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Hare Krishna Transformed, by E. Burke Rochford

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Hare Krishna Transformed. By E. Burke Rochford, Jr. New York University Press, 2007. 284 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$23.00 paper.

This book presents updated information about the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), or Hare Krishnas. This movement, founded by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in New York City in 1966, moved its operations to San Francisco in 1967, and attracted many young, disaffected Americans seeking refuge from mainstream culture. Before Prabhupada's death in 1977, Hare Krishna temples were established throughout the globe. The movement has lost many members since the mid-1980s. This book documents the causes for these losses and investigates changes being enacted to ensure the future health of the organization.

Shortly before his death, Prabhupada appointed eleven gurus empowered to initiate new members. Scandal eventually plagued the eleven gurus appointed by Prabhupada, many of whom were removed because of various forms of illegal activity. The leadership model was altered several times, resulting in the eventual appointment of eighty gurus in 1993. Swami Prabhupada had initially envisioned a celibate, male monastic order devoted to the worship of Krishna in the style of Bengali saint Chaitanya (1486–1533). In New York, he agreed to initiate women as well as men, and “allowed women to . . . give classes and public lectures . . . to chant alongside men in the temple, and to assume significant institutional positions in ISKCON” (p. 128). Men in leadership positions objected to the high status accorded to women, and by the mid-1970s, all the privileges listed above (and more) were revoked.

Marriages in the movement were generally arranged by temple presidents, whose “decisions [frequently] were guided more by community needs and economic considerations than by concerns for marital compatibility” (p. 57). Sexual relations were to be conducted only during a woman's most fertile time of the month, and after five or more hours of chanting.

The early ISKCON movement supported itself by donations received from the sale of books, incense and other items. This form of service to the organization, known as *sankirtan*, required long hours. Children were separated from their parents at the age of four and sent to boarding schools known as *gurukulas*. In 1986 all the *gurukulas* closed, and the center point of the movement shifted from celibate, unmarried persons to married persons earning a living outside the temple.

In addition to the marginalization and maltreatment of women, the treatment of many children in the movement was quite horrific. Rochford interviewed several young adults who described nightmarish experiences at the *gurukulas* in North America and in India from the early 1970s to mid-1980s, including physical and sexual abuse. Many of the older children were forced to beat the younger children. One leader in West Virginia entered a downward spiral following an attack by a disgruntled disciple, and eventually was removed on charges of mail fraud and racketeering. He was infamous for sexual indiscretions with young male devotees.

Despite this sordid history, ISKCON has exhibited resilience. Women now serve on the governing board, and successfully resisted an attempt by a group of men to remove them from all positions of authority. A settlement was reached in 2005 that paid financial compensation to 535 people who had been abused in the *gurukulas*. Second-generation members of the movement are creating their own way of relating to the worship community, and new sources of revenue have been obtained, largely from immigrant Indian Americans who have helped build new temples and support existing ones. What began as a countercultural movement has adapted to American society and become, in effect, a denomination of a larger faith tradition.

Rochford presents a concise analysis of the history, troubles and future prospects for the Hare Krishna movement. An important sequel to earlier studies, it provides an honest and respectful assessment of this “new religion” as it enters maturity. This book will be helpful to all students of American religious movements, and certainly should be included in every college and university library.

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