* and *vanaprasthas* wear white. Female devotees wear a variety of coloured *saris*, independent of *asrama*, although I met one widow who only wore white (she also cut her hair short).<sup>6</sup>

‘*Brahmacarini*’ – the *asrama* category designating a female celibate student – is understood within ISKCON to be an invention of Srila Prabhupada’s. This is not really an accurate perception from an historical or cultural point of view (Khandelwal (op.cit.) shows that ‘brahmacharini’ and even ‘sannyasini’ (female renunciators) are in fact established categories in some Hindu traditions in India, although these are rare and ‘tolerated, even revered, only as long as they remain exceptions’ (171)). It is nonetheless significant that the position of women in ISKCON’s *asrama* system is understood by devotees themselves as one of Prabhupada’s few significant concessions to ‘Western culture’. Knott (1996) reinforces the ISKCON perspective that the inclusion of a women’s *asrama* was an innovation of Srila Prabhupada’s, at least in terms of the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition:

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<sup>6</sup> Knott (1996:105) and Brooks (1989a:130) confirm there are no women gurus in ISKCON. On the subject of ‘widowhood’, Brooks recounts an interesting encounter between a woman ISKCON devotee and village pilgrims to the ISKCON temple in Vrindavana. The devotee was dressed as a widow, but ‘as [the pilgrims] discovered, the reason for her dress was neither widowhood nor her husband’s vows of celibacy and austerity. There is no formal institution of *sannyas* for women in Indian society or in ISKCON, but informally, a number of Hare Krishna women have taken this step. The village women found this action extreme, agreeing that it was “not natural”; still they respected her for it’ (ibid.). As my account of the ‘women’ issue in ISKCON will indicate, the ideal of celibate renunciation is generally given different value to men and women

Until the arrival of Prabhupada... in the United States in 1966, his religious training and his empirical experience had provided him with little reason to take women seriously except as home-makers. In the Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition of which he was a part, the emphasis had previously been placed on the spiritual progress of the men. Certain women, renowned for their great spirituality and leadership, were mentioned favourably in the texts, but they had at that time no place in the ritual practices of the *asramas* of this tradition. In addition, the normal role of women in Indian society was one of domestic subservience, with few women given the opportunity to attain higher material or spiritual positions. When [Prabhupada] came to the United States, however, his empirical evidence altered. In a talk to the residents of Vrndavana, India, several years after his arrival in America, he reported, "...in the Western countries there is no distinction. They [boys and girls] are given equal liberty. In our country there is still discrimination." Because of this he saw it as appropriate to allow both men and women to enter his movement, to become disciples on the path of Krishna Consciousness with the same opportunities for advancement and responsibilities for service. (103)

Fortunately, Knott also makes the worthwhile suggestion that neither the 'ideals' of gender equality that may have been generated in the wider Western society, nor an idealised 'Vedic' system of social and gender hierarchy, should form the basis of comparison for the practices surrounding gender in ISKCON (100-1). She makes this suggestion in the context of an on-going debate about the position of women in ISKCON, a debate in which both male and female ISKCON devotees, as well as outside scholarly observers, have voiced concerns about the unfavourable and unequal treatment of women within the movement.<sup>7</sup> 'The "life" of women in the movement', Knott observes, 'can seem and has seemed restrictive by the "standards" of those outside' (101). But standards are

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within ISKCON.

<sup>7</sup> Knott (op.cit.) looks at some of the early concerned observations of Judah (1974a) and Daner (1976).

often different to practices. When I broached the complex and controversial issue about women in ISKCON with Avatari dasi, a woman devotee who lives and works independently of the Sydney centre (that is, she is unmarried and lives outside the *brahmacarini* ashram), I received a brief but clever response: “I have a problem with about ten-percent of what goes on in ISKCON, but I have a problem with ninety-percent of what goes in the rest of society.”

In the following section I want to ‘contextualise statements on the subject of gender’ (Knott op.cit.:101) within the particular framework of the *asrama* system in ISKCON. In this way I will be skipping over what Knott refers to as ‘the starting point’ of the debate about women in ISKCON: that the ‘basic philosophy of Krishna Consciousness concerning the soul is one of spiritual equality’ (94). I will be addressing questions concerning the nature and *gender* of the soul in the next chapter. For the moment my focus remains on the concepts of *varnasrama* and brahminical training in ISKCON. Given that the four *asrama* categories are all defined by their relationship to sex and marriage, their explication requires that I address the issue of women in ISKCON. Introducing some of the issues relating to women, marriage, and work in ISKCON will also provide some insight into the practical development of the *asrama* concept over the course of the movement’s brief history.

### **ISKCON as *grhastha*: women, marriage, and work**

In the early days of ISKCON, before there were *gurukulas* or even many children born into the movement, everyone was a new recruit and all serious devotees lived in the ‘communal’ context of temple life (Rochford 2000). The number of young unattached women wanting to join the movement necessitated Prabhupada’s decision to designate a

separate *brahmacarini asrama*. But Prabhupada was especially wary of youthful, Western promiscuity, and the co-existence of young men and women in ISKCON centres presented a potentially dangerous situation for the spiritual welfare of his disciples. Within each ISKCON centre, *brahmacarinis* always slept apart from *brahmacaris* in a separate ashram, and this segregation between the sexes is still strictly enforced today. *Brahmacaris* and *brahmacarinis* often perform different forms of service within the centre, or else perform them separately or at different times.<sup>8</sup> During collective deity worship, female devotees must stand to the rear of the temple room, and Tulasi worship in the morning takes place around two separate *tulasi* plants. During scripture classes the sexes also tend to sit apart.

Many of the male devotees I met during my stay at the Sydney centre expressed antagonistic or circumspect attitudes toward women. From most accounts, this antagonism was even stronger during the formative years of the movement. Women are still regarded by many male devotees as the embodiment of *maya*: that seductive, illusory, and also feminine force which, if not actively resisted, would bring about a *brahmacari's* spiritual downfall. Women are relegated to the back part of the temple floor so as not to enter the line of sight of male devotees taking *darsana* of the deities, and so distract them from worship. This positioning would suggest that the real *spiritual* concern is for male devotees.

The following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted (in Vrindavana 1999) with Bhakta-vatsala dasa, a male Prabhupada-disciple who has remained a *brahmacari* ever since joining the movement in Britain in 1972. It provides a particularly graphic insight into

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<sup>8</sup> Knott (op.cit.) makes the important point that while men and women may perform their services separately, the tasks themselves are not necessarily distinguished by stereotypically gendered categories that might assign, for example, domestic-type work to feminine roles. '*Brahmacharis* [males] engage in singing and dancing, sewing and cooking, dressing the Deities, praising and admiring clothes and flowers, all in a spirit of submission and obedience. Roles which, in society at large, have been commonly assigned to women are here adopted as a spiritual discipline by those of both sexes' (88).



the kinds of negative associations made in regard to women and the sexual desire for women that can destroy a *brahmacari*'s spiritual career:

The whole world is illusion. A vagina walks past and all the men are looking like this [staring wide-eyed], you know, and they're just thinking "how I can get in that vagina?" [laughter from another older *brahmacari*] So at the time of death they go inside that vagina, and to take birth they again come out from that vagina, and again they're thinking through their whole lifetime how to get back inside that vagina. So... this material life is simply in and out of the vagina. That's all it is [laughter from the other *brahmacari*]. And this is hell. This vagina is hell. You live in there for nine months. Just imagine living inside inside this vagina for nine months. Can you imagine? It's hell. Who wants to go back to that? Certainly, by the grace of God, I will never have to go back inside that vagina.

For many of Bhakta-vatsala's generation, *brahmacarya* was never considered to be a mere 'first stage' in the spiritual life. Bhakta-vatsala represents an ideal which I also encountered amongst younger *brahmacaris*, that celibacy in *brahmacarya* should be a life-long commitment. From this perspective, the only *asrama* more desirable than *brahmacarya* is *sannyasa*, in which total renunciation is combined with an intense itinerary of globe-trotting for the purpose of proselytisation and spiritual instruction. From this perspective, the *grhastha asrama*, or married life, appears as a second-rate option for weaker devotees.

This is a male perspective, however, and *brahmacarya* is a strongly gendered ideal.<sup>9</sup> Knott (op.cit.) cites one woman devotee who stressed a balanced view of the problem of sexual desire:

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<sup>9</sup>Khandelwal (op.cit.) shows us how the notion of sexual abstinence which underlines the meaning of 'brahmacharya' in Brahmanic Hinduism carries quite different religious and cultural connotations when applied to women rather than men. While chastity, for example, is a most highly valued feminine quality in Hindu society, 'the ideology of gender relations leaves it far removed from the historically male pursuit of celibacy' (163). Chastity is a form of sexual renunciation that is practiced (by women) within the context of

“The scriptures do describe women as a cause of material entanglement for men, and that’s true. But scripture balances that out by describing that men are also a material entanglement for women”; “unmarried women... live as celibates within the protection of the temple community, living the same ascetic, devotional life as the male devotees.” (cited in Knott op.cit.:89)

My conversations with *brahmacaris* at the Sydney temple revealed, however, a general attitude toward *brahmacarinis* which showed little respect for women devotees’ capacity or desire for celibate life. I frequently heard references to the notion that women are, by nature, more emotional and less intelligent than men. This notion was also coupled with the idea that women’s natural emotionality leads to their greater ‘attachment’ to the material world. Female devotees are therefore considered less capable of renunciation, and would inevitably desire marriage and children. For many male devotees, on the other hand, the struggle to maintain celibacy seems to be synonymous with spiritual advancement itself. For many *brahmacaris*, even the thought of marriage is considered a spiritual failure. Even talking to female devotees is considered a potential risk to the spiritual progress of a *brahmacari*.

An interesting insight into these types of attitudes and their relation to the *brahmacarya asrama* was afforded me during an interview with Devaki-nandana dasi, a second-generation woman devotee in her mid-twenties. Devaki-nandana was ‘born a devotee’ in the movement’s first Indian centre at Vrindavana, her father (a Scottish Prabhupada-disciple) being the centre’s first Temple President. Devaki-nandana revealed that growing up as one of the first wave of *gurukula* students in England she encountered

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married life (*grhastha*), but outright celibacy amongst women is typically seen as deviant and potentially

little tension between the young *brahmacaris* and *brahmacarinis*. It was only as a young adult, when she was to spend time staying in the *brahmacarini* ashram of ISKCON's Los Angeles centre, that she discovered the more 'extreme' and 'obnoxious' attitudes toward women that seem to be widespread amongst new recruits to the *brahmacari asrama*. Devaki-nandana related one story in which a young *brahmacari* from the ashram had announced his intentions to marry (another devotee), and had begun to attend temple functions dressed in the white robes of a *grhastha*. The *brahmacaris* of the ashram expressed their collective disapproval by wearing black armbands in his presence.

In the following excerpt, Devaki-nandana begins by referring to the temple ashrams as something of a breeding ground for 'fanaticism' amongst new converts – an experience obviously foreign to someone born and raised within the movement. Her observations quickly develop into a specific criticism of *male* converts:

I'll think you'll always have the hardcore... You always have people joining and they, without fail, without fail everyone goes through this phase of, like, complete fanaticism and the P.D. Syndrome, which is the Pure Devotee Syndrome... You know, okay, give yourself twenty years, see if you're right then...

I see it's really difficult... when they go through their... first few years. They're extremely extreme about Krishna Consciousness... I don't know because I've never gone through that process, so I can't experience how that is. I don't know whether the reasoning is they just... have so much distaste for, you know, I guess Western culture or whatever, everything that's the sort of negative things that come along with Western culture, that they just want to completely cut that off. But then it's very hard because you can't just completely cut that off, and I see that they have hard times dealing with that. The *men* especially [Devaki-nandana's emphasis]... I mean, I don't know, it's... an interesting concept how you, you know, pretty much your [whole] life you've grown up in associating with the opposite sex, different things like that, and all

of a sudden you've come to a Society where 'No [you can't do that]'. But then because they don't have a mature outlook, they're really immature about it, you know. They're really immature, just the way that they deal with it, it's like... you know, 'No, no, I can't do that, oh my gosh, no', you know, 'this is *maya*' – which, you know, you think, 'Just give me a break'... you don't even want to deal with people like that...

Maybe I should just be compassionate, but at times I just think it's a little hard where ... you know, you feel that you have to be walking on egg-shells around these men, because you know they're having such a hard time. Maybe they are having such a hard time – you know, I'm not a man so I don't know – you know, controlling themselves, and they can be so disturbed by seeing you... which is just... such nonsense, because if they're that disturbed, go to the forest... even Prabhupada said that.<sup>10</sup>

Devaki-nandana's experience at ISKCON Los Angeles not only sharpened her perspective on men in *brahmacarya*, but also on the particular conditions and sacrifices of women in the *asrama*:

Living in L.A... that was a real eye-opener... speaking with the women in the ashram and just the way that they were treated. And I think this is pretty much women within our Society, you know, it goes for everyone in ISKCON... it's kind of interesting how... they join a movement... they fully join the temple, they give up any type of security they have like... on a material level, even on an emotional level depending on how their family takes it, or their boyfriends or husbands or... friends. Then they're completely sort of at the mercy of ISKCON, or that temple that they're in. And a lot of times they're not taken care of. I definitely know, like on a material level, they're not taken care of... My realisation was that if I wasn't born a devotee, I don't know if I would join. You know, I would be really interested in Krishna Consciousness, but I don't think I would join the temple.

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<sup>10</sup> Moving to the forest is often equated with worldly renunciation. The word 'vanaprastha', which I have

It is of course significant that I only managed to record such an openly critical perspective on ISKCON's gender issues outside of a temple/ashram context, and with a woman who is not a 'convert' to Krishna Consciousness, but born into the movement. Given the context of gender segregation at the Sydney centre, I gained scant information about the conditions or attitudes of the *brahmacarinis* in residence. This information was by no means denied to me outright, but 'participation' as a method inevitably entails the observance of normative gender relations. At ISKCON Sydney this meant I received an insight into generally younger male attitudes towards sex and gender issues. But these attitudes were revealing nonetheless, especially as they seem notably consistent with the negative attitudes experienced by a devotee like Devaki-nandana.

While I encountered many negative attitudes toward women and marriage amongst *brahmacaris* during my fieldwork, it is important to realise how these attitudes are cultivated within a particular *asrama* in relation to another. It was only once my fieldwork took me out of the context of *brahmacarya* life in the temple (restricted as it was to the male ashram) that I began to encounter different attitudes towards women and marriage, particularly amongst older devotees (including males) in the *grhastha asrama*. Devaki-nandana's account indicates, I think, two sides to the 'fanaticism' associated with male celibacy in *brahmacarya*. On the one hand we see this fanaticism played out as a radical difference between 'Western culture' – with all the associations with sexual hedonism that this term seems to evoke for devotees – and the convert's newly discovered 'spiritual culture'. *Brahmacarya* life in a temple is, after all, the first experience most devotees will have of spiritual life in ISKCON. But then on the other hand we also see the celibate ideal played out as a difference *within* ISKCON's 'spiritual culture', as a difference not just

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introduced as the *asrama* category of retirement from married life, literally means 'retired to the forest'.

between men and women, but between *brahmacarya* life and *grhastha* life. This latter difference is one often measured by *brahmacaris* in terms of commitment and quality of devotion, and there are still many of ISKCON's first generation (like Bhakta-vatsala, for instance) who advocate the *brahmacarya* ideal as the higher spiritual standard. To understand the relationship between the two sides of this issue – that is, between the externally-defined opposition to 'Western' practices, and the internally-defined opposition to married life – we need to take a historical or developmental approach to the *asrama* system in ISKCON. Because in the early days of the movement, the *grhastha asrama* had not yet become a significant factor in the social development of the spiritual life in ISKCON. The 'communal structure' which Rochford (2000:175) associates with ISKCON's nascence is directly equatable with the *brahmacarya asrama* and spiritual training still practiced in ISKCON centres today. But in the early days *everyone* was in the *brahmacarya asrama*. To be outside *brahmacarya* was to be outside ISKCON itself as it existed *at that stage*. As marriage and family had not yet become a legitimated part of the spiritual life in ISKCON, these were automatically associated with a movement away from ISKCON and back into the 'material world'.<sup>11</sup>

But as devotees grew up, so to did ISKCON (and this is the 'structural' point which Rochford's 'disintegration' (ibid.) thesis overlooks). Bhakta Jack, the middle-aged Temple Commander at ISKCON Sydney, related this institutional 'growing up' process in the language of *asrama*: now in its mid-thirties, ISKCON as a society has entered the *grhastha*

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<sup>11</sup> Knott (op.cit.) makes the case that the conflict over women and marriage did not in fact arise until the mid-1970s, when some of ISKCON's prominent male devotees took initiation into the *sannyasa* order. 'With a desire to protect their own asrama and their individual spiritual advancement, they saw the involvement of women as a problem. The householder or *grhastha asrama* as a whole was criticized, with women in particular targetted. Some *sannyasis*, it is said, wanted to see the initiation of women stopped... One practical effect of their preaching was the reorganization of worship such that women were made to stand at the back of the temple behind the male devotees' (104). Khandelwal (op.cit.) notes that 'Hindu thinkers have debated the relative importance of celibate and housholder lifestyles for centuries' (161).

stage of its spiritual development, with a significant proportion of its membership made up of married couples and their children; in its youth, the institution of ISKCON itself was still in the *brahmacarya* stage. ISKCON is only just reaching the stage where new *sannyasis* will have progressed through all the *asrama* stages; new spiritual masters have generally been initiated straight from the *brahmacarya asrama*. The *vanaprastha asrama* is a relatively new stage in the spiritual life of ISKCON.

Bhakta Jack, who has been involved in ISKCON for nearly twenty years, considers himself a *vanaprastha*. At the time I met him he was living in the Sydney centre with the *brahmacaris* – that is, in practice, he lived as a *brahmacari*. Jack's status as 'retired from householder life' was somewhat involuntary, given that his wife had left him and ISKCON with their two children. Jack's *asrama* position demonstrates the kind of ambiguity that can exist in these categories (he only learned that he should be wearing white, rather than saffron, during the time I was staying in the ashram). It also demonstrates how *brahmacarya* and brahminical training are essentially on-going processes for devotees in ISKCON, irrespective of *asrama* position. Jack was only one of the devotees I met who went through fluctuations of spiritual enthusiasm, coming and going from the temple scene. Jack expressed his enthusiasm through a rigorous participation in the temple program, but he was also known for 'getting fried' after 'charging his batteries' at the temple, and then leaving of his own accord. Jack never considered these transitions as diminishing his life commitment to Krishna Consciousness. Finding and speaking to Jack in the inner-city during one of his spiritual low points, I realised how these retrogressive moments were still framed in terms of a struggle for spiritual progress. Jack's wife, on the other hand, had apparently dissociated herself from Jack and ISKCON altogether – although Jack still

believes that the spiritual education he imparted to his children will continue to be a guiding influence in their lives.

Speaking to husbands and wives (who remain) in the *grhastha asrama* provided me with a different perspective on Hare Krishna life outside the various trials and transitions of temple life (*brahmacarya*). Janardana dasa is a middle-aged devotee from Sydney who seems particularly well-adjusted in his *grhastha* life. I met Janardana, his wife, daughter, and son outside the Sydney context altogether. The whole family were staying in ISKCON's headquarters in Mayapur to celebrate the Gaura-Purnima festival, at the same time I was there with two *brahmacaris* and a *brahmacarini* from the Sydney centre. In an untaped conversation, Janardana told me about his initial move toward the *grhastha asrama*. He recounted how in the early days of ISKCON Sydney, all the original devotees lived in the temple, but none of them contributed anything financially towards its maintenance. Frustrated with the fiscal ineptitude of his fellow devotees, Janardana decided to go out and earn a living as a mechanic. Still living as a *brahmacari* in the ashram, Janardana's job supplied the other devotees with many of their essential needs. Janardana speaks somewhat defiantly about his early role as breadwinner, as if his own transition from monasticism to the world of work represented a more mature level of spiritual development. He seems to carry this same attitude in relation to his present role in the *grhastha asrama*. Around his children he gives the impression of being a loving, fun-loving, protective and proud father. Besides engaging in festival activities during their pilgrimage/holiday in Mayapur, Janardana and his wife were also looking into the possibility of enrolling their son in Gurukula Maharaja's *gurukula*.

Far from representing a process of 'disintegration' (cf. Rochford *ibid.*), the many devotees who make the transition into the *grhastha asrama* understand this move as a



process of *integrating* Krishna Conscious practice into the everyday practices of family and work. Of course, this is not to deny that processes of disintegration occur: the possibilities for separation and strife are surely as much a part of Hare Krishna family life as an other.<sup>12</sup> But these situations (and even situations of outright apostasy) cannot be equated with the ‘disintegration’ of an ISKCON ‘culture’, which is the argument offered by Rochford (ibid.). The fact remains that many Hare Krishna devotees get married, have children, and work in everyday jobs, while also being engaged in the pursuit of Krishna Consciousness. ‘Spiritual culture’ can be as much a part of these lives as it is of the lives of *brahmacaris* and *brahmacarinis* in the temple. It is practiced in home kitchens, at home shrines, in participating in ISKCON festivals and functions, in raising and educating children, and even in the sex practices of married couples. This is to say nothing of the underlying struggle for spiritual consciousness which is common (if differentially expressed) to all devotees, nor indeed of the support to be found in family, friends, spiritual masters, Prabhupada’s books, and the chanting of the Holy Name.

‘Brahminical training’ can be understood as a program of ‘disciplinary practices’ (Asad 1993:125) which forms the basis for the development of spiritual ‘aptitudes’ (77) in ISKCON. It should also be understood that these aptitudes are not only applied in the strictly ‘brahminical’ contexts of *brahmacarya* (temple life) or *sannyasa* (renunciation, preaching, and travelling). Spiritual development can be seen both as the process of brahminical training as such, and as the application of this training in various life contexts. Discovering the particular forms of *activity* that best suit one’s own *qualities* is increasingly being appreciated within ISKCON as fundamental to spiritual development. With the

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<sup>12</sup> Knott (op.cit.) points out that the ideal of marriage in Krishna Consciousness is often held up against increasing divorce rates in the wider society, but, she asks, ‘are Krishna Conscious marriages always true to the ideal? Do they never fail?’ (101). I will treat these as rhetorical questions.

maturing of ISKCON into its *grhastha* stage, there has been an increasing acceptance of the fact that not all devotees will make the most effective spiritual progress within *brahmacarya* or the institutional environment of an ISKCON centre. Independently supporting and maintaining a Krishna Conscious household are now appreciated as forms of ‘devotional service’ in themselves. This maturing perspective may be restricted in large part to the more mature devotees, but its consequence has been quite profound in terms of defining spiritual practice, ‘spiritual culture’, and also the social and spiritual significance of women in ISKCON.



*Grhasthas* made up a good proportion of the audience attending Gurukula Maharaja’s *varnasrama* lectures. The husbands and wives attending were generally younger devotees, in their mid-twenties. They were not the middle-aged first-generation devotees who experienced ISKCON itself gradually move into its *grhastha* stage. Sitting in Maharaja’s hut – a classroom usually attended by children being groomed as ‘first-class *brahmacaris*’, ISKCON’s future *brahmanas* – these young *grhasthas* learned that householder life was by no means a fall-back option for unsuccessful *brahmacaris*. Maharaja made the point quite clear: “First class *brahmacari* makes first class *grhastha*, second class *brahmacari* makes second class *grhastha*.”

The sense of challenge, encouragement and also relief that these words could engender for these young *grhasthas*, men and women alike, can only be appreciated in light of the history of negative attitudes towards women and marriage in ISKCON.<sup>13</sup> As I have

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<sup>13</sup> When one young couple approached Maharaja to personally thank him for the class, it was the beaming

shown, these attitudes still prevail amongst many of the *brahmacaris* I have met. But in his series of lectures Maharaja offered a clear argument against the idea that *grhastha* means failed *brahmacarya*, and therefore spiritual failure. A failed *brahmacari* cannot possibly succeed as a *grhastha*, but a well-trained *brahmacari* can make positive spiritual advancement as part of a Krishna-centred household. Maharaja also pointed out that no matter what *asrama*, all devotees should in fact *act* with the same attitude of renunciation characteristically identified with the *sannyasi asrama*:

...the living entity who performs his activities without desiring the fruit is called *sannyasa*, right? ...*Sannyasa* means I give up the work that creates the fruit, right? So now here comes also very very fine point, 'cause it has two levels. One is, we see in the *external tradition*, means we give up those things that create... the material benefits that everybody's jumping around after, right. Facility, money, position, you know, power, all these things. So *sannyasa* means... giving up those activities. I don't do business, right, I don't look for position, I don't try to control everything... But now Krishna points out that the finer understanding of this is that I perform my activity, perform my prescribed duty – means the duties according to my *varna* and *asrama* – but I do so without desiring the fruit that comes from that, right. So therefore no material fruit is created, it is done for Krishna, so what result comes is spiritual. So Krishna points out this is the real *sannyasa*. Therefore no matter what *varna* or what *asrama* one is in, if one performs those activities, his prescribed activities for Krishna without desiring the fruit, he understands the result is Krishna's before its happened – that is *sannyasa*. (Gurukula Maharaja; my emphasis)

Maharaja used the example of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-gita*, the *ksatriya* warrior performing his duty for Krishna, as an example of a 'perfect *sannyasi*'. This reading utilises an interesting combination of the *varna* and *asrama* ideals. Where *ksatriya* is a *varna* category, Maharaja is suggesting that all *varnas* and all *asramas* adhere both to the

‘brahminical’ ideal and to the renunciate ideal of *sannyasa*. But how is this interpretation different to the ‘external tradition’ to which Maharaja refers, and which I emphasised in the above quotation? I highlight this term because it points to the sense of cultural and theological uniqueness which ISKCON devotees associate with the term ‘spiritual culture’.

I will let Maharaja continue the point:

...*daiva varnasrama* [‘divine’ *varnasrama*] here has these subtleties: that one is performing the activity of *varna* and *asrama* according to one’s nature, but he is doing it simply to please Krishna, right? It’s Krishna’s rules and regulations. I’m a human being, I have to act, so I must do it for Krishna according to the *varna* and *asrama*. I follow those Vedic rules according to the devotional principles of *pancaratna*, and that given by Rupa Goswami. I follow those rules, and the thrust is to always remember Krishna, never forget, always chant the Holy Name. Then one establishes oneself properly in *daiva varnasrama*. So *daiva varnasrama* is not the externals, right. You can have *varnasrama* and have nothing to do with Krishna, right. You have millions of examples of that in India. (ibid.)

So ‘externals’ are ‘Vedic’ or ‘brahminical’ activities which are not Krishna Conscious, or centred around Krishna. The ‘external tradition’ is *varnasrama*, but it is not ‘daiva’ – ‘divine’, ‘God-centred’, or ‘spiritual’ *varnasrama*. This is the *varnasrama* associated with India, where ‘so-called *brahmana*’ is a privilege of birth, not a quality of an individual. It is the *varnasrama* of ‘caste brahminism’ or ‘material brahminical culture’. It is not ‘pure brahminical culture’ or ‘Vaisnava brahminical culture’ (ibid.).

Maharaja had more to say on the ‘external tradition’, but we need to pause here to consider the ways in which ‘India’ provides a discursive counterpoint to ISKCON’s ‘spiritual culture’. In so doing we need to recognise that the anti-caste position which largely defines this counterpoint has always been a fundamental feature of India’s own

*bhakti* traditions. One of the most important ideological factors influencing the success historically of *bhakti* movements in India, including the Bengali Vaisnava sects associated with Caitanya and his followers, is the strong anti-caste sentiment which has frequently accompanied the devotional expressions of *bhakti* (Pinch 1996; Bayly 1999). A theological emphasis on quality of devotion over purity of caste opened a path to liberation to members of all castes, denied the power and importance of the caste *brahmanas*' exclusive rights over Vedic ritual, and challenged the political exclusivity of Brahmanic Hinduism. As a spiritual and political vehicle for the subaltern, devotion or *bhakti* has been the theological catalyst for India's most populist religious movements.

In what follows I will be looking into more of Prabhupada's teachings on *varna*. As a concept which Srila Prabhupada inherited during his spiritual training under Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur in the Gaudiya Math, long before he ever established ISKCON in America, *varna* is articulated by Prabhupada as a fundamentally an anti-caste ideology with a universally religious rather than indigenous political agenda.<sup>14</sup> Prabhupada passed his teachings on *varna* on to his Western ISKCON disciples as a fundamental spiritual doctrine, despite the cultural ignorance of his disciples and the political irrelevance of caste ideologies to his Western audiences. Prabhupada's teachings contain many references to the anti-caste sentiments of the previous Gaudiya-Vaisnava *acaryas* in Prabhupada's tradition (or *sampradaya*). They also make many references to both 'India' and 'Hinduism' as counterpoint to ISKCON's *varnasrama* mission. My interest is not in the historical or political validity of Prabhupada's critique of these constructions, but in the 'sense' of historical, cultural and religious consequence which this critique confers upon the contemporary practice of 'spiritual culture' by non-Hindu ISKCON devotees. Two

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<sup>14</sup> Prabhupada's official biography records Prabhupada's early political involvement, and later

further points will need to be elaborated in relation to *varnasrama*. One is the effect of ISKCON's category of 'qualified brahminism' on devotee-congregation relations at the temple level, with a special focus on Sydney devotees' perceptions of their Indian/Indo-Fijian congregation. The second takes us back to Gurukula Maharaja's lectures, and to the origins of spiritual culture in the spiritual world. As I have indicated in preceding chapters, the connection between the 'cultural' and the cosmological is intrinsic to ISKCON's theology of 'spiritual culture'.

### **The sacred thread: caste and *brahmana* initiation**

Srila Prabhupada frequently condemned 'caste' in his lectures and writings. The question of caste was also a familiar and significant topic to many of the ISKCON devotees I met during my research, both in India and Australia. ISKCON devotees seem consciously aware of the fact that while anti-caste ideology was a crucial factor in the spread of *bhakti* movements in India, it was *sine qua non* in the 'transplantation' of Krishna Consciousness in the West. After all, Prabhupada could never have made disciples in the West if caste was a condition: Westerners are outcastes, *mlecchas*, they live outside the social divisions of caste, or *varna*, established within the Hindu social system of *varnasrama*.

In the Gaudiya tradition (*sampradaya*) from which ISKCON traces its lineage, there are two important historical moments (besides the actual introduction of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism to outcaste Westerners by Srila Prabhupada) to which devotees often refer when explicating ISKCON's position on caste. The first of these involves Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, the *acarya* credited within the *sampradaya* with single-handedly reviving Gaudiya-Vaisnavism in Bengal during the late nineteenth century. Bhaktivinode

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disenchantment, with the nationalist cause of the Gandhi movement (Goswami, S.d. 1993:21-35[vol.1]).

was an Indian *brahmana*, and also a magistrate in the colonial administration of Bengal. After intensive scholarly and spiritual efforts, Bhaktivinode discovered the birthplace of Sri Krsna Caitanya Mahaprabhu in Mayapur and became one of His greatest *acaryas*. Bhaktivinode is also famous for making a public demonstration against ‘caste brahminism’ (or *smarta* brahminism) by burning his sacred thread, the symbol of the twice-born (*dvija*) castes to which he had been privileged by right of his birth to a *brahmana* family. Bhaktivinode encouraged all of his disciples who were similarly privileged by birth to destroy their sacred threads.

The second historical moment which devotees use to illustrate ISKCON’s position on caste involves Bhaktivinode’s son, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur. Hagiographic accounts depict the birth of Bhaktivinode’s son as an auspicious event: ‘He was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck and draped across his chest like the sacred thread worn by *brahmanas*’. (Goswami, S.d. 1993:44[vol.1]). Bhaktisiddhanta, who was to institutionalise and revolutionise the preaching efforts of his father by founding the Gaudiya Math in 1920, inverted the symbolic gesture of his father towards the sacred thread, and demonstrably magnified its symbolic effect. Instead of destroying the *brahmana*’s thread, Bhaktisiddhanta bestowed the thread upon non-*brahmanas* in a process of initiation. Rather than a birthright, *brahmana* was now a *quality* of the spiritual aspirant, to be demonstrated through genuine devotion and commitment to *saddhana* (regulatory practice). Only by deserving and receiving *brahmana* initiation, then, can a devotee claim to be *dvija* – twice born, born into ‘culture’ or *varnasrama*.

As a disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta, Srila Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada continued the practice of *brahmana* initiation when he established ISKCON in America and elsewhere around the world. In ISKCON, *brahmana* initiation is a second initiation. First initiation, or

*nama* initiation, symbolises the devotee's surrender to Krishna and to His representative in the form of the initiating spiritual master. At *nama* initiation the spiritual master bestows a spiritual name upon his new disciple, and the disciple in turn vows to chant the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* for a minimum of sixteen rounds every day. In ISKCON, first initiation is most highly valued because it establishes the disciple's spiritual connection to the *parampara*, the disciplic succession which leads back – as a spiritual conduit running through the all the *acaryas* of the lineage – ultimately to Krishna Himself.<sup>15</sup> The disciple's own spiritual practice and chanting of the *mahamantra* are especially empowered by this connection, which devotees refer to through electrical metaphors, like a cable plugged into a power source. The spirit-soul's return to Godhead is entirely dependent on its energetic connection to the *parampara*. Krishna cannot be approached directly, but always through the channel of His pure representatives. When the spiritual master is satisfied that his disciple is established enough in his or her *saddhana* (practice), and often this takes several years of practice, he may grant a second initiation. At *brahmana* initiation the spiritual master whispers the secret *gayatri mantra* into the disciple's ear, and bestows upon the new *brahmana* the sacred thread of the twice-born. As well as the daily sixteen rounds of the *mahamantra* chanted upon *japa* beads, the disciple must from this point onwards also chant the *gayatri mantra* upon his or her *brahmana* thread. Initiated *brahmanas* with the requisite knowledge of *pancaratra* may serve temple deities as *pujaris*.

Prabhupada thus distinguishes the concept of *varna* from that of caste. Where caste is arbitrarily conditional on birth, membership in any of the four *varnas* is conditional on

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<sup>15</sup> The spiritual master is the first link in the *parampara*. Given that most spiritual masters in ISKCON today are Prabhupada-disciples, Prabhupada himself provides the next link, followed by Bhaktisiddhanta, then Gaurakisora dasa Babaji, then Bhaktivinode Thakur. By tradition, Bhaktivinode could not initiate his own son, Bhaktisiddhanta. The most significant figures in the *parampara* leading all the way back to Krishna are listed near the beginning of Prabhupada's *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* (1986a).



*guna* and *karma* – qualities and work. Any person exhibiting the qualities of a *brahmana* can be considered *brahmana*, and receive *brahmana* initiation. *Brahmanas* act in the mode of goodness (*sattya-guna*); *ksatriyas* in the mode of passion (*rajo-guna*); *vaisyas* in the combined modes of passion and ignorance; and *sudras* in the mode of ignorance (*tamo-guna*). ‘But in this age, in Kali-yuga, every man is so fallen that he cannot follow any regulative principles according to the Vedic scriptures. As such they have been accepted as *sudras*. *Kalau sudra-sambhavah*: “In this age everyone should be accepted as *sudra*”. But then how to elevate them?’ (Prabhupada, cited in dasa, A. op.cit.:20).

*Janmana jayate sudrah*. By birth everyone is a sudra. He has to be educated. *Samskarad bhaved dvijah*. *Dvija* means twice-born. One birth is by the father and mother, and the next birth is by the spiritual master and Vedic knowledge. So Vedic knowledge is the mother, and spiritual master is the father. Then one beomes *dvija*. Therefore the sacred thread is given. (10).

This second birth is a ‘cultural’ (*samskara*) birth, and it distinguishes civilised human life from animalistic life:

Unless society comes to the institution for accepting these four *varnas* and *asrama*, it is not human society. And in the human society there is understanding of God, not in the animal society. Therefore as the institution of *varnasrama* is now abolished, people are becoming godless. Because *varnasrama* means the institution or a set-up of society where gradually one can understand Visnu and worship Visnu. That is the system. Not that so-called *brahmana* and so-called *ksatriya*, they have no information of Visnu, and they are declaring, “I am *brahmana*”, “I am *ksatriya*”. They are called, according to *sastra*, *brahma-bandhu*, *dvija-bandhu*. One who is born of a *brahmana* family or a *ksatriya* family or *vaisya* family, but do not act as *brahmana*, *ksatriya*, and *vaisyas*, they are called *dvija-bandhu*. They are not

accepted as *dvija*. (22)

Prabhupada frequently cited the false implementation of ‘so-called’ *varnasrama* as the cause of India’s present poverty and social malaise:

Confusion has come to exist because in India, at a later day, the son of a *brahmana*, without having the brahminical qualifications, claimed to be a *brahmana*; and others, out of superstition or a traditional way, accepted him as a *brahmana*. Therefore the Indian social order was disrupted. But in our Krishna consciousness movement we are training *brahmanas* everywhere, because the world needs the brain of a *brahmana*. (6)

False or ‘materialistic’ *varnasrama* (*asura-varnasrama*) is directly equated with the practice of ‘Hinduism’. Several devotees with whom I talked recognised ‘Hindu’ as an historically constructed term designating, for them, a corruption in the true and eternal ‘Vedic’ tradition of *daiva varnasrama*:

This word Hindu is not a Sanskrit word. It was given by the Muhammadans. You know that there is a river, Indus, which in Sanskrit is called Sindhu. The Muhammadans pronounce *s* as *h*. Instead of Sindhu, they made it Hindu. So Hindu is a term that is not found in the Sanskrit dictionary, but it has come into use. But the real cultural institution is called *varnasrama*. (ibid.)

‘You may call the Vedas Hindu, but Hindu is a foreign name. We are not Hindus. Our real identification is *varnasrama*. *Varnasrama* denotes the followers of the Vedas, those who accept the human society in eight divisions of *varna* and *asrama*’ (Prabhupada 1974:2-3). Prabhupada’s critique of ‘Hinduism’ as an historical construction could find

support in recent academic work on the subject (e.g. Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995). But my concern is not with the historical or cultural legitimacy of the term ‘Hinduism’, or even with the validity of Prabhupada’s critique. I am much more interested in the way Prabhupada’s teachings on ‘India’ and ‘Hinduism’ actually serve to assign cultural and religious legitimacy to ISKCON by *denying* this legitimacy to Indians and Hindus.

Many devotees with whom I spoke at ISKCON Sydney were aware of Prabhupada’s arguments about India and Hinduism. Of particular interest, however, is the way specific points of reference for these arguments were found in the proximate form of Indian visitors to the ISKCON Sydney temple. Amongst the *brahmacaris* at Sydney at least, circumspect opinions of Indians often outweighed those expressed against women.

### **Caste, culture, and conversion**

During one week of my stay in the *brahmacari* ashram in Sydney, a young Indian man named Chandra was sharing a room with Bhakta Jack, myself, and the new Food for Life recruit, Bhakta Andrew. Bhakta Jack expressed some serious misgivings about Chandra. For a start, he hadn’t come to the centre seeking participation in the temple program. Through his family in New Delhi, Chandra was fortunate enough to possess a Life Membership in ISKCON, and one of the privileges of Life Membership is the open invitation to free accommodation at any ISKCON centre around the world.

ISKCON’s Life Member program was originally established by Srila Prabhupada in India, after he had returned to his home country with the first of his Western disciples. Life Membership was conceived as a way of receiving financial support for ISKCON from its Indian sympathisers. Life Membership itself requires a substantial donation (Zaidman (op.cit.) puts it at US\$1111), but there are no religious obligations as such. In India today,

ISKCON boasts to having many influential Life Members including high-profile industrialists and politicians, although the involvement of these supporters extends little further than their financial contributions to temple-building or welfare programs. Many Life Members, however, do participate in ISKCON as congregational members. The Life Member program exists in countries outside of India, but the overwhelming majority of Life Members are of Indian descent. Outside of India, they are predominantly diasporic Indians living in metropolitan centres, and are often the more active members of Indian-dominated congregations.

Chandra's right to stay in the ashram was begrudgingly acknowledged by Bhakta Jack. As Temple Commander in charge of temple duties, Jack was quick to categorise Chandra as a freeloading traveller who wouldn't pull his weight. What was worse, Chandra was a caste *brahmana* by birth, but he frequently escaped from his duties in the temple to smoke cigarettes on the street outside. For Jack, this was only one sign that Chandra did not 'act as *brahmana*' are supposed to act. Tensions between Jack and Chandra eventually escalated to the point where Jack expelled Chandra from the centre. Justifying this punitive action to me, Jack incredulously cited Chandra's parting taunt: "He's our God, not yours!"

This scenario is not representative of ethnic relations at ISKCON Sydney. But from my own proximate perspective as obedient participant-observer and 'potential convert', it did raise an important question about the position of Indians at the temple: are Indians potential converts? That is, are they subject to the same sense of transcendental inclusiveness which (as I explained in Chapter One) legitimated my own presence at an ISKCON temple? Perhaps Chandra did not participate in temple life as obligingly as I did, but the scornful language with which Bhakta Jack denounced this lack of participation – as the typical behaviour of a 'caste *brahmana*' – made particularly apparent to me that degrees

of participation at the temple level (and, by extension, at the *transcendental* level) are defined in cultural terms.

Prabhupada always stressed that the spiritual path in ISKCON is open to everyone, irrespective of ‘culture, caste, or creed’. ‘I am not this body, I am spirit-soul’ – which is something of a theological catch-phrase in ISKCON – applies to cultural and religious identifications (‘I am Indian, I am American, I am Christian, I am Hindu’) as much as to bodily identifications (‘I am a woman, I am a man...’). And certainly ISKCON has attracted devotees in all parts of the world, including India. Yet regardless of Prabhupada’s teachings about ISKCON’s ‘spiritual culture’ transcending cultural distinctions as such, the fact remains that cultural differences are an undeniable feature of the temple scene in many parts of ISKCON today – and these differences are measured by ISKCON devotees themselves in relation to commitment and *capacity* for spiritual advancement.

As I demonstrated in the last chapter, a principle ethnic distinction exists between the Anglo-Australian devotees who live and preach in the Sydney ISKCON centre, and the Indian/Indo-Fijian congregational members who attend its Sunday Feast and other programs. Chandra represented a departure from this usual social and ethnic distinction by actually staying (temporarily) in the ‘ethnically white’ (cf. Nye 2001:6) *brahmacari* ashram. Chandra is not himself a member of ISKCON Sydney’s congregation, although his Life Membership did indicate a certain knowledge of ISKCON as an institution, and at least some degree of prior affiliation (even if this was mediated by his family). In terms of the essentialised discourse informing Jack’s criticisms, however, Chandra’s Indian-ness puts him in exactly the same category as those Indians who make up ISKCON Sydney’s congregation. The category ‘Indian’ was also applied by Jack and other devotees to Indo-Fijians, who make up a good proportion of the Sunday congregation. ‘Hindu’ might seem

like a more accurately inclusive category in this case, but I would suggest that ‘Indian’ and ‘Hindu’ are essentially interchangeable pejorative terms in ISKCON. I never heard devotees acknowledge any actual ethnic or socio-cultural differences between Indian and Indo-Fijian immigrants, even those regarding caste (which is, in fact, a source of ethnic antagonism between these two communities (Ghosh 2000)).

As I indicated in the last chapter, ISKCON’s Indian congregational members in general rarely become fully participating devotees (Carey 1983,1987; Zaidman op.cit.). This is certainly the case at ISKCON Sydney, and this fact provides the immediate context and specific point of cultural reference for many of the attitudes expressed by my informants towards ‘Indians’ and ‘Hinduism’. I relate Bhakta Jack’s perceptions of Chandra’s apathetic stint in *brahmacarya* not merely to illustrate the existence of this ethnic and religious distinction, but to indicate how this distinction features as a discursive basis for the cultural affirmation of ISKCON devotees’ own sense of religious virtuosity. I must stress, therefore, that my principle concern here is with the *perception* of ‘Indians’ by non-Indian devotees, and not to the perceptions belonging to Indians (or Indo-Fijians) themselves. I want to stress here too that the negative attitudes expressed by devotees towards Indians should not be understood simply as *reactions* to Indian attitudes and practices. Prabhupada positioned ISKCON’s ‘spiritual culture’ against Indian ‘caste brahminism’ and ‘Hinduism’ before ISKCON temples in the West ever became important centres for Indian congregational communities. The ethnic distinctions to which I refer only reinforce these teachings and, I argue, they also serve to reify the convert’s sense of religious virtuosity.

In the last chapter I recorded an opinion about Indian congregations expressed by ISKCON Sydney’s Temple President: that ISKCON’s Indian congregations were a sign of

the movement's *failure* at effective proselytisation, because Indians do not convert; that Indians come to the temple for *darsana* and *prasadam* and for the sense of community generated by congregational worship, but they do not become ISKCON devotees themselves; that the spiritual path offered in ISKCON is not especially new or different to Indians; that there needs to be this sense of something new and different for someone to become a 'fired up' devotee willing to actively proselytise a spiritual discovery to others.

TP's observations point to what I regard as a fundamental feature of Hare Krishna spirituality. In more conceptual terms, they indicate that the *sense* of cultural otherness evoked for the Western practitioner by the cultural aesthetics of Hare Krishna spirituality is indissociable from the *sense of spirituality* which actually sustains the spiritual process itself. Unashamedly essentialist, TP's observations take it for granted that this sense of otherness must be differentially available to Western and Indian practitioners. TP's observations also recognise the undeniable fact regarding the ethnic division of participation at the Sydney centre. TP is by far the most authoritative devotee to comment on devotee-congregation relations within the social context of ISKCON Sydney. As Temple President, he is the person with whom the congregation's principle spokespersons must consult. TP's age (mid-forties), experience (he was initiated by Prabhupada at age twenty-one), and the fact that he is married with children (he is a *grhastha*), all undoubtedly contribute to the respect he seems to command amongst the congregational members.<sup>16</sup> TP's productive and diplomatic relations with his congregants presents an exception to the general lack of interaction that exists between Indians and other devotees. Having then observed TP exhibit this kind of rapport with his Indian congregational members, I found his comments about Indian congregations representing a *failure* within ISKCON both

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<sup>16</sup> Zaidman (op.cit.:216) also notes that the lack of religious authority attributed to temple residents by Indians

unexpected and revealing, to say the least. I was doubly surprised when the opinions TP had expressed to me in private became the subject of a public lecture he presented to an all-Indian audience.

### **On the self-edifying practice of preaching to the unconvertible**

TP was invited by some of his congregational members to give a talk and lead a *kirtana* for the Sri Mandir Society of NSW in Auburn, in Sydney's Western suburbs (an area with a high population of immigrants, including Indians and Indo-Fijians).

The Society is a Hindu cultural organisation currently managed by two young engineering students. Its main function is to support the operation of an 'all-India' temple (*mandir*), which had been established in 1979 in 'a vacated old church building in the middle of the industrial-cum-residential suburb' (Bilimoria 1989:60). 'The temple, dubbed as the 'first Hindu shrine in Australia'', Bilimoria (*ibid.*) records in his survey of *Hinduism in Australia*, '...was nothing glamorous, nothing traditional, just a temporary sanctuary where Hindus of diverse persuasions could meet and mingle, and join in worship or prayer or chanting with their families' (*ibid.*). The Society itself was established as 'a unique non-sectarian, non-partisan, benevolent community organization' (cited in *ibid.*), with the broad objective to 'promote rich Hindu Culture' (cited in *ibid.*:61) – although as 'a venue for bolstering cultural identity and heritage... the Sri Mandir Society project left much to be desired' (63) for some members of the community.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the 'temporary' site in

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did not seem to extend to the Temple President of ISKCON Philadelphia, or to his wife.

<sup>17</sup> Bilimoria records some of the 'factionalism and differences' within the Indian migrant community that saw funds and interest in The Sri Mandir Society diverted to the establishment of another organisation, The Sri Venkateswara Temple Association of NSW, which boasts a much grander *mandir* in Helensburgh, another suburb of Sydney (65-70). The situation of the Society today would appear to have altered little from 1989, when Bilimoria offered the following observations: 'There have always been plans to restructure the 'whole Temple Complex', meaning that either the present premises are renovated and extended (which the local



the former Salvation Army hall has remained to the present day, and has, according to Bilimoria, ‘been instrumental in bringing together a highly dispersed group of Hindus and given them a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging’ (62).

TP was accompanied to the *mandir* by half a dozen devotees from the ISKCON centre (and myself), who performed *kirtana* before an audience of about sixty Indian supporters of the Sri Mandir Society. One of the devotees attending was Bhakta Jack, who was especially disapproving of the standards maintained at the Mandir. For a start, the Radha-Krishna deities had to share the large shrine with Siva, Ganesa, and an inclusive range of other deities. The shrine was decorated with shiny Christmas decorations, tinsel and fairy lights, and the old carpet on the floor of the hall was – according to Jack – entirely unacceptable for a temple. Jack made immediate comparisons with the Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha Mandir of ISKCON Sydney, with its polished marble floor and lavishly attired Radha-Krishna deities occupying centre stage (see Picture 2 in the preceding chapter). With some disdain, Jack suggested to me that the Indians present were wealthy, but spent all their money on ‘materialistic’ pursuits instead of providing for their temple and deities (Auburn, I must point out, is by no means a ‘wealthy’ region of Sydney).

During his lecture, TP also made comparisons between the ‘chipboard and melamine’ shrine behind him and the ‘opulent’ and ‘well looked after’ ISKCON temple in North Sydney. But TP’s comparisons were significantly more nuanced than Jack’s, both culturally and theologically. Leading up to his comparison, TP had been making the theological point that *arcana*, or temple deity worship, is not the ideal form of self-realisation in the Kali-yuga, the present Age of spiritual degradation. *Arcana* was the

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Council has forbidden on all kinds of seemingly spurious grounds ), or that a more suitable location is found elsewhere for a decent temple and cultural outfit. No further development at Auburn has taken place and the former church stands as an impoverished monument to the (stated) ‘permanent nucleus for propagation of

recommended form of worship and spiritual advancement during Dvarapa-yuga, the previous Age of opulence, in which ‘Vedic culture’ was practiced by everyone, and when



**Picture 7 Members of The Sri Mandir Society of NSW listening to TP’s lecture**

truly sumptuous offerings could be made to deities. In comparison, TP pointed out, even the seemingly impressive deity worship offered in ISKCON temples is merely ‘simple’. Even so, the simple deity worship of this Age is necessary, and its performance requires ‘qualified *brahmanas*’:

So for the purpose of worship of the deity we need qualified *brahmanas*. Again, the purpose of *diksa* [first initiation; and] the purpose of the sacred thread, second initiation, is to be able to perform the *pancaratrika* system of worship. But who is qualified? Of course we give *brahmana* initiation, we give second initiation, for the worship of the deity. And we do simple worship. If anybody’s been to our temple in North Sydney, we see there everybody will think this is very very nice, this is very opulent, very nice temple room, very nice deities, well looked after. But this is very simple, very simple level of worship, and still for that we require a degree of qualified *brahmanas*. We must come to the platform of becoming *suci*, clean. [TP cites a Sanskrit *sloka*, which he immediately translates as:] ‘If we remember Krishna

constantly, then internally, externally, we are considered to be clean'... Within and without, we are clean, we are *sucihi*: this is a *brahmana*. If we always chant Hare Krishna, we become *suci*, therefore we become naturally *brahmana*. So after some training we give *brahmana* or *gayatri mantra* to the candidate, who becomes *dvija*, or twice-born. So therefore we can perform some deity worship, some *arcana*, some *puja*. But that is simple standard. That is not the main process. The main process in Kali-yuga is *bhagavata-vidhi*...

The actual process of spiritual advancement in Kali-yuga, TP lectured, was provided by Sri Krsna Caitanya Mahaprabhu: *hari nama sankirtana*, the chanting of the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*. *Bhagavata-vidhi* is another name for the process of hearing, chanting, and remembering Krishna. Through this process even *mlecchas* (outcastes, in this context 'Westerners') become purified and automatically qualify as *brahmanas*. Importantly, this qualification is 'natural' and automatic because the process actually transcends the 'brahminical' as such:

So *bhagavata-vidhi* takes us from *mleccha* to *mahabhagavata*, *uttama-adhikari*: pure devotee of the Lord... So in the Krishna Consciousness movement we are practicing advancing in devotional service to Krishna. This is beyond brahminical culture. This is pure devotional culture. *Uttama-bhakti* culture.

In itself, 'brahminical culture' is not sufficient for advancement in Krishna Consciousness. At its most perfected stage, 'brahminical culture' can only facilitate the attainment of *mukti*, or liberation: the attainment of Brahman realisation, immersion in Krishna's impersonal effulgence (this is the inferior form of self-realisation pursued by *advaitins*, non-dualists, *mayavadis*). 'Pure brahminical culture', or 'Vaisnava brahminical culture' – 'brahminical culture' that is 'dovetailed' in the service of Krishna and therefore

pure ‘devotional culture’ – rejects this inferior form of realisation in favour of devotional service to God, the only means to love of God (*bhakti*, or *Kṛṣṇa-prema*).

TP also pointed out that Siva and Ganesa, who occupy prominent positions on the Auburn shrine, are in fact devotees of Krishna, and therefore ‘Vaisnava’. Plainly targeting any possible Saivites or Advaitins in his audience, TP explained how Lord Siva was in fact performing devotional service to Krishna when he incarnated as Sankaracarya, the famous ninth-century exponent of non-dualism, or Advaita Vedanta. Siva appeared as Sankaracarya in order to promote the ‘regulative principles’ of ‘brahminical culture’ in an otherwise degraded age of atheism and materialism. In this service, Siva was merely preparing the groundwork for Krishna’s own appearance as Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu in fifteenth century Bengal. In the following extract, TP enters this narrative about Siva via an important postulation on the function of the Sri Mandir Society for its members:

What is this religion to be concerned for? It is something far from us, far away from us, or else it’s simply some heritage, a culture. So we form social Society just to preserve the *saris* and the *dhotis*. Just to preserve these things, but what is inherently good about these things? They are only good because they reflect the real thing. But what is the real thing? Without the real thing this is simply showbottle, it is superficial, the real thing is [Sanskrit *sloka*...], ‘I am eternally *jīva*, the *jīva* soul. And the *jīva svarupa*, the *svarupa*, the original identity of the *jīva* is *kṛṣṇa nitya-dāsa*... ‘I am the eternal servant of Krishna’. This point has to be understood. This is the central point of Vedic culture. The whole of Vedic culture rested on this point. Originally India was Vedic, and Vedic was Krishna Conscious. There was no confusion on these things. Where the confusion comes from? It comes from Sankaracarya, for one, who was Lord Siva deputed by Krishna to bewilder the atheistic class of people. This story is described in the *Puranas*. Lord Siva was directed by the Supreme Lord: ‘You speak this confused atheistic idea, this *advaita dharma*, non-dual philosophy, and bewilder everyone, because they are all nonsense and they all want sense gratification. They are all becoming materialistic, so at least

you explain to them an idea which will force them to give up sense gratification, to stop illicit sex, meat eating, intoxication and gambling, all these things'. Because even to follow these impersonal – the 'One' idea – one has to be principled. Better to be impersonal than destined to hell.... When we become atheistic we become materialistic. When we become materialistic, we become condemned to go to hell. So Sankaracarya, Lord Siva, he speaks very strongly and establishes principles. Vedic study, regulative principles, in this way saving the people from going to hell, bringing some sanity into the situation... Then after Sankaracarya, Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu appears...

There is more at stake in these words than the usurpation of doctrinal difference in the name of 'Vaisnavism'. The cultural context of these words is what makes them especially remarkable. They begin with TP speaking 'as' his audience: 'What is this religion to be concerned for? It is something far from us, far away from us, or else it's simply some heritage, a culture. So we form social Society just to preserve the *saris* and the *dhotis*'. Then, within this context of cultural 'preservation', TP forces a fundamental point of theology: 'these things [the *saris* and the *dhotis*]... are only good because they *reflect the real thing*' (my emphasis). 'But what is the real thing?' 'The real thing' is not 'showbottle', 'superficial', or (to use Gurukula Maharaja's term) 'external'. *Saris*, *dhotis*, and even the 'Vedic' principles of 'brahminical culture' are merely 'superficial' if not utilised in pursuit of Krishna Consciousness. These things, after all, are also used by non-Vaisnavas or so-called 'Hindus'.

TP leaves the very fine distinction between 'superficial' and 'the real thing' for his concluding statements. He approaches this distinction via a testimony, a testimony to the *experiential* veracity of Sri Krsna Caitanya Mahaprabhu's method of *hari nama sankirtana*:

...from *Bhagavad-gita*, with the guidance of guru, then everything becomes very clear. Naturally we will be enthusiastic. It's not hard, it's not difficult. It's

practical, and it's tangible experience. We feel our progress tangibly, day by day by day. It is not some blind faith thing, we hope for forty years we did the right thing, only to discover actually we are still just the same fool we always were. Self realisation in Krishna Consciousness is not like that. The experience of increasing awareness, understanding, realisation, enthusiasm, expertise in devotional service to Krishna, it is a progressive development. So we have to simply learn the process. It is practical, it works, it makes everything meaningful, real. But we have to learn it. And it simply begins with chanting Hare Krishna *mantra*. Chant this *mantra*, Hare Krishna *mantra*. This is *mahamantra*, great *mantra*, meant especially for Kali-Yuga, for our deliverance. We should simply take it, take this *mahamantra*: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, [the devotees and some audience members join in] Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. You think we are all interested in becoming Hindus? These girls here, wearing a *sari*, they have white skin, you think they're interested in becoming Hindus? That all of a sudden I've become inspired, I want to wear a *dhoti* to become a Hindu? Why do I want to become a Hindu for? You think we're so impressed with the culture? [laughter, from several audience members] It's not that impressive. You're more impressed with our culture. Well why are you here? You're all wearing jeans, T-shirts. No, this is self realisation. *Self realisation*. Becoming spiritually conscious and aware. This culture is natural. Why *saris*, *dhotis*? Because in the spiritual world this is what Krishna wears. You see on the deity, Krishna is not wearing a pair of jeans. God does not wear a three-piece suit. What does God wear? God wears wonderful clothes, he wears *dhoti*, *chaddar*, garland, he wears these things. What does Radharani wear? She wears *sari*. Why do we wear these things? Because this is Krishna culture. It is Krishna culture. And by adopting these things it helps us to cultivate understanding and awareness. It helps us to become more Krishna Conscious. That's why we do this. Not we are imitating Hindus. We are becoming Krishna Conscious, and we want to cultivate that consciousness. [pause] We are not Hindus. And furthermore, you are not Hindus. We are all eternal spirit-soul. We are not the material body, and we have nothing to do with these external things. So let us come to this platform of understanding. This is the message of the *Gita*. Want to understand *Gita*? This is the conclusion.

The subtle line between ‘external things’ and ‘the real thing’ marks a crucial cultural and religious difference. In the one instance, ‘the *saris* and the *dhotis*’ are ‘superficial’ and ‘external’ when associated with ‘some heritage, a culture’ dissociated from Krishna Consciousness. But then in the other they are ‘good because they *reflect* the real thing’: ‘Krishna culture’. In the latter case, ‘reflection’ is fundamentally a relationship between a spiritual methodology and its ‘practical’ or experiential efficacy. This is a relationship between the practice of ‘Krishna culture’ and the ‘cultivation’ of Krishna Consciousness. TP makes it clear that ‘the real thing’ is the spiritual world itself, where Radha wears a *sari* and Krishna wears a *dhoti*, and ‘*by adopting these things it helps us to cultivate understanding and awareness. It helps us to become more Krishna Conscious*’ (my emphasis). ‘Krishna culture’ reflects the spiritual world, and it is for this sole reason that ‘Krishna culture’ facilitates the development of Krishna Consciousness, as the process of ‘remembering’ one’s own original identity as an eternal inhabitant of the spiritual world. The spiritual process is thus figured as mimetic technique, in which the practitioner physically models his or her actions on the divine model provided by the inhabitants of the spiritual world; and mimesis effects anamnesis, or the gradual ‘remembrance’ (*smarana*) of one’s true self-identity (*svarupa*), which has been forgotten in the ‘material’ illusion of bodily and cultural identifications.

It is crucial to remember, though, that when TP poses the rhetorical question, ‘Why do *we* wear these things?’, ‘we’ in this context refers to TP and half a dozen Anglo-Australian devotees. TP is undoubtedly aware that his lecture will be unlikely to convince any of the sixty or so Indian members of the Sri Mandir Society to become committed ISKCON devotees. In this context, it is ‘the *saris* and the *dhotis*’ which adorn the ‘white skin’ of ISKCON devotees which are *spiritual*, ‘the real thing’. But on Indians they are

merely the ‘superficial’, ‘external’, or ‘*material*’ signs of a constructed ethnic or ‘Hindu’ identity. This cultural difference seems essential in itself to the *experiential* efficacy of ‘Krishna culture’ for the Western devotee. As Bhakta Jack’s disdain towards the Sri Mandir Society seems to testify, the opportunity to preach to an Indian audience is also an opportunity to become ‘fired up’ about one’s own spirituality by reifying the cultural-experiential difference of being a convert. It is in this sense that I view the spiritual process in ISKCON as one of *mimetic excess*, in which the ‘cultural’ elements of embodied practice – like ‘the *saris* and the *dhotis*’ for example – are *spiritualised* precisely to the extent that they exceed their own Indian-ness.

### **Practical transcendence: ‘spiritual culture’ as mimetic technique**

‘Why do we wear these things?’ – I remember TP answering a similar question on the day I first arranged with him to stay at the ISKCON centre. ‘What should I wear?’ was my question. TP directed me to Bhakta Jack, the Temple Commander, who would show me how to dress like a devotee, how to apply *tilaka*, and supply me with a set of *japa* beads for chanting Hare Krishna. I was to stay in the *brahmachari* ashram upstairs, but as I had not yet surrendered to a life of renunciation, I would wear white, and I did not need to ‘shave up’ for the time being (I could keep my precious ponytail). Jeans and a T-shirt were my usual garb when I visited the temple on Sunday afternoons, but staying in the ashram required my attendance at *mangala-arati*, and TP expected to see me there at 4.30 the next morning in full devotional attire. A *dhoti* is civilised dress, he explained. It is also like a policeman’s uniform: it is a sign of authority which people recognise, and which also makes the wearer feel authoritative. If you dress like a devotee, then you *feel* like a devotee.



This advice takes on a particular significance when the details of ‘spiritual culture’ are recognised as the ‘practical’ means of spiritual development in ISKCON. Bhakta Jack, who instructed me in many of the details of devotional life – including how to dress like a devotee – once offered some comparable advice by way of a simple anecdote. The anecdote relates an instruction that Srila Prabhupada once gave to a reluctant disciple. The reluctant disciple had protested to Prabhupada that, although he was attracted to Krishna Consciousness in principle, he felt uncomfortable about prostrating himself before the guru. Prabhupada advised him that it did not matter whether or not one *felt* like prostrating: that if one simply began to prostrate regularly enough, *then* one would develop a feeling for it. The reluctant disciple soon enough became a committed devotee.

Prabhupada’s advice plainly instructs the neophyte to surrender ‘belief’ or ‘intention’ in favour of ‘practice’. Spiritual motivation comes from practice, and not the other way around. ‘We feel our progress tangibly, day by day by day... The experience of increasing awareness, understanding, realisation, enthusiasm, expertise in devotional service to Krishna, it is a progressive development. So we have to simply learn the process. It is practical, it works, it makes everything meaningful, real. But we have to learn it’. The preceding discussion points to only some of the ways in which this process is made ‘tangible’ through the *practice of cultural difference*. ‘Krishna culture’ is ‘spiritual culture’ because it reflects the spiritual world – but it is also spiritual because of what it is not: the ‘external’ or ‘material’ signs of an ethnic identity: ‘These girls here, wearing a *sari*, they have white skin, you think they’re interested in becoming Hindus?’; ‘We are not imitating Hindus’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Compare TP’s rhetorical question – ‘you think we’re interested in becoming Hindus?’ – to Nye’s (2001) observation, which I cited last chapter, that the ‘ethnicity of white western devotees also proved an ironic attraction [for Indian Hindus]. The fact that these people had actually taken the trouble to *become* Hindus

*Imitation*, though, in a very unique sense, appears to be fundamental to spiritual practice in ISKCON. TP hinted at this process when he pointed out that devotees dress *like* Radha and Krishna dress in the spiritual world. But perhaps we should not take TP too literally on this point. In reality, while female devotees in ISKCON all wear *saris*, and male devotees like TP certainly wear things like ‘*dhoti*, *chaddar*, [and, often when preaching] garland’, devotees do not actually dress in the same opulent fashion in which Radha and Krishna are presented in depictions of Their divine *lila* in Goloka Vrindavana. *Brahmacaris* wear the uniform saffron-coloured *dhoti* of renunciation, and *grhasthas* like TP wear uniform white. Krishna, on the other hand, wears an exquisite array of patterns and colours. Male devotees also shave their heads in renunciation, whereas Krishna has long dark locks. TP’s comments should not be taken out of cultural context, of course. He was trying to make a point: that where ‘the externals’ of Hindu or Brahmanic culture are merely superficial signs of ‘some heritage, a culture’, ‘Krishna culture... reflects the real thing’. The mimetic relationship of ‘reflection’ that TP posits between ‘spiritual culture’ and ‘the real thing’ becomes more difficult to define, however, when we acknowledge that ‘the real thing’ – the spiritual world of Goloka Vrindavana as described in the Tenth Canto of *Srimad Bhagavatam* (*Bhagavata Purana*) – does not appear to adhere to all the rules, regulations, aesthetic and ascetic modes that define ‘spiritual culture’ as the ‘model’ life of renunciation in ISKCON.

The cultivation of Krishna Consciousness, the spiritual path back to Godhead, the path back to the spiritual world, requires some ‘practical’ form of imitation of the transcendent. But if the ‘original’ of mimetic practice in ISKCON is the spiritual world itself, this cannot be accessed on the strength of a devotee’s own independent intention: a

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proved a challenge to the Indian visitors’ (26-27; original emphasis).

devotee cannot *see* the spiritual world, inspect it, and hence make of copy of the original ‘spiritual culture’. Such a vision requires Krishna Consciousness, and to acquire this vision requires training, instruction, practice – and Krishna’s mercy. The original, or the transcendental model – the ‘spiritual culture’ practiced by Radha and Krishna in the spiritual world – only becomes gradually manifest to the devotee through the practice of ‘spiritual culture’ in this material world. ‘Spiritual culture’, as a reflection of the spiritual world, might be considered the model for imitation in ISKCON. But ‘spiritual culture’ is not just a model – an original which stands in relationship to a copy – because ‘spiritual culture’ is also the imitative *practice* itself, and the practice produces the transcendental result. ‘Spiritual culture’ must be learned, and as TP made clear, it is this process of learning itself which produces the practical, developmental experience of progress in Krishna Consciousness: ‘And what is culture? Culture is training. Culture is training, that’s all it is. We cultivate plants, we train a vine up a post, we are cultivating, we are culturing. We are training, we have to train ourselves. It’s not a sentimental thing, ‘Oh my culture’, ‘Oh my culture’’. Here again, in the process of legitimating and reifying ‘spiritual culture’, TP must deny cultural validity to his Hindu audience.

In the next chapter I explore more fully ISKCON’s theology of mimetic practice. I do so primarily by comparing ISKCON orthodoxy to the theology and practice of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism in India. Of particular value to my comparative analysis is the study made of Vrindavana’s Gaudiya-Vaisnavas by Haberman (1988) in his book *Acting as a Way of Salvation*. Haberman’s study is valuable for two reasons. First, it provides a conceptual model for interpreting the phenomenological or affective dimensions of ‘imitation’ as *saddhana*, or religious technique, in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. Haberman’s ‘acting’ paradigm is intended to demonstrate how ‘action... engages emotion’ (66) as the practitioner of

Gaudiya-Vaisnavism physically models his or her actions on the ‘divine model’ provided by Radha and the *gopis* of Vraja (Krishna’s cowherdess companions). Second, Haberman’s study provides a theological point of comparison by which I can clearly demonstrate some of the key theological differences which exist between ISKCON and its source tradition in India, especially as these differences relate to both the logic and the ‘model’ of religious imitation in ISKCON.

I argue that Haberman’s ‘acting’ paradigm of religious ‘imitation’ fails to realise that the ‘divine model’ is never an objectively observable reality to be imitated, but is actually *manifested* in the intersubjective context of spiritual practice. I would apply an analogous argument to ISKCON’s relationship to the Indian ‘culture’ of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism: for while ISKCON can certainly be considered to be a form of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, ISKCON does not itself stand in a relationship of ‘imitation’ to an Indian original as a merely faithful copy. I show that while a certain logic of religious and cultural ‘imitation’ informs spiritual practice in ISKCON, ISKCON’s teachings on the ‘divine model’ in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism represent a significant theological departure from the Indian tradition –and this departure has led to real sectarian tensions in the development of ISKCON’s institutional sense of identity. As the ‘divine model’ of mimetic practice in ISKCON, then, the ‘spiritual culture’ embodied by Srila Prabhupada and carried by him to the West is understood by ISKCON devotees to *exceed* even the traditional models of spiritual practice provided by Gaudiya-Vaisnavism.

As a transcendental messenger not only from India, but from the spiritual world itself, and as the literal embodiment of ‘spiritual culture’ in practice, it is in fact Srila Prabhupada himself who provides the exemplary model for ‘imitation’ in ISKCON. But Srila Prabhupada’s *transcendental presence* only becomes *manifest* in mimetic practice

itself. In Chapters Five and Six I will explore the various ways in which hagiography and citational practice operate as the mimetic mechanisms by which Prabhupada as ‘divine model’ is embodied in the spiritual practice of ISKCON devotees.

But before entering into the second half of this thesis and these further theological and conceptual explorations of Hare Krishna spirituality, I want to conclude this present chapter by returning to where it began: Gurukula Maharaja’s hut. Here – under a thatched roof, amongst the palm trees and manicured gardens of the Mayapur *gurukula*, situated ‘in the field’ in West Bengal, near a rice-field on one of the nine islands of Navadvipa formed amidst the merging, mutable flows of the sacred Ganga, Saraswati and Jalangi rivers – the sense of otherness I have attributed to ISKCON’s ‘spiritual culture’ became manifest for me in its most otherworldly sense. Perhaps I was influenced in this feeling by one of my travelling companions, a young *brahmachari* from Sydney, who had described the Mayapur *gurukula* as ‘the spiritual world itself’ *before* either of us had ever seen it for ourselves. In this most ‘spiritual’ of contexts, then, Maharaja delivered some more of his ‘brahminical’ expertise on the topic of *daiva varnasrama*, ‘spiritual culture’ – the way or *dharma* for returning to the spiritual world:

*Dharma* comes from the Lord, right. It’s coming from God. God establishes *dharma*. [Sanskrit *sloka*...], means the Lord establishes *dharma*. So *dharma* and *varnasrama* are synonymous then. When we say *sad-dharma*, that means those activities that takes us to the spiritual realm, those that are transcendental activities. So now comes in another aspect that we need to understand, is that what is spiritual, right? Because we see the activity we are doing, we are doing an activity, it’s our material body, right? It’s being performed with the material energy. We are moving around some material energy, right? Our mind is material, our intelligence is material, the ego is material, right? And Krishna mentions everything is being pushed around by the modes of nature. We only desire, we desire to do something, the modes of nature make it happen. So then how is it spiritual, right? Krishna points out,

Prabhupada points out in the *Gita* that the devotee is going to the market and the *karmi* is going to the market; the *karmi* is cooking, the devotee is cooking; the *karmi* is eating, the devotee is eating. So what's the difference? The difference is, is 'cause the devotee does it for Krishna. So when he does it for Krishna he becomes empowered... this is the secret of the *daiva varnasrama* system, of the devotional process.

The answer to the questions 'what is spiritual...?' and 'how is it spiritual?' is a 'secret'. This secret, or what Maharaja also referred to as 'the mystery of the devotional process and the mystery of the whole *daiva varnasrama*', is a mystery as to how the *seemingly* 'material' and 'external' activities of spiritual practice are in fact 'spiritual': 'the real thing'. In the last two chapters I have sought to demonstrate how a *sense* of the mysterious and a *sense* of the spiritual is evoked for the Western convert through the practice and production of cultural difference. But the key difference here lies not in the classic construction of an East-West dichotomy, or in the neo-Hindu opposition between 'Indian spirituality' and 'Western materialism' (cf. King 1978), or even in a cultural opposition between life in ISKCON and the Western devotee's prior '*karmi*' existence. These constructions certainly have their place in Hare Krishna spiritual discourse, but it is in the further differentiation between ISKCON and the 'Indian' that the spiritual *rasa* of Krishna Consciousness is refined and extracted for the Western convert from any 'material' sign of cultural identity.

## Chapter Four

### ISKCON and imitation: appropriating the model in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism

#### **“Who is the girl with Krsna?”: revealing and concealing the conjugal *rasa***

The Divine Couple, Radha and Krishna, grace the front cover of the *Krsna* book adorned in exquisite jewellery and garlands of flowers. Krishna wears a *dhoti*, and a peacock feather protrudes from His ornate headdress; Radha wears a beautiful *sari*, and leans gently on her beloved. Krishna’s flute is held daintily between the two lovers.

Inside the *Krsna* book, below an untranslated Sanskrit *sloka* (verse), appear the following first lines of Srila Prabhupada’s Preface: ‘In these Western countries, when someone sees the cover of a book like *Krsna*, he immediately asks, “Who is Krsna? Who is the girl with Krsna?”’ (Prabhupada 1970b:xi). These words convoke the reader to the text, to witness therein Prabhupada’s unique revelation of the glorious ‘transcendental pastimes’ (*lila*) of Krishna and His beloved Radharani. They speak for the reader, assuming the reader’s inquisitiveness and cultural ignorance (a Hindu would not ask these questions). In so doing, they present the book in hand as if it had been verily summoned to explain itself, to answer the questions posed by its curious presence, to perform its own cultural translation for the benefit of ‘these Western countries’ in which it finds itself so auspiciously placed.

Devotees affectionately refer to it as ‘the *Krsna* book’, but the full title of Prabhupada’s text is *Krsna: The Supreme Personality of Godhead*. This partially answers question number one, “Who is Krsna?” But of course, the ultimate answer to this question is available only to the fully-realised soul; that is, to someone like Prabhupada, who is realised in his or her constitutional relationship with Krishna. The answer will not truly be known simply by reading once through the *Krsna* book. The question itself, though, is crucial: this is really the starting point of the spiritual process. Hence the importance of publicly distributing ‘a book like *Krsna*’, for even the cover of such a book may be enough to ‘plant the seed’ of spiritual curiosity and inquiry. Publicly chanting ‘Hare Krishna’ can produce a similar effect, as Prabhupada himself so successfully demonstrated. ‘What does “Hare Krishna” mean?’ is the desired question, calling forth the response, ““Krishna” is the Name of the Lord; “Hare” is the energy of the Lord’. (“Hare” means “O Hara,” “O Stealer.” Hara is she who steals the mind of Krsna; she is Radha’. (Choudhury 1985:5)). It is in these moments of translation, literal and cultural, that the Word and Name of Krishna are being propagated by Prabhupada’s preaching movement.

The *Krsna* book is presented by Prabhupada as ‘A Summary Study of Srila Vyasadeva’s *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Tenth Canto’. Of the twelve cantos (eighteen thousand verses in all) comprising *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (*Bhagavata Purana*), the Tenth is the only one to reveal the intimate ‘transcendental pastimes’ – or *lila* – of Radha, Krishna, and Their close associates: the *gopis* (cowherd girls), *gopas* (cowherd boys), and other inhabitants of Vraja. Situated within the pastureland region of Vraja, as described in the Tenth Canto, we find the forest of Vrindavana. This is the place most secret and special to Gaudiya-Vaisnavas, because this is where Radha and Krishna reveal Their most intimate and esoteric of ‘pastimes’ in the conjugal ‘mood’ of *madhurya-rasa*. This is also Goloka



Vrindavana: ‘the spiritual world’ itself and home of the spirit-soul (*jiva*), a final return to which is the spiritual aspiration of all Gaudiya-Vaisnavas (including ISKCON devotees).

The practical process of returning to ‘the spiritual world’ is the principle subject matter of the present chapter. ‘*Sravana, kirtana, smarana*’ is the threefold process readily cited by devotees in ISKCON: ‘*sravana*’ – ‘hearing’ the narrated pastimes (*lila*) of Lord Krishna, as revealed in Prabhupada’s translations of Vaisnava scripture; ‘*kirtana*’ – ‘praising’ the Lord by reciting His transcendental pastimes and chanting His Holy Name; ‘*smarana*’ – ‘remembering’ Krishna, which is facilitated by the other two processes, *sravana* and *kirtana*, and which is really both the means and end of salvation, of ‘remembering’ one’s own original, forgotten identity as spirit-soul in Krishna’s transcendental abode. ‘*Kirtana*’, especially in the form of ‘*sankirtana*’ – congregational chanting of the Holy Name – is the spiritual practice most readily identifiable with the Hare Krishna movement in the West. But ‘*sravana*’, the process of ‘hearing’ the transcendental ‘nectar’ of Krishna’s narrated pastimes, is the feature of Hare Krishna spiritual practice which will emerge as being of key importance in the following account. The importance of this process will be revealed as I examine some of the significant theological controversies which it has engendered in ISKCON.

Prabhupada advises readers of the *Bhagavatam* that ‘one will be unable to capture the effects of the Tenth Canto without going through the first nine cantos’ (Prabhupada 1985:xvi). The first nine cantos prepare the reader with all the foundations of Vaisnava creation and cosmology, so by the time the amorous young cowherd boy named Krishna appears in the Tenth, the reader should know that in reality this is God Himself, revealing His most intimate of relationships with the spirit-souls. Notwithstanding this cautionary advice, Prabhupada was concerned nevertheless to present his Western disciples with the

most central of *sutras* in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism early in his proselytising mission. Accurately predicting that his time left for translating the *Bhagavatam* in proper sequence was too short, he presented the English-language Summary Study of the Tenth Canto (the *Krsna* book) before completing the preceding nine.<sup>1</sup> The risk of prematurely revealing the most esoteric, and therefore most distortable, of Krishna's *lila* was one of Prabhupada's greatest concerns. This concern is widely understood and shared amongst Prabhupada's followers in ISKCON, and can be readily identified with one basic theological problem: the potential misinterpretation, on the part of the unqualified religious practitioner, of the transcendental exchange between Krishna and the *gopis* as a mundane form of eroticism. This risk was understood by Prabhupada to be magnified in 'these Western countries', given what he regarded to be a Western cultural proclivity toward pornography and promiscuity. Devotees say, however, that Prabhupada composed the *Krsna* book in such a way as to be read by the neophyte, who would remain protected from the 'offence' of misinterpretation by Prabhupada's careful exegesis. The *Krsna* book is widely distributed by ISKCON devotees, and it is typically the first (not the tenth) canto of the *Bhagavatam* to be read by neophytes.

There is an extensive spiritual literature available to devotees in ISKCON, but the *Krsna* book and the more formally presented translation of the Tenth Canto found in Prabhupada's *Srimad-Bhagavatam* are the only textual sources that directly describe the ultimate destination for the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness: 'the spiritual world' of Goloka Vrindavana. Yet despite its apparent availability (albeit in an insulated, summary, approachable form), the sacred narrative of the Krishna-*lila* – which features Radha and Krishna together in Vrindavana – does not feature in formal contexts of scriptural

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<sup>1</sup> Prabhupada died before finishing his translation of all twelve cantos of *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, a task he had begun in Vrindavana, India, in preparation for his preaching mission to America. This task was completed by one of Prabhupada's trusted and learned American disciples, a Sanskrit scholar and influential ISKCON guru

instruction in ISKCON. The *Krsna* book may provide the neophyte with an initial ‘taste’ for the Krishna-*lila*. It may even serve to inspire the essential questions, “Who is Krsna? Who is the girl with Krsna?” But the hard work of then deserving or being ‘qualified’ for such knowledge actually dominates the spiritual life in ISKCON. The regulative, ascetic practice of ‘spiritual culture’, in all its practical detail, is what really defines the daily spiritual pursuit of ISKCON devotees, and it does so throughout the progressive stages of spiritual development (*asrama*) offered in ISKCON. In contexts of scriptural instruction, the question “Who is Krsna?” actually becomes dissociated from its correlative, “Who is the girl with Krsna?” The core scriptures in ISKCON, like the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* and the other cantos of the *Bhagavatam*, describe Krishna’s ‘transcendental activities’ (*lila*) which take place outside of the intimate and playful Vraja-Vrindavana context traditionally celebrated by Gaudiya-Vaisnavas. In these other contexts, Krishna reveals the more princely, majestic, or godly aspects of His divine nature. Krishna’s flirtatious associations with the *gopis* of Vraja are replaced, for example, by His masculine associations with the *ksatriya* (warrior caste) Pandavas. Krishna’s young *gopi* lover, Radha, is conspicuously absent from these contexts. In fact, later editions of the *Krsna* book have even replaced the image of the Divine Couple with others scenes from Krishna’s story, in which Krishna is accompanied by His male companions. Radha’s absence in this context is made all the more conspicuous by the fact the first lines of Prabhupada’s Preface, which refer directly to the book’s front cover – ‘when someone sees the cover of a book like *Krsna*, he immediately asks, “Who is Krsna? Who is the girl with Krsna?”’ – are still included in the same form in these later editions.

Radha's absence from narrative practice (or from the spiritual practice of *śravaṇa* – 'hearing') is perhaps most notable when contrasted to Her ubiquitous visual presence in ISKCON. Radha and Krishna typically appear *together*, for instance, in the form of pictorial depictions (like the one on the cover of the original *Kṛṣṇa* book) which adorn the walls of ISKCON temples and give a sense of colour and form to the spiritual world (and we should always remember, as I stressed in Chapter One, that every temple is, in ultimate reality, 'non-different' to the spiritual world – even as the spiritual world itself is not confined by temple walls). Radha's narrative absence also contrasts with the tangible presence of the Radha-Gopinatha deities (Gopinatha is the form which Krishna takes – as 'Master of the *gopīs*' – on the shrine at ISKCON Sydney), which preside together over temple worship, facilitating loving reciprocity between devotees and the Divine Couple; and also with the almost constant aural presence of Radha (Hara) and Krishna together in the form of the *mahamantra* – 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna...'

The notable absence of stories about Radha and Krishna from formalised narrative practice in ISKCON also stands in contrast to the regular presence of such stories (known as *katha*) in orthodox Gaudiya-Vaiṣṇavism. The process of 'hearing' the intimate *līlā* of Radha and Krishna as revealed, for instance, in the Tenth Canto of the *Bhagavatam*, is a traditional religious practice in Gaudiya-Vaiṣṇavism. In ISKCON, however, this same practice has become subject to strict censorship, and has been effectively closed as a legitimate path to salvation for those who wish to follow the letter of Prabhupada's teachings under the spiritual auspices of ISKCON. In order to gain a fuller theological appreciation of the spiritual path offered in ISKCON, therefore, we need to explore the theological tensions which have developed between ISKCON and its source tradition in

India, and which have subsequently led to the sectarian assertion of ISKCON's unique spiritual and institutional identity.

### **ISKCON as Gaudiya-Vaisnavism**

Throughout this chapter I will be establishing a comparative perspective on spiritual practice in ISKCON, as a way of exploring some of the unique and complex theological concerns of ISKCON devotees. In making the comparison between accepted practice in ISKCON and 'orthodox Gaudiya-Vaisnavism', I must stress that it is not my intention to construct ISKCON as in any way an unorthodox expression of 'the tradition' from which it claims its origin. Nor, conversely, do I have any stake in asserting the fidelity of ISKCON to its Indian 'original'. As I made clear in the introduction to this thesis, scholarly observers have long been willing to testify to the ritual and theological 'authenticity' of ISKCON as a 'genuine' expression of Caitanyite Vaisnavism. One problem which the present chapter seeks to address, however, is that in its willingness to participate in ISKCON's project of cultural and religious legitimation, the academic literature on ISKCON has effectively ignored everything that makes ISKCON *unique* (a term I use without any determination as to 'authenticity') in relation to its source 'tradition' in India. As we have seen in regard to ISKCON's project of extrinsic cultural legitimation, ISKCON's alignment with 'Hinduism' can be of more or less strategic importance, depending on context: ISKCON may be publicly aligned with a Hindu minority identity in one context (Nye 2001), but then in another context we have seen (in the preceding chapter) how a theological and cultural opposition to 'Hinduism' fundamentally informs ISKCON devotees' own special sense of religious virtuosity. In a similar sense, ISKCON's affiliation with 'Gaudiya-Vaisnavism' must be approached according to discursive, theological, and cultural context. We should

acknowledge, first of all, the plain fact that ‘Gaudiya-Vaisnavism’ is not a religious, cultural, or historical *given* which is simply *there*, in some *other* time and place – say, in ‘India’s past’ (cf. Klostermaier 1980) or sixteenth century Bengal – available to be appropriated or ‘believed in’ by the Western convert to ISKCON. ‘Tradition’, I argue, is only ever made manifest in the immediate context of spiritual practice, and we need not look beyond this context in order to appreciate or to justify the religious legitimacy of Hare Krishna spirituality. Having myself encountered Gaudiya-Vaisnavism first in an ISKCON temple in Sydney, Australia, and only subsequently through historical or other academic textual sources (which are products of a different, but equally contemporary and Western, form of engagement with this tradition), it is necessary to qualify the parameters of my ‘comparison’ between ISKCON and Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. While others who are more confident in their knowledge of Hinduism or Vaisnava *bhakti* movements may be prepared to make an objective assessment of ISKCON’s authenticity in relation to its source tradition, it is the comparisons made by ISKCON devotees *themselves* that ultimately form the basis of my comparative interest. In particular, I am interested in the way ISKCON devotees frequently assert ISKCON’s institutional sense of identity *over and against* Gaudiya-Vaisnava practice as this might be observed on its home soil. The comparative analysis which I offer below is intended to delineate this sectarian position as it is formulated within ISKCON. I use the term ‘sectarian’ advisedly here, for the position I want to delineate has been only gradually formulated, and only recently formalised, by ISKCON’s institutional and theological authorities. Significantly, this official position has been formulated in response to an increasing awareness of, and extended contact with, Indian Gaudiya-Vaisnavism amongst Western ISKCON devotees. By drawing the strict sectarian line against other expressions of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, and thereby reinforcing

ISKCON's unique sense of spiritual identity and mission, this official position in ISKCON has also, arguably, established the possibility of *defection* from ISKCON to its Indian counterparts. In what follows I examine some of the causes and consequences of this position within ISKCON, and explore some of the spiritual tensions it has occasioned in the lives of ISKCON devotees.

Brooks (1989a,1989b,1990) is the only academic observer to have commented in any detail on the differences between Hare Krishna spiritual practice and the practice of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism in India. Brooks' study, *The Hare Krishnas in India* (1989a), is based on fieldwork conducted between 1982 and 1983 in Vrindavana, in central northern India. Vrindavana, located in the region of Vraja, in the modern day state of Uttar Pradesh, is a holy *dhama*: it is the geographical location in which Krishna is traditionally understood to have revealed, in historical time, His eternal pastimes (*lila*) with Radha and the *gopis* of Vraja. In Hare Krishna terminology, the geographical Vrindavana is 'non-different' to the celestial Goloka Vrindavana. Krishna's transcendental *lila*, which takes place eternally in Goloka Vrindavana, is also understood to be taking place eternally in Vrindavana-*dhama*, albeit presently concealed from the material senses by the illusory cover of Yogamaya (see Swami, M. 1991).

Brooks is interested in the 'symbolic interactions' which he observed being played out between local inhabitants of Vrindavana and Western ISKCON devotees, the latter having established an influential presence in this traditional centre of Krishna pilgrimage and worship, ever since Prabhupada founded ISKCON's Krishna-Balarama temple there in 1975 (1989a:72).<sup>2</sup> As for all Gaudiya-Vaisnavas, for ISKCON devotees too Vrindavana is a place of ultimate significance as the location in which Krishna's transcendental *lila* took

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<sup>2</sup> I spent two weeks in Vrindavana, in March of 1999, staying in a local *bhavan* (pilgrim's accommodation)

(and takes) place. As a pilgrimage destination for ISKCON devotees from all over the world, Vrindavana also has another level of significance in ISKCON, for it was here that Prabhupada spent many years translating Vaisnava scriptures into English in preparation for his mission to the West. Vrindavana is therefore the place to which ISKCON devotees trace their first link to a traditional heritage on the subcontinent. Himself a Bengali, like many of the Vaisnavas who settle in Vrindavana, Prabhupada considered Vrindavana to be his ‘spiritual home’. Prabhupada is presently entombed in his *samadhi* (sacred crypt) on the grounds of ISKCON’s Krishna-Balarama complex, where he departed this material world in 1977 – only two years after establishing ISKCON’s permanent presence in the town.

Brooks tends to focus on the Indian side of the ‘symbolic interactions’ he observed between ‘Vrindabanbasis’ (residents of Vrindavana) and the foreign ISKCON devotees. He is concerned to demonstrate the ‘integration’ (197) and ‘incorporation’ (205) of ISKCON into the religio-cultural life of Vrindavana, and records that by the early 1980s the ISKCON temple in Vrindavana had ‘become a popular part of [the] town’s sacred complex’ (10) and a great attraction for Indian pilgrims. I want to offer an alternative to Brooks’ Indo-centric focus on the cultural ‘integration’ of ISKCON’s differences, however, by showing how the significant theological differences between local and foreign Vaisnavas (which Brooks’ both reveals and resolves in his account) have also become a continuing cause of *disintegration* within ISKCON itself.

“Indeed they [ISKCON devotees] are very good Vaishnavas, perhaps the best in Brindaban,” states of one of Brooks’ Vrindabanbasi informants, “but their mood is different from ours” (cited in Brooks 1990:264). It is this difference in devotional ‘mood’, and the associated differences between the devotional practices of ISKCON devotees and their

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with three male devotees from the ISKCON Sydney centre.



Indian counterparts, which has become the pivotal issue in the sectarian debate within ISKCON, particularly in the years subsequent to the time of Brooks' research. The debate centres around the relationship between two separately defined techniques (*saddhana*) of religious transformation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism: '*Vaidhi-bhakti saddhana*' – the devotional method in which the practitioner's behaviour is constrained and guided by scriptural injunction (the strict 'rules and regulations' of asceticism); and '*Raganuga-bhakti saddhana*' – the devotional method in which the practitioner is enjoined to cultivate the spontaneous emotional 'mood' of devotion exhibited by the *gopis* toward their beloved Lord Krishna. Brooks (1989a) also points to the 'processual dynamics' which have seen ISKCON develop into 'the highly bureaucratic institution that it is today' as a central factor influencing the particular 'mood' of devotion in ISKCON (176-7). The 'emotional attitudes' that accompany this 'bureaucratic' 'mood' in ISKCON are seen by Brooks to 'contrast with the attitudes of the local [Vrindavana] population' (ibid.). In what follows I want to stress that the organisational development of ISKCON as a religious institution with 'bureaucratic' attitudes cannot be divorced from the theological debate about orthodox *saddhana*, or correct practice, in ISKCON.

Brooks locates the theological basis for the particular 'mood' of devotion developed within ISKCON in the strict and seemingly exclusive emphasis placed by ISKCON devotees on the 'rules and regulations' of '*Vaidhi-bhakti saddhana*'. As a traditionally recognised and indeed requisite form of devotional practice in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, Vaidhi-bhakti is grounded in the ascetic requirements of Krishna worship. Haberman (1988) defines Vaidhi-bhakti as a form of devotion 'motivated by fear of sin' (65) and guided by scriptural injunction. In ISKCON, the practice of Vaidhi-bhakti is most commonly identified with the four regulative principles, which (as we have explored in

preceding chapters) strictly regulate diet, sex, and other forms of ‘sense gratification’. These principles form the practical foundation for life on the path of *varnasrama-dharma*, or ‘spiritual culture’, and they are the basic standards by which ‘brahminical’ qualifications are measured in ISKCON.

Placed in the ‘traditional’ Vaisnava context of Vrindavana, Brooks shows how ISKCON’s claim to be producing ‘qualified *brahmanas*’ out of ‘*mlecchas*’ (foreign ‘outcastes’) in the face of traditional ‘caste brahminism’ is a cultural ‘paradox’ (10) not easily resolved for certain members of the local Brahman community. But ISKCON’s challenge to caste exclusivity is hardly new in the history of *bhakti* movements in northern India. The arrival of Westerners on the Indian Gaudiya-Vaisnava scene might well be regarded as a new cultural ‘paradox’ (this is also, undoubtedly, the source of ISKCON’s ‘ironic attraction’ for Indian pilgrims (cf, Nye 2001:26)), but caste is not necessarily the key point of cultural difference. For many non-Brahman inhabitants of Vrindavana, like Brooks’ informant cited above, the exemplary standard of Vaidhi-bhakti maintained by ISKCON’s *brahmanas* is not only accepted, but is an admired religious aptitude, and one which would indeed seem to qualify ISKCON devotees as ‘good Vaishnavas’. The point of difference arises from ISKCON devotees’ *exclusive* focus on the ‘rules and regulations’ of Vaidhi-bhakti and the ‘brahminical’ qualifications to be gained from ascetic practice – to the neglect of the more advanced developmental stages of devotional practice offered in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. In the sympathetic (if somewhat patronising) words of Brooks’ same informant: “their understanding is not yet complete – they are only beginning along the path of deep mysteries of Krishna in the *madhurya-rasa* [erotic emotion] of Braj.” (cited in Brooks 1990:264; Brooks’ parentheses).

The ‘path of deep mysteries of Krishna in the *madhurya-rasa*’ is the path of Raganuga-bhakti: devotional practice in the ‘mood’ of spontaneous emotion; or the mood in which the *gopis* of Vraja devote themselves to Krishna (*madhurya-rasa*). Referring to Rupa Goswami’s sixteenth century Sanskrit treatise on the teachings of Sri Caitanya, *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (a text made available to ISKCON devotees in the English language ‘Summary Study’ form of Prabhupada’s *The Nectar of Devotion* (1982 [1970])), Haberman (op.cit.) makes it clear that Raganuga-bhakti *saddhana* is the traditionally prescribed method of salvation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. He observes that the two orthodox forms of devotional practice (*saddhana*) in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, Vaidhi-bhakti and Raganuga-bhakti, ‘are traditionally considered sequential: Vaidhi Bhakti Sadhana prepares the way for the more esoteric path of Raganuga’ (65). ‘The move onto the stage of Raganuga is necessary for further progress, because Vaidhi is judged to be inadequate for transporting one into the world of the Vraja-lila’ (66).

The ‘world of the Vraja-lila’ in Haberman’s study is synonymous with ‘the spiritual world’ of Hare Krishna soteriology: it is the ultimate goal of spiritual practice both for the Gaudiya-Vaisnavas of Vrindavana, and for ISKCON devotees. But while the ultimate goal of spiritual practice is still the same, the path of Raganuga, which Haberman finds to be essential ‘for transporting one into’ the spiritual world, is not opened to devotees within ISKCON. Brooks notes the hard line taken in ISKCON towards Raganuga-bhakti and those devotees who would pursue its practices under the guidance and inspiration of Vrindavana’s *babajis* (renunciates): ‘the “official” ISKCON attitude at this stage is intransigent; if a devotee wishes to practice raganuga-bhakti instead of vaidhi-bhakti, he has no choice but to leave the organization. Some ISKCON members... have done just that’ (Brooks 1989a:197).

This ‘official’ attitude has only been intensified in the time following Brooks’ research. It has developed in direct response to increasing rates of defection by ISKCON devotees who have sought guidance in Raganuga-bhakti under new spiritual masters from India. We need to examine what Raganuga has to offer the spiritual aspirant before we can appreciate why devotees would defy ISKCON authority in pursuit of this particular (and otherwise orthodox) technique of spiritual advancement. I will examine this technique in what follows, but I will also introduce a different perspective on the matter than is provided by Brooks in his study. Brooks’ Indo-centric focus on the processes of ISKCON’s ‘integration’ and ‘incorporation’ into Vrindavana tends toward a sympathetic representation of ISKCON’s *defectors*, at the expense of any detailed insight into the majority position within ISKCON itself. He reveals his sympathies when he argues that the movement of some devotees away from ISKCON actually ‘serves an *integrative* function in that ISKCON-created foreign Vaishnavas plunge deeper into the indigenous Indian culture, taking their own culture change one step further’ (197; my emphasis). Brooks’ seriously under-theorised notion that ISKCON devotees are ‘foreigners to India, yet Hindus by a complex process of conversion and culture change’ assumes that this *culture conversion* process remains *incomplete* until devotees take the spatio-cultural step, first into India, and then subsequently *out of* ISKCON and ‘deeper into the indigenous Indian culture’ of Vrindavana. Brooks writes that ‘the opening of the Krishna-Balarama temple complex [in Vrindavana] in 1975 gave the Hare Krishna movement a major resource for completing the process of conversion and culture change’ (72). But if this ‘process of conversion and culture change’ is only fully experienced by those who actually *leave* ISKCON, then this cannot be a very useful concept for understanding those who *stay* with ISKCON, convinced that real spiritual progress is available only to those who follow the letter of Srila

Prabhupada's teachings. Without 'taking the Krishnas seriously' (Shinn 1989:117) on their own terms, we cannot possibly appreciate what is at stake in this complex theological debate – and using 'culture' as an objective criterion for assessing the maturity or completeness of a devotee's spiritual awareness, as Brooks presumes to do, really underestimates the value of ISKCON devotees' own concerns in this matter. Brooks seems to accede to the judgement that the spiritual path offered in ISKCON is somehow lacking or incomplete, but this is really a theological assertion (rather than an objective anthropological observation), and one which will be seen to relativise and threaten the ultimate spiritual authority in ISKCON – Prabhupada's teachings. As mine is a study of ISKCON, and not of any 'indigenous Indian culture', it is the ISKCON-centric terms of this debate which I am compelled to represent. As we now proceed to explore the 'path of deep mysteries of Krishna in the *madhurya-rasa*', or the path of Raganuga-bhakti, to see what might be attracting devotees away from ISKCON, it should be borne in mind that we are dealing with an alternative path that is 'officially' considered heterodox – even heretical – practice in ISKCON. The theological reasons for this attitude, which are not adequately provided by Brooks, will be examined in what follows. We will also need to consider the theological debate about Raganuga-bhakti in relation to certain institutional crises that have contributed to the processes of defection from ISKCON, as well as to the disintegration and subsequent reinforcement of ISKCON's sectarian identity. Only then will we be able to appreciate that the development of a 'bureaucratic' or 'official' mood of devotion in ISKCON is ultimately inseparable from the theological development of ISKCON itself into an independent, institutional vehicle of salvation.

**Ecstasy and its imitations: the techniques of *raganuga-bhakti***

*Madhurya-rasa* is the mood of devotion in Vrindavana, and it is this mood which Brooks and his Vrindabanbasi informants find to be lacking in ISKCON. As a realised state of spiritual consciousness, *madhurya-rasa* is the divine emotional experience of the conjugal relationship of amorous love with Krishna. This *rasa* is only found amongst the *gopis* of Vraja, the cowherd girls who forsake all other duties (including their husbands) to be with Krishna. As the highest, most intimate, and rarest of exchanges with the Supreme, the *madhurya-rasa* experienced by the *gopis* of Vraja is the unique and ultimate object of emulation for Gaudiya-Vaisnavas. Other forms of *rasa* found in the transcendental Vraja – like that experienced by Krishna’s adoptive parents (*vatsalya-rasa*), or Krishna’s male companions (*sakhya-rasa*) – may be equally perfect and indeed essential as expressions of the different devotional natures of individual spirit-souls, but *madhurya-rasa* is the source and essence of all the other forms of *rasa*. And even as the *gopis* enjoy *madhurya-rasa* with Krishna, it is Srimati Radharani, as the head *gopi* and principle object of Krishna’s affection, who embodies the essence and infinite depth of *bhakti-rasa*, or *Krsna-prema* (love of Krishna). The love between Radha and Krishna is especially mysterious and powerful. At certain moments in the unfolding love-play of Krishna’s *lila* in the forest of Vrindavana, Radha’s love for Krishna seems to hold sway over Krishna (God) Himself. Indeed, in (the geographical) Vrindavana, it is often Radha rather than Krishna who appears as the central object of devotion. “Radhe! Radhe!” is the typical greeting between Vrindabanbasis. “Hare Krishna!” is an alternative greeting, introduced by the foreign Vaisnavas from ISKCON (Hawley 1982:42; Brooks 1989a:188).

According to Haberman (op.cit.), who provides a detailed study of the ‘religio-aesthetic’ technique (*saddhana*) of Raganuga-bhakti in his book *Acting as a Way of*

*Salvation*, the practitioner of Raganuga is enjoined to ‘follow’ or ‘imitate’ the spontaneous emotional ‘mood’ of loving intimacy which the *gopis* of Vraja exhibit toward Krishna (*madhurya-rasa*; or ‘Ragatmika Bhakti’) (77-78).<sup>3</sup> Given that the divine emotions experienced by the *gopis* are identified as the ultimate state of spiritual realisation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, imitation of this ‘divine model’ is understood to effect the gradual realisation of the *gopis*’ salvific emotional state, experienced (or ‘remembered’) as the practitioner’s own original state of being. As a practical means to a spiritual end, ‘imitation’ of the *gopis* ‘is to become permanent participation’ (76) in Krishna’s divine *lila*. Only the *gopis* of Vraja experience Krishna in *madhurya-rasa*, which means to experience *madhurya-rasa* for himself or herself, the practitioner of Raganuga must ultimately *become* a *gopi* of Vraja. One must enter Krishna’s Vraja-lila, or ‘Ultimate Reality’, *as a gopi* (ibid.). According to Haberman, this ‘Ultimate Reality’ is made ‘objectively available’ (66) as a model for imitation in Vaisnava poetry and scripture.

Haberman’s study is unique in presenting us not only with the theological rationale behind the religious practice of ‘imitation’ in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, but also with a conceptual model which seeks to account for the experiential efficacy of this practice, in terms compatible with its aesthetic mode. Haberman elaborates upon the ‘dramatic’ sense of ‘the word “*lila*”... usually translated as “play”’ (45) to interpret Raganuga-bhakti *saddhana* as a kind of religious ‘role-taking’ or ‘method acting’, where ‘the successful practitioner’s goal is to become so totally identified with a character in the Vraja-lila that he or she *really is* that character’ (75; original emphasis). The ‘holy actor’, in Haberman’s

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<sup>3</sup> ‘To follow’ and ‘to imitate’ are both considered by Haberman to be acceptable translations of the Sanskrit word ‘*anusara*’, which Rupa Goswami uses synonymously with ‘*anuga*’. The term ‘*raganuga*’ means to follow or to imitate ‘*raga*’, which is the mood of the *gopis*. Haberman argues for the latter translation: ‘I think “imitation” is an... acceptable translation, if we keep in mind that it is not “mere imitation”, but an imitation that includes a particular intention: the realization of the world of the one who is being imitated’ (78). I would add that ‘following’ is a form of imitation: as one follows in the footsteps of another, say, one is physically

terms, or the religious practitioner of Raganuga-bhakti, aims ‘at complete absorption in a dramatic role which is understood to be his or her true identity in the eternal world of Vraja’ (ibid.).

Haberman derives his ‘method acting’ paradigm from the Russian theatre director, Stanislavski. He draws upon the Stanislavski Method for his phenomenological insight into the imitative process in Raganuga-bhakti: that ‘external’ bodily actions can induce ‘internal’ states of consciousness. ‘Stanislavski informed his actors that the inner life of a character is approached by imitating the physical acts of that character... The goal of such imitative action is to “live the role”, that is, to completely enter into the world of the character one is imitating’ (67-68). Pursuing the phenomenological insight that ‘action...engages emotion’ (67),<sup>4</sup> Haberman finds a series of parallels between the ‘affectivity of the actor’s art’ (ibid.) and Rupa Goswami’s theological appropriations of the theories, techniques, and experiences of dramatic transformation developed within classical Indian drama and *rasa* aesthetic theory.

Paralleling Stanislavski, Rupa realized that the inner perfected emotions of the paradigmatic Vrajaloka [inhabitants of Vraja; specifically the *gopis*] were physically expressed as *anubhavas* [the external manifestations of emotion] and were recorded in Vaisnava scriptures, such as the *Bhagavata Purana*. In further agreement with Stanislavski’s notions,

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imitating the direction and method of another.

<sup>4</sup> I have introduced this same kind of performative logic already in earlier chapters. In the Introduction, for instance, it emerged in considering the performative dimensions of proselytisation, in which preaching acts to reify belief and compel the devotee’s own conversion process. In Chapter One I introduced it in more conceptual terms through the phenomenological concept of mimesis, which I applied to ethnographic methodology, as well as to the spiritual methodology offered in ISKCON. At the end of the last chapter, this same kind of logic could be detected in TP’s advice to me that by dressing like a devotee one *feels* like a devotee, and also in TP’s suggestion to his Indian audience that ISKCON devotees dress like Radha and Krishna dress in the spiritual world as a practical method of developing Krishna Consciousness. I follow Haberman’s analysis at this point for heuristic purposes, in order to reveal how fraught and complicated a theological problem ‘imitation’ of the ‘divine model’ has become in ISKCON, and how this problem has been formulated in relation to the type of practices explored by Haberman.



he asserted that the only door of access to the inner emotions of the Vrajaloka is through these physical expressions or *anubhavas*. Hence Rupa's key insight: If the *bhakta* [devotee] could somehow take on or imitate the *anubhavas* of one of the exemplary Vrajaloka he could obtain the salvific emotions of that character and come to inhabit the world in which that character resides – Vraja. This imitation of the ways of the Vrajaloka is the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana. (69-70)

Significantly, 'the ways of the Vrajaloka' include not only the physical expressions (*anubhavas*) of the *gopis*' dominant emotional states (*sthayi-bhava*), but also the circumstances or conditions (*vibhavas*) which give rise to them, as well as the auxiliary emotions (*vyabhicari-bhavas*) which typically accompany them (15). All of these terms which appear in Rupa's *rasa* theology originate in the Indian tradition of *rasa* aesthetic theory. The intimate connection between theology and aesthetic theory in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism has long been recognised by scholars of the tradition, including Dimock (1966a), who observes that 'the device of phrasing religious experience in terms of knowledge of the beautiful, as in esthetics [sic]' is one of 'peculiarities of the doctrine of the Bengal school' of Vaisnavism (42). The term *rasa* itself is traditionally associated with an aesthetic experience, in which the *rasika* or 'sensitive and cultured viewer' (Haberman op.cit.:36) is so moved by the emotive force of a dramatic or poetic performance, that he or she momentarily 'steps out of ordinary time, space, and – most important of all – identity' (24). This concept of *rasa* as a transcendent aesthetic experience has been especially amenable to theological conceptions of self-transcendence. Rupa's particular innovation, according to Haberman, was to transform the *rasa* experience from one analogous to the impersonal 'generalized experience' (17) of the dramatic spectator, to one more analogous to the personalised experience of the dramatic *participant* or actor. 'The emphasis for Rupa

is not on the ability of generic drama to lift one out of the everyday experience; rather, he is deeply concerned with the means by which one may participate in the one Real Drama... the divine play of Krsna' (36). Where the aesthetic components of classical Indian drama or dance are intended to stir unrefined emotions (*bhava*) that lie dormant in the heart of the spectator as *vasanas* (unconscious or latent impressions) into the refined and 'relishable' state of *rasa* (Carney 1992:296-298; see also Ram 2000:266), the aesthetic components of Raganuga-bhakti are intended to evoke in the heart of the 'holy actor' his or her dormant love of Krishna, which is 'the dominant emotion or *sthayi-bhava* of [Rupa's] *bhakti* aesthetics. Under the right conditions... this love could be experienced as paramount bliss (*bhakti-rasa*, also called Krsna-prema) in the heart of the sensitive one [*rasika*] – now no longer the literary connoisseur, but the *bhakta* [devotee]' (Haberman op.cit.:33). As the only *rasa* of any concern to the practitioner of Raganuga is that experienced by the participants in the Vraja-lila, so must all the dramatic components of religio-aesthetic practice – the excitants (*vibhavas*), external responses (*anubhavas*), and auxiliary emotions (*vyabhicari-bhavas*) – be directly modelled upon the scene, actions, and expressions of the Vrajaloka, or the *gopis* of Vraja. Extending the 'dramatic' analogy one stretch further, Haberman finds these 'external' devices recorded in the Gaudiya-Vaisnava 'script' (66) – which is Haberman's term for Vaisnava poetry and scripture, including, especially, the Tenth Canto of the *Bhagavata*.

'From what has been said thus far', writes Haberman at a critical point in his 'acting' thesis, 'the reader might assume that the practitioners of the Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana in Vraja physically imitate the *gopis* in all ways – dress, external behaviour, and so forth' (95-95). Indeed, two-thirds of the way into Haberman's book, this is exactly what the reader would have to assume from an analysis predicated entirely upon a dramatic

metaphor for an affective mechanism, in which ‘external’ actions induce their corresponding ‘internal’ emotions. But at this point, Haberman raises a crucial and now apparently unresolved question: ‘What does it really mean to imitate the divine model?’ (94). Exactly what it means *in practice* to ‘imitate’ the *gopis*, we discover at this point, has in fact been a point of theological contention in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism ever since the Six Goswamis of Vrindavana codified the teachings of Caitanya in the sixteenth century. At this point, Haberman reveals what is in fact an *unorthodox* practice engaged in by some of Vrindavana’s contemporary *babajis* (renunciate practitioners) in the name of Raganuga-bhakti: male practitioners physically adopt the dress of the *gopis*, including *saris* and women’s jewellery, as well as the feminine dispositions and devotional expressions that the *gopis* are said to exhibit toward Krishna (98). The inherent logic underpinning this particular form of ‘literal and external’ (94) imitative practice is what really forms the basis for Haberman’s ‘method acting’ interpretation of religious transformation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. It is in relation to this practice that the central concept in Haberman’s phenomenological paradigm – that ‘action... engages emotion’ (67) – takes on its most literal relevance. This is ultimately a problem for Haberman’s ‘acting’ thesis, because the performances of religious transgenderism which see this ‘literal and external’ logic of imitation put into practice are ‘rare’, and reflect an unorthodox interpretation against which ‘contemporary Gaudiya-Vaisnavas are eager to voice warnings’ (96). The orthodox response to such deviant practice was to ‘internalize’ the method of imitation: practitioners may ‘visualize’ themselves as *gopis* participating in Krishna’s *lila*, but this mental technique of imitation should never interfere with the ‘external’ dispositions ‘appropriate’ to (male) Vaisnava asceticism (94). Haberman identifies this practice of ‘vizualization’ as the core religious technique employed by orthodox practitioners of Raganuga-bhakti, so it

is significant that he never adjusts his conceptual model to account for ‘performative techniques... that take place in the inner mind’ (123). This oversight is only partially compensated for by the fact that the ‘internalization’ of imitative practice in Raganuga-bhakti, or the technique of ‘visualizing’ oneself as a *gopi*, only represents one half of the theological solution to the problem of gender deviance. The other half of the solution was to place the ‘external’ behavioural constraints of male asceticism – that is, the practice of Vaidhi-bhakti – into the theological framework of ‘literal and external’ imitation. This solution, which Haberman attributes to the seventeenth century theologian Visvanatha Cakravartin (106), required a radical shift in the *form* of the ‘model’ of ‘external’ imitation itself. It worked by substituting the otherworldly, feminine model provided by the *gopis* of Vraja (now ‘internalized’) with the worldly and masculine model provided by the Goswamis of Vrindavana – who are, in Ultimate Reality, actually *gopis* (106-107):

It is well known [that Caitanya] was considered to be an incarnation of Krsna, and later a dual incarnation of Radha-Krsna. What is less well known, however, is that every major figure associated with Caitanya was considered to be a particular “mythical” character from the Vraja-lila also incarnated as one of the “historical” figures during the time of Caitanya... Rupa Gosvamin came to be considered as the incarnation of Rupa Manjari, an important *gopi* who served Radha and Krsna in the mythical Vrindavana under the *sakhi* Lalita... Rupa Manjari is the *siddha-rupa* [perfected body] of Rupa Gosvamin, the theologian [sic] who settled in the north Indian town of Vrindavana. The physical form he manifested in history is his *sadhaka-rupa* [practitioner’s body], manifest not in this case to attain a perfected state (for he is considered to be an eternally perfected one by Visvanatha), but rather to provide a physical model for the human practitioner. (107)

‘...to provide a physical model for the human [read *male*] practitioner’: it is significant that Haberman attributes this divine purpose to the Goswamis of Vrindavana, while Caitanya is only really mentioned in this context by way of association, and without any consideration as to His own divine purpose. This is the only time Haberman ever mentions the ‘well known’ identity of Caitanya as an *avatara* of Krishna – a fact which could be construed as something of a theological and historical oversight, given Caitanya’s role as *avatara* and spiritual founder of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, if we were not to consider the contextual limitations of Haberman’s study.<sup>5</sup> The theological development of the Caitanya *avatara* doctrine developed separately from Vrindavana and the Goswamis. It is most authoritatively represented by Krsnadasa Kaviraja in his biography of Caitanya, *Caitanya-caritamrta* – which, unlike the work of the Goswamis, was composed in Bengali rather than Sanskrit (Dimock 1976). Referring to Krsnadasa’s text, Tuck (1985) identifies a ‘primary’ and a ‘secondary’ purpose behind Krishna’s Caitanya-*lila*. The ‘primary’ purpose of this *lila* relates to the doctrine of ‘dual incarnation’ mentioned by Haberman in the above citation, by which Caitanya is understood to be the incarnation of both Radha and Krishna in the one person. This is an especially esoteric aspect of the Caitanya *avatara* doctrine, which states that ‘dual incarnation’ was the means by which Krishna could satiate His desire ‘to taste his own sweetness’ (31). Tuck notes that ‘although Krsnadasa was reluctant

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<sup>5</sup> Haberman’s context is confined geographically to Vrindavana, and historically to the developments in Gaudiya-Vaisnava doctrine which took place there during and after the time of the Six Goswamis. This leaves the Bengali side of the tradition notably unrepresented in Haberman’s version of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. While Gaudiya-Vaisnavism originated in Bengal (Gauda) under the inspiration of Caitanya, the Goswamis left Bengal for Vrindavana under Caitanya’s instruction to establish a Sanskrit foundation for His teachings. According to Dimock (1966a), the departure of the Goswamis from Bengal saw a split develop within the tradition. The more devotionalist side of the tradition, with its particular focus on Caitanya as *avatara*, developed in Bengal under the influence of Caitanya’s closest companion, Nityananda; while the more intellectualist side of the tradition developed in Vrindavana under the Goswamis. Dimock notes that the Goswamis ‘rarely mention Caitanya, except in a formal way’, and ‘usually in devotional rather than theological contexts’ (45). Taken into account, these historical developments serve to remind us that ‘Gaudiya-Vaisnavism’ is not some monolithic tradition against which we can measure the standards of religious practice in ISKCON.

to reveal the secret meaning [of the dual incarnation], he described it in a somewhat oblique way for the edification of faithful readers' (29). Dimock (1976), also drawing upon Krsnadasa, reveals the mystery for us:

Krsna, the essence of whose nature is to love and be loved, separated Radha from himself in order that the love relationship could take place. But Krsna could not appreciate fully the depth and extent of Radha's love and at the same time his own. So he recombined the parts, both still fully individual but bound up in one, the person of Caitanya. Only then could he fully taste the combined joys of two and of one. (114)

Tuck (op.cit.) explains that Krishna's 'secondary' or 'external' purpose in appearing as Caitanya 'was to propagate the Name by means of *samkirtana*, and to establish the religion for the Kali *yuga*' (33). This is the doctrine of the *yuga-avatara*, where Krishna takes *the form of His own devotee* in order to reveal the means of salvation appropriate to this present Age (the *yuga-dharma*). The means of salvation which Caitanya presented, and presented through His own example, was *hari nama sankirtana* – the congregational chanting of the Holy Name: *Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*.

To appropriate Haberman's terminology, Krishna Himself incarnated as Caitanya so as 'to provide a physical model for the human practitioner'. And here we have what might be regarded as the definitive 'model' for religious imitation in ISKCON. Paintings which adorn the walls of ISKCON temples, often alongside those of the Divine Couple, depict the 'scene': Caitanya and Nityananda lead a large procession of followers through a town or village in Bengal, while their followers all dance, raise their arms into the air in surrender to God, play *karatala* cymbals or beat *mrdanga* drums, or wave flags and banners inscribed

with the *mahamantra*. If we superimpose all the ‘religio-aesthetic’ components of this image onto a different backdrop – the streets of a contemporary Western city, and the white bodies of Western ‘holy actors’ – we have an image readily identifiable with the Hare Krishna religious ‘scene’.

The *yuga-avatara* aspect of Caitanya’s divinity – where God Himself appears in fifteenth century Bengal to provide mankind with a model of devotion which can lead the devotee ‘back to Godhead’ – was the aspect which Srila Prabhupada stressed most in his teachings on Caitanya for his Western ISKCON disciples. Prabhupada’s translation of Krsnadasa’s *Caitanya-caritamrta* is a key scripture in ISKCON, and Prabhupada founded ISKCON as a global preaching society with a mission to propagate Caitanya’s *sankirtana* movement ‘in every town and village’ in the world. Caitanya’s *sankirtana* movement is both the model of proselytisation, and of personal spiritual advancement in ISKCON. Furthermore, Caitanya exemplified the personal devotional process by following strictly the regulative principles of Vaidhi-bhakti *saddhana*, even taking his renunciate vows of *sannyasa* at the early age of twenty-four. Caitanya was the ‘model’ devotee of God, and yet He was also God Himself, who in the form of a male renunciate took on the golden hue of Radha and experienced for Himself the most sublime of Radha’s divine emotional states.

But it is only particular ‘religio-aesthetic’ features of the Caitanya ‘model’ which are actually taken up in spiritual practice in ISKCON. In ISKCON, Caitanya provides the exemplary model of devotion in terms of His ascetic standards and His *sankirtana* method. But the ‘ecstatic symptoms’ which He manifested whilst experiencing Radha’s divine emotions, and for which He is equally celebrated within the tradition, were not deemed by Prabhupada to be an appropriate model of devotional practice in ISKCON. Krsnadasa records Caitanya’s ecstatic episodes in the *Caitanya-caritamrta*, and symptoms which

follow the same pattern as those of Caitanya also feature in the religious practices of orthodox Gaudiya-Vaisnavas on the path of Raganuga-bhakti. Classic ‘ecstatic symptoms’ typically include a lot of uncontrollable weeping and wild rolling about in the dust. Brooks (1989a) records that such spontaneous displays of ecstatic emotionalism amongst the *babajis* of Vrindavana have been a particular source of attraction for Western Vaisnavas from ISKCON to the path of Raganuga-bhakti (181ff). But such displays were never a feature of Srila Prabhupada’s teachings, nor of his personal pattern of devotional behaviour. And nor were the techniques of inducing the *gopis*’ divine emotions merely ‘internalised’ by Prabhupada through the use of ‘mental’ techniques of imitation such as ‘visualization’, which Haberman identifies as the core religious practice in Raganuga-bhakti. The three different forms of devotional practice which we have so far encountered in relation to Raganuga-bhakti – the practice of religious transgenderism (or the ‘literal and external’ imitation of the *gopis*); the more orthodox ‘internal’ method of imitating the *gopis* through ‘visualisation’; and the unfettered display of spontaneous emotion or ‘ecstatic symptoms’ of *madhurya-rasa* in the manner of Caitanya – are each rejected by Prabhupada and his followers in ISKCON as being but various manifestations of the same heterodoxy. They are each dismissed as *sahajiyism*, and *sahajiyas*, according to Rosen (a.k.a. Satyaraja dasa), ‘are considered materialistic in the sense that they are imitationists. They imitate Radha and Krishna, and they imitate the symptoms of *prema*, falsely exhibiting the ecstatic symptoms of true lovers of God’ (cited from Rosen’s interview with Sailley (1992:146)).

### ***Sahajiyism: imitation as heresy***

The opprobrious term ‘*sahajiya*’ in ISKCON conveys all the worst connotations of artifice and duplicity that might be read into the terms ‘imitation’ and ‘acting’. To be sure,



this are *not* meanings which Haberman (op.cit.) ever attaches to these terms or to the religious techniques which they are intended to describe in his analysis of Raganuga-bhakti. On the contrary, Haberman conveys a sense of deep respect for the ‘holy actor’ of Raganuga-bhakti, and most of the ‘performative techniques’ he describes are considered orthodox practice in the tradition. Nevertheless, Haberman’s choice of terminology remains vulnerable to this kind of interpretation, whether justified or not, and this possibility can be exploited, I suggest, to help us identify precisely what ISKCON devotees identify as *sahajiya* heresy.

According to Dimock (1966b), the word *sahajiya* derives from ‘*sahaja*’, which ‘literally means “easy” or “natural”, and in this meaning the term is applied to a system of worship and belief in which the natural qualities of the senses should be used, not denied or suppressed’ (35). Dimock’s study *The Place of the Hidden Moon* concentrates on the Vaisnava-sahajiya cult of Bengal, whose followers strive to personally realise the conjugal union of Radha and Krishna by re-creating (‘imitating’) this union through ritual sex practice.<sup>6</sup> Haberman (op.cit.) makes it clear that orthodox Gaudiya-Vaisnavas are generally ‘much more concerned with denying the validity of males imitating Krsna and acting out his love affairs with female practitioners’ (139) in the manner of Dimock’s Vaisnava-sahajiyas, than with the form of ‘literal and external’ (94) imitation that would see, in his

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<sup>6</sup> Dimock’s *sahajiyas* draw upon elements of Bengali Tantrism, and regard the conjugal union of Radha and Krishna as a symbolic model for the cosmic union of feminine (*prakṛti*) and masculine (*puruṣa*) forces (141). This union is equated with the ultimate transcendence of matter/spirit dualities, a state which is aspired to as the ultimate stage of self-realisation for the religious practitioner (222-225). This is a theology clearly removed from the one we have been addressing in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, even if Vaisnava-sahajiyas would claim many of the most prominent of Gaudiya-Vaisnava personalities as their own (notably Nityananda, Caitanya’s closest companion (91-95)). Where the Vaisnava-sahajiya seeks ultimately to transcend duality – as represented by Radha and Krishna – in order to become one with God in cosmic unity, the Gaudiya-Vaisnava seeks to become established in an ultimately dualistic relationship with God as a *gopi*-lover. Gaudiya-Vaisnavas generally dismiss any notion of cosmic non-dualism (the ‘Vaisnava speaks of tasting sugar, not becoming sugar’ (Haberman op.cit.:38)) with the pejorative term ‘*mayavada*’: acceptance of illusion as truth. The use of term *sahajiya* in ISKCON conveys a similarly dismissive sense, but the object of criticism has less to do with the dualism/non-dualism debate than with the practice of what Haberman would

example, a male practitioner ‘taking on the dress and behaviour of a woman’ (98) in pursuit of the *gopis*’ emotional experience. In ISKCON, however, *both* of these practices are equally rejected as *sahajiyism*. Defending his ‘holy actors’ against the charge of *sahajiyism* in an interview with Rosen, Haberman (1992) is quite unwilling to concede to his interviewer (an ISKCON devotee) that the term *sahajiya* can be applied to ‘male practitioners who dress themselves up as females’ (317), preferring to reserve that term for the left-handed Tantrism of Dimock’s Vaisnava-sahajiyas. Rosen’s insistence on applying the term to both forms of practice (ibid.) is indicative of the perspective I encountered amongst devotees in ISKCON.

Although none of the practices which Haberman identifies with Raganuga-bhakti, and which ISKCON devotees would reject as ‘imitationist’, actually involve any form of ritual sex practice, the label ‘*sahajiya*’ is used in ISKCON intentionally to associate *all* such practices with religiously sanctioned sex, or at least with the danger of its potential occurrence. The theological reasoning for such an explicit association between ‘imitation’ and illicit sex practice is easy enough to follow: if the divine emotions of the *gopis* can be imitated through their ‘physical expressions’ and circumstances (Haberman 1988:69), then why not the other features of the *gopis*’ conjugal relationship with Krishna? The theological problem with religious ‘imitation’ as presented by Haberman is that it presupposes that ‘transcendental’ experiences have ‘material’ equivalents, and that they can be understood and attained through physical or bodily means. The ultimate result of such thinking, according to the ISKCON position, is the degradation of the conjugal *rasa* between Radha and Krishna, by appropriating this ‘divine model’ to the level of human (possibly sexual) activity and understanding. And this problem is not solved by the

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call ‘literal and external’ imitation of the Divine Couple.

‘internal’ method of imitation or mental ‘visualization’, because the mind (or ‘subtle body’) and all its ‘material’ emotions are just as removed as is the physical body from the transcendental realm of experience. Prabhupada (1982 [1970]) explicitly rejects the practice of visualisation (*siddha pranali*) in which practitioners ‘imagine that they have become associates of the Lord simply by thinking themselves like that’ (127). Prabhupada understands ‘visualisation’ to be simply another form of ‘external behaviour... followed by the *prakṛta-sahajīya*, a pseudo-sect of so-called Vaisnavas’ (ibid.). Prabhupada’s conjunction of the word ‘*prakṛta*’ with *sahajīya* serves to emphasise the problem: *prakṛta*, from ‘*prakṛti*’, refers to ‘material nature’, which is the manifestation of Krishna’s inferior, ‘external’, illusory (and also feminine) energy; *prakṛti* is *maya*, or illusion, and *prakṛta-sahajīyas* are under the illusion that material experience, however ecstatic, can be taken for spiritual realisation.

Accusations of *sahajīyism* have been used as the key theological deterrent in ISKCON against defection to the various ecstatic or esoteric forms of Raganuga-bhakti found amongst the *babajis* of Vrindavana or Bengal. But we have yet to encounter the specific form of practice which has sparked the most recent *sahajīya* controversy in ISKCON and the resultant sectarian development in ISKCON which I foreshadowed earlier in this chapter.

### **Intimations of division: whispers of *rasa-katha***

In 1976 Srila Prabhupada received news of a group of his disciples based in Los Angeles. This group was to become known as ‘The *Gopi-bhava* Club’. Tamal Krishna Goswami has written about ‘The *Gopi-bhava* Club Heresy’ in a paper originally addressed to the American Academy of Religion (Goswami, T.K. 1998a:322-325). ‘TKG’, as he is

affectionately known in ISKCON, is an influential American guru famous in ISKCON as a close associate and disciple of Srila Prabhupada, who also happened to start an academic career late into his eventful spiritual career in ISKCON. TKG's insights into the *Gopi-bhava* affair are especially valuable, therefore, both as a considered 'insider's' account addressed to an academic audience, and as an authoritative theological statement on the *sahajiya* issue in ISKCON.

TKG records that the *Gopi-bhava* Club was a group of 'perhaps twenty-five women and an equal number of men [who] began meeting surreptitiously to read portions of *Caitanya-caritamṛta* that describe Radha and Kṛṣṇa's intimate pastimes' (323). TKG describes the ensuing confrontation between Prabhupada and the *Gopi-bhavas*:

The club leaders appeared before Prabhupada explaining that they were *not trying to imitate Radha and Kṛṣṇa's love affairs but simply studying the descriptions in order to develop such desires*. Prabhupada's lips quivered with anger: "First deserve, then desire!... So long as there is any pinch of material desire there is no question of desiring on the spiritual platform." (ibid.; my emphasis)

This is a compelling account which demonstrates that Prabhupada's concern with *sahajiyism*, of which the *Gopi-bhavas* were accused, was by no means restricted to its more obvious 'literal and external' expressions (cf. Haberman 1988:94): 'simply studying the descriptions [of Radha and Kṛṣṇa's love affairs] in order to develop such desires' is equally dangerous and for the same reasons. This form of *sahajiyism* operates in obedience to the same causal logic which legitimates physical imitation of the *gopis* by the *prakṛta-sahajiyas*. According to this logic, re-enacting Kṛṣṇa's Vraja-līla either physically, 'mentally', or aurally – through the recitation of stories – one can generate the divine

emotions of the *gopis*. This is the same causal logic which underpins Haberman's model of religious imitation in Raganuga-bhakti – that 'action... engages emotion' – only here the 'action' involved is the ostensibly innocuous practice of 'hearing' (*sravana*) about the transcendental pastimes of Radha and Krishna. Where Haberman's 'holy actors' are depicted as being directed in their 'religio-aesthetic' performances by the Gaudiya-Vaisnava 'script' – meaning the scriptural accounts of Krishna's intimate *lila* – here it is the so-called 'script' as narrated which is *itself* empowered with a performative force capable of inducing the divine experience of the *gopis* in the listener. The technical term for this force in Sanskrit is *sabda-brahman*, signifying a transcendental sound vibration which emanates from the spiritual world itself (from Krishna Himself), which takes manifest form in revealed scripture and the voice of the guru. Far from serving a merely mediating or semiotic function in *representing* 'Ultimate Reality', as implied by Haberman's 'script' metaphor, revealed scripture is part and parcel of this Reality, and the performance of its recitation and reception is considered by many practitioners to constitute a form of direct *participation* in Krishna's *lila*.

Brooks (1990:272) too refers to Prabhupada's angry response to the *Gopi-bhava* affair. He cites a letter by Prabhupada, circulated internationally throughout ISKCON by his Governing Body Commission (GBC) after the discovery of the *Gopi-bhava* heresy. The letter was structured as a series of 'questions' and answers intended to resolve any doubts about the role of the *gopis* as model of devotion or subject of 'hearing' in ISKCON.

Q: The gopis are pleasing Krsna the most.

A: Gopi is the highest stage, but you are on the lowest, beginner, rascal stage, so how can you understand. Don't become monkeys, jumping over to the gopi's rasa lila. There are already enough monkeys in Vrindaban,

we don't need any more.

Q: To develop our ideal spiritual body in the next life, we should have a strong desire for thinking of the gopis.

A: First there must be no lust or sex desire, otherwise you will go to hell. To think of Krsna while desiring for sex is sahajiya life. This contamination comes from the babajis in Vrindaban. No devotee should wander around Vrindaban apart from our organized program. If this sahajiya nonsense continues, then all preaching will stop. (cited in Brooks 1990:273; question marks and italics absent in original)

It is possible to discern two distinct yet related issues arising out of Prabhupada's response to the *Gopi-bhava* heresy, although defining the relation between these is a problematic task. The first issue relates to the dubious phenomenology we have already associated with the *sahajiya* heresy, in accordance with which certain physical actions, even the 'act' of hearing with the material senses, can be employed intentionally to induce the divine state of the *gopis*. The second issue relates to the suggestion that ISKCON devotees are simply *not yet* ready for such 'esoteric topics' as the *gopi's rasa lila*. Prabhupada makes explicit in his response to the *Gopis-bhavas* the connection between *sahajiyism*, sex, and a problem which TKG calls 'premature "realization"' (Goswami, T.K. op.cit.:325): 'The texts warn that Krsna's conjugal pastimes can be understood only by highly advanced devotees; premature attempts to enter such esoteric topics will end in mundane lust – the opposite of spiritual love' (322). But there is an implicit suggestion too, that while ISKCON devotees are still 'on the lowest, beginner, rascal stage' of trying to overcome the desire for sex and 'sense gratification' (in other words, they are still striving to master the ascetic techniques of Vaidhi-bhakti), eventually they will advance to a higher stage and be qualified to consider the more 'esoteric topics' available to the practitioner of

Raganuga-bhakti. This second suggestion would seem to undermine the power of the first critique of *sahajiyism*. It appears to allow that it is not the *form*, or even the *logic*, but the *timing* of esoteric practice which is really at issue. Here we find once again the perspective promoted by Brooks (1989a; 1990) and his Vrindabanbasi informants: that ISKCON devotees are simply at an immature stage of their spiritual-cultural awareness and mastery of the tradition, and that the mysteries of Raganuga-bhakti are still ultimately available to the more mature or advanced of devotees. The problem, however, is that this level of maturity has never been defined in ISKCON. Indeed, it would seem that the first critique – that the form and logic of Raganuga, even in the form of ‘hearing’, is *sahajiyism* and should therefore be banned as heretical practice – ultimately wins out in this debate, because to date (nearly forty years after Prabhupada initiated his first American disciples) *no* ISKCON devotee has yet been deemed qualified for such esoteric spiritual knowledge. The ultimate source of authority for this attitude is Prabhupada’s teachings, particularly as formulated in response to controversies like the *Gopi-bhava* affair: but these were teachings addressed to a fledgling movement only twelve years into its development when Prabhupada departed this material world in 1977. In this regard, the debate over Raganuga and *sahajiyism* coincides directly with broader institutional concerns in ISKCON over the continuity of Prabhupada’s spiritual authority as set in writing. This burning question, with significant sectarian consequences, has arisen again and again in ISKCON since the departure of Srila Prabhupada as a living spiritual authority: can Prabhupada’s teachings, and by extension ISKCON itself, ever advance the devotee beyond the ‘beginner stage’ of spiritual development? Brooks, as we have seen, would suggest not, and in this sense his view is representative of ISKCON’s theological detractors and defectors. But the issue is more

complicated than Brooks allows, and needless to say, devotees loyal to ISKCON would not agree with him.

TKG again offers us a privileged insight into these issues, especially because he himself was to become embroiled as a protagonist in a controversial repeat of the *sravana* ('hearing') drama which occurred 'some fifteen years' after the departure of Prabhupada (Goswami, T.K. op.cit.:325). TKG adds that some individuals, including (by implication) himself, had been involved for 'as long as five years' before this (327). He locates the origins of the '*Rasika-bhakti* Heresy' amongst a group of devotees who were based in Vrindavana at ISKCON's Krishna-Balarama Temple. The group included 'four members of the GBC and other gurus' as well as 'large numbers of their followers' (ibid.). He names himself and Giriraja Swami as two of the key ISKCON gurus (by definition quite 'advanced' devotees) who had been drawn into the association of 'an elder Gaudiya Math *sannyasi*' named Narayana Maharaja:

Narayana Maharaja... is a disciple of Prabhupada's *sannyasa* guru and long a well-wisher of ISKCON. A learned, austere, long-time resident of Vrindavana, he has a fondness for narrating *rasa-katha*, the sublime topics of Krsna's Vrindavana pastimes. A small group of prominent ISKCON men and women were gradually drawn into his association, ignoring history, GBC resolutions on the books which forbade outside association, and ample warnings from their peers as well. Narayana Maharaja made no effort to conceal his relationship with them, which as time went on became increasingly intimate. When invited by ISKCON to a number of public functions, he frankly proclaimed that ISKCON devotees should not remain neophyte, clinging simply to rules and regulations, but should follow the path of spontaneous devotion. His emphasis on *gopi-bhava*, the mood of Krsna's amorous cowherd lovers, particularly disturbed his ISKCON audiences who were conscious of so many warnings from Prabhupada.



Prabhupada had stressed that the path of spontaneous devotion was only for liberated souls. He personally taught and exemplified the activities of devotion performed according to rules and regulations. Once a practitioner became purified of all material inebrieties, spontaneous devotion would automatically become manifest. Yet the ISKCON followers of Narayana Maharaja felt that they were making tangible spiritual advancement by following his advice and example. They were increasing their chanting, becoming attached to the sacred places where Krsna had performed His pastimes, and generally experiencing an overall deepening of their Krsna consciousness. Prabhupada, they believed, was now guiding them in the person of Narayana Maharaja. (326)

Narayana Maharaja's *rasa-katha* has touched a raw nerve in ISKCON, one which connects all the tense theological concerns over *sahajiyism* to the sensitive heart of ISKCON's institutional sense of identity: the figure of Srila Prabhupada himself as ultimate spiritual authority. Narayana Maharaja's instruction to follow the path of spontaneous devotion, or Raganuga-bhakti, through the medium of *rasa-katha* (hearing stories about Krishna's amorous pastimes) represents an otherwise orthodox pursuit within the broader Gaudiya-Vaisnava tradition. Indeed, Narayana Maharaja himself hails from the exactly the same strand (*sampradaya*) of this tradition as Srila Prabhupada (Srila Bhaktisiddanta's Gaudiya Math; and as TKG mentions, Narayana Maharaja is 'a disciple of Prabhupada's *sannyasa* guru' (ibid.)). In TKG's account, however, Narayana Maharaja's instruction is seen as a direct threat to the path of 'rules and regulations' of Vaidhi-bhakti asceticism, as exemplified for ISKCON devotees by the person of Srila Prabhupada. It again conjures that spectre of lax principles and 'premature "realization"' which would threaten the spiritual welfare of all ISKCON devotees. But this is perhaps an unjust assessment of the danger presented by Narayana Maharaja, in that Narayana Maharaja is himself a highly respected renunciate. And when Narayana Maharaja 'proclaimed that ISKCON devotees should not

remain neophyte, *clinging simply* to rules and regulations, but should follow the path of spontaneous devotion’ (my emphasis), he never suggested that the rules and regulations of Vaidhi-bhakti should be abandoned. He only suggested that *something else* is required for advancement in Krishna Consciousness. By offering ISKCON devotees this ‘something else’ that Prabhupada did not reveal during his time on earth as ISKCON’s Founder-*Acarya*, Narayana Maharaja has found himself directly imputed as a threat to ISKCON and to the ultimate spiritual authority of Srila Prabhupada.

The tension finally came to a head [in 1994] at the anniversary celebration of Srila Prabhupada’s entering the *sannyasa* order, traditionally held at Narayana Maharaja’s temple where the actual *sannyasa* ceremony had taken place in 1959. Tamal Krishna Goswami and Giriraja Swami, rather than glorifying Prabhupada, used the occasion to praise Narayana Maharaja, recommending his association to all of ISKCON. Narayana Maharaja spoke next, opining that there were many higher teachings that Prabhupada could have given had his disciples been more advanced. He implied that Prabhupada’s missionary work was elementary and that ISKCON devotees were now ready for the more advanced stage of Krsna consciousness, which he could give. (327)

This suggestion, that Prabhupada’s teachings – set down in texts which were to be the world’s ‘law books for the next ten thousand years’ – were somehow incomplete, indeed, ‘elementary’, evoked an ‘indignation’ in ISKCON which ‘reverberated world-wide’ (ibid.). Led by a demand from an influential group of North American Temple Presidents, the GBC (Governing Body Commission) response was firm (328):

The *rasika-bhakti* controversy was first on the 1995 annual meeting’s agenda. A week of thorough investigation brought the implicated members

in line. They admitted that by promoting a non-ISKCON authority and his teachings, they had relativized Prabhupada and his teachings. Their example was already being followed by many neophyte devotees and, as Prabhupada had predicted during the *gopi-bhava* affair, *missionary activities were being minimized to focus on personal spiritual advancement*. (ibid.; my emphasis)

The official response of the GBC to the Narayana Maharaja issue represents a most significant reflexive statement on the sectarian identity of ISKCON. This unique sense of institutional identity is established most pointedly by the assertion that ‘personal spiritual advancement’ actually detracts from the primary spiritual goal of ISKCON: ‘missionary activities’. Implicit in this assertion is an intriguing possibility. On the one hand, it seems to grant a certain level of validity to the path of *rasa-katha* offered by Narayana Maharaja, as a means of ‘personal spiritual advancement’. But then, on the other hand, it places the *institution* of ISKCON itself at an even higher level of *spiritual* consequence, as the vehicle of Prabhupada’s proselytising mission. This complicates the terms of the debate about Raganuga-bhakti in ISKCON. It shows that the ‘official’ attitude in ISKCON towards the Raganuga technique of ‘hearing’ (*sravana*) is not merely ‘motivated by fear of sin’ (cf. Haberman 1988:65), even as the fear of *sahajiyism* certainly remains a key deterrent to potential defectors to Narayana Maharaja, but is further motivated by a more positive affirmation: of a higher spiritual purpose available *only* to devotees in ISKCON. In what follows I seek to explicate the theological basis of this exclusive and righteous path to salvation in ISKCON. But first I want to contextualise the debate over Narayana Maharaja in more localised terms, for this debate continues to incite sectarian conflict on the Australian Hare Krishna scene.

## **Narayana Maharaja in Australia**

‘The simple fact is that Srila Prabhupada and Srila Narayana Maharaja have very different teachings, standards, practices, and moods of devotion’ (dasa, B. 2000), the GBC states in its official response to the Narayana Maharaja issue. But ‘ISKCON recognizes and respects Srila Narayana Maharaja’s right to teach according to his understanding and inspiration’ (ibid.). All conciliatory gestures aside, however, TKG records that by 1996 (after TKG had himself been censured over his involvement and the subsequent ‘loss’ to Narayana Maharaja of some of his own disciples) ISKCON had already begun working to ensure that Narayana Maharaja had ‘little opportunity’ to teach devotees in ISKCON:

ISKCON leaders, while offering hospitable greetings whenever Narayana Maharaja and his entourage visited an ISKCON temple, made certain that he had little opportunity to contact ISKCON devotees. By the time his tour ended in July, though dozens took initiation from him in Europe and North America, there seemed to be little overall impact within ISKCON’s temples from his visit. Nevertheless, he announced his intention to extend his tour later in the year to Australasia. (Goswami, T.K. op.cit.:329)

Thus this series of events comes to be situated in a context very close to the time and place of my own research at ISKCON Sydney. By 1997 (still prior to the time of my fieldwork), a mood of deep suspicion had been generated in ISKCON towards Narayana Maharaja, especially over claims attributed to Narayana Maharaja that Srila Prabhupada had personally requested him to guide his ‘children’ in ISKCON after his death. Many Temple Presidents, including the TP at Sydney, banned Narayana Maharaja from visiting their temples during his February visit, fearing he was on a recruiting drive for disaffected

ISKCON devotees and was launching a challenge to ISKCON's leadership. But a temple is not an isolated world, of course, and there were others means by which Narayana Maharaja's influences came to be felt in ISKCON. In a revealing footnote, TKG writes:

While the impact of Narayana Maharaja on devotees residing within ISKCON temples is minimal, he has created a significant following among independent devotees not under any direct ISKCON authority. His visit to Australia attracted many persons who no longer felt inspired by the ISKCON leadership. The fact that ISKCON is bracing itself in anticipation of his next world tour indicates that ISKCON is both concerned and affected by what goes on in the wider circle of devotees residing outside its immediate temple communities. (343)

TKG does not provide us with any specific reasons for there being so 'many persons who no longer felt inspired by the ISKCON leadership' in Australia, but he does provide enough information earlier in his paper to warrant his concern that GBC resolutions on Narayana Maharaja may 'not be enough to prevent the continued exodus of devotees who felt unable to repose full faith in some ISKCON authority' (329). This is where the Narayana Maharaja issue really hits the raw nerve in ISKCON, exposed as it is by over two decades of leadership crises (or what TKG calls 'The Perils of Succession' (283)) already suffered in ISKCON since the departure of Srila Prabhupada. Of the original eleven disciples that Prabhupada nominated as his immediate successor gurus, only a small few remain to this present day with untarnished spiritual records in ISKCON. TKG nominates himself as one of the first three of ISKCON's 'fallen' gurus, for a sin committed even before his more recent part in the Narayana Maharaja affair.

Faith in the gurus and in the institution as a whole was severely

shaken when [in 1980] the GBC had to censure three of the eleven gurus for varying degrees of misconduct. Jayatirtha dasa was found to be taking LSD and was guilty of sexual transgressions. Hamsaduta Swami, in a much publicized case, was discovered amassing weapons, and was also found to be sexually promiscuous. Tamal Krishna Goswami [referring to himself in the third person], the leader of a large number of *sannyasi* and *brahmacari* preachers, had insisted that he was now their *via media* in relating to Prabhupada and expected that his godbrothers follow him absolutely. (305)

These spiritual masters were clearly not living up to the ‘model’ of devotion set by Prabhupada. The case of TKG is different and potentially more destabilising, in that he was arrogantly presuming to occupy the same exalted position previously granted only to Prabhupada himself – although TKG has since repented for his sins. The list of ‘fallen’ gurus continues beyond these first three, the latest being exposed in 1998 for ‘sexual transgressions’ and the appropriation of ISKCON funds. Some of the earlier cases of ISKCON’s ‘fallen’ gurus have been already been documented by non-ISKCON observers (Hubner and Gruson 1988; Rochford 1985:221-255; Rochford 1998; Shinn 1987a:50-60;). Only one hitherto undocumented case concerns me here, however, as it has had a particular impact on the Australian Hare Krishna scene, making Australia a particularly fertile ground for Narayana Maharaja’s preaching tours.

‘Govinda dasa’ is a ‘fallen’ American guru who once wielded great power and influence in ISKCON. Formerly a favoured disciple and personal servant of Srila Prabhupada, Govinda was later found ‘guilty of sexual transgressions’ (which emerges as the dominant, recurring symptom of spiritual fallibility amongst Prabhupada’s immediate successors). As one of Prabhupada eleven appointed successors, Govinda had wielded his spiritual and institutional influence in ISKCON through his position in a now dismantled structure of guru leadership called the ‘Zonal *Acarya*’ system. Under this system, each of

the original eleven '*acaryas*' 'was allocated his own exclusive geographical area in which to initiate [new disciples]...

Since all the new recruits soon became his disciples, each guru exercised an increasing influence over the devotees within not only his own GBC zone, but any zone of which he was the initiating guru. Thus, for all purposes, he became the zonal *acarya*, the head of the institution (or at least a geographical portion of the institution). (Goswami, T.K. op.cit.:304; see also Rochford 1985:222-3)

From Prabhupada's departure in 1977, to the time of Govinda's infamous 'fall' in the mid-1980s, Govinda dasa was responsible for initiating all new recruits to ISKCON in Australia. Effectively, Govinda was 'the head of the institution' of ISKCON in Australia at that time, and the sole spiritual link to Prabhupada for all new Australian disciples. Given the central importance placed on a devotee's spiritual link to the *parampara*, or disciplic succession, through the spiritual master, the 'fall' of any given zonal *acarya* was certain to leave 'many casualties in its wake' (Goswami, T.K. op.cit.:306) in the corresponding 'zone' on the ISKCON map. Many 'disciples of fallen gurus felt shelterless' (ibid.). As theirs was only the latest in a series of serious breaches of faith committed by some of ISKCON's most powerful individuals, many of Govinda's Australian disciples joined the 'exodus of devotees who felt unable to repose full faith in some ISKCON authority' (329).

TKG does not reveal that Narayana Maharaja's largest ex-ISKCON support base is drawn from this same generation of disaffected former disciples of Govinda in Australia. Many of Govinda's former disciples have since taken re-initiation from Narayana Maharaja and accepted him as their new spiritual master. I met several such disciples while

conducting my brief period of fieldwork in Mayapur and Vrindavana.<sup>7</sup> I also had the rare privilege of meeting Narayana Maharaja himself on his latest visit to Australia in January of 2001. During that encounter I recorded an exchange between Narayana Maharaja and a middle-aged Australian devotee, who approached Narayana Maharaja for guidance in his long-standing struggle with the spiritual life. As is revealed, the devotee was the first ever disciple of Govinda's. The exchange establishes the urgent priority of re-initiation by Narayana Maharaja, so to expunge the taste of 'bad water' left by ISKCON's fallen gurus:

**NM:** Have you received [initiation]?

**Devotee:** Yes I was initiated... by [Govinda], Maharaja

**NM:** Oh, this will not do. [laughter by some of Maharaja's disciples] If you want to serve Krishna, really, ... you have to go and surrender to any living guru... they will help. Who is fallen himself, what he can help you?... How many years you have taken initiation?

**Devotee:** I was the first [ever disciple of Govinda's].

**Assistant:** '78. Twenty-three years.

**NM:** Have you developed? Are you really realising that you are happy and that you are advancing?

**Devotee:** No.

**NM:** ...Do you want to serve Krishna?

**Devotee:** Yes.

**NM:** Then why you delay? Are you thirsty? If you are thirsty then at once you should take water. Don't delay otherwise you will die. So if you want to serve Krishna and you have thirst for that, really, if you are hungry, at once without delay. Tomorrow, what will be done? No one knows, why not today? And if today, then just now?

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<sup>7</sup> Many of Govinda's Australian ex-disciples have a long association with these two sacred locations, for these were also part of Govinda's 'zone' during his reign as zonal *acarya*, and Govinda enlisted many of his



**Devotee:** Please.

**NM:** ...very soon ...don't delay ...I help all, I may help you more.

**Devotee:** We will serve you forever if you can help us...

**NM:** Why delay, don't delay. If you have good faith, strong faith in any devotee... who is really a realised soul and who can help you, you should take initiation from that person. First judge yourself whether he can help you or not, and then, oh very soon, you shall cry [for Krishna]. This is the process, and the next day you will realise something. [agreement from other devotees, "Yeah, it's true"] Very wonderful, very wonderful.

**Devotee:** It has been very hard. I feel I have no help in my spiritual life.

**NM:** Oh because you are not sincere .. if you say.. 'I must have the service of Krishna'... if you are really thirsty, you will search water here and there, very soon you will have water... but don't take bad water otherwise disease may come and all will be sick.

Given that disaffected former disciples of Govinda have already distanced themselves from the institutional auspices of ISKCON, their re-initiation to Narayana Maharaja does not present a new or substantial threat to ISKCON as such. Of greater concern to ISKCON authorities, however, are those devotees within ISKCON who are either uninitiated, or who, while already initiated under an ISKCON guru still in 'good standing', continue to be drawn into the association of Narayana Maharaja and his band of ISKCON defectors. Of concern also is the fact that ISKCON in Australia now has an influential competitor in the recruitment of new or 'potential converts' – 'potential converts' like myself for instance:

**Assistant:** [Malcolm] was hearing from ISKCON devotees, and they-

**NM:** They cannot do anything.

**Assistant:** Then he discovered that everywhere, they were speaking about “Narayana Maharaja... Narayana Maharaja.” [Laughter from the other devotees]

**NM:** Narayana Maharaja [is] very tricky. [Hearty laughter from the devotees] First he will keep you in his pocket and then you will be [his]...

**MH:** I’ve been doing this study of Hare Krishna, and I’ve been to India, I’ve been to Sridhama Mayapur, I’ve been to Sridhama Vrindavana, but my study has been focussed here in Sydney. And every time – sometimes a devotee will mention “Narayana Maharaja” – but every time a devotee mentions “Narayana Maharaja” it’s very hushed and very quiet, and we have to hide to talk about Narayana Maharaja. [laughter] Why can’t the ISKCON devotees talk about Narayana Maharaja, openly?

**NM:** They cannot do. Because they are my childrens. I think they are my childrens. They are disciples of my bosom friend and my *siksa* guru: very powerful Bhaktivedanta Swami Maharaja [Prabhupada]. So they know that he is very dearest of Srila Prabhupada, Srila Bhaktivedanta Swami, and there is transcendental relation between them, and if he will come in our area, all will be attracted to him. They think that all their disciples are their wealth, their.. property. And they fear that, “Oh, if Narayana Maharaja, oh, he will collect all the money and all the disciples.” But I don’t want... I never. But I know that they are ignorant, and that is why their guru... Srila Bhaktivedanta Swami Maharaja, told me, personally, and to also them, that “You should help my devotees.”... All these disciples, I want without self... But then they fear because ignorant. If not ignorant, then they would have come to me. I would have helped so much more. So they tell, but secretly... I help them, I want to help, and I help, in any way I am helping.

**MH:** Can the gurus in ISKCON help devotees?

**NM:** They can help, but to some limit that they know. After that, transcendental things, they cannot. They can help in money-making so much, or that you should give up... four kinds of basic principles – don’t take eggs, meat, wine – and you should chant *mantra* and you should read *Bhagavad-gita*: they can do, and this way they can help so much. They can make a platform...

Narayana Maharaja adheres to the developmental conception of spiritual progress explored earlier in this chapter. He grants that ISKCON can provide the devotee with the ‘basic principles’ of Vaidhi-bhakti *saddhana*, which are absolutely necessary as a ‘platform’ for further advancement. But Narayana Maharaja purports to offer a higher teaching than is available to devotees in ISKCON, by presenting them with the esoteric technique of Raganuga-bhakti in the form of *rasa-katha*. Furthermore, to his followers, Narayana Maharaja also represents something which ISKCON has evidently failed to produce since Prabhupada left his movement in the hands of his inexperienced Western disciples: a ‘pure devotee’ of Lord Krishna, or someone ‘who is really a realised soul and who can help you’. Narayana Maharaja’s challenge is ultimately founded on the most sacred relationship in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, that between disciple and spiritual master. He and his followers assert that only an *uttama-adhikari*, a devotee of the highest class, has the capacity to guide the disciple across the material ocean to the lotus feet of Lord Krishna. A ‘pure devotee’ is fully Krishna Conscious, by definition infallible, and speaks of what he himself sees of the eternal pastimes of Radha and Krishna in the spiritual world: he speaks *from* the spiritual world itself, and his words are *sabda-brahman*, pure transcendental sound and ‘nectar’ to the ears of his disciples. Only such a guide, who knows and can describe the spiritual world from his own elevated experience, can lead the disciple back to the spiritual world.

While disaffected ISKCON devotees who follow Narayana Maharaja still accept Srila Prabhupada to be one such empowered devotee of the Lord, they do not accept that there is any living guru in ISKCON today who can offer devotees a direct, substantive disciplic link to the transcendental realm. For how can there be, when even ISKCON’s most experienced and exalted of spiritual masters have repeatedly proven their fallibility?

The old system of guru leadership in ISKCON, which TKG refers to as the ‘Zonal *Acarya* Heresy’ (304), has long since been abandoned.<sup>8</sup> But the sordid history of ISKCON’s guru crises since the departure of Srila Prabhupada still weighs heavily upon the movement, and this history only lends further weight to the challenge presented to ISKCON by Narayana Maharaja. ISKCON must still contend with the fact that faith in the spiritual authority of ISKCON been eroded amongst a significant number of devotees. Such disillusionment has been enough in itself to alienate devotees from ISKCON and lead them to the alternative paths offered by other representatives of the tradition.

### ***Prabhupadanuga: model, method, and mood in ISKCON***

In its response to the Narayana Maharaja challenge, the collective voice of authority in ISKCON, the GBC, has not sought to deny or to defend the evidence of ISKCON gurus’ fallibility. It has not sought to counter the claims of Narayana Maharaja’s followers to have found a ‘pure devotee’ of the Lord by claiming the same status for any of ISKCON’s current spiritual masters. Instead, it has sought to downplay the role of the initiating (*diksa*) guru, and to direct the devotee’s spiritual practice toward Srila Prabhupada as instructing (*siksa*) guru and as Gaudiya-Vaisnavism’s only ‘world *acarya*’. The devotional ‘mood’ in ISKCON is to be developed through the devotee’s personal spiritual relationship with Srila Prabhupada as Founder-*Acarya* of ISKCON. This relationship is to be developed in spiritual practice through the medium of Prabhupada’s books and the continuation of Prabhupada’s ‘missionary activities’.

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<sup>8</sup> ISKCON gurus are now required to travel constantly and initiate disciples from all over the ISKCON world, thus restricting the influence and power of any particular guru over a given region, and potentially minimising the damage in any region in the unfortunate event of another guru crisis.

In a recent re-affirmation of the official ISKCON policy on the Narayana Maharaja issue, the GBC has published a series of comparisons between the teachings of Narayana Maharaja and those of Srila Prabhupada. The following extract demonstrates a strategic movement in the theological argument – from a specific indictment of Narayana Maharaja’s *rasa-katha* to a definitive re-assertion of ISKCON’s core model of spiritual practice: preaching and ‘spiritual culture’.

Srila Prabhupada repeatedly warned about prematurely hearing descriptions of madhurya-lila, the intimate pastimes Krsna enjoys with the gopis. Srila Narayana Maharaja speaks openly about these topics...

Srila Narayana Maharaja says that Srila Prabhupada’s work is unfinished because he did not provide us with intimate rasika literature and methods of raganuga-sadhana. Srila Prabhupada described his unfinished work as the fact that *varnasrama-dharma had not yet been established in his Society, that sets of his books had not yet been placed in every home, that people were still going hungry within ten miles of ISKCON temples, that the Lord’s Holy Name had not yet been heard in every town and village.* (dasa, B. op.cit.; my emphasis)

The highlighted section of this text could readily stand as a definitive mission statement for ISKCON. First to be mentioned is the establishment of *varnasrama-dharma*, or ‘spiritual culture’ (as I have sought to define this concept in Chapters Two and Three). Then comes ‘book distribution’: the selling of Prabhupada’s books to the public as a principle form of proselytisation or *sankirtana*. Then *prasadam* distribution, taking the organisational form of ISKCON’s Food for Life program. And finally there is *hari nama sankirtana*: congregational chanting of the Holy Name in public. Any teaching that would threaten the standards set out in this mission statement, or suggest that they were either ‘elementary’ or incomplete and that a higher spiritual purpose could exist beyond these

standards, can be regarded as constituting a ‘Hare Krishna Heresy’ (Goswami, T.K., op.cit:283).

This would seem to leave no room whatsoever in ISKCON for the various techniques of ‘personal spiritual advancement’ offered by other representatives of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, who would pursue directly the divine ‘mood’ of Krishna’s *gopi* companions. By extension, it seems, this would also mean the definitive effacement of the *gopis* themselves as ‘the divine model’ (cf. Haberman 1988) of devotion in ISKCON. Yet, to be sure, Prabhupada fully adhered to the Gaudiya-Vaisnava view that the *gopis* of Vraja embody the highest level of *bhakti*, love of God, expressed as the conjugal *rasa* (*madhurya-rasa*) and revealed in the sacred literature. As TKG reminds us,

[Prabhupada] did not hesitate to translate Rupa Goswami’s *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, a work entirely devoted to analyzing devotional relationships. His seventeen-volume translation of Krsna dasa Kaviraja’s *Sri Caitanya-caritamrta* highlights many intimate pastimes in which Caitanya and his companions became absorbed, and identified with the conjugal mood of Radha and her companions. However, Prabhupada repeatedly warned his audiences not to compare these wholly transcendental descriptions with their seemingly mundane equivalents. (323)

Prabhupada’s repeated warnings were further reinforced by his careful exegetical style. Even in Prabhupada’s use of the word ‘*bhakti*’ – to which he gives the rather staid translation, ‘devotional service’ – we see a deliberate effort to shift the semantic emphasis away from that divine intimacy which lies at the heart of the Krishna-*lila*. Nevertheless, the promise of eternal participation in Krishna’s Vraja-*lila* is still extended to devotees in ISKCON. According to the ISKCON position, the perilous path offered by practitioners of Raganuga-bhakti is *no longer necessary* to the attainment of spiritual perfection in

Krishna's transcendental abode. Emerging from its theological contests with the tradition emboldened with renewed sectarian zeal, ISKCON's theological authorities have proclaimed a *new* path to salvation never before revealed in the history of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. This is the path of 'Prabhupadanuga' (dasa, B. op.cit.), and it is open only to those who follow the model, method, and mood of devotion provided by Srila Prabhupada.

From the teachings of scripture, the members of ISKCON understand... that Srila Prabhupada is a most confidential empowered servant of the Supreme Lord. Scripture and saintly persons predicted the appearance of a senapati-bhakta, a great general sent by the Lord to organize a worldwide preaching mission and establish the most effective and certain ways and means to achieve pure love of God. The members of ISKCON believe Srila Prabhupada to be that unique emissary of the Lord.

It is in this light that ISKCON's members see the special position of Srila Prabhupada, read his Bhaktivedanta purports, and work to maintain the standards, practices, and goals he personally established. ISKCON sees Srila Prabhupada as not just one of the many Vedic voices but rather as that world acarya *sent directly by the Supreme Lord to craft the process of deliverance for this place and time*. Srila Prabhupada himself said, "my books will be the law books for the next ten thousand years." For the members of ISKCON, the words of Srila Prabhupada are the template by which all other statements are to be measured. (dasa, B. op.cit.; my emphasis)

With the hagiographic formulation of Srila Prabhupada as the 'world acarya sent directly by the Supreme Lord to craft the process of deliverance for this place and time', we witness the advent of a new *lila*: the Prabhupada-*lila*. For the Prabhupadanuga, or follower of Prabhupada, Prabhupada's life and work must be read not merely in the historical context of the West's encounter with a Bengali Vaisnava tradition, but in the context of a

sacred chronology of God's divine dispensation. A paraphrased reading of this sacred chronology might run as follows.

Five thousand years ago, by Hare Krishna reckoning, Krishna manifested His eternal transcendental *lila* in Vrindavana, revealing to humanity His own most intimate and exalted of pleasures. Five hundred years ago, in the Bengali town of Navadvipa, Krishna manifested His Caitanya-*lila*, so that His own transcendental pleasures could be doubled (the dual incarnation theory), and so as to establish the *yuga-dharma*, the path of salvation for the present Age. The manifestation of Krishna's Caitanya-*lila* on the streets of Navadvipa was to herald the beginning of a new Golden Age, in the midst of this degraded Kali-yuga, in which even the lowest *mleccha* (outcaste) could attain salvation through the simple process of *sankirtana*, congregational chanting of the Names of the Lord. Caitanya was Radha and Krishna combined, which means that in ultimate reality, participation in Caitanya's *sankirtana-lila* is 'non-different' to participation in Krishna's *rasa-lila* with the *gopis*. As Krishna's most munificent incarnation, Caitanya presented the world with *sankirtana* so as to make the *rasa-lila* accessible, forestalling any need on the part of the devotee to risk 'jumping over to the gopi's *rasa lila*' (Prabhupada, cited in Brooks 1990:273). But with the disappearance of Caitanya, the *sankirtana* movement began to suffer from a lack of proselytising zeal, and the corruption of Caitanya's teachings in the form of various *sahajiya* sects saw the movement devolve into a state of stagnation.

That was until Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur instigated a spiritual and scholarly revival of the Caitanya movement in Bengal, after receiving a divine vision of Caitanya's birthplace, Sridhama Mayapur, in the late nineteenth-century. With the preaching and organisational efforts of Bhaktivinode's son, Caitanya's *sankirtana* movement saw the beginnings of a true revival in the form of Srila Bhaktisiddanta Thakur's Gaudiya Math.



But again, the absence of a great leader was to see the fire of proselytisation dampened, and almost extinguished, as Bhaktisiddanta's successors dissolved his organisation into inward-looking, guru-centred factions with no interest in promoting the universal teachings of Caitanya outside of their own narrow purview. Of Bhaktisiddanta's many thousands of disciples, only one – Bhaktivedanta Swami, or Srila Prabhupada to his later followers – was to carry the light of Caitanya to the world.

The definitive hagiographic moment in this sacred chronology occurs in the year 1965. In this year, after a 'lifetime in preparation' (Goswami, S.d. 1993[vol.1]) in India, Srila Prabhupada boarded the steamship *Jaladuta* and sailed to America equipped with the first of many translations and the instruction of his spiritual master, Srila Bhaktisiddanta, to spread the teachings of Caitanya to the English-speaking West. Bhaktisiddanta's father, Bhaktivinode, had said that just as Caitanya's companions beat *mrdanga* drums to sound out the rhythm of *sankirtana* through the towns and villages of fifteenth century Bengal, so the printing press was to be the *brhat-mrdanga*, the 'great drum' of the modern-day *sankirtana* movement. Srila Prabhupada introduced a new dimension to Bhaktivinode's *brhat-mrdanga* that was to expand immeasurably the range and power of Caitanya's mission: translation. Prabhupada's trans-oceanic voyage from India to America, in a literal, historical, as well as wholly transcendental sense, stands for that movement of translation which was to bring a new light and life to Caitanya's *sankirtana* movement. But Prabhupada did not only carry Caitanya's message across oceans and languages: he also carried it between worlds. For instead of appearing Himself to impart His latest revelation, Krishna had sent His 'most confidential empowered servant' straight from the spiritual world itself, 'to craft the process of deliverance', 'a worldwide preaching mission' which

would be a vessel capable of translating its passengers directly unto the heavenly world of Krishna:

Srla Prabhupada labored long and hard to design his ISKCON as a great transcendental boat. He believed that it was fully able to carry those who take shelter of it across the ocean of the material world to the lotus feet of the Supreme Lord. The planks, the sails, the rigging, and the charts of Srla Prabhupada's boat are his standards, his mood of devotion, his instructions, and his system of organization. It is at great risk that one begins to tinker with and retool the craft created by such an empowered personality as Srla Prabhupada. (dasa, B. op.cit.)

Those Prabhupada-disciples lucky enough to have participated in the construction of Prabhupada's 'great transcendental boat' are understood to have witnessed first-hand the divine will of Krishna being enacted upon the world. The life and work of Prabhupada are therefore approached as nothing less than 'transcendental pastimes', or *lila*. Hagiographic re-constructions of Prabhupada's *lila* can in this sense be understood to constitute a form of *spiritual practice* which in other Gaudiya-Vaisnava contexts would be called *lila-smarana*: 'remembrance' of *lila*.

In the following chapter I seek to analyse the hagiographic practice of 'remembering Prabhupada' as a core spiritual practice in ISKCON. According to Haberman (1988), *lila-smarana* is a process of 'remembering' or 'bearing in mind' (124), in which mental participation ('visualization' in Haberman's context) in Krishna's Vraja-lila is understood gradually to effect actual participation on the transcendental 'stage'. O'Connell (1992) refers to the process of *smarana* or 'remembrance' as 'an exercise in *anamnesis*, or the reversal of amnesia' (232; original emphasis), where intense exposure to the sound or image of Krishna works to dispel the illusion of forgetfulness, and hence effect the

realisation of one's own true spiritual identity. O'Connell also appreciates, however, that remembrance is not merely a mental process, but a process which can engage any or all of the senses in bringing the *lila* into the realm of present experience:

Use your ears, use your eyes to see the image of the deity! Use your voice – all of the senses – to build up and sustain an all-encompassing awareness of the Divine. It is called *smarana*, or “remembrance”. It is not simply looking back at the past. You make the awareness present, right here and now. (232)

Narayana Maharaja appeals to the first of these imperatives: ‘Use your ears...!’ He offers his followers the sacred narrative (*katha*) of Krishna's *rasa-lila*, with which to ‘remember’ Krishna and the originary state of the *gopis*, and thus effect the spiritual process of anamnesis. In responding to the Narayana Maharaja threat, ISKCON makes its most effective critique by offering devotees an *alternative narrative (katha)* – the hagiographic narrative of the Prabhupada-*lila* – with which to ‘remember’ the origins of ISKCON itself as the ultimate vehicle of salvation. The theology of *smarana*, or anamnesis, as the key process of salvation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, has not in itself been abandoned in this response. But with the revelation of the Prabhupada-*lila*, Krishna has provided humanity with a new narrative ‘model’, a new story through which He may be remembered. And to appropriate O'Connell's phrase which I cited above: remembering Prabhupada, twenty or so years since the time of his material death, ‘is not simply looking back at the past. You make [Prabhupada] present, right here and now’. In ISKCON, the process is called ‘putting Prabhupada back in the centre’. To cite Prabhupada's unique authority is also to recite his unique story, and to tell Prabhupada's story is to *participate* in the ‘unfinished work’ of the narrative and to bring the *lila* of Prabhupada's special mission

to life, as the promise and purpose of spiritual practice in ISKCON. To continue with Prabhupada's 'unfinished work', and to remember his unique story, is also ultimately to bring Krishna's *lila* into the accessible realm of spiritual practice in ISKCON. No other path to salvation is deemed necessary, and lest the devotee forget the unique spiritual position of Srila Prabhupada, no other path should be deemed acceptable practice in ISKCON. For since, in ultimate reality, the Prabhupada-*lila* is 'non-different' to the Caitanya-*lila*, which is in turn 'non-different' to the Krishna-*lila*,

...the sincere aspirant who faithfully serves Srila Prabhupada by following his directions for sadhana and working wholeheartedly to fulfil the goals of his preaching mission will automatically come to the highest levels of realization. We do not need to add anything to or subtract anything from the process Srila Prabhupada established while personally present on the planet; rather, by absorbing ourselves totally in fulfilling the mission of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, we will *surpass* all other processes. (dasa, B. 1997; my emphasis)

As I turn now to examine hagiographic practice in ISKCON as *lila-smarana*, or the 'remembrance' of Srila Prabhupada's 'transcendental pastimes' (*lila*), I emphasise again that this is not a practice of 'simply looking back at the past' (cf. O'Connell, op.cit.), but of practically participating in the sacred narrative of Srila Prabhupada's life and work. I want to stress also that the academic study of ISKCON should not be a process of 'simply looking back at the past' in order to identify ISKCON with a particular Indian tradition called Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. For the practitioner of Krishna Consciousness in ISKCON, the spiritual process *surpasses* Gaudiya-Vaisnavism precisely because Srila Prabhupada brought its teachings *out* of its traditional Indian context and modelled his movement upon a vision of Krishna's global dispensation.

## Chapter Five

### Remembering Prabhupada: hagiography as spiritual practice

#### Remembering Prabhupada: history and hagiography

In September 1965, His Divine Grace Abhay Charan Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (the founder-acarya of ISKCON) walked down the gangplank of the *Jaladuta* and stepped onto the dock in New York Harbor. He was all alone except for the order of his spiritual master and a few sets of his translation and commentary on the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*. As he later said himself, “I did not know whether to turn left or right”.

From such a humble beginning flowed the amazing success of Srila Prabhupada’s mission. In twelve short years he opened well over one hundred temples, schools, farms, and prasadam restaurants, inaugurated the worship of dozens of sets of Radha-Kṛṣṇa deities, and launched magnificent Ratha-yatras and other festivals. He initiated more than five thousand disciples from every corner of the world. Such accomplishments, in such a short time, are unprecedented in religious history. (dasa, B. 2000)

There is a clearly devotional inflection to these words, ‘unprecedented in religious history’. When hagiographic claims such as this are made by a devotee, ethnographers of ISKCON are obliged to attend (listen, read), at least initially, just as we are obliged to observe: with some attempt at empathic understanding (cf. Robbins, et al. 1973). But when comparably grandiose statements about ISKCON’s cultural, religious or historical

significance are unabashedly supported by ISKCON's scholarly observers, we are presumably permitted to make a more critical response. In an interview with Stephen Gelberg (a.k.a. Subhananda dasa), the distinguished cultural historian of India, A.L. Basham, repeatedly compares the 'historical uniqueness' of ISKCON to the spectacular rise of early Christianity:

It is the very first time since the Roman Empire, as I've said more than once, when an Asian religious movement has been practiced publicly in the streets of the western world by people of western descent. The Hare Krishna movement is something unique in the West, at least in the history of the last two-thousand years. (Basham 1983:195)

This is an unsolicited statement, I might point out (despite a series of leading questions by the devotee-interviewer). Basham had previously made the same claim in his conclusion to *A Cultural History of India* (1975), and in the scholarly context of his own A.N.U. office (Gelberg specifies the date and place of the interview), he is happy to confirm it again and again on tape for the sake of Gelberg's book. I find in this interview context a fascinating role-reversal of the typical scholar-informant relationship: Basham reads like a convert. Of course, the type of legitimation sought by Basham's interviewer is only possible because Basham is *not* a convert, but a 'distinguished scholar', and Basham himself assures us that: 'I could never belong to [ISKCON] myself' (Basham op.cit.:190; also cited in Baird 1988:163).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, along with the other 'five distinguished

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<sup>1</sup> Baird (1988) cites Basham's affirmation of distance in his paper on ISKCON's 'struggle for legitimation'. He also makes the point that although '[n]ot every statement [made by Gelberg's scholarly interviewees] is laudatory', this very fact makes 'many of their other statements even more forceful in the legitimation process' (163). Baird notes a recurring emphasis by Gelberg's interviewees on the point that ISKCON is not a 'new' religious movement, but has genuine religious roots in India (ibid.). Interestingly, Baird himself participates in precisely this same form of legitimation, in almost exactly the same words, in his foreword (Baird 1993:vi) to Volume Five of Srila Prabhupada's biography (a text which I address in detail shortly).

scholars' interviewed by Gelberg for *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna* (Gelberg 1983), Basham is happy to participate in a project of cultural, religious, and historical legitimation for the as-yet fledgling Hare Krishna movement in the West. This legitimation finds its source – or the power-point of historical continuity from which ISKCON's cultural authenticity flows through to the practices of its members – in the person of Srila Prabhupada. Basham explicitly sets the figure of Prabhupada against the foil of those 'streamlined swamis' belonging to movements like Transcendental Meditation and certain contemporary forms of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society – movements which he tactfully dismisses as 'scarcely Hinduism at all' (166). 'That is one extreme. Yours is the other. You appropriate an Indian religious sect – its beliefs, its practices, all its taboos, and so on – root and branch and import it into the West' (167).

The use of *transplantation* ('root and branch') as a metaphor for cultural authenticity is found throughout ISKCON hagiography. There are other convergences too between scholarly and hagiographical language, some of which are put to good use in the ISKCON literature. For example, despite Prabhupada's express antipathy towards Western 'materialist' knowledge, the words of Western academics appraise the cultural authenticity of ISKCON and its founder between the covers of Prabhupada's key translations. For the most widely distributed of Prabhupada's works, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* (1986a), 'Dr J. Stillson Judah, Emeritus Professor of the History of Religions and Director of the Library, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley'<sup>2</sup> (and also author of the first monograph study of

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Baird (1988) acknowledges that the use of scholars' forewords to each of the six volumes of Prabhupada's biography is 'regularly mentioned in advertising' (163) and as a form of legitimation for this text, but fails to mention his own contribution. Baird's paper also explores the involvement of scholars in the legal defense of ISKCON in American courts, and the various efforts within ISKCON to open dialogue with scholars. On the ethical and methodological problems raised by scholars working *for* cults in this kind of capacity, also see Barker (1983) and Beckford (1983).

<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of these scholars' full academic titles is presumably intended to add weight to the scholarly authority elicited from their statements.

ISKCON, Judah (1974a)), offers the following appraisal: ‘In this beautiful translation, Srila Prabhupada has caught the deep devotional spirit of the *Gita* and has supplied the text with an elaborate commentary in the *truly authentic tradition* of Sri Krsna Caitanya, one of India’s most important and influential saints’ (my emphasis). ‘Dr Francois Chenique, Doctor of Religious Studies, Institute of Political Sciences, Paris’ writes, ‘Whether the reader be an adept of Indian spirituality or not, a reading of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* will be extremely profitable, for it will allow him to understand the *Gita* as still today the majority of Hindus do. For many, this will be the first contact with the *true India, the ancient India, the eternal India*’ (my emphasis). My personal favourite, though, comes from ‘Dr Elwin H. Powell, Professor of Sociology, State University of New York’, who foregoes historical claims to authenticity and simply takes at face-value the evidence of practice: ‘If truth is what works, as Pierce and the pragmatists insist, there must be a kind of truth in the *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, since those who follow its teachings display a joyous serenity usually missing in the bleak and strident lives of contemporary people’.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot help but bring a critical reading to these appraisals. I read them as excessive overflows of scholarly empathy, unfettered celebrations at the possibility of a *cultural alternative* to the crisis of Western modernity, and in this way as further instances of those pervasive and problematic sociological assumptions I addressed in Chapter One. But in the (con)text in which I find them, these academic appraisals require a different kind of reading than they would otherwise invite as ‘objective’ academic observations expressed within an academic context. This kind of reading has nothing to do with the intersubjective dilemmas of ‘empathic field observation’ in the course of researching cults (as I explored in Chapter One with reference to Robbins et al. (op.cit.), Barker (1987), Ayella (1993)), nor

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<sup>3</sup> All of these citations come from inside the cover of Prabhupada (1986a).



with the potential ethical hazards of complicity between scholars and cults in the work of cultural or religious legitimation (Barker 1983; Beckford 1983). I remain cautiously distanced from both these concerns (while yet maintaining a subjective ethnographic contact), as I accept the inclusion of academic appraisals in ISKCON books as a small but interesting ethnographic detail.

I mean *ethnographic* detail in the important sense that, for the purposes of my research, ISKCON books are my ethnographic artifacts. Unlike my *japa* beads, which lie visibly neglected on the shelf above my desk, these artifacts are being put to use. Acquired ‘in the field’ – mostly from Varadaraja’s Temple Shop at ISKCON Sydney, some from ISKCON stockists in India – the books that lie around me as I write ‘at home’ still emit the sweet-spice fragrance of incense as I lift their covers and read these little words of authentication. The scent takes me back to ‘the field’ – but this kind of return cannot be a purely internal or mental ‘remembrance’, because a scent is materially present and I taste it with my senses. I still avoid placing my spiritual literature on the floor or bed: in the *brahmachari* ashram I knew *explicitly* that these places were *muci*, unclean. Whatever the original intention of their authors, the academic appraisals I have cited have been incorporated into these ethnographic reading practices.

I am also reminded of the materiality of my textual artifacts as I heave my massive ‘special collector’s edition’ of the *Lilamrta* (Goswami, S.d. 1993) down from the shelf. Originally published as six separate volumes, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami’s *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* (‘The nectar of Srila Prabhupada’s transcendental pastimes’) is the official ISKCON biography of Srila Prabhupada. Written by one of Prabhupada’s earliest American disciples, each volume of the *Lilamrta* also includes a foreword by a different academic admirer of Prabhupada. Two of these are authors I have referred to earlier in my

thesis – Judah and Shinn. Their presence in this crucial ISKCON text presents another interesting convergence of my ethnographic material with ‘secondary’ or ‘interpretive’ material which might otherwise be thought to ‘transcend’ the ethnographic.<sup>4</sup> Judah – as the earliest sociologist on the Hare Krishna scene who had the privilege of meeting and speaking with Srila Prabhupada – has a way of appearing in these significant ethnographic spaces.

November 14 1999, Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day.<sup>5</sup> I sat with a group of devotees on the floor of the Cessnock farm temple, watching video testimonies of Prabhupada-disciples. Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day, I was led to believe, was annually flooded with the tears of Prabhupada-disciples – but the mood in the room was sombre rather than unreservedly emotional. The devotees (some first-generational, but most younger) listened intently, as I did, to stories about Prabhupada and the personal lessons (*siksa*) imparted by him to those fortunate enough to have experienced (however fleetingly) their guru’s direct acquaintance. Many of the stories provoked sympathetic laughter rather than tears. Interspersed amongst the stories was documentary footage in which Prabhupada discussed or debated the topic of Krishna Consciousness with various scholars or journalists. Dr Judah’s appearance provoked in me a singular feeling of reflexive displacement. Judah’s name was one I had found in a university library and placed in a reference list. The appeal of this name was bibliographic, not ethnographic, yet here was

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<sup>4</sup> Social scientific texts traditionally strive for a transcendence that comes from critical objectivity. I seek a different path to transcendence, inspired by Tyler’s (1986) occult appraisal of the (post-modern) ethnographic text as ‘a means, the meditative vehicle for a transcendence of time and place that is not just transcendental but a transcendental *return* to time and place’ (129; my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Disappearance’ connotes the death of the physical body. As I will explore, Prabhupada’s *spiritual* presence does not disappear with his material death.

Judah in the midst of my fieldwork, playing his part in this most significant act of devotional remembrance.<sup>6</sup>

After the video, the devotees carried Srila Prabhupada (in the form of his *murti*) on *parikrama* – circumambulating the Cessnock farm before stopping under a tree for a reading of the *Lilamrta*. As we heard more stories about Prabhupada’s accomplishments in establishing his international mission, some of the devotees took turns in serving Prabhupada, fanning him to ward off flies and keep him cool in the mid-November heat.



**Picture 8 Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day at ISKCON Cessnock. Devotees watch videos of Prabhupada-disciples recounting Prabhupada stories, while Prabhupada (in the form of his *murti*) receives devotional service from a grand-disciple.**

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<sup>6</sup> A note on libraries. While academic reviews within the covers of ISKCON books provide one source of legitimation, Rosen (1992b) reinforces this same sense of authority by adding that Prabhupada’s books can now be found within the academy: ‘His books are now being used in ninety-percent of North America’s universities and literally thousands of public libraries throughout the world’ (12). I have never really sought out ISKCON books in my university library, having my own copies (to hand) of those few I know are available there. I dare say there is a degree of wishful thinking in Rosen’s (a devotee’s) idea that ISKCON books are ‘being used’ in so many North American universities.

The presence of an ISKCON book in my academic context might well provoke the same kind of ‘remembrance’ of my fieldwork that I experience when consulting my ISKCON books at home. The effect of this remembrance/return might also be compared to the kind of ‘displacement’ I felt with Judah’s appearance in the midst of my fieldwork – only reversed, as it were. Both experiences, I suggest, have the effect of displacing ‘the field’ as such. I will have more to say on the ‘presence’ of ISKCON books – that is, presence as form despite content – later.

Listening to stories about Prabhupada is a spiritual act of *sravana* ('hearing') and *smarana* ('remembering'). Video testimonies, taped and transcribed conversations and interviews, the personal recollections of Prabhupada-disciples, readings from Prabhupada's collected letters (*Srila Prabhupada-siksamrta*) and Prabhupada's biography (in which the author draws on these same sources) collectively provide an extensive facility for such practice. The title of Prabhupada's biography, *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*, asserts that stories about Prabhupada are *amrta* – 'nectar'; and Prabhupada's life and accomplishments are *lila* – 'transcendental pastimes'. Hearing (*sravana*) stories about Prabhupada is therefore equivalent to the spiritual process of *lila-smarana*, 'remembrance of *lila*'. The final paragraphs of the *Lilamrta* affirm the process:

We hope that the *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* will help the readers in establishing their relationship with Srila Prabhupada. Its contribution is in the mood of remembering Srila Prabhupada in separation. Remembering his pastimes puts one into direct contact with him and with the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and this remembrance can free one from bondage to material life and enable one to taste the nectar of the eternal pastimes of Krsna and His associates in the spiritual world.

Srila Prabhupada's life did not end on November 14 1977. And we hope that readers of *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* will not feel they have finished their connection with this literature by having read it once. *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* can be read regularly, from beginning to end. Our hope is that by hearing about Srila Prabhupada the reader will become himself a Prabhupadanuga, a follower of Srila Prabhupada. We can wish no better fortune upon anyone. (Goswami, S.d. 1993:426-427[vol.6])

It would have been difficult to appreciate the hagiographic practice of reading or hearing about Prabhupada without the theological explorations of the previous chapter.

*Sravaṇa* ('hearing'), *kīrtana* ('praising'), *smaraṇa* ('remembering'), and *līla* ('transcendental pastimes') are all involved here, as is the concept of *anuga*, which Haberman (1988) translates as 'imitation' but ISKCON devotees use to mean 'following' – as in 'Prabhupadanuga, a follower of Srīla Prabhupada'. These theological devices are traditionally associated with the practice of 'hearing' and 'remembering' Krishna's *Vraja-līla* or His *Caitanya-līla*. But remembering the *Prabhupada-līla* is what makes ISKCON unique in relation to its 'tradition'. For Prabhupada's followers, tradition is synonymous with *mission* – a tradition *forgotten* until Prabhupada took it to the world. As we saw last chapter, devotees may leave ISKCON in search of a more genuine experience of *bhakti* in the mood of the *gopīs*, Krishna's cowherd girl lovers. They may seek this mood in the stories of *Kṛṣṇa-līla*, told by Vaiṣṇava renunciates from (and typically *in*) India on the traditional path of *raṅganuga*. True-to-heart ISKCON devotees, however, seek only to follow the mood of Prabhupada, Krishna's pure representative. The path of *Prabhupadanuga* is Prabhupada's unique gift to the world, making all other paths to Krishna unnecessary and even dangerous. The path is opened in the here-and-now context of hearing and remembering Prabhupada's life: for Prabhupada's life (and, as we shall see, his death) is his lesson.

In his foreword to Volume Three of the *Līlamṛta* (the volume which covers the events of 1967 centred around San Francisco's countercultural Haight-Ashbury district – the time and place of Judah's (1974a) original research), Judah (1993) conveys no reflexive sense whatsoever that he himself might have stepped into the transcendental terrain of *līla* upon contact with Prabhupada (whether he 'believes' it or not). Nor perhaps could he have realised that, with this contact, his own words and project might be subsumed and subverted within a spiritual context which incorporates the same theological devices long

associated with ‘the truly authentic tradition of Sri Krsna Caitanya’. Judah offers his appreciation for Satsvarupa’s work as ‘a mine of information for scholars and to anyone else interested in the movement Prabhupada brought to America from India, and in the counterculture itself, the social milieu in which the movement *took root and flourished* in its early years’ (v; my emphasis). He also values the work as ‘a fascinating close-up study of the process of religious conversion, about which psychologists and sociologists are so intrigued’ (vi). That is, Judah appreciates the work as a chronicle and as a supporting document to his own thesis. All the scholars who contributed forewords to Satsvarupa’s work seem to value its honesty, factuality, and detail as an historical or sociological resource. And indeed, every study of ISKCON produced since the original *Lilamtra* was published has made ample use of this resource.

For ISKCON’s scholarly observers, then, hagiography serves as history. Judah, for one, could not have known how readily this service could be reversed: that his history and sociology were to serve as hagiography. This is exactly what happens in Rosen’s (Satyaraja’s) ‘Summary Study’ of Satsvarupa’s *Lilamrta*, entitled *Passage From India: The Life and Times of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* (Rosen 1992b).<sup>7</sup> Rosen records in his introduction to this text that, ‘Being inspired by Prabhupada’s scholarship and pure devotion, two hundred American and Canadian scholars at [an] annual convention of the American Academy of Religion signed a petition asserting the Hare Krishna movement’s authenticity’ (11). He later cites some of the sociological scholarship on ISKCON (including Judah (1974a) and Bromley and Shinn (1987a)) with an explicitly hagiographical intent:

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<sup>7</sup> Rosen’s ‘Summary’, written in English, was intended for translation. It was written on the request of Tamal

The following documentation... need not be viewed as divergent from the... transcendental reasons for Srila Prabhupada's success. The sociological, legal, and theological considerations... may rightly be viewed as direct *manifestations* of Krishna's blessings and wholly transcendental in their own right. Krishna, it will be seen, had deliberately paved the way for Prabhupada by using these same so-called "mundane" phenomena. And in this way the Lord Himself may be said to have perfectly timed Prabhupada's every move.

This can be clearly seen by exploring some of the "sociological" considerations. (Rosen 1992b:58; original emphasis).

By exploring the convergences and complicities in historical/sociological and hagiographical accounts of Prabhupada's life, my intention is not to undermine the historical validity or value of these textual remembrances. Rather, my intention is to recognise these as practical forms of Hare Krishna spirituality 'in their own right'. Just as my textual artifacts emit a material essence which somehow returns me to the spiritual context of my ethnography (to be remembered or lived again in writing, in an ethnographic *anamnesis*, as in my brief account of Prabhupada's Disappearance Day) – so the very *form* of historical narrativity has the power to put the sensitive reader 'into direct contact' with Srila Prabhupada and offer a 'taste' of the hagiographic 'nectar' which is Prabhupada's life.

Wyschogrod (1990) offers a brilliant analysis of the '*mechanism*' (33; original emphasis) of hagiographic narrativity, in which she recognises the particular value and force of historicity in contemporary hagiography. 'Contemporary hagiographic reading is especially sensitive to the issue of plausibility so that even when extraordinary moral or ontic claims are propagated, they are rendered credible through the believability of context' (27). Wyschogrod's argument is worth citing at greater length:

...it is misguided to look at hagiography as straightforwardly historical, as if its overriding purpose were the assembling, reporting, and interpretation of a narratively regulated past. At the same time, saints' lives, even when punctuated by miraculous interventions and rhetorical strategies reflecting specific literary contexts, appear to be informed by a will to historicity. That is to say, whether unconsciously or artfully inserted into the text, the political, economic, and social conditions of the time of writing are exhibited in hagiography. This rich detail, hagiographically orchestrated, occurs even when it is inert so far as the narrative's denouement is concerned. Such concrete contexts announcing the story's provenance are not mere embellishments but are bound up with the fact that hagiographic discourse purports to disclose a life...

Hagiography requires historicity for still another reason. The beliefs and actions of saints constitute an unmediated appeal to the lives of their addressees without recourse to laws, moral rules, or maxims even when intratextual reference to such juridical structures occurs. It is the life as narrated that exhorts the text's addressees to "make the movements" of the saint's existence after her/him. The success of the life's appeal is in part the result of sheer perlocutionary force: the indicative mood of the narrative's sentences carries imperative weight. Hagiography is historical to the extent necessary for saintly praxes to be experienced as imposing realizable demands on the lives of its addressees. (28)

Wyschogrod's analysis weighs the 'imperative force' (*xxiii*) of hagiographic narrative upon the reader. "Here I am," is the hagiographic indicative – the saint's avowal of her/his availability – that empowers and sanctions the hagiographic imperative, "Come, follow me" (33). Unlike mythological texts or scientific hypotheses, which serve an 'etiological' or explanatory function in locating the 'origin of groups, natural phenomena, or cultic practices', hagiography is "lived forward" (29). Similarly, 'Srila Prabhupada's life did not end on November 14 1977', and in 'making the movements' with Prabhupada's



life story, Prabhupadanugas – followers of Prabhupada – make the *movement* which is ISKCON. Scholars who approach Prabhupada’s life story as an historical resource, even when (in the manner of Basham) they seem to accord it almost mythological value, misdirect the force of the narrative. Their genuine appreciation for genuineness is backward-directed. It traces cultural authenticity backwards to an originary past like ‘ancient India’ or the ‘truly authentic tradition of Sri Krsna Caitanya’. Harvey Cox perhaps exemplifies this backward-directed reading in his foreword to Volume One of the *Lilamrta* – the volume which traces Prabhupada’s ‘Lifetime in Preparation’ in India before, at the advanced age of sixty-nine, his mission was to propel him across the Atlantic and into the next twelve years and five volumes of his life:<sup>8</sup>

[This volume] reminds us of how very ensconced Srila Prabhupada was in one of the oldest religious traditions in the world. It recalls how very much went on in the generations, centuries, and even millenia before him that seems to be gathered and focused in his life and teaching. In one sense, Srila Prabhupada was not at all “original”, and reading stories about his life raises questions about our Western proclivity to attach such value to originality. What the book makes clear, on the contrary, is that Srila Prabhupada is a man who incarnates tradition. (Cox 1993:ix)

Eastern origins and Western originality. There is always this spatial as well as temporal tracing-back of cultural authenticity. But for those who ‘follow’ it, the force of the hagiographic narrative is forward-moving *between* East and West (India and America), and the ‘originality’ of Prabhupada’s different (and ‘non-different’) incarnations – his person, his story, his Society, and his translations – lies in this same movement. The narrative also

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<sup>8</sup> It is this last twelve years – in ‘the time that is left’ (Wyschogrod op.cit.:64) before Prabhupada’s material death, that truly impels the hagiography and constitutes its material volume.

‘reminds’ and ‘recalls’ these incarnations in a spatial presence which, with the temporal present, moves ever forwards. ‘Preparation’ (in India) leads inexorably to ‘passage’ (from India).<sup>9</sup> History and hagiography converge in a narrative ‘flow’ whose ‘humble beginning’ – remembering my opening quotation – really begins in an in-between space: the gangplank of a steamship called *Jaladuta*.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this ‘humble beginning’ and this in-between space – and the associated trope of ‘movement’ which extends metonymically from the gangplank to the ship itself, to its voyage between India and America, and most of all to its special cargo – in hagiographic accounts of ISKCON’s origin. The *Lilamtra* includes a photograph of the Bombay registered *Jaladuta* under another of Prabhupada’s stamped passport.<sup>11</sup> Between the two photos appear some words Prabhupada wrote in his diary *en route*: ‘If the Atlantic would have shown its usual face, perhaps I would have died. But Lord Krsna has taken charge of the ship’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In yet another act of scholarly complicity, ‘Dr Thomas J. Hopkins, Chairman of the Dept. of Religious Studies, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania’ concludes his foreword to Rosen’s *Passage From India* (op.cit.) by instructing his readers to ‘sit back and watch it unfold, as author Steven Rosen puts you in touch with perhaps the most important passage from India the world has ever witnessed’ (Hopkins 1992:6)

<sup>10</sup> I thank Kalpana Ram (personal communication) for pointing out one possible translation for the name of this cargo ship: ‘*Jaladuta*’ can be translated as ‘water messenger’ (Sanskrit: *Jala*, ‘water’; *duta*, ‘messenger’). I have not encountered any translations for this name in the ISKCON literature or amongst devotees, so I must leave this possibility as an interesting footnote to my main argument. The relevance of this note will become clearer as I explore the significance of the *Jaladuta* as a metaphor for translation in ISKCON hagiography.

<sup>11</sup> At ISKCON’s Vrindavana centre I photographed a life-sized diorama depicting Prabhupada on the gangplank of the *Jaladuta*. The diorama depicts Prabhupada *ascending* the gangplank, making the first steps of his passage from India. Although this event took place on a pier in Calcutta, its depiction in Vrindavana is significant because this is the place (Prabhupada’s ‘spiritual home’ and the home of Krishna-*bhakti*) in which Prabhupada prepared for his journey by working on his English translation of the *Bhagavata Purana* (*Srimad Bhagavatam*). In this figure of departure, then, Vrindavana represents India. But in theological terms, Vrindavana is also ‘non-different’ to the spiritual world itself. So here we also have an image of Prabhupada departing not only India but the spiritual world – with his translations as cargo – to embark upon his historical mission.

<sup>12</sup> Rosen’s (1992b) ‘Summary Study’ reproduces the same page. In Varadaraja’s Temple Shop I have seen a large picture-book type publication entirely devoted to the *Jaladuta* and Prabhupada’s trans-Atlantic voyage. The cover re-prints the same photographs contained in the *Lilamtra*. I never read this book, but I think I can safely assume that it was another ‘Summary’ of this most important episode of the *Lilamtra*.

If the calmness of the ocean was a manifestation of Krishna's mercy, then the two heart attacks Prabhupada suffered during his voyage were a divine test of faith and devotion which Prabhupada passed with saintly humility. In a poem composed in Bengali (entitled 'Markine Bhagavata-dharma' – translated into English in Satsvarupa's and Rosen's texts as 'Teaching Krishna Consciousness in America') near the end this life-threatening ocean-crossing, Prabhupada concludes with the following words of self-negation:

O Lord, I am just like a puppet in Your hands. So if You have brought me here to dance, then make me dance, O Lord, make me dance as You like.

I have no devotion, nor do I have any knowledge, but I have strong faith in the holy name of Krsna. I have been designated as Bhaktivedanta, and now, if You like, You can fulfil the real purport of Bhaktivedanta.

Signed – the most unfortunate, insignificant beggar,  
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami,  
On board the ship *Jaladuta*, Commonwealth Pier,  
Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

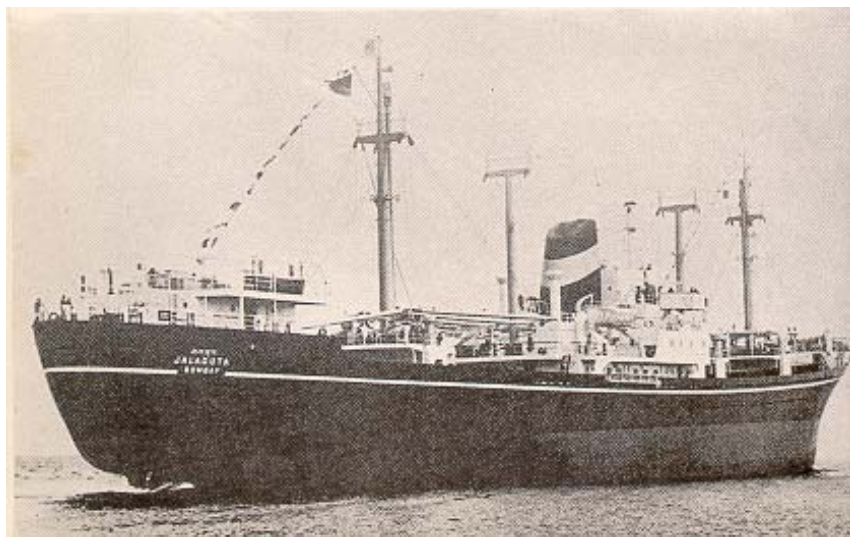
Dated 18th September 1965. (cited in Goswami, S.d.  
1993:6[vol.2])

On one level, Prabhupada's passage on board the *Jaladuta* is the ultimate expression of a soul fully surrendered to Krishna. On another level, though, we realise in the pain and suffering of two heart attacks that Prabhupada is surrendered not only in soul but also in body. As the puppet of God, the surrendered body is emptied of self-expression altogether – even as it writes and signs its name – to be filled again with God's own will (a will to historicity – to take up Wyschogrod's point again (op.cit.: 28)). Wyschogrod also stresses that the hagiographic narrative addresses a corporeal existence. 'Saintly self-emptying' (33) opens up the very possibility of 'making the movements' with the saint in



**Picture 9 Srila Prabhupada's passport. From The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust Int'l © 1993**

**Picture 10 The Jaladuta 'If the Atlantic would have shown its usual face, perhaps I would have died. But Lord Krsna has taken charge of the ship'. From The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust Int'l © 1993**



**Picture 11 A diorama at ISKCON Vrindavana depicts Prabhupada ascending the gangplank of the *Jaladuta*.**



the body and life of the addressee: ‘The saintly response to the Other entails putting her/his own body and material goods at the disposal of the Other’ (xxii); ‘The saint forgoes self-interest claims, or, in Christian hagiographic language, the soul empties itself of self. In theistic hagiography, the “interior space” that is thus hollowed out is filled by a transcendental Other. But human others, the recipients of saintly benevolence, may also come to occupy this void’ (33)<sup>13</sup>; ‘Although narratively articulated, the lives of actual saints nevertheless touch on real bodies, exhibit real pain, and address flesh and blood listeners. The recipient is now the destitute sufferer and the saint, one who relieves actually felt distress’ (49).

‘The *renunciation* of power’ (57: original emphasis) paradoxically *authors* as well as *authorises* ‘saintly action’ (ibid.). And it is undoubtedly Prabhupada’s renunciation which also legitimates his *authenticity* in the eyes of his devotees and scholarly admirers. Only in renunciation can Prabhupada’s surrendered body become the embodiment – or ‘incarnation’ as Cox put it – of authenticity. The will of Krishna – the transcendental Other – which fills the voided body is simultaneously the *cultural* other of ‘tradition’ (other both to Western and Indian modernity). ‘Self-emptying’ in the mood of pure Vaisnava renunciation is what qualifies Prabhupada as the embodiment of ‘spiritual culture’.

Immediately following Prabhupada’s disembarkment from the *Jaladuta* (to another in-between space: ‘I did not know whether to turn left or right’), the *Lilamṛta* offers a *physical* description of Prabhupada’s appearance:

Sṛila Prabhupada was dressed appropriately for a resident of Vṛndavana. He wore *kanthi-mala* (neck beads) and a simple cotton *dhoti*, and he carried *japa-mala* (chanting beads) and an old *chadar*, or shawl. He

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<sup>13</sup> Though not Christian, Gaudiya-Vaisnavism is adamantly theistic.

complexion was golden, his head shaven, *sikha* in the back, his forehead decorated with the whitish Vaisnava *tilaka*. He wore pointed white rubber slippers, not uncommon for *sadhus* in India. But who in New York had ever seen or dreamed of anyone appearing like this Vaisnava? He was possibly the first Vaisnava *sannyasi* to arrive in New York with uncompromised appearance. (Goswami, S.d. 1993:7[vol.2]).<sup>14</sup>

Prabhupada's physical presence in New York is marked by the use of *italics* (as with foreign terms requiring translation in an ethnography). The cultural artifacts signified in italics are translated in parentheses, but Prabhupada's cultural authenticity is 'uncompromised' by this need for translation – indeed, I argue, it is formed in the act or movement of translation itself. This is, after all, Prabhupada's saintly mission: to translate the 'tradition' he 'incarnates'; to translate himself. A few paragraphs later we hear that Prabhupada also carried an umbrella and a suitcase. Besides a few other essentials, Prabhupada's only other luggage consisted of several volumes of his as-yet incomplete translation of the *Bhagavata Purana* ('*Srimad-Bhagavatam*'; some copies of which he sold to the captain of the *Jaladuta* during the voyage). Prabhupada was the bearer of translation

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<sup>14</sup> Where Satsvarupa dasa Goswami has Prabhupada 'dressed appropriately for a resident of Vrndavana' for this passage of the *Lilamrta*, for his version of the same in *Passage from India*, Rosen (1992b) has Prabhupada 'dressed appropriately for a resident of *the spiritual world*' (70; my emphasis). Again, this possibility of translating 'Vrndavana' as 'the spiritual world' derives from the concept of the holy *dhama*, which I explored in the last chapter: the geographical Vrndavana in India, U.P. (where Prabhupada lived prior to his passage), is 'non-different' from Krishna's eternal celestial abode, Goloka Vrndavana. But the idea that Prabhupada's renunciate appearance is 'appropriate for a resident of the spiritual world' has further significance. First, it intimates that (as I explored last chapter) Prabhupada is an eternal 'resident of the spiritual world' wherever he may be on this material planet. Second, it intimates that the (masculine) dress of a Vaisnava renunciate is a more 'appropriate' model than the (feminine) dress of a Vrndavana *gopi* (which accords with Haberman's (1988:107) understanding of the 'physical model' of religious imitation in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism). It therefore points to the idea that the physical model provided by Prabhupada, including dress, is one that truly represents the cultural pattern of the spiritual world – or 'spiritual culture'. One other interesting and related point about Prabhupada's appearance here involves Prabhupada's golden complexion. This reference – far from being a merely positive 'racial' description of skin-colour – is one which any well-versed ISKCON devotee would recognise as a description normally reserved for Lord Caitanya. Caitanya – or Gauranga, 'the Golden One' – who is Radha-Krishna combined in the one body, received his external golden hue from the Radha aspect of his dual incarnation. Applied to Prabhupada, the reference could be taken to intimate Prabhupada's divine purpose in the propagation of Caitanya's *sankirtana* movement. But it could also intimate the more esoteric notion that, as 'a resident of Vrndavana', Prabhupada is not only a male

in more ways than one. Between the burden of the body and the burden of text; between the heart that suffers and carries Krishna's will and the hand that writes and carries it out; between India and America, italics and parentheses – the physical description of Prabhupada's passage and disembarkment confirms that if Prabhupada 'incarnates tradition', he also *incarnates its translation*. From this pivotal point in the hagiographic narrative it becomes impossible to refer – for purposes of cultural legitimation or cultural analysis – to any 'truly authentic tradition' in relation to ISKCON's foundation without giving due consideration to the uncompromising effects of translation.

### **Hagiography and translation: Founder-*Acarya* as translator-saint**

'Translation?' asks Tyler (1986) – 'Not if we think of it as fording a stream that separates one text from another and changing languages mid-stream' (137).

If Tyler's fluvial metaphor does not work, and I believe it succeeds in not working quite well, both for the translation of texts and for the always metaphorical concept of 'the translation of cultures' (ibid.; Asad 1986; Budick and Iser 1996), then how are we to think of Prabhupada's trans-Atlantic 'fording' – that definitive passage which so meaningfully *conveys* Prabhupada's (literal and embodied) work of translation? Derrida (1998:33) reminds us of the etymology of 'translation': from the Latin *trans* ('across') and *latus* ('carried'), 'translation' translates as something 'carried across' something and presumably between two discrete points (languages, texts, cultures?). So what is it that is 'carried across' by a translation, and across what is it being carried? From Benjamin (1996 [1923]) we learn that 'any translation that intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but communication – hence, something inessential' (253). Neither the

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renunciate but also – simultaneously – a female *gopi*-maid (or *manjari*) of Radha (but never Radha herself).

sense, meaning, nor the ‘subject matter’ of the original is ‘transmitted’ by translation. The only ‘essential quality’ of the original that becomes ‘manifest’ in the work of translation, Benjamin argues, is the the original’s translatability (254). Translatability is the vital element, not to the life of the original but to its ‘afterlife’, its ‘continued life’, or its ‘survival’ (ibid.). This progressive kind of vitality therefore refers not to any essential ‘organic corporeality’ but to the ‘life of history’ (254-255). ‘There is life at the moment when “sur-vival” (spirit, history, works) exceeds biological life and death’, Derrida (1985:179) explains. Having just read how Prabhupada’s work of translation survived the two heart attacks of its bearer, we have cause to reflect on this matter of life and death. Before contemplating any fording of streams or trans-oceanic and cultural crossings, we must first appreciate how Prabhupada’s life (history) and work (translation) is ‘carried across’ death.

From the moment he began his work of translating the *Bhagavatam* into English as ‘a resident of Vrndavana’ in preparation for his mission, translation remained Prabhupada’s ‘saintly work’ (Wyschogrod op.cit.:57) until the moment he departed this ‘ocean’ of the material world. Tamal Krishna Goswami, whom we encountered in the last chapter, was Prabhupada’s ‘right-hand man’ (his secretary) during the time leading up to Prabhupada’s death. TKG’s recently published memoir of Prabhupada’s ‘final *lila*’ – *TKG’s Diary* (Goswami, T.K. 1998b) – has already made a significant contribution to the hagiographic literature on Prabhupada in ISKCON. In the interest of furthering correspondence between my hagiographic and scholarly sources, however, I refer not to this work but again to TKG’s more academic reflections. In a paper originally addressed to the American Academy of Religion on the ‘hermeneutic strategies’ employed by Prabhupada in composing his ‘elaborate commentaries’, as Judah describes the ‘Purports’ to Prabhupada’s



‘beautiful translation’ of the *Bhagavad-gita* (cited in Prabhupada 1986a; from the cover of that text), TKG observes that ‘a sense of urgency guides Prabhupada’s purports as much as it propels his movement; his followers; and, in a very personal way, his own life, near its end from the moment he set foot in America’ (Goswami, T.K. 1998c:276).<sup>15</sup>

‘Purports’ that are guided not by a sense of meaning, but a sense of urgency (‘purport’, then, as professed purpose rather than meaning). This is a forward-moving sense: a momentum or *intention* which looks not backwards to check what must be *said*, but instead moves forward, up to the task or to what must be *done* in the interests of a work’s survival. As Benjamin argues, the ‘task of the translator’ is not in ‘rendering the sense’ of the original, because the original ‘has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed’ (Benjamin op.cit.:260). Prabhupada is relieved of this effort of conveying because ‘Lord Krsna has taken charge of the ship’. Prabhupada does not convey but is himself conveyed by the Other, his own survival representing the transcendental will of Krishna. Prabhupada’s survival *depends* on Krishna because Prabhupada is performing Krishna’s work; or shall we rather say, *Krishna’s work survives in Prabhupada*, the self-surrendered soul without whom the teachings of Sri Krsna Caitanya would never have breathed life outside of Bengal or Vraja. We see from Benjamin that self-surrender or ‘self-emptying’ (in Wyschogrod’s terms) is also required of a translation: ‘as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can – in fact, must – *let itself go*, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*’ (260; my emphasis on ‘let itself

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<sup>15</sup> The version I refer to appears in an ISKCON publication, but the essay was originally ‘presented at the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco, November 24 1997, and published in *Journal of Vaisnava Studies* 6, no. 2 (March 1998)’ (Goswami, T.K. 1998c:267).

go'). Surrender to the intention of the other defines both the task of the translator and the work of the saint, a definition thus doubly applicable to the mission of the translator-saint: 'the task... the mission to which one is destined (always by the other)', writes Derrida (1985:175), elaborating upon Benjamin's famous title; 'The Task of the Translator' 'names the subject of translation, as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in the position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival. The sur-vival of works, not authors. Perhaps the sur-vival of authors' names and of signatures, but not of authors' (179). The translator 'is summoned to translate' (176).

Prabhupada is not Krishna, but one who enters (the material world, history) in the 'unfolding' (Benjamin op.cit.:225) of a genealogical inheritance (*parampara*: the disciplic succession) whose origin is Krishna Himself, and in the unfolding story (*lila*) of Srila Prabhupada's life and work, Krishna's Name enjoys renewed life. Having thus entered the task of 'translating' the subject of translation into one of hagiography, it remains to be seen how Prabhupada's own life, name, and work survives the genealogical crisis of Prabhupada's death. Significantly, the sense of urgency – measured by what Wyschogrod calls 'the time that is left' (op.cit.:64) – which TKG reads in Prabhupada's work does *not* accelerate as Prabhupada's life-time (story, *lila*) draws close toward its conclusion. From the *Lilamrta* we learn that up until the very end, Prabhupada's work continued exactly as it had done throughout the definitive 'twelve short years' spanning Prabhupada's arrival in America and his 'departure' in India. In his ailing final days, Prabhupada had returned to his 'spiritual home' of Vrindavana, the place from which his translating/preaching mission was launched. Of course, Prabhupada had already returned to India, and to Vrindavana specifically, on numerous occasions since his original departure. Prabhupada's first return to Vrindavana had in fact occurred ten years previously, a mere two years after his arrival

in New York, and was also a response to ill health. Prabhupada was accompanied on this occasion by his first American disciple, Kirtanananda dasa.<sup>16</sup> After ten years as a ‘Jet-Age *Parivrajakacarya*’<sup>17</sup> (his mission had long since become airborne), however, Prabhupada had amassed an entourage. Far from being a mere return to origins, Prabhupada’s mission in India had gained the full momentum of an international following. It was thus under the impressive roof of his Western-funded ISKCON centre in Vrindavana that Prabhupada spoke his last breaths into a tape-recorder, ‘continuing to dictate his translation of Vedic texts, with his penetrating and lucid explanations’ (Rosen 1992b:111), as a room full of his closest Western disciples resonated with the Names of God: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*.

The *Lilamrta* depicts this moment as Prabhupada’s ‘Final Lesson’, an episode entirely consistent with an exemplary life of saintly humility and surrender to the will of Krishna.

Prabhupada’s “last breathing” was glorious, not because of any last-minute mystical demonstration, but because Srila Prabhupada remained in perfect Krsna consciousness... he remained completely collected and noble and grave, teaching until the end... showing that one should preach with every breath he has. The many devotees who crowded the large room bore witness to that up to the very end, Prabhupada remained exactly the same. There was nothing suddenly incongruous with what he had previously shown and taught them. At the time of his departure, therefore, he was

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<sup>16</sup> The ill-fated Kirtanananda dasa was to become one of Prabhupada’s eleven appointed successor-gurus, who were to continue initiating disciples into the *parampara*. Kirtanananda and his disciples at the opulent New Vrindavana centre in West Virginia, U.S.A., were for some years excommunicated from ISKCON as a result of Kirtanananda’s experiments with ritual practice (e.g. adopting the symbols and clothing of Christian monks), but were eventually re-admitted to the fold (Goswami, T.K. 1998a). Kirtanananda’s involvement in the hoarding of firearms, and his alleged involvement in the killing of a devotee at New Vrindavana, brought him further disrepute both within and outside the movement (see Hubner and Gruson 1988).

<sup>17</sup> A *parivrajakacarya* is a travelling mendicant missionary. According to the *Lilamrta* (Goswami, S.d. 1993:196[vol.4]), news writers in India gave Prabhupada the handle ‘Jet-Age *Parivrajakacarya*’.

teaching how to die, by always depending on Krsna... This last lesson was one of the most wonderful and important instructions Srila Prabhupada gave us. He taught by his life, by his books, and at the end by his dying... His passing away, therefore, was a perfect lesson, and one that can be faithfully followed. (Goswami, S.d.1993:418-419[vol.6])

Life-books-death: no mere narrative progression from beginning to end (East to West and back again), Prabhupada's life is a practically sustained model for spiritual life in ISKCON. As Wyschogrod (op.cit.) argues, the 'comprehension of a saint's life understood from within the sphere of hagiography is a *practice* through which the addressee is gathered into the narrative so as to extend and elaborate it with her/his own life' (xxiii; original emphasis). And like any practice, hagiographic reading not only bears but *demands* repeating, the end merely signalling a new beginning: 'readers of *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* will not feel they have finished their connection with this literature by having read it once' (Goswami, S.d. 1993:427[vol.6]). At its end, the *Lilamrta* explicitly guides the addressee to a hagiographic reading and remembering which does not replicate in a merely psychic 'presence' copies of a real but absent original (or model), but gives life to the original in a practical sense:

...when Srila Prabhupada departed from the world and left his disciples to carry on his mission, they immediately realized union with him in separation. He was gone, but he was still very much present. This realization was not a pretention or a myth, nor was it sentimental psychic phenomena – telepathy, “communion with the dead,” or so on. It was a completely substantive, practical, palpable reality, a fact of life. (423)<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The *Lilamrta* makes explicit the connection between this 'union in separation' which Prabhupada's disciples felt toward Prabhupada after his material death, and that most exalted state of 'union in separation' in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism – *vipralambha-bhakti* – which Radha and the *gopis* felt towards Krishna during His absence from Vrindavana. According to the *Lilamrta*, this doctrine 'had remained a theoretical teaching to many of Prabhupada's followers' (423) until they experienced 'union in separation' with Prabhupada. In

Wyschogrod's (op.cit.) analysis affords us a unique theoretical insight into the 'palpable reality' of saintly presence in hagiographic practice. 'Although narratively articulated' (49), the lives of saints 'are *read as embodying* saintly qualities' (ibid.; my emphasis). The 'hagiographic field' (constituted by the text as practice: the narratively orchestrated life as well as the 'flesh and blood listeners' (ibid.) who 'extend and elaborate' (xxiii) it with their own lives) 'is thus also, so to speak, a text of flesh' (49). Following Wyschogrod along these lines, we enter into a *phenomenological* analysis of hagiography as the core textual and spiritual practice in ISKCON. Such an analysis is crucial because every other text and every other practice that engages devotees in ISKCON is 'gathered into' (xxiii) ISKCON's missionary narrative, which is nothing other than the extension of Prabhupada's life/work of translating, teaching, and preaching Krishna Consciousness. I argue that reading from or even indirectly citing Prabhupada's books of translation and instruction, for example, is in every instance an *act* of translation and instruction. And even if these other texts are not hagiographical as such, their reading is incorporated into hagiographic practice, insofar as the texts embody Prabhupada's life/work and Prabhupada's life/work lives on in their reading. For even when devotees say, in contexts of preaching or practical spiritual instruction, "*Prabhupada said this*," "*Prabhupada used to say that*," "*Prabhupada said that no meal of prasadam is complete without sweets*," "*Prabhupada said that if you just perform dandavats (prostration) regularly enough, then you will feel like performing dandavats*," it is not merely the citation of authority to which we should be empathically listening, but the re-telling of an *event*, an instructive episode in a life of instruction, which is 'lived forward' (29) in the telling. Prabhupada survives as

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relation to the theological developments I explored in the previous chapter, this formulation clearly demonstrates how the devotee's relationship with Srila Prabhupada has replaced the *gopi's* relationship with Krishna as the ultimate 'divine model' and devotional 'mood' in ISKCON (cf. Haberman 1988).

instruction and translated practice. He is present in his books, on the tongue of every one of his readers (even when alone, devotees are encouraged to read aloud), and in every learned gesture and movement of a devotee's body, to be explicated again and again in every new context of spiritual instruction.

### **Mimetic readings: textual practice in ISKCON**

Hagiographic reading is an act of *mimesis*. Although Wyschogrod does not employ the concept herself, the phenomenological dimension of hagiographic reading which she opens up in her analysis offers some useful insights into mimesis in textual practice, or into mimetic practice in general – because textual practice, I want to stress, is no less phenomenological than any other form of ‘practical mimesis’ (cf. Jackson 1983:340). This point is in fact crucial to our understanding of Hare Krishna spirituality, for ISKCON devotees understand that Srila Prabhupada is ‘embodied in his books’, and it is by developing their own lived relationships with Prabhupada in the form of his books that devotees also strive to develop their Krishna Consciousness. Reading Prabhupada's books and reciting his story are both mimetic practices, I argue, in which Prabhupada is experienced in the life of the devotee as a tangible presence – a ‘completely substantive, practical, palpable reality, a fact of life’ (Goswami, S.d. 1993:423[vol.6]).

In Chapter One I introduced the phenomenological concept of mimesis in relation to Jackson's ethnographic strategy of ‘literally putting oneself in the place of another’ (340). For Jackson, the mimetic faculty facilitates ‘a bodily awareness of the other in oneself’ (336). The mimetic ‘experience of the other’ (340) operates at the corporeal level of experience which, according to Jackson, ‘lies beyond cognition and words’ (341): for while ‘words and concepts distinguish and divide, bodiliness unites and forms the ground of an

empathic, even universal understanding' (ibid.). But 'words and concepts' (ibid.) are never wholly abstracted from phenomenal experience. Wyschogrod's (op.cit.) analysis of hagiographic practice shows how 'words' can indeed form 'the ground of an empathic... understanding' (in Jackson's terms), and can even generate 'a bodily awareness of the other in oneself'. For although the life of the saint is 'narratively articulated', it is 'flesh and blood listeners' (49) who are 'gathered into the narrative' (xxiii), in whose real lives the life of the saint is 'lived forward' (29), and in whose actual voices the narrative itself breathes life as a 'text of flesh' (49).

For Benjamin (1999 [1933]), the same compulsions which permeate physical mimetic behaviour (for instance, in the imitative play of children (720)) also play a role in our 'higher functions'. As the highest of human functions, in Benjamin's view, 'language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour' (722). In their genealogy of the mimesis concept, Gebauer and Wulf (1995) stress that even when 'mimesis' refers to 'representation' – a term which Jackson (op.cit.) dismissively relegates to an assumedly immaterial realm of 'words and concepts' (341) – it should not be interpreted simply as 'the act of an autonomous mind but the product of a practice: the practice of the hands in the formation of materials, painting, or writing; of the face, the mouth, the whole body; of the collective activities of a linguistic community' (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.:21). Gebauer and Wulf also dismiss any sharp distinction between 'practical mimesis' and 'literary mimesis' (23), because

[w]ithout the practical mimesis of daily life, literary mimesis would bear no reference to the world. It does not matter how far literature diverges from the daily practice of its time or how closely it embraces it: even the extreme cases of distancing maintain a thread of connection to the modes of worldmaking inherent in social practice (ibid.).

The distinction between ‘practical mimesis’ and ‘literary mimesis’ is further blurred by the fact that, just as ‘literature works with mimetic material’, so ‘literature can become mimetic material’ (ibid.):

...literature can intervene in the mimetic processes of social practice. It can provide models for the latter and influence the way in which social behaviour is undertaken, alter codifications, or create new ones; it can persuade empirical persons of their ability to experience the world similarly to the models found in literature. In short, literary mimesis can itself flow back into social practice. (ibid.)

In cases of contemporary hagiographic reading, ‘modes of worldmaking’ (ibid.) inherent in text become mimetically available through the ‘believability of context’ rendered by the historicity of hagiographic narrative (Wyschogrod op.cit.:28). To stress Wyschogrod’s point again, historical narrative is a *form* ‘necessary for saintly praxes to be experienced as imposing realizable demands on the lives of its addressees’ (ibid.). But while historicity provides a general contextual possibility for the mimetic ‘flow back into social practice’, a more specific condition relating to the mimetic *availability* of the other in hagiographic practice finds its correlative in Wyschogrod’s concept of ‘saintly self-emptying’ (33): in which, as we have read, the surrendered body of the saint is opened out, as a space to be filled by the transcendental Other, and also by the human others who heed the saintly imperative and ‘extend and elaborate’ (xxiii) the saintly narrative into their own lives.

The mimetic availability of the other is something which Jackson’s (op.cit.) concept of ‘practical mimesis’ – as a method of ‘putting oneself in the place of the other’ (340) – does not take into account. Jackson advocates a methodological version of ‘self-emptying’



on the part of the (saintly) ethnographer, who above all else must surrender ‘ulterior motive’ (ibid.). But ultimately, this kind of self-surrender is still directed from the self (however well-intentioned toward the other), and is not in itself enough to make ‘the place of the other’ knowable, especially as bodily experience. Mimesis, like love (whether love of another person or another people, or love of God and guru), also requires surrender on the part of the other, and in this sense the mimetic relationship is also conditional on the vagaries of trust. Even in the most intimate of mundane relationships between lovers, or between empathic ethnographers and their informants, the mimetic experience of ‘oneness’ between self and other sought by Jackson is continually short-circuited by doubt (and doubt is less often reasoned or reasonable, and more often *felt* as anxiety, awkwardness, or dissonance (cf. Desjarlais 1994:18-19)).

Mutual self-surrender is also inherent to the mimetic act of reading – for every author and every reader surrenders something of himself or herself to the other in the act of writing or reading:

The author prepares a text to which the reader in the moment of reading *lends his voice*. There occurs a process of mimesis between the reader’s voice and the author’s text, in which the text becomes a *body of sounds*. The author, who is absent in the text, is made present in the sounds made by the reader in reading. Every author needs the voice of a reader for his words to be heard and his fame to grow. (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.:51; my emphasis)

Utilising Benjamin’s terminology, Gebauer and Wulf suggest that even in the absence of voice (as sound), a mimetic relationship between reader and writer emerges from the fact that ‘[r]eaders, by means of their mimetic faculty, analyze the abstractions of

writing, concretize them, and fill them with “life” (272). Citing Benjamin, they argue that the reader ‘must discover the mimetic procedure that “expresses itself... in the activity of the writer”’ (272). In other words, the ‘modes of worldmaking’ familiar to the writer and reproduced in the form of (in the example of the novel) plot or character motive, must be discovered by the reader and reproduced from the reader’s own experience in the life-filling act of reading. The significant point here is that the mimetic ‘model’ is not simply an object to be imitated, but the ‘mimetic procedure’ of writing itself as a creative process. In the Benjaminian terms taken up by Gebauer and Wulf, ‘life’ refers to this creative or generative process, not to any corporeal essence that might be used to distinguish subject from object, copy from original.<sup>19</sup>

In the next chapter I offer an analysis of Hare Krishna textual practice in which I argue that ISKCON devotees *participate* in the ‘activity’ of writing which constitutes the life of Prabhupada’s books and the ‘tradition’ which they – in the manner of Prabhupada himself – ‘incarnate’. Given that most of Prabhupada’s key books are works of translation, ‘the activity of the writer’ (272) of most interest to my analysis of practical/textual mimesis in Hare Krishna ‘modes of worldmaking’ (23) is Prabhupada’s activity as translator: an activity immediately suggestive of mediation *between different* ‘modes of worldmaking’.

Tamal Krishna Goswami (1998c) refers to his spiritual master’s activity as writer and translator as a spiritual technique – a *yoga*. Prabhupada’s ‘yoga of scriptural transmission’ (277), according to TKG, ‘is always as much a transformation as it is a translation, an exercise in preserving the canon’s authority while extending its boundaries’ (ibid.). ‘Scriptural transmission’ is also the *yoga* which Prabhupada imparted to his

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<sup>19</sup> The distinction is one Gebauer and Wulf make consistently in their book in relation to artistic creativity, in which the aim is not the faithful reproduction nature as object (*natura naturata*), but the imitation of nature’s generative power (*natura naturans*).

disciples, as he founded ISKCON as a movement devoted to the global distribution of his books of translation. It is also a *yoga* which ISKCON devotees practice whenever they participate in ritual contexts of scriptural instruction, and even in their personal reading practice. In these contexts, I argue, the practitioner mimetically participates in the *transformative* ‘activity’ or *yoga* of translation which Srila Prabhupada imparted to his disciples as the ultimate means of spiritual realisation. For the devoted reader, Prabhupada’s translations are the sole substantive means of yoking (*yoga*) the devotee to the spiritual world. Translation is the textual vessel in which the devotee is to be ‘carried across’ this material ocean to the lotus feet of Lord Krishna.

Of course, this *yoga* must be practiced and repeated in real contexts, in which the mimetic ‘flow’ (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.:23) between reader, text, and life is continually interrupted by the infelicities of material circumstances and the devotee’s own ‘material consciousness’. Thus even in silent reading, ‘there remains a physical residue, which makes its presence felt in typically physical processes of depletion, such as fatigue’ (316). This point is worth pursuing as I continue my exploration of textual mimesis in ISKCON in the next chapter, because it is in the physical context of reading that the life-filling process of mimesis takes place and is taken up with the ‘flow back into social practice’ (23).



## Chapter Six

### The nectar of translation: *mantra*, text, and the ‘yoga of scriptural transmission’

The sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred.

– Jacques Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’ (1985:204)

#### The *Bhagavatam* class

Defeating fatigue is probably a vital factor in any practice. The practice of jolting myself back into consciousness after a momentary lapse, and inconspicuously assessing any potential embarrassment with a sideways glance toward the other devotees, was one in which I had gained repeated experience as a participant in *Bhagavatam* classes. Luckily, as I never perfected the art of sitting cross-legged for any length of time, my physical discomfort prevented any serious dozing, and my lapses of concentration were confined to only a few minor instances of uncontrolled (but disguisable) head-nodding. Embarrassment was also spared by the fact that I was rarely the only one going through such lapses. By 6.30 each morning, the starting time for the hour-long class, devotees have already been awake for around three hours. By this time devotees have already bathed, dressed and applied *tilaka*, attended and sung prayers to the deities at *mangala-arati*, worshipped Tulasi-devi, recited the Ten Offences against the Holy Name, offered their obeisances to

the Vaisnava *acaryas*, and chanted an hour or so of *japa*. And breakfast *prasadam* is still over an hour-and-a-half away.

*Bhagavatam* classes take place on the temple floor and follow a set format. Before each class, the *sloka* (verse) from the *Bhagavatam* which is to be the object of the lesson is copied onto a whiteboard, following the same format displayed in Prabhupada's text. Sanskrit script appears at the top of the board, then a transliterated version, followed by a word-for-word translation, with the verse and canto number also appearing in one corner. Prabhupada's Purport to the *sloka*, which in the book format appears after these other elements, will be cited orally during the class. The *sloka* for each daily class follows the textual sequence of *slokas*, so that over time regular participants will proceed systematically through a narrative sequence of verses and cantos of the *Bhagavatam*. Given that there are eighteen thousand verses to the *Bhagavatam*, however, a neophyte will only ever enter this narrative at an arbitrary point, and devotees will inevitably miss sections of the narrative covered sequentially in the class over the weeks and years. Personal reading practice is the only way a devotee will finish the *Bhagavatam* during his or her lifetime.

The devotee who is to present the class sits cross-legged upon the *vyasasana* – the seat of the spiritual master – before the other devotees (who sit separated by gender), and is presented with a flower garland. The relevant book of the *Bhagavatam* sits before him upon a low lectern. Overseeing the class in the form of his *murti*, Srila Prabhupada sits (perpetually, untiringly) cross-legged upon his own permanently raised *vyasasana* at the rear of the temple room. In a corresponding act of devotional service to the *sastric* (scriptural) teacher, Prabhupada is also presented with a flower garland and a copy of the *Bhagavatam*, which is opened before him at the relevant page. At the front of the temple room, in the direction of Prabhupada's perpetual gaze, Sri-Sri Radha-Gopinatha will remain

sequestered behind the shrine curtains until 7.30, the finishing time for the class, when the curtains will re-open for the Greeting of Their Lordships.

To open the class the teacher generally recites the following invocations:

*om ajnana-timirandhasya*

*jnananjana-salakaya*

*caksur unmilitam yena*

*tasmai sri-gurave namah*

*sri-caitanya-mano- 'bhistam*

*sthapitam yena bhu-tale*

*svayam rupah kada mahyam*

*dadati sva-padantikam*

*vande 'ham sri-guroh sri-yuta-pada-kamalam sri-gurun vaisnavams ca*

*sri-rupam sagrajam saha-gana-raghunathanvitam tam sa-jivam*

*sadvaitam savadhutam parijana-sahitam krsna-caitanya-devam*

*sri radha-krsna-padan saha-gana-lalita-sri-visakhanvitams ca*

*nama om visnu padaya krsna-presthaya bhu-tale*

*srimate bhaktivedanta-svamin iti namine*

*namas te sarasvate deve gaura-vani-pracarine*

*nirvisesa-sunyavadi-pascadya-desa-tarine*

*sri krsna-caitanya prabhu nityananda*

*sri-advaita gadadhara srivasadi gaura-bhakta vrnda*

*hare krsna hare krsna krsna krsna hare hare*

*hare rama hare rama rama rama hare hare*

*om namo bhagavate vasudevaya*

The first few of these verses are recited quite quickly, although a slower, formulaic rhythm typically enters the recitation toward its end. Other devotees also tend to join in with the more frequently chanted verses toward the end, especially with the *mahamantra* ('*hare krsna hare krsna...*'). The last line, which invokes Lord Krishna as the son of Vasudeva, is repeated three times in a call-and-response chant between teacher and devotees. In the class these prayers are left *untranslated* (although translations may be found readily enough: for instance, in the pocket-sized *Temple Song Book* which I carried around with me during temple programs, and from which I have just cited these verses (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1998:20-23)). For descriptive purposes, then, I also leave these prayers untranslated here, so as to convey some textual sense of the textural foreignness of the *mantric* phonemes which resound from the mouths and in the ears of English-speaking ISKCON devotees.

After the invocations, the teacher recites (sings) the *sloka* from the *Bhagavatam* in full, reading from Prabhupada's text. The example I choose below is the first *sloka* (Text 1) of the Second Canto, Part One of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (Prabhupada 1986b:2; original in italics):



*sri-suka uvaca*

*variyan esa te prasnah*

*krto loka-hitam nrpa*

*atmavit-sammatah pumsam*

*srotavyadisuh yah parah*

The teacher then recites the first line only, and the devotees respond in kind, reading from the transliterated text on the whiteboard. This call-and-response pattern happens for each line of the *sloka*, and the whole *sloka* is repeated like this several times over. Each time the *sloka* begins again, a different devotee in the class will take up the lead call in the chant. After the teacher is satisfied that the *sloka* has been repeated often and eloquently enough, he will begin the word-for-word translation. The Sanskrit word is sung out by the teacher and repeated by the class, and then the English translation (‘Synonym’) is read by the teacher and repeated by the class. This pattern continues for each word of the *sloka*. Below I have copied the translation format shown in Prabhupada’s text (and which would be replicated textually on the whiteboard, and orally by the class). The Sanskrit components are sung or chanted, with a long high-rising tone on the final syllable, whereas the English translations are simply spoken:

*sri-suka uvaca* – Sri Sukadeva Goswami said; *variyan* – glorious; *esah* – this; *te* – your; *prasnah* – question; *krta* – made by you; *loka-hitam* – beneficial for all men; *nrpa* – O King; *atmavit* – transcendentalist; *sammatah* – approved; *pumsam* – of all men; *srotavyadisuh* – in all kinds of hearing; *yah* – what is; *parah* – the supreme. (2-3)

The teacher then reads Prabhupada's full translation:

#### TRANSLATION

Sri Sukadeva Gosvami said: My dear King, your question is glorious because it is very beneficial to all kinds of people. The answer to this question is the prime subject matter for hearing, and it is approved by all transcendentalists. (ibid.)

The teacher may or may not read the entire 'elaborate commentary' contained in Prabhupada's Purport, but reference to this authority is usual. It is worth providing an example of a Prabhupada Purport in full (there are shorter as well as much longer Purports to be found):

#### PURPORT

Even the very question is so nice that it is the best subject matter for hearing. Simply by such questioning and hearing, one can achieve the highest perfectional stage of life. Because Lord Krsna is the original Supreme Person, any question about Him is original and perfect. Lord Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu said that the highest perfection of life is to achieve the transcendental loving service of Krsna. Because questions and answers about Krsna elevate one to that transcendental position, the questions of Maharaja Pariksit about Krsna philosophy are greatly glorified. Maharaja Pariksit wanted to absorb his mind completely in Krsna, and such absorption can be effected simply by hearing about the uncommon activities of Krsna. For instance, in the *Bhagavad-gita* it is stated that simply by understanding the transcendental nature of Lord Krsna's appearance, disappearance, and activities, one can immediately return home, back to Godhead, and never come back to this miserable condition of material existence. It is very auspicious, therefore, to hear always about Krsna. So Maharaja Pariksit requested Sukadeva Gosvami to narrate the activities of Krsna so that he

could engage his mind in Krsna. The activities of Krsna are nondifferent from Krsna Himself. As long as one is engaged in hearing such transcendental activities of Krsna, he remains aloof from the conditional life of material existence. The topics of Lord Krsna are so auspicious that they purify the speaker, the hearer, and the inquirer. They are compared to the Ganges waters, which flow from the toe of Lord Krsna. Wherever the Ganges waters go, they purify the land and the person who bathes in them. Similarly, *krsna-katha*, of the topics of Krsna, are so pure that wherever they are spoken, the place, the hearer, the inquirer, the speaker and all concerned become purified. (3-4)

After referring to the specific Purport attached to the *sloka*, and possibly reminding listeners of the *sloka*'s narrative context, the teacher will then elaborate upon Prabhupada's teachings on the matters raised therein. Experienced preachers do not prepare for scripture classes, but rely on Krishna and Prabhupada to guide their lecture. Experienced preachers will be able to cite other relevant *slokas*, from the *Bhagavatam* and *Bhagavad-gita*, in Sanskrit. They will also be able to translate them for their listeners, and to impart *siksa* (instruction), based upon Prabhupada's teachings and example, which will be relevant to the topic at hand and to any particular circumstances affecting the spiritual life of individuals, the temple, the Society, or indeed society at large.

The last part of the class is devoted to questions and answers regarding the lesson. At the end of the class the teacher exclaims "Srila Prabhupada, *ki jaya!*", with all the devotees joining in the "*ki jaya!*" ("all glories!"). The devotees offer their obeisances to the teacher by touching their heads and hands to the floor (part prostration). The end of the class ideally coincides with the *pujari*'s sounding of the conch-horn, signalling the opening of the shrine curtains and the Greeting of Their Lordships.

The content, subject matter, or meaning of the sample *sloka* in my re-construction of a *Bhagavatam* class is less pertinent to my analysis than the context, structure, and practice of its enunciation. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to approach the eighteen thousand verses of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (or the contents of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, *Caitanya-Caritamrta*, *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* (The Nectar of Devotion), or any other of Prabhupada's translations or teachings) merely as the codified expression of Hare Krishna 'belief', or as the externalised source of the Western convert's newly discovered 'meaning' or 'tradition'. The fact that a new Hare Krishna 'convert' would be unlikely to have read the contents of the *Bhagavatam* in their entirety (or possibly at all), is reason enough to avoid such an approach. If ISKCON books can be considered a *corpus of belief*, then it is to the corporeal or embodied dimensions of the text as practiced, where the text is approached first of all as form and presence, that analysis should proceed. To understand textual practice in ISKCON as simultaneously *mimetic* and *spiritual* (for the former, I believe, can best help us appreciate the latter), we must also abolish any notion of a relationship between text and belief, or practice and belief, which would correspond to a semiotic distinction between signifier and signified.

Having noted this, however, it is plain that I have not chosen my sample *sloka* arbitrarily. I have chosen a *sloka* (although there are many others to be found) in which the meaning or purport – which as the transcendental 'signified' would ordinarily be located arbitrarily behind, beyond, or beneath the surface of the material 'signifier' – actually re-invokes the signifier itself as a transcendental force in its own right. This *sloka* is 'about' hearing *slokas*. While there are thousands of *slokas* which narrate Krishna's transcendental activities (from the *lila* of Creation to the various pastimes of Krishna's twenty-two incarnations – including, secreted away in the bower of the Tenth Canto, those of Krishna

the Cowherd and His young consort Radha), there are also many *slokas* which narrate the activities of the narrators, making a transcendental ‘topic’ out of the act of narration itself (most of the First Canto, Part One is devoted to this ‘topic’).

*Srimad-Bhagavatam* works through various intermingling layers of narration (wherein narration itself intermingles between form and content). According to the publishers’ introduction (one layer of narration) to Prabhupada’s translation (another layer) of the Second Canto, Part One, the *Bhagavatam* was originally compiled by Srila Vyasadeva, ‘the literary incarnation of God’ (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1986:xiv). It was compiled as a commentary (another layer) on the *Vedanta-sutras*, a collection of aphorisms in which Vyasadeva had set forth (another layer) the essence of the *Vedas*. Vyasadeva was also the first to put the oral tradition (another layer) of the *Vedas* into writing (another layer).

After compiling the *Bhagavatam*, Vyasa impressed [another layer] the synopsis of it upon his son, the sage Sukadeva Gosvami. Sukadeva Gosvami subsequently recited [another layer] the entire *Bhagavatam* to Maharaja Pariksit [the emperor of the world; a *rajarsi* or saintly king, facing his final days before death] in an assembly of learned saints on the bank of the Ganges at Hastinapura (now Delhi)... The *Bhagavatam* begins with Emperor Pariksit’s sober inquiry [another layer] to Sukadeva Gosvami: “You are the spiritual master of great saints and devotees. I am therefore begging you to show the way of perfection for all persons, and especially for one who is about to die. Please let me know what a man should hear, chant, remember and worship, and also what he should not do. Please explain all this to me”.

Sukadeva Gosvami’s answer [the recitation] to this question, and numerous other questions posed by Maharaja Pariksit, concerning everything from the nature of the self to the origin of the universe, held the assembled sages in rapt attention continuously for the seven days leading to

the King's death. The sage Suta Gosvami, who was present on the bank of the Ganges when Sukadeva Gosvami first recited *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, later repeated [from memory: another layer] the *Bhagavatam* before a gathering of sages in the forest of Naimisaranya... The reader of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* hears Suta Gosvami relate the questions of Maharaja Pariksit and the answers of Sukadeva Gosvami. Also, Suta Gosvami sometimes responds directly to questions [another layer] put by Saunaka Rsi, the spokesman for the sages gathered at Naimisaranya... Furthermore, while instructing King Pariksit, Sukadeva often relates historical episodes and gives accounts of lengthy philosophical discussions [another layer] between great souls as the saint Maitreya and his disciple Vidura. (ibid.; my citation here contributes yet another layer of narration)

One effect of these multiple layers of narration and dialogue is the ever-increasing extension of the boundaries of the *Bhagavatam* itself. As a commentary on the *Vedanta-sutras*, the *Bhagavatam* is already an extension of the *Vedas*, which had themselves been reincarnated, as it were, by discarding an oral for a written form through the work of Krishna's 'literary incarnation', Vyasadeva. The written text of the *Bhagavatam* then takes a new 'incarnation' every time it is recited orally: first by Vyasadeva Himself, then Sukadeva, then Suta – each of whom is engaged in a dialogue which must also be incorporated into the textual incarnation. But far from becoming lost amid these ever expanding contexts, the 'original' *Bhagavatam* grows with and *as* them. Recitations of the *Bhagavatam* become part of the text of the *Bhagavatam* as we now encounter it. In this same sense, Prabhupada's word-for-word translations and *sloka-by-sloka* commentaries are read by devotees as part of the *Bhagavatam*'s transformative growth – as 'extending its boundaries' as TKG writes of his guru's life/work of translation (Goswami, T.G. 1998c:277) (a full set of Prabhupada's *Bhagavatam* takes up a lot of shelf space). So too are the introductions to each volume by Prabhupada's disciples who work so hard at

ISKCON's BBT (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust); and so too are the translations and commentary to the final Cantos of the *Bhagavatam*, completed by one of Prabhupada's trusted and learned American disciples, Hridayananda dasa Goswami, who took up the task of Prabhupada's unfinished life/work on the *Bhagavatam* after Prabhupada's Disappearance. All of these layers of narration are to be found between the covers of an ISKCON publication of the *Bhagavatam*, which is *the Bhagavatam* as far as any ISKCON devotee is concerned. And as soon as the covers are opened (in fact, even before this) and a *sloka* recited, the *Bhagavatam* incorporates yet another narration and dialogue (another incarnation) into its growth: as, for instance, the call-and-response, question and answer session of any given *Bhagavatam* class on the hard marble floor of an ISKCON temple.

In its recitation, the *Bhagavatam* takes form (incarnates) as a 'body of sounds' (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.:51). In the 'process of mimesis between the reader's voice and the author's text' which occurs when the reader 'lends his voice' (ibid.) to the *Bhagavatam*, there may be any one of a number of absent 'authors' (narrators: Vyasa, Suka, Suta, Prabhupada, etc.) 'made present in the sounds made by the reader in reading' (ibid.). But ultimately it is Krishna (as Vyasadeva, the original compiler) who authors the *Bhagavatam* and who becomes manifest in its reading. As 'the activities of Krsna are nondifferent from Krsna Himself' (Prabhupada op.cit.), so 'one [who] is engaged in hearing such transcendental activities of Krsna' (ibid.) – including, I want to stress, Krishna's activity in writing/narrating the *Bhagavatam* – is himself or herself also engaged in Krishna's transcendental presence. As a mimetic process in which the reader 'must discover the mimetic procedure that "expresses itself... in the activity of the writer"' (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.: 272; citing Benjamin), reading the *Bhagavatam* involves mimetic participation in Krishna's transcendental presence as 'writing' (or 'narration'; writing as activity rather than

textual object). Of course, the ‘body of sounds’ which takes shape in the ‘process of mimesis between reader’s voice and author’s text’ also incorporates the relationship between reader and hearer. This observation may seem especially appropriate in a call-and-response format, where reader and hearer take up alternating places. But a reader always simultaneously speaks and hears the voice that he or she ‘lends’ to a text. As a ‘body of sounds’, the *Bhagavatam* is a sensorium which incorporates all the bodies and senses engaged in its practice. The text transcends its bounded form by becoming, in Wyschogrod’s (op.cit.) phrase, a ‘text of flesh’ – a phrase which incorporates into its meaning all ‘flesh and blood’ participants constituting the ‘carnal generality’ of the narrative ‘field’ (49-51): ‘the place, the hearer, the inquirer, the speaker and all concerned’ (Prabhupada op.cit.), as Prabhupada teaches in the Purport cited above.

As narrative ‘field’, the *Bhagavatam* thereby also constituted, at various times and places, my ethnographic ‘field’. As to identifying what part the sleepy body of the ethnographer might occupy in this ‘text of flesh’, I need only surrender reflexive concerns and refer the spiritual matter back to the *Bhagavatam*. More specifically, I refer to Prabhupada’s Purport to Text 1, First Canto, Part One, which is another *sloka* ‘about’ the transcendental benefits of ‘simply... giving aural reception to this Vedic literature’ (Prabhupada 1985: 346). In his Purport, *Prabhupada says*: ‘There are various senses, of which the ear is the most effective. This sense works even when a man is deep asleep. One can protect himself from the hands of an enemy while awake, but while asleep one is protected by the ear only. The importance of hearing is mentioned here in connection with attaining the highest perfection of life... it is definitely suggested herein that simply by hearing the message of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* one gets attachment for the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Sri Krsna...’ (ibid.).



So, thankfully, even my sleepy body is receptive to Krishna's transcendental 'body of sounds'. But if attentiveness in hearing seems to be irrelevant to the transcendental efficacy of Krishna's sonic form, what effect does *intention* have in the act of uttering this same transcendental sound? Are there any factors which might de-fuse the mimetic circuit and so displace Krishna's transcendental power from the sound of His Name or His recited pastimes? What effect does translation, for instance, have on Krishna's transcendental 'body of sounds'? And does the need for repetition in sustaining Krishna's transcendental presence as sound necessarily introduce a disruption in that presence? These important theological questions are taken up in the next section in relation to the meaning, translatability, and performativity of *mantras* in ISKCON.

### ***Mantra, performativity, and translation effects***

The phrase 'hearing about Krsna' contains a grammatical distinction which actually conceals the true nature of Krishna's presence in the ideal context it purports to describe. The distinction is maintained by the word 'about', which wants to separate out the signifying component (the sound that is spoken and heard) from the semantic component (God), when we are told *repeatedly* that these are in reality 'non-different'. Each syllable, word, and *sloka* (verse) of the *Bhagavatam* forms a part of Krishna's incarnation as a body of sounds, and each part participates in a metonymic relationship to the whole (like 'the Ganges waters, which flow from the toe of Lord Krsna' (Prabhupada 1986b:4)). Through mimetic participation in Krishna's body of sounds, the practitioner is therefore acting on the same 'spiritual platform' on which the spirit-soul (*jiva*) exists in an eternal metonymic relationship to the Supreme: as constitutionally 'part and parcel', quantitatively 'different' yet qualitatively 'non-different' (*acintya bhedabheda*), to Krishna.

As transcendental force and substance, a *sloka* is a *mantra* which awakens the practitioner's dormant spiritual consciousness as spirit-soul. Writing on the Pancaratric ontology of *mantra*, Gupta (1989) states that the 'sonic form of a deity is a mantra' (230), and also that the *mantra* is a 'palpable divine personality' (236). Prabhupada instructed his disciples in the *pancaratric* rites of deity worship, only with Radha-Krishna rather than Laksmi-Narayana (to which Gupta is referring) at the centre of the rites. Gupta's understanding of the ontological and soteriological force of *mantra* is nevertheless applicable to the recitation of *mantras* in ISKCON – if we simply substitute the relevant Name of God:

Mantras are the pure creation, and at the same time they are the means and the path to salvation. This salvation is the same as release from the influence of maya and of the desire which is its consequence. The simultaneous result of such release is to attain [Krishna's] highest abode (*paramam padam*), which is the same as his great presence (*dhaman*), the supreme paradise of omniscience and bliss. (Gupta op.cit.:228).

Pancaratra acknowledges different levels of language at which the distinction between word (*sabda*) and referent (*artha*) holds differing significance:

The relation between language and its referent, as normally is understood, applies only at the grossest level... In this final stage of its manifestation, speech/language is discerned as divided into syllables, words, and sentences, and its separation from its referents is complete. One level higher... the language is not produced but is an impression on the mind... Higher still... the denoting and the denoted are not yet separated. At the highest level... there is no differentiation between the designator and the designated. (230)

In ISKCON, speaking in Sanskrit activates this highest order of language. In an early study of the movement in America, Daner (1976) notes that ‘Sanskrit is the language spoken in Krsna-loka [Goloka Vrindavana, Krishna’s highest abode] and the spiritual sky. It is regarded as a holy language, having special auspicious properties which aid in the advancement of a devotee’s spiritual progress’ (66). Daner’s only observation about Sanskrit-in-use conveys a discernible note of cynicism: ‘Once a devotee was quoting a Sanskrit phrase to a visitor who asked,/ “Do you know what that means?”/“No, but I read it in scripture.”’ (ibid.). This observation might be read as suggesting that ISKCON devotees indeed make ‘no differentiation’ between the ‘meaning’ and ‘form’ of Sanskrit *slokas* and *mantras*: but this reading would give undue credit to Daner, who has no serious interest in the ontology of holy language. Daner’s observation also runs counter to my account of scriptural pedagogy in ISKCON, which clearly shows that the recitation of Sanskrit ‘phrases’ *with their translation* and accompanying ‘meaning’ (or Purport) is a core spiritual practice in ISKCON, and an admired spiritual aptitude of the accomplished preacher.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Daner on at least two counts then, the following analysis – which both builds upon and collates the ethnographic material on textual or citational practice in ISKCON which I have introduced in this chapter and the one preceding it – may be read as a

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is possible that Daner’s observation reflects a less mature stage in the development of scriptural practice in ISKCON, or in the Boston temple in which it was made – but Daner gives us no indication as to whether or not her observation should be taken as a sign of the movement’s or the individual’s level of ‘spiritual progress’. Compare this to Hopkin’s excitement at witnessing the gradual introduction of *Srimad-Bhagavatam* lessons as part of a nascent ‘formal ritual structure’ in the very early stages of the movement in New York (Hopkins 1983:105-106). Providing no developmental insight into the personal or institutional ‘spiritual progress’ that speaking in Sanskrit is meant to advance, Daner simply takes the use of Sanskrit as a feature of ISKCON’s ‘culture pattern’ (Daner 1976:66), finding meaning in the presence of this ‘pattern’ despite her suggestion of meaninglessness. These are issues I raise again later as I develop my more serious analysis of Sanskrit recitations in ISKCON.

theoretical gesture toward ‘taking the Krishnas seriously’ (Shinn 1989:117) on the topic of *mantric* utterances and their translation in spiritual practice.

As the language of *mantra* and *sastra* (‘scripture’) in ISKCON, Sanskrit ostensibly conforms to what Assman (1996) calls the ‘energetic theory of language’ (31), in which ‘the phonetic form of language function[s] not as a *signifiant* which stands for some *signifie* but as a mystical symbol, a kind of verbal image full of mysterious beauty and divine presence’ (30). This ‘energetic theory of language’ is most frequently propounded in ISKCON in relation to the ‘transcendental sound vibration’ of the *mahamantra* – *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare* – although it applies equally to other to *mantras* and to the *slokas* (verses) of *sastra*. The narrated ‘activities’ of God and the Names of God are both ‘non-different’ to God Himself. Krishna Himself dances upon the tongue of one who utters His Name and in the ears of one who hears it. It is also this special quality of divine names which informs Assman’s interest in ‘energetic’ language and the collapsed distinction between signifier and signified: ‘In dealing with divine names one has to exclude all questions of meaning and reference. The name is to be regarded as a mystical symbol. It cannot be *understood*’ (ibid.; my emphasis). There ‘is a natural link (*sympatheia*, “sympathy”) between name and deity... the magical and “presentifying” power of language rests in the sound and not in the meaning’ (ibid.).

Assman also offers the argument that if it is ‘the sound, the sensual quality of speech, that has the power to reach the divine sphere’, and not the meaning, then this necessarily means that the ‘*energetic* dimension of language is untranslatable’ (31; original emphasis): ‘It cannot be understood and for this very reason it cannot be translated’ (30). The ‘energetic theory’ surrounding the *mahamantra* in ISKCON would seem, on the one

hand, to agree with Assman's formulation: that the indistinction ('non-difference') between word and referent, Name and God, indeed means that the *mahamantra* cannot be *understood* or *interpreted*. This is a rule reinforced each morning in ISKCON temples when devotees recite the Ten Offences against the Holy Name, including Offence number five: '*Tathartha vadah*', translated as: 'To give some interpretation on the Holy Name of the Lord' (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1998:17). To be 'infested' (16) with the offence of 'interpretation' is to negate the transcendental effect of the Holy Name. And yet, on the other hand, Prabhupada's translations from Sanskrit (including the offence of interpretation which I just cited), and the word-for-word recitations of these which feature in spiritual practice in ISKCON (as in my *Bhagavatam* class demonstration), would seem to defy Assman's strict opposition between 'energetic language' and translatable language. Furthermore, the offence of 'interpretation' against the Holy Name (and the associated negation of its energetic effect) can only refer to *new* interpretations, not to interpretation *per se*, because the fact is that devotees refer frequently to the 'meaning' of the name 'Krishna' and of the *mahamantra*.

'The name Krishna literally means the all-attractive, Supreme Person', states a flyer publicly distributed by the Sydney devotees during *hari nama sankirtana* – the (literally) energetic chanting of the Holy Names through the streets of Sydney's CBD or along its popular surf beaches. On the several occasions that I participated in *hari nama* with the Sydney devotees, it was my appointed service to distribute these flyers with this translation to the public. This same piece of 'propaganda' (Prabhupada was fond of this term) asks, 'What does the Maha-mantra mean?' and provides the following answer:

The *Maha-mantra* is in effect a prayer, a heartfelt request by the soul

to be re-instated in it's [sic] original position of eternal loving service to the Supreme Lord, Shri Krishna. Implicit within the repetition of this mantra is the plea, **"Oh my Lord, oh the energy of the Lord, please engage me in your eternal loving service."** By absorbing ourselves in this prayer, and the transcendental sound vibration of the mantra, we quickly revive the dormant spiritual consciousness latent within our hearts. (original emphasis)

If the Holy Name is non-different to God Himself, how is it possible to ascribe 'meaning' to God – as if God, as Name or as any other transcendental form, could suddenly become a signifier for something beyond God? To reiterate the question in the context of Assman's argument: how is it possible to *translate* God? Does not this very possibility suggest the re-inscription of a distinction between word and referent, the effect of which would be the displacement of Krishna's transcendental presence in an infinite regression of difference and deferral (in Derrida's sense of *differance*) in signification?

Even Derrida (1985) is 'tempted to say' that the proper name, even that of an ordinary person or place, 'as a pure proper name... in the proper sense, does not properly belong to the language' (172) in its ordinary sense as signification ('the grossest level' of language, in the Pancaratric view (Gupta op.cit.:230)). 'A proper name as such remains forever untranslatable, a fact that may lead one to conclude that it does not strictly belong, for the same reason as the other words, to the language, to the system of the language, be it translated or translating' (Derrida 1985:171). A proper name 'can properly inscribe itself in a language only by allowing itself to be translated therein [in Jakobson's sense of 'intralingual translation', which 'interprets linguistic signs by means of other signs within the *same* language' (173; original emphasis)], in other words, *interpreted* by its semantic equivalent' (172; original emphasis): 'like *pierre* [rock] in *Pierre* [Peter], and these are two absolutely heterogeneous values or functions' (ibid.). 'From this moment [of interpretation]

it can no longer be taken as proper name' (ibid.), for the name has fallen back into the 'grossest level' of language as just another word.<sup>2</sup>

But the Name of God is wholly different to any ordinary proper name, for by 'allowing itself to be translated' (173) into the language of man, the Name of God nevertheless loses nothing of itself to translation. Following Benjamin, Derrida shows how the 'self-relation of the sacred body' (205) – that is, the sacred body of God constituted as sound or 'letter' (204), and a 'self-relation' which uniquely defines the ultimate singularity of God and Name – cannot be violated by translation. This fundamental theological point is best explicated in the present context by demonstrating how the offence of 'interpretation' in ISKCON is avoided in Prabhupada's English translation of the Holy Name of Krishna. This demonstration will show how, in a movement which challenges without contradicting Assman's (op.cit.) argument, the 'energetic dimension of language' (Name, *mantra*, Sanskrit) can and factually does persist in its translation into ordinary language (word, sentence, English). Following Benjamin's (1996 [1923]) maxim that 'translation is a form' (254), it will then be possible to show that for sensitive readers of Prabhupada's books of translation, this persistence of the energetic (the holy language in all its 'foreignness' (257)) in translation allows translation itself to be sensed (read/heard, recited, remembered: *sravana*, *kirtana*, *smarana*) as a *form* 'full of mysterious beauty and divine presence' (a description Assman (op.cit) reserves for *the untranslatable* 'mystical symbol' (30)).

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida turns the proper name into a simile in describing the way Benjamin leaves his paragraph-length citation of Mallarme in untranslated French in 'The Task of Translator': 'Benjamin has, first of all, forgone translating the Mallarme; he has left it shining in his text like the medallion of a proper name' (Derrida 1985:177). I draw the reader's attention to this simile in connection with the Sanskrit invocations I left untranslated in my re-construction of a *Bhagavatam* class. The apparent contradiction by which a proper name, the Name of God, or a 'holy language' – despite the seemingly insurmountable fact of untranslatability (by virtue of the indistinction between 'pure signifier' and signified being, or 'energy') – in fact demand, and open up the possibility of, their own impossible translation, is the contradiction from which Derrida extracts the 'sacred' element in Benjamin's essay. Given the centrality of the Holy Name in ISKCON, the proper name is an appropriate starting point for pursuing this space of the sacred in translation in ISKCON, but I

‘The name Krishna literally means the all-attractive, Supreme Person’. Not only does ‘Krishna’ (as *nama*/Name) mean ‘all-attractive’, but Krishna (as *rupa*/Form) is the All-attractive. All-attractiveness is a transcendental quality of Krishna, and Krishna only, as simultaneously Name, Form, ‘Supreme Person’. In this personalistic theology, Krishna is the Supreme ‘palpable divine personality’ (Gupta, op.cit.:236), complete unto Himself, ‘full of mysterious beauty and divine presence’ (Assman op.cit.:30), All-attractive. ‘The all-attractive, Supreme Person’, then, effectively functions as a supplemental proper name for Krishna as much as it functions as ‘meaning’. Because the literal meaning of ‘Krishna’ can only ever refer to Krishna Himself, the Name loses nothing of its status as proper name by being thus ‘interpreted’ or supplemented, because the meaning that exists cannot be differentiated from ‘the way of meaning it’ (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:257), and vice-versa. The ‘literality’ of the Name is the definitive ‘way of meaning’/‘what is meant’ (ibid.). This is what Derrida (1985) means when he refers to ‘the indistinction of meaning and literality’ (203) as a unique quality of the sacred text – the Name of God being the prototypical sacred text – and this indistinction makes the Name of God distinct from any ordinary proper name, whose ‘meaning’ or ‘interpretation’ would bear no exclusive or literal relevance to the person named.

Krishna Himself possesses many names (which is a different matter from many people sharing the same name) each of which refers to a different aspect of Krishna or Krishna’s activities (*lila*): like different manifestations, or revelations, of the same energetic source. Each different deity-form (*arca-vigraha*) of Krishna worshipped in different ISKCON temples around the world, for instance, has its own name, but is nevertheless worshipped as the same God. At Sydney, Krishna is worshipped as Gopinatha, ‘Master of

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would extend these observations to all *mantric* formulae in ISKCON, including Sanskrit invocations, prayers,



the *gopis*' (and Krishna, of course, is the *only* master of the *gopis*). Krishna's names, like 'Gopinatha', generally contain their own transparent 'meaning' for someone who knows a little Sanskrit: 'Gopi' means *gopi*, a cowherdess companion of Krishna; 'natha' means master; 'Vasudevaya' – son of Vasudeva (the name invoked at the commencement of a *Bhagavatam* class) – is another example of 'literality' that can only refer to Krishna in this particular aspect or manifestation of His *lila*. These different names cannot be considered 'translations' of each other, not even 'intralingual' translations, at least not in any traditional sense of translation, because the specificity of their literal meanings in fact differs according to the particular incarnation or episode of Krishna's *lila* which they invoke. The different names of Krishna each reveal a different aspect of the original's unrevealable totality, or a particular profile of Krishna's All-attractiveness. Literal translations of Krishna's names, into English or any other language, also participate in this revelatory function.

Thus, it is not quite the case that 'in dealing with [the] divine names [of Krishna] one has to exclude all questions of meaning and reference' (Assman op.cit.:30), for Assman's point might be taken to 'signify a poverty of meaning' (Derrida 1985:204). But rather, in the Name and sacred text alike, there can be 'no meaning that would be itself, meaning, beyond any "literality"' (ibid.):

In the sacred text "meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation." It is the absolute text because in its event it communicates nothing, it says nothing that would makes sense beyond the event itself. That event moulds completely with the act of language, for example with prophecy. It is literally the literality of its tongue, "pure language." (ibid.; citing Benjamin)

The literal meaning of ‘Krishna’ is offered *as* its translation (or vice-versa). That is to say, ‘The name Krishna literally means...’ could equally be taken to mean, literally, ‘The name Krishna translates as...’ The literal meaning is purely transferred and expressed as its translation. The meaning itself is not, however, in any translation, translated or translatable. It is not ‘what is meant’ by an original which is translated in a translation, but the ‘way of meaning it’ (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:257). This is the real reason why translation is traditionally identified as a treacherous task: the impossibility of ever reproducing in one language the unique ‘way of meaning’ something in a different language – which is also why Benjamin rejects the ‘traditional theory of translation’ as a theory of ‘faithful reproduction’ or ‘imitation’ (256). But Benjamin and Derrida argue that the ‘literality’ of the sacred text actually opens up the possibility for its *unconditional translation* (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:262). For it is not the case that the ‘self-relation of the sacred body’ (Derrida 1985:203-5) renders the sacred text or Name of God meaningless (as implied by Assman’s (op.cit.) exclusion of ‘meaning and reference’ (30) in dealing with divine names), but that the meaning is no longer mediated, obscured, or displaced by its *form*, or ‘way of meaning’, in the usual sense that the signified is thought to be deferred or displaced by the signifier. Assman’s argument that ‘the magical and “presentifying” power of [divine names] rests in the sound and not the meaning’ (ibid.) actually introduces a distinction between ‘sound’ and ‘meaning’ which would contradict the ontology of holy language in ISKCON, in which Krishna’s body of sounds is ‘non-different’ to Krishna Himself as transcendental ‘meaning’ or signified. As a ‘way of meaning’, ‘literality’ renders the signifier transparent, allowing the meaning or signified to participate in and *as* the same ‘energetic dimension’ (ibid.) of the original phonetic or textual signifier. And it is precisely in this ‘self-relation of the sacred body’ (Derrida 1985:205) that the Name, seemingly paradoxically (if we were to

adhere to Assman's view), 'can announce itself, give itself, present itself, *let itself be translated as untranslatable*' (203; my emphasis). No longer mediated or constrained by any 'exterior body' or 'corset of meaning' (205), no longer irretrievably obscured by the language or 'way of meaning' of the original, meaning becomes unconditionally *available* in translation: 'Where the literal quality takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionally translatable' (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:262); 'since no meaning bears detaching, transferring, transporting, or translating into another tongue as such (as meaning), it commands right away the translation that it seems to refuse' (Derrida 1985:204).

The transparency of the 'letter', or in our case the energetic *sound* of *mantra*, therefore 'grants a liberty to literality' (ibid.). 'Literality' is a way of meaning in any language, and the translation of the Name or sacred text can and 'must write literalness with freedom' (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:263), so that it remains itself immediately transparent to the meaning of the original. The 'indistinction of meaning and literality' (Derrida 1985:203) in the sacred text makes it immune to translation, uncompromised yet open to every literal effort. 'This situation', though, as Derrida points out, 'does not exclude – quite the contrary – gradations, virtuality, interval and in-between, the infinite labor to rejoin that which is nevertheless past, *already given, even here*' (205; my emphasis) – and a more appropriate way of describing the ontological struggle underpinning the recitation of *mantras* and their translations in ISKCON, I dare to say, would be hard to find.

For even if every devotee or 'aspiring' devotee in ISKCON assents to the energetic force of the Holy Name, to the transcendental presence of Krishna in the form of His Name and His narrated pastimes, no devotee can yet claim to have fully realised this 'already given' transcendental presence at the level of spiritual consciousness. Because to have

achieved such realisation is to have achieved salvation, defined again by Gupta (op.cit.) in relation to the Pancaratric *mantra* ‘as release from the influence of maya and of the desire which is its consequence. The simultaneous result of such release is to attain [Krishna’s] highest abode’ (228). Krishna is ‘non-different’ to His Name and to His (narrated) activities, and Krishna is also ‘non-different’ to His transcendental abode – which means the ‘pure language’ of *sastra* and *mantra*, as Krishna’s transcendental body of sounds, is also ‘non-different’ to the promised land of Goloka Vrindavana: the spiritual world (where, as so unrevealingly pointed out by Daner (op.cit.), the inhabitants speak Sanskrit). The Holy Name of Krishna ‘surrenders itself to translation’ (Derrida 1985:204) so as to *reveal* that sacred space separating the promise from the pure land – sacred because it is also the space of infinite possibility and the measure of all spiritual progress. This space must itself be revealed before there can be any intention or desire to be ‘carried across’ it.

Every event of translation, Benjamin (1996 [1923]) argues, ‘*points the way to this region*: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages’ (257; my emphasis) – that is, to the realm of ‘pure language’. A tangible sense of ‘remoteness’ (ibid.) compels the translator in this sacred task: ‘all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution to this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt’ (ibid.). But the elusiveness of the ‘foreign’ does not preclude the *experience* of ‘foreignness’, or the ‘knowledge of this remoteness’ (ibid.) from ultimate reconciliation in ‘pure language’ (or in what amounts to the same thing in Hare Krishna *mantra* – the pure realm of Goloka Vrindavana) – that is, knowledge of ‘the remoteness that relates us to it’ (Derrida 1985:203). ‘One can know this remoteness, have knowledge or a presentiment of it, but we

cannot overcome it' (ibid.). The sacred text is one which receives 'all the signs of remoteness' (203). The sacred in translation is also 'present' as the 'sign of that end' (202), and as the 'knowledge' and 'presentiment' of the 'remoteness' which relates us to the transcendent.

In 'The Task of the Translator', the 'pure language' is only ever encountered as a 'messianic' promise and annunciation (ibid.; Derrida 1985:202). The effect or force of this promise – that languages may ultimately be reconciled – is what engages the translator in his or her sacred task. 'But a promise is not nothing', Derrida points out, 'it is not simply marked by what it lacks to be fulfilled. As a promise, translation is already an event, and the decisive signature of a contract. Whether or not it be honored does not prevent the commitment from taking place and from bequeathing its record' (191). A promise is a promise, whether or not the *intention* behind its performative event fades or was barely traceable in the first place, and regardless of whether or not anyone *believes* the promise will be fulfilled. Against the record or citation of a promise made, intention or belief can even be called to account, even engendering a (re-)commitment to the original promise. The performative force of the promise over and above the intention behind it also means that it cannot be taken 'as [merely] the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act' (Austin, cited in Culler 1989:219). It is the context, and not the intention, that will determine one's accountability to a promise, and context (as Derrida (1988) rigorously argues in relation to Austin's theory of 'speech acts') can never be fully determined, least of all by reference to a 'conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation' (14). Only in the ideal 'total context' of the "'pure" performative' (17) – in which the performative does 'not come to split and dissociate itself from the pure singularity of the event' (17), and in which 'no *residue*... escapes the present

totalization’ (14; original emphasis) – can we ever refer to a ‘free consciousness present to the totality of the operation’ (15).

The ultimate goal of *mantric* utterances in ISKCON, and the promise they make, is the pure realisation of the *mantra* in a ‘free consciousness’: again, ‘the simultaneous result of such release is to attain [Krishna’s] highest abode’ (Gupta op.cit.: 228). That is to say, the utterance is also, simultaneously, the means to that end. The intrinsic difference between means and end, or between the promise and its pure fulfilment (a difference *felt* in every *mantric* act as the ‘remoteness’ that relates the means to the end), introduces a ‘citational doubling’ (17) and hence a certain impurity to the *mantric* performative. In theo-ontological terms, this impurity or lack belongs to the ‘consciousness’ of the speaker, not to the *mantra* as ‘pure singularity’ (ibid.). The *mantra* maintains its ideal singularity as transcendental presence even though, in its repetition or ‘structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and its content’ (18). *Mantric* utterances betray the impurity of the speaker’s ‘material consciousness’ in their need for repetition (and translation), but within the very ‘structure of iteration’ also lies the *promise* and possibility of their eternal ‘realisation’ in ‘spiritual consciousness’. What appears before this realisation is not simply a space of lack or failure – which it *is* in every unrealised instance of repetition – but also the ‘general space of their possibility’ (19) of success. As Derrida argues, the ‘always possible’ (15) failure of the performative is also its ‘internal and positive condition of possibility’, the possibility of success: ‘the very force and law of its emergence’ (17).

Repetition and translation both introduce a ‘citational doubling’ (ibid.) to *mantric* speech acts, exposing their infelicities while simultaneously revealing their ‘positive possibility’ (ibid.). The ISKCON propaganda which I cited earlier provides another

‘translation’ for the Holy Name which directly addresses its structure of repetition in the form of the *mahamantra* – *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*. ‘The Maha-mantra is in effect a prayer, a heartfelt request... *Implicit within the repetition of this mantra is the plea*, “Oh my Lord, oh energy of the Lord, please engage me in your eternal loving service.”’ This ‘translation’ addresses the *effect* and *form* of the *mantra* as ‘repetition’ rather than its literal ‘meaning’ as such: the repetition of the *mahamantra* is ‘in effect’ another form of performative: prayer, request, plea. The curious point about this ‘implicit’ plea is that the chanting of the *mahamantra* (especially in the public context of *sankirtana*) is *already* a form of ‘loving service’ to Krishna. Public chanting of the *mahamantra* is also referred to as a *yajna*, or sacrificial offering – as putting oneself at the disposal of Krishna in His loving service. The ‘translation’ of the *mahamantra* as plea, then, points to a ‘citational doubling’ in which an implicit ‘running narrative of the rite’ (Taber 1989:149) takes place as the *mantra* is uttered and the plea and sacrifice are being made (in a similar sense, the phrase ‘I promise’ is simultaneously a ‘running narrative’ of the event of uttering a promise, and the promise itself).

The structure of the *mahamantra* as repetition also adds another dimension to its performative effect. Independent of any reference to ‘meaning’ outside the event of the untranslated utterance itself, the *mahamantra* also conveys an implicit *imperative* force whenever it is called out, for instance, by the leader of a *kirtana* session. The call *demand*s a response simply by virtue of being called. This demand is ‘intended’ to illicit a response, even if it fails to get one, say, from disinterested members of the public. But this is a ‘materialistic’ perception of failure, because the ‘transcendental sound vibration’ of the *mahamantra* is nevertheless understood to have a transcendental perlocutionary effect – an

awakening of the soul – even if the response does not become immediately manifest in the listener: for one’s spiritual life, which is measured over lifetimes, actually begins when one hears the sound of the Holy Name. Whether one realises it or not, upon hearing the call, a response is forthcoming. Hence the transcendental, rather than strictly proselytising, significance of public chanting. And hence also the indeterminability of any human ‘intention’ behind the perlocutionary force of the call, given its unknowable contextual limits.

After the call by the *kirtana* leader, a response of the ‘same’ – sound, prayer, plea, praise (*kirtana*), sacrifice – by the other participants in the *kirtana* party in turn constitutes an imperative demand or call for a response back from the *kirtana* leader. Earlier in this chapter I suggested that the call-and-response format in a *Bhagavatam* class produces the effect of a (con)textual sensorium, a kind of mimetic circuit wherein the *Bhagavatam* itself breathes life as a ‘body of sounds’ or ‘text of flesh’ in the intersubjective narrative ‘field’. I also noted that, where the call-and-response format takes for granted at least two different yet alternating subject positions – speaker and hearer – a speaker is also always a hearer of his or her own words. As obvious as it may seem, this is a fundamental point, because the ‘transcendental sound vibration’ does not belong to the speaker. The speaker may spiritually strive to ‘own’ the plea, to truly intend it, but the *sound* belongs to Krishna as His own body; the sound is Krishna Himself. This means the sound itself may issue a call back to the speaker, the space between call-and-response in this way revealing the ontological difference between God and the living entity (*jiva*, spirit-soul). In the quieter, private repetitions of the *mahamantra* during *japa* meditation, this call-and-response structure is actualised in a cyclic momentum of ‘rounds’. The intense rapidity of these repetitions could make it difficult for someone listening-in to discern when one repetition



ends and another begins, but the spacing between each is nevertheless attentively maintained by devotees, as they physically count off the chant and rounds of chanting on their circular strings of one hundred and eight chanting beads (*japa-mala*). The mimetic circuit opened up between tongue and hand, sound and body, is continually interrupted by this spacing of repetition, by the possibility of being interrupted, of being torn out of one's always already imperfect meditative state or context. But this same possibility also opens the *mahamantra* out onto the world – it is the possibility by which the *mahamantra* mercifully 'surrenders itself' to dissemination, to proselytisation, to translation, to being 'grafted', as Derrida (1988) writes of citationality, onto any foreseeable context ('even here' in this context of ritual analysis), so to extend its possibility as global promise.

The call opens up that space of possibility between itself and its response. This is the same space of revelation opened up between the 'implicit' plea and the 'pure performative', the 'literal' translation and its reconciliation in 'pure language', the promise and the promised land. This sacred space is not revealed by the *mantra* as 'pure singularity' – because the *mantra* as 'pure singularity' *is* the promised land or spiritual world – but by its structure as repetition, as the space between repetitions, and in the movement *between* the 'original' *mantric* form and its translation. As the graphic hyphen establishes most transparently the spatial difference between an 'original' Sanskrit term and its English 'Synonym' in Prabhupada's word-for-word translations of *sastra*, so each recitation is a moment of 'coming to terms with the foreignness' (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:257) of the original and with one's conscious 'remoteness' (ibid.) to that *transcendental presence* which is always 'already given, even here' in the phonetic form of the *mantric* utterance. Assman (op.cit.) is only partially correct, then, in writing of holy language that it is 'the sound, the sensual quality of speech that has the power to reach the divine sphere' (31) –

because in *mantra*, the sound *is* the divine sphere. But in order to be known in all its sacred ‘remoteness’ in this human sphere, the *mantra* may mercifully ‘lend itself to translation’ (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:254) and to citation. It may even ‘call for it’ (ibid.).

A response to this call in kind must ‘lend itself’ to the original, put itself at the disposal of the original its loving service. In citational practice, this self-sacrifice occurs at the moment the devotee ‘lends his voice’ (Gebauer and Wulf op.cit.:51) to Krishna’s body of sounds as *mantra* or *sastra* (scripture). Similarly, in translation, the ‘language of translation can – indeed must – *let itself go*, so that it *gives voice* to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*’ (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:260; my emphasis). The language of translation ‘must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning’ (ibid.), and it must be transformed in this process as well, in letting itself go, in ‘allowing [itself] to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue’ (Pannwitz, cited in Benjamin ibid.:263). Surrendering one’s voice to the Other effects a process of self-transformation, and reflects a capacity for renewal and freedom in translation: ‘freedom proves its worth... by its effect on its own language’ (261). Most importantly, in surrendering itself to translation, ‘the original undergoes a change’ (256) as well. For Benjamin, translation is the literary form ‘charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own’ (ibid.).

In the language of ISKCON hagiography, this was Srila Prabhupada’s ‘special mission’: to personally watch over the ‘maturing process’ of his own tradition and the ‘birth pangs’ of its delivery into a new body – ISKCON. As Krishna’s latest revelation, ISKCON was necessarily to be both ‘a transformation and a renewal’ (ibid.) of the original tradition, and translation was to be the catalyst for this change. Translation was Prabhupada’s ‘special

mission’ and his ‘yoga’ (cf. Goswami, T.K. 1998c:277). As an emissary of Lord Krishna, Prabhupada descended from the spiritual world itself in order to deliver his books of translation as the practical means of spiritual transformation in the present Age. Prabhupada’s books are to be read not as mere ‘faithful reproduction[s]’ (Benjamin 1996 [1923]:259) of traditional Hindu texts, but ‘as blueprints for spiritual change, cathartic agents meant to agitate a revolution in consciousness’ (Goswami, T.K. 1998c:268). Prabhupada is Krishna’s ‘pure representative’, which means that, in practice, Prabhupada must be read *as if* he were God Himself, as if (as in ‘pure language’) there were no distinction between the representative and the represented (every disciple must worship his guru according to this principle). As *lila* – ‘transcendental pastimes’ – Prabhupada’s work of translating scripture must be considered ‘non-different’ to the ‘activities’ of Krishna Himself in composing the original, and we have already learned that the activities of Krishna, even in their narrated form, are ‘non-different’ to Krishna. Prabhupada’s ‘activity’ as translator is but a renewal or growth of Krishna’s original writing activity. The translation itself is to be known by the name of the original (*the Bhagavatam*, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* – not ‘as it was’), but the original also incorporates a new signature into its growth: the sacred texts in ISKCON are ‘Prabhupada’s books’. Prabhupada is not God, and nor does he imitate God in his worshipping capacity. Prabhupada remains distinct from God as His representative and as an individual saintly ‘personality’, but as one whose limitless capacity for self-surrender allows the pure, uncompromised, represented ‘original’ to shine through the work of the representative without the latter ever compromising anything of his own personality or originality.

In ISKCON, devotional participation in Prabhupada’s ‘special mission’ is promoted as the most effective means of spiritual realisation. By ‘watching over’ Krishna’s latest

revelation in this world and in their own lives, by giving life to Prabhupada's original mission by living it forward into the space of its own possibility, devotees may also experience a transformation of self: transformation not as conversion to a new self, but as the gradual growth and revelation of the 'original' spiritual self. Devotees participate in Prabhupada's special mission whenever they engage in the proselytising activities of *sankirtana*, including the distribution of Prabhupada's books. Devotees also participate in the transcendental activity of translation itself, I argue, whenever they 'give voice' to Prabhupada's books in the mimetic act of reading. Performed privately or in ritual contexts of scriptural instruction like the one I described earlier, reading Prabhupada's books is a form of mimetic participation in Prabhupada's original revelation of that sacred space which separates the realm of 'material consciousness' from the spiritual world. Here the devotee 'can know this remoteness, have knowledge or a presentiment of it' (Derrida 1985:203). Reading Prabhupada's books of translation also constitutes a form of hagiographic practice, in which devotees may experience the 'palpable reality' of union-in-separation with Srila Prabhupada.

## Conclusion

### Conversion, mimesis, translation: self-realisation and the other in Krishna Consciousness

In his introduction to *Orientalism*, Said (1978) makes a small reference to the ‘many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use’ (4). Western membership in ‘Eastern sects’ is never explicitly targeted in Said’s critique, but the *Orientalism* argument is now familiar enough to most critical thinkers for us to have some general notion of what ‘domestication’ might mean in this context. The implication, put most simply, is that Western knowledge of Eastern spiritualities ultimately reflects more about Western cultural experience than about Eastern spiritualities, and that this knowledge is a product, and potentially an instrument, of Western hegemonic power.<sup>1</sup>

Postcolonial criticism has not found its way into any of the mostly sociological accounts of ISKCON published to date. A recent exception is Nye (2001), who does introduce some postcolonial theory to the topic, although there is not very much *critical* about Nye’s thesis that ISKCON constitutes an ‘ethnic religion’ in multicultural Britain. I have no intention of becoming distracted by the fascinating problems of postcolonial theory

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<sup>1</sup> King (1999) has applied Said’s argument to Western constructions of ‘the Mystic East’. Like Said, King is concerned more with the discursive constructions of Orientalists in the Western academy, than with the actual spiritual experiences of Western practitioners. King argues that the intellectual appeal of Vedantic non-dualism (*advaita vedanta*) to Western scholars of Hinduism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had more to do with theological debates over Christian ‘mysticism’ than with Vedanta as such. Monistic Advaita Vedanta, particularly as exported by Swami Vivekananda and his Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, has attained greater representation in the West (both among scholars and practitioners) than the less intellectualist, more devotionalist (*bhakti*) theologies of dualism – of which Gaudiya-Vaisnavism is but one example.

at this late stage of my thesis: I only raise the *possibility* of interpreting ISKCON critically as a culturally ‘domesticated’ form of Orientalist spirituality, so as to indicate one alternative direction which might be taken to that of my own thesis. I also want to position my own contribution to the cultural analysis of Hare Krishna spirituality in relation to this form of cultural critique, and also in relation to the interpretations so far offered by ISKCON’s sympathetic investigators, which have been founded upon decidedly uncritical ideas about the ‘authenticity’ of ISKCON’s cultural otherness. By way of conclusion, then, I want to show how my own analysis functions neither as cultural critique nor as a cultural legitimization of ISKCON, but as an attempt to critically appreciate how ‘the cultural’ is uniquely figured in the practice of Hare Krishna spirituality.

As I demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis, Nye’s (op.cit.) construction of ISKCON as an ‘ethnic religion’ is only the latest example of an academic undertaking which effectively services ISKCON’s project of cultural and religious legitimization. Shinn’s (1987a) observation that ISKCON is an ‘authentically Indian’ (9) religious movement concisely conveys the sentiment shared by other sympathetic observers of ISKCON.

It is such a complete and thoroughly Indian vision, modified over the centuries and carried to America by Prabhupada, that ISKCON devotees aspire to live and into which they are bound with their initiation. Whatever else one may think of ISKCON, it cannot be denied that it has become in America and other countries of the world an implanted Hindu religious institution with all the attendant ritual and social trappings that are easy targets of secular criticism or praise. (121)

Shinn is quite right in identifying ISKCON’s ‘ritual and social trappings’ as ‘*easy targets* of secular criticism or praise’ (my emphasis). Shinn himself clearly contributes to

the scholarly salvo of secular praise when he recalls that ‘the first surprise for this investigator was the authenticity of the [American] Krishna tradition I had thought was little more than just another quasi-Indian import’ (10). ISKCON’s unique exemption from the broad category of the ‘quasi-Indian’ seems to be precisely what makes this movement so special and deserving of sympathetic representation from ISKCON’s observers. For Shinn, to ‘step into the Krishna temple in Berkeley or Dallas is to enter a world of images, cuisine, and activities that can be found throughout northern India in homes and communities devoted to Krishna’ (9-10).

Compare this image of ISKCON as an ‘implanted’ cultural ‘world’ to the way Klostermaier (op.cit.) cuts straight through ISKCON’s external ‘cultural trappings’ to find what is in essence a ‘Western’ expression of religious piety:

In many ways, the Western *Hare-Krishna* movement (apart from its Indian cultural trappings) resembles a nineteenth-century British puritanical pietistic movement much more than a typical Hindu religious movement. Its ideas of orderliness, cleanliness, efficient work and literal following of the commands of the master have hardly any parallel in Indian traditional religious history. (100; original italics)

I am not in any position to challenge Klostermaier’s knowledge of Indian religious history, but I suspect he may be overstating his point. Nevertheless, Klostermaier serves to demonstrate an alternative position that is quite antithetical to the cultural legitimization techniques of ISKCON’s sympathetic observers. Klostermaier is not being deliberately unsympathetic, but by identifying Western or Christian origins for Hare Krishna spirituality, he offers an implicit challenge to those who find value and validation for

ISKCON in its Indian ‘roots’.<sup>2</sup> I am not convinced by Klostermaier’s position, I must declare, but neither am I convinced that ISKCON is an essentially ‘Indian’ form of religiosity. Both of these arguments proceed according to a logic of cultural essentialism: the first implies that Westerners are ultimately trapped within their own traditions, no matter what ‘cultural trappings’ are used to express these; while the second allows that another cultural tradition can be ‘transplanted’ into foreign cultural soil – ‘root and branch’ (Basham 1983:167) – and practiced by foreigners, without its original cultural essence being fundamentally transformed in the process. This organic ‘transplantation’ metaphor for religio-cultural transmission is in fact a recurring trope in Hare Krishna spiritual discourse, but it also recurs in a remarkably uncritical way throughout scholarly representations of ISKCON:

It was Bhaktivedanta’s task to bring [Caitanya’s] message to America, *to plant it* in a place where it would *take root and flourish*, and to do so without compromising the tradition and the teachers who made this work possible. (Hopkins 1989:52; my emphasis)

Bhaktivedanta, with the help of his disciples, has successfully *transplanted Vedic culture* [?!] in America with as few errors in transmission as possible... The seed that Bhaktivedanta has planted has taken root within the fertile soil of America’s dissatisfied youth and is growing rapidly. (Daner 1976:103-4; my emphasis)

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<sup>2</sup> Klostermaier is not the first to identify a Puritan influence in non-Christian new religious movements in the West. In their essay on ‘The Common Foundations of Religious Diversity’, Zaretsky and Leone (1974) identify a Puritan foundation for the new religious effervescence associated with the countercultural period in America, of which ISKCON was a part: ‘These groups are ultimate defenders of the Puritan ethic, not in theology, but in action and performance’ (xxxii). Wallis and Bruce (1984) argue that many liberal Protestants joined new religious movements during this period ‘not because they were dissatisfied with their liberal Protestant religion but because going one’s own way is the logic of liberal Protestantism’ (24).



I detect a strange kind of cultural relativism informing the image of ISKCON as another religio-cultural ‘world’, somehow ‘transplanted’ from northern India into the West yet surprisingly unaffected – unlike the typical ‘quasi-Indian import’ (Shinn 1987a:10) – by the homogenising influence of the consumerist Western culture which surrounds it. As I argued in Chapter One, this relativism is perpetuated by an ‘anthropological’ fantasy common to many sociologists of NRMs, who like to believe ‘that a young doctoral research candidate can now go out and study a “cult” in somewhat the manner in which yesteryear’s aspiring anthropologist might embark on the study of a primitive tribe’ (Robbins 1988:14). Shinn (1987a) does not submit to this tribal fantasy, to be sure, but he nonetheless entertains the *cultural* fancy that one can have an authentic experience of a northern Indian Vaisnava community by entering a Hare Krishna temple in Berkeley or Dallas (9-10). ISKCON’s authentic ‘cultural trappings’ seem to be enough, in this case, to qualify ISKCON itself as ‘Indian’.

In drawing critical attention this kind of cultural essentialism, my intention is certainly not to single out ISKCON for that superficial kind of ‘secular criticism’ (121) which would dismiss the movement as inauthentic or ‘quasi-Indian’ (10).<sup>3</sup> Shinn (1989)

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<sup>3</sup> Such criticism might be permitted its satirical value, as in Mehta’s (1979) description of ‘your favourites and mine – the Krishna Consciousness Ensemble...

...in the middle of the rush hour, reeling and rocking, Bill Haley bhaktis, bombed out of their minds with the thirty-three thousand repetitions of Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare Rama, Hare, Hare. They have no trains to catch, no mouths to feed, no sick waiting to be attended. They have only to say their beads over and over again, salivating salvation into the dust. (86)

But we should not expect such satire from scholars – like Narayan (1989;1993) for instance, who represents her own Western informants – followers of her very own endeared Swamiji – as credulous dupes with ‘eyes colored by visions of the wholly spiritual land’ (1989:158); who insists on putting her Western informants’ new “Indian” names in inverted commas, reducing their proper signifying function to a spurious “as if” type of effect; and who offers us the following charming recollection of her encounters with ISKCON:

During my graduate years in Berkeley, I learned that one could attend... concerts of the Hare Krishna temple while an eerie mannequin of their deceased Guru Swami Prabhupada looked on. Walking to the campus one might encounter a pale troupe of Hare Krishnas dancing to the accompaniment of drums and tambourines, joined by an occasional excited dog or bum... (73)

rightfully insists on ‘taking the Krishnas seriously’ (117) in their religious pursuits, and I have adhered fully to this ethic in my analysis. But I would argue that the distinction between the ‘authentically Indian’ and the ‘quasi-Indian’ is neither objective nor useful to the study of Hindu-inspired spirituality in the West, especially if this is the basis upon which we are to take Western practitioners ‘seriously’ or otherwise. I would also insist that Shinn’s advice can be heeded at various possible levels of analysis, and the work of defending ISKCON’s religio-cultural authenticity against unsympathetic representations is only one of these possibilities. However justified, the politics of legitimation that has informed sociological representations of ISKCON has also led to some problematic conceptual assumptions which, left unchecked, inherently restrict more interesting and critical analyses of Hare Krishna spiritual practice. In what follows I provide a brief review of this critique as I have developed it, before drawing together the dominant themes of the alternative cultural analysis that I have offered in this thesis.

### **Essence, difference, transcendence: extracting the *rasa* in ISKCON**

In Chapter One I critically examined the construction of ISKCON as a spatio-culturally ‘transplanted’ site of otherness as a discursive effect of the ‘anthropologised’ self-representations of sociologists of NRMs. This methodological trope, I argued, also functions implicitly to reinforce a problematic explanatory model of conversion to ISKCON. It implies from the outset that the convert to ISKCON actually inhabits another cultural ‘world’. Already, the process of conversion to ISKCON is assumed to involve a spatio-cultural movement from the ‘outside culture’ (Rochford 2000:179) to inside the

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I acknowledge these decidedly unsympathetic alternatives – both from Western-educated Indians, as it happens – in passing, in order to recognise the openness of the field of possible representations available to

‘alternative culture’ (Judah 1974a:17) of ISKCON. ISKCON’s cultural authenticity, once established, also assumes an explanatory function for sociologists as an apparently self-evident *reason* for people to join the Hare Krishna movement. The ISKCON devotee is depicted as a *culture convert*: someone who has rejected one culture, which inherently lacks meaning, authenticity, or ‘culture’ as such, in favour of another more meaningful and authentically cultural ‘world’. In this sense, the convert has also been figured as a cultural *critic*, whose spiritual critique neatly coincides with certain established *sociological* premises about the meaning-crisis of Western modernity. Once ISKCON is established as an ‘alternative culture’ to Western modernity, a conceptual difference or *distance* must be maintained between these two culture-worlds in order to keep ISKCON’s authenticity in tact. Like the romanticised construction of the anthropologist’s ‘primitive tribe’, the ISKCON temple is represented as an isolated cultural totality, structurally removed from the secular, modern, Western culture of the ‘outside’ observer. The concept of ‘conversion’ actually functions to maintain this conceptual distance, because conversion allows for a radical leap between cultural subjectivities without disturbing the surface of cultural homogeneity, and without descending into the problem of cultural adulteration.

The idea that ‘conversion to Krishna represent[s] not only a change in religious faith, but in culture and cultural values as well’ (Judah 1974a:11) is the underlying theoretical tenet of the sympathetic representations of ISKCON I have explored. Brooks’ (1989) study *The Hare Krishnas in India*, which I addressed in Chapter Four, gives the strong impression that it was only with the establishment of ISKCON’s physical presence in India, particularly in the northern Indian holy town of Vrindavana, that ISKCON devotees could properly assimilate their own faith: ‘The opening of [ISKCON’s] Krishna-

Balarama temple complex [in Vrindavana] in 1975 gave the Hare Krishna movement a major resource for completing the process of conversion and culture change' (72). According to this assessment, then, a devotee's conversion process will remain *incomplete* until he or she comes into physical and cultural contact with ISKCON's 'roots' in India. But those who have sought to affirm ISKCON's cultural 'authenticity' have implied that a physical move to India is not, in fact, necessary 'for completing the process of conversion and culture change' (ibid.) in ISKCON – because ISKCON's religio-cultural 'roots' have already been successfully 'transplanted' into Western soil. The problem for these observers then becomes one of delineating the spatio-cultural locus of ISKCON's cultural authenticity – or cultural *reality* – within the broader cultural milieu of Western modernity.

Rochford's (2000) recent account locates ISKCON's 'culture' in its 'traditional communal structure' (175) – by which he means the ashram context of ISKCON's temples, farms, and schools (*gurukula*). Rochford argues that the increasing movement of devotees away from ISKCON centres into the 'outside culture' (179) represents 'the disintegration of ISKCON's traditional communal structure' (175), and therefore a threat to the convert's newly acquired sense of 'reality' (177). From this perspective, the 'reality' of Krishna Consciousness requires a totally integrated, inhabitable, 'stable cultural space' (173) in which it can be lived out. This image of ISKCON as a structurally bounded cultural 'reality', ideally protected from the wider cultural influence of Western modernity and its supposedly inherent meaninglessness, is nowhere more apparent than in Daner's (op.cit.) analysis of ISKCON as a 'total institution':

The ISKCON temple provides a total-institutional setting which allows its members a well-defined structural and ideological situation into which they can fit themselves. It creates a social situation in which they can

realize their identities, thereby eliminating much of the ambiguity which is generated by modern society. An ISKCON temple also provides formal rites, positive identifications and models, and an ideology, all of which are lacking in modern society. (12)

Daner's analysis is simplistic and it perpetuates some commonly held misconceptions about cults. 'Rites', 'models', and 'ideology' are not 'lacking in modern society' by any measure (Daner might have applied her terms to a modern corporation or political movement), and it is equally wrong to suggest that ISKCON provides a safe haven from 'ambiguity'. Spiritual life in ISKCON is often fraught with ambiguity and doubt, and the constant struggle to realise one's ideal spiritual identity is largely a struggle against persistent, culturally habituated 'identifications' which do not simply disappear at the front door of an ISKCON temple. Shinn (1987a) also points out the dangerous similarities between Daner's construction of ISKCON as a 'total institution' (a concept she borrows from Goffman) and the accusations of the anti-cult/de-programmer lobby (91). He properly rejects Daner's analysis by pointing out that it 'is hardly the case *in practice* that all of a devotee's "desires, thoughts and actions" [in Daner's words] are controlled by Krishna ideology. Rather, the ideology serves as a guiding interpretation of the world, the Divine, and oneself that is imperfectly (not totalistically) lived by devotees' (92; original emphasis).

I think most ISKCON devotees would agree with Shinn that their understanding of Krishna Consciousness is 'imperfectly... lived' (ibid.). I would add that to live Krishna Consciousness *perfectly* is to have attained spiritual realisation, or Krishna Consciousness itself, and no devotee in ISKCON, no matter how fanatical or totalistic, would make this claim. The difference between ideal and practice is inherent to spiritual practice itself: it

provides the very motivation for continued practice, and creates the ontological space in which the struggle for spiritual transformation takes place. We lose sight of this definitively spiritual struggle by reducing the process of spiritual transformation to a singular leap of faith from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ the cult. There is more fluidity and gradation in cult participation than can be acknowledged by constructing analyses around the entry and exit points (i.e. conversion and apostasy) to an apparently self-enclosed, spatio-cultural world. The creative possibilities opened up on the path to perfection in ISKCON necessarily include possibilities both of insight and doubt, realisation and failure, at every moment of the spiritual process, and both inside and outside the immediate institutional environment of an ISKCON temple. Conversion to the *promise* of salvation in Krishna’s spiritual world is only one possible stage of a potentially life-long *process* of spiritual transformation that ideally culminates in the fulfilment of that promise.<sup>4</sup> And until that point, it could never be said that the ISKCON devotee actually inhabits another world, cultural or otherwise. For if we are to understand spiritual practice in ISKCON as a means of cultural as well as spiritual transformation, it is similarly a process which is always partial, self-conscious, and imperfect – not in comparison to some model historical tradition, or some ‘traditional communal’ (cf. Rochford 2000:175) ideal, but in relation to the devotee’s own sense of spiritual mastery over the religio-cultural means of perfectibility.

In this thesis I have been more interested in the techniques of spiritual transformation that practically engage ISKCON devotees in the pursuit of Krishna Consciousness, than in the reasons or circumstances behind devotees’ original ‘conversion decisions’ (Shinn 1987a:141) to adopt these techniques the first place. In this respect, I

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect I agree with Shinn that ‘psychoanalytic or social explanations that focus upon [the] *conversion decision* alone neglect the maturing *conversion process*’ (141; original emphasis), although I wonder whether ‘conversion’ remains a suitable term to describe a process of spiritual transformation that can

have sought to redress something of the paucity of interest that has been paid to the phenomenological dimensions of Hare Krishna spirituality in the sociological literature, which has only ever been interested in spiritual transformations that operate at the self-conscious level of ‘decision’, ‘choice’, or ‘belief’. This exclusive focus on first-stage belief conversion leads to the secondary treatment of spiritual practice, where practice is presented merely as an example or an expression of belief.

Yet the idea that spiritual practice – as *yoga*, or *saddhana* (method) – can *induce* rather than merely *express* a transformation of consciousness is fundamental to the theology of Krishna Consciousness. I stressed this point in the introduction to this thesis, where I sought to prioritise the *performative* over the merely expressive or ‘strategic’ (cf. Knott 2000; Rochford 1982; 1985) dimensions of proselytisation practices in ISKCON. Preaching acts as an ‘instrument toward complete faith’ (Judah 1974a:177), or a ‘practical means’ (Knott, op.cit.:154) of realising one’s true spiritual identity. This same insight must also be applied to those self-conscious forms of cultural embodiment so readily identifiable with the Hare Krishna movement, in which we witness the ‘cultural trappings’ (Klostermaier, op.cit.) of Hare Krishna spirituality being put to performative use. We need to understand how ‘the cultural’ is uniquely appropriated in ISKCON as the ‘practical means’ of spiritual transformation.

I suggest, then, that instead of reading the religious rites and cultural aesthetics of Hare Krishna spirituality simply for what they *represent* – in the sense that, for ISKCON’s sympathetic observers, they ‘authentically’ represent the tradition of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism and a genuine ‘alternative’ to Western secular modernity – we need to understand what they *do* for the devotee of Krishna Consciousness ‘*in practice*’ (Shinn 1987a:92; original

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only foreseeably reach any completion at the ultimate stage of salvation itself.

emphasis). Instead of reading ISKCON's 'cultural trappings' at face value as signs of cultural otherness, or as signs of a devotee's culture conversion, we need to understand how the Western practitioner of Krishna Consciousness practically *engages cultural difference* as a technique of spiritual transformation.

This perspective draws attention to cultural differences that are intrinsic to spiritual practice within ISKCON, rather than being purely extrinsic markers of ISKCON's cultural otherness. These are differences which exist, for instance, between the culturally habituated body of the practitioner and his or her new religio-cultural patterns of body use. Because these differences are experienced at the corporeal level of the individual practitioner himself or herself, they cannot be reified as extrinsic differences between ISKCON and the 'outside culture' (cf. Rochford 2000:179), as if 'conversion' to ISKCON was a purely oppositional act of communal identity politics. These intrinsic differences, and the tensions and insights which they produce, are what define the ontological struggle for self-realisation 'in practice'. They are *felt* at the experiential level of body and consciousness, and they *compel* the practitioner toward self-transformation, not only in the build up toward some singular moment of 'conversion', but throughout the spiritual career of the practitioner.

This perspective was developed in Chapter One, first of all through a reflection on my ethnographic experience of Hare Krishna spirituality. Whatever academic motivations brought me to my 'field', my ethnographic method of participating in spiritual practice was for all *practical* purposes 'non-different' (to appropriate an ISKCON expression) to the spiritual methods employed by ISKCON devotees themselves. Accepting this fact, Chapter One proceeded to work through what might be considered a comparative methodology. It worked by juxtaposing the ethnographic quest for the 'experience of the other' (Jackson



1983:340) with the spiritual methods of experiencing the other in ISKCON. This juxtaposition led me to examine the phenomenological dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork, especially through Jackson's (ibid.) methodological reflections on the phenomenology of *mimesis*.

Jackson uses the mimesis concept to evoke the corporeal openness of our Being-in-the-world (ibid.), and to comprehend the possibility of a 'bodily awareness of the other in oneself' (336). In order to establish my methodological juxtaposition, I asked whether an ethnographic 'experience of the other' of this sort might be considered a form of 'culture conversion', and whether such an experience is necessary to the production of ethnographic knowledge. Jackson's radical empiricism seems radical indeed when compared to the objective methodological distance maintained by sociologists of cults who, as I demonstrated, actively *resist* any form of subjective 'conversion' to the other (and who, in so doing, implicitly represent cult conversion as passive *submission* to the other). But mimesis is not a concept which suggests the same kind of 'internal or subject-centered process' (Viswanathan, op.cit.:85) of transformation typically implied by the term 'conversion'. The phenomenology of mimesis permits a methodology which does not reflexively distance itself from the experiences of cult informants. It also offers an alternative approach to the question of 'conversion' or 'culture conversion' in the Hare Krishna context, by looking to the particular mimetic practices which make a cultural 'experience of the other' intrinsic to the spiritual experience of self-realisation in Krishna Consciousness.

This meant looking to a more sophisticated conceptual model of cultural difference than the one offered by sociologists of NRMs, who are content to represent ISKCON as a cultural 'alternative' to Western secular modernity, for instance, or as a new religious

‘choice’ which appeared on the Western market-place of religions (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) when Srila Prabhupada single-handedly ‘transplanted’ Gaudiya-Vaisnavism to the West in 1965. Cult conversion is not the straightforward rejection of one cultural subjectivity in favour a newly available and preferable one. Different religious or cultural experiences are not simply *there* as so many alternatives, made available to the Western spiritual seeker (or, indeed, to the anthropologist ‘at home’) through the globalising ‘recruitment strategies’ (cf. Rochford 1982, 1985) of religious traditions. Rather, I argued, cultural difference is *produced* in the ‘interpretive act’ (Viswanathan, op.cit.:43) of conversion to ISKCON, and also in the repeated explication or ‘cultural translation’ of Krishna Consciousness which occurs in contexts of preaching and spiritual instruction (the ethnographic context being but one example of both of these). These spiritual ‘translation practices’, as I have called them, involve the self-conscious ‘production of cultural *differentiation*’ (Bhabha 1994:114; original emphasis), and they ensure that a sense of cultural difference remains intrinsic to the spiritual experience in ISKCON. This is not a sense of *being* culturally other in relation to a prior Western self, even for the seasoned devotee: for as long as the practitioner engages his or her mind, body and senses in different cultural patterns and aesthetic tastes as a self-conscious means of self-transformation, the mimetic circuit between self and other remains partial and incomplete. This mimetic ‘slippage’, in Bhabha’s (ibid.:86) terms, is not a problem of cultural incompetence or the incompleteness of cultural conversion, for it is an effect of spiritual practice itself: an effect born of the desire for spiritual progress and manifest in repetitive practice. And because the production of this cultural difference is so intrinsic to spiritual practice in ISKCON, it also gives rise to the convert’s mimetic ‘excess’ (ibid.): to the hyperbolisation and *spiritualisation* of ‘the cultural’ such that the ‘Indianized’ (cf. Shinn

1987b:139) becomes something *more* than Indian, ‘*more* than Hindu’ (cf. Nye 2001:31; original emphasis), and more than Gaudiya-Vaisnava.

While the phenomenological direction of this argument led to an understanding of Hare Krishna spirituality as mimetic practice, re-figuring ‘conversion’ as *mimetic excess* also required an analytical shift of emphasis from the differences between ISKCON and the so-called ‘outside culture’ (Rochford 2000:179), to the ‘differences within’ (cf. Nye 2001:6) ISKCON between convert Western devotees and *non-convert* Indian congregants. The meaning of ‘conversion’ to ISKCON emerges in a different focus when it is figured not just against the ground of ‘Western’ cultural experience, but also against the incontrovertibly *unconvertible* position of the already Hindu Indian.

Chapter Two introduced this latter topic with a short ethnographic account of ISKCON Sydney’s Sunday Feast. Run by a small group of resident (though often transient) Anglo-Australian devotees, this weekly event attracts hundreds of Indian and Indo-Fijian congregants to the temple. It is to the devotional experiences of the former group that I directed my ethnographic inquiries. But as became quite apparent during these inquiries, the production of cultural difference in ISKCON has as much, if not more, to do with differentiating convert from congregant – or ‘Indianised’ from Indian – experiences, as it does with differentiating post-convert from pre-convert experiences.

For the Western convert to ISKCON, the cultural aesthetics of Hare Krishna otherness are suffused with a spiritual significance which has been extracted and extricated from any symbolic or immediate mimetic relation to cultural, ethnic, or national identity. It is on this basis that the convert makes the claim to a superior mimetic or experiential relation to ‘the spiritual’ than is available to those Hindu supporters of ISKCON whose religious participation is inextricably linked to cultural, ethnic, and diasporic community-oriented

issues of identity. For the convert, the ritual activities and religio-cultural forms ('trappings') of Krishna Consciousness are understood to be modelled not on those of a particular Hindu tradition, but on the forms and activities of 'the spiritual world' itself. This crucial theological point was introduced in a different context in the introduction to this thesis, when I referred to the preaching activities of *sankirtana* as being modelled on the paradigmatic activities of the spirit-soul (this is the basis of ISKCON's unique theology of 'communication' (cf. Knott 2000)). It was also explored in Chapter Three, where we learned that the '*saris* and *dhotis*' which adorn the bodies of ISKCON devotees are worn because these are what Radha and Krishna wear in the spiritual world. All the forms and features of cultural embodiment which constitute the cultural otherness of Hare Krishna spirituality must also be understood within this theological framework: that is, for their *salvific* rather than merely cultural significance. Far from simply offering up the tradition of 'Bengali Vaisnavism' as an 'alternative culture' (Judah 1974a:17) for Western converts to live in, ISKCON offers a complex theology of 'culture', in which the cultural other is to be mimetically engaged as a *yoga*, or *saddhana* (method), as the practical means of experiencing the transcendental Other.

The mimetic techniques of Krishna Consciousness are directed toward the realisation of one's original spiritual identity as an eternal companion of Krishna in the spiritual world. ISKCON cosmography depicts the spiritual world – Goloka Vrindavana – as a place of spiritual form and beauty, populated by spiritual personalities. It has colour, form, taste, sound, and the spirit-souls all relate to Krishna and to each other through a complex of personal and emotional relationships. These forms are transcendental and wholly incommensurable with mundane or 'material' forms and human relationships, including those we might associate with a particular cultural tradition. And yet these forms

are made available to the human practitioner through ritual processes of transubstantiation: material wood or stone, shaped in the likeness of Radha and Krishna, become Radha and Krishna Themselves in Their worshippingable deity-form (*arca-vigraha*) through the ritual of installation; the sonic vibrations formed by chanting the Sanskrit Names of God are ‘non-different’ to God Himself; ordinary foodstuffs (*bhoga*) are metonymically transformed into Krishna’s spiritual energy (Krishna’s ‘mercy’ or *prasadam*) when offered for Krishna’s consumption, and then consumed by the devotee. ‘The spiritual’ becomes substantial and tangible to the senses through these processes. That ‘the spiritual’ also takes on the form, colour, and ‘taste’ of a particular cultural aesthetic is not due to the historical vagaries of human cultural tastes, according to this theological position, but because these are the transcendental tastes of Krishna Himself. These are the forms and features of ‘spiritual culture’ or ‘Krishna culture’, and they reflect the very pattern of the spiritual world itself. By mimetically engaging these transcendental forms of ‘spiritual culture’ in spiritual practice, the devotee strives for ‘remembrance’ (*smarana*) of his or her forgotten original identity as spirit-soul. Mimesis effects anamnesis, or the reversal of the forgetfulness which leads us away from Krishna and into the illusory realm of bodily and cultural identifications.

Of course, the religious forms and cultural aesthetics of Krishna Consciousness *can* be identified with a ‘certain cultural and sectarian strand of ‘Hinduism’’ (cf. Nye 2001:290), or simply with Hinduism in general, as ISKCON’s sympathetic observers have repeatedly observed. But for the devotee, whose perspective has concerned us here, such historicist or culturalist observations are ultimately ‘materialistic’, in the same way that cultural identity is itself understood to be an illusory or ‘materialistic’ attachment. It is this latter kind of attachment which is seen to prevent Hindu congregants from receiving the

same spiritual insights which lead Western converts into full-time devotional life in ISKCON. Convert Western devotees preach to diasporic Indian congregants as religious virtuosi, with the theological authority to transubstantiate ‘culture’ by spiritualising it: by extricating ‘the spiritual’ from anything that might be called ‘ethnic religion’ (cf. Nye 2001) while still nevertheless maintaining the ‘authenticity’ of cultural form. And the devotees’ virtuosity becomes *reified* by the fact that congregants tend to stay congregants and busy themselves with ethnic community concerns, and rarely if ever take up the spiritual life as ISKCON devotees (cf. Zaidman 2000).

Thus while converts and congregants participate in the same religious and cultural activities during an event like the Sunday Feast, converts themselves are quick to differentiate the two types of religio-cultural taste being catered for in this context. Chapter Two took up this theme of ‘taste’ at its literal, cultural, aesthetic, and theological levels of meaning. The Feast itself provided the literal entrée into the question of ‘taste’, by looking at the centrality of food practices to Hare Krishna spirituality. The different cultural and aesthetic ‘tastes’ to which I referred relate to the ‘Indian-ness’ of Hare Krishna food production and consumption, and to the respective significance of this cultural aesthetic to convert and congregant participants at the Sunday Feast. Spiritual practices surrounding *prasadam*, or sanctified food offerings, also provided an example of ‘spiritual culture’ in practice, and demonstrated the kind of attention to ritual and aesthetic detail that this practice can entail in ISKCON.

The aesthetic sense of ‘taste’ also has a central place in the theological discourse of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism, or *rasa* theology: ‘the device of phrasing religious experience in terms of knowledge of the beautiful, as in esthetics [sic]’, writes Dimock (1966a:42), is one of the ‘peculiarities of the doctrine of the Bengal school’ of Vaisnavism. One of the

peculiarities of ISKCON, though, and the one which most differentiates it from its Indian predecessors, lies in the fact that ISKCON's theological discourse not only dresses 'the spiritual' in the terms of aesthetic experience, but also in *the experience of otherness*: for no Indian 'knowledge of the beautiful' (ibid.) can comprehend or share in the Westerner's cultured taste for the otherness of Indian aesthetic forms.

The unique theological convergence of cultural otherness and transcendental otherworldliness which we witness in the Hare Krishna discourse and practice of 'spiritual culture' was further explored in Chapter Three. *Varnasrama-dharma* is the Sanskrit term which ISKCON devotees typically translate as 'spiritual culture'. In the Hindu context, *varna* refers to the four principle divisions of caste (*brahmana*, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, *sudra*), while *asrama* refers to the four different stages of the (male) life-cycle as defined by religious duty (*brahmacarya*, *grhastha*, *vanaprastha*, *sannyasa*). These divisions are maintained in the ISKCON definition of *varnasrama* as 'spiritual culture'. But it is by differentiating ISKCON practice from perceived Hindu custom that ISKCON devotees define their own religious terms. In ISKCON, *varna* are divisions based on human qualities and spiritual qualifications, rather than on the contingencies of one's birth in a particular caste or country. The Hindu caste system, or 'caste brahminism' in particular, comes under repeated attack by ISKCON devotees as an historically degraded form of the true, divinely directed system of *varnasrama-dharma*. Challenges to caste exclusivity have been well formulated throughout the history of Indian *bhakti* (devotional) movements (Pinch 1996; Bayly 1999), but the ISKCON critique has a special significance to the Western convert's sense of religious authority. Westerners are *mlecchas*, 'outcastes' with no traditional right to practice brahmanic ritual (such as *arcana*, deity worship) or to receive the *brahmana*'s secret *gayatri mantra*. ISKCON devotees proudly acknowledge their *mleccha* status as an

open challenge to ‘caste brahmanism’, and claim the right to become *brahmanas* themselves with the appropriate training and qualifications.

Chapter Three showed how ISKCON centres and schools (*gurukula*) function as ‘brahminical’ training facilities. ISKCON’s *gurukula* provide schooling and ‘brahminical’ training for the children of devotees, while ISKCON centres like the one at Sydney are places where neophyte ‘recruits’ in the *brahmacarya asrama*, or celibate ‘student’ stage of their spiritual development, acquire the basic brahminical ‘aptitudes’ (cf. Asad 1993:77) necessary for further spiritual progress in Krishna Consciousness. The ISKCON doctrine of *asrama*, or spiritual life-stages, dictates that *grhasthas*, or married ‘householders’, must live financially independent lives outside the ISKCON centre. Married or single, the majority of ISKCON devotees pass through the instructional stage of *brahmacarya* to integrate their new religious aptitudes into life and work outside of the temple/ashram context. Rochford’s (2000) argument that this movement represents ‘the disintegration of ISKCON’s traditional communal structure’ (175) and a threat to the convert’s newly acquired sense of ‘reality’ (177) does not reflect the understanding of the devotees I have encountered in this situation. These devotees pursue their spiritual development by applying their new religious aptitudes to life’s usual chores and challenges, and also by ‘dovetailing’ – as the devotees say – their inherited cultural and individual capacities to the service of Krishna. Rochford’s approach to ISKCON’s ‘culture’ does not accommodate this kind of ‘accommodation’, because it relies on the artificial construction of ISKCON as another ‘reality’ which is structurally and spatially removed from the devotee’s ‘prior’ cultural experience. As in Daner’s (op.cit.) construction of ISKCON as a ‘total institution’, the ISKCON temple provides this spatial locus of ‘culture’ in Rochford’s account. But these analyses fail to appreciate that in ISKCON, ‘culture’ is acquired not as a new ‘reality’, but as a spiritual *technique*. ‘Spiritual



culture’ does not necessarily require spatial demarcation to be practiced as a *method* of spiritual advancement.

After exploring the concept of ‘brahminical training’ in the context of ISKCON’s doctrine of *asrama*, or spiritual life-stages, Chapter Three then examined how the critique of ‘caste brahminism’ contained in ISKCON’s doctrine of *varna* is extended to a general critique of ‘Hinduism’. I was especially interested in the way this opposition is played out in the presence of Hindu congregations. While acknowledging the intriguing relationship of cultural interdependence which exists between Western ISKCON devotees and their Indian Hindu congregations, I argued that preaching to the unconvertible functions for the devotees as a means of edifying and reifying that heightened or excessive sense of religious virtuosity typically associated with the experience of ‘conversion’.

The theology of mimetic transformation which I have identified with Hare Krishna ‘spiritual culture’ dictates that devotional acts, being modelled on the forms and activities of the spiritual world itself, can bring about the conscious realisation of that world and one’s original identity as spirit-soul. This mimetic logic formed the basis for the theological explorations and comparisons offered in Chapter Four. This chapter delved into the theological complexities of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism and examined the sectarian differences which exist between ISKCON and its source tradition. Rather than assume ISKCON to be a ‘transplanted’ reproduction of a monolithic tradition, as ISKCON’s scholarly observers have led us to believe, I examined the significant sectarian antagonisms that have been generated within ISKCON toward other representative strands of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism (cf. Brooks 1989a).

The theological issue on which I focused centred around the Gaudiya-Vaisnava practice of ‘imitation’ – a practice which has been extensively analysed by Haberman

(1988) in his book *Acting as Way of Salvation*. Haberman identifies the ‘Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana’ as the technique of religious transformation most central to the practice of Gaudiya-Vaisnavas. This technique (*saddhana*) involves practitioners either physically or, more conventionally, mentally enacting the divine role of a *gopi* – a cowherdess lover of Krishna. Traditionally, the transcendental emotional states (*rasa*) of the *gopis*, as experienced in their loving exchanges with Krishna during His ‘divine play’ (*lila*) in the spiritual world, represent the ultimate spiritual ideal in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. Haberman interprets the Gaudiya-Vaisnava technique of attaining these divine emotions as a form of religious ‘method acting’: imitation of the ‘divine model’ provided by the *gopis* is understood as a dramatic technique, in which imitative ‘action... engages emotion’ (67) as the internal experience of divine consciousness.

In ISKCON, imitation of the *gopis* – including physical performance, mental ‘visualization’ (cf. Haberman op.cit.:123), and even the seemingly innocuous practice of hearing stories (*katha*) about Krishna’s intimate pastimes (*lila*) with Radha and the *gopis* – is explicitly rejected as *sahajiya* heresy. The accusation of *sahajiyism* is levelled at some otherwise orthodox practices in Gaudiya-Vaisnavism. In exploring the theological definition of *sahajiyism* in ISKCON, I showed that it not so much the *logic* of religious imitation which so offends devotees in ISKCON, but the *model* of imitation. In ISKCON, a theology of imitative practice is revealed in the idea that performing *sankirtana*, for instance, or engaging in the practices of ‘spiritual culture’, are effective means of transforming one’s ‘consciousness’, because these practices are modelled after the ‘eternal activities of those who desire Krishna’ (Knott 2000:163 n.1) in the spiritual world. In these cases, the model to be imitated (‘those who desire Krishna’) is implicitly androgynous. But when the ‘divine model’ is expressly feminised and implicitly sexualised, as is the case

with the *gopis*, then the idea of religious imitation becomes offensive to devotees in ISKCON. The danger lies in unqualified practitioners misinterpreting the transcendental exchange between Krishna and the *gopis* as a human form of eroticism.

A heightened sense of vigilance surrounds this potential theological transgression in ISKCON, and the problem is made palpable for devotees because it is explicitly related to the personal spiritual struggle to overcome sexual desire. Ironically, it is the ignominious failure of some of ISKCON's most influential gurus to live up to the strict renunciate ideals upheld by Srila Prabhupada that has seen many disillusioned disciples leave ISKCON and discover the more esoteric teachings of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism offered by other representatives of the tradition in India. It is in direct response to this challenge that ISKCON's theological authorities have sought to re-assert the centrality of Srila Prabhupada as the ultimate 'divine model' in ISKCON.

According to ISKCON theology, Srila Prabhupada is *nitya-siddha*, an eternally liberated 'emissary of the Lord' sent directly from the spiritual world itself in order to translate Vaisnava scripture and establish ISKCON as a global vehicle of salvation. For devotees in ISKCON today, no other 'divine model' is deemed necessary in the quest for self-realisation other than that provided by the 'transcendental pastimes' (*lila*) of Srila Prabhupada. With Prabhupada himself firmly placed 'at the centre' of spiritual practice in ISKCON, no longer can the traditional goal of Gaudiya-Vaisnavas – the divine emotions of the *gopis* – be considered the primary spiritual objective for devotees in ISKCON. While the esoteric insights and ecstatic experiences promised by other representatives of Gaudiya-Vaisnavism continue to attract devotees from ISKCON (Brooks 1989a;1990), those loyal to ISKCON's sectarian ideology understand that true spiritual purpose lies solely – means and end – in the life and work of Srila Prabhupada.

Chapter Five then examined how *hagiography* functions as a ‘mechanism’ (Wyschogrod 1990:33; original emphasis) of mimetic transformation most central to spiritual practice in ISKCON.

As I listened to the “Prabhupada stories” that devotees loved to tell, the constant themes of Prabhupada’s full-time commitment to his faith and his ability to exemplify that faith were repeated consistently. His disciples experienced him as a perfect devotee who lived what he preached.

In sum, Prabhupada was the embodiment of both traditional and charismatic authority. (Shinn 1987a:41)

Chapter Five began by recognising the legitimation techniques of ISKCON’s scholarly observers as instances of Hare Krishna hagiography – or ‘Prabhupada stories’. Cox (1993) conveys the hagiographic sentiment shared by other sympathetic observers when he writes that ‘Srla Prabhupada is a man who incarnates tradition’ (*ix*). But to understand how contemporary ISKCON devotees themselves develop a lived relationship to their ‘tradition’, we needed to examine the ways in which Srla Prabhupada becomes ‘incarnate’ in the immediate context of spiritual practice. There is a more complex theology at work in this regard than has so far been acknowledged by vague sociological references to the ‘routinization of charisma’ in ISKCON (cf. Shinn 1987a:48-50). We need to comprehend how Srla Prabhupada’s spiritual ‘presence’ is made an experiential reality for ISKCON devotees, most of whom never met the man ‘in person’.

To this end, I took up Wyschogrod’s (op.cit.) argument that the ‘comprehension of a saint’s life understood from within the sphere of hagiography is a *practice* through which the addressee is gathered into the narrative so as to extend and elaborate it with her/his own life’ (xxiii; original emphasis). The story of Prabhupada’s mission to the West is one of

‘saintly self-emptying’ (33): conveyed by the steamship *Jaladuta* from India to America, Prabhupada is himself a divine vessel ‘filled by a transcendental Other’, Lord Krishna, and filled also by the ‘human others’ (ibid.), Prabhupada’s future Western followers, who are themselves ‘gathered into the narrative’ (xxiii) of Prabhupada’s life/work, and in whom Prabhupada’s life/work is ‘lived forward’ (29) in the performance of preaching and spiritual practice. It is in this sense that hagiographic practice constitutes a form of mimetic embodiment. Srila Prabhupada is the singular embodiment of ‘spiritual culture’ and the very incarnation of ISKCON’s theology of ‘communication’ (cf. Knott 2000). Every detail of spiritual practice taught to neophyte devotees in ISKCON contains a story about how Srila Prabhupada himself once communicated the same to his first Western disciples as part of his transcendental *lila* (‘pastimes’). In this way, hagiographic practice permeates every aspect of the devotee’s spiritual life: it is the very heart and soul of Hare Krishna spirituality.

Devotees say that ‘Prabhupada is embodied in his books.’ In Chapter Five I undertook the conceptual task of ‘taking the Krishnas seriously’ (Shinn 1989:117) in their lived spiritual experience of this theology in textual practice. Prabhupada’s life story is recorded in his six-volume ‘official biography’, *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta*: ‘The nectar of Srila Prabhupada’s transcendental pastimes’ (Goswami, S.d. 1993). To hear the ‘nectar’ of Prabhupada’s story, which is also the story of ISKCON,<sup>5</sup> is itself a spiritual act. Just as the stories of Lord Krishna’s *lila* contained in Prabhupada’s translations of Vaisnava scripture are a transformative spiritual force, emanating ultimately from the spiritual world itself, so Srila Prabhupada’s story acts to dispel illusion and awaken spiritual consciousness in the speaker and hearer.

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<sup>5</sup> The first volume of the *Lilamrta* is devoted to Prabhupada’s ‘lifetime in preparation’ in India. The other five

Chapter Six then continued my analysis of textual practice as a means of spiritual transformation, by examining how the act of reciting Krishna's story, translated word-for-word in Prabhupada's books, is a performative act of mimesis – an embodied practice in which the devotee 'lends his voice' (Gebauer and Wulf 1995:51) to Srila Prabhupada's original spiritual act of translating the scripture. '[T]o become a devotee of Krishna is to become a preacher of Krishna's story', observes Shinn (1987a:110), but it is also to *participate* in that revelatory act of translation (cf. Benjamin, op.cit.) which is the divinely inspired purport of Srila Prabhupada's life and movement.

Having revealed *translation* to be the divine purpose of Srila Prabhupada's life and work, I also turned in Chapter Six to Benjamin's (op.cit.) thoughts in 'The Task of the Translator', and to Derrida's (op.cit.) commentary on this seminal essay, 'Des Tours de Babel', to develop a conceptual insight into the spiritual dimensions of translation practice in ISKCON. Word-for-word citations of Prabhupada's scriptural translations feature as a core spiritual practice in ISKCON, and the ability to remember Sanskrit *slokas* (verses) and their translations by heart is a measure of a devotee's spiritual mastery. I devoted special attention to these citational practices in my final chapter, for I believe they provide the most cogent ethnographic illustration of that intrinsic *sense of otherness* which pervades spiritual practice in ISKCON, and which, I have argued, also compels the practitioner toward self-realisation in Krishna Consciousness.

The phonetic texture of Sanskrit *slokas* and *mantras* provided an especially significant example of what I have called (in Chapter Two) the *cultural aesthetics of otherworldliness* which imbue 'the spiritual' with a tangible sense of 'taste' and form in ISKCON. Sanskrit is the language of 'spiritual culture' and the sonic fabric of the spiritual

world. The transcendental ‘nectar’ which Prabhupada extracts from the Sanskrit ‘original’ in his English translations acquires its special ‘taste’ for the convert, I argue, because the ‘original’ itself never loses its *essential* ‘foreignness’ (Benjamin op.cit.:257). Benjamin writes that ‘all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than temporary and provisional solution to this foreignness remains out of reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt’ (ibid.). In every word-for-word repetition of Prabhupada’s Sanskrit-English translations, I have argued, ‘this foreignness’ is realised for the ISKCON devotee as the ‘remoteness’ (ibid.) which separates material self from transcendental Other, or self from self-realisation. For translation, linguistic or ‘cultural’, only becomes necessary in a ‘material world’ where form and meaning have become irreconcilably separated in signification. The difference between this state and the language, Name, and ‘culture’ of God – in which form is ‘non-different’ to meaning – is co-extensive with the difference between ‘material consciousness’ and ‘Krishna Consciousness’. By revealing and reiterating this essential difference between the spiritual and the material, Prabhupada’s translations also open up that ontological space in which the promise and possibility of spiritual realisation can become the lived experience of Hare Krishna spirituality. And finally, it is this taste of the spiritual in all its ‘foreignness’ that ISKCON offers in the nectar of translation.





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