To Sulochana, and Sulochana's guru
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In 1965, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, a Kolkata holy man, sailed to the U.S. on a mission to spread the religion of Shri Chaitanya, a 16th century *brahmin* who taught ecstatic devotion to the Hindu god Krishna and his goddess, Radha. Later known as Prabhupada, the determined immigrant settled into the Lower East Side and began attracting countercultural youth to his tradition’s congregational chanting of Krishna’s names, iconic deity worship, and sacred food. As the first disciples began to feel committed to the teachings of their guru, he added an emphasis on asceticism. The newborn International Society for Krishna Consciousness, also known as the Hare Krishna movement, endeavored to bear the cost of sacrificial asceticism for the sake of spiritual enlightenment and the institutional expression of Prabhupada’s teachings. From the very beginning, Prabhupada persuaded his followers to adopt his missionary spirit, and with little preparation or experience they became preachers.

Within a few years, ISKCON opened centers throughout America and, eventually, the world. Prabhupada’s passing in 1977 underscored profound differences in the ways that his followers related to his teachings. This development threatened the very existence of his organization, but for a variety of reasons that this dissertation will examine, the growing
community of New Raman Reti devotees in North Florida continues to attract adherents from all over the country and the world.

This dissertation explores the history of the Hare Krishna movement in the United States and illuminates the reception of Prabhupada’s teachings in the light of a rational choice, cost benefit analysis of human behavior and thought. As the ascetic emphasis that originally defined the movement gave way to the community’s emphasis on family life, the devotees’ spirituality of searching discovered—and continues to discover—a spirituality of dwelling in the American Southeast. Important topics include the experience of Hare Krishna women, the movement’s first and second generation, and Hindu immigrants who have their own version of spiritual dwelling. Here is a story of the union of the ordinary and extraordinary in society, and an explanation of how this new religious movement is becoming established as a church.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A New Religious Movement in America

In 1965, a sixty-nine year old Bengali holy man, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), embarked from Kolkata on the order of his guru to bring the Hare Krishna form of Hinduism to the U.S., a country—as the Swami would see it—with many dull churches, in need of an imported religious cult. Indeed, the purpose of his voyage was to invite Americans to see his cultic religion as a doorway to a beautiful, spiritual world. He called this religion “the cult of Shri Chaitanya”, after the 16th century Bengali brahmin who taught devotion to the god Krishna and his goddess, Radha. This dissertation will not shy away from the term cult, as many well meaning researchers have done out of respect for religious faith. Rather, I will discuss the term cult as Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge have written about cult in their 1979 essay “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements.” I will also discuss the cultic nature of Prabhupada’s teachings in America as a religious social movement, emphasizing the non-pejorative terms cult and church in the context of a rational choice, cost benefit analysis of the formerly ascetic Hare Krishna movement and its culmination in the lay community of New Raman Reti in North Florida. For the Hare Krishna religion in America, the cult to church paradigm and the movement from an ascetic to a lay orientation are related. Both the corporate and individual expression of the paradigm and the orientation shift have resulted in a more ordinary cognitive orientation, while achieving a level of independence that still complements the hopes of the founder. I will keep closely to emic categories related to theology and practice, and this approach will illustrate Prabhupada’s intention and answer the question, in the quest for a spirituality of dwelling, what became of Shri Chaitanya’s cult in America? Why should we call it the Hare Krishna movement?
The hopes of the movement: Although “the most notable scholarly interpreter of Krishna consciousness in America” Burke Rochford (Asch, 2002; Bromley, 2007) has not specifically endorsed the conceptual and terminological paradigm of church and cult, his latest social interactionist work in *Hare Krishna Transformed* suggests that it is high time to look at a new religious movement’s hopes. An emphasis on these hopes is integral to my approach. Rational choice perspectives reveal the hopes of a religious tradition, individually and corporately, so I find it appropriate to apply the rational choice perspective to issues both large and small.

Stark has reminded us that the study of new religious forms has general importance because of the opportunity to understand religious beginnings. “We have no time machine to permit study of the past. But religious sects and cults can be studied from the start and thus can furnish a body of information concerning the rise of institutions and the invention of culture” (Stark, 1979: 130). Stark divides cults into native and exotic varieties (ibid, 125). Both are important anywhere in a modernized, globalized world where the vitality of religion has confounded expectations of its inevitable demise. Imported (or exported, as may be the case) religion attracts attention from a variety of angles. New religious movements from foreign cultures have interested researchers who want to evaluate religious continuity and change in America, yet the exotic ideas and values of an Indian swami or Tibetan lama tend to create a sensation in American society, where the religious norms of the majority are radically different. Consequently, the sensational aspect of exotic religious forms has influenced the direction of inquiry by all disciplines, so researchers from antipathetic, empathetic, and "objective" etic orientations have been preoccupied with questions of recruitment tactics, strange lifestyles, and odd belief systems—even criminal behavior—which keep these religious forms in tension with their environment (Knott, 2005: 251).
Eileen Barker, for instance, in researching *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwash or Choice*, studied the Unification Church with the purpose of answering the question, "Why should—how could—anyone become a Moonie?" (Barker, 1987: 1) In this study we will not only be concerned with the question of how anyone could become a cultist, we will also engage with questions of how anyone could remain a cultist in the face of very trying circumstances and how these circumstances can be opportunities for cultic expansion and advancement toward the status of a church. This will require a close look at documented personal feelings, not in the interest of idealizing or condemning, but in the interest of taking moods and motivations as important points to consider.

Questions about socially novel and contentious religion are appropriate to the study of new religious movements, and are dealt with squarely in Chapter Three, where the “joiners” of the first American Hare Krishna movement are examined in the light of their momentous decisions, and in Chapter Six, where criminal behavior is brought to light. But the reader will discover that an inner-cultic sense of wonder about its own history has benefits for establishing a new religious form in society, even when—especially when—it is ridden with scandal. It is a part of a special type of cost benefit analysis. However, this dissertation also seeks to advance beyond the wonder stage of research to investigate the ways in which an exotic new religious form in America becomes accepted, rather than gawked at or opposed—or abandoned by its participants—and how it integrates with the host society, not how it decays, because we are interested in the hopes of the founder of Shri Chaitanya’s cult in America. Research on new religious movements in America has reached a critical mass, suggesting a closer look at how tension with society is reduced, for this perspective addresses questions of continuing religious innovation, questions that lie at the very heart of the study of new religious movements. And, to
further our understanding of this cultic movement’s hopes, we will explore a topic recently broached by Burke Rochford in *Hare Krishna Transformed*—the reduction of tension *within* a new religious movement (Rochford, 2007: 212-215). Although we will look at various interacting groups of this religion in America, because of its novelty, special focus will go to the first generation.

About half of this study is concerned with events that occurred before the founding of the North Florida devotional community of New Raman Reti, where I conducted my interviews, because these events are critical to understanding the present. So instead of looking primarily at New Raman Reti as a special example of the 21st century Hare Krishna movement in America, my focus is on movement history culminating in New Raman Reti. Except for a few devotees who are public figures because they have been written about in books, journals, and the national press, all the names of my interviewees have been changed.

In one way or another, religious people form religious communities that must come to terms with their internal and external environment, because, like people, no religion is an island. All religions are in flux, and this is particularly true of new religious forms that must struggle to be accepted. Consequently, there is no alternative to the ethnographical approach when the intent is to understand the development of modern new religious forms. Catherine Albanese has observed that ethnography has now become the preferred method of studying the Hare Krishna religion in America (Albanese, 2002: 8). But such studies must also transcend the previous narrow focus on this religion’s official religious institution, in order to engage with human populations at the level of daily life and observe its social development clearly. For this dissertation, an American who has no relationship with his local Hare Krishna temple president, or who is unfamiliar with the Hindu text the *Bhagavad Gita*, but keeps an altar with a picture of
Krishna painted by an American devotee in his home, is just as interesting as the literal contents of the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the same time, because the Hare Krishna religion arrived here with a fully developed ideology, lifestyle, and ritual catalogue, we must assess continuity as well as innovation in relation to its "origin" crystallized in instruments of power such as religious texts and official organizations. At this juncture the reader will want to know what point of view will lead the discussion, and the relationship of the researcher to his material. Let's begin with the latter.

**Research Reflexivity**

I first contacted participants of the Hare Krishna movement in 1971 or 1972, when shaven headed young men wearing *dhotis* and young women wearing *sarıs* sang their famous Hare Krishna mantra (see glossary) and danced to the accompaniment of *mridangas* (clay drums) and *karatals* (hand cymbals) on the streets of San Diego, California.¹ Since then I have remained closely connected to the Hare Krishna community in various American locations, sometimes feeling like an insider to the tradition in relation to academia, and sometimes feeling like an outsider in close Hare Krishna circles—yet most people would consider me an insider. As one might imagine, these divergent perspectives have proven invaluable to my research.

The various themes pertinent to the social movement known as Hare Krishna may be legitimately nuanced from a number of reflexive angles, which have been delineated by Junker and Gold as four basic types along a continuum from complete outsider (observer) to complete insider (participant) with the middle positions occupied by observer as participant and participant

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¹ *Dhotis* and *sarıs* are traditional Indian items of dress for males and females, respectively, and consist of a single cloth tied in a variety of ways.
as observer (Knott, 2005: 243-259; Gold, 1984: 373-380). All of these positions are useful in evaluating stasis and change in a new religious social movement. Insiders are often concerned about the use of the word “change” in critical studies of their religious traditions; I have always felt uneasy about the use of change in relation to the development of the Hare Krishna religion in America, for often these accounts seem inaccurate to the emic understanding—yet no study of a new religious form could avoid the issue of change. Caring about the emic (“depoliticized and ahistorical”) understanding of religion is exactly what Russell McCutcheon has addressed in *Critics Not Caretakers*, but it is nowhere evident that a caretaker cannot be a critic as well (McCutcheon, 2001: xii, xiv, 4, 10, 88, 205). The terms need not exclude each other, and we must consider the possibility that some insiders make better critics than caretakers. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders are indeed porous.

**A Phenomenological Approach to Human Agency**

At the very least, by placing the emphasis on emic thoughts and practices before offering an explanation of any social group, researchers may avoid the imposition of a predetermined etic theory. Like Max Weber (1864-1920), I am interested in an “adequacy of meaning”, or how the relevant actors subjectively interpret the situation. And heeding the advice of conversion scholar Louis Rambo—who observes that, in discussions between anti-cultists and pro-cultists, he was surprised that they didn’t throw chairs at each other (Rambo, 1998)—concerning intentionality, active instead of passive roles, and emic accounts of the conversion process, the approach here is to place the emic voice in the forefront of this study. Rambo’s wholehearted acceptance of

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2 Gold meant that all of these roles were actually outsider positions, with the participant being a sociologist **who pretended to be an insider** for the sake of research. For this work I have adopted Kim Knott’s adaptation of Gold in Hinnells, 2005, "Insider/Outsider Perspectives", which does not rely on pretense.
theological language to describe conversion is appreciated and utilized in this study as a starting point for all research on the social dimension of religion.

Bernice Martin has written, "Like Max Weber, I am inclined to consider ideas, norms, and values as powerful patterns which may deflect, transmute, and perhaps even preclude the development of possibilities which lie in the structural arrangements of societies (Martin, 1985: 1). Weber and Martin considered powerful what religious missionaries such as Prabhupada and his guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (1874-1937) were determined to prove as such; their determination has resulted in a rich variety of related, Indic-origin human ideas, norms, and values that run counter to the structure of American society. A phenomenological approach is used here not to get at an essential experience—not what religious experience *per se* feels like, according to the insistence of phenomenologists like Rudolph Otto—but in order to treat divergent emic actions and statements about ideas, norms, and values seriously as valuable sources for illuminating the growth of an imported new religious movement. These sources are the subject matter of our inquiry. Without understanding the divergent statements of religious individuals, we can never hope to understand their collective social actions, past or present.

According to Prabhupada, Shri Chaitanya defined a Krishna devotee as “someone who, when seen, reminds one of Krishna” (Prabhupada, 1985: 54). A Gaudiya Vaishnava is of course someone who worships Sri Chaitanya as an *avatara* of Krishna; it may be a *sampradaya* (see glossary) status definition or a more common one. However, I do not specifically define Gaudiya Vaishnava or even Vaishnava in this study because my interest is in the social development of an imported cult, and accordingly theology and theological identification is analyzed from that perspective. Prabhupada’s market niche is highly defined, but like the distinction between emic and etic analysis, it also has porous boundaries, as we shall see.
The individual approach to studying a new religious movement blends well with rational choice theory, cost-benefit analysis, and exchange theory, that presume people calculate their interests from their own point of view. It also complements the Weberian observation that all societies are conglomerations of individuals and their understandings, which include ideas. This dissertation seeks to understand both the intention and the context of human action by looking at ideas, practice, and finally ideas about practice. The attempt at this sort of understanding of the American Hare Krishna movement and its original institutional expression, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, is apropos because the Society began with an individual who traded in ideas. In this chapter I will explain my theoretical presumptions in support of a close look at emic views, and, while challenging the use of misleading terms in the study of new religious movements, I will introduce terms borrowed from the social sciences for the purpose of clarifying the social development of a new religious movement.

If we can trace the beginning of an imported religion in any society to the ideas of a single person—as we can in this instance—then any discussion of that religion must be recognizable by Prabhupada, the first believer of the Hare Krishna movement in America. W. C. Smith (1916-2000) has written, “No statement about religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by the religion's believers” (Smith, 1959: 42). By the same token, any portrait of Prabhupada’s ideas that he would not recognize would qualify as *missverstehen* (getting it wrong) in Weberian terms (Muggleton, 2000: 14), even if it was designed by those who claim to follow his teachings. *Missverstehen* is a common matter of contention in religion, especially for a nascent religious expression struggling to define itself in pluralistic America, for even if a researcher has understood Prabhupada’s intention we must still recognize the interpretive struggle for agency that arises when any textual tradition takes on a social dimension. For instance, Rochford
emphasizes the voices of married men who suffered a “loss of status” when they married (Rochford, 2007: 57), but neglects to mention that many men cherished their spouses as wives and as Krishna devotees (Gressett, 2008: 189). Etic scholars have been complicit in this struggle because of a tendency to privilege certain voices over others. Although it is likely that these scholars have not consciously done this, Brian K. Smith has written, “…it seems problematic when scholars of religion arrogate to themselves the authority to decide for religions what does and does not count as orthodoxy or religious identity” (Smith, 2005: 103).

This dissertation will air contentious understandings of Prabhupada’s teachings among his followers to correct studies that rely upon information from “senior devotees” without bothering to explain the qualifications for seniority. Instead, because Prabhupada brought an entire Indian tradition to a country where it was virtually unknown, in this work Prabhupada will be considered the only senior devotee representing Hare Krishna orthodoxy in America. His charismatic presentation embodied a persistent standard. The veracity of charismatic leaders is not in contention by emic participants who find the leaders charismatic, only mode of interpretation and presentation of the charismatic leaders’ teachings by his or her followers to themselves and to the rest of society. We will suspend judgment about the veracity of Prabhupada’s ideas. There are numerous contradictions in Prabhupada's literary work, but they form a coherent whole and are not an abstraction, for scholars have noted a remarkable consistency in Prabhupada’s presentation of his tradition (Baird, 1995: 203). As "authoritative" ideas they were not presented symbolically but as facts to ponder, and after "submissive inquiry", one was enjoined to do what Arjuna did in relation to their implementation—decide. "Thus have

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3 A good example is a contentious numerical profile of Prabhupada’s disciples by leaders. In the past, researchers have accepted their version of who is “actively practicing Krishna consciousness.” The criteria for such active practice is rarely defined by the leaders and rarely questioned by etic researchers. http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/irg/adikarta2.htm (The relevant reference is found at quote 10.)
I explained to you knowledge still more confidential. Deliberate on this fully, and then do what you wish to do" (Prabhupada, 1989: 847).

The focus on individual decisions has a long history in Hinduism, and the range of acceptable choices offered by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita stands in stark contrast to the kind of monotheism endorsed by large sections of the American “mainstream.” Because of the (comparably) soft monotheism of the Bhagavad Gita and a certain leniency that goes with it, we must engage with a very complex group of devotees and their perspectives.4 As this work proceeds the reader will find that official doctrine and a strong emphasis on orthopraxy is now an elite social option within a larger cultural frame that provides for more eclectic and less rigorous forms of practice. At the same time, we must keep in mind that Prabhupada’s emphasis remains as the foundation upon which many layers have been added—layers that may be considered by some American Hare Krishna devotees to be common sense, but for others, nonsense—depending upon who is doing the interpretation.

What Became of the Hare Krishna Movement in America?

Rochford concludes his influential new book by declaring, in the last paragraph, "The fate of Prabhupada's legacy lies primarily with independent communities like New Raman Reti and

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4 Monotheism is a contentious word. If monotheism is defined as the proposal that only one God exists, Vaishnavism qualifies as monotheism because the other devas (gods) are considered servants of the one and only God (Vishnu or Krishna) by Vaishnavas. Although some will not accept any form of Hinduism as monotheistic, an article in the New World Encyclopedia indicates that at the popular level, monotheism has become an accepted term for the Hare Krishna religion. See http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Monotheism#Hinduism However, I have devised the term soft monotheism to indicate that the god Krishna, while claiming to be the one and only God, in the Bhagavad Gita allows for the validity of many different paths and worship of other gods, who represent different aspects of himself (Prabhupada, 1989: 536). Krishna does not endorse these paths (ibid, 234-236), but he does facilitate them because he recognizes the need for individual souls to fulfill material desires and wishes to preserve the independence of these souls (ibid, 396-397). Additionally, these paths represent gradual elevation according to the conditioning of the individual practitioner (ibid, 794). Prabhupada taught that when the individual souls are finished with all of these diversions throughout many lifetimes they will take to Krishna’s devotional service and be liberated from the round of birth and death. There is no teaching by Prabhupada that one must fully surrender to Krishna in one’s present lifetime or face the destruction of the soul or banishment to an eternal hell. It is for these reasons that I have devised the term soft monotheism. In the words of Graham Schweig,“Krishna is clearly not a jealous God” (Schweig, 2007: 270).
with the many devotee families throughout North America socializing the next generation of Krishna devotees while remaining a part of American culture" (Rochford, 2007: 217). For the last two decades the movement has declined in terms of temples and temple residents all over America while flourishing in North Florida, where for the first time it has become a team player in a small town locale, enjoying a normalized relation with its environment as an important, substantial minority with social influence. Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven take us to New Raman Reti to investigate the Hare Krishna community of North Florida, for it exemplifies two basic aspects of a new religious movement vital to this discussion, institution and community.

Appropriate Terminology for the Study of Religious Forms

The professional critique of new religious movements has created two opposing camps. The brainwashing theory of psychologist of religion Margaret Singer (1921-2003), for instance, has rallied the anti-cult interests against the research of the majority of sociologists and anthropologists in the field (Rambo, 1998). But, “Sociological studies have rejected the brainwashing model, focusing instead on the interactions between potential and established cult members. Nevertheless, the absence of a coherent frame work and confusion about terms has hampered such studies” (Bader and Demaris, 1996). American sociologist of religion Rodney Stark has compared this absence of coherence to a Tower of Babel prevalent in the critical study of religious forms. He blames the conceptualizations and terminology of Max Weber, or the confusion caused by the conflation of Weber's ideas with that of his student Ernst Troeltsch (1865--1923), for creating a muddled situation in which researchers speak past each other even on basic terms such as church or sect. For instance, Stark defines the sect primarily as a religious form that has broken off from another religious form, while his British rival secularization theorist Steve Bruce defines the sect primarily as a religious form that claims to have a monopoly on religious truth (Stark, 1979: 117-131; Bruce, 1999: 6). These terms could easily overlap in
some circumstance, but by Bruce’s definition, many American expressions of the Baptist church would be a sect. The Baptists would likely be perturbed to hear this, but more importantly I have another set of definitions with the aim of explaining religious novelty. This work uses the ideas of Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge for naming and conceptualizing religious forms because of the clarity of their system, which has been ratified—more or less—by an impressive group of social scientists, for instance, who contributed to Bromley and Hadden’s 1993 *The Handbook On Cults And Sects In America*. However, before entering the classification discussion initiated by Weber, it must be clear to the reader that no universal claim will be made for any system, including the one endorsed here. An Indian religion can make its way in America, but observations about its social aspect in India may not be relevant in America at all. This last point will become important in the chapter on the Hindus at New Raman Reti, for it indicates an historical difference in attitudes between community groups that, for historical reasons, relate to a single religious teaching from a multitude of angles.

Weber recognized the futility of universal concepts for social phenomena and so tried to make a virtue of the ideal type, a necessarily one-sided abstraction with one or more selected characteristics (Stark, 179: 121-122). Because he preferred to view social phenomena from the individual level before constructing arguments for momentous events in social history, he focused on the element of choice in the recruitment process for religious organizations understood as ideal types. For Weber, one is born into a church, but one elects to affiliate with a sect; if a congregation is composed mostly of born members, it is a church, otherwise, a sect. Weber's student Ernst Troeltsch, a theologian instead of a social scientist, kept Weber's terminology but conceived of a church as an established religious body in harmony with its environment, while the more "mystical" sect type was less accommodating of society's values.
This discrepancy between the two systems resulted in Stark's typological Tower of Babel because many English language researchers did not realize that Weber and Troeltsch, whose respective works were not contemporaneously available in translations, had different intentions for their typologies. Although Troeltsch's emphasis on religious experience departs from most sociological analyses of religion, his notion of accommodation was to prove seminal, and was continued in the work of Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962). Niebuhr specified that a sect breaks off from a church (Latin, *secta*), and expanded the tension concept within a religion; some prefer a church, others a sect (Swatos, 1998). Benton Johnson also kept the church-sect system, and distinguished between religious institutions and religious movements—like all social movements, a religious movement goes beyond its own institution and aims to dominate or at least influence society (Stark and Bainbridge, 1979: 117). It will become apparent later in this discussion why such a delineation of movement-institution is important for the Hare Krishna religion in America, a religious form that was born with the attributes of both.

With various smaller modifications, the church-sect model has been accepted as fundamental by the majority of scholars in the field of new religious movements, even by staunch secularization theorists such as Bryan Wilson (1926--2004), who see the proliferation in modernity of new religious forms as merely an indication of religion's last gasp, a vindication of secularization theory (Berger, 1996-1997: 3-12). Regardless of the issue of secularization, theorists in the field have also been preoccupied with naming and conceptualizing the possible faces of religion beyond the basic church-sect dichotomy, and many systems of naming and conceptualizing religious forms—using church, sect, cult, denomination, ecclesia, order, etc.—have served the interests of individual researchers for different situations, producing overlapping

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5 Berger (1996-1997: 9) now terms this idea "the last-gasp thesis," and judges it to be "singularly unpersuasive."
and sometimes contradictory systems, systems that must be learned anew in reference to each important research name in the field.

Let’s apply Stark’s and Bainbridge’s ideas about religious classification to the system that is pertinent to New Raman Reti. It is in the area of the so-called "new religious movements" that previous typologies are especially inadequate for ISKCON and a host of other new religious groups in America. One of the main problems with using the old church-sect typology for new religious movements is that religious groups that break off from other religious groups—sects—are not the only religious groups in a state of high tension with their environment as characterized by Niebuhr. Frequently at an even higher rate of tension with society is another category that Stark and Bainbridge divide into two. These groups are at odds with the dominant culture because of 1) innovation from within the culture or 2) because of having a cultural origin that is completely alien. Stark and Bainbridge call these groups cults.

We must pause here to acknowledge the history and present state of cult as a pejorative term in 20th century America, a history that betrays subjective interests in line with an influential church and sect atmosphere created by a small army of established religious leaders and a handful of psychiatric workers, aided and abetted by a sensationalistic media. Yet Stark has argued for the reclamation of the term cult as a precise social science concept in his writings and as an expert witness in a libel suit against anti-cultists in Alameda, California (Stark, 1983). David G. Bromley and Jeffrey K. Hadden have also favored the use of sect and cult instead of new religious movement because of the conceptual ambiguity of the latter term and because the purpose for which the term had been invented—to remove the stigma attaching to sect and cult—has failed after more than two decades. The media and the general public have not embraced or understood the term. They write, "By calling attention to the concepts [sect and cult] as they are
used by social scientists, we hope to begin the long process of educating the mass media and public regarding the non-pejorative meaning of these words" (Bromley and Hadden, 1993: 7-8). Accordingly, undergraduate courses on cults continue to use the term in a non-pejorative way, so it is clear that the non-pejorative use of cult has solid support in academia. 6

Cult is derived from the French *culte*, which in turn has its origin in the Latin *cultus*, care, cultivation, or worship. 7 Until the turn of the 20th century, the term enjoyed a positive or neutral usage in reference to religious devotion to a particular saint in Christianity, or even a specific god, as, in Hinduism, the cult of the god Krishna (Saliba, 1995: 1). In America, this positive or at least neutral understanding of cult has had to compete with sensationalistic, negative definitions by Christian and Jewish religious leaders with ideological ties to religiously conservative media managers and owners. In this situation it is easy to demonize a new religious form in society and impossible to defend one. As Philip Jenkins observes, "…while nothing was lost by offending members of a quirky local commune, it took a brave editor to run a story attacking a mainstream denomination [that might demonize a “cult”], which would respond with an advertising boycott or a venomous letter-writing campaign" (Jenkins, 2000: 15, 20). This demonization of religious groups with ideas and practices running counter to established interests continued throughout the century with the result that prominent scholars of the sociology of religion—J. Gordon Melton, Thomas Robbins, Tim Miller, James Beckford and many others—have responded to this situation by abandoning the term cult in favor of new religious movement. But, as already mentioned, this term has never caught on with the general public (York, 1996). Moreover, cultists too play into the intentions of anti-cultists, for as Jenkins notes, "…did anyone ever

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7 *Cultus* in turn is derived from the verb, *colere*—to inhabit, till, worship.
announce, straight-faced, that he or she had joined a cult?" (Jenkins, 2000: 14). Because of a seemingly irreversible connotation associated with cult, the Hare Krishna movement officially and routinely denies being a cult—even though the founder, Prabhupada, unabashedly called his religion "the cult of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu" (Prabhupada, 1975: 66; Prabhupada letter, 1971). Although Prabhupada’s use of the term cult is different from the current popular misappropriation of the term, and possibly different from the academic usage, it has in common with academia a non-pejorative meaning. Regardless of Prabhupada’s usage, Hare Krishna devotees have made a cost-benefit analysis and decided there is more to lose in retaining their guru's nomenclature than rejecting it. Most people do not want to be called cultists.

Such an impasse reifies the definition of cult promulgated by anti-cultists, yet in light of the shifting parameters for the term at the popular level there is much to be lost in abandoning it in the sincere effort to avoid stigmatizing marginal religious groups. Michael York has assembled a compelling examination of the ramifications of retreating from a useful descriptive term such as cult: "In the contest over the meaning of an ambiguous object, the agents who win have successfully demonstrated their authority to define the situation, and thereby influence thought and action" (Dillon and Richardson, 1995). York observes that in modern complex societies, “the social world becomes defined and delineated” by dominant institutions for the whole population (York, 1996). Sociologist James Beckford argues that new religious movements which are considered "deviant, threatening or simply weird” are of interest to the media on the basis of their newsworthiness alone. For Beckford, “Cult is therefore a self-contained and self-standing category which is of interest to the mass media for its own sake” (Beckford, 1993: 4). Larry Shinn also writes about the elusiveness of the term at the popular level, and the complicity of the media: “Rather than providing discriminating examinations of a
single cult or a comparison of a variety of cults, most popular media and literature simply assume that that the reader knows what cults are and spend their time telling atrocity stories that serve to heighten the reader’s fear of ‘the cults’ in America” (Shinn, 1987: 16). James T. Richardson has written that such a sensationalistic interest, working at cross purposes with the academy, is actually ideological in nature, and is "most insidious because it precludes individuals and groups from even thinking of questioning a given situation of disproportionate power" (York, 1996). For most of the public, why doubt the pejorative use of the term cult as it is used in newspapers, television, and radio news programs? By this very reason Richardson agrees with Beckford, Melton, et al. because cult now represents an objective fact that cannot be wished away by scholars. In the “politics of representation” contest York takes exception with the capitulating group of scholars (Richardson, et. al.), and is concerned that failure to vigorously educate the public about the proper usage of cult makes academic researchers in the field complicit in the politicization of the term, with all the disastrous results that ensue. He asks, “What has been learned if the academic faction merely acquiesces in the established misuse of a term?” (ibid).

Beside the non-pejorative social scientific use of cult, there is also the long-standing non-pejorative designation for a group of individuals intensely involved in any special interest, which seems to be the way that Prabhupada used the term. For him, “the cult of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu” represented the “crème de la crème” of all religion. Therefore, it was a cult.

After this necessary detour into the politics of representation surrounding the term cult, we may now examine more closely the concept of cult as it has become understood by American researchers who endorse the non-pejorative use of this term: A cult is a new religious movement in tension with its environment (Stark, 1979: 25). Because of this tension, “Cults, then, represent
an independent religious tradition in a society” (ibid) and so, additionally, cults tend to lack prestige in society. The term new religious movement is often used for both sects and cults, and since sects and cults have different origins and relationship with society, the blanket term new religious movement may be quite misleading (ibid) because cult and sect may then be conflated. As Stark explains, “It is vital to see that a theory of sect formation simply will not serve as a theory of cult formation. The genesis of the two are very different” (ibid, 126). This is but one reason why Stark and Bainbridge added cult to church and sect, for church and sect alone cannot account for all novelty, just as not all religious forms that come under the rubric of new religious movement are actually social movements. The term movement, too, is often used without critical reflection that organization alone does not a movement make, for a clear intent to influence society is essential to the concept of a movement; for instance, a well established church in decline (or perhaps meeting in secret to avoid persecution, without any interest to gain new followers) is not a movement per se, but any social group—however small—actively striving to increase its numbers is certainly a movement (Jenkins, 2000: 138).

The following comments, following Stark and Bainbridge, bear upon the way that two particular religious groups, that also happened to be social movements, entered American society as cults. These comments are not meant as a specific comparison to the Hare Krishna religion, rather, they are only intended to educate the reader about the concepts of church, sect, and cult, which Stark takes to be universal concepts (see Stark, 1979, abstract). After this we can define the Hare Krishna religion in America as a specific religious form, which bears some relation to the Starkean subculture-evolution concept of cult (Stark, 1985; 171-172).8 This model stresses

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8 Stark points out two other models prominent in the critical study of new religious movements, 1) a psychopathological model which “describes cult innovation as the result of individual psychopathology that finds social expression” and 2) the entrepreneur model, which emphasizes monetary motives (Stark, ibid: 173-183). All of these types of cults can be further divided into client cults, audience cults, and cult movements. Client and audience
“the end point of successful cult evolution [as] a novel religious culture in a distinct social group which must now cope with the problem of extracting resources (including new members) from the surrounding environment” (Stark, ibid: 185). Later I will problematize Stark’s ideas of “a distinct social group” and new “members”, and deal with the concept of religion as it pertains to beliefs.

For instance of the native type of cult the Church of the Latter Day Saints—a favorite research area for Stark—was born without an organizational tie to any previous sect or church, and although it did not depart from the core values of American society, it added to those values a novel interpretation of Christian teaching and history at great odds with American society (Stark, ibid: 245). Their leader Joseph Smith did not break from any religious group, and his visions inspired a new group. For the same reason that it can be said that Smith was the founder of a cult, it can also be argued that Buddhism began as a native cult, for it was in tension with its environment, and in comparison to established religious concerns lacked social prestige in its earliest years.

Here is how a religious cult may come into existence. If an influential Baptist founds a new religious expression upon the notion that Christ was actually a woman, he has founded a cult because such a notion is entirely at odds with Baptist teaching and American culture. The fact that the preacher had been a Baptist—indeed, even if he claims that he is still a Baptist—has no consequence in this conceptualization of the new religious form for which we find him responsible. Whether he “leaves” his church or not, he is still a cultist.

This notion of cult helps us also to see the Stark and Bainbridge notion of sect more clearly. "To be a sect a religious movement must have been founded by persons who left another

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cults enjoy a low tension status with society. Other than cult movements, we are not concerned with the various manifestations of cults mentioned in this note.
religious body for the purpose of founding the sect" (Stark, 1979: 125). If the same Baptist had only insisted that the present organization had strayed from its original charter, and in advocating a return to pristine Baptist teaching, founds another institution or inspires a separate body of worshipers, he has founded a sect. Sect formation has generally been construed as reformist because innovation is not its essential feature. Both reform and innovation are likely to be in tension with society, so the terms sect and cult are often conflated. However, as these terms have come to be understood by American researchers, cults are more socially “deviant” than sects (Yinger, 1946: 154). All of these observations show that, by Stark and Bainbridge's calculation, the frequent nomenclature of sect for the Hare Krishna movement in America is untenable. We shall presently see why.

The other type of cultic new religious movement in America is amply demonstrated by, but not limited to, the importation of Buddhism in its various manifestations. It is generally acknowledged that Buddhism has many features that go against the grain of American society, such as belief in reincarnation. Although a close examination of Buddhism's history reveals that it is not strictly a new religion in America, still, in broad social terms it is both new and contentious. Again, the reader will be reminded that these observations are not offered as specific comparisons to ISKCON or the wider Hare Krishna movement, but are meant to explain the general concept of a cult—a new religious movement lacking prestige in society and in tension with its environment. Also, for Stark, any religion can be a cult, and I agree: “Examples are various Asian [a category that does not bother Stark] faiths in the United States or Christianity in Asia” (Stark, 1985: 25). Both the LDS and Buddhism aspire to influence any society in which they function, and consequently they both conform (or at one time conformed) to Stark and Bainbridge's definitions of a cultic new religious movement in America. Neither of them are
sects because they did not break off from an existing religious form. The LDS, for instance, was born in the 19th century as a native cult movement, and swiftly moved to the status of a church and church movement in certain parts of America, bypassing the sect category altogether. Buddhism was also born as a native cult movement in ancient India and, like the LDS in America, went to church and church movement status in many parts of the world without ever being a sect. Now, in America, it seeks church status but for the time being remains a cult and cult movement of importation, because although some Buddhists are content to practice their cultic religion without spreading it, other Buddhists seek to propagate their beliefs and practices in America (Berkeley Zen Center, 2000) and so go beyond mere cult status and deserve to be recognized as a cult movement. Unfortunately, as mentioned, many researchers damage the definition of new religious movements for cults or sects that are not social movements—not intending to influence society and (probably) having little influence upon it—by calling all religious cults or sects movements.

ISKCON, the broader Hare Krishna movement in America, and its historical expression in India known as Gaudiya Vaisnavism, have often been called a sect. However, new religious movement scholars Joachim Wach and Gene Thursby have observed that the word sect is inappropriately applied to Indian religious forms that have not split off from another group (Miller, 1991). The use of sect for Hinduism’s many forms since the early 17th century has continued unabated to this day, without reference to the developments of the term by Weber and Troeltsch for Christianity, or the efforts at standardization of sociological terms for religion by Stark and his friends. The use of sect in relation to Indian religion in India is non-descriptive and relatively meaningless, except as a catch-all term denoting difference. Here, it is important to delineate the foundation of the Hare Krishna religion in America as a cult instead of a sect.
because not only is it new and quite different from many perspectives, its first institutional expression, ISKCON, has already splintered—in other words, it has produced sects. Although this may be seen as an organizational failure for an institution, for a social movement it could broaden religious market share. Insiders may see significant differences between the cult and sects derived from the cult, but in social terms the differences are negligible, while the benefits of alternate packaging are well known in the marketing world. We will not examine the sectarian developments of the Hare Krishna movement in America in any detail in this work because although organizations that have split off from ISKCON are sects, they are still cultic in America, with no firmer social or cultural foundation than their cultic mother.

Let’s define the Hare Krishna movement in America as a particular type of cult before illustrating its cultic development. In social terms it is an imported cult movement like many manifestations of Buddhism in America because Prabhupada’s writings, still highly respected within the movement, address concerns beyond individual spirituality; Prabhupada’s aim was for his teachings to become established in American society and influence its direction. He meant for his cult movement to become a church and church movement. During his lifetime his cult took its inspiration from him, and no researcher has doubted that he was a charismatic leader. Following Weber, charismatic leadership has typically been viewed as personal and institutional. Prabhupada embodied both types because, beside whatever personal qualities attracted his followers to his authority, he also represented a formal tradition with its own charisma, the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya. The Sanskrit word sampradaya has been interpreted as religious community (a vague but still useful term) or religious “sect” (a misleading term), and “disciplic succession” (a quaint but standard ISKCON term), understood as an unbroken chain of
masters and disciples. It has also been used as if it were synonymous with tradition, although this too is vague, like community. A *sampradaya* has a comprehensive and systematic religious teaching, and claims great antiquity for the teaching. Prabhupada explicitly based his teachings upon those of his guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, whose *sampradaya* institution, the Gaudiya Math, emphasized the spiritual love of the Hindu god Krishna and his goddess Radha, as mentioned, through the teaching of medieval exemplars and scholars inspired by Shri Chaitanya. Whether Prabhupada’s authority to lead others in spiritual life rested more on his representation of his *sampradaya* or his personal qualities is an interesting question, but all we can say here is that his disciples and grand-disciples—for his disciples have taken disciples—have always related their praise of their guru to their guru’s God, the charming Krishna. It seems that we cannot separate Prabhupada’s charisma from the charisma of his teaching. I shall presently discuss the new American devotion to Krishna’s charm as a rational choice with historical roots in sentiments expressed by Shri Chaitanya in terms of a severe cost-benefit analysis.

ISKCON the institution in America in 2009 may now be precisely defined as an imported cult movement with an early history of personal and institutionalized charismatic authority embodied in the founder. The wider Hare Krishna community in America and in North Florida, also a cult movement, has been heavily influenced by the institution, and both represent standards of measurement important to the thesis of this work. The institution represents an ideal, while the community represents social reality. For some, the institution no longer represents even an ideal. The connections and distance between the institution and the community will tell us much about issues of continuity and change pertinent to the study of new religious forms in society. In the last chapter I will discuss these issues in the context of cognitive adjustments to

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9 “Disciplic” is not found in dictionaries. It is possible that Prabhupada or his guru coined the term.
the teachings of the founder and to the grief of his passing, and how the disciples’ resolution of liminality takes place within a framework of spiritual growth with benefits for the mission’s determination to become a church.

**Other Misleading Terms for Religious Populations**

Before beginning an introductory discussion of rational choice, cost-benefit analysis, market theory of religion, and other human centered research on religion, it will be helpful to point to certain terms currently in use for churches, sects, and cults, and question the validity of membership, transplantation of religious culture, and “full time” and “part time” devotees. ISKCON temple presidents routinely cite the number of devotees living in temples when asked for numbers of members by researchers, or divide their calculations between “full” and “part-time” members. Ironically, this method of calculation has reproduced itself among otherwise fastidious academic researchers, yet curiously is only used for cults but not sects or churches, as if most cultic devotees think of themselves in that way—as a part-time Hare Krishna devotee or a full-time devotee of the currently popular female guru Amma. Problematically, such narrow views of membership and full-time and part-time terminology disenfranchises all but a very slim group of Americans involved with Prabhupada’s teaching. Congregational participants including the first generation of disciples of all ethnicities, their children, and any among the general public who might be involved with the teachings are not considered full fledged members. Even the concept of membership is rarely defined, allowing for observations about “leaving” ISKCON, without asking whether ISKCON truly leaves those who have “left” it. Shinn has written, “…approximately seventy-five hundred of the nine thousand Krishna devotees initiated by

10 Occasionally a Hare Krishna devotee may use these terms, ostensibly following a sociological account or their temple president. George Harrison may have been the source of this confusion, though it seems reference to himself as a “part-time” devotee has not been appreciated in the light of his humor.
Prabhupada have left ISKCON…” (Shinn, 1987: 159). Shinn, whose book focuses on the Hare Krishna movement in America, leads us to believe that Prabhupada initiated nine thousand Americans, seemingly without reflecting that ISKCON’s claim of the figure of nine to ten thousand disciples is for the entire world, not just America. While cults are certainly gratified by inflated numbers, Shinn’s elite conception of membership in America, ironically, still deflates the number of people actually involved with Prabhupada’s teachings in the past or present.

Shinn’s own figures, borrowed from the work of cult investigator Stuart Wright, are telling.

One question that was asked [of ‘defected’ participants of the Unification Church, the Children of God, and ISKCON] was, “When you think about having been a member, how do you feel?” To the five choices of response Wright gave them, the defectors responded—Indifferent 0%; Angry 7%; Duped/Brainwashed 9%; Wiser for the experience 67%; Variety of other responses 18% (Shinn, 1987: 161).

After an appraisal of these defections involving “a whole sequence of cognitive and emotional maneuvers”, Shinn concludes: “Essentially, the voluntary defector’s revised perspective on her or his cult rested somewhere between that of hyperbolic anti-cult description and the continuing idealism of most of the committed followers” (ibid). Although Shinn reiterates the mistaken terminology of members, full time members, etc. with “committed followers” as one end of a continuum, we can still understand the likelihood that a large percentage of the people who attend American ISKCON temples for the Sunday program and decorate their homes with pictures of Krishna come from Wright’s 67% who described themselves as “wiser for the experience.” The number of people who feel an affinity for the religion expands dramatically when we include people Shinn did not list as defectors who chant, dance, and read the Bhagavad Gita but never “joined” in the first place, because Wright confined his study to initiates and people who resided at a temple for a time while Prabhupada was alive without seeking initiation (unfortunately these numbers are not available and are impossible to
obtain unless a nation wide survey is directed to their availability). 11 There are also disgruntled “ex-ISKCON” people who call the institution a dangerous cult (obviously unaware of the non-pejorative understanding of the term cult), yet keep some or all of their former ISKCON practices in their daily lives. For instance, the ISKCON Revival Movement, dedicated to informing the world of ISKCON’s foibles, is a striking example of the latter category. Unlike most researchers of ISKCON the institution—defined as a structure and mechanism of social order and cooperation governing religious projects—the IRM does not make the mistake of conflating institution with community and other aspects of the social movement. Accordingly, the name of their publication is *Back to Prabhupada.* 12

It must also be mentioned that the advent of the internet has expanded the availability of Prabupada’s teachings beyond hard copies of books so that it is no longer necessary to meet a flesh and blood devotee to become one, for the Hare Krishna religion is a prominent representative of cultic exuberance in cyberspace, where numerical affiliation with anything is anyone’s guess. In addition to issues directly involving the Alachua temple, this dissertation also seeks to illuminate the more diffuse impact of Prabhupada’s efforts to spread “Krishna Consciousness.”

Finally, it is, as Shinn (Bryant, 2004: xix) has observed, Prabhupada's pious faith that has become Prabhupada's legacy, but this legacy is not like a plant from Bengal that has now taken root in America. Unfortunately, the notion of a religious transplant has become a misleading cliché in the study of "transplanted" religious forms from one culture to another, for researchers

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11 Researchers such as Judah (1974: 166) frequently noted that the number that sampled temple life without taking initiation far exceeds the number who took initiation and stayed for longer periods. Temporary intense involvement is common with cults. What we do not know is the extent of more relaxed involvement with cults, primarily because surveys of religion are not directed to this end. The insight in recent decades that religion has porous boundaries, reflected in the latest Pew study, has not penetrated research on religious cults.

routinely use this trope without ever exploring its properties (Rosen, 2007: 12-13). If a plant is taken from one continent to another, it either survives with very little change or it does not survive at all. Yet we know that the representation of Prabhupada's faith has suffered from misinterpretation and scandal as well as profited by innovative presentations for the sake of proselytizing, and in both cases it was the work of human actors, people with personal and cultural histories that have accounted for novel interpretations and representations, or misrepresentations. Surely, we cannot presume that Prabhupada, a worldly businessman for over thirty years, would tell his disciples to put his teachings into their own words while expecting that everything would remain exactly the same—if the transplantation metaphor made much sense. On the contrary, well aware that change was inevitable, to forestall its full force Prabhupada demanded and even begged of his disciples that they would leave his teachings as they received them (Prabhupada, 1969). He wanted his disciples to “translate” to the American public, not innovate. But such cultural translation, especially by individuals new to a culture, cannot avoid innovation. This last observation also dismantles the myth of the all powerful charismatic leader, at least in Prabhupada's case, for without questioning the claims for traditional transplantation by charismatic leadership in social context we are left with unhelpful exaggerations. We will examine the powerful charismatic leader-who-transplants-a-static-religious-culture myth in later chapters, emphasizing instead a rational choice perspective.

The objection here to the transplantation trope is not merely a criticism of rhetorical convention, it also has heuristic implications. The leader of a cult is only powerful to his followers, and his message tends to become “diluted” by competing messages to the extent that followers or even the teachings leave the enchanted circle. This is because a cult generally has very little social support, inasmuch as it is truly cultic—otherwise, it would be a church or a sect.
The implications of this observation limit the transplantation concept, for a cult becomes a church in only two ways—by converting the host culture, or by accommodation with that culture. (A military conquest, perhaps, could confer church status, but that consideration is beyond the scope of this study.) The ways that a cult becomes a church may overlap, but we are only considering the two ways mentioned here. In the category of accommodation we also find the concept of cultic appropriation, in which the teachings of the founder take a new direction as they are appropriated by Americans who may or may not feel allegiance to the founder. At any rate, most religious cults want to be churches when they “grow up”, not stand-alone transplanted oddities without standing in society.

Churches and sects have cultural “genes” everywhere in society, social supports for their beliefs, practices, and values that some now call “memes”, cultural memory. Memes replicate themselves automatically, for those involved with them do so with little effort or deliberation. But an imported cult does not have the same (or the same amount of) memetic resources to sustain itself in society. In comparison to churches and sects the religious cult is especially vulnerable to forces beyond its control—such as the whims of its followers, or the way in which the media chooses to represent it. Instead of transplantation, the confluence of religious cultures (such as the specific religious culture Prabhupada was trying to instill and the general American culture that had never heard of Krishna) should be compared to the marriage of rivers, for rivers, like cultures, do not have fixed boundaries; they change course, their depth fluctuates with the seasons, draw from many sources and may contribute to other rivers. Unlike the notion of a transplant, with the river trope we can still attempt to analyze social history. The waters of the Ganga do not taste the same at the delta as they do in the Himalayas; yet, in spite of evaporation
and human uses, some of the melted snow water makes its way to the ocean. Here we are interested in the melted snow of Prabhupada's tradition, in America.

**Rational Choice and Other Theoretical Perspectives**

The focus on rational choice in the social sciences has been called a theory, a paradigm shift, common sense, and utter nonsense. It has been both admired and rejected for its modern origins in the writings of Adam Smith and its connection to economic theory of human behavior. Because of its emphasis on the individual, it has come to be associated with conservative ideology, although it has also been incorporated into Marxist systems, for “rational choice theory adopts a relatively spare and simple model of the individual, one that can be applied across time and space, so that it is a universal model” (Gingrich, 2000). Proponents of rational choice claim that it is capable of explaining all human behavior, while its opponents take the same claim as an indication that, without defined limits, it is a tautology that mocks theory and explains nothing. It differs from a Durkheimian perspective in that social norms and values could only figure into an individual’s rational choice, not automatically dominate his actions—yet a Durkheimian strain of social unity has been seen in the work of Rodney Stark, currently the foremost proponent of rational choice theory (Fox, 2005: 294). Its emphasis on the individual sets aside large-scale, global and historical forces that interested Weber and Marx in favor of a micro-analysis of human behavior (Gingrich, 2000). However, Weber’s insistence that all social reality represents the sum of its individuals, and his focus on different types of rationality, are often seen as supportive of rational choice theory.

Stark has demonstrated little interest in any of the imported cults he has deftly defined as such, and he has specifically questioned the legitimacy of the American Hare Krishna movement. Indeed, the antagonism Stark has demonstrated toward imported cults reinforces the thrust of his arguments for rational choice and cost-benefit analysis on the theoretical level that,
instead of ethnography, typifies a great part of his work; even religions he doesn’t like, plus crime and deviance, are practiced by ordinary rational actors. He writes,

"One need not be a religious person to grasp the underlying rationality of religious behavior any more than one need be a criminal to impute rationality to many deviant acts (as the leading theories of crime and deviance do)…What I am saying is that religious behavior---to the degree that it occurs---is generally based on cost-benefit calculations and is therefore rational behavior in precisely the same sense that other rational behavior is rational” (Stark, 1998: 616-617).

Most rational choice thinkers believe that humans generally make a cost-benefit analysis in everything they do, with one exception—not all of these thinkers extend the cost-benefit, rational choice model to religion, or magic. The most often mentioned objections stem from a reluctance to corrupt religion with selfish motives, or an association of the word rational with a variety of (usually) undefined, technical meanings, instead of common meanings. On the second point, rational choice theory holds that individuals see their actions as rational even if others do not, for people make the best decisions they can with the information they have (Gingrich, 2000). The word “rational” need not indicate an ability to understand formal logic or other intellectual pursuits. In this light even magic is rational, because, as Malinowski observed, believers in magic who spit on their fields in the hopes of getting a good crop do not neglect to also pull weeds (Stark, 1986: 510). Such folks are behaving rationally because going by what they know about farming, the ritual costs nothing and could have benefits. The same reasoning applies to religion, for religious actors generally do not neglect to perform their worldly, non-religious obligations, and do consider the pros and cons of being religious or not being religious, if religious texts have any influence upon them, for religious texts indicate rewards for being religious and negative consequences for not being religious. As for the issue of self-interests, many rational choice theorists would not rule out cooperative action, or even altruism and self-sacrifice. These theorists, even while privileging etic analysis, would respect emic categories and
incorporate them into their findings. A theorist who is interested in an inside perception of religion might ask, if parents can behave selflessly toward their children, why couldn’t a religious person rationally offer something or everything to God? And, why should emotion—so important for religion, therefore likely to be cited as militating against rational choice theory for religion—be separated from rationality?

Recent research on the somatic influences in religiosity—how our physicality “constructs” religion, rather than focusing on how religion and other aspects of culture construct the body—finds human reason to be intimately connected to human emotions at the most primal levels of awareness. Robert C. Fuller takes the body’s own reasoning as indispensable to a Geertzian analysis of culture over time. “We continually scan our environments (often unconsciously) in order to identify potential harms or potential benefits…Research shows that emotions exert identifiable influences on a variety of such vital activities as goal setting, information gathering, selective attention, retrieving goal-specific memory, communicating intent, and shifting energy levels” (Fuller, 2008: 29). If we take religious cost-benefit analysis as the method of a rational actor and relate this natural analytic method to theology and the body’s emotions that are intimately connected with theology, we will discover how “long lasting moods and motivations” are established and maintained (Fuller, 2008: 31), on the path from cult to church. Without long lasting moods and motivations no cult could survive its first generation. In later chapters we will explore the interaction of the emotions of fear and wonder with the rational choices of Americans in the Hare Krishna movement.

**Hare Krishna Theology and Cost Benefit Analysis: A Marriage Made In Heaven**

Cost-benefit is not necessarily synonymous with common definitions of selfishness, for the moods and motivations of religious people can be construed in line with theology, which has its own categories for thinking of the self and its interests. For instance, according to Prabhupada’s
rendering of the Hindu text the _Bhagavata Purana_ 7.5.31, the theological concept _svartha_ (_sva_, one’s own; _artha_, value or interest) is understood in the context of liberation (from material conditioning), _gatim_ (the goal)—which is inseparable from Vishnu (God) and his interest (Prabhupada, 1982: 1692). In other words, Prabhupada saw one’s real self-interest and God’s interest in reclaiming souls as very compatible, even essentially the same; without seeing dedication to God as one’s self-interest, there could be no real knowledge (Prabhupada, 1974), and consequently, no real happiness.

We should note that Hinduism in all its varieties, invested in the concept of the existence of individual selves, is steeped in a rational choice perspective, for there must be an individual self to exercise knowing (_jnana_) and discrimination (_viveka_). Here rational choice has strong support in the _Bhagavad Gita_, which recommends individual strenuous endeavor toward perfection by more than one path. Because Krishna allows for different avenues to spiritual attainment, the _Bhagavad Gita_ not only emphasizes rationality in the way that Arjuna hears Krishna’s reasoning, it also indicates that Hinduism is comfortable with individual choice. For this reason I have referred to Hindu monotheism as “soft monotheism”, as compared to other monotheisms that do not reckon the validity of different avenues to transcendence.

The Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition cries out for a rational choice, cost benefit analysis for a variety of reasons, partially indicated in this chapter, and developed as this work proceeds. The _Bhagavad Gita_—which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter—explicitly offers options to Arjuna, a man often construed as symbolic of all humanity, who must make a difficult choice in the matter of internecine warfare. Much later, Shri Chaitanya in the 16th century managed a spiritual movement that radiated from Bengal throughout India, appealing to high and low by making a different kind of calculation in taking _sannyasa_, (renounced order of religious
life), an act that socially elevated his teachings in the Sanskrit environment of the time. Three centuries later Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838—1914), a Bengali magistrate in the service of the British Raj who was the father of Bhaktisiddhanta, systemized these teachings and rescued them from social obscurity and moral ambiguity, explicitly employing a market theory of religion that remains important in his disciplic line to this day (Dasa, 1999; Atlanta ISKCON Nama Hatta Sangha, 1997). Bhaktisiddhanta made further calculations in taking *sannyasa* which, although “inaugurated” by Shri Chaitanya, had not become standard for the *sampradaya*, and initiated all he deemed qualified as *brahmins*, a decision that alienated many Hindus but nevertheless brought his religion in harmony with modern “rational” trends. Bhaktisiddhanta’s disciple, Prabhupada, in his own words could not live with himself without following the order of his guru to fulfill the prediction of Shri Chaitanya that his name would be glorified in every town and village on earth. Ultimately, in his old age, he made the decision to cross the ocean and initiate “women-hunters”, drug addicts, and “the lowest of the student community” (Prabhupada, 1973: 22). In the hands of Prabhupada’s disciples, his institution, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, has ventured perilously close to the verge of collapse in America, but has regrouped and rallied stronger than ever in places like New Raman Reti (Asch, 2002). The devotees involved with this North Florida community continue to apply cost-benefit analysis to their affairs as they are inevitably confronted with momentous options.

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13 The theory of the Nama Hatta is very complex, for there are business partners, store keepers, guardians, treasures, clerks and accountants, cooks, currency examiners, brokers and sales agents, weighers, servants, porters, cart pullers, and customers, personified by Shri Chaitanya’s associates.

14 Rochford has publicly lamented the role he thinks he might have had in ISKCON’s decline. “On the one hand, I have the strong feeling of wanting to gain justice for people who were abused and who have a right to justice. Yet I also feel guilty about my role in bringing ISKCON to the edge of financial ruin and possible destruction. I especially feel this way because of the many sincere devotees whose lives will be negatively influenced should the lawsuit be successful,” he said. "That's the bind--I'm stuck in the middle of those quite different feelings." Rochford’s work affords his readers a compelling perspective on the possible problems and rewards of ethnographic research. See http://surrealist.org/gurukula/articles/rochford.html. For the record, I have never encountered a single devotee who assigns any blame to Rochford for any of ISKCON’s public embarrassment.
To the objection that a cost benefit analysis is unsuitable for the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition because of Shri Chaitanya’s confession that he loves Krishna unconditionally (see Appendix, verse 8), Prabhupada would reply that the cost associated with unconditional love is its own reward. He explained that Krishna admits that he cannot repay devotees’ love for him; they must be satisfied with the bliss they feel from their love and service (Prabhupada essay, pre-1967). The element of cost and benefit is also very strong in the *Bhagavad Gita*—even though Arjuna is advised to do his duty without expectation of enjoying the fruits—because working without attachment brings a great reward—salvation (Prabhupada, 1989: 135, 138). To the objection that Krishna warns Arjuna not to be attached to the fruits of his work (ibid: 134), Prabhupada also points out that Arjuna’s non-participation in the battle would be another form of attachment and would further entangle him in “sinful life.” So, just to do the duty that he is “entitled” to do, Arjuna must still consider the stakes, as Prabhupada explains: “Therefore, fighting as a matter of duty was the only auspicious path of salvation for Arjuna” (ibid, 135). If he wanted to avoid a retrograde spiritual path, he had to kill his own relatives—a high price indeed. It is difficult to imagine choices more starkly rational.

Because this study is not about rational choice theory, but rather focuses on the social development of a religious cult using rational choice theory as a tool, we will not exhaust the topic of rational choice, interesting though it is. Instead, we hope to show in later chapters the utility of rational choice and cost-benefit analysis in religious studies as a discrete academic discipline apart from sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, etc., while acknowledging that other approaches are valid.

According to the theology of the Gaudiya Vaishnava *sampradaya*, each soul has a minute amount of independence to “spend” according to one’s own design. This independence can be
utilized in the service of pleasing the Lord, a service that repays the servitor many times over; or this independence may be misused in the service of matter, with ever diminishing returns—“the trap of the illusory energy” (Prabhupada, 1989: 396, 721). At least since the time of Shri Chaitanya, the principle of Krishna’s pleasure has been doctrinally intrinsic to all choices in Gaudiya Vaishnavism at the theoretical level. The remaining chapters of this dissertation will link theology, a lacuna mentioned by Stark in connection with his own work, with rational choice theory, in an attempt to study the cult to church paradigm from the perspective of religious studies as a discrete academic discipline (Stark 1987: 17). There is no single rational choice theory, and no single use of the term rational choice, so I remind the reader of how the term rational will be used—as it has already been explained—throughout this work (Bainbridge, 2003: 22). It is at once more and less than Wilson’s definition, for he felt that an understanding of cause and effect was rationality’s essence, but my position is that rational religious actors may be very intellectual in their approach to their decisions or not intellectual at all (Wilson, 1966: 17).

Rational simply means reasonable; humans tend to reason their way through life, even if their reasoning power is deficient. The vehicle for human rationality is cost-benefit analysis, which, although always beginning with an individual, may be expanded beyond secular definitions of individuals to include religious explanations of the individual—not because I am making an inside argument for religious truths, but because I am acknowledging religious categories for the purpose of illuminating their contribution to the social development of religion.

Russell McCutcheon has criticized the supposed phenomenological approach to religion as an ahistorical sui generis category, not something fashioned by flesh and blood people. But the phenomenological approach, the attempt at verstehen, and even strictly emic accounts of religion
need not presume the *sui generis* status of its object, for anyone at all might play the role of a critic or an historian. In this study the rational choice emphasis is to claim nothing special for religion at all; whereas, if we ascribe religion to the irrational, we are marking it as something extraordinary, not amenable to ordinary means of investigation—not human. I agree with McCutcheon that religion is as ordinary as any other aspect of human life. Only such a perspective of the ordinary can illuminate the social development of novel religious forms.
CHAPTER 2
THE GAUDIYA VAISHNAVA RELIGION IN AMERICA

India Comes to America

Before we can attend to ordinary affairs of a cult—developments that sink cultic foundations into its social environment—we need to examine its extraordinary side in order to determine its potential market niche and understand the details of its bid for religious market share. After all, an ordinary cult is an oxymoron. And, in this case, we are gazing at a cult that was fully formed as a church in its place of origin with significant investments in the ordinary, such as lineal descent from Gaudiya practitioners, wealth, professional influence, commonly observed holidays, even ties with other religious traditions; all the factors that make this religion memetic like any other. But none of these ordinary investments were available to the tradition when it arrived in America, and until now, none of them could come within the gaze of researchers. In this chapter, we will be concerned with the supply side in a highly specific religious market situation, so that the product being offered by Prabhupada to the American public, and the moods and motivations involved in Prabhupada’s framing of his tradition, can be understood.

Luckily for researchers, in addition to the items mentioned above, the Hare Krishna movement in America, from the very beginning, also represents an unusual opportunity to study the textual and ritual foundations of a cult already fully formed before interacting with its host culture, for cults of South Asian origin in America have tended to downplay their Indic history, deliberately exposing Americans only to the tip of the traditional iceberg. According to A.L. Basham, these other groups are “scarcely Hinduism at all” (Basham in Gelberg, 1983: 163, 166-167). Generally, this has had the effect of diluting the extraordinary nature of Hinduism in America. For instance, an early disciple of Transcendental Meditation teacher Maharishi Mahesh
Yogi informed me that her guru explained that he did not want to make his disciples Hindus, because he was teaching universal truths. As Prema Kurien has written, “Both Yogananda [the founder of the Self Realization Fellowship] and the Maharishi downplayed the Hindu basis of yoga and TM and instead promoted them as techniques that had scientifically demonstrable value for everyone irrespective of religious background” (Kurien, 2007: 42). By and large, the exception to this strategy has been the Hare Krishna movement, which has sought to “Hinduize” all comers, especially initiated disciples (Hopkins in Gelberg, 1983: 107, 109-110; Rochford, 2007: 181-200; Shinn in Bryant, 2004: xvii-xviii). These disciples, for all their serious shortcomings—and regardless of internal and external protests by some that they are not Hindu—represent an elite cadre important to the development of Hinduism as an international presence. An American wearing a sari and dishing out sacred vegetarian food in the name of Krishna at a college campus that welcomes her efforts, for instance, represents far more than simply her “religion.” Because she and her food are welcome, we can understand that in some areas power relations between Indian and American culture have become more equitable since the days of Protestant hegemony in high places with enormous social influence. The 1998 Pew report on religion confirms this.

“Analysts expressed some surprise at how far the tolerance needle has swung, but said the trend itself was foreseeable because of American Christians' increasing proximity to other faiths since immigration quotas were loosened in the 1960s…If you have a colleague who is Buddhist or your kid plays with a little boy who is Hindu, it changes your appreciation of the religious 'other’ " (Biema, 2008).

The sheer range of cultural choices available in America since the 1960s makes a more favorable atmosphere for the inculcation of Indic religion in America where its acceptance by Americans not of Indian parentage can nevertheless be better ascribed to calculation than to inertia. Even Steve Bruce, the foremost proponent of secularization theory and vociferous critic
of rational choice theory, has admitted that if rational choice theory for religion applies anywhere, it applies to religious cults—although for Bruce they too will go the way of churches, into the dustbin of history (Bruce, 1999: 6).

**Cultic Religion and Belief**

While I am aware of the conceptual and terminological problems that many scholars see in the word religion, because the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the West freely used the word, I retain it here. An examination of his teachings reveals that he would not disagree with my use of the word, for I have also adopted a Tyloren definition of religion as a category that is reflected in Stark’s work as a system of “solutions to questions of ultimate meaning which postulate the existence of a supernatural being, world, or force, and which further postulate that this force is active…” (Stark, 1979: 119). Stark’s use of the words “questions” and “postulate” situates our study in the area of doctrines and beliefs—ideas—although practice is important too (Greil and Bromley, 2003: 13). Cultic religion—especially the cult we are studying here—is particularly invested in belief as opportunity. George Santayana wrote, “The vistas it [religion] opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion” (Geertz in Banton, 1966: 87-125).

The study of religious cults turns scholarly attention back to issues of belief, because cultic beliefs are literally alien and “deviant”, and we want to see if and how they survive (Melton and Moore, 1982: 15).¹ In this study, the emphasis on belief takes us further into details that influence decisions to join, remain involved, proselytize, or raise one’s children as a cultist

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¹ Deviance is sometimes used in the social sciences without any pejorative meaning. “Cults are religions that espouse an alien belief system that deviates strongly from the traditional faiths most people have grown up with” (Melton, 1982: 15).
(Greil and Bromley, 2003: 13). All of these decisions, which bring people into conflict with family, friends, and society in general, are costly to individuals, so the presumption here is that deep belief is essential to them. Such belief is not always fragile, as some researchers have imagined, and cultural opposition is as likely to strengthen them as it is to weaken them; in cultic circles, disbelief is unlikely (Snow and Machalek in Barker, 1983: 25-42). For new religious movements, even ritual activities may not supplant the importance of belief. “A new religious movement’s teachings are the fuel by which the religion is driven, and without which it would fail” (Chryssides, 1999: 3-4). For Basham, the belief component in the Hare Krishna religion is striking (Basham in Gelberg, 1983: 163).

What is meant by ultimate meaning will be illustrated here rather than defined, and the reader will discover that ultimate meaning for the Gaudiya Vaishnava religion in America is more or less inseparable from the movement qua social movement, which is dedicated to proselytizing. Prabhupada was inspired by this passage from Chaitanya’s Shikshashtaka: “This sankirtana movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon” (Prabhupada, 1968: xxxvii-xxxviii; see Appendix II).

Although it is almost impossible to define specific religious traditions to the satisfaction of all concerned, we can look at the origin of a religious expression in a particular place in order to later see how it develops over time, for “movement” in the term new religious movement cannot be understood without looking at origins, some standard to begin with. To reiterate, it is fair to say that the very existence of the first generation of Hare Krishna disciples in America stems from the efforts of a single individual representing a particular type of Hinduism, and therefore, our investigation must examine the teachings of the cultic founder (Selengut, 1999: 4).
As will be demonstrated as this study proceeds, the “ideal” nature of these teachings is not defined solely by the Weberian method of including some interests and excluding others, for there is another consideration vital in this work—the distance between the teaching’s exemplars and those who aspire to follow their examples tends to highlight the teachings as an ideal that is almost—but not quite—impossible for a late 20th century person to attain. Yet this ideal remains as a standard of measurement for an “ethic of responsibility” for rational goal-oriented behavior, “conduct in which, once the goal has been chosen, due consideration is given to the appropriate means and full account is taken of the foreseeable consequences…” (Freund, 1968: 106-107).

In later chapters, another kind of rational behavior will be explored—the rationalization of religious ideas under the spell of a universal ethic, or “ethic of conviction”, sometimes with insufficient consideration of appropriate means and even less account of foreseeable consequences (Weber in Lassman, 1994: 353).

**Cultic Religion and Social Reality**

Weber’s reality is supposed to be too complex for any expression not bounded by precise parameters inspired by individual values. Here we are discussing the reality of religious faith, practices, and their historical development in America, keeping rather closely to the concerns of emic values so that we can evaluate the negotiated quality of the cult to church paradigm. Religion presumes its own values, often taking circular logic as a virtue. “Far from a shortcoming, the circularity of such theological argumentation is taken to be a mark of superior achievement” (Taylor, 1999: 33). Prabhupada specifically trained his disciples in theological argumentation, without any reference to the postmodern warning about essentialism. Let us note that essentialism still rules in religious traditions, especially one that distributes literatures to one and all proclaiming its God to be the cause of all causes, the *summum bonum*, and the Supreme
Personality of Godhead. Essentialism has been critical in the establishment of Prabhupada’s market niche, and has also attracted market share.

However, the Hare Krishna movement in America—“the archetypal post-1960s American new religious movement”—has generated a popular awareness and scholarly comment out of all proportion to its actual influence on society (Jenkins, 2000: 165; Vande Berg, 2008: 79). Although this is not a strategy in the strict sense, it is still a workable situation for a religious social movement with some favorable social facts and a small, stable market niche, letting everyone who may be attracted to it know about it, and fostering a sense of accomplishment for those under the influence of cultic enthusiasm. But it has taken enormous enthusiastic efforts to accomplish the simple introduction of “Bengali Vaishnavism” to America, keeping to the tradition’s standards as much as possible. It is not easy to make a cult “real”, in other words, make it a church. The remainder of this chapter will focus on these initial efforts.

Although the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya, and hence, the Hare Krishna movement, has its roots in 16th century Bengal—roots that cannot be separated from very ancient Indian history—our story begins in New York City and San Francisco. This is appropriate because our focus is on the developments of a cult in America, not the history of a church in India. We must discuss the mood and intentions of the cultic founder, what he was offering the American public and how he offered it, adding just enough previous history to show religious continuity and later, to assay such continuity in its new home. ²

² Baba Premananda Bharati brought Gaudiya Vaishnavism to America in 1902. Under social pressure that led to the Asian Exclusion Act of 1917, his movement dwindled after his departure from America in 1911 and his death in 1914. Little is known of his movement, but a critical study is under way by Gerald Carney, Hampton-Sydney College, Va. See http://www.hipforums.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-174234.html
Why would you bring me to this terrible place?

In 1893, Hinduism was brought to America by the Bengali Swami Vivekananda, a graduate of Kolkata’s Scottish Church College. After traveling around the United States, he pronounced the country spiritually bankrupt (Eck, 1997: 101). Roughly 70 years later, another Bengali graduate of Scottish Church College, Swami Prabhupada, brought the Vaishnava form of Hinduism to America. Like the earlier sadhu, Prabhupada came penniless, yet both were determined to enlist Americans to serve their spiritual cause. Unlike his monistic predecessor, devoted to a humanistic style of Hinduism heavily involved in reform and Indian independence without specifically emphasizing sampradaya teachings, the personalistic Prabhupada was devoted instead solely to the god Krishna—but like his senior alumni he was also anxious about the low spiritual status of Americans (Rochford, 2007: 187; Smith in Llewellyn 115; Fitzgerald in Llewellyn: 171; Basham in Gelberg, 1983: 174-175). Although technically a diaspora Hindu from the Asian Barred Zone created by the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1917 (a legal development born of rural Protestantism and the American aversion to foreign “cults”), like Vivekananda, Prabhupada did not share the dreams of other Indian immigrants to build a life for themselves and their families in America, so the biographies of the Bengali swamis are of a radically different nature (Rosen, 2007: 15). Their missions represent a reversal of the European colonial project, exalting Indian ideas and values in a foreign land, and issuing a direct challenge to the host culture and its self-perception as a rational “unique culture, with its universal significance and value” that gives to Indian culture without taking anything from it (Saliba, 1995: 207; Hopkins, 1983: 111-112; Freund, 1968: 140-141).

Following his predecessors’ Bhaktivinoda’s and Bhaktisiddhanta’s notion of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a religion dealing in universal themes and values such as the welfare of humanity and spiritual brotherhood (Prabhupada, 1968: xxxvi), Prabhupada offered the spiritual
metaphor of a poverty stricken India as a crippled man with vision, and a wealthy America as a blind, able bodied man, who should cooperate together for the benefit of the entire world (Prabhupada, 1974: 23; Hopkins, 1989: 46). 3 That anyone in America would accept the validity of such a spiritual metaphor and its implication that Indian culture could also have “universal significance and value” indicates the nature of and extent to which globalization had continued to change the world since Durkheim asserted that the ancient gods were growing old and dying (Durkheim, 1912: 429). Ironically, the global feature of modernity brought new life, new opportunities for the ancient gods. Indeed, the efforts of these Bengali swamis represent a remarkable demonstration of Hinduism’s vitality and flexible nature, bringing a previously minor theme—proselytizing to the masses—to the fore in the 20th century. 4 Prabhupada’s emphasis on the dissemination of a systematic doctrine that I will outline, is seen by many scholars as quite unusual in a Hindu guru (Ketola, 2008: 54).

Like Vivekananda, Prabhupada was also interested in America not only for the sake of inspiring Americans, but also as a way to influence the spiritual life of India, for if he could teach Krishna devotion to Americans they would in turn inspire a modernizing India to look to its own spiritual past (Gosvami and Gupta, 2005: 82). After the ground had been prepared for Prabhupada’s religion by previous Hindu gurus from India beginning with Vivekananda, the inception of the Hare Krishna movement was further installment, in terms of ideas—and even more significantly, in terms of practice—of the dissemination of Hinduism throughout the world.

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3 It should be noted that Vivekananda, too, used the blind man/sighted man comparison in relation to America and India. The metaphor has a possible origin in the ancient Sankhya philosophy. See The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/sankhya.htm, under d. Evolution, humanity, and the world.

4 The Gaudiya school has always been interested in its own propagation by way of congregational singing and dancing and distribution of sanctified food, but explaining the details of its teachings to one and all was inspired by Bhaktivinoda in the late 19th century, and his son Bhaktisiddhanta made it his life’s mission. Previously, the religion was spread to the masses only by kirtana, prasada (sanctified food) distribution, parades, and other non-discursive means.
New, rational choice opportunities, then, will figure as importantly in our understanding of alternative religious trends in America since the 1960s as does the historically standard emphasis on the “counterculture”, the Viet Nam war, the economy, the disintegration of the American family, or other social facts and currents. In the person of Prabhupada, a particular spiritual opportunity boarded a steamer bound for America from Kolkata on August 13, 1965.

Before disembarking in New York, September, 1965, Prabhupada’s carrier the Jaladuta attended to a few hours business in Boston Harbor, where the seventy year old sannyasi composed some verses in Bengali, *Markine Bhagavat Dharma* (Vaishnavism in America). “My Dear Lord Krishna, You are so kind upon this useless soul, but I do not know why you have brought me here. Now you can do whatever you like with me. But I guess You have some business here, otherwise why would you bring me to this terrible place?” (Gosvami, 1980: 5).

This poem is important because it shows an angle of cultic development that has not received the attention it deserves—the initial attitude of a founder of an imported cult. Generally it is the attitude of the dominant or host culture that defines any religious form as a cult, but there is some importance to the other side too. Prabhupada did not come to America on holiday, nor was he impressed with “the American dream.” But, his poem clearly indicates that he was willing to tolerate an uncomfortable situation for the sake of his mission. Ironically, within a few months of disembarking from the Jaladuta, Prabhupada was informed by Swami Vivekananda’s spiritual descendent, fellow Indian immigrant Swami Nikhilananda, “that if he wanted to stay in the West he should abandon his traditional Indian dress and strict vegetarianism. Meat eating and liquor, as well as pants and coat, were almost a necessity in this climate…even if it meant breaking vows he had held in India; almost all Indian immigrants compromised their old ways” (Gosvami, 1980: 38). That Prabhupada kept to his cultic ways is crucial to understanding his
mission in America as a rational choice, cost-benefit decision for the young people who followed him, fascinated instead of repulsed by his alien habits, “drawn...as if by magnets”, as we shall soon see (Wheeler, 1985: 12). And like the Christians who kept to their ways in India, he depended utterly upon the teachings of his guru in America. Culturally, we might think of his mission as a reversal of a reversal, for Larry Shinn has described Prabhupada as “a Hindu missionary who brought to America an Indian form of ecstatic devotion to God that rivals in its intensity of feeling the evangelical Christianity preached in his Indian homeland” (Shinn, 1987: 10; Melton, 1982: 9).

**A New Religious Market Niche in America**

To this day the concept of a personal Hindu God remains esoteric for most Americans, but it was possible for Prabhupada to address his poem directly to a Hindu deity because Hinduism is almost never iconoclastic, even when the ultimate reality is supposed to be monistically impersonal. Yet Prabhupada’s Vaishnava style of Hinduism rejects all monistic conceptions of deity that takes various gods and goddesses as conduits to something higher—the purely non-qualified oneness (King, 2007: 202). Vaishnavism of all sorts conflicts with most forms of Christianity because, vaguely like the LDS, it construes humanity “in the image of God” literally, not only as free moral agents in the sense understood by most Christians (Sheler, 2000). For Vaishnavas, the Lord is literally and eternally a person, as are the souls who worship him, not a connection to, or a symbol of, something “higher” lacking qualities, variety, personality, and society. According to the Gaudiya tradition, in all existence Krishna is the most qualified person for the name Bhagavan, which has been delineated by Parashara Muni as someone who possesses unlimited, unparalleled, and eternal beauty, knowledge, wealth, strength,
fame, and renunciation (Prabhupada, 1987: 503-504). These qualities are the basis of Krishna’s charm, which in turn is the basis of his religion beyond the stages pertaining to rules and regulations (raganuga), when structured practice yields to the heart’s guidance (Prabhupada, 1985: 289). It is on the basis of these qualities that Prabhupada interpreted the name Krishna as “All Attractive.”

Unless we presume that the first American devotees were charmed by rules and regulations, it is apparent that Krishna’s charm is a benefit at the beginning stages too, certainly not a cost. Regardless of the level of practice, Prabhupada would see both as situated upon personal endeavor, persistent application of individual will (Prabhupada, 1968: 142-143). For this tradition there is no question of spiritual advancement merely by acquiescing to history, the domain of “prior, observable social worlds” (McCutcheon, 2007: 964). Rather, as a rational choice, bhakti yoga, along with many forms of Hinduism, should be seen as a deliberate attempt to forge one’s own future regardless of one’s history. At least on this point, many voices within Hinduism agree with Christianity—we are free moral agents qualified to choose among options. For instance, as a consequence of the personhood of God and individual souls, the great Hindu theologian Ramanuja (traditionally 1017-1137 CE)

wanted to preserve a certain degree of independence for humans. This desire appears rooted in his embrace of the doctrine of karma. God has provided humans with the ability to make choices, and they are responsible for these choices. Ramanuja finds evidence for this assertion in the very fact that the Hindu scriptures offer certain “definite commands.” Such commands, he reasons, would be unnecessary and even futile if the actions of the individual were wholly determined by Brahman (Hanshaw, 2008: 77).

Far from the assertion that Hinduism is fatalistic because of its doctrine of karma, Ramanuja believed that the opposite was true—karma is a doctrine of choice, and the Lord

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5 At present the historicity of the sage Parasara Muni or any ancient personage of puranic Hinduism cannot be verified. However, overwhelmingly, participants in the American Hare Krishna movement do not doubt their historicity.
demands that humans follow a goal oriented ethic of responsibility. Ramanuja’s views on karma are not markedly different from the Gaudiya school, and resonates with much of the wider world of Hinduism.

**Prabhupada’s Personalistic Market Niche**

For prospective followers, the key difference between Prabhupada and his contemporary Indian gurus in America in terms of roles is plain. The monistic gurus persuaded Americans to focus on the guru or even themselves as the object of meditation, or sometimes a candle or other visual aid to calm the mind. If they came from a *sampradaya* they frequently did not mention it. The founder of ISKCON, on the other hand, derived his charisma from his worshipful relationship with Krishna and his *sampradaya*. These observations are easily illuminated by a rational choice perspective, because when market niches are very similar, one can substitute for another, and the negligible differences may never be understood. There are of course differences between any two gurus, but many researchers have noted the increased differential in relation to the Hare Krishna movement (Chryssides, 2006: 304). *Sampradaya* Hinduism is invested in difference, and so always requires its own market niche. The Gaudiya Vaishnava *sampradaya* as presented by Prabhupada was highlighted in the forefront of his mission in America. For this reason, Prabhupada’s teachings especially confront Americans with a conscious choice when they visit the corner of the nation’s religious market where Indic religion has found a home.

**Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead**

Prabhupada’s prolific use of the term “Supreme Personality of Godhead” could mean that Krishna is not a “demigod”, not a god with a small “g”, subordinate to a high god, with a big “G.” Krishna is that big “God” (Prabhupada, 1972: 233). Or, the term could mean that Krishna is the fullest manifestation of God, eclipsing with his qualities (the aforementioned beauty, knowledge, strength, wealth, fame, and renunciation) any of his *avatars* or even the majestic
Because of the irresistible attraction of these qualities, Prabhupada interprets the name Krishna, as already mentioned, to mean “all attractive” (Prabhupada, 1970: xi). It will not hurt to reemphasize here what Prabhupada’s Godhead is not, because the term has other currencies. It is nothing like 14th century Meister Eckhart’s impersonal concept (unmanifest Absolute) of Godhead (Gottheit) that transcends the concept of God as a person (Manifest Absolute), or the aforementioned oneness of Shankara, for in all kinds of Vaishnavism, it is the personal concept that transcends the impersonal. Vaishnavas interpret statements from Hindu scriptures that God is without qualities to mean that God has no material qualities, no material form—but he has a form, nevertheless. Somehow, inconceivably (acintya), he has form not composed of material elements, whether these elements are construed according to Vedantic reasoning (earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intelligence, and “false” ego) or the periodic table of elements known to science (Prabhupada, 1987: 369). In this connection we must briefly examine the word “incarnation.” Prabhupada sometimes used incarnation as a translation of the Sanskrit avatara (forms of Vishnu that descends to Earth) but if he had known the etymology of the word incarnation—its explicit indication of flesh and blood—it is likely he would have abandoned it for the purpose of describing Krishna too, because the form of this god is supposed to be identical with his eternal being, without internal organs (asnavira) or decay (avyaya), without death (Prabhupada, 1997: 55; 1989: 224-226). By this reasoning, Prabhupada taught that Krishna has an eternal form not composed of flesh and blood (Prabhupada, 1989: 224).  

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7 If Prabhupada had been aware of the explicit meaning of incarnation, he would have abandoned its use for Vishnu as well. The reader will be reminded that for the Gaudiyas, Vishnu is considered to be an expansion of Krishna, also an “incarnation.” See Back To Godhead #23, 1969, “Sri Isopanisad Purport.”
The deeply personal nature of Vaishnavism must feature prominently in our understanding of modern Hinduism anywhere in the world, for this trans-global Hinduism has porous internal boundaries promoting interaction between its parts. Therefore we cannot separate the Hare Krishna movement in America, what to speak of the Gaudiya community that formed directly around Shri Chaitanya as a social movement, from the larger world of Hinduism. Unfortunately, observers of this movement(s) qua social movement, especially in America, have not cared to delve deeply into the implications of a spiritual conceptualization that Graham Schweig has called “theistic intimism”, and have preferred to study the implications of ISKCON’s foundation by a charismatic leader—without reflecting that Prabhupada derived his charisma from his tradition (Schweig in Bryant, 2004: 13-34; Bryant and Eckstrand, 1). This scholarly reluctance will be corrected here, because the tradition exalts an aspect of Hinduism that relates to deity as one would relate to an honored guest in the home, a type of piety shared by Gaudiya Vaishnavas, other kinds of Vaishnavas, and even non-Vaishnava Hindus. In practice and in sentiment, there is actually less “pure” monism in Hinduism than non-Hindus are prone to imagine. The importance of the personalistic emphasis brought by Prabhupada must be understood if we are to grasp the nature of the market niche he was presenting to the American public, which, over time, has included Hindus from India or of Indian parentage.

Schweig, presuming that a personal instead of a monistic conception of divinity is essential to the term theism, understands the Vaishnava (worshiping Vishnu) forms of Hinduism to be the most theistic. “When a loving relationship with a deity in bhakti is not merely a means but the goal of a religious tradition, that tradition sustains theism in the fullest sense” (Schweig in Bryant, 2004: 15). In the interest of exploring the subtleties of loving devotion, the practice that leads to loving devotion, and surrender to the Lord in the Shri Vaishnava tradition, a similar
theme was also developed by Vasudha Narayanan in *The Way and the Goal: Expressions of Devotion in the Early Shri Vaishnava Tradition* (Narayanan, 1987: 2). Although we cannot significantly develop this theme here, it must be mentioned because the identification of the way and the goal in Vaishnavism brings spiritual issues into the present—not just the afterlife in a spiritual world—and influences any cost-benefit analysis of devotional religion by practitioners and etic researchers alike. Certainly, Shri Chaitanya’s confession that he is only concerned with devotion to Krishna, not whether he gets liberation from the material world as a result of that devotion, makes devotion its own reward, overturning Stark’s contention that religion mainly trades in compensators instead of direct rewards. “What I want only is that I may have Your causeless devotional service in my life—birth after birth” (Prabhupada, 1968: xxxvii).

For Schweig, the Gaudiya, or Chaitanyaite version of Vaishnavism extolled by Prabhupada, is the ultimate in theism because it is the most intimate (Schweig in Bryant, 17). In an apparent reversal of Otto’s vision of a mighty God that makes one tremble, Georges Bataille has commented that the essence of religion is “the search for lost intimacy” (Bataille in Taylor, 1999: 1971). Accordingly, Chaitanyaism contradicts the more common Hindu belief that the majestic, four-armed Vishnu expands into the familiar, two-armed Krishna, and takes Krishna to be the origin of Vishnu and all his *avatars*. According to Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the “highest” (most intimate) relationships cannot be had with Vishnu, because the worshiper can never forget that Vishnu is God. Vishnu does not forget that fact either. We might say that the Gaudiya ideal transcends even theism—while resting upon it and championing it—because Krishna and his friends sometimes forget Krishna’s identity as God (Deadwyler, 2004: 151). So beyond the worship of Vishnu or even Krishna as God, Prabhupada introduced something he considered still higher—the “Absolute Truth” as a Divine Couple, Radha and Krishna, who eternally enjoy
loving affairs and accept the service of their friends in a very highly defined spiritual world—far beyond any similar conception of spirituality encountered by his American public (Prabhupada, 1989: 1; Prabhupada: 1969; Chatterjee, 1992: 16-17; King, 2007: 202). In actuality, there was no similar conception.

**Going to Hell for Krishna**

Although these points presented here may seem too esoteric for consideration by the masses, to Prabhupada they were essential truths that should be broadcast, even though his tradition warns against instructing the unprepared (Prabhupada, 1985: 72). He explained his risky policy of formally initiating such people with a cost-benefit analysis: “I am prepared to go to hell for service of Lord Chaitanya” (Audarya Fellowship, 2002).

At the very least, he went to Manhattan, and pointedly told New Yorkers that they were wasting their lives, challenging them to understand the difference between animals and humans. “The dogs are running on four legs, and you are running on four wheels” (Prabhupada transcription, 1977). Prabhupada, like his guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, saw the animalistic world situation as dire; there was no question of simply instructing only those few who might have approached him out of curiosity or even sincerity. Everyone must become aware of the Hare Krishna movement, and that mere awareness was considered a form of Krishna Consciousness. Krishna consciousness, socially broadcast through every available means, in any and all amounts, was the reason Prabhupada had sailed from his hometown, Kolkata. The example of expanding the communication of Gaudiya teachings had been given by Bhaktisiddhanta, who had named his Indian printing presses the “brihat mridanga”, because the mridanga, a clay drum used in Gaudiya congregational worship, could announce the good news to a city block or a village, but the brihat, or great mrdanga, could be heard around the world—
and the world, according to Prabhupada and his guru, would be saved. Indeed, Bhaktivinoda referred to Chaitanya as “the Eastern Savior” (Bhaktivinoda, 1869).⁸

After decades of struggle in India for his guru’s mission, even as a family man, in New York Prabhupada was now on a mission to bring his guru’s wisdom to the world, a mission characterized by the slogan, “Books are the basis, preaching is the essence, utility is the principle, purity is the force” (Smullen, 2008). Because a cult’s trajectory is fundamentally a projection of the mood and vision of its founder, as Melton has observed, here we will analyze the four items of Prabhupada’s slogan.

The Brihat Mridanga: Scriptural Foundations of ISKCON

Scholars of cults know that generally, cultic efforts to achieve a systematic teaching are a work in progress within the lifetime of the founder (Forsthoefel, 2005: 3). But Prabhupada was not such a cult leader who develops his principle ideas over time; instead, he depended spiritually and literally on the previous masters in his line to guide him in his own life and in teaching others (Ellwood, 1983: 11; Hopkins, 1983: 140). He quoted incessantly from his scriptures. In India he had begun translating the extensive Bhagavata Purana, the “biography” of Krishna’s earthly career also known as the Shrimad Bhagavatam. In the Puranas, the earlier system of sacrificing to various deities for (largely) material gains (as prescribed in the ancient

⁸ Shri Chaitanya is seen as Krishna descended to earth for two purposes. His internal purpose is to experience the ecstasy of Shri Radha as she savors her service to him, so he comes with her complexion and in her mood, as a devotee (Prabhupada, 1968: 290). Because Radha is the ringleader of all devotees in the spiritual world, arranging for their service to Krishna, by the same reasoning Shri Chaitanya desires that all fallen souls conditioned by material nature return to their original position as servants of the Lord. Consequently, Krishna as Chaitanya has an external feature that complements his/her internal mood—he is a dispenser of unlimited causeless mercy to gods, humans, and even animals and ghosts. He wants to “drown” the world in ecstatic love of Krishna (Prabhupada, 1973: 27).

For adepts, Chaitanya considered discussion of exalted topics concerning Krishna and his associates both a spiritual means and an end, because the purifying edification that resulted from such discussions was liberating and blissful. For the masses, there was chanting, dancing and prasada (Prabhupada in Back to Godhead, 1976). The program for the masses is seen as extremely merciful because unlike other practices familiar to Vedantic Hindus, such as silent meditation, austerities, studying Sanskrit texts, renouncing the world, complex rituals, etc., anyone could do it.
scriptures of India known as the *Vedas*), is established as the *de facto* standard for human society—as Prabhupada’s tradition would see it—with the various gods serving as a type of background *dramatis personae* to the religion of devotion favored in works such as the *Bhagavatam*. Through Prabhupada’s translations and commentaries his American audience simultaneously imbibed information of the Vedic standard (as he would see it) and the subsequent *puranic* teaching that, for Prabhupada’s school, eclipses the Vedic (Prabhupada, 1972: 127; Minor, 1986: 1). Thomas Hopkins has written, “Prabhupada has managed, successfully, to bridge an enormous cultural gap and to give practical application to teachings that were originally designed for people in a very different cultural setting” (Hopkins in Gelberg, 1983: 142). How successfully the cultural gap was bridged is a subjective observation, but at any rate the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* is considered by the Gaudiya school to be the natural commentary on, and “the ripened fruit” of, the *Vedas* and its aphoristic philosophical explanations, the *Vedanta Sutras*. Occasionally Prabhupada disturbed some of his fellow Hindus because for him the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, being the cream of the Vedic literature, is even more important than the four *Vedas* (Krishna.com, 2008).

In America the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* project was temporarily set aside to translate the *Bhagavad Gita*, the famous “Song of God” sometimes referred to as “India’s Bible” because of its widespread popularity. The *Bhagavad Gita* is composed of seven hundred verses in a much longer work, the massive *Mahabharata*. The Gaudiya tradition recognizes the *Bhagavad Gita* as a prerequisite study before one can understand the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, otherwise one might

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9 Although modern Hinduism is informed by the Puranas far more than by the Vedas, there is a tendency to call all subsequent literature “Vedic”, and consequently no distinction is made between the two literary worlds. The Hare Krishna movement in America is no exception to this; consciousness of the movement’s *puranic* base is a scholarly one. Ironically, because most Hare Krishna devotees in America revere the *Vedas* without familiarity with the *Vedas*, at the time of this writing they resemble the vast majority of Hindus, who, for the most part, are also unfamiliar with these scriptures, but revere them.
get the impression that the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* simply depicts Krishna as a mere cultural hero involved in ordinary sensual—even licentious—affairs (Hospital, 1992: 73; Prabhupada, 1968: 8).

Because the *Bhagavad Gita* focuses on the welfare of individual souls as well as the Supreme Soul, Krishna, the *Bhagavad Gita* can be seen as a literary paradigm for cost-benefit analysis of one’s actions, classifying them as “action, reaction, and perverted actions” (Prabhupada, 1989: 244; 805). It discusses spiritual issues in the form of a momentous personal decision, for Krishna’s cousin and friend, the protagonist of the text, Arjuna, is invited to act for Krishna, “the Supreme Personality of Godhead” (Prabhupada, 1983: xviii, xix). Krishna allows that there are many options in spiritual life, but he won’t allow Arjuna to give up his soldierly duty of fighting without first telling him, literally, the facts of life—how the soul goes from life to life and suffers by ignorance and misuse of options, and how this dreadful cycle can be arrested. He affirms the sacred nature of the Vedas, yet tells Arjuna to go beyond the “flowery words of the Vedas”, which can only lead to temporary and unsatisfying worldly happiness in this life or the next (Smith, 2003: 43; Prabhupada, 1989: 129, 141-142).

According to Prabhupada’s translations and commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita* and other oral and written communications, renunciation of worldly things is good, but work in devotion is better (Prabhupada, 1989: 799-805). This is important for the devotee Arjuna, as for every mortal, because the stakes are high when spirituality is at issue. Krishna offers, though, a rather sweeping account of the situation Arjuna faces outside of the purview of pure devotion. An important facet of this presentation is the discussion of the *gunas*, or the “modes of nature”, by which the whole world is enchanted (Prabhupada, 1989: 380). Prabhupada translates these as goodness or maintenance (*sattva*); passion or creation (*rajas*); and ignorance or destruction.
These modes of nature, in turn, are related to the varnas, the four main divisions of human society. These are the brahmins who are supposed to be influenced by sattva and are the priests and scholars of the sacred texts; the martial kshatriyas dominated by rajas; the vaishyas given to a mixture of rajas and tamas, engaged in agriculture, dairying, and trade; and the shudras, thoroughly in tamas and serving the other varnas as skilled and unskilled workers. All of these classes must adhere to their svadharma, one’s own or “specific duty”, so that they may be elevated instead of degraded in the continuing cycle of birth and rebirth, samsara (Prabhpada, 1989: 116). Svadharma is a complex idea, because for Prabhupada it pertains both to duties within the conditioned life of samsara, and the post-samsara spiritual world where one enjoys eternally with Krishna (ibid).

But Krishna, although ultimately instructing Arjuna to abandon all dharmas except the dharma of surrendering to him, allows for the legitimacy of other paths in the case of persons that are not ready to act upon his final word (Schweig, 2007: 265). If one cannot fix the mind upon the Lord without deviation, then one should follow the rules and regulations of bhakti-yoga. If such regulative practice is beyond one’s abilities, one can still work for the Lord, “because by working for Me you will come to the perfect stage.” If this is not possible, one can give in charity. After that, Krishna recommends the cultivation of knowledge. Better than learning is meditation, and better than meditation is renunciation of the aforementioned fruits of action, for this kind of renunciation will bring peace. It appears that Arjuna can do whatever he pleases, but if he acts for himself alone he can never have peace. At the very least, if he cannot follow the direct path of devotional service to Krishna, he should take to one of the indirect methods so that he could still be elevated after death, not degraded (Prabhupada, 1983: 850; 619-626. But the Bhagavad Gita only explains basic truths and does not go into the details of spiritual
life (Chryssides, 1999: 169). Arjuna sets the example of making the proper decision to serve Krishna because the proof is in the resultant victory (Prabhupada, 1989: 860, 863), but when he takes up his weapons the *Bhagavad Gita* is finished.

According to Prabhupada’s tradition, it is the career of Chaitanya, the god Krishna coming to earth as his own human devotee, that shows how devotion to Krishna should be performed in more detail (Prabhupada, 1968: xviii). Nevertheless, although Chaitanya taught pure, ecstatic love accessible to all, he was extremely renounced by general standards. Such renunciation is the origin of the ascetic nature of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, but this fact must be nuanced or we cannot grasp the quality of Gaudiya asceticism. Generally, a person becomes Krishna conscious not by “absolute flight from the world”, as Weber presumed of the Hindu ethos, “it’s highest means being mystic contemplation.” Instead, detached work in devotion transcends mere renunciation (Weber, 1967: 326; Prabhupada, 1989: 163-172).

Ironically, there is a striking resemblance between this conception of work and Weber’s “worldly asceticism”, the principle difference being the continuity of the Vaishnava way and the goal, instead of the instrumentality of work in a “calling” for the Christian seeking assurance of salvation (Bendix, 1960: 206). In reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*, Weber denied the ability of “a Hindu to prize the rational transformation of the world in accordance with matter of fact considerations and to undertake such a transformation as an act of obedience to a Divine Will” (ibid). It is difficult to imagine a transformation of the world more plainly rational—at least in the actor’s mind and behavior, which is where Weber begins all social analyses—than taking up a sword to kill one’s enemies. Anyone who has read the *Bhagavad Gita* cannot deny that Arjuna decided to act in “obedience to a Divine Will.” Prabhupada’s writings indicate that he would have blamed Weber’s misconceptions on an inadequate exposure to “bona fide” interpretations.
of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Hindu scriptures, for how could Weber reconcile Arjuna’s terrible decision to act on the field of battle, with worldly flight? (Prabhupada, 1989: xviii).

Arjuna’s *modus operandi* was nothing like Shri Chaitanya’s. However, Arjuna was instructed to control his senses by means of his intellect; this is what it means to be a human. “A human being is called a rational animal. When rationality is destroyed, the human being is left an ordinary animal. The difference between a human being and an animal is based on the strength of human being’s being above the animal propensities” (Prabhupada lecture EA 20). In the terms we have been discussing here, only humans possess a finely tuned sense of costs and benefits, or rational choices.

Now the example of Chaitanya is as radical as Arjuna’s, but in another direction. The 16th century hagiography of Shri Chaitanya’s life, the *Chaitanya Caritamrta* of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, was summarized by Prabhupada as *The Teachings of Lord Chaitanya* and used as a standard text until the mid 1970’s, when the guru engaged a small army of helpers in completing a translation of the Bengali language classic. As the supreme exemplar of Krishna devotion, Chaitanya plays the part of a religious skeptic in his youth who becomes a scholar and a religious prodigy, and his associates, incarnations from the days of Krishna in antiquity, are supporting actors in a charming spiritual drama. ¹⁰ In his devotional life Chaitanya is as ascetic as Arjuna is skilled in battle; for instance, his disciples must beg him to eat, and to accept a thin mat of straw instead of sleeping on the bare ground (Prabhupada translation, Antya Lila 13.5-19).

¹⁰ Chaitanya’s and his associates’ status as “incarnations” is more complex than Krishna’s for the Gaudiya school, which maintains that Chaitanya left the world by merging with the deity of the Tota Gopinath Mandir in Jagannatha Puri. But the tradition also speaks of Chaitanya’s spiritual ecstasy in which his joints were disconnected, his limbs elongated, and his pores oozed blood. At present there is no significant discussion of his bodily nature in the American Hare Krishna movement, nothing like the controversy over the nature of Jesus’ person in the early centuries of the Christian church. Most of the devotees I have interviewed admit that they had not considered the issue.
Although modern scholars have often seen Chaitanya as a social reformer because he upset rigid caste boundaries by associating with low castes and Muslim born Vaishnavas, his tradition shows him as an extreme theist in love with God, neither endorsing nor rejecting the social order. His theism inspired him to see the whole world as Krishna and to inspire others the same way, not to try to change the world. He was primarily interested in the welfare of people’s consciousness, not their welfare as it is generally construed in modern society concerned with the material needs of impoverished people. At the same time, Chaitanya is a very interesting figure for religious cost-benefit analysis because although he rejected the things of the world unfavorable to Krishna devotion, he did not reject the world per se or consider any other world better than the one he was in, if it was favorable to his devotion. As already mentioned he wrote, “I only pray that by your causeless mercy You give me pure devotional service to You, life after life” (Prabhupada translation Antya Lila, 20.30). Material benefits needed to survive in this world such as sufficient food and shelter would come automatically as a result of Krishna consciousness, which must come first (Prabhupada, 1987: 180). Along with the *summum bonum* (a favorite term for Prabhupada, which he seems to conflate with the Absolute Truth), apparently, the lesser goods come with it (Prabhupada, *Shrimad Bhagavatam* Introduction, 1962).

Prabhupada produced other works, translations and summations of Sanskrit religious literature, but Schweig has called these three—the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, or *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, and the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*—ISKCON’s prasthana-traya, “the three foundational [theological] writings” (Schweig, 2008).

**Spots on the Moon—the Good Outweighs the Bad**

Bhaktisiddhanta’s *brihat mridanga* has been extremely important in the dissemination of Gaudiya teachings in America. Melton has observed that improvements in communication have
made it easier for a new religion to define its niche, but of course, this too is not without its problems. Like scholars of the academy, Prabhupada was aware of the difficulty of translating across cultural and linguistic boundaries, but set the consideration aside by taking an urgent tone, pointing out that when there is fire, a person not expert in the local idiom will generally be able to make himself understood (Winquist, 1998: 225; Prabhupada, 1969). Although admitting his “frailties in presenting Shrimad Bhagavatam” and acknowledging any irregularities that may exist in the original text, he is hopeful that “the transcendental glories of the name, fame, form and pastimes of the unlimited Supreme Lord” will ignite “a revolution in the impious life of a misdirected civilization” (Prabhupada, 1989: xvii). Any imperfections were only “spots on the moon”, trivial costs compared to immeasurable benefits (Jayadvaita, 2002).

Not all Gaudiyas shared Prabhupada’s enthusiasm. His advisors in India had been against his American mission, fearful that Americans could not understand the contents of their sacred scriptures, and some were concerned about his health and advanced age—but in the face of much opposition Prabhupada thought the rewards would offset the investment (Gosvami, 1980: 281-285). It was like spots on the moon. He would “go to hell for Krishna.”

**Preaching**

Prabhupada, an orthoprax Hindu, was well aware of many of the other difficulties that lay in store for him and his mission. He knew he would have to reduce certain rules and regulations of his tradition to an absolute minimum if Americans were to follow it, telling his disciples, “I’m ninety-nine percent lenient. If I were to tell you everything at once, you would faint” (Wheeler, 1985: 72). The Swami laughed when he said it, but he meant it, for ISKCON in later years was far more sophisticated ritually than it was at the beginning. Conversely, at the very beginning Prabhupada made Gaudiya orthodoxy a main selling point to a generation of religiously disaffected Americans, though such a mission directed to non-Hindus by a sampradaya was
unprecedented in the history of Hinduism. Indian Hindus of many types were already present in America and especially in New York, but these Hindus did not try to religiously influence Americans who had arrived in previous waves from Europe—the English, Irish, Germans, Italians, and others. *Advaitins* such as Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda generally had not presented only the teachings of a single *sampradaya*, but they still left the impression that monism was the final word in Indian spiritual thinking.\(^{11}\) With Prabhupada’s Atlantic voyage, both poles of Hinduism’s philosophical outlooks regarding spiritual ontology—personalism and impersonalism—were now established in the New World, and Prabhupada saw it as his business to make sure that his personalistic Hinduism confronted monistic Hinduism for religious market share—although the extraordinary spectacle of different strains of Hinduism competing in America was an intra-cultic contest invisible to the average citizen.

Prabhupada’s teachings are derived from his guru Bhaktisiddhanta, who was in turn trained by his father Bhaktivinoda, the 19\(^{th}\) century magistrate in the employ of the British Raj mentioned earlier. Bhaktivinoda traced his disciplic line to Shri Chaitanya in 16\(^{th}\) century Bengal, where the Hare Krishna religion has its historical beginning as a discrete religious tradition centered upon the worship of the Hindu goddess and god, Radha and Krishna, and Chaitanya himself, as the combination of Radha and Krishna in a male human form.\(^{12}\) Chaitanya taught exclusive devotion to Krishna, considering other gods to be servants of his Lord. This consideration, for Prabhupada, was proof that his tradition was monotheistic.

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\(^{11}\) Followers of Prabhupada tend to divide the Hindu religious world into personalism and impersonalism; any system that does not recognize Vishnu or Krishna as the ultimate truth is considered impersonal. Because Shaiva schools tend to ultimately see the personal form of Shiva as subordinate to the impersonal Shiva, the Gaudiya school would not recognise Shaivism as true theism.

\(^{12}\) Like most religious traditions, the Gaudiya tradition does not recognize its human origins, for Shri Chaitanya is considered no mere human, and, as is common in Indic religion, his system is seen as eternal—but manifest on earth again and again only during rare stages in cyclic time.
Confident that the literatures of his Chaitanya tradition would enthrall some Americans, Prabhupada, following the vision and orders of his predecessors Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta, established his mission upon these literatures. He referred to his missionary efforts as preaching, a word not commonly used by other gurus in America (Gosvami, 1980: 52; 122). To this day Hare Krishna devotees of all levels of involvement in America commonly speak of preaching, instead of sharing or celebrating diversity, unlike other participants of the so-called “cultic milieu” that speak of sharing and diversity but shun preaching.\(^{13}\)

Prabhupada’s arrival in America was due in part to the English language emphasis of his predecessors Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta, who wrote and spoke about Krishna consciousness in English as well as Bengali. Bhaktisiddhanta specifically instructed his disciple Abhay Charan De (Prabhupada’s name before taking sannyasa)\(^ {14}\) to preach in the English language in the Western countries (Gosvami, 1980: 61, 92; 224), and Prabhupada took this to be “the purpose of his life” (ibid: 92). His guru even reiterated his desire that Prabhupada preach in the Western world as his parting instruction on his last bed (ibid: 92); and as if to drive the point further, Bhaktisiddhanta later appeared to Prabhupada in a dream and again demanded that his disciple “spread Krishna consciousness throughout the Western world. *Sannyasa* was for that

\(^{13}\) Colin Campbell explains the cultic milieu. “The term *cultic milieu* was coined by Colin Campbell to refer to a society's deviant belief systems and practices and their associated collectivities, institutions, individuals, and media of communication. He described it as including ‘the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure’ (Campbell 1972:122), and it can be seen, more generally, to be the point at which deviant science meets deviant religion. What unifies these diverse elements, apart from a consciousness of their deviant status and an ensuing sense of common cause, is an overlapping communication structure of magazines, pamphlets, lectures, and informal meetings, together with the common ideology of *seekership.*” See [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/cult.htm](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/cult.htm)

Although cultic milieu seekership is shared by people who become interested in Krishna consciousness, an “ensuing sense of common cause” is frequently absent as far as Prabhupada’s disciples are concerned because by and large they are working to convert the cultic milieu, not cooperate with it, except for the possibility of conversion. There are of course exceptions to this.

\(^{14}\) Generally, Bhaktisiddhanta changed the name of his initiates. In Abhay Charan’s case, he simply added *aravinda* (lotus) so that the new name was Abhay (fearless) Charanaravinda (Gosvami, 1980: 72).
end; otherwise, why would his spiritual master have asked him to accept it?” (ibid: 224).
Schooled by Bhaktisiddhanta, Prabhupada saw himself as a revolutionary armed with books in
the English language (ibid: 241) designed to fill the “spiritual vacuum” of the West (Gosvami,
1980: 241). He also wanted to preach in English to more than a few educated Indians, “and I am
sure India will again go back to spiritual life when the principle is accepted by the Europeans and
Americans etc. because the Indian people are now in the habit of begging, after neglecting their
own property” (ibid: 213). He had heard of the current interest in Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita
in the Western countries, and he was certain people in these countries would never be satisfied
with mere material advancement (ibid: 215). And, he saw all of this as his duty, for not only
would the Western world benefit spiritually from the message of his guru, he would also benefit
by delivering it (ibid: 92).

Prabhupada’s style of preaching has been described in detail by his disciples in many
biographical works, especially in the best known (and perhaps best written) *Srila Prabhupada-
lilamrta* by Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami (Hopkins in Gosvami, 1980: viii). Deliberately giving his
institution the legal name International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Prabhupada
combined the appeal of sacred Hindu scriptures, ordinary reasoning, and a charming personality
with ritual practice and fatherly concern for his students, while preaching about extraordinary
worlds and consciousness in the context of personal decisions (Gosvami, 1980: 15; 56; 63; 119;
121; 127-128). Practically speaking, Prabhupada used a carrot and stick approach already
prominent in his scriptures to instill a sense of place and consciousness, at times framing it
especially for the potential new devotees (Prabhupada, 1970: 55-59). He declared that the
elevation of consciousness in ecstatic devotion to Krishna surpassed all imaginable mundane
pleasures—including sex and drugs—while simultaneously inducing a vision of the “material
world” as a place of suffering (Gosvami, 1980: 201-202; 215-217). Pessimism about the material world was always balanced with literary descriptions of the spiritual world, an eternal, non-material place of beautiful, charming relationships, replete with details (Prabhupada, 1975: 72-91).

Such definite descriptions function as selective but highly effective advertisements in a religious market that tends to arise, as Stark and others point out, in a pluralistic situation where potential religious customers are free to make comparisons. Comparison is intrinsic to such a market (Lemmen, 1990: 97), and Prabhupada capitalized on comparison, never neglecting an opportunity to point out the conceptual poverty of his competition. He preached about a friendly and erotic God in a friendly and erotic spiritual world, without ambiguities. And God (or more accurately, the Absolute Truth) is a divine couple. “The Vaishnava hands God over to you freely, as a commodity: ‘Here is God’ ” (Gosvami, 1980: 222).

As we have seen, Prabhupada also preached about the soul. The individual soul, trapped in a network of illusion and suffering in one lifetime after another, could choose to attempt to attract the personal Lord and his mercy, and enjoy a variety of options understood in terms of an “Easy Journey to Other Planets”, the title of one of Prabhupada’s books. The attempt to attract the Lord was framed in the context of the worship of Mother Hara (Shri Radha), the Prime Worshiper, a super-extraordinary soul who mediates between the devotee and Krishna in the ultimate spiritual “planet”, Krishna Loka, which expands eternally in time and infinitely in space. Although some features of Vaishnavism agree with the theistic emphasis of the Abrahamic religions, the feminine facet of Prabhupada’s theistic teaching has no counterpart in the Abrahamic traditions as they have generally come to be understood, for the bridal mysticism of Christianity or the Shekinah of Judaism bear only a vague resemblance to Radha. As a feature of
the *vaidhi sadhana* (rules and regulations) phase of spiritual life (Chatterjee, 1983: 17), Prabhupada cautioned his disciples about entering the realm of Radha’s interactions with Krishna. Nevertheless, Radha’s exalted position in Gaudiya theology remains attractive to Americans, both female and male, attracted to the Hare Krishna movement. She controls (attracts) the “all attractive” Krishna by her love, and is “better” than him in attractiveness (Prabhupada, 1968: 125). When we speak of the Hare Krishna movement, we are literally referring to the religion of the beautiful milkmaid goddess Radha and her love for Krishna, in the person of Shri Chaitanya. By contrast to the relative dearth of divine female imagery in many forms of Christianity and most of Judaism, Radha’s preeminence is a drawing card for some religiously disaffected Americans (Cox, 1983: 32-33). Many scholars have noted her derivative role in relation to Krishna in Prabhupada’s theology (and Hinduism in general) and this is certainly accurate, but it is an academic distinction unimportant for the way she is actually revered by American Gaudiyas (King, 2007: 193-229). Additionally, “Mother Hara” is not merely symbolic of spiritual yearning, for the Gaudiyas, as some take her to be. Like Krishna, Prabhupada understood Radha to be an historical person within this world and a divine person in the spiritual world. Although she remains embodied within Shri Chaitanya, her children—all living entities—are supposed to emulate her mood *vis a vis* the *sankirtana* movement.

**The Central Ritual of the Gaudiya Religion in America**

Theology, doctrine, and belief—closely related categories that intersect—are very important considerations for most new religious movements (Saliba, 1995: 187). However, Prabhupada did not limit his preaching to explaining the *Bhagavad Gita* or descriptions of the spiritual and material worlds, for he claimed a means to verify the words of the scriptures with a simple practice of mantra meditation. Indeed, this means was the cornerstone of his tradition: “Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s cult is based upon the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra”
In these discourses on ecstatic spiritual happiness and unavoidable misery in the material world, the venerable swami from Bengal addressed his students in parental tones: “My dear boys and girls, I simply request you to chant Hare Krishna…and your life will be sublime.” Prabhupada taught the repetition, individually and congregationally, of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra (great mantra), the ritual of all rituals in the American Hare Krishna movement: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare—Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, three invocations that he translated as “Oh Lord, Oh energy of the Lord, please engage me in Your devotional service.” Although mantras are commonly used without reference to a particular “meaning”, Prabhupada’s translation of the mantra encapsulated his tradition’s siddhanta, or ultimate view, that service to Krishna is its own reward. The way and the goal—or the cost and the benefit—are identical.

For this reason, Vaishnava schools claim that other paths are relative, not absolute, because their ways and goals are not identical—at some point, the non-Vaishnava practitioner expects a reward other than what he or she is already doing. Of course, the notion that one should pay for the privilege of more paying directly contradicts all worldly markets, and shows that the rational choice view of religion applied to this tradition has but a mere coincidental connection with Adam Smith’s economic theory. In his Shiksashtaka, Chaitanya declares that he only knows Krishna as his Lord, even if Krishna mistreats him (Prabhupada, 1968: xxxix, see Appendix). The devotee who really knows himself as a spiritual soul and his relationship to the Lord considers himself to be like an animal already sold. No cost, then, is considered too much to bear on the path back to Godhead.

As for chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, it is taken to be a form of loving devotional service, and the cost and the benefit are said to be the same. To the question “What does chanting
produce?” Prabhupada replied, “Chanting produces chanting. Just as when you are calling the name of your beloved. If there is someone you love very much, then you want to repeat his name again and again. That is love” (Gosvami, 1980: 214). The repetition of the Hare Krishna mantra in the mood of utter, dependent servitude was meant to gladden, purify, and embolden anyone to become an instrument in the hands of the Lord.

Prabhupada’s presentation to America was undoubtedly extremely bold, for not only was he proposing a radical program of virtuoso spirituality to the young people who came to him, from the beginning he told them to preach about it, as he did on an evening in 1966: “Therefore, each and every one of us should be engaged in the preaching work of Krishna consciousness for the benefit of the whole world. ..The Lord says, “Just take my orders, all of you, and become a spiritual master” (Gosvami, 1980: 121). 15 Prabhupada frequently startled his audience with such pronouncements, whether one had ever heard of Krishna, or not. Many have questioned the “easy” availability of Prabhupada’s commodity as his preaching presented it, and even he agreed with outside researchers about the difficulties faced by beginners (Gosvami, 1980: 180). But, according to his official biographer Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami, he preached up to his last moment on earth.

**Purity Comes with a Price, but Utility is the Principle**

Prabhupada’s idea of purity, for “dissolute” New Yorkers of the 1960’s, required sacrifice of all kinds of common pleasures and comforts for the sake of the greater gain (Gosvami, 1980: 192). Sacrifice (yajna) is a large theme in the *Bhagavad Gita*, pertaining to the Vedic fire sacrifice, and other types of sacrifice such as austerity, charity, marriage, even breathing; it is the means by

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15 It should be noted that the lecture that this quote was taken from occurred before Prabhupada had initiated any disciples, and even before he had officially founded his Society. He seemed to understand the value of startling his audience, something he often did. His disciple Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami, who witnessed this particular incident, glosses it: “Prabhupada can’t wait to tell them—even if they aren’t ready. It’s too urgent. The world needs Krishna conscious preachers” Gosvami, 1980: 180).
which all good things may come to humans (Prabhupada, 1989: 171-182, 255-256, 257). The sacrifice, Prabhupada explained, pertained to two kinds of happiness. Immediate gratification is *preyas*, like nectar in the beginning, and poison in the end. *Preyas* requires little or no sacrifice. Delayed gratification, *shreyas*, is much better, for although it is like poison in the beginning—requiring great sacrifice—it becomes nectarean later on. *Shreyas* is one of the most important points of the Hare Krishna movement as interpreted by Prabhupada. In the summer of 1966 Prabhupada handled this aspect of his teaching diplomatically, reflecting the wisdom of one of his often quoted Bengali sayings, “Go in like a needle, and come out like a plow” (Gosvami, 1981). He allowed his very first disciples to sample his wares of ecstatic Hare Krishna mantra singing before requiring “payment” for them; some might even say he “tricked” these followers into sacrificing their material pleasures for the higher pleasure of Krishna consciousness.

On September 9, 1966, Prabhupada formally initiated eleven young Americans as disciples, changing their birth names to Sanskrit names (for instance Radha Dasa for males or Krishna Dasi for females). These devotees felt that they were bound to him and his lineage for all eternity. It was a new birth for them. The rules for this initiation was made explicit to all of them *after* the ceremony: one must recite the Hare Krishna mantra a minimum of 1,728 times a day, and follow the “four regulative principles”, 1) no eating of meat, fish, or eggs, 2) no illicit sex, 3) no intoxication, and 4) no gambling (Gosvami, 1980: 182; Rochford, 1985: 155). All further initiations were clearly defined, and the rapid establishment of strict rules was the opposite of subtlety in imposing a standard; it was the statement of price and a contract between master and disciple. As Prabhupada explained, any initiate who followed the four regulative principles and attentively chanted sixteen rounds daily would be liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and return to Krishna in the spiritual world at the end of life (Das, 2003: 67). These rules
are devised by Gaudiya preceptors according to *kala*, *patra*, and *desa*—time, circumstance, and place—so that the religion can be relevant and applicable universally (VedaBase, *Shrimad Bhagavatam* 1.9.9). Nevertheless, the gradual “needle and plow” strategy continues as an important feature in *sankirtana* in America, as we shall find in later chapters.

It seems that the principle of utility establishes the efforts of the Hare Krishna mission upon fluctuating contingencies, a principle understood by Rochford in the context of changing recruitment strategies. However, Rochford neglected to pursue an adequate understanding of the nature of an imported religion. He writes, “No social movement emerges with a fully developed ideology, a complete set of goals, or a stable organizational structure” (Rochford, 1985: 167). Whether or not Gaudiya ideology plus the four regulative principles as stated above—principles derived from ideology—are binding for all Hindus, Prabhupada brought them with him from India, from his own life, and from his guru’s mission. A prospectus of the goals of ISKCON, specified on the exact date of the establishment of its charter with the State of New York, is provided in Appendix I. For our study, at least Rochford’s third observation from the quote above about ideology, goals, and organization, is correct. It is really the organizational structure of ISKCON and its broader religious community in relation to religious ideology and goals within American society that informs our thesis; at the end of the next chapter, we will begin our discussion of New Raman Reti in order to measure the distance between Prabhupada’s vision, and his legacy. One salient point here is that although this legacy does not conform entirely to his wishes, it was formed by the efforts of people who did try to pay a high price for the spiritual delights he offered…at least for a time.

Unlike many Hindu gurus in America, Prabhupada never required a monetary fee for spiritual instruction. He criticized the practice in no uncertain terms. However, if someone
wanted to become his disciple, it was understood that the price was steep—the recitation of the mantra and the four rules was only the beginning on the path to raga—deep, devotional attachment to Krishna and his names. The guru taught that one must dedicate everything to Krishna, one’s whole life. One could not perfect the repetition of the mantra without learning how to say the names of God as if they were more dear to the devotee than breathing—one must learn to cry for the Lord as a child cries for the mother (Prabhupada, 2008). On the other hand, if one began the practice of devotion to Krishna and did not reach perfection in the present lifetime, nothing was lost, for the devotee would take up in the next life where she left off in this life (Prabhupada, 1972: 347-357). In the next life, the devotee would be placed in a good position, again be directed to a shelter of a “bona fide” spiritual master “by the order of the transcendental system.” Prabhupada offered himself as an example, for after taking birth in a pious family, he met his guru Bhaktisiddhanta (ibid: 354). To put an even finer point on the cost benefit analysis of an aspiration to Krishna devotion, Prabhupada presented a provocative challenge, a Hindu twist to Pascal’s wager—if one were to dedicate even one lifetime to Krishna, and found it unsatisfactory, one could do something else in the next life—so what was there to lose?

The challenge to try Krishna Consciousness for even one lifetime must be understood within the context that the challenge was raised, and that context is discipleship. Prabhupada preached to all, but from the very beginning he had been looking for disciples that he later revealed had been “sent” to him somehow by his own guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. Without accepting a spiritual master and without being accepted as a disciple by a spiritual

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16 Gaudiyas believe that Krishna is identical to his names, forms, actions, abode, and association. Because of this identicality, Krishna is absolute, not relative. It is on this principle that hearing about Krishna from a superior devotee will bring one to Krishna.

17 For this reason, many in the Hare Krishna movement, not only initiated disciples of the founder, believe that in their previous life they had lived in India.
master, Prabhupada held minimal hope for progress on the spiritual path. Because his standards for *diksha*, spiritual initiation, were so difficult, initiation would have profound consequences for the future of his mission in America, when the founding group of religious specialists would face a new generation interested in a more casual approach to religion. But for the first generation, initiation by Prabhupada was a fairly universal goal. People seemed to understand that Krishna could take the elderly “Swamiji” away from them at any time.

It is true that Prabhupada relaxed the orthoprax demands of his tradition in terms of ritual propriety, as previously mentioned, but in sensual restrictions and other aspects of lifestyle and behavior Prabhupada’s standards resembled the organization of his guru, the Gaudiya Math, in India. In fact, it has been pointed out that Prabhupada, addressing the laxity of American life, required an even stricter standard than the Gaudiya Math for *harinama-diksha*, the first initiation of the disciple into reciting the *maha-mantra*. As explained above, the dominant mood of all of Prabhupada’s writings and recorded conversations was that of a master instructing dedicated disciples, instead of as a teacher content to address mere followers and admirers. Although the lay devotee, a family person not committed to an ascetic life of renunciation—and not initiated by a guru with a social mission requiring serious participation—has historically been the mainstay of most Hindu communities in India, Prabhupada did not encourage this mindset or lifestyle among his American disciples. And, although he occasionally initiated someone from whom very little direct service to his mission was expected, it seems that Prabhupada followed his own slogan in utilizing his disciples in his guru’s service. He intended to make them fit for this service by streamlining their lives. His success in this area has been mixed, as we shall see, for the preparations required to make a disciple fit had much to do with restrictions.
The various strictures for unmarried celibates in the Gaudiya tradition have never been challenged by people who participate in the Hare Krishna movement; it has always been the reflection of ascetic ideals and practices upon the householders that have made the latter uncomfortable and sometimes resentful of celibate (sannyasis and brahmacharis) or semi-celibate (householder temple presidents and Governing Board Commissioners) authorities, who, in the beginning of the movement, generally expected married disciples to live almost like sannyasis. Therefore, it is the concerns of Hare Krishna householders in relation to restrictions that interest us here, so it will help to reflect upon the difference between Prabhupada’s conception of householder life, and the way marriage and family has been more generally understood. In Prabhupada’s terms, he insisted that an ascetic life was not essential to Krishna Consciousness, because he did not consider his standards for householder life ascetic—he did not feel that his strictures for married disciples meant “rigorous self-denial”, a common dictionary definition for asceticism. If people could marry and have a house and children, while “keeping Krishna in the center”, where was the question of asceticism? But (although he indicated he knew that backsliding was common) Prabhupada never deviated in his writings or conversations from his strict behavioral ideals for his householder disciples, ideals that most people would consider to be rigorous self-denial: sexual activity only at the optimum time for conception and never for recreation purposes, rising by four a.m. to perform religious activities, donating fifty per cent of one’s income to spiritual causes, never eating in restaurants, attending a sporting event, or reading a novel, associating with materialistic people or monists, and more. 18 In other words, householder disciples were also supposed to be highly devoted religious specialists,

18 All of the items mentioned above were commonly practiced in the early movement, with the exception of donating fifty per cent of one’s income. This researcher has not encountered even one devotee who was able to fulfill this order of their guru.
people who could, theoretically, also complete the circle by initiating disciples—new religious specialists that most people, including critical scholars of religion, would consider ascetic (Basham, 1983: 192-193).

Through Prabhupada’s requirements for initiation and his policy of mentioning these requirements on every other page of his books, the rigorous course set for the serious Hare Krishna devotee was institutionalized early in the movement’s history, and so remains an essential factor in any discussion of the movement in America. Even today, anyone in attendance at an American Hare Krishna temple who publicly disputes the actual necessity of a rigorous lifestyle as described by Prabhupada for initiated disciples will likely be shown his books, and failing that, possibly shown the door or considered flippant, or perhaps deranged. At present the practicality of the founder’s instructions at the individual level may be questioned—within limits—but not the principle.

Now the third item in Prabhupada’s slogan after “books are the basis; preaching is the essence”—“utility is the principle”—has always been contested by his disciples, because what is useful to one’s spiritual life is not necessarily useful to another’s, at all times and in all places. One of the largest considerations in the utility principle, which tends to multiply into many smaller considerations, is the division between those who can follow Prabhupada’s instructions strictly, and those who cannot. Of course, this is a graded continuum, not an either/or paradigm. Naturally, those who can follow more strictly have tended to fill the positions of authority and pronounce upon the practicality of any course of action in Krishna consciousness. In later chapters we will explore the ramifications of this division in the lives of American Hare Krishna devotees, illuminating it to examine some details of cultic endeavors to become a church.
Consciousness

Prabhupada was lenient in certain aspects of his mission, but doctrinally he accepted no compromise. Without fixing one’s mind on Krishna in the association of devotees, consciousness is ruined, at least for a time.19

…one who has learned perfectly knows that every living entity is an eternal servitor of the Lord and that consequently one has to act in Krishna consciousness. The entire Bhagavad Gita is directed toward this conclusion. Any other conclusions, against this consciousness and its attendant actions, are vikarmas, prohibited actions. To understand all this one has to associate with authorities in Krishna consciousness and learn the secret from them; this is as good as learning from the Lord directly. Otherwise, even the most intelligent persons will be bewildered (Prabhupada, 1989: 244).

Prabhupada offered himself, an agent of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, as an authority in Krishna consciousness, and he indicated Krishna’s first son Pradyumna as an example of perfect desire in Krishna consciousness. To eradicate desire is impossible, a foolish project, against the nature of every soul. If Pradyumna did not like something, but discovered that Krishna liked it, then he began to like it. If Pradyumna liked something and found out that Krishna did not like it, then he no longer liked it. He was perfect not because he eradicated desires, but because he perfected them (Prabhupada, 1985: 318).

Such ideas diverged radically from discussions of consciousness in other spiritual circles in do-your-own-thing America of the late 1960s, particularly the most popular manifestation of Indian spirituality, TM, which spoke of elevating one’s consciousness but not dedicating it to a personal God. TM’s promise of the ability to do your job better, relaxation, and other seemingly mundane benefits, along with the techniques of other groups that included gazing at candles and

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19 There is no eternal hell in the Gaudiya scheme. The entire material world is an educational facility, and hell is simply a classroom with a harsh environment.
deciphering *koans*, struck Prabhupada and his followers as nonsensical, without potency to
deliver the practitioner from *samsara*—and most practitioners of TM had never even heard of the
term *samsara* either in Sanskrit or English. While often denying its status as a form of Hinduism,
the Hare Krishna movement was the most Hindu of all the Indic origin “consciousness raising”
groups in the West, at least for a time (Ellwood, 1988: 203). It has been necessary to exhibit the
reasons why Prabhupada included consciousness in the title of his institution so that the reader
will have a clear understanding of the product he was offering, that filled a particular religious
market niche.

**The Moods and Motivations Engendered By Prabhupada’s Teachings**

Although Stillson Judah found that their experience with the Hare Krishna mantra was
most often mentioned by his informants in the early 1970s as their main reason for being
attracted to the Hare Krishna movement, their choice in continuing with the mantra was aided by
a systematic philosophy pertaining to it, although most learned about this philosophy over time
instead of before becoming intimately involved with the movement (Knott, 1996: 91). This
learning curve represents a large benefit in a rational choice view of religion, for if the initial
enchantment of the mantra and other facets of Hindu culture fade away for an individual, the
“Alluring” doctrine looms ever larger and supports the previous commitment as “a fundamentally
complete philosophical system (Chatterjee, 1983: 13; ISKCON Communications Journal, 1992).
Judah’s interviews also confirmed that the doctrine was an important factor in attracting new
devotees, as one disciple explained to Shinn. For this disciple, doctrine was the overriding
reason. “Basically it was the philosophy which had satisfied me. All other philosophies I could
now understand in proper perspective” (Shinn, 1987: 29). Here we are not concerned with “a
complete philosophical system” as it is generally understood in Western philosophical thinking;
rather, Chatterjee’s remark pertains instead to categories likely to be deemed essential by the
religiously minded such as “Why was I born? What happens at death? What or who is God?” (Squarcini, 2004; 55).

In Hinduism, philosophical understanding has varying degrees of religious content, and is usually paired with practical application of philosophy, as Fritz Staal has observed. Bhakti yoga, the application of Krishna consciousness teachings, though cultic and at odds with American culture, is the means by which, reminiscent of Turner and Geertz, theology is brought to life, validating “the moods and motivations engendered by the theology” (Shinn, 1987: 109). The atmosphere of the Bhagavad Gita, especially as it was presented by Prabhupada, tends to provoke serious moods.

How Universal is Gaudiya Vaishnavism?

Up to now we have endeavored to emphasize the mood of Prabhupada as a missionary representative of his guru Bhaktisiddhanta. Many commentators have noted the continuation of Prabhupada’s intentions and actions and those of his guru, who rationalized Chaitanyaism even more than his father Bhaktivinoda according to the principles of kala, patra, and desha—time, circumstance, and place. These principles provide the scope for Gaudiyaism as a “universal religion”, not bound to Bengal or even India, as flexible as necessary. However, this is not to say that Prabhupada arrived in New York with no cultural baggage, or that his religion does not presume certain cultural standards.

The scope of articles brought to America by Prabhupada that would be ordinary in India, but extraordinary—that is, cultic—in America, is so extensive that it is difficult to choose among them for presentation here, because every one of them is integral to our cult to church paradigm. To begin with there is Krishna, who meets the wives of others in the middle of the night, and in so many ways contradicts the moral severity of the Biblical God. This playful Krishna is also represented iconically upon an elaborately decorated altar, not as a symbol of something else but
as an actual repository of the divine. And with Krishna comes the general Indic notion of a Goddess, long obsolete in Western society. As if this were not enough to make Krishna consciousness cultic in America, such topics represent only the iceberg’s tip of Gaudiya theology radical in America’s religious culture. Turning to science, Prabhupada’s Hindu pronouncements on the natural world directly clash with the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the détente that prevails between liberal Christianity or Judaism, and the scientific world.

But none of these so directly challenge the social order of America as does Prabhupada’s social views, and therefore it is to these teachings that we now turn. A large portion of these teachings are rich with cultural presumptions that have difficulty staying alive in America, with a history vastly different from India’s. Burke Rochford has noted that it is the “failure” of Prabhupada to establish varnashrama dharma, Hinduism’s ideal of four social divisions and four life stage divisions, in America, which accounts for so much of ISKCON’s troubles, but his observation has little to do with the cult to church paradigm, as we shall presently see (Rochford, 1997). Rochford thinks that varnashrama dharma is something that is supposed to happen within ISKCON the institution (Rochford, 2007: 71) instead of a societal development (Dwyer, 2007: 131-132). However, it has been argued even by ISKCON devotees that no consistent, serious effort to make this happen anywhere in the American Hare Krishna movement has been attempted (Rochford, 1992). Part of the conceptual problem of varnashrama dharma lies in the style of Prabhupada’s communications on this matter and other matters, along with his ambitions. In examining his books, letters, and transcripts of lectures and conversations it is clear that he hoped that his Society would be accepted as a form of guidance by government leaders, who would implement his dharmic ideas. Not surprisingly, this mentoring would begin with the brahminical program ISKCON was already offering. Conversely, though his optimism seemingly
knew no bounds, Prabhupada also had a more limited, practical idea of *varnashrama dharma* in America, which had little to do with the main thrust of his institution, the temple communities in urban areas. Instead, ISKCON’s various rural communities were supposed to be based on agriculture so that the *varnas* could develop naturally from an alliance between brahminical culture and cow “protection”, not something to be established in cities, which he deemed artificial (Hopkins, 1983: 109; Rochford, 1997).

The agrarian condition of pre-modern India is hardly questionable, and so provides an economic presumption for *varnashrama dharma*, at least in theory. We can doubt that such a system ever really existed outside of scriptures, but an understanding of it from Prabhupada’s communications will reveal much about his movement’s ideas on the “caste system”, the role of women, vegetarianism, religious pluralism, gays, politics, and other important topics. It will also provoke a thoughtful discussion of the cult to church paradigm vital to our thesis, as the tension between Vaishnavism and *varnashrama dharma*—a tension with deep roots in Indic history—is delineated anew in ISKCON the institution, for many features of *varnashrama-dharma* will emerge as costs to the new devotees, what to speak of the general public.

First, any understanding of *varnashrama-dharma* for the Hare Krishna movement in America should rely exclusively on Prabhupada’s presentation of it. Critical observations on *varnashrama-dharma* in India, in theory or in practice, have no relevance here, for Prabhupada rarely spoke positively of this institution as it is academically understood throughout Indian history and in modernity, with the exception of his approval of village life. Prabhupada, a follower of Gandhi in his college days, but critical of Gandhi after meeting his guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, shared to the end of his life Gandhi’s vision of an agrarian society permeated by cottage industries. His motto in this connection was “Simple living, high thinking”
(King, 2007: 200-201). He spoke of reestablishing in America India’s original culture, which for Prabhupada meant people working according to their guna influences and natural inclinations as a member of one of the four varnas, which had nothing to do with the social position of ones jati, or natal family (Prabhupada, 1989: 498; 741). The skeptic as well as some believers will easily recognize the ideal nature of these views, and will most likely appreciate the greater appeal of negotiable varna over non-negotiable jati for non-ethnic Hindus.

For examples of cultic teachings that could serve as costs instead of benefits to Americans being introduced to his teachings, there can be no cultural articles more contradictory to the social order than Prabhupada’s varnashrama dharma views on meat eating and the social roles of women. In a country that subsidizes the industrial grazing of beef cattle and exports this to the world, in a society informed by the Biblical notion that animals are without souls and are put on earth only for the consumption of humans, the Hare Krishna view on the subject upsets even the most common form of social intercourse, commensality. Not only will Hare Krishna people not eat meat even on American holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas to please their parents or to avoid offending a host—unlike a large majority of other American “vegetarians” who make an exception for Thanksgiving but nevertheless describe themselves as vegetarians—they are on a mission to persuade all carnivores of the error of their ways. Yet, because we can afford to highlight only one of these cultic articles in this chapter, and because Prabhupada’s views on women are less likely to survive in America for a variety of reasons, we will briefly focus on this, instead of dietary, issues in this chapter, and expand both in further chapters.

While he makes it abundantly clear that women are spiritually equal to men, Prabhupada’s writings agree with the Hindu dharma scriptures that women are never to be
granted independence, and should remain under the care of their fathers, husbands, and in old age, their sons or other male family members (Knott, 1999: 87-107). Their main business in life is the bearing and rearing of children. Prabhupada presumes that their interests are worldly and that they are satisfied with their children, nice food, clothing, jewelry, and the protection of their husbands. On the other hand, women are gifted with an innocent interest in religious ritual and are by nature pious; Prabhupada was aware that women are mainly responsible for the transmission of religion in society precisely because, like charity, religion begins in the home. So, while women are equally important to the religious life of society, their bodily nature makes them suited for material enjoyments at home where children have their mothers as their first guru, while a man’s bodily nature makes him suitable for greater austerity and detachment from home, hence, spiritual realization (Prabhupada, 1968: 7).

Prabhupada acknowledged that some of the features of varnashrama-dharma entail costs for a benefit, for instance women doing their duty of cooking over an open fire in India’s hottest months, or a sannyasi practicing celibacy and other austerities (Prabhupada, 1989: 93). But, simply by performing one’s regular duty in this system, one could worship the Lord of sacrifice and attain all desirable things (Prabhupada, 1989: 28, 173, 174, 135).

All of this ties in with Prabhupada’s use of the word “intelligence”, which meant the ability and will to control one’s senses (shreyas) according to a plan—to act rationally—after agreeing with Krishna as Arjuna did. For Prabhupada, even scientists and other intellectuals were considered to be lacking in “intelligence” on account of not agreeing with Krishna. Brahmin women in the 10th Canto of the the Bhagavata Purana, on the other hand, supposedly less intelligent than their husbands, surpassed these learned brahmins of the Rig Vedic culture because they not only agreed with Krishna, they dedicated their lives to him without reservation.
This made them much more intelligent than their husbands (Prabhupada, 1970: 157-165). Still, “intelligent” brahminical culture, although usually the province of males, is suitable for the development of Krishna consciousness, and valuable to society. Brahmins were supposed to be brahmins by learning and sense control, never by birth, and therefore women, though otherwise considered less intelligent, were given the same intelligent brahmin status as their ISKCON brothers when initiated by Prabhupada. At least, that was Prabhupada’s standard.

Although varnashrama dharma is not an absolute necessity for the religion of bhakti—otherwise how could Prabhupada have brought bhakti to New York City—many of its ideas and practices were considered so basic to proper living that he had to come to terms with it in some way or another for his mission’s sake, so far from his home. Yet it obviously embodies many ideas and practices that militate against its acceptance by Americans, whether they are attracted to the Gaudiya cult, or not. 20 Although many feel there still has been no serious attempt at varnashrama dharma in America, no one can read Prabhupada’s books without being confronted with his varnashrama dharma ideals. And they would be reminded of Prabhupada’s goals for the social order whenever they witness a devotee wearing the sacred thread of the “twice born” varnas, or performing ritual homage to a cow.

Nevertheless, Prabhupada knew that he was offering something very attractive to the young Americans who flocked around him; his long term concern was market share, not market niche, for his teachings were unique and compelling, as the next chapter will demonstrate:

By nature and constitution, every living being—including the Supreme Lord and each of His parts and parcels—is meant for eternal enjoyment, but they are seeking it on the wrong platform. Apart from the material platform is the spiritual platform, where the Supreme Being enjoys Himself with His innumerable associates…The real center of

20 The founder of ISKCON was torn between a practical understanding that varnashrama-dharma was not possible in America, and a hope that it would be. His communications on this matter reflect his ambivalence and are the source of much debate in the Society even today. See Kenneth Anderson in Dwyer, 2007, 123-124.
enjoyment is the Supreme Lord, who is the center of the sublime and spiritual rasa dance. We are all meant to join Him and enjoy life with one transcendental interest and without any clash (Prabhupada, 51-52: 1997).

Whatever one thinks of Prabhupada, his religion, and his cultural ideals, it will be demonstrated here that, under the influence of his guru Bhaktisiddhanta, he was like a machine that manufactured other machine-making machines, machines that preached the message of Shri Chaitanya. Prabhupada’s great facility in preaching to non-Hindus—his personality—was recognized by his associates in India after the fact, while others have preferred to emphasize his spirituality, or his raw courage. In reviewing his achievements that were undeniably religious, instead of simply pertaining to Vedantic meditation and yoga lacking an emotional “biting edge”, Harvey Cox observed that “perhaps he was one in a hundred million” (Cox, 1983: 28, 41).

Here we have briefly surveyed the Gaudiya tradition brought from India without recourse, for the most part, to translation into “western scientific jargon so that it could become more intelligible or more acceptable to the common American”—as did more statistically successful groups such as TM. And for my part, I am utilizing, as much as possible, explanations in terms of Indic categories, concepts, and terminology (Hopkins, 1983: 108). As our study proceeds we will see that such a religiously cultural emphasis brought an intensity of spirit and effort reflective of the urgency felt by Prabhupada upon the dock at Boston, with mixed consequences.

After only a few years the Society Prabhupada fathered in America had centers in major cities all over the world, spreading the cult of Shri Chaitanya. In light of ISKCON’s subsequent successes and disasters we might take this statement about him self as a double entendre: “I have one disease—I only think big” (Friends of the BBT, 2007). Yet somehow he managed, in only
twelve years after leaving the dock at Kolkata, to accomplish his mission of establishing Krishna consciousness in the West.

Whatever it was about him, in his view he had landed in the world’s capital of mundane enjoyment, “this terrible place” (*ugra-desha*), and almost immediately fascinated a small, youthful section of the population already fascinated with and devoted to enjoyment, believing in a philosophy of life embodied in the saying “do your own thing.” Prabhupada did not negotiate with the do your own thing philosophy, and he did not hesitate to address it on many levels found in his tradition. He never discarded his cultural baggage in the pursuit of establishing his brand of Krishna consciousness as a universal religion, but like his gurus Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivinoda he was prepared to sacrifice all for the *bhakti* teachings on which he took his stand (Hopkins, 2007: 190). In doing so, he brought God and sin back into the vocabulary of countercultural youth, who were more accustomed to speaking of ultimacy as “the universe” or “oneness”, and had never reckoned their American “pursuit of happiness” to be sinful. This sea change in the life of these youngsters is a prime example of rational choice applied to religion. Now these Americans had compelling reasons to avoid sin—not simply because the Bible told them so—for such avoidance deepened their experience with the Hare Krishna mantra and other practices taught by the Swami. On the basis of their experience, according to ethnographic sources that appear in the next chapter, they soon began to accept everything their guru told them.

What he told them, we will find, had a fullness they felt they had never encountered before. Krishna the Supreme Personality of Godhead was a personal God unlike the personal God of the Bible, for Prabhupada’s new followers had previously only understood the Biblical God as a vengeful God, or at best, a God of ethics, vaguely limned and not very interesting.
Now their teacher was showing them in Technicolor and Dolby Sound that God liked to have fun, and was similar to them as a person with individual preferences, only better—he was the Supreme Enjoyer, a very uncommon vision of divinity in Western society—utterly unique. And this was religion, with many cultural underpinnings that could immerse a practitioner, not simply meditation as a hobby. For this reason, few researchers doubt that Prabhupada’s teachings will survive in America (Basham, 1983: 187-188; Rochford, 1985: 257-258). But in 1966, his market niche easily and permanently established merely by opening his cultic book, Prabhupada faced a more difficult project, market share.
Fortunately for Prabhupada’s ambitions, the Immigration Act of 1965, which loosened restrictions on Indian visas, was signed by President Johnson in October, two months after the Swami’s arrival. The history of Hinduism in the West would have taken a different course but for this piece of legislation, for Prabhupada had planned to return to India when his two month visa expired. The dramatic story of his first year in America is well known in Hare Krishna circles, when he struggled against great odds to maintain himself at a very austere standard by personally selling his books, simultaneously preaching at odd venues and hoping for support from his Indian Gaudiya colleagues—support that never came (Gosvami, 1980: 45-48). In a small office never meant for a residence, shaped like a boxcar, with a hotplate to cook his meals and a washroom down the hall, he lived and began his mission (Gosvami, 1980: 51, 52, 60).

**New Memes in America**

**An extraordinary opportunity for researchers**

Prabhupada’s career in America offers a rich opportunity for the critical study of modern religion because it has been meticulously documented by his initiated disciples. Thomas Hopkins has commented, “Those of us who are historians of religion will be working this rich vein for years to come” (Hopkins in Gosvami, 1980: viii). Because of the voluminous records left by the first generation, we can gather a clear understanding of the experience of the new devotees in relation to their master. These were not nominal initiates of a hereditary guru as one commonly finds in India. They did not expect to return to their normal lives after initiation, to become absorbed in careers and worldly affairs. Instead, Prabhupada acquired these disciples as students fascinated by his personal presentation, which, as they learned more about it, set the example of
how to spread Krishna consciousness by making great sacrifices of material comfort. In 
Geertzian terms he was seen as a personal model of Krishna devotion, and with his sampradaya 
teachings he also provided a blueprint for aspiring Krishna devotees. Culturally, he was a one-
man “genetic template” for the development of memes responsible for new “powerful, pervasive, 
and long-lasting moods and motivations” in American culture and society (Taylor, 1999: 86-87). 
But he was not an ordinary example of Krishna devotion such as one could find almost anywhere 
in India, and certainly not merely a “cultural Hindu.” Those few pre-initiation students that had 
been to India noticed this immediately, and they tried to acknowledge his status by assisting him 
in his mission (Gosvami, 1980: 101-12; 103-104). In this chapter we will discuss the actions and 
consciousness of the demand side of the religious market Prabhupada entered when he 
disembarked at New York in 1965, in order to illuminate the new market niche and its cultic 
origins in America.

A new voice of authority

The previous chapter was an endeavor to present the voice of the guru, and it is necessary 
to continue the importance of the guru in presenting the voice of his young disciples because 
they were, as numerous researchers have commented, the spiritual children of a textbook quality 
spiritual father figure. It is only when Thomas Hopkins, a young religion professor from Franklin 
and Marshall College, visited the first center of the International Society for Krishna 
Consciousness in New York, 1967, and met Prabhupada, that he was able to comprehend what 
these young people—disciples and candidates for initiation—were about, for their enthusiastic 
performance of chanting Hare Krishna and dancing in the streets and parks of Manhattan was 
irregular, even wild (Hopkins in Gelberg, 1983: 105). Hopkins was amazed to discover that they 
were attempting to follow a Gaudiya Vaishnava guru from Kolkata, for even the name Shri 
Chaitanya was unfamiliar to some. However, they knew that the recitation of the Hare Krishna

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mantra was opening up a whole new world for them, and this was evident upon further visits by the professor, who found them rapidly assimilating doctrine, ritual, and lifestyle inculcated by their guru (ibid, 106, 107). The first part of this chapter will illustrate this fledgling spiritual and cultural cosmogony in America, exploring such topics as charismatic authority, charm, and the costs and benefits of entering the brave and new—yet ancient—world brought by the Swami from India. It will be necessary here to go further into the ramifications of a rational choice perspective applied to the development of an imported cult, illuminating details that pertain both to the supply side (the guru and his tradition) and the demand side (the new devotees) of religious markets. I will expand upon previous theorists such as Stark and Bainbridge and the data provided by researchers such as Judah, Rochford, and Gelberg, and ethnographic material culled from biographies, internet sources, and personal interviews.

Confronted with momentous choices concerning their natal roots and the cultural offering of their teacher, besides their fascination with Krishna, “somehow or other” (a favorite saying of Prabhupada’s) the new devotees also accepted such traditional teachings as the limited social roles of women, pre-modern views on the natural world, and numerous moral restrictions, among a long list of culturally confrontational items that we cannot deal with adequately in this work. Most initiates also adopted an ascetic lifestyle (Kurien, 42: 2007). But, in seeking a cause for such a radical entry into an exotic “transplanted” culture, the most important item of acceptance must be the Indic assertion of the primacy of shabda brahman—spiritual sound vibration. In this new situation, hearing from the guru was tantamount to the Vedas as shabda brahman. Now, working intimately with a guru is not the kind of relationship with authority that Americans could recognize from their own experience, but it could be that some of these young people craved this kind of instruction; they may have yearned for boundaries enforced by a different sort
of orthodoxy than they were accustomed to (Cox, 1983: 46-47). American religion scholar
David Hackett suggested that they were also looking for discipline (personal communication).
As for *shabda brahman* of the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, Gaudiya orthodoxy posits two kinds, the
“book *Bhagavatam*”, and the “person *Bhagavatam*” (Prabhupada, 1972: iv). As a *sampradaya*
representative of his own guru, Prabhupada the person *Bhagavatam* was a voice of authority
carrying the message of Hindu scriptures “just as a mailman” without tampering with it, realized
personally and deeply through a lifetime of experience after being raised as a Gaudiya Vaishnava
in Bengal, where Shri Chaitanya is a celebrated native son (Prabhupada, 1973: lecture
Stockholm). We must remember that for Prabhupada, Gaudiya holidays, consuming food sacred
to his religion, or worshiping a deity at home or in a temple, were memes he grew up with. For
him there was really no question of faith—because where there are memes, there is faith without
question. He knew he must create new memes of faith in America. Consequently, his speech was
constantly about Krishna, and the new devotees quickly learned by his remarks, a raised
eyebrow, or even his silence, the appropriate topics for discussion. Therefore, it will aid our
understanding to reiterate the significance of the guru-disciple relationship more closely, because
it is extraordinary in America. Focus on the extraordinary aspect of religious cults is the key to
understanding the importance of the cultic emic view, not because it represents religion as “a sui
generis category” (that should be seen only as an ordinary phenomena, with which I mainly
agree)—as McCutcheon insists—but because it is vital to the development of any cult in a social
atmosphere dominated by church ideas, church values, church myths, and church lifestyles
(Mccutcheon, 2001: x, 10, 22).
The extraordinary nature of a religious cult is the product it has to offer prospective followers,
even while it tends to restrict its market share. This is why cultists are rare; if we presume that
society’s interest in the extraordinary could be represented by an inverted bell curve, cultists would be at one end, most people—with a moderate interest in the extraordinary—would be in the middle, while those who fear or hate the novel, at the far other. We should not be surprised to find the latter invested in church ideas, values, myths, and lifestyles. They do not want the extraordinary features of cults to become memes.

Cultic Conversion Is Not the Same as Church Conversion: The Significance of Participant Disclosure for Iskcon

The lack of respect for participant disclosure when the social sciences study religion would not exist if religious affiliation was seen as a rational choice in a religious market. Strong support for this idea comes from the commercial world, which routinely relies on participant disclosures in the form of questionnaires to ascertain marketing trends. Yet a current leader among sociologists of religion, Russell McCutcheon, has lampooned “the participant disclosure ‘I converted to X because of doctrine of Y’” while very selectively highlighting the work of Stark and Bainbridge in which they demonstrate the connection between altered religious beliefs and interpersonal bonds (remember Rochford’s interactionist approach) instead of rational decisions. Curiously, McCutcheon neglects to acknowledge these scholars, who have criticized the common practice of social scientists in not valuing participant disclosures, as the foremost champions of rational choice theory for religion. As for interpersonal bonds, Rochford has demonstrated that interpersonal bonds can be deftly illuminated by participant disclosures in Hare Krishna Transformed. Participant disclosures related to the Hare Krishna movement in America contradict McCutcheon’s claim that inner beliefs are less important than interpersonal bonds in the matter of conversion.

We shall presently nuance the notion of conversion to religious cults instead of established churches—a distinction not very interesting to McCutcheon—but here we will simply object to
his version of conversion in relation to our project. “Inner beliefs” are dismissed as a causal explanation for individual new religious behavior, “changes surely brought about by a host of different, mundane reasons, such as increasingly developed feelings of affinity and shared interests…that result from, for example, happenstance associations in the workplace that lead to opportunities to dine out with one’s colleagues, which produce invitations to someone’s home, followed by attendance at little league games, more potluck suppers, a chance invitation to a Bible study, participation in a worship service, etc.” Here McCutcheon has amply described the usual pattern of church conversion in America at least from the etic point of view, for as Stark and Bainbridge have argued, church conversion generally does not involve a radical shift between religious forms. In a religious market most people do not venture very far from one market niche to another, and those that become involved with cults are rare, so one’s peers in school or at work are likely to cherish church ideas, values, myths, and lifestyles. However, the extraordinary nature of cults and their development in society cannot be explained only by “mundane reasons” found in cultural continuity, which is what McCutcheon is emphasizing in religious conversion. “As aptly phrased by a student of mine whom I asked—to illustrate this very point—why he grew up to believe that he liked the University of Alabama’s football team: ‘Coz my Grandpa told me to’ ” (McCutcheon, 2007: 963-964). McCutcheon’s emphasis is inadequate for research on new religious movements. Because by their very nature new religious movements tend to be extraordinary in society, we must look elsewhere for explanations.

**New Solutions to Questions of Ultimate Meaning**

Prabhupada undoubtedly projected an air of grandfatherly experience and concern for the young who flocked around him. However we must not lose sight of the fact that he was not their grandfather in the cultural sense that McCutcheon emphasizes, for in his role as the only cultist in an imported cult who actually came from the culture of the imported cult, he could only be
their “father” (Ambarish in Siddhanta Das, 2003: 19).\textsuperscript{21} There are no grandfathers in the first generation of a cultic religion, what to speak of one imported from India to America, offering exotic “solutions to questions of ultimate meaning” instead of insisting that the established church answers to these questions are sufficient. So one of the first things that Prabhupada did in America was to establish himself as a cultural father who benevolently related to his young followers as a grandfatherly figure by generously supplying his wisdom, his guidance, and his food (Wheeler, 1985: 63). Seventy years had made him very practical, and he intuitively knew how to deal with people even if he did not quite understand their culture, at least to the extent that he was able to effect their inner beliefs.\textsuperscript{22}

He took grandfatherly advantage of mixing commensality with his preaching mission, but the Indian vegetarian food he served them and the social atmosphere of his storefront temple could not have had much in common with McCutcheon’s church suppers, for the difference between one American Protestant church and another is fairly negligible compared to the difference between Gaudiya Vaishnavism and American culture. McCutcheon is gazing at something very pertinent to the establishment of cultic religion, cultural continuity. Such continuity is really one important means by which a cult becomes a church, but has only a secondary value in “conversion” to a cult. Only if we do not take participant disclosure seriously can we imagine such cultural continuity as interpersonal bonds—although these are also significant—trumping the statement “I converted to X because of doctrine Y” for the Hare Krishna movement in America, which emphasized doctrine, as explained in Chapter II (Wheeler, 1985: 63).

\textsuperscript{21} Ambarish Das is Alfred Ford, the great-grandson of Henry Ford.

\textsuperscript{22} Prabhupada had majored in English and economics at the University of Kolkata, and had been a manufacturer/entrepreneur of medicinal soaps and other remedies after his graduation until becoming a vanaprastha in the mid-1950s. For this era of his life see Gosvami, Satsvarupa A Lifetime in Preparation, Prabhupada Book Trust, Los Angeles, 1980.
Participant disclosure, then, is another key to understanding religious cults, and we will emphasize it here.

It is likely that Prabhupada would have agreed that cultural continuity (with three significant exceptions to be explained later) had little influence in his project, for after ISKCON’s beginning period, he staked his mission upon the translation of contentious scriptures, even to the neglect of administrative and other pressing issues involving ISKCON’s dealings with American society and culture. The movement has paid a high price for this emphasis, but it has also gained a reward, for a contentious doctrine could serve as a meme bridging the crucial first three cultic generations, as well as any holiday or ritual.

A New Obligation for Americans: A Clash of Orientations

The second part of this chapter will comment on the first generation’s lives after they “joined” and beyond. For some, this involvement remained intimately connected with ISKCON the institution. For most, a more relaxed relationship with the institution became the norm. Both methods of involvement with Prabhupada’s teachings have been deeply influenced by the mood of the founder reflected in his question to his disciples, “What is the use of your being Americans if you don’t do something wonderful for Krishna?” (Karnamrita, 2008). Prabhupada believed that America was the leader of the world, and represented an almost unlimited facility for his movement within his reach through his American disciples. We shall see how his *sampradaya* has appropriated these disciples as a missionary resource, and produced a clash of lifestyle orientations in the process.

The householder mode of disciple religiosity was practiced by Prabhupada as a family man in relation to his guru’s institution, the Gaudiya Math, and both Prabhupada and his guru

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23 Wheeler’s book *The Hare Krishna Explosion* is written in the first person, so this book is entirely participant disclosure. Additionally, he provides the participant disclosures of his friends.
approved this kind of participation—but this angle of the Hare Krishna cult in America has not enjoyed the same interest of scholars compared to interest in temples and ascetic authority (Krishna.org Community, 2008). As already mentioned, previous researchers have relied on reports from ISKCON leaders because these leaders’ views represented a norm for Prabhupada’s teachings. In some ways they did and that’s why the leaders were chosen to be leaders, but they can only speak for the institution, not the movement. The great majority of American disciples of Prabhupada who have made their peace with the world, so to speak, still feel obliged to pass on his ideas to the rest of American society—without supervision from ISKCON leaders—and their contribution is currently more representative of Prabhupada’s teaching as a social movement. As Weber sometimes uses the term rationalization to mean the manifestation in society of ideas, we will trace this rationalization to show an intertwining of elite and more common orientations to Prabhupada’s teachings that eventuated in the establishment and population of New Raman Reti. The clash in orientations eventually reached a crescendo, and we have chosen a shocking example to conclude this chapter.

**ISKCON’s First Year**

ISKCON’s first year was the Big Bang for the Hare Krishna movement in America. Everything that has happened since then has unfolded from that time—with other streams of influence entering that line of unfolding—when Prabhupada set the personal example and trained the first leaders. We will now examine this period with an aim to understand how cultic ideas, if they persist, are consequential.

**“Swamiji” Becomes Prabhupada**

“Swamiji”, not content to witness modest spiritual gains in his small but growing audience and anxious to expand his mission, was always trying to fan the flames of small fires into big ones. For instance, he was keen to address the United Nations when a representative expressed
interest, although this scheme never materialized (Gosvami, 1980: 174-175; Wheeler, 1985: 44).

In small groups or one on one, he preached by patiently lecturing, persuading, demonstrating, and perpetually referring to his tradition. To do this on a large scale required resources he did not have, such as money for temples and *ashramas*, diverse publications, and competent disciples who could lead his movement according to his direction. Yet in the summer of 1966, after a year of preaching and holding *kirtans*—congregational chanting of Krishna’s names—in sundry venues, Prabhupada managed to establish a storefront center in New York’s Lower East Side’s 26 Second Avenue with the financial and practical help of followers and sympathizers. Tellingly, when the new devotees and the Swami encountered the storefront it still had a sign in the display window announcing its name and wares—“Matchless Gifts.” The Swami rented some rooms in a building behind his new “temple” and immediately began designing and inspiring the first atmosphere of a physical location in America where anyone could come and sample his religion (Hopkins in Dwyer, 180). This is where the Gaudiya Vaishnava universe began for the Western world.

Along with the *kirtanas*, classes in the *Bhagavad Gita* were held free of charge to the public, and there were elaborate vegetarian feasts on Sundays. As the disciples grew more acquainted with their teacher’s traditional lineage, they realized that “Swamiji” was an inadequate title for such an important person. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, fully cognizant of his historical role in bringing Shri Chaitanya’s teaching to the West, accepted from them the more serious title in the Gaudiya tradition, Prabhupada. But the other side of the relationship was still sketchy, for the new disciples were still very raw, not “pakka”; not mature in either their theoretical or their practical understanding of the lineage to which they now owed allegiance (Judah, 1974: 168, 169).
Hearing and Chanting

To remedy his disciples’ ignorance, Prabhupada mandated at least two classes a day in the teachings of the Gaudiya line every day of the year. At this early stage the elaborate worship of altar images, known as *archa-vigraha*, was in its infancy, and kept simple. Prabhupada did not try to hide the rituals of his tradition as other gurus in America did; he introduced them gradually, and sent the new devotees out all day long to perform *sankirtana* on the streets of New York with drums and cymbals, and to distribute *Back to Godhead* magazine, which he first published in 1944 and resurrected in 1966 (Hopkins in Gelberg, 1983: 107-108). Daily before going out to the streets the young devotees listened to a lecture and when they returned in the evening, there was another lecture. In their own words, the disciples’ dedication to their guru’s cause was an outgrowth of their experience with his lectures, the mantra, and a very important item that we will presently explore—*prasada*, the sanctified food offered to Krishna. The first experiences with Prabhupada’s religion emphasized the first two items in the nine processes of devotional service, hearing and glorifying the Lord (*shravanam kirtanam*). What were these experiences like in the very beginning?

The Search for Extraordinary Experiences and Authority

In addition to Prabhupada’s knowledge of the Sanskrit and Bengali scriptures of the tradition backed up by his personal integrity, the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra, the item most cited by the first generation as their most important reason for becoming involved with Prabhupada’s teachings, was another kind of “authority” because its palpable effects corroborated whatever else Prabhupada taught them (Judah, 1974: 162, 165-166; 170-171). Listening to these authorities and trying to follow offered a huge dividend for those cultic enough to believe, facilitating wholesale adoption of Prabhupada’s teachings embodied in new folkways. The dividend was ecstasy while chanting Hare Krishna in the “shadow” of
Prabhupada, for Gaudiya doctrine teaches that neophyte devotees may vicariously enjoy a bit of the ecstasy of the pure devotee (Prabhupada, 1985: 140). The reader must allow a rather long but striking quote from Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami’s account of these early congregational mantra sessions, for it represents a unique picture of the mid 1960’s New York City youth and drug culture and its first contacts with the Vaishnava religion of Bengal. The Gosvami’s remarks are, of course, emic commentary, and they are confirmed by ISKCON’s first chronicler, Ohio State University adjunct English professor Howard Wheeler, Hayagriva Dasa (1985: 4-6).

Most of these young men and women present had at one time or another embarked on the psychedelic voyage in search of a new world of expanded consciousness…there was merit in their valor, their eagerness to find the extra dimensions of the self, to get beyond ordinary existence—even if they didn’t know what the beyond was or whether they would ever return to the comfort of the ordinary. Nonetheless, whatever truth they had found, they remained unfulfilled, and whatever worlds they had reached, these young psychedelic voyagers had always returned to the Lower East Side.

When the kirtana suddenly sprang up from the Swami’s cymbals and sonorous voice, they immediately felt that it was going to be something far out…They would surrender their minds and explore the limits of the chanting for all it was worth…whatever this is, this Indian mantra, let it come, they thought. Let’s take it, and let the effects come. *Whatever the price, let it come.*

In their minds were psychedelic ambitions to see the face of God, fantasies and visions of Hindu teachings, and the presumption that “IT” was all impersonal light…But he let them chant in their own way. In time their submission to the spiritual sound, their purification, and their enlightenment and ecstasy in chanting and hearing Hare Krishna would come (Gosvami, 1980: 115-117, italics mine).

All of this was extraordinary. To more than one new devotee Prabhupada looked like Buddha in meditation, or a powerful monk (Ketola, 2008: 120). In this emic account of the first kirtana held at 26 Second Avenue, with its romantic charm for young seekers, we find a concept vital to our thesis—in this cultic religion we find a prevailing willingness to pay a high price for extraordinary experiences. We also find in this case a belief that Prabhupada was extraordinary, even though the author did not know quite how to place him in the summer of 1966. These points are essential to a rational choice view of religion, because Prabhupada’s youngsters were
deliberately replacing one extraordinary lifestyle (the so called hippy lifestyle) for another. Because the “counterculture” of the hippy society was more of an outgrowth of American culture than Indian culture, the alternative of Krishna consciousness was far more extraordinary.

**The countercultural experience of the first generation**

The lifestyle they had practiced before meeting Prabhupada put a premium on individual experience, following the popular slogan, “if it feels good, do it” (Gosvami. 1980: viii). This mindset was held in common with national youth trends—particularly in urban areas—emphasizing personal fulfillment through the use of mind altering substances and creative attitudes toward sexuality. Judah found that among American Hare Krishna devotees in 1974, “91% had been smoking marijuana one to twelve years; 74 % indicated frequent use. Closely following in popularity was LSD, which 85% had been taking one to seven years” (Judah, 1974: 129). These devotees commonly claim that their drug experiences contributed to their seeking Krishna consciousness (ibid, 128). “All experiences were planned and controlled by Krishna to lead me to Krishna consciousness” (ibid, 130).24

Their attitude toward sexuality also had no precedent. Belonging to the first American generation to openly profess “free love”, almost all were sexually experienced, although most were not married. Before a perusal of Prabhupada’s views on sex, we should note that the new sexuality, for many, was not without a spiritual dimension, or, unlike illicit drug use, without ever increasing philosophical support from America’s “establishment.” Don Lattin, author of *Following Our Bliss: How the Spiritual Ideals of The Sixties Shape Our Lives Today*, points out the modern *detente*, even partnership, prevalent between church religion and liberal views of

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24 “One who has had such a religious trip on LSD can more easily accept later the idea of a miraculous reality such as the world of Krishna, because he has seen a similar one. This is an experience that the majority of people who have not taken psychedelic drugs will never know” (Judah, 1974: 132-133). None of my informants claimed that they had seen a similar vision on drugs. However, we must consider that a drug experience could alter one’s attitude toward the universe of possible discourse, which shall be discussed in brief later on.
sexuality. “Today’s search for an ethical, sex-positive spirituality is one of the most powerful—and
still unfolding—legacies of the Sixties…Rather than ask what God tells us about sex, many
of these theologians ask, ‘What does our sexual experience reveal to us about God?’” (Lattin,
2003: 118). Lattin’s observations indicate a major paradigm shift in American culture that was
just beginning to attain critical mass in 1966, so willingness to experiment with, even commit to,
celibacy at this time points to a major difference between the young few who became seriously
involved with Prabhupada’s teachings and the vast majority that ignored the Hare Krishna
movement when presented with it.

Everything about the Hare Krishna movement was redolent of sacrifice. “America now
rides the crest of the Sexual Revolution, and renouncing sex is like fasting at a feast” (Wheeler,
1985: 41). Only a very few of this study’s informants were naturally interested in celibacy just as
the sexual feast was being set upon the table. Perhaps never before, at least in American history,
would the extraordinary celibacy option cost more.

Another major difference, although Americans mixing drugs with spiritual practices was
not unheard of then or now, was the importance of spirituality for these drug takers. Most
“hippies” simply took drugs without bothering to make a serious investigation of Indic religions;
those who inquired about Hinduism or Buddhism should be taken as a subset of of the so-called
youth movement—and in this case, a complete alternative to the general youth movement
(Daner, 104: 1976).

Hayagriva Dasa (Howard Wheeler) describes this subset within the 1960’s youth culture
in his first person account, The Hare Krishna Explosion. “The joyous affirmations of Emerson,
Thoreau, Whitman…filled a spiritual vacuum. Students began talking of ego-death, expanded
consciousness, eternity, infinity, heaven and hell, and even God. Wanting to get at the meaning
of things, we began searching...We were on the trail of something, but what?” (Wheeler, 1985: 4). The trail of Wheeler and his friends included “reading books on Eastern philosophy and religion, burning lots of candles and incense, and taking ganja and peyote and LSD as aids to meditation. Actually, it was more intoxication than meditation. ‘Meditation’ was a euphemism that somehow connected our highs with our readings” (Gosvami, 1980: 113). Wheeler’s and Gosvami’s experiences were by no means unusual for the majority of Judah’s informants who “testified that they were looking for self-realization and meaning during that period [six months before their “conversion point”] by practicing various forms of spiritual discipline, while still indulging in drugs” (Judah, 1974: 129; 136, 137). “Looking for self-realization and meaning” typified the entire first generation of the Hare Krishna movement in America that tried to include the ethnic Hindus who frequented ISKCON temples but had a different relationship with Prabhupada’s religion. These differences deserve illuminations from the work of sociologist of religion Robert Wuthow, who contrasts the search for spiritual meaning with a spirituality of dwelling. As this study proceeds, we will discover how these two modes of spirituality pertain to the cult to church paradigm, and how they blend, and in many cases, do not blend at all.

A wonderful new home for americans

The scene at 26 Second Avenue is best described as a spirituality of searching because it is not yet dwelling and still has the scent of novelty; these devotees have searched and come to the end of their search and found a cult, but in this stage the taste of searching is still in their mouths. Dwelling is a psychological state that occurs over time in the same physical and/or psychological place. At least, the sort of wonder that typifies cultic life resonates with its novelty, and the wonderful aspect of novelty is taken at face value as evidence of truth. An amusing incident on the sidewalk beside the storefront “temple” illustrates the mood of an early disciple who has come to the profound end of a long search, and the matter of fact attitude that
surrounded it. A soon to be initiated young man, who had heard of Prabhupada, inquired of Prabhupada’s neighbors. “Is this where a Swami is?” They giggled and said, “Pilgrim, your search has ended.” I wasn’t surprised by the answer, because I felt it was the truth.” Another man, soon to become ISKCON’s first temple president, also had an experience of discovery as he walked toward the storefront. “I had the feeling that I was leaving the world, like when you are going to the airport to catch a plane. I thought, ‘Now I’m leaving a part of me behind, and I’m going to something new’” (Gosvami, 1980: 159). A year later in San Francisco, Tamal Krishna Gosvami’s impression was identical to this one in New York (Ketola, 2008: 121).

As we have already mentioned, most of these devotees did leave their old lives behind, at least for some time, and none of them would ever be quite the same after contacting Prabhupada and his tradition. Whether the first generation would have eventually discovered this tradition on their own as they consumed Hinduism is an interesting question, but we can reiterate here that none of the other swamis and yogis that had come over from India informed them about Krishna. And somehow Prabhupada was able to encapsulate his Krishna philosophy in a way that a few Westerners could appreciate, and stimulate a pioneering “feeling of being there”, having arrived (Taylor, 1999: 133).

Wheeler attributes his new life to Prabhupada, and, though innocent of the wisdom of Robert Wuthnow, demonstrates a transitional moment in the relationship between a spirituality of searching and a spirituality of dwelling. No longer would seekers of Wheeler’s generation need to go to India, for India had come to America. This was the ultimate “trip.”

“Have you ever heard of LSD?” I ask [Prabhupada] boldly.

“No,” he says.

“It’s a chemical,” I say, vaguely feeling stupid. “Some people claim that it can give religious insights or ecstasies. Do you think it could be helpful in spiritual life?”
He looks at me for a moment with childlike curiosity.

“You don’t need to take anything for your spiritual life,” he says. “Your spiritual life is already here.”

Yes, it certainly is here, I think, standing before the most exalted personality I have ever seen (Wheeler. 1985: 14).

**Prabhupada Begins Price Negotiations: Spiritual Charisma Establishes a Seller’s Market**

The first installment toward the spirituality of dwelling—at least as far as major lifestyle changes are concerned—was sacrifice of all kinds of pleasures, for no one would make such sacrifices for any frivolous undertaking. This means these new devotees were determined to remain at the temple or align their minds with temple life, views, etc. (this is also an installment of the spirituality of dwelling). The requirements for formal initiation by Prabhupada were not clearly understood by the first initiates beforehand, but were announced soon afterwards. The guru was not willing to budge on the issue of the four regulative principles, but he haggled over the daily number of *japa* rounds to be chanted on strings of beads. A round is 108 beads, a mantra for each bead. At first he told them they must, like the holy men of his tradition, recite at least 64 rounds every day. The shocked facial expression of his new disciples brought the number down to 32, then 25, and finally the standard number for before and after initiation was set at 16 rounds (Gosvami, 1980: 179). This incident shows that Prabhupada was not the “all powerful” guru that many observers have presumed him to be.

Ironically, this negotiated development was very important to ISKCON’s history, because time dedicated to *japa* is time not dedicated to the direct work of spreading the mission through publishing, fundraising, opening temples, distributing literatures, or organizing vegetarian “love feasts.”

Several hours in the day spent chanting, meditating, worshiping, studying scriptures,

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25 It is unknown whether Prabhupada was aware of the meaning of this term for Christians, with its reference to *agape* in a symbolic meal. Prabhupada’s meals were very substantial, not merely symbolic, and the love was
etc. is also not conducive—at least by most Americans’ standards—to a family life and all that entails. Such a virtuoso lifestyle, where time for sadhana (including rituals and lectures) and time for preaching outside the cult competed with time for family, was set as the standard and never amended in any of Prabhupada’s communications. It is true that Prabhupada indicated that home sadhana could be substituted for temple sadhana for family people (and offered his father as an example of home sadhana), but at any rate, as anti-cult people point out, Prabhupada took over the lives of his disciples. But we must point out that he could not get them to chant more than 16 rounds daily.  

Nevertheless, Stillson Judah’s research corroborates the importance of charismatic leadership in cultic religion. Devotees told him about their first meeting with Prabhupada: “‘It was indescribable. It was like seeing the sun after being in the darkness’. Still another replied: ‘My mouth hung open, and I was almost in a trance.’ Others described their feelings as being ‘ecstatic’, ‘filled with awe’, and ‘inconceivable’” (Judah, ibid). Because of his ability to live austerely, even at an advanced age, and his claim to have never in his life violated any of the four regulative principles, he was seen as superhuman (Ketola, 2008: 126). One disciple told cult researcher Larry Shinn that he accepted Prabhupada’s authority because “he was presenting an ancient Indian system of faith that is based on the authority of the scripture. He wasn’t concocting something on his own…I was accepting the word of the Bhagavad Gita and the acaryas [teaching sages] because they were all speaking through him and he was the perfect example of it” (Shinn, 1987: 29). Frequently, these devotees were very concerned about tracing

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26 Many aspired to chant more. But that frequently meant going without sleep to do so.
the claims of a guru back to an Indian tradition, unlike American devotees of other gurus not so concerned with their teacher’s bona fides.

As 20th century philosophers were discussing the death of the author, the first Hare Krishna community in America was learning that the composers of ancient Sanskrit scriptures were speaking through Prabhupada. This gave Prabhupada enormous prestige and credentials to establish a seller’s market, discussing price directly and earnestly in the form of the prescribed number of rounds and the aforementioned regulative principles—the four main ones taken at initiation, and less important ones. But that was not all. The new devotees learned that the god Krishna, once in an almost ineffable interval of cyclic time, comes to earth as his own devotee Shri Chaitanya, in the mood of Radha. This unified combined form of the Divine Couple is eternally devoted to missionary work, to please her/his Lord. The mission was meant to teach all living entities to emulate Shri Chaitanya, and spread his religion. There was never in ISKCON’s history or the wider American Hare Krishna movement an understanding of the theology and practices not inextricably linked to the missionary work (Ketola, 2008: 70). The rounds and regulations would make the devotees fit for this work, ideally desiring to become nothing but a vessel of divine grace at the end of a chain of devotion beginning with Lord Chaitanya through all the exemplars in the Gaudiya line, to Prabhupada—*with the explicit understanding that the guru is not God*. Prabhupada wanted to keep his disciples as far away as possible from the notion that the guru is an *avatara* of Krishna, in sharp contrast to Indian gurus who not only claimed to be God, but taught that everyone was God. Instead, what made Prabhupada charismatic at the level of doctrine, ritual, and his personal example, was his fidelity to his *sampradaya*. In turn, the decisive efforts made by the devotees to follow Prabhupada’s instructions and assist the mission had the effect of integrating them into a very specific Hindu culture.
Prabhupada declares war on American culture—work now, samadhi later

An often quoted verse from the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* was interpreted by Prabhupada to refer to Shri Chaitanya as the leader of a spiritual social movement—the Gaudiya Vaishnava *sampradaya*—simultaneously identifying Shri Chaitanya as an *avatara* of Krishna. This verse has served to inculcate in American devotees the spirit of a great mission. "In the age of Kali, Krishna appears in a golden form, chanting the two syllables krish-na. He descends along with His weapons, *shaktis*, limbs, and eternal confidential associates. Those with intelligence worship Him with the *sankirtana yajna*" (Prabhupada trs. *Shrimad Bhagavatam* 11.5.32, Dandavats 2008). The conflation of the principle of sacrifice (*yajna*) with Chaitanya’s missionary goals and an implied spiritual army justified Prabhupada’s plans for his disciples and provided the movement with inspiration. If we illuminate emic reasoning we discover the new devotees as an organized group of shock troops created from native material by a cultural invader, Prabhupada and his *sampradaya*. In combination they created a beachhead for the influence of further “weapons, *shaktis*, limbs, and eternal confidential associates.”

If their rounds would make the disciples fit for *seva* (service) to the *sankirtana* movement, the opposite was also true. The disciples were not supposed to aspire for their individual spiritual progress alone. Instead, it was understood that one’s recitation of the names of Krishna would be more efficacious by rendering service to the *sankirtana* movement. The whole point of this dialectic was purification of themselves and society (Ketola, 2008: 70). Prabhupada compared himself to the Rama *avatara* of Vishnu, who gathered together an army of monkeys—and of course, his disciples were those monkeys. For their part, both male and female disciples readily identified with their designation, seeing their own state as fallen but with an opportunity, nevertheless, to serve the Lord through Prabhupada. They had all joined Prabhupada’s army, and were proud to wear their necklaces of the sacred *Tulasi* wood as their
“dog collars.” They were now Prabhupada’s monkey soldiers, however fallen, and Krishna’s dogs.

This meant, essentially, a lifetime of hard work. Prabhupada had noticed that Americans had difficulty sitting quietly for long periods of time, and accordingly he favored long kirtanas, short lectures, and lots of service, coining a phrase every Hare Krishna devotee in America knows, “Work now, samadhi later.” Because the way and the goal are the same, they had to perpetually pay for the privilege of more paying. Even the sannyasis were expected to set the example by actively traveling and preaching.

**Sannyasa is for all disciples**

Prabhupada used his scriptures to insist that the market place of the holy name would expand unlimitedly if the devotees detached themselves from sense gratification, chief of which was sex. At the same time, it was also understood that intense participation in the Hare Krishna religion was of an elite character. For the masses, there was simply the congregational kirtana, dancing, and taking prasada, food sanctified by the Lord. But an initiate was supposed to be a sadhu (holy person) or on the path to becoming a sadhu. The men and women who moved into temples without a spouse had psychologically taken sannyasa, although they were called brahmacharis and brahmacharinis. They were not absolutely committed to a life of celibacy as the formally initiated sannyasis were, but because they renounced their old way of life in a radical way, their psychological profile would be recognizable by critical researchers of the renounced ashrama. Prabhupada justified his policy of setting the bar so high for initiates with an example from the market place.

If some so-called guru tells you to give him money in exchange for some mantra and that you can go on and engage in all kinds of nonsense, he is just cheating you. Because we want something sublime and yet want it cheaply, we put ourselves in a position to be cheated. This means that we actually want to be cheated. If we want something valuable, we must pay for it. We cannot expect to walk into a jewelry store and demand the most
valuable jewel for a mere ten cents. No, we must pay a great deal. Similarly, if we want perfection in yoga, we have to pay by abstaining from sex (Prabhupada, 1995-2002).

Prabhupada’s statement above resonates with the religious market theory of Rodney Stark who contends that, in general, religious people want as much religious experience as they can get with the least expenditure possible—although Prabhupada was asking people to pay a high price. There is nothing uncommon in this, because preachers across religious traditions make a point of it and ask their listeners—most of whom are not religious specialists—to try a little harder. So Prabhupada, obviously, was determined to get as much sacrifice out of his religious specialist disciples as possible—for their own good and for his worldwide mission—and he had little patience for “sex-positive spirituality” and theologians who ask, “What does our sexual experience reveal to us about God?”

Instead, abstaining from sex would help to reveal God by attracting the “All Attractive”; it would hone the determination of young people just as Prabhupada told them that the very determined Gandhi, who went celibate at midlife, supposedly drove the British from India.27 By determined sacrifice, one could accomplish anything. Because sexuality is as basic as eating, sleeping, and work, attempts to radically alter it constitute, as Prabhupada noted, a declaration of war on material nature. For this tradition it is also inextricable from attitudes and policies toward women and consequently, children. It is a subject to which we must return frequently.

As far as sexual experience itself was concerned, Prabhupada would answer the question above by saying sex in all of its aspects reveals to us how temporary and unsatisfying it really is; the dissatisfaction felt in the political side of even married sex, for instance, should then be another reason to take the spiritual medicine, which begins in the mind. One should control one’s mind in the first place by always thinking of Krishna, and with much practice, detachment would come,

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27 Prabhupada interprets the name Krishna to mean “All Attractive.” See Prabhupada, 1982, 1.
then peace, and finally happiness (Prabhupada, 1989: 155-6; 158-160; 286). Controlling one’s mind strengthens one’s will; if the mind is uncontrolled the weak will begins anew the cycle of thinking about sense gratification, feeling and desiring it, and then willing it. If we take individual will as essential to a rational choice perspective, Prabhupada’s contention that all human actions are a result of first thinking, then feeling, and finally willing, has a certain logic. One could avoid falling into mundane consciousness by always thinking of Krishna, feeling the bliss of devotional service, and willing to perform more devotional service.

Prabhupada’s devotees report having trouble with all sorts of material desires, but the records show that attraction to the opposite sex was the number one temptation. The prohibition on gambling was a cipher for most devotees, since it wasn’t popular with most of them at any time; the one against eating meat, fish, or eggs was no problem for almost all of them; and intoxication was usually a temptation surrendered to only after the sexual issue became important, if at all. We will briefly mention here that for many, sexuality was somewhat important in the difference between the experience of women and that of men. It was acknowledged that almost all women would marry. There were exceptions to this acknowledgment, an issue that will be addressed further on in the interest of measuring costs and benefits on the cultic road to church.

There is nothing about Prabhupada’s views on sex that would surprise anyone familiar with worldly renunciation in many Indic religious systems. However, we cannot understand the cult to church paradigm in relation to the American movement without examining the imposition of renounced values upon the married disciples. Prabhupada shocked Wheeler when he described the ideal lifestyle of the Gaudiya householder. Stephen Goldsmith, a lawyer who assisted in the
incorporation of ISKCON, exclaimed, “I’m not ready to have children. But this doesn’t mean that I’m prepared to give up sex.”

“No,” Swamji says. “Restriction there must be. It is not that we to go to sex like cats and dogs. Sex should be restricted to once a month to beget nice children.”

“Once monthly?!?”

“Easier to forget the whole thing,” I say.

“Accha! That’s it! Best not to think of it…then we are saved from so much botheration. Sex is like an itch; when we scratch, it gets worse…We must understand that sex life is the highest material pleasure, and therefore the strongest bond to material life, to rebirth in the material world…[in the Bhagavad Gita] Krishna uses the word kama, lust, what we call sex life. That is all that keeps us from Krishna consciousness” (Wheeler, 40).

If a young New Yorker could accept that sex was an obstacle to be removed in spiritual life, lesser restrictions against watching television or listening to the radio, playing games of any sort, going to the donut shop (Prabhupada called it the “do not shop”) or the pizza parlor, or even maintaining intimate friendship with outsiders—could also be accepted. Now, as already mentioned, initiation was the standard for becoming a devotee of Krishna under Prabhupada’s system, and this makes none of the restrictions discussed here optional. My interviews indicated that it also makes it very difficult for many individuals to decide for themselves what level of cultic effort is appropriate, for it could seem to such cultists that, although the process of rational choice continues, the option to make one’s own detailed plan does not really exist. The choice becomes instead to follow or not to follow because the relationship between master and disciple is of the utmost seriousness (Prabhupada, 1972: 79-81). Any other plan, to one degree or another, is directed by maya. We should point out here that some individuals were more self-directed than others, but this was in spite of, not because of, the general trend. Indeed, there is little room in such a system for the critique of universal standards by “public intellectuals”, as McCutcheon would put it, concerned with demonstrating the local
instead of universal pertinence of many of Prabhupada’s instructions. Even Prabhupada, who was frequently exasperated by his disciples’ lack of a sense of proportion or sensitivity to time, place, and circumstance, did not encourage the public intellectual in his institution, for he was conducting a siege of American culture by Sri Chaitanya’s army, not encouraging an institutional dialectic. Nuance would come later in the cult to church process. We will show at the end of this chapter that at one time, to adopt the position of a public intellectual could be dangerous within the organization founded by Prabhupada but directed by his disciples.

All of this adds to a condition of choice that Gelberg, when he was still involved with the cult, described as heroic, for cultic choices generally are heroic or at least radical in the beginning (Gelberg, 1983: 50). After all, many devotees literally had to follow the instruction of Jesus to leave one’s natal family behind, because their parents could not abide their child’s rational choice. 28 So the first generation faced drastic choices, by most people’s standards—either follow the strict path at a terrible cost, and get the supreme reward—or not follow at an even greater cost, wasting one’s valuable and rare human life. Prabhupada repeatedly emphasized the rarity of Krishna consciousness and forthrightly stated the price. "Pure devotional service in Krishna consciousness cannot be had even by pious activity in hundreds and thousands of lives. It can be attained only by paying one price—that is, intense greed to obtain it. If it is available somewhere, one must purchase it without delay" (Prabhupada in VedaBase, Madhya 8.70). It was now available in Manhattan. But were they greedy enough?

28 Two brothers were initiated at 26 Second Avenue, and their mother was furious. “She tells “Swamiji”, ‘You could have left me at least one of my sons.’ ‘Go bow down to your mother, Swamij tells Brahmananda, [who] immediately complies…’I still don’t see what is wrong with Judaism’ she pouts, less than flattered by this strange gesture of humility by her son” (Wheeler, 78). Devotees’ parents—even of “liberal” Christian and Jewish persuasion—were usually more adamant in their opposition than their cultic children were in opposing them, who now wanted to bow to them, and many would not humor their children at all. It is left to the reader to decide whether the cultic choice we are discussing was heroic or not, but at least it was generally very calculated because being disowned by one’s parents can be quite expensive psychologically.
“You Americans Will Go Back to Godhead by Taking Prasada”

June McDaniel has observed that one big difference between followers of tantra and followers of Chaitanya is that the former, supposedly, have sex without sensuality, while the latter have sensuality without sex. Of course all Gaudiyas—in India or America—do not necessarily aspire to an ascetic life. Still, McDaniel has understood the sensuality of Shri Chaitanya’s legacy in the form of prasada, the sanctified food offered to the Lord. Taking prasada is the only daily bodily pleasure authorized for vaidhi sadhana bhakti—the system of rules and regulations preparatory to spontaneous devotion, in which Prabhupada’s constant slogan is “I am not this body.” Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami, in the first person, obliges our theoretical perspective by describing the taking of “sumptuous” prasada in the terms of cost-benefit analysis. “Eating the feast was an intense experience. We were supposed to be controlling our senses all week, following strict regulations, controlling the tongue. And this feast was a kind of reward” (Gosvami, 1980: 245 italics mine). Wheeler recalls, “After the feasts, we are so full that we can only roll over on the floor and sleep” (Wheeler, 1985: 79). But devotees soon discovered the practicality of prasada for the mission.

Prabhupada set a goal for ISKCON—to eventually guarantee that no one would ever go hungry within ten miles of an ISKCON temple. It is likely that Prabhupada understood the efficacy of distribution of food by Hindus and especially Sikhs to one and all, for it had helped Bhaktivinoda to consolidate Gaudiya communities in Bengal, and hundreds of years earlier did the same for Guru Nanak’s teaching. Prabhupada believed that prasada magically turned a conditioned soul wandering in samsara into a Krishna bhakta on the way back to Godhead, as explained in the hagiography of the sage Narada (Prabhupada, 1989: 453).
**Spiritual experience in the here and now**

The new devotees claimed that *prasada* changed one’s consciousness in the here and now (Joanna, 2009). There was no question of *prasada* merely functioning as a compensation for eternal life in the future, as Stark has claimed for religious belief (Stark: 1987: 27-47). The corroboration of sacred Gaudiya texts by *prasada* (and vice versa) for Americans of the 20th century was pivotal for the first generation, for it had previously experimented with and embraced mind altering substances that seemed to confirm or at least indicate spiritual realities. The literature on these substances is filled with personal accounts of visions of *mandalas*, auras, and *cakras*, a wide assortment of fantastic hallucinations involving all the senses. The effect of the mantra and *prasada* was found to be even more efficacious in the confirmation of spiritual realities than illicit drugs. “After all, it was spiritual…This was better than American food. It was like chanting…You got high from eating this food” (Gosvami, 180: 151, 189).

Much like the Pentecostal movement, and sects and cults in general, as a new religious movement the “Hare Krishnas” “major in experience. People will say, ‘I went there and something happened to me” (Lattin, 2003:182). This was exactly what Prabhupada intended with his *kirtanas* and *prasada*; he wanted people to have a spiritual experience in addition to a discursive understanding of his cult. In the history of religion we have never heard of a religion marketing itself as a religion of delicious food until the Gaudiya invasion of the West. Prabhupada said his movement could be called “the kitchen religion” (Brahmabhuta, 2001).

**Prasada addresses a counterculture lacuna**

The group ritual of taking *prasada* was a kind of communion that bound the new devotees to each other. Here we can profitably substitute the word *prasada* for *mantra* in a reference from Gregory Johnson’s 1969 study of the first San Francisco temple. "For many devotees, the hypnotic quality of the mantra seemed to be an experience equivalent to hallucinogenic drug use.
Not only did the mantra generate feelings of ecstasy or transcendence, it also involved a community—something lacking in the drug experience" (Johnson 1974: 44). So kirtana and prasada—highly theistic, yet also magical—reversed the Enlightenment project in America, and established Shri Chaitanya’s program—chanting, dancing, and feasting.

**Momentous Options for A Live Wire Hypothesis—Religious Experience and Wish Fulfillment**

Aside from its social aspects, with our description of the significance of its doctrine, mantra, and especially prasada, and how these support each other, we now have sufficient information to examine the rational nature of this religious cult from a closer psychological perspective. Before continuing our exploration of the development of early ISKCON I will discuss the psychological state of cultic affairs as “momentous options” according to the logic of William James.

I have already pointed out that Starkean cults, being extraordinary, require more conscious choosing than do Weberian churches, in which one is born and can drift along with other believers under the spell of memes. Of course, cultic choice is only absolutely true if the brainwashing hypothesis for religious cults is absolutely false. While it would be injudicious to claim that coercion never takes place in religious cults—coercion being well known also in established churches and sects, and non-religious situations—the notion that involvement in religious cults actually undermines the will and judgment of a consenting adult has been rejected by almost all sociologists and anthropologists who study religion (Ellwood, 1988: 272). ²⁹

So far I have engaged with ISKCON and its investment in literary discourse, but there is another discourse of a more primal nature that has been very important to the sampradaya’s purpose and resonates with contemporary observations that art has taken over many of the

²⁹ Professionals who endorse brainwashing theory are almost always psychologists.
functions of religion (Taylor, 2007: xvi-xvii). Fortuitously for our purposes, the movement has literally painted vivid pictures of its views on the nature of “free” will. The soul is free to love Krishna or not, and that is its only freedom. One of the first accomplishments of ISKCON was the establishment of devotee art studios dedicated to capturing the teachings on the soul in relation to God in pictures, which soon appeared in Prabhupada’s Bhagavad Gita As It Is, published by Macmillan Co. in paperback with color plates in 1972. In this text, Plate 38 depicts the choices available to “conditioned souls” in the material world. The painting shows two men—the paintings as well as the written teachings were almost always situated toward a male point of view—standing midway upon a symbolic stairway. One man is looking down the stairs at a beautiful woman offering trinkets as he descends into attachment, pride, greed, etc, until finally, desperately clutching his heart, he finds himself in hell clutching for one more trinket. The other man, conversely, is looking up the stairway at a shaven headed devotee inviting him to accept the spiritual master, then to study the scriptures, perform austerities, practice sense control, and finally attain direct spiritual knowledge of devotion to Radha and Krishna. The two men, obviously, represent the choices individual souls make in the material world for better or worse, either entangling them in the fruits of their karma, or liberating them to begin the spiritual ascent. Regardless of the gender emphasis, the picture applies to men and women. According to the Bhagavad Gita, all people including women may approach the Lord through devotion (Prabhupada, 1989: 497), and all must consciously decide to do so. ³⁰ Here we are reminded of Eileen Barker’s question as to how anyone could consciously choose to become a cultist in the

³⁰ Prabhupada tended to use the masculine pronoun when referring to the soul in specific context, but he also asserted conceptually that all souls were female in relation to God. There are souls in the form of males in Vaikuntha or Goloka, the spiritual world, so it is not clear how all souls are literally female. Shri Chaitanya was impatient of any identity at all save servitorship, which “engendered” all other spiritual forms and relationships. One’s gender, form, etc. is only what Krishna wants, which is identical with the pure souls’ wants. For this tradition, that’s the whole point of the Bhagavad Gita—a personal oneness of relationship, not monistic advaita.
first place, because any Hare Krishna devotee will tell you that religion is about making momentous decisions in the progression from thinking (this includes belief), to feeling, to willing. In this regard, as we have mentioned, Gelberg has written that cultic choice is heroic. ISKCON researcher Larry Shinn takes it as “rational.” “While there are also social and emotional components to any conversion process (though in various mixtures), the dominant force is usually the convert’s rational (or rationalized) quest for meaning that is satisfied by the Krishna story” (Shinn, 1987: 161).

In his famous “The Will to Believe”, an 1896 lecture aimed at defending religious faith, James takes the argument that religious belief is rational (James, 1896). James’ view compliments our emphasis on belief for a religious tradition seeking to establish itself in America through texts. “Let us give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead” (James, 1896). He then proceeds to list standards of evaluation for any two competing hypothesis, and discusses the nature of options.

1. **Alive or dead.** This means that a hypothesis either appeals to someone, or it does not. For instance, for a faithful, conservative Protestant Christian, the hypothesis that Krishna is God is a dead hypothesis; that Jesus is God the Son is a live hypothesis. “This shows that deadness and liveness in a hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker” (ibid). If it is related to the individual thinker, it is subjected to feeling. Accordingly, one feels that options are either alive or dead.

2. **Forced or unforced.** James offers Pascal’s Wager as a hypothetical situation bearing a forced option, for to accept his wager is to reject objections to it, and vice versa. Anytime there is an either/or situation, it is a forced option.

3. **Momentous or trivial.** High stakes options are momentous, low stakes options are not. The possibility of the existence of heaven and hell makes our decisions serious, deciding between chocolate or vanilla does not.

    James proposes that only options that are alive, forced, and momentous are important to religious belief—and that this is rational. This view has been criticized by Dewey and others for
its seeming dependence on Abrahamic monotheism, but it is evident that Dewey did not (and probably, due to the immature state of contemporary Western discourse on Indic religions, could not) account for theistic Hinduism. At any rate, we have already discussed the extent to which the early devotees were inclined to believe Prabhupada’s teachings, for they were charmed by what they considered to be a live option. These teachings—especially as they challenged their previous religious training, science, and modern views on social issues—were either correct, or they were not, and so constituted a forced option. And because they had to sacrifice so much in order to take these teachings very seriously, the new devotees certainly were confronted with a momentous option. It will not surprise us that Stark has delineated sacrifice as important to religious belief, for the simple reason that when one invests in anything, the tendency is to believe in what one has invested in. So here, we have indicated a three-fold motivation for American devotion to a Hindu god and his goddess—it was alive, forced, and momentous.

**Religious Experience, Religious Economy, and Wish Fulfillment**

At this point we must remind the reader of another facet of religion not explored in James’ essay, which valorizes religious faith: the importance of religious experience. Melton has written, “To downplay the genuine religious atmosphere of most new religions is to miss the heart of their reality” (Melton, 1982: 32). Participant disclosures reveal that Prabhupada’s teachings seemed to be verified by the “scientific experiment” he recommended; they tried chanting and dancing, they tried following the four regulative principles, they tried every kind of prasada they could get their hands on, and after trying all of these, they claimed to experience spiritual ecstasy. The ecstasy was the payment for their trials. And when the payment was slow in arriving, James’ principle of the “moral question”, settled the matter in favor of continued involvement with the cult. “Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose
solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist” (James, 1896).

Belief in Krishna, as Prabhupada systematically presented him, fulfilled the wishes of his disciples, more than theoretically. Wish fulfillment is a classic symptom of cultic involvement, whether we see a “cult” as something evil or prefer the social scientific, non-pejorative denotation for the term; people do not lend themselves to extraordinary beliefs, practices, and lifestyles without strong wishful motives for doing so. Prabhupada would reject Freud’s view of religion as a childish illusion, but he would affirm that wish fulfillment was fundamental to his cult; the soul like Krishna is a conscious person, and desire is a symptom of consciousness. Because of the wish-fulfilling capacity of Gaudiya Vaishnavism for these young people, the positives overwhelmed the negatives and finished the discussion. As James noted, “A system, to be a system at all, must come as a closed system, reversible in this or that detail, perchance, but in its essential features never!” (ibid).

Essentially, according to participant disclosures with this tradition, Krishna fits the description of God, and more. Here is a feature of a personal divinity that is very unique, for “pure devotees” love Krishna whether he is God, or not: "He may be God or He may be whatever He is. It doesn't matter” (Prabhupada, Jaya Radha Madhava translation). Ultimately, that Krishna is God is a detail, and such an idea promotes the beautiful, knowledgeable, strong, wealthy, famous, and renounced Krishna, rather than speculative theology, to discuss and experience through the person and book Bhagavatam. And, there is kirtana and prasada (Prabhupada, 1989: 518). The package presented by Prabhupada, whether experiential or a "moral question", was, to his disciples, beautifully circular. But how could beauty and aesthetic appreciation suffice to compel one to “take sannyasa” from American society?
What is Real? Symbols and Signified All the Way Up

*Om asato mā sad gamaya
   Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya
   Mṛtyor mā amritam gamaya.*

"Lead me from the unreal to the real; lead me from darkness to light; lead me from mortality to immortality." - *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28

The universe of possible discourse—how does one know what is real?

Prabhupada’s disciples overwhelmingly accepted his version of everything as real, or depending on the context, the Real. But the Real is generally not approached in Hinduism by late teenagers and twenty-somethings leaving everything behind, and as Jesus counseled, leaving the dead to bury the dead. Prabhupada set the example of marriage and raising a family, and did not leave his family until he was elderly. For our purposes, the issue of the percentage of the Indian population that ever actually practiced *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*, the retired and renounced *varnas* of the Hindu social system, is not germane to this study. For the purpose of illuminating the cult to church paradigm for the Hare Krishna movement in America, it is only important to understand that Prabhupada demanded great sacrifice as the price of admittance to the cult of Shri Chaitanya.

The sacrificial mood of Prabhupada’s books begs us to continue our psychological discussion of the first generation. We have shown powerful moods and motivations for the establishment and continuation of this cult in America, and now, under the suggestion of Eileen Barker, it is appropriate to further address the issue of doubt. How could one become a cultist when almost everyone rejects the cult? How can one know what is real?

Judah’s work features testimonies that discuss world views in relation to church symbols vs. cult symbols at a time when cultural norms in America appeared to be disintegrating. “The devotees of Krishna found themselves in an established culture that had been defended by logic,
but did not fit their world view.” Of their educational experience, such adjectives as “stupid” and “a drag” were used to describe it (Judah, 1974: 152). Widespread cynicism was the order of the day, because “the preachers didn’t do as they preached.” Another devotee spoke disparagingly of her entire religious experience prior to Krishna consciousness. “Even from the first grade my religion seemed to be lacking, hypocritical, insufficient.” There was also existential despair. “Before entering Krishna consciousness, I had the feeling that the world and all its goings on were a gargantuan mistake and the only way to live with any meaning was to see that life has no meaning outside itself...Krishna consciousness has meaning and permanent results” (ibid, 155). Commonly, even the material culture as well as standard concepts of the devotees’ parents’ church were not appreciated, as one recent informant reveals. How could they be Real?

When I was a child of three or four, my Catholic church had a life-size diorama of Christ crucified. Here I am, terrified of this image, and they would force me to go see it. I remember being told how Christ rose from his grave. Then at night, they made me pray to the Holy Ghost—who had left his grave—and the image of the bloody diorama would haunt me. To top it all off, if someone did not love the cruel Father, the Holy Ghost, and his tortured to death Son, they were destined for an eternal existence in hell. So when I heard that Prabhupada would refuse to enter any room with a crucifix out of deference for Lord Jesus Christ, I knew this was one more reason that he had won my respect. The ghastly medieval images of Christianity made me question the whole thing (Diego 2008).

Former Jews, too, spoke of unsatisfactory imagery; the altar in a synagogue contains no images at all. The invisible God of Judaism and Christianity had not been compelling to these devotees. Jesus was universally admired as a holy teacher by devotees from both Christian and Jewish backgrounds, but for many his God—seen as cruel, fanatic, capricious or at best indifferent—had little attraction for them (Melton, 1982: 32). They also saw no reason to respect as holy the priests who smoked and drank, ministers who drove fancy cars, or orthoprax rabbis who, in terms of belief, were agnostic or even atheistic.
Beliefs were important cultural symbols, for in their generalizing about mainstream American culture many of the first disciples were put off by two highly defined options—either you had only one life to live, to be judged when dead for all eternity, or, there was no God, no soul, no nothing after death but the material world that goes on without you. Liberal Christian theology may have been acceptable for its social doctrine, but its metaphysics were not inspiring, and consequently there did not seem to be a rich plethora of belief options in American culture regarding the afterlife.

The question of options is also a question of identity, for people who hold fast to any of the belief systems mentioned above generally realize that they are mutually exclusive. When you become a cultist, you subscribe to a deviant doxa, somewhat as the term has been developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His doxa takes for granted “the universe of possible discourse”, and seems to be closely related to the concept of memes, for doxa automatically restricts one’s consumption of alternate possibilities. Bourdieu was thinking about “self-evident”, memetic class restrictions on consumption of high culture, but here we are thinking of alternate cultural consumption—the embracing of a counterculture by (mostly) middle class youth of a very different universe of possible discourse. This is vital because, in addition to its emphasis on doctrine and texts, Prabhupada’s main arguments are pitched to a high level of cultural interest in the aesthetic. What is more, these teachings aimed at the aesthete are deeply rooted in Indian high culture and as such, however cultic, are another validation of their authenticity (Embree, 1988: 265).

This aesthetic portrayal of the divine gave Prabhupada and his teachings enormous symbolic capital (authoritative embodiment of cultural value) and enabled him to create in his followers a modicum of cultural capital (enabling knowledge, experience and/or connections
with a culture) where none had existed. In turn, the ability of the first generation to comprehend, even superficially, the aesthetic appeal of Gaudiyā doctrine and experience a shadow of its ecstasy radically unhinged them from the cultural symbols of their upbringing. When this happened, they were able to comprehend, at least partially, Prabhupada’s example of spiritual veracity. How does one know that one is on the right, the real, spiritual path? Prabhupada said it was just as when a hungry man eats and feels satisfaction—this is how he knows that his food and his eating experience are real (Prabhupada, 1971, Detroit initiations). We cannot pass judgment on what is Real or the legitimacy of religious experience, but we must reiterate that the first American devotees needed the cultural capital Prabhupada donated to them, in their attempt to approach the Real as Prabhupada described it.

**Radical alienation from society’s ideas—who is crazy?**

It is apropos to view the disciples’ renunciation not only as detachment from material things (or the attempt to be detached) but also alienation from their parents’ cultural symbols. These did not “belong” to them (Judah, 1974: 137; Glock, 1964: 25, 28, 31). “This alienation created the world of the Krishna pre-convert” (Judah, 1974: 160). The invisible God and the suffering God did not belong to them, nor did atheism have any aesthetic appeal as a world view—there was no scope for appreciating the beauty of God if there was no God.

In most cases they had begun the process of identification with Indic ideas and values years before they encountered Prabhupada’s teachings (Judah, 1974: 161). This identification suggests the pertinence of Stark’s theory of religious markets, for investment in the Hare Krishna market niche is more likely if someone already likes Hinduism or even Buddhism, and not likely, for instance, if someone likes America’s largest Protestant religious expression, the Southern Baptist Church. Indeed, the Baptists are not even “represented in the statistics of the Hare Krishna membership, nor are any of the rapidly growing Pentecostal groups” (Judah, 1974: 148).
After all, Christian groups who have actively opposed Indic religion in America, even going so far as to disrupt public outdoors Hare Krishna festivals and parades, have never been of the liberal variety, and they are satisfied with conservative church or sectarian religious symbols. Therefore, they (and some atheists) question the sanity of the Hare Krishnas. Prabhupada, who insisted that his religion was rational, responded to these criticisms with a *Back to Godhead* article entitled “Who Is Crazy?”, which, naturally, turned the tables on his critics.

**The discredited god and simulacrum**

Mark C. Taylor’s discussion of the “speculative” nature of theology in *About Religion* speaks to my thesis. He writes, “Every system—be it philosophical, social, political, psychological, or religious—is an economic structure that sustains and is sustained by networks of exchange. Though the currency varies, the laws governing such systems remain structurally constant” (Taylor, 1999: 22). For Taylor, God the creator has been “discredited” in modern exchange with humans because humans, their lives lived on credit and their futures “mortgaged”, fail to keep their obligations to God and incur a debt—guilt. Taylor’s observation is directed to Christianity, but in 1966 recognition of guilt and fearful guilty feelings had been reinstalled for the first generation of Hare Krishna devotees in America because, unlike most gurus who came from India and humored a counterculture unconcerned with the fearful consequences of sin, sin against a personal—albeit loving—God was brought into focus for this generation by Prabhupada. The first generation’s debt and feelings of guilt could not be erased by immersion in Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” which effaces “the pure and intelligible idea of God.” This precession was disdained by many in the generation that came of age in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, the first in history to be trained in the appreciation of extreme simulacra of electronic media, which is nothing but “ideality”, things that exist as ideas only, “signifiers all
the way down” with no signified anywhere (Taylor, 1999: 22). Consequently we the guilty remain complacently shallow in our search for happiness.

For the first generation of Hare Krishna devotees, Weber’s warning about modern society trapped in an iron cage of materialism (Weber, 1958: 9) is nowhere realized more poignantly than in Protestant values of sacred work twisted beyond recognition in the television advertising industry, where we are led to believe that a certain car or cigarette will bring happiness. A more complex level of simulacrum will show a car, in a 2008 television marketing ploy, appropriating the super powers of gods and flying in the sky. Nothing in the ad is real, it is nothing but a representation of a representation of a representation. For atheists Taylor and Baudrillard, Judaism, Islam, and many forms of Protestant Christianity, iconography is an “effacement of the divine”, and Taylor wonders if it is the negation of God or God’s self-realization (because no God, in fact, exists). Taylor admits that he is embarrassed that he still thinks in terms of God at all. With less apparent philosophical sophistication, some religious groups prohibit not only direct images of God, but have extended their contempt to photography, television, “play acting” in stage productions, films, etc. Could it be that these religionists realize that the invisible God dies when his simulacrum takes over?

It is clear that neither Taylor, Baudrillard or iconoclasts in the Abrahamic traditions are dealing in a concept of God commonly understood in Vaishnava Hinduism—that God not only is not effaced by icons, but is actually present in them—even as them—not merely represented. Although multiplied, these icons are never simulacra. For the Gaudiyas, the first principle of deity worship is that signified and signifier are identical. Do not reality and simulacrum exist only in the eyes of the beholder? At the very least, it seems the literature on simulacra would concede the point. Perhaps not. But the worship of icons throughout Hinduism, regardless of
opinions about the “ultimate” nature of divinity (an elite topic of discussion), is generally seen as a manifestation of the deity’s merciful nature, which does not exhaust or delete the deity. In participant disclosures by Hare Krishna people in America, we find, in addition to their fascination with another sort of “pure and intelligible idea of God” as they would see it (Bhagavad Gita 10.32, “Among logicians I am the conclusive truth”), a fascination with the three dimensional iconic forms of Radha and Krishna essential to Gaudiya ritual, and their existential reality realized in the Hare Krishna mantra, prasada, and other expressions of the divine.

When the first generation entered the iconophiliac world of Hinduism and learned the practice of “seeing” God—darshan—they effectively left the iconoclastic Protestant world that informed American culture, the “shell game” of Mark Taylor that proliferates corrupted images of the divine. Prabhupada introduced many facets of this Gaudiya form of Hinduism that affirm the sacred, such as the sacred basil goddess Tulasi Devi (ocimum basilicum/sanctum) embodied in living wood and leaves instead of being represented by wood and leaves; prasada understood as actually Krishna, not merely representative of Krishna; or the recitation of Krishna’s names understood as non-different from Krishna, not merely representative of Krishna. All of these challenge Baudrillard’s view of vacuous modern representations of the divine. For the American devotees, their new religion had nothing to do with “signifiers all the way down.” Because they were charmed by fresh understandings of reality that at least seemed divine, they took Prabhupada’s teachings about a wide array of supernatural entities breaking through to the plane of human consciousness as a set of signifieds all the way up. At the same time, taking prasada, chanting the holy name, and worshiping images of God and Tulasi are also holy signifiers—avenues to transcendence—because these are essential aspects of sadhana on the upward path to
enlightenment. And, when modern people consider food magical and believe that plants are goddesses, the world has been reenchanted.

**The role of sacrifice in the spirituality of dwelling**

Of course, to accept all of these things in a serious way, turning one’s back on American cultural ideas, is an exercise in great sacrifice—but it is precisely such cultic sacrifice, as opposed to absorption in society’s “simulacra”, that turns an extraordinary spirituality of searching into a consciously chosen, far more ordinary spirituality of dwelling. Denial of such ordinary interests is to deny the McCutcheon warning about researchers’ misplaced phenomenological credulity altogether, for then we would have to concentrate wholly on experience of an extraordinary, ahistoric, *sui generis* “Reality”, and we do not mean to do that here.

Wuthnow, in discussing the commercialization of trivialized and inconsequential options, has observed, “Choice exists only where sacrifice is involved” (Wuthnow, 1976: 206). When a spirituality of searching is imbued with such rational choices as always pertain to sacrifice, it becomes a spirituality of dwelling on account of sacrificial investments and then approaches, in one more way, the psychological profile of a church with stakes in the ordinary—internally, and in relation to society. Humans and animals search, invest (nesting), and consequently, dwell. After dwelling the cycle may replenish with new and significant parameters, as McCutcheon’s emphasis on history would insist, but here we are considering a particular cyclic phase.

For Prabhupada’s students the cyclic combination of an exotic teaching and sacrificial choice had a profound effect. In Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami’s and Wheeler’s emic accounts of the summer of 1966, for a few New Yorkers, Prabhupada reversed the Enlightenment project by reenchanting the world, blurring the line between religion and magic, and revealing the *axis mundi* in a mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary—in sacred food, sound vibration, marble and brass (diety worship), and living wood.
Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami records that throughout that summer and into the fall Prabhupada enjoyed robust health, heartily taking *prasada* (Gosvami, 1980: 168) and directing all the activities of his new center at Matchless Gifts. We must pause here to consider Prabhupada’s extraordinary frame of mind in the early autumn after he experienced success in fulfilling his guru’s order, for, as we have mentioned, the supply side of a religious cult is as important as the demand side in a religious market—whether church, sectarian, or cultic. Satsvarupa Gosvami writes nostalgically of this period.

“These were happy days for Prabhupada, but his happiness was not like the happiness of an old man’s ‘sunset years.’ His was the happiness of youth, a time of blossoming, of new powers, a time when future hopes expand without limit...He was like a young giant just beginning to grow” (Gosvami, 1980: 192). It is indeed remarkable that Prabhupada’s hopes were expansive in his old age, the most accessible (and dramatic) part of “the story of Srila Prabhupada’s sacrificial life” (Judah in Gosvami, 1981: viii). At this time the moods and motivations experienced by Prabhupada set the course for his institution and wider movement. However, although he knew everything about his tradition but very little about America, he still had his old “disease” of only thinking big. Could large scale planning and devotional fervor manifest in great sacrifice ultimately diminish the significance of profound misunderstandings of American culture—misunderstandings that, as certainly as the obligation to preach, were institutionalized in the very beginning? And what role would ISKCON leaders play in this?

We should not confuse Prabhupada’s acuity in business dealings on behalf of ISKCON (he had been a small entrepreneur in his married days, and was expert in bookkeeping and other business skills) or his Pied Piper role as a religious teacher, or even his reputed saintliness, with an informed view of American culture. As he himself revealed, when he got off the boat, he
didn’t know whether “to turn left or right” (Gosvami, 1980: 8). For instance, he quickly pointed out the number of closed down churches, but didn’t know (what even many educated Americans didn’t know) that conservative churches, with a well-defined market niche, were actually on the rise—unlike liberal churches struggling to define their niche. He couldn’t know that boarded up churches frequently meant more about shifting demographics than a loss of interest in religion. In keeping with his experience as an Indian male born in the Victorian age and steeped in Hindu mores, he also presumed that all women, including American women, wanted and needed to submit to a man and would be satisfied with nice clothes, jewelry, and children—and he never modified his views on women. Perhaps his greatest miscalculation was in misunderstanding American economics; seeing the nation’s vast wealth all around him, he thought or at least hoped that his householder disciples—who for the most part joined his movement before they were established in their careers—could afford to donate half of their income to the mission. On the most elementary, non-social level he even laughingly admitted that the first time he saw snow, he thought that the city of New York had spread lime on the streets. And yet, in his innocence of American culture, he still intended to use the country for his mission, founded on a shoestring. Many other examples could be cited, but these facts alone militate against the anti-cult myth that he was an all powerful guru. Without knowledge, there cannot be total control. But his summer of 1966 had been a huge success, and his disciples seemed willing to try to do anything he asked.

**Iskcon’s Manifest Destiny**

Then, as his second winter came upon him, Prabhupada made a fateful decision that was critical to the history of the institution. His disciple Mukunda Dasa had gone to San Francisco and reported that it was ripe for Krishna consciousness, and Prabhupada, naturally, was enthusiastic about the idea. But some of the devotees were shocked and/or terrified—how could they remain Krishna conscious without their Swami? And how could “Swamiji” survive in
America without them? “They didn’t think that people out on the West Coast could take care of Swamiji properly. Those people out there didn’t have the proper respect. Anyway, there was no suitable temple there” (Gosvami, 1980: 271). Prabhupada overrode all objections and announced his intention to travel. He had told them all along of his plan to fulfill Shri Chaitanya’s prediction that his name be sung in every town and village on earth, but no one thought the mission would expand from New York so abruptly. To mollify them, “Prabhupada explained that he would only be gone for a few weeks, and that he wanted all the programs to go on in his absence” (ibid). It has already been mentioned here that Prabhupada was a Gaudiya exemplar of unshakable faith, and that faith sustained his conviction that all would be well. Later in this chapter we will discover the consequences of such faith and how it has influenced, in both positive and negative ways, future cultic developments even to this day.

Prabhupada’s arrival in San Francisco, January 16, 1967, was very different from his embarcation on the other side of the continent a year and a half previously. Instead of being unknown and knowing no one, more or less penniless, without means and a plan to stay only a short time, California was a much friendlier environment from the beginning and strengthened his determination to make his institution a world wide movement (Wheeler, 1985: 131-145). Fifty long haired young men and women—probably some of them under the influence of the intoxicants that he hated—greeted him at the airport with flower garlands and kirtana. When he arrived at 518 Frederick Street he found a “temple” already waiting for him, with the same arrangement as in New York—a storefront, and an apartment in the adjacent building. Without going into his new apartment he lectured to the excited crowd, and later as he was climbing the

31 In a revealing twist to the spirituality of dwelling, the new devotees thought that Krishna consciousness would never go beyond the Lower East Side, or perhaps at most New York City. But they had come face to face with the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya and its ambition to influence—become a church—the entire world.
stairs to his residence he was followed by reporters from the San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner, always eager to report on the latest developments in the counterculture. Here Prabhupada had no obligations but translating, lecturing, and talking to guests; some devotees he had trained in New York had preceded him, and were already busy preparing his lunch according to his instructions. In worldly terms, he had “made it”; he had disciples at his beck and call, got more press than he had time to entertain, and he had straddled the continent in less than two years.

But he had not sailed from Kolkata on the Jaladuta to rest on his laurels once things got established. At one am the next morning he arose as usual to continue his translation project. Less than two weeks later he attended the “Mantra Rock Dance—Krishna Consciousness Comes West” at the now legendary Avalon Ball Room, in which soon to become famous acts like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin and others would perform, and the renowned promoter, Chet Helms, would donate his share of the profits to the temple. Allen Ginsberg had flown out from New York to sample the Haight Ashbury scene, and was the master of ceremonies. Owsley Stanley and Timothy Leary, synthesizer of five million doses of LSD and LSD pioneer, respectively, were in attendance. Prabhupada took the stage and sang and danced, and thousands of hippies imitated him. The local chapter of the Hells Angels, who appeared to Wheeler to resemble “the hordes of Shiva”, sat and “stared in mute incomprehension.” Upon leaving the ballroom, Prabhupada remarked to a disciple, “This is no place for a brahmachari” (Gosvami, 1981: 15).
Indeed, Haight Ashbury was no place for a brahmachari, which a sannyasi is automatically supposed to be. He was never supposed to associate with women or a wild crowd like Mantra Rock, intoxicated, with music Prabhupada declared explicitly sexual. But the Swami was continuing the work of his guru, who also contravened the ancient standards in allowing his sannyasis to wear sewn clothing and shoes, deal with money matters, and ride in automobiles. The benefit of these adjustments meant that his guru’s Indian mission could compete with other social movements and their means—Christians and groups such as Swami Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission, or nationalists who insisted that independence from Britain should come before spiritual matters. The cost of going against rules was negligible by comparison. Now, in America, Prabhupada was coming to terms with a new environment and making new rules as he went along for the same reason—to spread the rays of the sankirtana “benediction moon.” Judah has written, “Although never compromising his lofty principles, Srila Prabhupada mobilized existing resources of the contemporary subculture to make the Vaishnava faith better known…We witness how Srila Prabhupada’s disciples gradually changed their ways, accepting moral and spiritual discipline under his guidance” (Gosvami, 1981: viii). Some devotees, to the contrary, changed their ways abruptly, and with no hesitation moved into a temple. In looking at ISKCON’s recruitment strategies which have been exhaustively studied elsewhere, here we will provide a minimum discussion.

Prospective recruits came to the New York temple by word of mouth in common social circles, or followed the devotees back to the temple from the parks where they held sankirtana. San Francisco, on the other hand, had a Radha Krishna temple in the capitol of the hippie world, feeding the hungry, helping people down from bad LSD trips, and providing a friendly
atmosphere for young people thousands of miles from home. In New York every devotee had a home to go to at night, and usually relatives nearby, but in balmier San Francisco many were homeless and almost none were gainfully employed or enrolled in school. The temple in New York was an integral part of the neighborhood, not an integrated part. But the San Francisco temple was heavily involved in the storied neighborhood that soon became a pilgrimage destination for those who wanted to follow LSD advocate Timothy Leary’s invitation to tune in, turn on, and drop out. We shall have occasion to revisit the neighborhood element of the movement’s history, but for now we will note that no American ISKCON temple or community, according to my research, has interacted with its immediate social environment nearly as much as the Haight temple, until the founding of New Raman Reti. Could it be that only the counterculture could abide the Hare Krishnas?

In his earlier work on the movement Rochford, who as a sociologist of religion took an interactionist perspective describing individual choices as part of a web of social interactions, also admitted the necessity for “member’s cognitive orientations to become appropriately aligned with the goals and ideology of the movement” (Rochford, 1985: 83). Cognitive orientation to a cult is not just a case of being influenced by one’s friends, although Stark’s assertion that when all of one’s friends are cultists one has truly attained the same cultic status, is salient. Certainly in ISKCON’s case, the injunction to associate intimately only with Vaishnavas supports both scholars’ contentions, as we shall see.

In the first part of this chapter we discussed the cognitive alignment of the first generation, held spellbound by Prabhupada’s explanations of just about everything. But Prabhupada’s conceptual teachings were integrated into a systematic program of indoctrination, certainly cognitive but not in every way ideational, that was consonant with other bhakti traditions that
included ritual, meditation, and sacred work. The purpose of this *sadhana* was to awaken love (*prema*) for the deity (Gupta, 2007: 18). There was also a rigorous, sacrificial lifestyle. While reading this section, the reader will bear in mind Wuthnow’s assertion that “real” life choices are underlined by personal sacrifice.

All devotees in American ISKCON temples were instructed to report to *mangal aratrika*, the first worship service of the day, by 4.30 or 5 am. This required a bedtime of 9 or 10 pm—if one was lucky, and not involved in a service that cut into precious sleeping time—for Prabhupada insisted that five to six hours of sleep was sufficient, with less being preferable, and seven hours the absolute maximum. After *mangala aratrika*, there was worship of the Tulasi and the guru, a lecture on the *Bhagavatam*, and more worship of the deities after “Their Lordships” had been bathed, fed, and freshly clothed.

There was also time for chanting *japa*, but apparently not enough, for devotees could be seen performing *japa* at all hours of the day. After breakfast the devotees went to their duties—cooking, arranging flowers, or sewing for the deities, cleaning the temple, going on *sankirtana* for book distribution or public *kirtana*, administrative activities, working at the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust as an illustrator, editor, etc., lecturing at colleges, distributing *prasada*, or other activities conducive to the mission. In the evening the devotees gathered again for *aratrika*, *kirtana*, and a *Bhagavad Gita* lecture. Ironically, although Prabhupada wanted his disciples to

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32 “The spiritual master is always engaged in the temple worship of Sri Radha and Krishna. He also engages his disciples in such worship. They dress the Deities in beautiful clothes and ornaments, clean Their temple, and perform other similar worship of the Lord. I offer my respectful obeisances unto the lotus feet of such a spiritual master” (See *Songs of the Vaishnava Acaryas: Compiled By Acyutananda Swami*, BBT, Los Angeles, 1974.)

33 Prabhupada was amenable to using almost anything to spread his movement, including the contributions of icons of pop culture. On his order, the second worship service of the day included a recording of sung verses of the *Brahma Samhita*, produced by George Harrison with advice from Paul McCartney. This Beatle-esque devotional music remains an ISKCON staple to this day.
study his books in detail, this time consuming activity conflicted with other aspects of the
mission, so devotees were often told by their temple president to make time for reading by
cutting back on sleeping—which many did. Devotees also took time out of their sleeping to
finish their rounds. By all accounts, temple life was very austere, certainly not for the faint of
heart (or even anyone with significant health problems), or anyone not in complete agreement
with Prabhupada’s teachings. Temple life was for the young, the brave, and those who could
tolerate the rigors of a social atmosphere comparable to a Marine boot camp. In spite of that,
some individuals have reported an experience comparable to family affection during their
residence at a temple, a clear example of Wuthnow’s spirituality of dwelling in very concrete
terms.

On the other hand, there were instances where devotees were not encouraged by their
relationship with the temple—whether they moved in, or not—but they became devotees of
Krishna anyway. For these devotees, the cost of admittance to the mysteries of the cult could be
higher than certain theories will allow. These observations do not complement Rochford’s
interactionist approach to recruitment and Stark’s friendship theory of recruitment, but do ratify
rational choice because it is impossible to admit the brainwashed theory—the ultimate
deligitimator of all sorts of cults—if the temple doesn’t really want you around. This comment is
not a dismissal of the interactionist and friendship theories of cultic recruitment, it is only meant
to point out that these researchers rely too much on them. And anticult complaints about the
replacement of one’s natal family with a cultic family are frequently not relevant at all, at least
for the Hare Krishna cult. Many went along with temple leaders they resented for various
reasons, for the sake of their guru’s mission—not because ordinary personal needs were being
fulfilled. I will show that the suppression of ordinary personal needs of all—men, women, and
children—became a terrible cost instead of a benefit both for individuals and the entire mission effort.

**What happened to the joiners?**

In most temples the highlight of the week was the Sunday feast, at which guests were fair game for proselytizing; that was the intention of Gaudiya exemplars, certainly, beginning with Bhaktivinoda and his organized Nama Hatta (marketplace of the holy name) parties throughout Bengal in the 19th century. The entire American temple week was dedicated to exposing the public to Gaudiya teachings, *kirtana*, and *prasada*. If Krishna, situated in the heart of all living entities since time immemorial, desired, he could inspire any individual to become a Hare Krishna devotee, attend temple functions, and complete the circle by inviting more people to the temple. For this purpose all devotees were dedicated to the service of Radha and Krishna through serving the guru. On Monday, the weekly cycle of *sankirtana* began again for all temple residents.

The type of person who moved into these temples (devotees speak of “joining” a specific temple) were overwhelmingly white and middle class “monkeys”, with typically more education than Americans attracted to sects (Stark, 1985: 406-407). They were college graduates, college students, or college bound; some dropped out of school to join, many others were on an extended vacation from the normal pursuits of education and career. Though idealistic, their countercultural identity was not specifically defined by politics, but this identity was deeply nurtured at the roots by the images of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Gandhi. They were also interested in Indic religions, though reared in Catholic, liberal Protestant, and liberal Jewish families of “regular” observance, and accustomed to liberal middle class values (Melton, 1982: 29; Judah, 1974: 147; 159). Born in the affluent decade following WW II to parents “tempered by war [and] disciplined by a hard and bitter peace”, to their parents consternation they wanted
still more (John F. Kennedy, 1961). The Viet Nam war had neither tempered nor disciplined them along the lines of their parents, although some devotees were veterans of this war.

We must question Stark’s deprivation theory of religious conversion, for it is difficult to see where these young people were deprived. 34 They grew up in spacious homes with unending television, cinema, rock and roll, abundant food, cigarettes, alcohol and other recreational drugs, free love—no wonder they were bored with their parents’ American dream. The theory that they were deprived of love or meaningful relationships is also unsatisfactory because these conditions are common in society, yet most people do not join religious cults (Ellwood, 1988: 269; Melton, 1982: 30). Following Weber’s insistence on the importance of emic views we are more interested in Wheeler’s statement that they had nothing to lose. But what about optimism? Why must the American dream be confined to material possessions and the kinds of freedoms they provide? These were the sort of questions Prabhupada’s disciples brought with them from the subculture of the Lower East Side and Haight-Ashbury, and the first American Hare Krishna temples expanded in the quest for a radically different dream.

Actually, these were far more than temples. They were also ashramas where the seekers could become dwellers, as well as introductory boot camps where one learned a specific Indian and Hindu culture taught by Prabhupada, with the aim of establishing it in the rest of society. This culture continued the indifference to family life and normal economic and political values that has sometimes characterized bhakti in India (Embree, 1988: 32). In this early period the now self-described spiritual monkeys were a bit dismissive in their attitude toward the society that

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reared them before their second birth as Prabhupada’s children. Informants typically admit, looking back, that in their spiritual and even ordinary immaturity they were not ready to be disciples and fulfill all that discipleship implied. But in establishing temples Prabhupada did not compromise his lofty principles, for there was mercy to implement these principles—didn’t the guru explain that by the mercy of Lord Chaitanya a dog could swim the ocean, or a fool could compose wonderful poetry? “But those who worship Me with exclusive devotion, meditating on My transcendental form—to them I carry what they lack, and preserve what they have” (Prabhupada, 1989: 483). So why couldn’t the monkees, with Chaitanya’s mercy, reform themselves so that Prabhupada could present them without shame to the world?

Let us linger a bit longer on ISKCON’s very early history, because its basic patterns were established then. In terms of their ability to follow Prabhupada’s strictures, there was no difference between devotees in San Francisco and New York. The real difference was that for the first time, in San Francisco, Americans had begun the process of bhakti yoga without benefit of Prabhupada’s personal guidance, and this was a very consequential development.

We have already mentioned Prabhupada’s habit of rising early to translate. He had done it in New York, and continued the practice in San Francisco. However, he could not do this exclusively because in both centers he had to take at least some time to train his disciples so that they could push on his movement, and he could go on translating. New devotees “made” by those who joined earlier vindicated his theory that if his disciples held fast to his instructions,

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35 To be compared to Rama’s monkees was perceived not as an insult, but as an honor—and besides, Prabhupada was accustomed to designating people uninterested in spirituality as “dogs, hogs, camels, and asses” with descriptions that supported his views of material life in samsara. No matter how fallen the devotees, they could always view their fellow Americans—even their own relatives—as more fallen by a large margin. But Prabhupada criticized this mentality. Once a devotee revealed to Prabhupada that he had “fallen down” in some way, to which Prabhupada quipped that the devotee had not even gotten up in the first place, so where is the question of falling? By comparison to the description of materialistic dogs, hogs, camels, and asses, the monkee designation has remained a source of pride.
they could spread the mission without his physical presence, for the crude but viable Hare Krishna community in San Francisco was already fielding preachers who had never met Prabhupada. After creating the previously mentioned disciple making machine, he could spend a bit more time translating at the San Francisco temple. This was a major achievement for his important literary projects because he was already elderly; as he put it, “the notice is there.”

Because Prabhupada really believed strict following of his established instructions was sufficient to raise oneself spiritually and then help raise others, and because his impending mortality could not be denied, he chose to ignore the cost and pursue the benefit of long distance, proxy mentoring of his disciples. Subsequently, most initiates anywhere in the movement were recommended for the honor by their local temple president. In the first few years Prabhupada would attend these initiation ceremonies, dignifying the proceedings while a disciple intoned mantras and offered oblations to the sacred fire. As his institution grew he could no longer attend most initiations, and eventually, new disciples were initiated without ever having met their guru in person. No one, including Prabhupada, considered these disciples to be of a lesser order, and on a certain level this shows the efficacy of his plan to increase his mission by creating spiritual machine making machines.

But these developments remind us that most disciples had only Prabhupada’s books and the general Society as their staff, unless we want to count the temple administration. Although the founder’s printed words were potent for the faithful, few will dispute that the administrative end of the Society also functioned like a filtering device—that is, away from the founder. Even recent researchers have not understood this, and accepted the claim of official representatives

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36 American Hare Krishna devotees will typically say so and so Dasa or Dasi “made me a devotee.” It was all very personal. The impersonal part would come later, when devotees wanted to make their own decisions and were frequently opposed, sometimes by the person who had made them a devotee, or who they made a devotee.
that Prabhupada was accessible to most of his devotees when he was in town (Ketola, 2008: 115). In fact, after the initial period it was very difficult to reach Prabhupada. Just as importantly, the few devotees trained by Prabhupada did not have much time with him. Their qualifications to continue the line of training seemed to rest on their willingness alone, for Prabhupada admitted that Krishna had not sent him any “first class men”, and he had to make do as one tries to start a fire with wet wood when dry wood is not available; this was a frequently quoted example of his to justify the shoe string approach to institution building. Not surprisingly, many temple devotees and congregational members including the Hindu community have never found it possible to see many of these administrators as credible representatives of the *sampradaya*. To their credit, most leaders did not ask for the job, and there were many humble yet inept leaders as well as very bad leaders. Here and there, some were brilliant.

**An extraordinary message diffused through ordinary means**

In 1972, cult observer Marvin Henry Harper wrote, “From American college and university campuses more than a thousand men and women have renounced the ordinary pursuits of life and have taken up their abode in the temples as *brahmacharis*” (Harper, 1972: 230). By 1974, ISKCON had several thousand disciples and over thirty temples and farm communities in America. Most of these devotees *did not* leave their homes, families and friends, jobs, or school to take *sannyasa* with the Hare Krishnas because they had met Prabhupada. Instead, they had encountered the ISKCON machinery and been incorporated into it. And most had simply been looking for their own spiritual advancement, not a life of missionary work, as in “work now,

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37 Ketola’s credulity is a perfect example of scholarly reliance on authoritative statements by the institution that I warned against in Chapter One. He writes, “Prabhupada did not put an insurpassable distance between himself and ordinary devotees.” This could certainly be true. But Ketola does not reckon the distance put between Prabhupada and the rank and file by the leaders. He writes, “No elaborate screening procedures needed to be undertaken in order to meet and talk with him. Thus ample opportunities existed for all kinds of chance encounters and casual discussions with him.” Prabhupada was a very busy man, but many devotees have complained that the leadership kept them away from him, to an unconscionable degree.
samadhi later” (ISKCON Atlanta, 1983). In the Hindu context emphasis on a mission to non-Hindus was extraordinary, but the mission’s apparatus was not, and ISKCON’s leadership filled by people in their late twenties follows the ordinary pattern for cults in America (Melton, 1982: 24).

Many never saw Prabhupada at all, and most did not actually meet him with a real introduction and a conversation, yet his ideas were disseminated in one way or another by every ISKCON devotee. What was the nature of the rationalization of Prabhupada’s teachings in this way, and what did that particular type of rationalization—institution building—produce? Melton writes of new religious movements:

As the movement grows, and especially as branches are established, the leader has to work with intermediaries… Though the leader may retain some important pieces of control, the real task of managing the organization and administering the organization’s affairs increasingly passes to the second and third echelon leadership. The analogy between religious and secular corporations, however much it offends religious sensibilities, is both appropriate to and informative of religious group dynamics” (Melton, 11).

**Monkey leaders get the job done**

Fortunately for our thesis, American Hare Krishna devotees are not offended—could not be offended—by Melton’s analogy. In illuminating it here with a look at Gaudiya texts we find the justification for an early abdication of management and training responsibilities by Prabhupada, and we are made aware of his mood. The ineptitude of his disciples in training other disciples, like the spots on the moon, or like the excessive smoke of a very necessary fire due to using unseasoned wood, was simply a cost to bear in the propagation of the *sankirtana* movement. Chaitanya, who began the cost benefit analysis of his *sampradaya*, used the language of business to express his wishes and intentions to propagate his Krishna *bhakti*. “I have come here to the city of Kashi to sell my emotional goods, but there are no customers. With no sales, I will take my goods and go home. But I came here carrying a heavy load. How will I take it back?
So if I get even a little of its actual value, I will sell it here” (Prabhupada, VedaBase, Chaitanya
Charitamrita Madhya 17).

Prabhupada was determined to get even a little reciprocation for his efforts. He must have
been aware of the diminishing potency of the chain of leadership, but no one could say that his
system did not generate more and more disciples to spread the sankirtana movement. And, he
had not come to America only for America’s sake, but for the sake of the entire world,
particularly India. America, he knew, was the lynchpin for this distribution, and barely trained
leaders would have to suffice in his attempt to make Shri Chaitanya’s name known in every town
and village.

To facilitate this he divided the world into zones, assigned a disciple to govern the
movement’s affairs in each each zone, and unabashedly designated this system the GBC—
Governing Board Commission—after the organization that controlled India’s rail system under
the British Raj. This practical measure had an immediate consequence that is supported by
Melton’s corporate analogy, for increasingly, Prabhupada's disciples were carefully kept away
from him by the leaders. This was partially according to his desire, for he made it plain that the
temple presidents and GBC men, as he called them, were to take the reins so he could
concentrate on translation. This action was consequential in light of exchange theory and
Rochford’s interactionist perspective. Henceforth, Prabhupada’s darshan (audience) was an
extremely valuable commodity available only to devotees in very good odor with the authorities,
usually because they excelled at book distribution or were able to generate income for ISKCON
projects or any other reason. These devotees would be invited to Prabhupada’s room when he
was in town, or on one of his morning walks. But most, with nothing to distinguish them from
the rank and file and so no darshan capital, considered themselves quite lucky to simply witness
their spiritual master lecture. To be treated this way was well worth the cost, for after all, weren’t
they Krishna’s dogs? And, vani (the words of the guru) was soon declared more important than
vapu (physical presence). Every temple, after all, was expanding without benefit of guru-vapu.

The very first temples were experiments in communal living organized around spiritual
principles. They developed a template and a mandate from Prabhupada for self governance in
very specific terms, legally bound to each other in a loose confederacy instead of a strict
institutional union. The confederacy also provided ISKCON devotees some level of protection
from their local power structure; they could always vote with their feet and choose another
temple in which to live. If they were initiated or had proven themselves in some manner they
were almost never turned away, so in that sense ISKCON was a family of sorts, with all the
political dynamics of a family. At any rate, the wisdom of the confederate arrangement became
obvious when ISKCON ran into legal problems decades later; if one temple went down, it went
down by itself. But for awhile, the movement exuberantly opened one temple after another. The
rays of the Shikhashtaka benediction moon were being spread and it was an exciting time for
all.

Here we find the genesis of the propensity in ISKCON to go along with the authorities,
for it “cost” too much to not live in a temple and its devotional atmosphere. One could chant
Hare Krishna in one’s home—and there was plenty of non-joiner congregational people who
eventually served, ironically, as examples for devotees who wanted to leave the institution but
not the movement—and one could serve the mission in one way or another anywhere, but if one
wanted to make sure of one’s spiritual capital, for many it seemed that the most rational thing to
do was to attach one self to a temple “somehow or other.” Surrending to the temple authorities
was surrendering to Krishna through Prabhupada’s institution, for he requested all of his students
to humbly cooperate for the sake of Shri Chaitanya’s *sankirtana* movement. Humility was required of all; didn’t the temple president submit to the local “GBC man” and didn’t the GBC man report to the GBC body and Prabhupada, and wasn’t Prabhupada at Bhaktisiddhanta’s feet? And so on.

This arrangement was not without clear benefits for the movement. Cooperation implies staying in one place, both physically and/or metaphorically. The submissive aspect of ISKCON nurtured a spirituality of dwelling, a cultic feature of some Indic expressions of spirituality in America, but not most. For instance, in the TM movement there is no particular place to go to, no temple, (usually) no community, no spirituality of dwelling in the sense important here, and certainly nothing to surrender to, so little emphasis on sacrifice. At least in the primary stages of TM, surrendering to a doctrine, a lifestyle, an obligation, or a temple is not part of the program. 38 Like chanting Hare Krishna, for many TM is reportedly “fun” (and also contributes to better health and wealth), but it does not create a new cultural home as ISKCON did. Although TM spread a wider net because it was not presented as religion in this period, ISKCON spread a wide net in its own way. As fishers of men Prabhupada’s disciples were not very discriminating.

**Quantity over quality**

Unlike churches, ISKCON made no effort to ascertain the fitness of any individual for communal religious life and the life of renunciation. Consequently, ISKCON has seen plenty of mentally unstable people come through its doors, and some devotees feel that some of these people, in the aftermath of Prabhupada’s passing in 1977, have even made it all the way to the

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38 TM’s historical development was described to me in 1998 by Prudence Farrow (immortalized in the Beatles’ song “Dear Prudence”), sister of actress Mia Farrow. As one of Maharishi’s first American disciples Prudence became intimately involved with TM in 1962 and was present at the famous 1967 TM retreat in Rishikesh along with the Beatles and other pop culture luminaries. According to Prudence, there is very little interest among TM people in training their children in TM meditation and ideas, and Maharishi had little to say about life style except the requirement to be a vegetarian. She also explained that TM does not facilitate a social dimension important in ISKCON and other forms of Hinduism in America.
position of initiating guru. But Prabhupada, aside from communications by letter and occasional conversations with local leaders, left these and other matters to the organizational apparatus he had created. An example from Australia will suffice to explain Prabhupada’s mood in America too, when he installed ISKCON’s first deities in Sydney and “made an extraordinary request of Radha Gopinatha. ‘Now I am leaving you in the hands of the mlecchas. I cannot take the responsibility. You please guide these boys and girls and give them the intelligence to worship you nicely’ ” (Gosvami, 194: 1983). There were teenage temple presidents and sannyasis, and GBC men only twenty-five years old. Although Prabhupada was trying to light a fire with wet wood, in another register the management structure was like a match to dry kindling, as I will show.

The origin of ISKCON gender policy in Prabhupada’s biography

In order to satisfy the Hindu requirement that temple deities must be worshiped by brahmins, Prabhupada initiated most of his disciples twice. The first initiation meant that the disciple’s chanting of the holy name would be underwritten by the guru, and that the guru took the disciples karma phala—karmic reactions from innumerable previous lifetimes—so that obstacles to spiritual progress would be minimized. If the disciple could maintain his or her rounds and the four regulative principles, there was Gayatri diksha, initiation into the Gayatri mantra and the duties of a brahmin to worship the deity, lecture, and teach by example. The first two initiations were available to women, but the third, sannyasa initiation, was not. Prabhupada taught that women can be gurus, but never sannyasis.

No issue has been more problematic for ISKCON than its position on women, and Rochford has cogently argued that the genesis of ISKCON’s tragic scandals was in the low estimation of women and family life in the minds of many of the sannyasis and people who agreed with them. We shall expand on this topic presently. That Prabhupada’s teachings on
women have proven more or less unsustainable in America to this date validates our thesis that a religion and the culture that engendered it—no pun intended—cannot be transplanted; it cannot be transferred across cultural boundaries and remain absolutely intact. Here we are interested in how Prabhupada’s views on women and family life were rationalized for they cannot at present be integrated with American culture and society.

First we must review some of the details of Prabhupada’s life, born Abhay Charan De in Kolkata, 1896. He was a very pious youngster who staged a Ratha Yatra for his neighborhood at the age of five. As a teenager, he was unimpressed with the sadhus his Gaudiya father dutifully entertained, as many of them were lax in their moral life. Neither was Gour Mohan De impressed with these men, and he deeply desired that his son remain pure in his behavior. Yet his son would also need to take a wife, as is the duty of every Hindu male (Gosvami, 1980: 21-22). Abhay’s attitude toward the dynamic of marriage can be understood by his experience in college, for while studying Kalidasa’s Kumara-sambhava, Abhay admired the fact that Shiva was dhira, meaning he could resist the amorous advances of his beautiful wife the goddess Parvati (ibid, 23). And his father had sent him to study at Scottish Churches’ College where “he would not likely be exposed to immoral behavior” (ibid, 25). The young Abhay admired Gandhi, who “abstained from all intoxication, meat eating, and illicit sex” (ibid, 27). Even before he had met his sannyasi guru, it seemed Abhay was destined to become a sannyasi too.

Undoubtedly, the De family was very strict in their morals and traditional in their approach to life, but this was not unusual in Kolkata at the turn of the 20th century. Abhay’s mother Rajani, who passed away when he was 16, declared that if her daughter was not married by her twelfth birthday, she would drown herself in the Hoogly. As for Abhay, his father selected for him an eleven year old girl he did not care for—he wanted someone else—and like many
young Hindus even today—even in America—Abhay did not protest. Toward the end of his college studies, his father told him that his indifference to his young wife was Krishna’s grace. “Take it as a great fortune. If you do not become too attached to your wife and family, that will help you in your future advancement in spiritual life.” And he reconciled himself to the wife he had been given (Gosvami, 1980: 32).

Abhay worked for awhile as a manager in a pharmaceutical firm, and then started his own business traveling all over India selling such products as “De’s Pain Liniment.” But while still in his twenties, he met his guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, also respectfully called Prabhupada by his disciples. This meeting explains much about ISKCON more than forty years later, for the erudite sannyasi startled the young man in a way he would never forget.

Abhay and [his friend] Naran, having both been raised in Vaishnava families, immediately offered prostrated obeisances at the sight of the revered sannyasi. While the two young men were still rising and preparing to sit, before any preliminary formalities of conversion had begun, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta immediately said to them, “You are educated men. Why don’t you preach Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s message throughout the whole world?” (Gosvami 1980 a: 39).

Needless to say these young men were surprised to be addressed so forthrightly and immediately, but Abhay, deeply moved by Bhaktisiddhanta’s bold presentation, began associating with Bhaktisiddhanta’s disciples in his Gaudiya Math. As the years went by his wife disliked her husband spending all his spare time with sannyasis and brahmacharis and using their home as a Shrimad Bhagavatam lecture hall. She too was a devotee from a respected Vaishnava family, but like most Hindus she preferred to concentrate on family life and not become a religious specialist or donate her home for the convenience of the preachers of the Gaudiya Math, who she avoided. In 1959 this unhappy marriage of forty years was officially terminated not by divorce, but by Abhay taking sannyasa initiation. When he was asked afterwards to speak, as if previewing his future as a worldwide preacher, he chose to address the
gathering in English instead of Hindi or Bengali. He spent the next six years selling his English language *Back to Godhead* magazine and translating the *Shrimad Bhagavatam* into English, until finally he boarded the *Jaladuta* at Kolkata, bound for Boston.

Now known as Bhaktivedanta Swami, the business man from Kolkata had renounced the “black hole” of family life to dedicate himself to a global mission on behalf of his guru. When he started his new family of disciples in America he was somewhat tenuous about the involvement of women, but soon women were more than welcome to accept him as their spiritual father. In doing so they had to leave behind every notion pertaining to their rights and duties as women they had always taken for granted. And the men, too, had to adjust to the radical notion of viewing every woman except their wife as mother, and to literally address their “Godsisters” as Mother Krishna Dasi, for instance, or simply “Mataji” (“Mother”). According to Satsvarupa Gosvami and Howard Wheeler, in the beginning most women were recruited through the involvement of their men, but this soon changed as “women’s liberation” (the term feminism was not in popular usage at this time) grew throughout America as a social movement.

**Individuality sacrificed on the altar of sankirtana**

Prabhupada wished that all the programs he inaugurated in New York would continue without his presence, and they did. Because he created machine making machines out of his first disciples, his wishes even preceded him in his travels. We have seen the spiritual benefits of his efforts in New York, but there were also problems. The important thing was missionary expansion, not consolidation of the sort that reckoned individual spiritual needs, what to speak of individual material needs. On this point anti-cult people are at least partially correct—some cults, desperate for market share, tend to sacrifice the individual to the cause of becoming a church, because cultists erroneously miscalculate their likelihood of taking over society, and think that
heroic individual sacrifices will accomplish their goals. Such sacrifices led to problems with the movement’s second generation, as I will show.

Prabhupada, after his residence at the New York and San Francisco temples and a few other situations here and there, never had the time to personally provide spiritual nourishment to disciples aside from instructions in his books. The exceptions to this include selected leaders that he sometimes kept with him as servants or secretaries for personal training in the process of sampradayic machine making. In other words, Prabhupada could not mother his disciples, and he was an absent father to his “boys and girls”, as he called them (Siddhanta, 2003: 117). Instead, he appointed people he already knew to positions of authority without paying close, continual attention to their performance. Like the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, Prabhupada chose to trust in humanity’s potential for good instead of taking a pessimistic attitude (Adler, 2002: 40), but given that he could not augment nature with nurture, this was risky business. With the scope of his ambitions, and the enthusiasm of his devotees to please him, what else could he do but pay this price?

Womens’ problems in ISKCON

It is uncertain whether Prabhupada’s views on women evolved over time after he stepped off the Jaladuta, or simply kept the standards he brought from Bengal, and, making a shrewd cost-benefit analysis, decided to include women in his mission—for he was originally surprised that women wanted to participate actively in his movement. He had envisioned a Society of sannyasis and brahmacharis, and of course, he allowed for very committed married men, as he had been. But he quickly realized that American womens’ demands to be included would be extremely useful to his objectives. And besides, these women were not at all like most of the women he was familiar with in India. They were assertive in public, inquisitive about his teachings, and determined to tolerate any austerity he requested of the men. But his teachings on
women, aside from being derived from premodern norms that shocked the imagination of modern feminism, may appear to be very inconsistent, even conflicting.

On the one hand he was proud of his women disciples for many reasons: because they could be as strict, enthusiastic, and obedient as the men, they excelled in deity worship and distributing his books, and because they were obviously fascinated with his blue Lord. The Hindus who visited ISKCON temples had to adjust to the idea of an American woman—formerly a hippie—performing *aratrika* in public, before a temple congregation. Above all, Prabhupada proclaimed these women equal to his men, not like ordinary women, because they were serious Vaishnavas. And because they were equal to the men, they were expected to devote their lives to missionary activities (Prabhupada, 1973: 24). In most temples there was very little gender based division of labor.

At the same time, women’s roles were defined by Prabhupada using Krishna’s ancient *Bhagavata Purana* instructions to the the cowherd women of Vrndavana as a template. When these milkmaids trysted with Krishna in the forest in the dark or night, he told them that their primary duty was to their husbands and tending to their children. Even if a man were of bad character, a woman should always remain devoted to her husband, obey his parents, and show affection to his friends and younger brothers. Further, Krishna counseled that if a woman truly wanted to worship him, she should stay at home performing her household duties, and while doing so, remember the Lord and chant his names (Prabhupada, 1986: 347-348). Prabhupada added to this the famous (or infamous) stricture of Manu—a woman should remain under the supervision of her father as a child, her husband in her maturity, and an elder male relative in her senior years, after her husband had renounced the world. She should never be granted
independence, because her emotional level was of a child, and she was easily seduced by unscrupulous men.

How to reconcile the two conflicting instructions? Presuming for the moment that an ISKCON woman agreed with both of Prabhupada’s instructions, there are still only so many hours in a day. It is not possible to rise at four am for religious activities, chant sixteen rounds, go out on sankirtana all day, briefly return home (or a room in the temple compound) and prepare for the evening aratrika in the temple followed by a Bhagavad Gita lecture, and cook, clean, care for children, be a loving wife, etc. One instruction was for a woman who, as a disciple of a missionary guru, was expected to be a religious specialist, and the other instruction was for a married woman whose “guru” was supposed to be her husband. The two instructions could not be reconciled. The result was that the temple authorities, seeing themselves as representatives of Prabhupada, frequently demanded obedience to themselves instead of the husband, and encouraged only sankirtana. So, a woman who consciously or subconsciously resented being told she was “less intelligent” on account of her gender had, at the same time, to submit to more than one man with conflicting interests, and do all this gracefully—at least in theory. Movement researcher Susan Palmer and ISKCON Women’s Ministry founder Sudharma Dasi have found little consensus among these women, for some have submitted cheerfully, others had or still have reservations about the practicality and desirability of 16th century gender mores in modern America, while still others claim that Prabhupada’s teachings

39 A recent GBC proposal to add editorial footnotes to future editions of Prabhupada’s books was rejected. Some devotees are concerned that his manner of expression will not be understood and some explanation of these expressions should be offered. For instance, in many places where Prabhupada uses the word intelligence he is referring to a lack of spiritual intelligence, which includes austerity. Since women are supposedly less inclined to spiritual matters because of a desire for material comfort, they, along with scientists who deny the existence of God and the soul, would be considered less intelligent. Prabhupada stated that in the rare instance where a woman was more inclined to spiritual life than her husband, the husband should (theoretically) follow his wife. This latter observation shows that his system is hierarchical through and through—A follows B, B follows C, etc. Equality is not important.
on gender were hijacked by misogynist male renunciates and women so oppressed that they swallowed misogynist lies whole. But most submitted long enough to get initiated, perform great amounts of seva to their guru, and now, after decades of institutional triumphs and scandals, some of them are standing up for women’s rights in the American Hare Krishna movement.

Any religious form in America that advocates the sort of ideas on women’s issues presented here is likely to be a cult or a sect, whether women are supposed to be religious specialists on a mission to the public, subservient to their men, or both.

**Family life vs. Sankirtana**

In many temples the leadership discouraged women from marrying because Prabhupada enthusiastically read the regular sankirtana statistical report—how many Bhagavatams sold, how many Bhagavad Gitas, etc.—and most temple presidents did not want to fall behind the other temples in the competitive drive to please their spiritual master, just because of time consuming marriages. Men were also discouraged even more from marriage for the very same reason, plus the danger of forgetting Krishna in the association of a woman. As in Hinduism in general, men can be “maya” for a woman too, but this is a minor theme in Hinduism and in Prabhupada’s books. However, some ISKCON managers expanded on this theme in the interest of diverting women from marriage which almost always seemed to cause some trouble to the sankirtana effort. Marriage for women could mean their giving up sankirtana. Small children were an unimportant concern for temple managers, or simply a botheration, because some women had to remain in the temple vicinity during the day to care for their Godsisters’ children. And this did not get the books out.

Older children were expected to live apart from their parents at the gurukulas in America or India, where the emphasis was at least as spiritual as academic. The main point in these
schools was to train boys and girls in devotional service by following a similar program as their austere parents, except that *sankirtana* was (mostly, although many children did *sankirtana* too) replaced by schooling. The children slept directly on the floor without mattresses in sleeping bags, did not watch television or go to the theatre, and were encouraged to learn Sanskrit and scriptures. Prabhupada saw this program, along with book distribution, as the best way to produce a class of religious specialist *brahmins* in the interest of preaching Krishna consciousness and developing *varnashrama dharma* in America. In this regard he had more hope for ISKCON’s second generation than he did for his adult disciples, even though he gave them two levels of *diksha*.

**Finances**

By this time the reader will want more details about how all of this was financed, for ISKCON soon left the simplicity of the first two temples behind, and became ever more sophisticated in its missionary efforts. The details that follow were witnessed by me in San Diego, Los Angeles, Laguna Beach, San Francisco, Berkeley, Vancouver, Phoenix, St. Louis, Cleveland, Columbus, and New York City. The temple rent or mortgage had to be paid, elaborate *bhoga* feasts were served to the Deities and then distributed (more or less) free of charge as *prasada* to guests on Sunday, the Deities were decorated on a daily basis with costly clothes and flowers, devotees took pilgrimages to India, the householders had to have their rents payed if they did not have a room in the temple, each temple had to contribute money to ISKCON’s Indian projects and any financial need that arose for the Prabhupada Book Trust,

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40 The term religious specialist sometimes refers to a person involved in the critical study of religion, and it also sometimes refers to a religious person who has made a career of religion. While the latter definition is in need of further refinement, it is this definition that is pertinent to this study.

41 At the Sunday program, it is rare to see any devotee leave the *kirtana* to recite the second initiation Gayatri at the twilight *sandhya*, prescribed time. The Gayatri was offered to legitimate the existence of American pujaris and to aid their spiritual progress. But according to Prabhupada’s teachings, it is not essential.
many temples staged or contributed to several large public festivals every year, and of course, the *gurukulas* had to be maintained.

Stark has observed that when cults pull people out of their careers or disrupt their career plans to serve the cult, valuable resources are made unavailable for cultic expansion. In ISKCON’s case, so many dropped out of high school and college to join that few had developed significant marketable skills anyway, and this situation added support to the emphasis on *sankirtana* as a source of funding even while the years were passing without the normal investment in making a living. It was like a cat chasing its tail because for most, ordinary pursuits were abandoned in favor of *sankirtan*, but at the same time *sankirtana* was all many devotees could do because they weren’t accomplished enough to offer significant financial or professional service to the movement. However, anyone rendering those kinds of services, even if not initiated and much less observant, almost unfailingly got preferential treatment from the authorities. But it must be noted that submission to such humiliations was certainly not unheard of in the administrative class as well, where austere standards were frequently met and even established by a few beloved leaders with excellent reputations.

The devotees’ austere lifestyle helped to lower costs on the personal maintainance end—for a *brahmachari* was not supposed to possess any money, and for the most part, the unmarried devotees were practically penniless—but even then, donations from the Life Member program, to be discussed later, and other sources were not enough to cover general expenses. Prabhupada declared that temples could be financed simply by selling his books, just as he had maintained himself by selling them, and all facets of the material structure of the *sankirtana* movement would be nourished in this way. Apparently he presumed that somehow enough devotees would be able to do this service and society would cooperate enough that the American movement
could spiritually, organizationally, and financially revolve around book distribution. Hadn’t his own guru instructed the Gaudiya Math to sell the marble from his temples to buy printing presses?

In the beginning, especially in San Francisco, Prabhupada’s literatures were actually sold on their own merit on the street by devotees or in head shops, for San Francisco was the perfect environment to sell a magazine for a quarter or fifty cents to the countercultural types who had taken over the Haight district. As more and more expensive literatures became available and there was more exhortation to distribute them, actually selling a ten dollar book in public places was a marketing feat that many devotees could not manage. Counter-intuitively, the quantity of books distributed increased dramatically anyway. Instead of selling a hundred Back to Godhead magazines a day, and bringing in twenty five or fifty dollars, large temples were now distributing many hundreds and sometimes thousands of magazines and books a day. The Los Angeles temple was the headquarters for the coordination of this worldwide project, where a military style efficiency prevailed over everything else. But if most devotees could not actually sell the books, how was it possible?

At one point, book distributers realized that they could solicit donations instead of selling, and this would finance book distribution. These devotees trained others in the art of slippery fund raising, and soon shaved headed brahmacharis and householders were disguising their odd appearance with wigs and getting donations for ISKCON World Relief or some other ruse, in order to give out books without charge to those who wanted them. Contrary to the claims of anti-cultists, this practice never yielded much of a “profit” because all the money went

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42 Although the devotees used ruses for book distribution and fund raising, because most lived at a level below America’s poorest, a sense of guilt did not prevail. Rightly or wrongly, the appropriation of Chaitanya’s 16th century mood in “tricking” people of the 20th century into Krishna consciousness did prevail. Aside from that, ISKCON World Relief and the later Food for Life program were real benefits for America’s poor, winning the praise of government officials.
to ISKCON projects—although people absconding with temple money was not unheard of. Additionally, some devotees were barely able to procure the printing costs of these literatures, and their mode of book distribution undercut the efforts of devotees who were able to distribute a book for many times its cost.

That ISKCON was able to accomplish so much with so little is only understandable in the light of Prabhupada’s instruction that temple budgets should not run in the black—for that meant sense gratification. A brahmin was supposed to live in the red, depending utterly on the Lord. So it was only a steady cash flow combined with austere living that accounted for the material success of the movement in the beginning. ISKCON’s financial state in America was always precarious, but because the movement kept opening more temples and distributing more and more books and prasada, few realized the eventual fate of the institution. The market place of the holy name along with its material byproducts was considered unlimited.

**The institution vs. the Hare Krishna movement**

The Americans who gathered around Prabhupada were experimenting, regardless of their claim that they had accepted everything verbatim and without alteration (Wheeler, 1985: 57). In their zeal they did not understand that cultural transplantation is impossible, and if Prabhupada was innovative, so were they. When and where had Vaishnavas shaved their heads and then donned wigs—as Prabhupada’s disciples began to do in the early 1970’s to approach a public put off by shaved heads—to preach?

But the most obvious example of eclectic Hare Krishna spirituality can be seen in the testimonies of the vast majority who were impressed with Prabhupada’s teachings but never took initiation or resided in a temple ashrama (Judah, 1974: 165-170). These people continued with their schooling or careers while attending the Sunday program and chanting the mantra on their own during the week. Some simply took whatever wisdom they could integrate into their lives.
while rarely visiting a temple or associating with the disciples. If they read Prabhupada’s books, apparently they did not feel obliged to try to follow everything, and on the level of belief we must consider that many accepted only some of the teachings, not all. Whatever their combination of practice and belief, they had indeed received a *samskara*, a lasting spiritual impression, for their lives were forever altered. On the less rigorous path to spiritual attainment, many of them supported Prabhupada’s army of monkeys without enlisting, and consequently never “fell down” from their vows as most of the disciples did because they never took any vows. Intuitively, many of these non-joining *bhaktas* have fared rather well in their spiritual lives, much as the tortoise instead of the hare wins the race. These devotees are also part of the first generation of the Hare Krishna movement, and they include Hindus who recognized Prabhupada as a *sadhu* and his movement as genuine (to one degree or another) but were not prepared to sacrifice their life plans to become religious specialists.

**The utility principle is a dividing principle**

Since taking initiation, the lives of almost all ISKCON disciples have eventually come to resemble the more relaxed kind of Gaudiya experience, for as Rochford’s research demonstrates, marriage and family life began a social process that has since defined both individuals and the institution. True to his discipline, Rochford—who, like other researchers, fully realizes the importance of theology for the Hare Krishna movement in America—nevertheless like most researchers does not emphasize Gaudiya theology in the process of recruitment, commitment, marriage, and reintegration with American values, focusing instead on economics and scandals in this process. But we will continue our discussion of systematic religious ideas and practices in a broader treatment of cultic development.

In Chapter Two I briefly introduced the principle of utility in Prabhupada’s fourfold scheme for his movement: “Books are the basis, preaching is the essence, utility is the principle, and purity
is the force.” I have already dealt with the separate issues of texts and preaching, and purity will be examined later in this work. Here we must examine the utility principle more fully, for it is upon this principle that Hare Krishna devotees differ in their cost-benefit analysis. All cannot use the same things for Krishna in equal manner and measure, and the political aspect of religion is brought to the surface where there is disagreement. This is equally true for incipient cults as well as established churches, and disagreement is the chief explanation for the emergence of sects. It is a wonder that there was so much cooperation between people who could not have been expected to be friends outside of the Hare Krishna context. It was only because of the unifying potency of Prabhupada’s authority that they chose to cooperate, and that the sectarian impulse began as late as it did.

There are plenty of examples in the Hindu scriptures where someone is enjoined to submit to authority, and once again the example of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita is paramount. However, Arjuna is expected to accept Krishna's authority as a rational choice—otherwise, what was the point of eighteen chapters focused on influencing his decision? Krishna told Arjuna, “yathecchasi tatha kuru”, do as you will, decide (Prabhupada, 1989: 847). Although Rochford does not frame his argument in terms of exemplars in Hare Krishna Transformed, his research on ISKCON’s conflict between the values of renunciation and the values of householder life tells much about the internal history of the movement in social and economic terms. It remains here to show the textual-utilitarian basis of ISKCON’s greatest conflict—because, as Rochford has observed, it is this conflict that has engendered most of the rest—in order to get at the details of ISKCON’s move towards church status. We will also pursue psychological details that did not interest Rochford. Since Rochford has shown that the decline in sankirtana is directly tied to marriage—a more ordinary orientation to life than celibacy—sexuality will continue to be
emphasized and serve as a symbol of all the issues inherent in the utility principle, which the
authorities wanted to confine to technical issues of seva.

The supreme married man vs. the supreme celibate in ISKCON texts

Obviously, as a sannyasi Prabhupada was not an exemplar of married life, a situation that
obliges his disciples to look for literary examples of the married state. In ISKCON literatures
Lord Krishna is the supreme married man because he had 10, 108 wives—and besides, he’s
Krishna. However, human men are only made in the image of God, who as Krishna is male but
not a flesh and blood man. So what Gaudiya literature depicts the exemplary husband? To
answer this question we will utilize two examples from scriptures as synecdoches, in much the
same way that Arjuna represents Everyman.

Married devotee men of the Chaitanya Caritamrta are depicted as very advanced religious
specialists expert at sensual restraint, so their example would be favored by Prabhupada. The
preferred Shrimad Bhagavatam example would seem to be the brahmin Sudama, who had been
Krishna’s friend and classmate in the gurukula of Sandipani Muni. After Sudama married, he
and his wife were so austere and detached from material pleasures that they accepted only what
came their way for their living without much effort. It is not hard to see that Sudama and his wife
would have felt at home in an early ISKCON temple. But most married people had moved out of
the temples by the early 1980’s, and enjoyment of ordinary life was not the least of their
considerations for changing their residence. By this consideration our second synecdoche is
Arjuna, for aside from his heroic work at Kuruksetra, he was interested in worldly things, and
was lucky enough to marry Krishna’s sister Subhadra. What woman could be more beautiful
than Krishna’s sister? Unless we presume that a hero with a kshatriya’s license for sensuality
would subscribe to Prabhupada’s idea of a good marriage, not only one but two vital dimensions
of Bhagavad Gita religion—bhakti and kula dharma—are to be found perfectly in Arjuna. Kula
dharma refers to the duties one performs for one’s family. We must note that Krishna, although asking Arjuna to act for him, was nevertheless only asking Arjuna to do his ordinary duty which included kula dharma. Without devotion to wife and family, kula dharma is meaningless.  

Arjuna’s terrible decision to fight his relatives according to the Lord’s desire, or face a retrograde spiritual course (and lose his position in the “material” world), is nothing like the career of Sudama, what to speak of Shri Chaitanya. All of these human examples are willing to lay down their lives for Krishna, but besides that they have little in common. Arjuna is a worldly householder, Shri Chaitanya is a sannyasi; one has ordinary incentives like family and control of material possessions, the other is content with spiritual ecstasy and wants nothing more. As Krishna’s disciple, Arjuna is clearly bewildered and needs instruction about his duty within the varna system, the master Chaitanya needs no instruction and as a sannyasi lives beyond the varna system. Significantly for power issues in ISKCON that we shall presently indicate, the Lord simply instructs Arjuna to do his ordinary duty and fight, but does not tell him how to do his duty. Conversely, there is something extraordinary about Chaitanya giving explicit instructions about humility—not something Krishna wanted from Arjuna—and, after proclaiming the greatness of Krishna’s names, out of humility claiming to have no attraction to them. It will be a long time before such a perplexing exemplary sentiment becomes a meme or attains church status in America.

Although such issues may seem too detailed and not interesting to standard social analyses of a religious form, they are vital to our understanding of the evolution of this religious form in America, because it began here as an institution founded on texts (which include all of Prabhupada’s pronouncements) that prescribe or imply particular ways of life. These texts have

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43 Prabhupada taught about the kula dharma of Hinduism, but he really only dwelled on varna issues.
become part of the consciousness of devotees over time, and their respective emphases create a complex, dynamic synergy that forms the material for a different study. Here we are more interested in untangling the elements of this synergy in the interest of observing the cult to church progression.

The *Shikshashtaka*—forget the stairs, take the elevator

The untangling is a very simple matter. In revealing his intentions for his disciples’ spiritual progress, Prabhupada explained that if you want to ascend a tall building you could climb the stairs or take the elevator. This meant that he wanted to see his disciples on the fast track back to Godhead. Accordingly, he emphasized the Vaishnava elements of all Hindu scriptures, but in reference to married life he emphasized only the extraordinary values of the *Chaitanya Charitamrta*. This octad of Sanskrit verse, in which the *Shikshashtaka* is located, is dedicated to the career of a very austere *sannyasi* who sets an ascetic example because he is Krishna come to earth as his own devotee. The text does not forbid householder life, yet it obviously valorizes a radical turning away from—not the world—but all efforts and interest in enjoying the world. Prabhupada’s austere mood as a preaching staple to the masses was extraordinary, because most Hindus who study the *Bhagavad Gita* are not renunciates—what to speak of Americans—and anyone who wants to enjoy an ordinary family life should not look to Prabhupada’s commentary on the *Chaitanya Caritamrta*, or for that matter, any of his commentaries.

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44 Edward C. Dimock, a noted authority on Shri Chaitanya, did not comment on the real authorship of the *Shikshashtaka* in the notes to his translation, *Caitanya Caritamrta of Krsna Dasa Kaviraja* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, 11). Dimock did mention that Amulya Sen, an “acerbic” Bengali scholar, claimed that Chaitanya could not have authored the Shikshashtaka because he went “mad” in love of Krsna.

45 Some devotees have argued that between Prabhupada’s act of translating into his dictaphone and his books rolling off the press, things were deliberately changed by ISKCON leaders. Naturally, the implications of this for changes in the teachings on married life—if it is true—are profound. We cannot pursue this issue here, but we must reiterate
In particular among Prabhupada’s many translations, the *Shikshashtaka* is frequently recited in temples and has been memorized and internalized by the first generation. Indoctrination in this brief but essential text was definitive for this generation because it summarizes and prescribes the views of the *sampradaya’s* founder, and what’s more, was demonstrated in the life of ISKCON’s most immediate exemplar. Almost everyone who resided in an American ISKCON temple at one time aspired to its values or at least understood the doctrine in light of this document. And what did Shri Chaitanya have to say in his *Shikshashtaka* about the ordinary pleasures of sex with a mate, house and property, and raising a family? “O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want your causeless devotional service life after life” (see Appendix II). This brief text, along with Prabhupada’s emphasized personal disgust with sexuality, made it difficult to be a householder in the institution that Prabhupada created. On the other hand, reminiscent of the social status situation in the recently cultic LDS—which for all practical purposes has become a church in America—it was very difficult for an uninitiated ISKCON man to get a Hare Krishna bride. Ironically, this meant most men had to be initiated just to be married, even if the ascetic requirements of initiation ran counter to his real values—which was probably the case, if the truth be told, otherwise why would he look for a wife? 46

The literatures we have discussed so far, and certainly the verse above, like all Hindu texts expressed a male point of view, but the mood it provoked affected the consciousness of ISKCON women as well. Male or female could marry and still recite the world affirming but pleasure rejecting *Shikshashtaka* communally on a daily basis, whether their real values resembled Shri

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46 Uninitiated women generally did not face the same problem because the man was supposed to lead the woman in spiritual life, and that required initiation for him, not for her. Uninitiated men with initiated women was uncommon.
Chaitanya’s or not. Prabhupada’s idea of married life was a reflection of the views of his guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, a life-long celibate (naishtika brahmachari) whose own guru Gaura Kishora Babaji was also celibate and even more ascetic. Prabhupada’s idea of a good marriage was predicated on whether it or not it helped one in Krishna Consciousness—a rather dramatic example of the principle of utility in action, and with profound implications. One disciple wanted to know how one could marry a woman one did not love, and conversely, how could one not have (recreational) sex with a beloved wife? Prabhupada replied that there was no real love in the material world, and that love should only be for Krishna. This meant it was not so important—at least from the celibate (and male) religious virtuoso point of view—who one married (Gosvami, 1981: 85).

But there was even more to Prabhupada’s idea of a good marriage, an idea that without apology sacrificed individuals to the success of the mission, and for the benefit of the mission stretched the utility principle to its logical conclusion. Prabhupada’s core reason for approving of married life had nothing at all to do with material happiness, and arguably, even individual spiritual advancement. Here is a synecdoche in this regard. Prabhupada countered the protests of a male disciple who did not want to marry by citing the examples of great preaching performed by householders in London, Los Angeles, Boston, and Hawaii. Tamala Krishna Gosvami, then a householder, had gone to London with a few other couples, they had befriended George Harrison, and Harrison was now chanting Hare Krishna and spreading the message to the world. So how could marriage be a bad thing?—that was Prabhupada’s point (Wheeler 1985: 258-259). In noting that the protesting disciple was averse to getting married, yet still obeyed his guru and married, our cost benefit focus emerges once again as indispensable to the social analysis of this cult in America. Pleasing the guru meant ecstasy and release from samsara. As long as
individuals, but even more so, the *sankirtana* movement, were taking the elevator instead of the stairs, how could marriage be a bad thing, especially when it is subordinated to collective rather than personal ends? Even if one was averse to getting married?

Although the records clearly show that Prabhupada did not feel his standards were ascetic, as we have mentioned, almost all observers would disagree. He felt that because his tradition is not reclusive, is devoted to verbal praise of God instead of silent meditation (the Gayatri being the exception), and involves all the senses and includes practical work, it was “simple and sublime”, not ascetic. “*Samadhi* doesn’t mean inactivity. It means being absorbed in Krishna.” Yet *samadhi*, however conceived, is the pinnacle of spirituality in Indic systems, generally attained only by the religious specialist or spiritual virtuoso. By Prabhupada’s calculations, Arjuna was in *samadhi* as he did his work at Kuruksetra. But Prabhupada was not interested in the ordinary side of Arjuna who, according to the standards of his day, also engaged in the ordinary religion expected of him. Instead, for Prabhupada, Arjuna set the example of a warrior in *samadhi*, because his mind was absorbed in Krishna, and was not shaken, “even in the midst of the greatest difficulty” (Prabhupada 1989: 330-332).

In the *Bhagavad Gita* section of the Mahabharata, Arjuna may appear to be only interested in his spiritual duty, which he ultimately accepts to be pure and uninterrupted devotion to his Lord. However, when the *Bhagavad Gita* is concluded and the battle has been fought, Arjuna goes back to his householder orientation. If an American reading the *Bhagavad Gita* for the first time wonders why Krishna addresses Arjuna as Dhananjaya—winner of wealth—the answer is easily found in the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, where Arjuna wins a pile of gold to assist the rule of his brother Yudhisthira. The text does not say Arjuna gave all the wealth to his brother and then lived in a cave, for acquisition of wealth is one of the four *purusharthas*, legitimate goals for a
Hindu. It is common for Vedantic Hindus to consider the path of religiosity, acquisition of wealth, fulfillment of desires, and finally liberation from material desires to be a practical, natural progression. All of this is certainly a male perspective in a discussion of the ideal husband. The ideal wife was also described in Prabhupada’s books, but as we have seen, there was even less practical scope for such an ideal.

Now, as an interactionist perspective would reveal, if there could be no ideal wife there could be no husband modeled after a full portrait of Arjuna. However, this could not have concerned Prabhupada, who was not very interested in the purushartha progression for his disciples, which included the concept of liberation after one had enjoyed a religious family life. He merely tolerated marriage, or used it for his mission—the latter being the only endorsement that, on the whole, he could bring himself to make enthusiastically. A major reason for this is that Prabhupada understood that the rigorous standards he required at initiation would be abandoned in married life. It is of some interest to locate such a standard for householders in Hindu literatures, but that is of sparse concern here because Prabhupada was strict in following his celibate guru; his charisma was based in large measure on his fidelity to his sampradaya. And this sampradaya was founded by an extreme ascetic who, as stated, had no use for an ideal wife. It should be noted that occasionally one may encounter a disciple or granddisciple of Prabhupada for whom the various restrictions do not pose a significant problem.

At any rate, for many disciples, the difficulty of the teaching on sensual matters gave (and still gives) the ring of authenticity (Wheeler, 1985: 41), for anyone who makes even a passing survey of Vedantic religion knows that attachment to the human body and its pleasures are more often dismissed as unsatisfying and entangling, than not. So the disciples tried to pay the price

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47 Shri Chaitanya married twice, but he set the example in taking sannyasa at the age of twenty-four.
insisted upon by their guru for authentic spirituality. They could escape the mundane ocean of American simulacra and ultimately the ocean of birth and death known as samsara—in the same bargain. But their careers as religious specialists have since adjusted to their personal needs and outside influences.

Here we can pause and note that the preceding three sentences reiterate the very center of our thesis, the cult to church paradigm that parallels the modal shift in orientation—institutionally and more broadly—from elite asceticism to more accommodating householder life. This will also allow us to examine the results of devotees’ continuing efforts to escape unfulfilling samsaric simulacra and return to normal American life with as much Krishna consciousness as they can afford. In many ways, we have risen to the “continental divide” for this dissertation, for most of what follows will flow from these observations and the mass of data upon which it rests.

We can now list the basic patterns we have discussed so far, of searching, attraction to Krishna Consciousness, recruitment, the sensation of leaving one world and entering another, indoctrination and temple life, some of the problems of temple life, the temples’ efforts at proselytizing, gender and family issues, and the incongruity of lifestyles portrayed in clashing textual images of devotion. The movement went on according to these patterns until the passing of the founder, and beyond. The remainder of this chapter and the entire study will be dedicated to unraveling the implications of all of these patterns and incongruity because they led to the establishment of New Raman Reti, which, when present situations are mentioned, we have been discussing all along. The North Florida community has funneled the American Hare Krishna movement in terms of population and internal social developments, and taken advantage of favorable material circumstances.
The Ordinary Life Competes With the Extraordinary Teaching

Rochford has described the economic and psychological impact of marriage on the institution. Even semi-ascetic householders generally want and need their own place, especially when children are born, and such needs are expensive. Some devotees financed this by keeping a portion of their personal sankirtana proceeds, others were awarded a temple allowance for rent and food in exchange for sankirtana or other important duties.48 Their modest apartments, sometimes shared between two or more families, were generally located a short distance from the temple. But in time even these small allowances could not be granted democratically because almost everyone eventually got married, there weren’t enough remunerative temple positions for every householder, and dedicated brahmacharis and brahmacharinis rightfully objected to the amount of money from their sankirtana efforts going to support householders—many of whom did not go on sankirtana (Rochford, 2007: 63-64). Resentment all around began to typify these issues long before Prabhupada’s passing, and afterwards the high-handed manner in which the new gurus dealt with their fellow disciples (Godbrothers and Godsisters), scandals at all levels, and the natural difficulty of ascetic living, made for a temple situation that was unsustainable psychologically as well as economically. Also, it became obvious that children could not flourish under the austere conditions endorsed by the authorities, even if they stayed with their parents instead of residing at a gurukula.

However, these developments did not affect the size of the entire congregation, only living arrangements and power relationships, for many or most of those who got regular jobs, now no longer financially captive to the wishes of the temple authorities, still attended the temple

48 In 1974 I observed that about half of the participants at the mangal aratrika in New Dvaraka (Los Angles temple) were householders. I can’t say what percentage had jobs. But I recall that there were also brahmacharis in the movement with jobs, for instance, taxi drivers, security guards, social workers, college teachers, and businessmen.
functions especially on Sundays. At this point cultural continuity helps to establish a cult in society, because for most, their own parents had taken them to church or synagogue without trying to be religious specialists. On this point the disciples’ parents had more in common with Hindus who frequent the ISKCON temples than their own devotee children, but because the practice of going to church or synagogue had been inculcated in the devotees before they contacted the movement, it was only natural to revert to that familiar pattern with a different religion. The simplicity of Shri Chaitanya’s Sunday program of chanting, dancing, and feasting, though not of a piece with most of Christianity or Judaism in America, has proven more durable than any temple structure dedicated to a military style of missionary work. The feasibility of this program is more compatible with Albanese’s ordinary religion, not because it is ordinary in terms of the clash between cult and church, but because it is more accessible to people who are not religious virtuosos. *Kirtana*, dancing, *prasada*, and a certain level of doctrinal understanding are things that could be fairly easily purchased, and the effort to follow the rest of the teaching, the difficult part—sacrifice—is the price, as stated plainly by Prabhupada earlier in this chapter under the subheading *Sannyasa is for all disciples*. Stated in these terms our thesis is illuminated by ordinary images we have used so far, such as a bargain, a market place, people calculating, making an analysis of costs and benefits as a rational choice, etc. Almost incredibly, investing less in *sadhana* and getting less results (without expecting more) was simply not encouraged by Prabhupada, who encouraged people to simply do what they could when they frankly admitted their inability to be ascetic—but his proxy representatives, who disparaged such ordinary efforts to maintain a connection with a difficult teaching, took this a step further and tried to enforce a teaching many of them now admit they did not understand. The extra step was resorted to simply
by falling back on Prabhupada’s many pronouncements on the subject of sense gratification, material entanglement, etc.

**An interactionist perspective applied to a charismatic leader**

Rochford’s interactionist philosophy of sociological analysis is compelling for research on cults. Obviously, ISKCON developed from the interaction of a cultic guru and his disciples, and this was a two way street. We must remember how Prabhupada felt exhilarated and confident in his ascetic approach in the fall of 1966, for he had experimented and seemingly experienced success in how far he could press the values of *sannyasa* upon his students. How Prabhupada felt is all important for our cost benefit approach because, unless we assert that he was completely “transcendental” in all of his dealings (which is what many followers say), it explains his reasoning in human terms.49

Although we cannot be very definite about Prabhupada’s mental state, we can surmise, based on his actions, how he felt or thought in some instances. It is possible that he had no misunderstandings of his disciples’ abilities, but it is also very possible that Prabhupada was exhilarated by false hopes given to him by his disciples who thought that, in one summer, they had changed their values. However, simply because one undergoes cognitive alignment with a cult, this does not mean that the things one values the most have changed, or because one has added new values the old values disappear quite rapidly. They may indeed disappear but

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49 The exact nature of Prabhupada’s spiritual status has become a matter of dispute among his disciples. Some think his perfection extended to all spheres of consideration. Others contend that his real perfection was that he loved the Lord without reservation, not that he never stubbed his toe. There is plenty of fodder for all these considerations in Hinduism because the principle that “the guru is one” could mean many things to many people. For instance, as a representative of God, or as the embodiment of all the demigods—standard Gaudiya assertions—how all knowing or super-resistant to sensual imperfection, mistakes, or illusion is a pure devotee guru supposed to be? In terms of their own knowledge and experience, which one of these new devotees could say? If such issues are not settled in India, no wonder they were contentious in America at the beginning of the Hare Krishna movement. However, even if some devotees may allow that Prabhupada made mistakes, they are considered honest mistakes (“Every endeavor is covered by some fault, just as fire is covered by smoke”; Bhagavad Gita 18.48) because this researcher has not found anyone still involved with the Hare Krishna movement who thinks that Prabhupada cheated anyone. In other words, he sold no simulacra.
reappear again, sometimes very inconveniently. Although the question of values is scarcely represented in the critical literature on religious cults, this is a mistake for rational choice and cost benefit analysis, because these are based on individual values.

The institutional patterns hold while an alternate devotional community grows

The psychological profile of the next group to get involved—the second wave of the first generation—was a bit different from the first wave. Many of them ridiculed the values of the first group and their talk of peace and love. Many of these later devotees were more goal oriented and less inclined to experiment with mind altering substances. This development proved that the attraction to Krishna consciousness was not confined to the values of (thrill seeking) non-conformists, although a fresh infusion of arguably countercultural orientations in ISKCON also emerged from the punk movement in the late 1970’s and throughout the next decade. At the same time, Jimi Wilson’s MA thesis indicates the never ending American—almost Protestant—interest in explanations and doctrinal clarity that happened to fit with Prabhuapada’s methods like a hand within a glove. In Wilson’s study a punk musician had considered becoming rastafarian before his involvement with ISKCON but ultimately rejected rastafarianism because it was too vague and couldn’t set its teachings on a firm philosophical platform (Wilson, 2008: 205-206). So the “Protestant” model of discursive religion is the third item of cultural continuity (after eating and ordinary religiosity) that has helped the movement to establish and maintain a spirituality of dwelling and perhaps move it toward church status, enduring in the Hare Krishna

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50 Wilson quotes the musician, John Joseph McGowan. "I was moved by H.R.'s revolutionary spirit and devotion to God, but something was missing. That something was a philosophical understanding as to why he did the things he did on his path. Religion without philosophy is fanaticism and when I would ask questions about certain matters like reincarnation, or how the soul fell into the material world in the first place I would get an answer like, 'Don’t worry about all that. It’s just Jah [God] you know.' In my experience the Hare Krishna people have a low tolerance for any discourse on religion that is not explanatory in detail.
movement to this day (Judah, 1974: 112). But why did the second wave of the founding generation experience the same cycle discussed here—searching, attraction, the sensation of leaving one world and entering another, sacrifice, dwelling, marriage, and reintegration with the ordinary?

It is impractical to fill out the biographical profile of ISKCON’s first generation, second wave here, but we can include this group at the point of sacrifice and the remaining items mentioned above. Because this group was heavily influenced by the straight edge movement, it may or may not have experienced similar difficulties with the sacrifice of asceticism. Be that as it may, it also eventually wanted family life. When cultists marry other cultists, it a primary tangible installment in the construction of the spirituality of dwelling, for it is unlikely that such marriages would occur without the clear intent to remain involved with the cult. Married ISKCON people account for most of the earliest diffusion of Prabhupada’s teachings that we have set aside as the wider Hare Krishna movement, and they are still vital in that diffusion today. One of the first things these young couples of both groups learned as they became independent of temples was that their Krishna consciousness was portable and sturdy, and in consideration of value differentiation could be taken in less measure than Prabhupada had insisted upon—they discovered that they could enjoy sex with their mates as they liked, listen to non-devotional music, have regular jobs, go back to school, eat an occasional pizza that was not prasada, explore other forms of spirituality, read a novel, engage in sports, even sometimes

51 There is nothing essentially Protestant about discursive religion and other subjects I have referred to as “Protestant” in this dissertation. Rather, I have been referring to the intersection between Protestant and Gaudiya religion (as Prabhupada had presented it) in a Venn diagram that could be devised to indicate their commonalities. The Bhagavad Gita is certainly a discourse, but this fact does not make it Protestant. And Indic religions had arguments between them long before the arrival of the Europeans.

52 Straight edgers often fail at asceticism, but since most try this lifestyle before contacting the Hare Krishna movement their previous orientation does not resemble the first wave. Judah has shown that the first wave was more interested in thrills than austerity. An excellent emic source for the straight edge movement is online: http://toefur.com/straightedge/x/articles/straightedgehistorymovement.php
indulge in intoxication—and still attend the temple Sunday program, have kirtans at home, go for japa walks (reciting the mantra on beads while walking), spread Krishna consciousness at work and play to their friends and neighbors, vote, own homes, etc. In other words, these devotees realized that they did not have to sacrifice everything in order to consider Krishna consciousness their religion, or themselves as representatives of it. Although Prabhupada welcomed all attempts to serve the Lord, no matter how small, this development was precisely what he did not want for initiated disciples. The author of Srila Prabhupada Lilamrta reflects on Prabhupada’s stated desires. “Although I was already doing whatever Swamiji recommended, I sensed that initiation was a heavy commitment. And with my last strong impulses to remain completely independent, I hesitated to take initiation” (Gosvami, 1980: 177). But the new American devotees discovered that they could cross the line that Prabhupada had drawn, and not spiritually self-destruct. Such acceptance of compromise is essential for any cult striving to become a church, unless the cult has managed to take control of its social environment—an extremely unlikely event. If cultists cannot follow every rule of the cult, how could the rest of society?

In New Raman Reti and throughout the movement in America, some devotees still do not accept the possibility of Krishna consciousness outside of the narrow market niche Prabhupada emphasized, and even narrower niche the leaders of the first two decades demanded. For example, one informant stated his surprise that anyone not strictly following the four regulative principles and chanting sixteen rounds could successfully grow the Tulasi plant at home, for it is

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53 Satsvarupa Gosvami, unlike Howard Wheeler (Hayagriva Dasa), did not write in the first person. He refers to himself in this passage as Steve Guarino.
said that this plant will only grow where there is devotion. But hundreds of Tulasis are growing luxuriantly all over New Raman Reti at the time of this writing, by American, Hindu, and Hispanic devotees who do not follow a contract of initiation. It should be noted that I could find no record of Prabhupada stipulating a standard of *sadhana* consistent with initiation for the cultivation of Tulasi, so this is an example of the proliferation (or invention) of conservative views of religion in the Hare Krishna movement. It appears that this particular idea of Tulasi is derived from Prabhupada’s insistence on strict standards that he found useful for imparting form to Shri Chaitanya’s mission in America. My informant, apparently, thinks that without strict following of rules there could be no devotion.

The reluctance to depart even minutely from Prabhupada’s ambitious vision is understandable if we reckon the importance of belief, for the compatibility of Prabhupada’s emphasis on texts and doctrine and the discursive appreciation of religion familiar to the first disciples puts a premium on belief, although this premium could have very unhappy results. By my observation of this cult since 1974, if one continued to believe Prabhupada’s teachings after giving up trying to follow any portion of them, the ensuing psychological conflict could be immense, and commensurate to the level of cultic investment—as anti-cult people are quick to point out. Anti-cult literature has understood the importance of cultic belief and has accurately portrayed the potential dangers of cultic involvement, frequently centering on the aftermath, which could range from mildly dysfunctional to tragic. Some devotees, feeling very “fallen”, have committed suicide. It should not surprise us that cult “deprogrammers” of the 1970s and 1980s focused on undermining cultic belief because they understood its vital importance to cultic life.

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54 Considered sacred even by non-Vaishnava Hindus, by the influence of the Hare Krishna devotees Tulasi’s prestige has increased still further in America.
Fortunately for the mental health of most Hare Krishna devotees, their learning curve on conservative discursive religion has been better than the temple authorities, vexed that the temples were falling apart, and slow to comprehend that the future of the movement lay in the cult to church process emphasized here. Unfortunately, these authorities tended to see real householder life as apostasy.\textsuperscript{55} Overwhelmingly (and understandably) concerned about temple finances in the wake of Prabhupada’s passing, the authorities often turned their backs on their fellow disciples and even the disciples of their recently minted guru Godbrothers, to curry the favor of another group we will presently discuss—the affluent, stable, less committed (in the way we have been discussing commitment here) and already church oriented Hindu community (Rochford, 2007: 192,195,197). We will discover that this group has been an important part of the first generation and in some ways a collective exemplar for it, even while keeping to a style of religion and family life that could not be immediately emulated by their American counterparts.

**Half a loaf is better than none**

The improbable but spectacular ISKCON experiment with religious novelty could be highly paradoxical as a rational choice. First, a few comments on the the negative side will help our perspective of cost and benefits. Prabhupada had told his followers that ecstasy would come by performing devotional activities, but it seems that Krishna does not supply ecstasy on demand. Prabhupada explained that failure to make advancement and experience ecstasy was

\textsuperscript{55} "My own perception is that an inability or unwillingness to continue a strictly ascetic life plays in most cases a major role in apostasy." This statement by Steven Gelberg typifies the attitude of early ISKCON authorities, even though it is inaccurate, for apostasy means renunciation of one's religion. At the time this statement was published, Gelberg was still involved with ISKCON although his writing was showing signs of discontent. His fellow disciples who have remained with the cult have discussed Gelberg’s own apostasy as a result of not being able to conceive of Krishna consciousness without a strictly ascetic life, for Gelberg has indeed renounced his religion. See Gelberg “The Call of the Lotus Eyed Lord” in Timothy Miller *When Prophets Fail* SUNY Press, Albany, 1991, 161, and for his apostasy see http://surrealist.org/betrayalofthespirit/gelberg.html.
due to strong material attachments, but that these attachments would “soon” disappear by continually chanting. However, some devotees have not experienced this at all, for after years of struggle as a religious specialist, for many the troublesome desires remained—even if they did or still do experience ecstasy.

As for the institution, it has been devalued as a source of authority because its leaders are often not respected; previous bad leadership still casts doubt on new leadership. The GBC in particular, seen as negligent in the face of many a scandal, is seen as illegitimate, ineffectual, or at least out of touch by many. New Raman Reti officially disassociated itself from the GBC in a document produced in 2000 that states a lack of confidence (Rochford, 2007: 177). This is a remarkably portentous development for a community considered by a subsequent GBC member (Sesa Dasa, who still retains a good reputation in the community) to be “ISKCON’s flagship.” By contrast, there are many devotees respected for their spiritual qualities but with no connection to management, and their examples are respected even if not emulated. Curiously, these devotees are commonly perceived to be without prejudice against those who cannot follow so strictly, while many in authoritative positions still cling to the old, strict paradigm—which they cannot enforce. It has been suggested by more than one informant that the insistence on strict following is a projection by those who fear their own real values.

On the positive side of this paradox for continuity in a spirituality of dwelling, failure to experience ecstasy or even simple peace of mind, whether or not one follows Prabhupada’s teachings strictly, is not necessarily considered a symptom of no spiritual advancement. One reason for this is because the tradition recognizes three classes of spiritual consciousness in relation to happiness. The highest type is beyond material misery, the lowest type may be so absorbed in material pleasures or ignorance so as to be temporarily without a feeling of misery,
but the middle position—where one has some knowledge and enhanced perspective on the existential condition—may be excruciatingly painful. Seen this way, the angst experienced by a neophyte devotee who is struggling, or who has even given up the struggle for the path of least resistance, is not a reason for someone at least in the middle position to give up Krishna consciousness altogether.

Here we should remember from Chapter Two that the Bhagavad Gita prescribes various options, and the difficult regulated life of sadhana comes right after pure devotion, not at the far end of Krishna’s list, with several, less direct ways to reach the Lord in between (Prabhupada, 1989: 621-626). In other words, although vaidhi sadhana bhakti may be the formal beginning of the path of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, other valid approaches may precede even vaidhi sadhana bhakti for those not ready to pay the cost of vaidhi bhakti. Such a simple cost benefit calculation is understood by many in the Hare Krishna movement as a rational choice, and is one of Hinduism’s most distinctive gifts to American religious consciousness. The institution is slowly getting used to this idea so prevalent in the scriptures it reveres, playing catch-up with the wider Hare Krishna movement.

**Cultic social actors interact with material factors**

As we have noted the progression from cultic asceticism to church worldliness, in a different register there is a similar progression from institutional rational choice to personal rational choice within the cult to church paradigm where the extraordinary and the ordinary strike a deal. Cults and sects tend to totalize their influence upon people’s lives, and cultic and sectarian institutions even more so. But “secularized” churches—mindful of their charter to include the sinner as well as the saint—do not mind if their ordinary congregation, for instance, watches football after the Sunday service. Some New Raman Reti devotees want to limit utility principle issues to a very basic understanding of Prabhupada’s teachings current forty years ago,
admitting the importance of time, place, and circumstance (*kala, desha, patra*) only for considerations of how best to distribute books, or the best wording in a public lecture, or whether or not the financially weak temple should charge to take *prasada* at the Sunday feast. But there are also personal issues of the utility principle, such as the realization that a person can only do so much—even Arjuna had frankly told the Lord that he could not perform *ashtanga yoga* (Prabhupada lecture, 1971) so Krishna provided a list of spiritual options—and this realization and related personal issues form a different perspective on rational choice. One’s sex life and whether or not to enjoy a football game should not be regulated by outsiders.

But when Prabhupada was “on the planet” no one wanted to disagree with him because he insisted that his way was practical, and more importantly, because he was Prabhupada. No one was quite sure of the limits of what constituted offensiveness to an exalted guru, for this could directly anger the Lord and exclude you from the association of Vaishnavas, deny you a ticket out of *samsara*, and who knows what else. Considering the stakes, it was better to pay the relatively small price of keeping your thoughts to yourself. Even then, many devotees have declared that Prabhupada could read their mind. As Wheeler wrote, “I first began realizing his potency just by looking at his face. Whenever I’m Krishna conscious, it makes me joyful. Whenever I’m not, I’m afraid to look at it; it accuses me, makes me ashamed without uttering a word. What power there is in the spiritual master’s face!” (Wheeler, 1990: 44). On Prabhupada’s side, he was annoyed that some of his disciples expected him to know everything without their input and he was amused at the naïve credulity of disciples who thought that he possessed extraordinary powers (Ketola, 2008: 176).

At this point one may doubt that people who tried to follow Prabhupada’s program did so only to get a benefit, because the price seems so steep that they must have had a natural dislike
for sex, pizza, Beatles music, etc., of their natural background, unless abstinence from these things is itself seen as a benefit. Abstinence was always justified as possible by replacing the lower taste of mundane pleasures with the higher taste of Krishna consciousness. Factually, some were naturally adept at renunciation at least for some time, but it is unknown whether their skill at following rules was due to a higher taste, a stronger will, or whatever. Most others tried their best at following Prabhupada’s most difficult instructions, eventually giving up and concentrating on *seva* instead of renunciation to express their spiritual aspirations.

Counterintuitively, this is not the end of the story, because temple authorities could be quite meddlesome even when householders had moved away from the temple. My interviews reveal that the powerful administrators could always selectively quote Prabhupada on any number of issues, marginalizing his more indulgent statements that could be construed as dispensation for persons of a more ordinary temperament. And the leaders understood that sex attraction led to marriage which led to children and the need for a separate residence, income, etc. They understood that householder life and all that went with it was the nemesis of the institution as it was constituted in that era. And when Prabhupada had passed on, the new gurus often tried to break up marriages because now they could directly order their married disciples any way they saw fit, regardless of either partner’s wishes. There are many incidences where new gurus would order a married disciple to pack up and move somewhere, and the partner could follow, or not. So just as previously the only way to certainly be Krishna conscious was to join the local temple, now the only way to save a marriage, for some, was to not go to the temple at all.

**The ultimate confrontation between renunciation and married life**

The most outrageous instance of institutional meddling in married affairs occurred in 1986 when Prabhupada disciple Sulochana Dasa was murdered by henchmen of New Vrindavana
leader Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, Keith Ham. To make a long story short, because Sulochana was not a model devotee along the lines of Ham’s married sannyasa standards, his wife—initiated by Ham—was persuaded by him (according to Sulochana) to leave Sulochana for someone else; he was prohibited from contact with his own children; he then complained to other devotees, law enforcement, and the press; and then, as many devotees believe, the full wrath of the ascetic mentality crushed him as an example. Incredibly, the date of his murder was well past the high point of householder residence in ISKCON, and this shows the desperation of management to control the lives of people they knew were slipping from their grasp. Ironically, Sulochana, although no longer interested in living under the thumb of any temple president or sannyasi, and no longer interested in imitating their lifestyle, was still a religious specialist by almost anyone’s standards. He chanted his rounds, read the scriptures frequently, and was steeped in Prabhupada’s teachings. Apparently, anyone who could set an example of accepting Prabhupada’s teachings as half a loaf and still dedicate their entire life to his mission constituted an intolerable threat to a certain way of being a Gaudiya Vaishnava that had to be defended at all costs.  

But shortly after Sulochana left the New Vrindavana community Ham deemphasized Gaudiya Vaishnavism and encouraged devotees there to dress in the robes of Christian monks, abandoning Sanskrit kirtanas for glorification of God in English—measures that most American Hare Krishna devotees feel have no basis in Prabhupada’s teachings. However, Ham still insisted

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56 The intimate details of Sulochana’s troubles with ISKCON authorities were provided to the author of this study by Sulochana himself in the summer of 1982. Ham was only partially brought to justice because others took the rap for him. He spent several years in prison and house arrest under racketeering charges, and currently resides in India in the company of Indian and Western disciples. It is true that Sulochana rightly accused Kirtanananda and others of scandal, but it was his alternative lifestyle in Krishna consciousness that provoked their ire enough to meddle with his life, beginning the chain of events—including his talking to law enforcement—that eventually took his life. Sulochana’s book is available online: http://www.hareKrishna.org/pada/sulocan1.htm
on near celibacy for householders. The title of his book *Joy of No Sex* attests to this, and even after serving prison time, he has reiterated this position in recent statements (Bhaktipada, 1988).

Sulochana’s execution-murder is an extreme example of the messy situation produced by immature renunciation. It is a symbol of a universal policy that cannot work in America (or probably anywhere), where there is little support for such a lifestyle and even less ability to follow one. However, there is a silver lining in this cloud of the suppression of the public intellectual in ISKCON. It has created a storm that, in its clearing, revealed the problem for what it was: “ISKCON’s history in North America has clearly been one of ongoing conflict over marriage and family life” (Rochford, 1997: 207). Now everyone in the movement or at least New Raman Reti knows the difference between householders and *sannyasi*. This means that whether married people and their children follow Prabhupada’s teachings strictly or not, it is no one’s business but their own, and they can live their lives in their own way. The intense interest among New Raman Reti devotees in self-improvement courses similar to the Landmark program that we will discuss in later chapters shows that the individual has become almost sacred, and this has given them greater stability in a society and culture that mocks the values of obedience and submission to the supposed needs of the mission.

For Weber, “Sexuality…belongs (together with economic interests and those of power and prestige) to ‘the most fundamental and universal components of the actual course of interpersonal behavior’ ” (Lemmen, 124). To be practical and to reflect the emphasis of the tradition, we will continue with the issue of sexuality for ISKCON householders because more than any other ordinary activity, sexuality is considered the most binding force in the material world, and consequently sums up the displeasure of the authorities and telescopes the frustration, anger, and resentment of householders towards these authorities more than any other issue. After
all, Prabhupada had explained that renunciation was like cutting one’s nails; if we let them grow out, it does not hurt—otherwise the pain would cost more than it was worth. Quite often, powerful administrators, though, tried to decide for the individual when the nails should be cut. And beside sexuality, there were a host of painful issues in this connection, such as money matters, the status of women, and especially child rearing, that we cannot pursue in this chapter. These will be discussed more fully in the chapter on the second generation, under the rubric of women in ISKCON, who often have their own views on the utility principle.

**Prabhupada teaches his disciples how to die**

Prabhupada did not live to see the terrible, ultimate confrontation between renunciation and married life that came to a climax in the Sulochana affair. The founder fell sick in the summer of 1977 and took the opportunity of his remaining months to demonstrate how one should, even on one’s last bed, serve the Lord (Gosvami, 1983: 418). He had never really talked to his American children about anything but Krishna, and he continued this habit through his final moments as a steady stream of his Godbrothers from the Gaudiya Math and prominent Hindus of all sorts came to pay their last respects. In Vrndavana, November 14, 1977, with his room packed with weeping devotees, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami “Srila Prabhupada” closed his eyes for the last time and went “back to Godhead.” His official biographer, Satsvarupa Gosvami, compared the event to the passing of the warrior Grandfather Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* (Gosvami, 1983: 418). He would never have to return to the awful round of repeated birth and death in the material world, but as his biographer wrote, his disciples were not so fortunate (ibid, 421).

According to their own testimonies Prabhupada had been the most authentic person these Americans had ever known, showing them that spiritual life could be much more than simulacra (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1995: xii, 30, 31, 46). He had also appealed to their imagination like
no one else, and like no elder in their pre-Hare Krishna days he commanded their respect as a spiritual authority (ibid, vii). In this authoritative role he had challenged young Americans to do great things for Krishna—otherwise what was the value of being American, simply a monkey dedicated to sense gratification, or a dog running on four wheels? But now the absent father had gone away for good and left his children in charge of his estate. Would his instructions be enough to carry on his mission? Could they cooperate enough to keep his programs going? They had thought that his teachings had settled everything, but since no previous Vaishnava guru had ever taught in America, even his passing was extraordinary (Dwyer, 2007: 181-182).

Although not immediately affecting his teachings, Prabhupada’s departure changed movement power relations significantly for the cult to church paradigm.

Where Prabhupada’s physical life left off—in psychological and practical terms—New Raman Reti began. On the same day that Prabhupada left his movement with its grief, the papers were signed on the property of New Raman Reti, Alachua, Florida.
CHAPTER 4
NEW RAMAN RETI

Why Study New Raman Reti?

A significant development for the spirituality of dwelling in the American Hare Krishna movement can be seen in an area of North Florida where the devotees typically no longer feel obligated to greet each other at the local supermarket or post office, simply because their population level has made such casual meetings an everyday event. This chapter will explore the New Raman Reti community that brings our discussion up to the present, a snapshot of a religious neighborhood in time.

New Raman Reti has 1) an officially, legally chartered institution affiliated with a national and international organization, with buildings for worship, publication of religious literature, and the education of the young; arable land for dairying and produce, business enterprises, and religious festivals; and an administrative body concerned with regular affairs of the ritual calendar, and plans for future development. While not everyone agrees with the policies of ISKCON, the official institution recognized at New Raman Reti is ISKCON which claims the institutional authority of Prabhupada. Some claim that Prabhupada would not recognize this institution (Rochford, 2007: 170), but nevertheless the North Florida branch of ISKCON—the Shri Radha-Shyamasundara Mandira (temple) at New Raman Reti and all of its projects—claims that it bases its activities on the teachings of Prabhupada as they are presented in his books, letters, and electronic media recordings.

New Raman Reti is a complex phenomenon. Encompassing the institution known as ISKCON defined as a structure and mechanism of social order and cooperation governing religious projects and people, represented by the mandira, is the local embodiment of the wider Hare Krishna movement, 2) the largest community of Hare Krishna people in North America,
mostly gathered in North Florida from elsewhere in the US and around the world. All of these devotees have a relationship with the *mandira* to one degree or another; and aside from temple activities, they practice the religion in their daily lives, which commonly includes home worship. This community is composed of first generation, formally initiated disciples of the founder, first generation disciples of disciples of the founder, second generation children of all of these disciples, and their children, and less formally affiliated followers.

The majority of these devotees at New Raman Reti are Americans of European descent, followed by a substantial presence of ethnic Hindu devotees from India or whose parents are from India, and devotees from Latin America. Statistics on the Hare Krishna religion in America are contentious, by practitioners and critical scholars alike. Except for festival days, the temple at New Raman Reti is dominated by people of European or Hispanic descent. A recent temple president, Chaturatma Dasa, estimates that 1,000 of these devotees live in the North Florida area; 30-40% is Hispanic. He also estimates the Hindu population at about 1,000. This last figure, however, is disputed by the director of the Temple Outreach Program, who claims an estimate of 2,000 Hindus. The criteria for these estimates was attendance at the temple at least once or twice a year. There are also devotees who have not visited the temple in years, but are still part of the community. For what it is worth, the director of the Temple Outreach Program reports that over 75,000 plates of *prasada* were served in the last recent year that records were kept. We do not know how many times the temple was visited by the people who consumed this food. At any rate, by the most liberal estimates, according to figures provided by temple officers, the community is composed of about three thousand devotees, although my personal sense is that this is too liberal of an estimate.
Most of these devotees live within a half hour's drive from the *mandira*, while some live further away but must still be considered part of the community of the *mandira*, which broadcasts its ritual services in cyber space. Rochford's contention that ISKCON in America has become less oriented to temple worship and is now more involved in domestic worship—a process of secularization—is not supported by specific research on New Ram Reti (Rochford, 200: 210). Both types of worship remain important.

Rochford's analysis in *Hare Krishna Transformed* takes information from statements by temple leaders, which is fair (Rochford, 2007: 3), yet keeps the terminology of full and part time devotion, while this study looks instead at a community of a social movement heavily influenced by a religious institution. Rochford’s emphasis has an historical connection with his discipline and his field, informed by secularization theory, for “change in the direction of accommodation with mainstream cultures [secularization]...represents the decline of community” (Wilson 1976: 265-6). Such a “decline” leaves “the residual—individual religiosity—as the essence of religious life”, because these scholars conflate community with institution. This may allow them to make a seemingly watertight argument—and try to analyze “full” and “part time” devotees—but only at the expense of lived religion. For the Hare Krishna religion in America, this would mean that married practitioners living in their own homes are not part of the ISKCON “community.” Wilson also claims that loss of community makes group ritual meaningless (Wilson, 1982: 160). In these studies both Wilson and Rochford do not emphasize the potential for "secularization" to strengthen a religious community, for accommodation with mainstream culture, as Stark has pointed out, means added resources with which to augment a religious social movement. Without those resources it is impossible for a new religious movement to become a church, a religious body with significant influence upon society.
I have shown the ongoing tension between institution and communities composed of individuals for the American Hare Krishna people, and a yearning for a balance between them. Rochford’s assessment is confusing in this regard, because he privileges the voices of married devotees who claim they were “kicked out” or “forced out” of the temples, and while they may very well have been forced to make other living arrangements, this emphasis does not acknowledge the eagerness with which householder devotees have separated themselves from the oversight of the institution (Rochford, 2007: 68). Many of my informants at New Raman Reti contradict the assessment of the aforementioned sociologists, because as a functioning community of believers, individual and group ritual and belief flourishes in the temple, their homes, even while riding together in a car—and sometimes, in harmony with most church religion in America, even while watching a sporting event. Church goers are far less likely to label someone a “part-time” Methodist or Jew because they root for the home team on Saturday.

For the purposes of this study, the large community at New Raman Reti is the lay community, which is not committed to the elite, ascetic practice of celibacy, and does not as a whole rise at three or four a.m. for meditation and ritual. The elite, non-lay, ascetic dimension of the religion at New Raman Reti is now more or less represented by scriptural and institutional authority, instead of being a staple of daily life. However, it remains an important resource for inspiration or—sometimes to the dismay of family members—emulation.1 Remarkably, the daily Shrimad Bhagavatam lectures have retained the ascetic emphasis, a reflection of the text and Prabhupada’s commentaries.

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1 When male devotees leave home to take sannyasa, the renounced order—especially if they have not provided the economic means for the sustenance of their family—considerable disruption may occur. Even simply following any of the rules strictly could disrupt the tranquility of family life, as the movement has discovered—for instance, the denial of sexual favors has resulted in the termination of many marriages. One informant told me that she married the man she did specifically because she did not want to have sex with him, and would be able to follow the stricture to engage in sex only at the optimum time for children. Understandably, the marriage did not endure, because the man had married her for opposite reasons.
Regardless of an ascetic emphasis in the institution, New Raman Reti is in the self-conscious process of establishing firm roots in American society, as many of its devotees have retreated from a stricter, more ascetic, and more separatist version of Hare Krishna religion practiced in their youth, when the lifestyle was "insular not isolated." On this point, Rochford has clearly shown the intrusion of ordinary life upon a new religious movement. In the earlier days, the devotees related to their environment for the purposes of missionary work, not for contributing to American society on its own terms. As most of these devotees married and had children, investment in America's "mundane" institutions—a regular job, ownership of property, a health care plan, etc, became important—at least as important as proselytizing one's neighbors. In the new scenario, household duties come first, and in their spare time the householders contribute to the temple's projects or devote themselves to religious activities apart from the temple. Because of its size, the New Raman Reti community provides an abundance of opportunity for a variety of religious expression within the teachings of the founder, where devotees speak of having found their "niche.” They have also found North Florida to be a land of opportunity for their children, for in addition to the New Raman Reti School offering a private education that includes religious training on the temple property, adjacent to the mandira is a public charter school with an enrollment dominated by students from the New Raman Reti community. We can then follow New Raman Reti students to the local high school, community college, and the University of Florida, and gauge their progress toward integration with American society, while maintaining (or not maintaining) their Hare Krishna identity. We can also include people who do not claim a status as "members" but integrate the practices and/or beliefs into their daily lives, and have moved to North Florida from other areas of the country for this very purpose.
The City of Alachua, where most New Raman Reti devotees reside, is a rapidly expanding town in terms of population, housing and municipal buildings under construction, and business growth. New Raman Reti is growing with Alachua. Alachua and Gainesville politicians canvas the devotees, who are gratified to be taken seriously by any branch of government, for their votes. For all the reasons already stated, New Raman Reti has become a community more identifiable than any other Hare Krishna community in the United States, especially since the first critical studies on the Hare Krishna religion in America were produced thirty and more years ago. Sesa Dasa, a Jacksonville immigration attorney and community leader who recently represented New Raman Reti to ISKCON's Governing Board Commission (GBC) has called the community an "ISKCON flag-ship" because it is showing to America the Krishna conscious lifestyle in a practical community (2007 personal communication). Sesa Dasa has succinctly expressed a common view within the community that the social mission of the founder is being fulfilled there. Not everyone who lives at New Raman Reti agrees with Sesa Dasa, so we certainly need "to admit discord to disrupt monolithic, reductionist accounts" (Gold, 2002: 25). For instance, one informant complained that very few new devotees have been formally initiated in the community (Prahlada, 2007). However, Sesa Dasa's assessment of the New Raman Reti community affirms the cult to church thesis with the additional observation that this paradigm is not only about the reduction of stress in relation to a new religious movement and its environment. It could also include the investment by new religious movement followers in the values and institutions of the wider society—without losing the spirit of the original charter—as Sesa puts it, lived, real, and "no longer theoretical."

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2 The U.S. census bureau in 2006 estimated the population of Alachua—incorporated as a city in 1905—at 7, 554 people. In 2000 there were 1,751 families living in Alachua. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alachua,_Florida Organized religion has a strong presence in Alachua. There are about a dozen churches, none of them Catholic, and there is no synagogue.
At the conclusion of *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, Stillson Judah in 1974 compared the Hare Krishna movement to a phoenix that reinvents itself, and wondered where it might fly to next. In his conclusion of *Hare Krishna Transformed*, Burke Rochford in 2007 indicated that New Raman Reti defines the future of the movement in America because of its strong commitment to family life, a relatively neglected but very important aspect of the Hindu tradition of which the Hare Krishna religion is a part. There is little disagreement among researchers that family life is a strong carrier of cultural continuity, but can it carry the ascetic values of an imported cult from one generation to the next? In Chapter One I also stated my interest to discover what would remain of Prabhupada’s ascetic cult in America over time as it struggles to attain church status. Could it retain its effervescence, its second generation, and doctrinal fidelity, as well as its ascetic lifestyle? What would be the effect of time on the wider Hare Krishna movement in America, instead of ISKCON as an institution? *Hare Krishna Transformed* answers the last question by laying out the processes by which ISKCON has been weakened in America in terms of personnel, financial resources, morale, functioning temples, qualified leaders, its educational system, and respect for management.

**The Cultic Process of Value Reassignment**

As for the wider Hare Krishna community, Rochford has shown that most first generation devotees cannot tolerate the devotional austerities of their youth that had supposedly turned them into *brahmins*—at least as far as their spiritual father Prabhupada was concerned. Prabhupada had shocked Allen Ginsberg when he told the poet that he intended to turn his disciples into *brahmins* by training them in self control and austerity, the qualities of the priestly *varna*, which he was trying to create in America (Wheeler, 1985: 28; Prabhupada, 1989: 827). For Prabhupada brahminical standards were meant to facilitate the beginning stages of devotion, not a reenactment of local ritual standards that typify the regional expressions of brahminical
Hinduism in India. However, many have questioned Prabhupada’s seemingly narrow insistence upon his austere rules of *vaidhi sadhana bhakti*, the regulated stage preparatory to deep experiences of spiritual love. And Prabhupada’s prediction that his disciples would not be able to continue chanting Hare Krishna without strict following has not been vindicated in the history of his movement. Many of these disciples, having come to terms with ordinary mundane affairs and American life decades ago—not just recently, as Rochford’s institutional focus indicates—still chant Hare Krishna, follow practices and lifestyle taught by Prabhupada at their own rate, and even contribute in various ways to the preaching mission.

But, as if confirming Prabhupada’s views on austerity and purity, and the *Bhagavad Gita*’s emphasis on sacrifice in order to “obtain all desirable things”, householder devotees unable or unwilling to sacrifice the ordinary things of the world have seen their temples disappear in some American cities. Yet we will find that while ISKCON was reeling in other parts of America, New Raman Reti, widely regarded to be the most effervescent Hare Krishna community in the nation, has steadily evolved to become the movement’s largest community in the Western Hemisphere, and with a vibrant temple bearing the ISKCON label. This development provokes questions about the textual tradition we have been following all along, among other considerations. What has become in America of devotees’ relationship to books like Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* and Shri Chaitanya’s creed, the *Shikshashtaka*, after forty years? Would Prabhupada recognize this relationship?

Before continuing this discussion, it will help to remind the reader of the cultic situation in the American Hare Krishna movement, informed by these literatures. There had always been significant participation among the ethnic Hindu community, but for the most part, at least at New Raman Reti, we are not dealing with a majority population transferred to America, bringing
a personal history from somewhere else. Although the term assimilation has been used in research on the movement’s first generation, because the term frequently includes population transfer or the way an established ethnic minority negotiates its status with a majority population, accommodation is a more accurate term for most of the first generation (Robbins, 1997). Even accommodation must be nuanced, for the concept may refer to cultural separation that must be overcome, and it is difficult to think of another situation in which Americans have learned to such an extent a foreign culture from a single individual and then *relearn* how to relate to their natal culture while keeping, at least in some measure, their newly learned culture. This study agrees with Rochford in the use of accommodation in relation to worldly interests, rather than as an adjustment to a different culture (Rochford, 2007: 201-217).

In learning Krishna consciousness these Americans were not disconnected from their cultural moorings altogether, as if they needed to relearn their native language or the importance of a holiday such as Thanksgiving, for people who become involved with cults do not forget the memes that inform their personal histories. Instead, it was the *value* Prabhupada’s devotees assigned to the memetic institutions of American society and culture that needed to be reassessed if they were to make their cult into a church; otherwise, attaining church status would be impossible unless they succeeded in radically changing American society. With value reassessment, the utility principle taught by Prabhupada becomes the focus for the retention of his teachings in the personal lives of the devotees, and in the spreading of the rays of the *sankirtana* “benediction moon.” Of course, value reassessment could be important for any Americans who have become heavily involved with any imported cult, but we have already

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3 The primary meaning of assimilation is as follows. “A term synonymous with acculturation, used to describe the process by which an outsider, immigrant, or subordinate group becomes indistinguishably integrated into the dominant host society.” See the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology at http://www.enotes.com/oxsoc-encyclopedia/assimilation.
indicated the distinctive emphasis of the American devotees on texts and the learning of a foreign culture.

To reiterate the thesis of this dissertation in plain terms, in the first generation’s value reassessment we are looking at the joining of the extraordinary with the ordinary in the cult to church process. Second generation devotees in particular generally have a different relationship with the teachings. Many of these devotees use the teachings quite differently. While the second generation’s Krishna conscious beliefs and practices may be extraordinary to their North Florida environment, these may not seem quite extraordinary to them because they were inherited, not chosen. Still, the second generation may come to understand the religion in an extraordinary way, and we are interested in their version of linking this with the ordinary. We will begin a series of individual portraits with a glimpse of second generation, extraordinary religion in New Raman Reti.

**Prabhupada’s Vision Dwells in New Raman Reti**

In the summer of 2000, I encountered a young man of nineteen years that I will call Gopal sitting on the bare concrete outside the Alachua Public Library and reciting the Hare Krishna mantra on his rosary of Tulasi beads. The thermometer was one hundred in the shade and there was a multitude of lizards and hundreds of insects darting about, but this young devotee was unperturbed and went on chanting. I learned that his mother was an initiate of Prabhupada, and he was aspiring to be initiated by Narayana Mahararaja, who is a Gaudiya Math associate from India. Although Gopal had very little *ashrama* training he considered himself a *brahmachari*. Using only Prabhupada’s books, his association with the local devotional community, and following the example of his future guru, Gopal nurtured the idea that his body was not his real identity, so he chose the celibate path to further develop his love of Krishna.
Gopal’s intense moods and motivations did not match the profile of any second generation American Hare Krishna devotee I had ever met.

In fact, Gopal’s path exceeded the level of austerity of even most first generation initiates and is more comparable to the *sadhus* that grace India’s many places of pilgrimage. His style of spirituality resonates with the second verse of the *Shikshashtaka*. “O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service birth after birth.” Celibacy and a lack of desire for followers is not unique to Gaudiya Vaisnavism, but because America does not support the Hindu custom of begging or wandering about penniless, without any money, what can this verse mean for Gopal in practical terms?

As an aspiring twenty-first century American *sadhu*, Gopal was not interested in getting a job or going to college, preferring to live with his mother for the time being and chant all his rounds, which is a difficult feat for a full time student or worker. It is appropriate to begin this chapter with the striking image of the *brahmachari* Gopal because although most Indian *sadhus* do not live with their mothers, Gopal represents possibilities of spiritual dwelling that rest upon a foundation of forty-two years of effort to spread Sri Chaitanya’s *sankirtana* religion in America. Without such a foundation it would not have been possible to produce an American who, like Prabhupada, had never known a time when he did not know about Krishna or worship Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead. One of the first items in the cult to church process is the establishment of the second generation in a cultural experience that seems ordinary to them even if it is extraordinary in the wider culture, because it is unlikely that any cult would succeed—that is, become a church—without a sense of comfort with itself, implicit in a spirituality of dwelling. In contrast to the testimonies of Wheeler and his first generation associates who had nothing to
lose in trying an exotic culture, because Gopal was born within the new Indo-American hybrid culture, he never bothered with Wheeler’s brand of cost-benefit analysis, and was personally unaffected by the hardships the first generation faced. Instead, he has experienced a type of conversion in which a religious actor deepens his or her appreciation and/or commitment of a natal religion because of an emotional or intellectual religious experience.

Like Bhaktisiddhanta, whose brahmachari career is legendary in Hare Krishna circles, Gopal does not strain against a conflict of personal values. To be sure, Gopal’s values conflict with most of the residents of North Florida, but so far that conflict has not been able to deter him from his path. The adjective most commonly used by American Hare Krishnas for such a person is “staunch.” Because Gopal is a staunch devotee, it appears that Prabhupada would be at least partially vindicated in his machine making plan which has resulted in the formation of New Raman Reti. His disciples, too, deserve credit for this, because the process has been a concerted effort of religious conversion. We have been discussing conversion—a term usually taken for granted—all along, but the staunch Gopal has a relationship with Prabhupada that Wheeler and the first generation could not. Prabhupada’s teachings have been the mother—not only the father—of Gopal’s religious consciousness of dwelling. If Gopal decides to give up his status as a Hare Krishna cultist he would have to turn away from his normal relationship with his family, so ironically his ongoing conversion—even though it is extraordinary by any standard—takes him further into the realm of church consciousness, which by definition is invested in the familiar. We will continue with the theme of dwelling in the remaining chapters, but here we need a brief history of New Raman Reti in order to understand its effervescence. We will not be much concerned with issues of contention between devotees and management discussed in
Chapter Three, because these were more or less the same in all American temples (Rochford, 2007: 52-73). These issues will also be discussed in more detail in later chapters. 4

North Florida’s Material Circumstances Prove Ideal for Hare Krishna Families

New Raman Reti was founded by householders of a very extraordinary cultic mentality, the dominant mode of participation in November, 1977, for they were invested in an ascetic lifestyle and worldview to the extent that, like Prabhupada, they did not conceptualize themselves as ascetic. However, it was not long before other devotees, who had weathered the same ascetic experience, brought their own ideas about how to live to the farm and the surrounding area, and it was not long before these ideas began to shape the community. As the sankirtana book distribution-money gathering combination which had powered temple expansion in earlier days waned in North Florida as it did throughout America, householders and their donations, or simply the seva they were willing to perform, began to dominate the agenda at New Raman Reti.

Democratic temple governance was allowed by Prabhupada, but in the beginning years, appointment of temple presidents was controlled by the GBC (Folio 1970). Yet when an early New Raman Reti leader tried to enforce strict rules, he was voted out by householders who now controlled the finances (Rochford, 2007: 176). New Raman Reti’s strength as a community as it grew gave it much status with the GBC, but the community does not return the sentiment, for many devotees there say that New Raman Reti does not need the GBC at all (ibid, 177).

The establishment of New Raman Reti was initially an outgrowth of the Gainesville Hare Krishna center, which had located close to the University of Florida and experienced success in

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4 “I have spent countless hours over the years listening to devotees complain bitterly about the failings of the leadership” (Rochford, 2007: 250, fn. 6). Emic and etic observers alike have attributed most of the movement’s problems to the leadership. I leave it to the reader to assess the validity of this perception, while entertaining the various factors that have made the issue of blame exceedingly complex. At any rate, like Rochford I have heard the same bitter complaints.
sending out parties of traveling book distributors, and distributing *prasada* locally. Prabhupada’s prescription for preaching in the Gainesville area was simple: “So do something wonderful there in Gainesville. Wonderful means simply chant loudly and distribute *prasadam*” (Nikunja Publishing, 2006: 8). Some devotees thought that North Florida had more to offer than a good place for the preaching mission, especially because Prabhupada also encouraged the establishment of farm communities where *varnashrama dharma* could develop. By the early 1970’s several Hare Krishna farm communities had been established in America for the purpose of “simple living and high thinking”, and many devotees aspired to live in these communities, away from the degrading influence of city life, where the material mode of “goodness” (*sattva*) was more conducive to spiritual life. 5

From the very beginning, the Krishna Lunch program established at the University of Florida in 1971 was a focal point for the community and has remained a source of inspiration for those anxious about the movement remaining in the public consciousness. 6 By serving Krishna lunch, devotees could attend to both their missionary and family obligations without too much conflict. The Gainesville area was a perfect fit for these aspirations, for in the surrounding countryside land was plentiful and affordable; in the earlier years of New Raman Reti land suited for development could be purchased for less than a thousand dollars an acre. Devotees from places like San Francisco—where the temple has been closed since 1996—were astonished at such prices. For many impoverished Hare Krishna householders who gave their youth to Prabhupada instead of the normal goals of making a living, this was an irresistible opportunity to

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5 Prabhupada taught the predominance of the *gunas* according to location. Wherever sinful activities such as meat eating, intoxication, illicit sex, and gambling were rampant, that place was characterized as ignorant; otherwise, cities and factories were ignorant and passionate; and the countryside was good for peaceful living and self-realization. Prabhupada expected his followers to apply knowledge of the *gunas* by leaving the lower *gunas* behind.

6 A personal account of a devotee who first contacted the movement at UF is available at http://btg.krishna.com/main.php?id=837
finally do something for their family in ordinary but very necessary terms. Finances were
determinative in other ways as well. ISKCON could not afford to keep both the Depot Avenue
temple in Gainesville and the rural property in Alachua, and it was the farm that proved more
attractive (Madhava, 2008). This decision, though, did not undermine the community’s
missionary efforts in Gainesville, because it has maintained the Hare Krishna Student Center at
214 NW 14th St since 1989.

The temple property in Alachua was intended to be a farm community, self-sustaining as
far as possible. At least, this was Prabhupada’s intentions for all ISKCON farm communities—to
get your own cloth. Have sufficient milk, vegetables…This is Vedic civilization: plain living,
high thinking” (Prabhupada, 1975).

At first a trailer was utilized as a place of worship, and many of the first devotees lived on
the farm property in mobile homes, but this policy ran afoul of local zoning laws, which limited
population growth on the property. Gardens were successfully developed and dairy cows have
grazed upon the land, but like all of ISKCON’s American farm communities, New Raman Reti
has never become self-sustaining, producing everything needed for worship and human life. It is
doubtful that any have even become financially successful as farms. In large part, especially in
the case of New Raman Reti (aside from the residential restrictions imposed by local
government), this is because very few devotees know much about farming, or are interested in
learning about it and doing the work. Prabhupada’s plan for the training of bulls to till the fields
has not been very productive, although here and there serious attempts have resulted in some
small but tangible progress. Throughout New Raman Reti’s history bulls have been trained to
work with a yoke, which have been made on the property. Some plowing of fields has been done
by these bulls, but to this day the devotees knowledgable in training and working bulls come and 
go from the community. At the time of this writing the training of bulls is limited to the pre-yoke 
stage in which the trainers try to keep bulls willing to walk along with a trainer. In reality, 
tractors are common in all American ISKCON farm communities, but, as more than one devotee 
has asked, how many people does it take to operate the tractors? Likewise with the sort of 
cottage industries Prabhupada, like Gandhi, preferred, for not many American devotees are 
interested in specializing in the standard trades of an Indian village. Although a few devotees 
have excelled in rural trades fit for America (gardening, animal husbandry, forestry, bee keeping, 
maple syrup production, diorama construction, and a few others), more often ISKCON “farms” 
have been financed by small factories manufacturing candles, warehousing and distributing 
incense, bumper stickers, and other paraphernalia, printed t-shirts, Indian imports—any kind of 
business easily set up and employing cheap, or very pious free labor.

But as the years passed devotees from all over America and the world realized that other 
opportunities at New Raman Reti were also very good, and not under the thumb of temple 
administrators. Unlike New Vrndavana, tucked away in the hills of West Virginia where 
missionary and job opportunities were few and far between, the twenty minute drive to the 
nearby university town of Gainesville made it possible to get a job, live in the country in one’s 
own home, and still be a temple participant or preach to students. The situation was also deemed 
a good environment for devotee children, who were the hope of the future for many in the first 
generation who had given up book distribution but still wanted to contribute to Prabhupada’s 
mission by raising Krishna conscious children. As a result, New Raman Reti has educated 
Perhaps the most important achievement in material terms has been the construction of the temple building in 1994-1995, at an estimated cost of $350,000-$400,000. The Hindu community, unlike their participation in the $8,000,000 project currently planned by the ISKCON temple of San Diego, was not a large contributor to the temple’s construction. Most contributors were ISKCON devotees with considerable means, but even many devotees with modest incomes donated $500-$1,000. The largest contributor was the local software developer, author, and wealthy New Age spiritual teacher and noted philanthropist Mickey Singer, who donated an estimated $120,000-$140,000. 7

So instead of strictly spiritual factors, the initial impetus for New Raman Reti was also found in affordable living conditions, a variety of economic opportunities, bucolic scenery and fresh air, a good environment for children, a variety of educational facilities, and the balance between city and country. Prabhupada’s vision of a self-sustaining farm community did not materialize, but it still acted as a magnet to produce a community of great consequence (Rochford, 2007: 176). Smaller versions of New Raman Reti in other parts of North America remain small because they do not have most of the factors mentioned above.

**Standards Of Living and Lifestyles**

Frank Zappa’s observation that the difference between a cult and a church is the amount of real estate that it owns is not a whimsical observation, for most cults have impecunious beginnings. At least by this standard, the movement has made tangible progress toward attaining

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7 It is not unusual for ISKCON projects to receive donations from people who claim no allegiance to Gaudiya teachings, including rock stars. For instance, John Lennon—who had significant disagreements with Prabhupada—donated living quarters at his estate, and transportation. See Gosvami, 1982, 33, 37. Perhaps more significant is the friendly relationship the Hare Krishna movement enjoys with door-to-door missionary Mormons who are regularly invited into the homes of Hare Krishna devotees throughout America, allegedly because of shared lifestyle values. ISKCON in Spanish Forks, Utah, considers itself the “little brother” of the local LDS community, which donated $25,000 for the construction of the ISKCON temple there. Because the LDS is one of the fastest growing religions in the world, such developments could help the movement’s quest to become a church. See http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week652/feature.html#
church status in North Florida because of the approximately 130 acres owned by ISKCON, and the increasing devotee ownership of land in the surrounding area. The temple building is a major investment in the spirituality of dwelling and serves as a focus for the community, and is especially important for drawing the participation of the Hindu community that typically does not regard any building not specifically constructed in the style of an Indian temple as a temple.

The Temple farm property is partitioned into different areas. Approximately fifteen acres is set aside for the Temple building, Tulasi house, offices, a sewing room, a store, cow barn, storage barn and a few temple-owned residences. The rest of the 127-acre tract provides space for two schools, Back to Godhead magazine, Bhaktivedanta Institute, the Krishna Community Fund, Community and Youth Center, and a few private, devotee-owned homes. The remaining land is pasture for the Lord's cows (ISKCON.com 2002-2004).

In contradiction to popular depictions of the Hare Krishna religion as an avaricious “cult”, we can note that currently ISKCON the institution (grounds including temple lawn and gardens, pastures and fields, buildings, administration, projects, etc.) is perceived to be under financial strain by many in the congregation of New Raman Reti. Current (2009) income figures for these congregational families are not available, but New Raman Reti accommodates a wide range of family incomes personified by the dedicated temple participation of Ford automotive heir Alfred Ford on one extreme, and devotee families living in government housing and receiving other forms of public assistance, on the other.\(^8\) Not surprisingly, there is also a wide range of occupations—janitors, laborers, delivery truck drivers, barbers, cashiers, newspaper deliverers, office workers, warehouse workers, farmers, field hands, construction workers of all trades, educators, university personnel, traveling sales people, business people, computer specialists, real estate agents, mental health workers, doctors and nurses, lawyers, and ritual specialists.

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\(^8\) Rochford’s figures from 1991-1992 are of course not applicable in 2009 ($6,000-$15,000 median income) but they indicate impoverished beginnings due to decades of free labor to ISKCON. My interviews indicate that general living standards have greatly improved since then. Still, some devotees moving to the area in recent years have gone directly to subsidized housing, while others buy large plots of land and construct multi-million dollar houses.
specialists. This is just a partial list. Many devotees have retired at New Raman Reti with their inheritances.

ISKCON temple finances throughout America do not resemble the Indian model where temples own productive land or have many visitors whose small donations add up to a substantial income. Although the temple organization is commonly perceived to be under financial strain, this is contradicted by the current (2009) Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, who claims that although the temple is carrying loans of around $130,000, the payment schedule is being fulfilled, and the temple is not in the red. But currently there is nothing to spare as the income ($25,000-$30,000) matches the bills including payment of loans. According to a recent temple president, middle and upper class participants disproportionately carry the financial burdens of the temple (Chaturatma, 2008). According to the Vice President (2009), the Hindu community, estimated at 10-15% of the regular congregation, accounts for 10-15% of the income through donations. For most of these devotees, the spiritual benefit outweighs the monetary cost because maintaining a temple for the use of all is a form of seva highly recommended by Prabhupada for householders (Prabhupada, 1989: 607). This is a form of internal economic class accommodation that, as we will discover later in this work, is relatively untroubled compared to internal lifestyle class issues resembling caste hierarchies imported from India, for New Raman Reti also accommodates—like most church religion, increasingly, in America—almost any lifestyle.

I have shown how lifestyle is an important issue in Prabhupada’s teachings because a Krishna conscious lifestyle is essential to developing devotional love. It also has a social dimension, because literatures like Rupa Gosvami’s Upadesamrita explicitly discourages intimate social connections between those who follow Gaudiya standards strictly (Prabhupada,
and those who do not, as Prabhupada informed geologist Bob Cohen (now Brahmatirtha Dasa) in 1975—if he wanted to advance in Krishna consciousness, he had to give up his intimate association with people who smoked marijuana—which he did. Although the entire movement in America is now far more relaxed in these matters, textual standards remain to influence New Raman Reti’s spirituality of dwelling, where one’s place in the continuum of obedience to Prabhupada’s teachings on lifestyle could be very determinative of one’s social circle.

**A Bisexual Man Chases the Hare Krishnas**

In the backwoods of North Florida, in a motor home surrounded by lush garden scenery where the sacred *Tulasi* plant thrives year round and deer stroll freely through the yard, lives a 55 year old man we’ll call Bhakta Tom. Tom calls himself an old hippie that “likes both men and women” and briefly tried to live in an ISKCON temple in the 1970’s—but when they insisted he shave off his long hair, he moved out. Tom says with a Southern drawl that he has remained a strict vegetarian and “chased the Hare Krishnas for 35 years”, but that’s as far as he goes with rules. He does not chant 16 rounds. Intoxication is a regular part of his life, but even then he continues to talk about Krishna, more or less constantly. His house is crammed with Krishna artifacts. He has never objected to Prabhupada’s instructions on sexuality (which does not condone same sex practices)—but in his earlier years, he simply couldn’t follow them. After his father died he took his inheritance and moved to New Raman Reti to be close to the devotees and the temple, to go to the Sunday program and occasional *Shrimad Bhagavatam* lectures during the week, and hang out with his friends, some of whom are devotees with a similar lifestyle—the

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9 The following instruction from Prabhupada puts a finer point on the issue of association. “Although such persons may chant the holy name of the Lord, they are not yet properly purified. Such people should be respected within one’s mind, but their association should be avoided” (Prabhupada, 1975: 50).
very lifestyle (minus meat eating, for Americans who chant Hare Krishna rarely go back to this) that Prabhupada was afraid would contaminate his movement. In spite of inability or unwillingness to make the lifestyle sacrifices Prabhupada preferred, Tom insists that Prabhupada has told him everything he needs to know, and he is utterly loyal to him. He is also more or less innocent of other teachings. He has not kept up with historical developments in ISKCON and keeps to the same opinions on sexual orientation and gender he had three decades ago: gays and lesbians are welcome to be temple leaders, but only if they are celibate; women can’t be san
yasis; and when asked if he felt guilty about anything he replied, “Everything.” He is offended by the existence of GALVA, the Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association founded by a disciple of Prabhupada, because he sees it as absurdly condoning sin. After all, “that’s the same as having a Vaishnava Smoker’s association”, he says, before stepping outside for a cigarette. But he goes on studying Bhagavad Gita As It Is whether he can follow all of Prabhupada’s lifestyle recommendations in the commentary, or not. The recent scholarly trend away from doctrine as a marker of religious identity can hardly apply to Bhakta Tom, whose guilt as a result of deviating from Prabhupada’s teachings is a strong part of his identity.

Tom can cite no particular reason for being a devotee; he approves of the whole program. To negotiate the social aspect of being a Hare Krishna in North Florida, he must perform a complex mental tap dance, alternating between feelings of humility recommended by Sri Chaitanya in the Shikshashtaka while remaining cognizant—or tolerating cognizant dissonance—of plain facts that can’t be ignored. Temple authorities barely know that Tom exists although he frequently attends temple programs orchestrated by people he respects out of respect for Prabhupada, not necessarily because they always command his respect. Yet sometimes Tom, a very humble man, is overwhelmed with feelings of respect and venerates the very people who
ignore him. Consequently he is not hesitant to open his modest purse for the temple’s various projects. However, he keeps his own counsel, and is not blind to the inadequacy of leadership or the scandals of the past that have subsided enough to allow New Raman Reti to flourish.

Bhakta Tom’s ongoing conversion—without much resemblance to the staunch Gopal—can be stated simply and in his own words; he describes himself as a shudra aspiring to eventually become a brahmin by the purification process of bhakti yoga. He has made his peace with the half a loaf style of devotion to the movement defended to the death by Sulochana, but now, in New Raman Reti, only his friends really care what he does. Some devotees feel that this development is a clear sign of progress, while others, concerned for the utter lack of pastoral care in the community, simply shake their heads in dismay—if they know Bhakta Tom at all. But a part of Bhakta Tom likes this situation even though he recognizes that there is something wrong with his invisibility, for he recognizes the convenience for a person who combines doctrinal fidelity without practice of an ascetic lifestyle. The temple presidents I interviewed affirmed that most of the devotees at New Raman Reti are not ascetic and in all probability do not strictly follow the four regulative principles or chant sixteen rounds daily. This means that there are hundreds of Bhakta Toms in North Florida and most likely thousands throughout America. Residence in New Raman Reti, with its affordable living and large congregation where one can be anonymous, works for Bhakta Tom because he can choose to stay close, but not too close. 10

I have mentioned that Gaudiya literatures delineate the sort of relationships the devotees should have with each other. Inasmuch as one’s status is determined by lifestyle, Bhakta Tom is in a low caste because of his cigarettes and his intoxication. Interestingly, Bhakta Tom is nearly

10 “I don’t like living in too close proximity to devotees. I need my space!” A second generation devotee who served as a research assistant wrote in the margin of Hare Krishna Transformed, with an arrow pointing to the preceding quote, “Alachua! That’s why everyone wants to come here” (Rochford, 2007: 68). Rochford thinks that this mentality developed in the 1980’s, but oral histories prepared by devotees reveals that it was there from the very beginning.
celibate, but, he laments, “All the devotees see about me is my long hair.” This social hierarchy system has been rejected, more or less, by the second generation.

**New Raman Reti is Not Limited to “Devotees”**

Not everyone involved in the New Raman Reti community claims to be a Gaudiya Vaishnava, although some aspire to that status without identifying as one of the “converted.” Others are simply friendly to the movement for a variety of reasons—because they like some of the teachings, or their neighbors are devotees, or their son or daughter has married a devotee, or because they are ethnic Hindus who want to remain ethnic Hindus by taking their children to the Hare Krishna temple. “Of greatest significance was the shared belief [by the Hindu community] that participation in ISKCON’s temple programs would help preserve their religious and ethnic identities” (Rochford, 2007: 183). There are also folks who have settled in Alachua in their retirement because their children and grandchildren live there; this is a trend fairly new to the movement, now commonly seen in Hispanic Hare Krishna families, who frequently become involved *en masse*. People from Mexico, Peru, etc, are much more likely to move to New Raman Reti with their extended family who all chant Hare Krishna—from the grandparents on down.

We have not portrayed the history of the Hispanic cohort and that is lamentable but necessary for the parameters of this dissertation. Moving to New Raman Reti as a single person, a couple, or a nuclear family is the norm for Anglo and African-American devotees. There are also people who are not friendly to the movement, but cannot escape an intimate connection to it for some reason. Although their stories are of minor relevance here, they are also a part of the cult to church paradigm, because they may try to obstruct it.

People of most of the categories mentioned in the paragraph above do not self-identify with the movement. They are important to the cult to church paradigm because they represent a bridge—with the exception of the inimical—between the proponents of a cultic market niche,
struggling to become a church through religious market share, and the rest of society. And they also correspond to the cohorts we have dealt with so far—first and second wave of the first generation, second generation, etc. The child of someone who simply respects the movement and has regular dealings with it but does not claim to be “a Hare Krishna” might also act as a bridge, and this is valuable for cultic expansion, as I will show.

A Christian Single Mother Finds Shelter in New Raman Reti

In an Alachua low income government housing project, a single mother of five struggles to keep her children fed, clothed, and protected from physical harm. Janet works constantly to keep her house clean for her children who daily host half of the youngsters on the block, most of whom are Hare Krishna children with Sanskrit names and some ISKCON education. She considers the perpetual crowd to be a bargain, for it keeps her children away from rougher kids who live down the street. This neighborhood is a long way from ISKCON’s gurukulas, or temple kids underfoot in the sankirtana effort to distribute Prabhupada’s books. Janet knows about ISKCON’s scandals but figures those were the fault of individuals—like the Roman Catholic scandals of her Polish-American heritage—not the religion.

Janet occasionally goes to the temple, though after three years she still knows very little about Hare Krishna teachings. She considers herself a Christian and prays to Jesus every day. But she is attracted to the Hare Krishna religion because it does not posit an eternal hell, it now appears to be deeply committed to family life, and she feels that Hare Krishna men, who address her as Mata (mother), are less sexist than the male population in general.

Janet is a collector of religion, entertaining LDS missionaries and adult Hare Krishnas in the same afternoon. She has become an on-and-off vegetarian due to the influence of New Raman Reti. It would be easier for her to be a vegetarian if she liked the Indian style food favored by the devotees, but she can’t bring herself to eat any of it—except for chapatis.
She would not describe herself as a convert, and is very conflicted about her slight knowledge of the doctrine. For instance, reincarnation makes sense to her, but ISKCON art depicting Radha and Krishna simultaneously bewilders and attracts her. She is uncertain about God as a blue person with a girlfriend, but she admits that female divinity makes sense. She says that she really loves the pictures, but fears that they might depict something that is too good to be true. Nevertheless, Janet stated that she wishes she could magically enter into the pictures.

In Janet’s case, we can see how far Prabhupada’s teachings have traveled, for in this scenario they are diffused through social interactions instead of literatures. Little is expected of Janet (just the way she likes it), and instead of claiming or admitting to a Hare Krishna identity, like Bhakta Tom she aspires to become “a real devotee” someday (but without giving up Jesus). Her involvement forces New Raman Reti residents to consider something that is almost incredible to some of them, but that has been right under their noses for over four decades. Some people simply are not interested in a discursive approach to religion as the first generation embraced it. However, they might respond sincerely to pictures that tell a thousand words about a religion’s idea of ultimate existence. Kindness and practical integration into a devotee neighborhood might replace, however imperfectly, training in an *ashrama*, and an interested person might presume that it is fine to relate to Krishna consciousness without wanting to study it, preach it, or teach it to one’s children. Such presumptions typify the practice of Albanese’s ordinary religion, which is more in line with the popular dimension of church religion, tending to accept all comers.

Without external new blood the movement has nothing to lose by creatively applying Prabhupada’s teaching according to the utility principle. Currently without a bumper crop of new recruits to temple life, like Prabhupada and Sri Chaitanya in their anxiety to “distribute Krishna
consciousness” many devotees have realized that it is not even necessary to insist that all newcomers accept Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead—mere open mindedness to the idea in the association of devotees, or even simple friendliness to the devotees, is sufficient to begin the process of spiritual purification. This could take the form of gradual conversion over the course of time instead of an abrupt conversion. Janet’s children attend the charter school administrated by the Hare Krishna devotees and take prasada—subsidized by the federal government—five days a week. The devotees expect that in time the magical prasada will not fail to have its effect.

When religious cultists of the social movement variety realize that not everyone will appreciate their religion as a religious specialist, nor is such a status necessary for cultic aims, one more step has been made toward church status because a cult cannot accommodate the dominant culture without coming to terms with it first. After all, what does it cost Krishna to give his mercy to an impoverished single mother afraid of Christianity’s hell, and for that matter, what does it cost the temple or any devotee to encourage the public to take as much of the teachings as they like, and when, according to their own discretion? There are plenty of references in Prabhupada’s books for this kind of participation, and they are finally enjoying a respectable status in New Raman Reti where “conversion” is not the only goal in relating to the wider public. Even the temple authorities throughout ISKCON in America have come to accept that half a loaf does not represent a loss where previously, there was no loaf at all.

The term conversion implies that a person has left one religion for another, and this is not necessarily how religious movements grow, as Eaton as shown. When this chapter was being written, Janet’s daughter attended a neighborhood birthday party for a Hare Krishna girl of the same age. When it came time to sing “Happy Birthday”, the words “How old are you now?”
were replaced by “May you never take birth again.” Janet’s daughter was momentarily puzzled by this lyrical deviation that has become memetic in only a few decades, but joined in and completed the song in the same way as her friends. If this girl remains in the neighborhood where most of her friends identify with the Hare Krishna religion, such a birthday party is likely to seem ordinary to her. Although it is more difficult for a cult to become a church by influencing society than by coming to terms with it, social contact in enclaves such as the one Janet lives in would have gratified Prabhupada, who was strict with his disciples but lenient with the general public.

The Temple President

The American temple president of today is quite different from what he was in ISKCON’s earlier history (there were no female presidents until the 1990s), for the authority of the office now extends to strictly institutional affairs only, not great control over other devotees’ lives. Although the office of temple president remains a respected one at New Raman Reti, many of the outward signs of this respect have been diminished. For instance, previously ISKCON’s presidents had first access to mahaprasada, the food offered directly to the deity in temple rituals, but no more. Instead of reifying the charisma and authority of Prabhupada in the transference of Indian hierarchical practices to the American environment, such as the first access to mahaprasada, in New Raman Reti Prabhupada’s legacy has found new expression in American standards of democratic church administration. In an interview the temple president stated that throughout America, temple presidents can no longer say, “It’s my way or the highway.” Instead, there is a strong tendency for the president to do things at the direction of others.

11 The New Raman Reti community has had two female temple presidents. The current temple president (2009) is a woman. Chaturatma’s tenure ended toward the end of my research at New Raman Reti.
Chaturatma Dasa is a white male in his 50s hired for the presidential position by the temple board, which is elected by adult participants of the temple’s programs. The qualifications for this office include taking a public oath before the temple deities that one follows the four regulative principles, chants sixteen rounds daily, and is loyal to ISKCON and not involved with sectarian rivals broken off from ISKCON, or other contentious groups derived from the Gaudiya Math. Chaturatma’s other qualifications are defined by his experience as temple president in St. Louis and other managerial positions in devotee businesses, which has prepared him for negotiations with the local municipality concerning the rezoning of the temple’s property as a natural preserve allowing for a greater residential population. Temple rezoning is one of his main concerns.

Chaturatma disagrees with Rochford that home worship has become the standard throughout the Hare Krishna movement in America, especially at New Raman Reti. Home puja is common in this community, but many do not perform it, and one devotee remarked that “my rounds are my puja” (Madhava, 2008). Because reciting 1,728 Hare Krishna mantras requires one to three hours to complete, anyone who chants all sixteen rounds every day could still be considered a religious specialist, a practitioner of extraordinary religion. Chaturatma acknowledges that New Raman Reti serves both religious specialists and those who do not aspire to that status “in this lifetime.”

By my observation, for most devotees, along with the worship of deities and observance of Vaishnava holidays in the home, temple worship in New Raman Reti remains the center of community life. It is the mode of temple organization, management, and participation that has changed, for the temple building has no facilities for living as had previously been the case for converted churches and houses that had served as temples. Outbuildings serve as living quarters.
for devotees from foreign countries, brought to Alachua under the R-Visa program for religious workers. They serve more or less as indentured servants—receiving only room and board—for several years before they can apply for a green card; this has solved the problem of procuring personnel with a slow cash flow (VisaPro 2002-2009). Consequently, the temple property at New Raman Reti has a mixed international population, the history of which, regrettably, we cannot pursue here because of our focus on American and Hindu devotees.

Chaturatma acknowledges the shift to a model of temple organization that in some ways resembles the Christian model in America, but because ISKCON New Raman Reti has not yet attained the financial stability that is optimal for churches at the same time that it observes an expensive ritual calendar of daily puja and annual festivals, finances remain a pressing concern. There are plans for building a prasada hall and a larger temple building. Consequently, pastoral care is beyond the scope of Chaturatma’s job description because his time is devoted to administrative concerns and finances almost exclusively, even though he sets an example of vaidhi-sadhana-bhakti—the practice of rules and regulations pursuant to the stage of devotional love.

For our purposes, one of the most salient aspects of Chaturatma’s Krishna consciousness is that he admits that the Chaitanya religion is an ascetic tradition through and through, for the tradition as it is presented in the Chaitanya Charitamrta and by Prabhupada is ascetic even for householders. This realistic assessment was not common in the movement in its earlier days and not present at all in the institution, for Prabhupada had described the behavior of humans in the Kali Yuga in stark terms—those who did not follow the four regulative principles, as people in the Kali Yuga are prone—were subhuman, at least in their morals. In other words, Prabhupada’s version of proper human life was set at the standard of the previous (Dvapara) Yuga, when
humans were supposed to enjoy a longevity of one thousand years, and the vices moderns take for granted (unrestricted meat eating, illicit sex, intoxication, gambling) were almost unknown. Chaturatma’s understanding of the Chaitanya religion as ascetic even for householders demonstrates a remarkable shift in comparison to the earlier years, because now he is comparing the movement not to previous Yugas but to the barbaric Kali Age in which we live—an age when any serious attempt to follow the four regulative principles is considered ascetic by most. In other words, the ahistoric, extraordinary past has become an ideal instead of a standard, and the ordinary present of human frailty is accepted with greater resignation than previously. There is also recognition that the Shikshashtaka, although still recited within the temple during the morning program, is invested in an extraordinary mode of religious behavior. New Raman Reti’s church aspirations are addressed by this shift in consciousness, which we shall revisit later on. It is a remarkable demonstration of Weber’s contention that a church is at one with its environment.

Like most Christian ministers, Chaturatma does not inquire into the lifestyle of any congregational participant. Temple participants are treated more like the general public than they were in the earlier days. Only moral lapses that occur on temple property are within the purview of Chaturatma’s job description, a clear departure from the policies of the movement’s cultic origins.

**A University of Florida Student Also Fulfills Prabhupada’s Mission**

The movement no longer attracts many new people to move into a temple or *ashrama*, but its effervescence can be seen in a distinctive cultural continuity through a common doctrine and belief system, world view, diet and ritual, holidays, and families of a common Sanskrit naming system unique among Americans, achieved in just a few decades. Many children of devotees who moved to New Raman Reti since its founding are doing more than passing the
culture derived from Prabhupada’s teachings to their own small children, for the “gurukulis” too feel an obligation to spread Krishna consciousness to the general public. Gurukula was the name for the schools that ISKCON operated for its children, until most of them folded due to scandal and/or financial difficulty.

As a counterpoint to the staunch Gopal, a young woman of the second generation interprets Prabhupada’s teachings and the history of the first generation in a different way, and accordingly her way of life and aspirations are also very different. Gopi Priya does not think it is necessary to follow all the rules recommended by Prabhupada, although she accepts them as an ideal. She lived in ISKCON’s temple compound at the hometown of Shri Chaitanya in Shridhama Mayapura, Bengal, from the age of three to thirteen, so her conversational Bengali is strong. She was then trained in the girl’s Vaishnava Academy in Alachua, and when she matriculated at the University of Florida, she was determined to use her education in the service of Krishna and accordingly is studying Sanskrit, and has recently studied in Bengal on a fellowship to improve her written Bengali skills and become a textual scholar. Unlike Gopal, who is less likely to interact with a broad range of Americans, Gopi Priya’s life seems to blend seamlessly with her environment, and she moves easily from leading the kirtan at Krishna Lunch to her major study of religion, including her own, with university scholars.

Although she is steeped in Gaudiya Vaishnava literature and practices, Gopi Priya is critical of her parents’ generation and their religious methods that are clearly not for everyone, including herself. She has observed that guilt plays an important role in the lives of first generation devotees who are unable to fulfill their vows, and she is firmly against impractical attempts at asceticism. “Prabhupada gave us the gateway to Krishna. The problem is with the all or nothing thing. He gave us this superexcellent plan…we’re going on this great highway to
Goloka (Krishna’s residence in the spiritual world), but it’s not like if you are in the slow lane you are not going anywhere!” (Gopi Priya, 2008).

Gopi Priya does not aspire to be initiated at least until her career has been established, for she does not want to jeopardize her career, and she knows the standards for initiation are very difficult. She does not think her years of education will be a cost to her Krishna consciousness. Her relationship to the methods of devotional service to Krishna is almost diametrically opposed to that of her parents, who left everything behind to move into a temple. Gopi Priya appreciates her youth both as an ordinary tool for her own spiritual progress, and as an opportunity to develop her life and professional skills to serve Prabhupada’s mission. But like Gopal, she is not typical of most gurukulis, who would describe their own efforts to spread Krishna consciousness in more modest terms.

There are several cohorts of gurukulis. Those who were small children when their parents joined during Prabhupada’s lifetime (or were born shortly thereafter) lived away from their parents, and in many cases suffered abuse ranging from mild to terrible. But the next cohort mostly attended ISKCON day schools, was not abused, and had a greater exposure to Krishna conscious teachings than the present cohort that goes mostly to public schools and watches the popular cartoon show, Sponge Bob. Yet these K-12 children still bless each birthday child with the imperative “may you never take birth again.”

A devotee passes away

Chaitanya Dasa became a sannyasi and served as the GBC representative in Italy before resigning as a sannyasi—not, as most have done, because he could not follow his sannyasi vows, but because he was disgusted with his fellow sannyasis who would not speak out against reported incidents of child abuse in the movement. While such incidents obviously obstruct the cult to church process, Chaitanya Dasa’s reputed integrity in his personal life as a householder
after his resignation helped to counteract the obstruction. He married, raised children, worked as a computer consultant at the University of Florida, and practiced his religion in such a low-key manner that he fit seamlessly with the social atmosphere in the office where he worked. It gradually became known to his fellow workers that he was a Hare Krishna devotee. The example he set as an individual inspired so much respect that when he died in 2008, the funeral home where his service was held became standing room only.

The ability to unify disparate social groups around a single individual is indicative of a lessening of tension between cultic and church religion. A close friend of Chaitanya Dasa’s, a Methodist minister, led all—including the Hare Krishna devotees—in a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. Many Christians and Jews participated in the Hindu aspect of the service, seemingly without reservation. Christian and Hare Krishna speakers alike expressed their appreciation of Chaitanya Dasa’s life in terms common to most religions—not necessarily Lord Jesus or Lord Krishna, but simply the Lord. At one point the Christian minister even went so far as to indicate that Chaitanya Dasa had gone to be with Krishna. Given the collar he was wearing, in a moment in time, the minister’s statement was extraordinary.

But there is nothing more ordinary than death. When a cultist’s funeral is heartily attended by members of the dominant religious tradition, the cultic religion has made great strides toward the status of a church religion. The union of the extraordinary with the ordinary—in this case, cultic religion with plain old ordinary death and the dominant religious culture—is essential to this process.

The complexity of New Raman Reti’s social profile is impossible to summarize, but it shows the continuing development of the practical application of Prabhupada’s teachings in terms of interpretation and various levels of commitment. This is a profile that resembles a
church, because churches tend to have wider parameters for acceptance. I have briefly described various devotees—an aspiring young *sadhu*, a middle aged man with strict doctrinal but not lifestyle conformity, a friend of the community, the ISKCON temple president, a young devotee woman aspiring to become a professor, and a man whose passing inspired a social union of cultic and church religion. We will meet some of these again plus more devotees in later chapters, for theirs is the story of New Raman Reti.
CHAPTER 5
THE HINDU DEVOTEES

“I don’t want a Hindu temple. Our constitution is different. We want everyone. Krishna consciousness is for everyone. It is not a Hindu propaganda.”

--Prabhupada, letter to disciple, June 9, 1969

The relationship between extraordinary and ordinary religion has been the focus in this work, on two levels: the cult to church paradigm, and the tension between ascetic and family orientations to spirituality. The ascetic-lay polarity defines more than a conflict of lifestyles, for it is also a conflict between extraordinary and ordinary human love. These themes figure prominently in this chapter because they define the relationship of New Raman Reti with the rest of American society—including Hindus—and with Prabhupada’s extraordinary teachings. They are important in providing a glimpse into the internal harmony, or lack of harmony, of the cult, so that we can qualify its nature and measure its strength as a social body and how it is likely to continue in or towards the spirituality of dwelling, which is a type of cultural continuity. The presence of the Hindus in the American Hare Krishna movement complicates issues of cultural continuity in a cult that would be unusually complex even without it, but this Hindu presence, although not inspired by the sheer novelty of a highly sophisticated exotic world view, brought something just as valuable to the movement. In its wholehearted acceptance of ordinary love, the Hindu group provides a model of stability necessary for the spirituality of dwelling. This model has little to do with the sentiments expressed by Shri Chaitanya in the Shikshashtaka, as we shall see, and of course, it does not conform to Prabhupada’s emphasis.

From the first days at 26 2nd Avenue in New York City, Hindus in America were involved in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, sometimes in a challenging way, sometimes favorably (Wheeler, 1985: 91-95; 109). At first the Hindu presence was a trickle, and by the middle of the 1970’s their population in ISKCON temples—especially on Sundays and
Vaishnava holidays—was integral to the communal functioning of every temple. As the first
generation of American devotees moved away from the temples—a process that began as soon as
the movement was started—the Hindus have actually come to dominate many temples. The
differences and similarities between the Hindu groups and the new Vaishnavas created by
Prabhupada form a major component in the cult to church process where the ordinary and the
extraordinary meet face to face.

**America Has Been Hinduized**

Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B. Partin have described a post-1960s alternative to Israel as
the Holy Land for many Americans. “This is India, whose very name and diversity suggests a
wonder and imagination worthy of God” (Ellwood, 1988: 179). India’s prestige in the “radical
religious plurality” of America, long considered only in terms of Christianity and Judaism, was
In the new mosaic, Hindus have found that America has become a more hospitable place for a
spirituality of dwelling since the 1965 Immigration Act, when their numbers increased
dramatically.

Sociologist Robert Bellah has denied the longevity and importance of the counterculture
of the 1960s, but American culture since then has been saturated with Indic concepts that have
taken on a life of their own. A recent television commercial for bathroom cleaner shows a
woman levitating in a lotus position. "You do things and you've got to expect karma to come
around," said an observer of the most recent OJ Simpson trial, and the popular television show
*My Name Is Earl* is based on the premise that a person can address karmic mistakes in the very
life in which they are made. There is now Christian yoga, yoga for babies, and even yoga for
dogs. Lunchboxes with images of Hindu deities are fairly common all over America. The
goddess Kali has become a popular element at Halloween.
Whether there is any “authenticity” to some of these developments at least we must note a certain easy familiarity with Hindu concepts, images, and people not present before. There are also more critically important developments. Hindus have attained high levels of prominence in all the professions, and are in the public eye as television journalists and commentators. A Hindu chaplain has led prayers on the floor of the U.S. Senate, and even the conservative Bush Administration, regardless of its Christian evangelical constituency, has honored the Hindu holiday of Holi. Surrounded by Americans of non-Indian descent, Hindus seem to blend distinctively but seamlessly with their environment.

Most Hindus in America still like to associate with large numbers of other Hindus, or even other Indians (Rochford, 2007: 188), and their extra-ISKCON activities are important to mention because they intersect with the Hare Krishna movement in North Florida. ChiTra, the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions at the University of Florida is a common focal point for Hindus, American Hare Krishna devotees, and the general public, in its presentation of Indic music and dance. In the same vein, the Indian Cultural and Education Center in Gainesville, Florida, sponsors programs for all kinds of Hinduism, as well as Islam—any kind of cultural presentation from India. The ICEC represents an early stage of organized Hindu interaction that has been documented all over America, but has not yet fructified into a pan-Hindu temple (a secondary stage), what to speak of a specifically dedicated sampradaya temple. Because it is located near the University of Florida, the ICEC also draws interest from non-Indians, including Hare Krishna devotees, who maintain the “Krishna House” from which the Krishna Lunch program at the university operates and inspires visits to the sampradaya temple at New Raman Reti.

Many Hindu students are vegetarian, and Krishna Lunch meets their nutritional needs (Rochford, 2007: 183) while informing all who are interested (including some who are not
interested) of the Krishna bhakti religion, and the Krishna House has regular, well attended programs of pujas and lectures that teach Krishna consciousness. It is easily established that many Hindus attend ISKCON centers in America for the same reason they attend centers like ICEC, where there is a genial cultural atmosphere for Hinduism and Hindus and the preservation of religious and ethnic identity (ibid). Rochford states this in stark terms. “Hindus who come to ISKCON’s [American] temples to worship and feast on Sundays do so mainly so they can associate with other Indian people” (Rochford, 2007: 191).

The socializing important to Hindus at ISKCON temples may frustrate Americans who sacrificed their youth to establish them, but nevertheless the Hinduization of both the temples and the rest of America has been integral to the cult to church process, for ironically, the growing Hindu community links ISKCON to the rest of the country. It has been noted that the presence of Hindus at ISKCON temple functions has added the aura of legitimacy to the institution with certain sections of American society (Rochford, 2007: 185). It is probable that the high economic, educational, and professional status of local Hindus has contributed to their social integration in North Florida, and this is helpful to New Raman Reti’s church aspirations. Diana Eck notes that the acceptance of Hare Krishna chanting by Hindus confronts people worried about “brainwashed” devotees, with the established respectability exemplified by Hindu professionals, instead (Eck, 2001).

There is an important relation between blurred lines of distinction and the cult to church paradigm because cults, being socially extraordinary, are very distinctive, while ordinary churches, more accommodating to society’s preferences and so appealing to a wider audience (Albanese, 1981: 8), are not as socially distinctive. An established church, for instance, may have a well defined market niche but compared to a religious cult, most churches in America do not
demand religious specialization of all their participants. This is not to say that churches lack religious fervor, but we have described religious specialization as extraordinary religion in terms of how one spends the hours of one’s day. You do not have to become a committed disciple of a guru, a minister, or attend services every day to participate in America’s churches, whereas a cult like ISKCON has produced a climate in which at least the American participants are or used to be religious specialists.

The blurring of distinctions is not how the founder of ISKCON wanted his cult to become a church, but as already explained, his teachings have always had a life of their own. They created New Raman Reti and other centers in America for the purpose of detaching people from material interests, but many Hindus repeatedly visit these centers for rather different purposes resembling *karma kanda*, a ritual style of religion rooted in the Vedas described by Prabhupada as more or less materialistic. Ironically, worshiping Krishna for worldly interests is not only allowed, it is also recommended in the *Bhagavata Purana* (Prabhupada, 1982: 286). Indeed, anyone who approaches Krishna for the fulfillment of these desires is “a person who has broader intelligence”, but in spite of this endorsement, Prabhupada recommended instead the otherworldly emphasis of the Upanishads, which can be understood when *karma kanda* has come to an end (Prabhupada, 1989: 132).

**Hinduism vs. Gaudiya vaishnavism in America**

It is far easier to describe a group of people who call themselves Hindus than it is to define Hinduism. For our purposes, any Hindu who visits New Raman Reti even infrequently is a participant in the community. Also, although we have written of Hare Krishna devotees of any nationality as Hindus (that is, practicing a form of Hinduism), to be practical, by the term Hindu we will mean devotees of Indian parentage, including *diaspora* Hindus born in other parts of the world beside India—otherwise we would be faced with the awkward prospect of American
Hindus, ethnic Hindus, diaspora Hindus, Hindus of Indian parentage, Hindus from the Caribbean, etc., for the rest of this dissertation. Another reason for the use of Hindu for devotees of Indian parentage is that no matter where they are from, there is a remarkable consistency in their opinions about the temple and other aspects of the Hare Krishna movement over time (Reddy, 2008). The nomenclature of Hindu also reflects the self-identification of most of the people we are highlighting in this chapter, and in the American Hare Krishna movement, devotees of American parentage refer to the Indians as Hindus. These Hindus seem not to mind this designation unless they identify strongly with the sampradaya teachings of Prabhupada, who referred to Hinduism as “a very complex topic” (Prabhupada, 1977: 195).¹

It is because of the following criteria—not “bona fide” by Prabhupada’s standards—that ISKCON’s founder proclaimed, “We are not Hindu” (Rochford, 2007: 181).

The chief concern of Hindu religious conviction is not the existence or non-existence of God or whether there is one God or many gods. Hindus can choose to be monotheists, polytheists, pantheists, atheists, agnostics, dualists, monists, or pluralists. They may or may not follow strict standards of moral conduct, spend time on everyday religious rituals, or attend a temple (S.A. Nigosian, 2000: 20).

For Prabhupada, the choices Krishna offers to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita are bona fide, while atheism, polytheistic worship of “demigods”, lack of a strict standard of moral conduct, etc. are not. Prabhupada often spoke of Hinduism as a “cheating religion” while recognizing the efficacy of various “Vedic” traditions (General HK, 2007; Prabhupada, 1989: 395), but he was not interested in promoting these traditions as an expression of Hinduism because Hinduism is

¹ A website devoted to the Krishna Lunch program at the University of Florida defines a common view at New Raman Reti: “If by Hinduism you mean what is commonly understood as Hinduism, then the answer is, no. Krishna consciousness is monotheistic whereas most people understand Hinduism to be polytheistic or monistic. If however by Hinduism you mean a religious tradition from India then, yes. Scholars would refer to the Hare Krishna movement as a sect of Hinduism called Vaishnavism.” See http://krishnalunch.org/content/view/31/63/ The reader will be reminded of how the term sect is explained in Chapter One, that does not consider sect an appropriate term for a religious form that has not broken off from another form.
an imperfect product of history, unlike his Vaishnava teachings (Gosvami, 1980: 165; Gosvami, 2005: 91). Following non-Vaishnava traditions could lead, at best, only to elevation to temporary “heavenly planets” within the material world, or to the ontology, experience, or simply the intellectual study of monism, from which the soul would eventually fall.

The devotees of Kim Knott’s “standardized” diaspora Hinduism that levels regional differences common in India in favor of a more ecumenical approach in America assuredly makes every ISKCON temple a pilgrimage destination, for Hindus go to varieties of Hindu temples in India even without ecumenical consciousness. But, “although they respect Prabhupada, many of ISKCON’s Indian-Hindu supporters do not embrace his teachings” (Rochford, 2007: 188). The situation is complicated because picking and choosing among Prabhupada’s teachings for personal consumption typifies Hindus who attend the New Raman Reti temple that is now an integral feature of their American spirituality of dwelling. Those who are aware of the difference between Prabhupada’s teachings and their own views are generally not disturbed by this incongruity, even though the very idea of preaching Hinduism might be foreign to them; they just accept Prabhupada’s way as another form of Hinduism. “If Prabhupada seemed at times to be unorthodox in terms of the Hindu tradition, it was thus because he was so true to his own tradition of Bengal Vaishnavism” (Hopkins in Bromley and Shinn, 1989: 52). As time passes, the second generation of Hindus in America are even less invested in regional or alternate sampradaya varieties of Hinduism, and for some the ISKCON variety becomes accepted as an orthodox—and even orthoprax—standard in the absence of opportunities for comparison (Anuradha interview). This is especially true at centers like New Raman Reti that offer individual ritual services for a fee to Hindus who constitute a clientele as well as a congregation. As Richard King has noted, the Ramakrishna Mission and ISKCON are competing
for the hearts and minds of the Hindu diaspora, but (at least at New Raman Reti) it seems this contest has more to do with availability and familiarity than any other factors. There are no other Hindu temples in the area that offer regular *darshan, puja, prasada*, and the performance of life cycle rituals.

**What is a Hare Krishna Hindu?**

For this dissertation, we cannot reject Hindus as Hare Krishna devotees simply because they endorse ideas and practices that Prabhupada would not. If they frequent a Hare Krishna temple, for our purposes Hindus are participants of the Hare Krishna religion to one degree or another whether or not they acknowledge this status, for after all they are enculturating their children in the Hare Krishna ritual and doctrinal environment. The search for a Hindu spirituality of dwelling in America finds opportunity at any Hindu temple including an ISKCON temple because these immigrant congregations are “not transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and therefore arenas of change” (Smith, 1978: 83: 1155-1185). However, we must also consider that change may be imperceptible to practitioners, especially through the generations.

Following more than one form of Hinduism or mixing these forms is a common practice in India, so it is also common among Hindus in America. They may follow *sampradaya* Vaishnavism or any other school, and find a way to mix these influences with or without conscious reflection. Most Hindus do not identify very closely with any formal school, which makes it easy to go to any Hindu temple. A Hindu might revere Swami Vivekananda or Sai Baba, dabble in *tantra*, do *vipasanna* meditation, and contribute in various ways to ISKCON. It is very likely that a Hindu in America continues practices brought from India. Both the institution and the wider movement have understood these facts all along, but in honoring Prabhupada’s sentiments about Hinduism, they have not always been at peace with it. Yet any
American who comes into contact with the movement is immediately brought into a religiously exotic world of Indian people, not only spoken Indic languages like Hindi and Tamil, Sanskrit and Bengali as liturgical languages, Indian food, rituals, ideas, art forms, etc. The new devotee or guest of American parentage might encounter a thousand (as estimated by the director of the Temple Outreach Program) or more Indians at New Raman Reti on a holy day, following different kinds of Hinduism. There is also an international component that transcends consideration of Hindu and non-Hindu, and cult and church, in Internet communication, and challenges Rochford’s contention that “radical beliefs require oppositional forms of social organization if they are to endure over time” (Rochford, 2007: 203). Anyone can be a Hare Krishna devotee or a Hindu on an online forum where societal tension cannot intrude as it can in the “real” world. Hindus that interact with ISKCON are part of a worldwide network of Internet devotees that discuss Prabhupada’s teachings as guides to living, but at their own discretion without supervision or pressure from any ISKCON authorities (Krishna.com, 2007).² Some American devotees participate with the wider world of (mostly Hindu) Vaishnavism online, dedicated to discussions of the Bhagavad Gita. Second generation Hindus in particular are very active in this cyber world of religion, and are likely to be even more eclectic than their parents, unreserved about accepting Americans online or at ISKCON temples as Hindus. “Why should I feel funny there? They practice Hinduism. They're Hindus. What's the difference?’ said a young Hindu engineer in Denver” (The Pluralism Project, 2009). Hindus of all sorts creatively interact with temples, festivals, books, and social networks that have created a rough framework for lay religious interpretation informing the wider Hare Krishna community.

² At the bottom of the webpage at http://connect.krishna.com/node/358 there is a list of Hindu names.
For instance, Prabhupada’s teachings now are understood, by some, in the context of websites like *Hinduism Today*, instead of in contrast to Hinduism in *Back to Godhead* magazine, which is published at New Raman Reti—yet *Hinduism Today* brings the world of Hinduism to New Raman Reti.³ Anna S. King refers to “the Indianization of ISKCON and the Iskconization of British Hinduism” along with the institutional abandonment of “the robust exclusivist theology of 40 years ago”, and because of the influences we have been discussing, the same would apply at New Raman Reti (King in Dwyer, 207: 165). Blurred lines of distinction have become normal.

But this community is different from many other large centers of Krishna consciousness in America (Rochford, 2007: 187), where Hindus provide the bulk of funding (Rochford, 2007: 187). Hindus do not regularly dominate the temple scene as they do in Hare Krishna communities such as Houston or Seattle, where more Hindus live. I have observed that New Raman Reti has dozens of mixed American-Hindu initiated couples in the immediate community whose families are also comfortable with practices brought from a range of Indian sources. But, tellingly, mixed coupling is fairly rare among the Hindu pilgrim group anywhere in America. These pilgrims are a distinct and parallel “community” at New Raman Reti when they are at the temple, before they disperse to locations throughout the southeastern United States. They tend to

³ The purpose of Hinduism Today, as set forth by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniya Swami, does not deter Prabhupada’s disciples from proudly publishing with this online magazine. “To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion, especially the Nandinatha Sampradaya; To nurture a truly spiritual Hindu renaissance; To publish a resource for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma.” [http://www.hinduismtoday.com/](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/) Prabhupada’s disciples now publish articles on Gauḍīya Vaishnavism in Hinduism Today, although Prabhupada designed his *Back to Godhead* magazine to emphasize his own *sampradaya* and never allowed articles promoting other types of Hinduism. Although this policy remains, the infiltration of his *sampradaya*’s views in Hindu forums is a remarkable development that he would likely approve.
stick together at the Sunday program (Rochford, 2007: 190), but I have observed this being done by generations and gender as well, although there is certainly mixing. Bengali Hindus are not dominant among the pilgrimage devotees at New Raman Reti, but they are prominent among initiated Hindus, and so can augment the “Bengali Vaishnava” element of Prabhupada’s teachings. Two or three dozen of the families who live in the Alachua area are Hindus from the diaspora in the Caribbean, not India. Many first generation Hindus in America are high caste professionals who left India for educational and career opportunities, mostly concentrated in engineering, medicine, and business. They tend not to live in enclaves so their children are not raised in ethnic neighborhoods as has been the general pattern for immigrants throughout American history (Rochford, 2007: 191). I have observed that these children are fairly easily assimilated into the society of their peers, while remaining Hindu Indians at home, where their parents are hopeful that they will remain loyal to social identification such as caste because caste is a familiar cultural artifact in an unfamiliar country, but not for reasons of social restriction as in India (Kurien, 2007: 40-41). Hindus also bring their children to New Raman Reti for some of the same reasons that they sponsor bala vihars, workshops for children typically using the Bhagavad Gita, in their homes (ibid, 59-61). If they are going to have a spirituality of dwelling in America, then their children must have some training in Hindu ideas and practices.

**All Indians Love Krishna**

If you scratch an Indian, Prabhupada said, beneath the surface you will discover the real truth, for as far as Prabhupada was concerned, all Indians, regardless of their professed beliefs, are devotees of Krishna. Even some Muslim Indians, he pointed out, were fond of Krishna as a cultural hero. However, Prabhupada’s views on Indians who come to America—ex-pats (expatriated) as they were called before the era of the ABCD (American Born Confused Desis)—were complex. Before diaspora Hindus had come to be considered the defenders of Hinduism in
India by Hindu nationalists, Prabhupada saw them as principle supporters of his mission in America, for they generally had advanced educations, good incomes, and were inclined to visit temples. ISKCON’s Life Membership program was started for the purpose of fostering the classic reciprocal relationship between householders and religious ascetics that has always been an important part of Indian culture. Anyone (although most Life Members are Indians) who contributed a certain monetary amount became entitled to stay and take prasada for three days at any ISKCON temple in the world as Life Members, and receive Prabhupada’s books (Rochford, 2007: 185). To this day the Life Member program is important in ISKCON, and includes, at various levels of monetary participation, many members of India’s business and industrial class, and expatriated Hindus in America (ISKCON, 2000-2004).

Although Hindus with monetary means who profess love of Krishna may demonstrate this love by becoming Life Members, Prabhupada could be very critical of Hindus in America (Wheeler, 1985: 109). Why had the Indians left India? Not, surely, for spirituality, as he had done. Only for economic development Hindus were willing to trade away their spiritual heritage, and the heritage of their children, for in the social atmosphere of America they would surely forget their ancient ways. But because you could scratch these Hindus and discover a gem waiting to be polished, Prabhupada entertained a complex mixture of dismissive pessimism and practical optimism regarding his countrymen.

Same Market Niche, Different Value Systems

Once again, Prabhupada’s prediction of forgetting about Krishna without following certain standards has not proved quite accurate for our purposes because his cultic teachings and the atmosphere he established in his centers have proved quite seductive for Hindus in America, for as a general rule, at least the temple atmosphere where Krishna is worshiped is valued. Partly this is because most Hindus tend not to emphasize doctrine as vitally as their American
counterparts, even though they may appreciate Hinduism in a more discursive or “Protestant” manner than many less educated Hindus in India. But because they are generally not invested to the same degree as the Americans in a discursive manner of understanding religion, many do not know the details of Prabhupada’s teachings, which is a workable situation for the majority who value the temple atmosphere more than anything. They have brought their Hindu consciousness with less emphasis on *sampradayas*, instead of a singular Krishna consciousness, to America. On the other hand, the Americans, to the extent that they follow Prabhupada who tended to emphasize only his own school, have only the Hare Krishna form of Gaudiya Hinduism as a movement in America to draw upon as a cultural reservoir of practices and ideas. This difference in orientation may become less momentous in time, but for now it is the cultural barometer for alterity throughout the American movement and in New Raman Reti.

Like the hippies, the Hindus in America have always been Prabhupada’s “best customers” as they have always been the largest minority social group in the Hare Krishna movement outside of India, but instead of giving up career plans and adopting a radically different way of looking at the world, as we have explained, they had other ideas. If politics makes for strange bedfellows, religion has the same potential. In broad terms, the hippies were looking for “the ultimate trip” in their spirituality of seeking, and they were thrilled by the extraordinary nature of Prabhupada’s teachings. The Hindus came to these teachings from the opposite direction, for it was the atmosphere of the ISKCON temples that reminded them of home and drew them into association with the Americans who had left everything behind; they were seeking something old and familiar instead. And almost none of them were interested in becoming ascetic religious specialists, unlike the Americans who were ready—or thought they were ready—for a highly regulated life of renunciation. Because of these value differentiations, we could state the
previous subheading differently—same teaching, different market niche. Regardless of how it is stated, and regardless of their differences, the partnership has weathered a tentative beginning and remains a strong, though still somewhat awkward, social bond.

Hindu Cultural Continuity in America

In Chapter Four, in order to make some preliminary statements about the fate of Prabhupada’s movement since his passing, we did not include any ethnographical treatment of Hindu devotees because as a whole their relationship to Prabhupada’s teachings has not significantly changed, even as Indians have begun the process of change in becoming Americans. This is a remarkable demonstration of a specific aspect of cultural continuity in population transfer, for by and large Hindus have wanted the same things from ISKCON for four decades.

The movement continues to attract market share from Hindus because of a certain populist element that goes beyond what is offered by the archetypical Ramakrishna Mission—what to speak of an organization like TM that has no temples, rituals, or prasada.4 Basham went so far as to call ISKCON a “genuinely Hindu” Indian movement in the West, “the straightforward Hinduism of the common man” (Basham in Gelberg, 1983: 175). Prabhupada was sure that all Hindus, regardless of their specific religious proclivities, love Krishna. So one place that they express this love is at the altar of New Raman Reti’s Shri Radha Shyamasundara.

Cultural Clashes

As stated in Chapter Two, we must be selective in our discussion of conflicting cultural items simply because there are so many. We must also recognize that these conflicts are also

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4 Recently the Ramakrishna Mission in America has moved further towards Basham’s “straightforward mission” of popular ritual, but this has caused consternation within its old ranks that prefer the previous emphasis on Vedantic discussions, meditation, etc. It will be interesting to see how these religious market share issues play out between the Mission and ISKCON, for both aspire to trade their cultic status for church status.
internal, not only in relation to the rest of American society. So, we return to our discussion of food and family, in the context of the tension between asceticism and lay devotion.

Prabhupada could not abide meat eating, and his attitude toward meat eating has become mimetic. As already mentioned, the first generation took to vegetarianism like ducks to water, and the second generation tends to follow it without protest or even reflection—unless there is a need to defend it, or promote it among their friends. American devotees of all groups are frustrated with the Hindu community’s dietary ambivalence, for the Americans do not understand the difficulty of a vegetarian diet and the small sacrifices—as they see it—one must frequently make in American society to maintain a vegetarian standard. Some of this lack of sympathy for Hindus who eat meat stems from unrealistic views of Indian culture even before contacting the movement. One devotee was shocked to discover that most Hindus even in India are not vegetarian, for she had thought it would be around 90% (Hill, 2008). In a society where knowledge of India and Hinduism goes back to the ideal musings of the philosophical Henry David Thoreau and his On Walden Pond, where the author lived on a vegetarian diet and pondered the mysteries of Upanishadic thought, this gross overestimation by Americans of vegetarianism among Hindus should come as no surprise.5

The worship of the cow is a subtle but very instructive source of conflict. Many carnivorous Hindus see only the cow as a taboo food, while the American devotees, who certainly refrain from eating the cow—even worship the cow at New Raman Reti in rituals such as Gopuja, well attended by Hindus—also find the eating of other animals equally as reprehensible; they do not see a gulf of difference between cows and other animals where eating them is concerned. But some Hindus see a general refraining from eating animals as a form of

5 Even Rochford emphasizes vegetarianism among Hindus in America, and nowhere recognizes the prevalence of meat eating in the Hindu community. See Rochford, 2007: 183.
religious discipline or renunciation (although many Hindus in America or anywhere would never dream of eating meat, so for them there is no question of vegetarianism as discipline or renunciation—a cost). One Hindu revealed that, to avoid too much austerity but still make some progress toward a vegetarian lifestyle, he is vegetarian on alternate days of the week. By contrast, American devotees tend to be amused (or saddened) by this account. Many American devotees do not accept anyone who eats beef as a Hindu, while some Indian students at the University of Florida do claim that one can eat beef and still be a Hindu (Kurien, 2007: 55). One second generation American devotee was informed by a Hindu for whom he had contracted to do carpentry work that although she was a strict vegetarian, she felt obliged to cook meat for her grown sons, who were carnivorous, when they visited. This confession was astounding to the American, who took the woman’s policy as a classic example of too much family attachment, especially since the woman and her husband were pillars of the temple community, not pilgrims (Nimai interview).

Tellingly, many American devotees think nothing of keeping close relationships with carnivorous Americans that they love and respect, but hold Hindus to a higher standard, as if the Hindu devotees are or should be their compatriots in certain cultural practices. For the most part, the Hindus feel no such compunction, for their allegiance to cultural standards has its origin in the examples of their elderly family members, not in temple lectures or the instructions of a guru (Rasa Prema, 2008; Madhavi, 2008). On the American side, we can reiterate our observation from Chapter Three—there are no purely cultic grandparents in the first generation of a religious cult, and their source of cultural instruction is the founder and his appointees.

The rapidity with which condemnation of meat eating has become a meme already for American disciples, grand-disciples, and second generation devotees is quite remarkable, for it
surpasses the standard of many self-described American vegetarians who set aside vegetarianism to please their relatives at Thanksgiving. Although some Hindus respect the American devotees for their religious vegetarian principles, many are unimpressed with any display of religion as a belief system or a specific lifestyle. Many Hindus are more inclined to accept Americans as Hindus if they have expertise in Sanskrit scriptures, rituals, or an art form important in Hinduism, for they view religion as contextualized in such things (Rochford, 2007: 183). By contrast, the Americans are likely to relate all sorts of technical proficiency to their guru’s principle of utility, not anything essential, which would, instead, be preaching—according to Prabhupada’s slogan “preaching is the essence.” Prabhupada’s fourfold *sampradaya* scheme of basic books, essential preaching, utility as a principle, and forceful purity—or the way this scheme is interpreted—frequently acts as a wall before, instead of a bridge to, the Hindu community.

There are also differences specific to Hinduism’s long history that cannot have any significant place in the non-Hindu American experience to date, such as *jati* considerations. Americans are, of course, without any place in the hierarchical *jati* scheme, yet it must be noted that this does not seem to affect commensality at ISKCON or other functions in which Americans and Hindus interact. For practicality’s sake in a foreign land, such issues have been set aside, it appears, rather gracefully. But marriage remains a barrier for many Hindus, as expressed by a young female informant. “Q. Do you consider it important to marry within your *jati*? A. Yes it is important to marry within one’s *jati* due to the mentality differences among the different jatis” (Mira, 2009). Whatever mentality differences may actually remain due to *jati* even in America, the American devotees are not likely to understand them or agree that they pose any significant barrier to the marriage of American and Hindu devotees—the barrier would
have more to do with religion. However, it must be remembered that Shri Chaitanya did not oppose *jati* customs per se, nor did Prabhupada. These customs are often intertwined indistinguishably with religion, especially as they are passed down from elder to younger family members in a domestic setting, even in America.

**Cultural Customers**

Many complex rituals are beyond the competence of domestic worshipers, who seek the services of professional priests. New Raman Reti resident Krishna Svarupa Dasa, an ISKCON initiated Nepali, offers an extensive catalog of life cycle rituals such as *nama-karana* (naming a child) and *vivaha-yajna* (marriage). But there are also American devotees now recognized as ritual experts by the Hindu community, lessening tension between these groups. Tamal Krishna Gosvami saw this as an instance in which “historical Hinduism has moved to realign itself with the trans-historical” (Gosvami in Forsthoefel, 2005: 91). Historically, it would have been inconceivable that non-Hindus would become ritual specialists for Hindus. For Prabhupada, this development would fulfill his idea of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a consciously chosen culture of universal religion, “a mode of faith that in principle a non-Hindu could share” (O’Connell, 1973: 342), with a meaning not bounded by historical or geographical context. Arjun Appadurai has written, "As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits, and collections, both in national and transnational spectacles, culture becomes less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an area for conscious choice, justification, and representation, the latter open to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences" (Appadurai, 1996: 44). Never mind that it is only life cycle rituals plus *darshan*, *kirtana*, and *prasada* that most Hindu pilgrims are choosing from Gaudiya Vaishnavism, not its doctrine. After all, the expansive cult of Shri Chaitanya—“spreading the rays of the benediction moon”—is centered on chanting, dancing, and feasting.
Although always known for its evangelical zeal, the Gaudiya tradition was late to do this internationally, but when it did “it has arrived in style.” For Arvind Sharma, “the appearance of Hare Krishna in the West is of great importance for Hinduism” because it boosts Hindu self esteem, and replaces a closet Hinduism with something practiced openly (Sharma in Beckford, 1986: 224-5). When Hindus as rational actors affirm their religion by participating in ISKCON, in various ways and degrees they are creating a new Hindu identity. "Even when we consume the religious ideas and rituals of what was, in some other society or some other time, a powerful tradition, we cannot forget that it is we who choose the tradition rather than the tradition that has created us" (Bruce, 1999: 186). Americans and Hindus simply choose to emphasize a different orientation to a still powerful tradition (Dimock in Prabhupada, 1972: ix), expressed in a single, or closely related, market niche.

Many Americans at New Raman Reti are more than willing to expand market share by catering to the religious needs of the Hindu pilgrims, who identify with the community because "although the followers of the Hare Krishna movement are primarily Western, they observe [certain] orthodox practices more faithfully than those of many movements rooted in India" (Wuthnow in Beckford, 1986). The nascent identification of ISKCON Hindus with the institution demonstrates the fecund nature of Hinduism, and it is likely to blunt the differences we have been discussing, in the long run. Like the hippies of three and four decades ago, the Hindus are also Prabhupada’s best customers.

**Prajapati Daksha vs. Narada Muni**

The differences between American and Hindu devotees we have indicated here, differences that divide the community, are broadly cultural, although (at least for for the Americans) their origin is narrowly doctrinal (doctrine also being an aspect of culture). The
difference in food is between ordinary and elite culture, because some Hindus (even in India) find vegetarianism to be difficult.

The difference in attitudes toward family is more complex, for the ordinary-elite confrontation in relation to family echoes a tension between householders and ascetics in India with a very long history. The sixth canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* tells the story of the conflict between Prajapati Daksha, who is dedicated to the ritualistic religion of the Rig Veda, and the ascetic god Shiva, who exemplifies the Upanishadic practices of meditation and asceticism. Narada teaches Daksha’s sons that ordinary family life is useless, and Daksha, in his turn, curses Narada Muni to be homeless. The *Shrimad Bhagavatam* and Prabhupada’s commentaries hold up Daksha as a good example of a bad example. But Daksha’s interest in material life was not irreligious, for he was one of the “mental sons” created by the god Brahma for the explicit purpose of populating the universe. Daksha’s style of family life, filled with various *yajnas* for different purposes, is actually religious, or “Vedic.”

Prabhupada saw the ritualistic propensities of the Hindus as a waste of time, coming within the orbit of family life, not spiritual life. His disciples also did not fail to recognize that Hindus wearing the sacred thread of the twice born *varnas* generally did not acquire these threads after a period of serious study with a guru, as Prabhupada recommended, but rather experienced a life cycle ritual (*samskara*) designating their *jati* status only. Many Hindus openly admit that their thread and the responsibilities that are supposed to go with it are not an important part of their life—the ceremony is just something that is done within their *jati*. Such sentiments are bound to conflict with American notions of the importance of *varna*, which is based on one’s particular capabilities and talents, not birth (Schweig, 2007: 263).
Daksha’s Rig Veda religion lives on, in a sense, in Hindus who come to New Raman Reti as pilgrims, and sometimes see Upanishadic religion more as something to respect than to practice. This divides the community, but it helps the cult toward church status because in the American context, Daksha’s less intense religion is more church oriented. Hindu rituals are of course different from Christian or Jewish rituals, and some of the premises are also quite different, but when the overall motive is well being in the world instead of otherworldly concerns, valuation in line with American culture should be considered.

**Ordinary Love, Family, and Work**

We must remember the background of the first Americans to sample Prabhupada’s teachings in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and their fascination with elite aspects of Indian culture such as Vedanta, not the culture of the Indian masses concerned more with their crops and family welfare. The elite emphasis puts these Americans at odds with the Hindu diaspora, where the modern Hindu equivalent of crops in America is one’s work as a professional, a business owner, or some sort of career after attaining one or two graduate, or at least college, degree. Whatever their occupation, Hindus in America are likely to see dutiful work as the most important message of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Ramachandran, Vaishak, Banerjee, 2008), and frequently use ritual to establish their new home as an extension of the conception of India as a sacred place of work (*karmabhumi*). But the Americans—unconcerned about the ritual sanctity of their homeland as a place of work---almost unanimously quote Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.66. “Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear” (Prabhupada, 1989: 850). Any devotee who sees this verse from the conclusion of the *Bhagavad Gita* as its essence must consider the gradual path of pious fruitive work (*karma-kanda*) to be less than the pursuit of spiritual knowledge, what to speak of devotion (Prabhupada, 1989: 130-133) because karma and *jnana* are considered
“the maidservants of devotion.” In his commentary to the *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.66, Prabhupada explains that the ordinary duties of life are in vain if they do not “lead to the perfectional stage of Krishna consciousness”, and should be avoided. “There is no need of thinking how one should keep the body and soul together, Krishna will see to that.” He also states that one should not be perplexed in this matter—one should simply surrender unto Krishna, because “such worry is useless” (Prabhupada, 1989: 851-852). Prabhupada never taught any method of spiritual elevation that would not be compared to the elevator, as explained in Chapter Three, instead of the stairs.

Because most Hindus at New Raman Reti generally have a more distant or relaxed relationship with *sampradaya* Hinduism, religious texts do not directly inform their views quite like the Americans. Consequently, their religious consciousness is not systematically confronted with descriptions of the conditioned soul found in literatures such as the *Bhagavatam*, which, although expressly meant for popular consumption (Prabhupada, 1982: 7-8), are in actuality saturated with renouncer perspectives. Because of the direct connection between ordinary love and everything else that humans do, such as remunerative work and forming and investing in social relationships, we must pause here to reflect further upon the renouncer orientation to ordinary love emphasized by Prabhupada. Although he declared the love of a mother for her children to be the most pure type of love in the material world, this love is still the product of erotic love, which is denigrated in no uncertain terms, as we have demonstrated in Chapter Three. Of course, the denigration is mostly from a male point of view—but all conditioned souls suffer on account of family attachment. Like a monkey, “the conditioned soul, being captivated by momentary sex pleasure, becomes attached to different types of bodies and is encaged in family life” (Prabhupada, 1982: 49). Encaged in family life, the monkey conditioned soul works
hard under the spell of family affection, but this is a mistake. “Instead of wasting time trying to attain a better position in material life, one should simply endeavor to return home, back to Godhead” (ibid, 48).

But what about Prabhupada’s acknowledgement of the relative purity of parental love in the material world? Why are one’s grandparents or parents not sufficiently wise to guide a Hindu in religious life? Why must one acquire a guru, without which, no one can make tangible progress toward God? The answer is to be found in Prabhupada’s favorite scriptures, and his commentaries on them.

In every form of life, birth after birth, the living entity gets a father and mother. In human society, however, if one is satisfied with his material father and mother and their instructions and does not make further progress by accepting a spiritual master and being educated in the shastras, he certainly remains in darkness. The material father and mother are important only if they are interested in educating their son to become free from the clutches of death (Shrimad Bhagavatam, 6.5.20).

Prabhupada’s strong words about parents and their duties concerning their children and the clutches of death, if we are to take them literally, could make almost everyone ineligible for legitimate parenthood. This was the kind of teaching that exasperated Daksha. As for the emphasis on worldly work as religious duty, in interviews Hindus commonly concur with the Bhagavad Gita that doing one’s worldly duty should be without the thought of the result, and this opinion does compliment Prabhupada’s statement that worry is useless (Meshal Soni interview). However, the alacrity that New Raman Reti’s Hindus apply to their careers indicates a serious interest in the more ordinary side of life whether or not this interest is considered worrisome. Most Hindus are likely to consider exclusive devotion to God and guru appropriate only after a full life as a householder. Interviews indicate that most Hindu devotees, unless they have become deeply involved with Prabhupada’s teachings, simply do not consider ascetic values for themselves, and may even be offended by the very notion of restrictions on sexuality,
which they take to be a right. As one Hindu said, “In my opinion, sexuality is a personal matter and should not be intertwined with religion” (Madhavi, 2009). However, online Hindu forums provide evidence that many Hindus do affirm Prabhupada’s vision that the only real love is love of God, and these are the sort of Hindus in America who typically become deeply involved with the Hare Krishna movement (Bhagavad Gita Talk, 2009).

Prabhupada’s views on sexuality and religion are inextricable from his views on remunerative work, for he acknowledges that ordinary people are unmotivated in their work without sexual expression (Prabhupada, 1989: 297). The significance of this stance is clear. For Prabhupada, when sexuality and the things that go with it, such as a family, are essential to motivated work, a successful career for people with ordinary motives is meaningless. This understanding is so cultic in America that it is ineffective in moving a religious cult toward church status unless the cult somehow dominates society. But, if the cultic aspiration to church status is a long shot, as Stark has averred, church status domination without participants who are successful in their careers is more or less impossible. We will find in the next chapter that the children of Prabhupada’s disciples, like most of their Hindu brethren, reject the otherworldly emphasis of the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in America.

A Clash of Heresies

Hindus are accustomed to reverencing a guru such as Prabhupada that they perceive as a powerful religious figure, regardless of his loyalty to sampradaya views. This is not necessarily illogical or cynical as it seems for many American devotees, for in India one may personally know many sadhus or gurus, and they may issue contradictory teachings. The common saying “Guru is one” may tend to instill simple reverence for all gurus (until proven unfit), instead of an impractical attempt at following them all. The American devotees, on the other hand, were trained selectively in relation to a form of Hinduism that they consciously chose and sacrificed
for, many rejecting their parents in the process or being rejected by them. Hindus are generally less heretical in religious matters, as Peter Berger has written of the term.

Berger notes that heretic comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “to choose.” In our postmodern world every religious person becomes a heretic, that is, one who is not simply born into a given religion or identity but must choose it, even if it is only to retain the identity offered by the circumstances of his or her birth (Esposito, 2009: 32).

The decision to remain with the religion of one’s birth is closer to the realm of church instead of cultic consciousness. It is church consciousness that explains much of the tension between the ethnic groups of New Raman Reti, as one Hindu ISKCON temple president told Rochford. “Most accept that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead…but they are not ISKCON on the basis of philosophy. All Hindus are brought up with a certain kind of faith and that sticks to them” (Rochford, 2007:189). By contrast, cultic consciousness emphasizes choice—as Bruce could allow as an exception to secularization theory—because it confronts the status quo and so is more intensely “heretical.” The heretical nature of the Americans at New Raman Reti may not be immediately understood by the Hindus for whom attendance at temple functions feels like church instead of cult as far as they are concerned, although it is still cultic for most of American society. The survival of this cult is not (or does not seem to be) at stake for Hindus who are behaving memetically in taking darshan of New Raman Reti’s deities Shri Radha Shyamasundara, taking prasada, and leaving an offering in the hundi (donation box) as they would at any Hindu temple.

Prabhupada frequently quoted Shri Chaitanya’s command that everyone—especially Indians—should become gurus and broadcast Krishna consciousness (Prabhupada, VedaBase, Chaitanya Charitamrita Adi Lila 9.41). “The principle that only Indians and Hindus should be brought into the Vaishnava cult is a mistaken idea. There should be propaganda to bring everyone to the Vaishnava cult. The Krishna consciousness movement is meant for that purpose”
(Prabhupada, 1973: 237). Because the heresy of the Hindus has more in common with church than cult, it is little wonder that they have little interest in the propaganda aspect of ISKCON’s stated purpose. This lack of interest could be particularly irritating to the Americans, whose Gaudiya lineage—contrary to some other Hindu ways of thinking—considers prasada to be spiritually purifying for any recipient, a notion at odds with the notion that one must take prasada in full consciousness or not get any benefit at all (Rochford, 2007: 190). Because American and Hindu devotees have different Bergerian heresies, there is resentment pertaining to basic issues, such as the missionary value of prasada. However, their common interest in prasada has a spiritual element that both acknowledge, and it is probably the material for their greatest social bond.

The Tortoise and the Hare—Hindus Lead By Default

Rochford has described the tragic result of immature renunciation and lack of experience with ascetic doctrines, a topic we shall explore in the next chapter. Problematically, Prabhupada taught the principles of religious householder life by precept, not example, for he was an elderly sannyasi when he arrived in America. Additionally, as we have stated, most initiates have found Prabhupada’s precepts for householders too difficult to follow. In spite of all the considerations mentioned above, Hindus are a potential source of exemplary religion for many American devotees—for sheer want of competing exemplars—although the Hindu example was not what Prabhupada wanted. But Hindus have the teaching of religion by grandparents as an invaluable resource for any religious community attempting to attain church status because it represents a more ordinary approach, tempered by experience. For devotees who have retreated from the inexperienced ascetic posture of their youth, the tortoise method of the Hindus can seem more appealing than their own hare efforts on the fast track of Krishna consciousness (Reddy, 2009). Relatively speaking, Hindus in America are steady in their careers, have stable families, go to
temples, and die after leading a life between extremes of hedonism and renunciation—instead of at extremes---at least by contrast to the first generation of American Hare Krishna devotees, who gave up everything for decades and are now trying to get everything back (Krishna.org 2003; Rochford, 2007: 163). Because Hindus have had thousands of years of experience with teachings similar to Prabhupada’s, they could take it in stride.

**The Heart of Hinduism?**

The stable Hindu group likes to visit New Raman Reti because they feel their pilgrimage will result in the acquisition of all good things in the future, including spiritual and material benefits (Dutt, 2009). But for the most part they do not, like the Americans, say that “Prabhupada saved me.” Instead, as a Hindu temple president told Rochford, “The Indians really respect Prabhupada because he has converted thousands of Christians and Jews into Hindus…He has shown the greatness of the Hindu tradition to the whole world. One man has converted so many people to my culture” (Rochford, 2007: 188). I have been told by second generation Hindu devotees that they have met American devotees—who have lived for decades in India—who seem to know more about Indian culture than they do. This is an odd twist to Prabhupada’s intention to reinvigorate India by coming to America, converting Americans, and taking them back to India so that his countrymen could see that they were already living amidst a treasure house of spiritual culture. In this scenario, young people of Indian parentage discover the treasure in their own American back yard.

It is somewhat standard that anyone initiated in ISKCON denies that it is Hinduism. This represents, like severed or strained family relations among the first generation, a valuable resource lost for the cult to church paradigm—or as a Hindu told Rochford, “How can ISKCON survive as a separate cult” from Hinduism? (Rochford, 2007: 189). The separation honors Prabhupada’s views on Hinduism but does nothing to unite American and Hindu devotees.
However there are some Hindus, “saved” by Prabhupada, who still identify with Hinduism as a term and a concept, such as the “saved” Hindu temple president quoted above. For another instance, the Vedic Friends Association, an online forum for the advancement of Hinduism around the world, takes Hindu and Vedic as more or less identical terms, and includes ISKCON as Hindu (Vedic Friends Association). Even ISKCON, while denying a connection with the term Hinduism on some websites, has embraced it on others, even claiming to be “the heart of Hinduism” (ISKCON Educational Services, 2004). However, Govind Reddy, a Prabhupada initiate member of the New Raman Reti board of directors and an Indian, does not agree that Prabhupada’s disciples are Hindus, but he would probably affirm Raymond Williams’ designation of the American Vaishnavas as the Hindu’s closest cousins (The Pluralism Project, 2009).

So far we have focused on Hindus who relate to New Raman Reti as pilgrims and more or less keep themselves at a distance to the teachings and the followers of Prabhupada. But, in combination with New Raman Reti’s geographical position that limits the number of more casual participation by Hindus—because North Central Florida is not a dense population center—Hindus who claim a more direct family relationship to Prabhupada as spiritual sons and daughters serve to inhibit the development of New Raman Reti as a sort of playground or business meeting hall for the diaspora. Throughout the Hare Krishna movement, ISKCON Hindus can be more opposed to non-sampradaya practices than their American or European counterparts, particularly the worship of other Hindu gods. Even sectarian (as we have defined this term in Chapter One) varieties of Prabhupada’s movement, such as the ISKCON Revival Movement, include Hindus adamantly against “demigod worship” (Back To Prabhupada, Summer 2008: 12). New Raman Reti Hindu devotees such as Govind Reddy, who
enthusiastically admits that Prabhupada saved him, are unwilling “to compromise elements of [ISKCON’s] religious culture and overall mission” so that Hindu pilgrims can have what Rochford has called an “ethnic church” (Rochford, 2007: 1999). Also, Reddy’s contingent does not want New Raman Reti to cater to “cultural Hindus” who—to him at least—lack religious conviction.

As Hindu devotees move to the North Florida area, it is expected that their participation in the New Raman Reti community will continue to be an important aspect of their spirituality of dwelling in America. But there is one thing about New Raman Reti that has stayed “old ISKCON” even while most of the rest of ISKCON temples in America—to varying degrees—have gone to the Hindu dominance model. Unless their moods and motivations concerning Prabhupada’s teachings are, as a class, significantly altered, or their population overwhelms the American devotees, the Hindu influence is likely to remain integral, not dominant, at New Raman Reti.
CHAPTER 6
THE CULT OF SHRI CHAITANYA TAKES ROOT IN AMERICA: THE SECOND GENERATION GROWS UP

Wandering female mendicants in India have been rare, for Hindu and Jain ascetics who are women tend to put down roots in one place. In a physical sense, the spirituality of dwelling has been normal for women and children in Hinduism because of this historical tendency to stay at home, but it comes naturally to almost all Hindus because of holy places and temples, family traditions, caste and village, the entire land and Hindu culture of Bharata. Religion, community, occupation, and land tend to be associated in consciousness because one’s parents, and their parents before them, worshiped at a particular temple, perhaps lived in a village and tended a particular plot of land, and followed the same jati customs in relation to their community as an integrated whole. In large part, this is how Hindus form their identity (Harlan in Pintchman: 66). Prabhupada could offer some cultural capital in the form of doctrine, ritual, and lifestyle, but he could not give cultural experience of the sort mentioned here, to America. This means that the new devotees could not have these channels and the memes that go with them to nourish and support religious consciousness and identification, a sense of spiritual being and dwelling.

Inasmuch as memetic norms are part of spiritual consciousness, imported cults—to the degree that they emphasize new ideas and practices—are adrift in the new land without a spirituality of dwelling. The first few generations must be invested in a search for a spirituality of dwelling. The first generation addressed these concerns by opening temples and then leaving them to become householders. They also tried to educate their children in Krishna consciousness. The story of the second generation—the first generation of Americans to absorb the religion from birth—represents a further departure from the searching end of the spiritual continuum as it works its way into America’s established culture.
Because in Indic religions women, even ascetic women, require a tangible spirituality of dwelling to one degree or another, Prabhupada blessed this quest when he allowed women to become his initiated disciples. If there were women, there would be marriage and children, houses and worldly careers, money affairs, generational transfer of culture, distinct communities, all things that we must consider beyond religious ideas and practices if we are to see how a cult becomes a church in a new land (Rochford, 2007: 57). This and the last chapter will take our examination of Prabhupada’s teachings further into the realm of women and children, the realm of family, where a religious cult can get some purchase upon a spirituality of dwelling.

There can be no viable spirituality of dwelling for children where their mothers lack physical, mental, and spiritual well being, so we begin our discussion of the second generation of Prabhupada’s followers by looking at the first generation of women who call themselves his daughters. When we do this we find that Prabhupada’s mission from the very beginning was threatened by gender roles that, in theory, elevated women, but in practice left both women and children vulnerable.

**The Heart of the Problem**

The problems that have overshadowed everything else about Prabhupada’s movement for almost two decades, regardless of its continuous expansion at New Raman Reti, can be traced back to a pivotal issue with manifold causes. Kim Knott has written about the movement’s “deeply painful matter” of gender roles as its greatest crisis second only to guru succession (Knott in Rosen, 1999: 87), but this assessment is slightly off target, for the movement and the institution—the official vehicle for the authority of the gurus—are overlapping but distinct categories. The guru succession issue mainly threatens the institution, but the issue of women hampers the entire movement because it disillusions prospective new devotees at the same time that it alienates many of the old devotees, making the goal of becoming a church more difficult.
Therefore, the issue of women represents the greatest crisis for Prabhupada’s mission for reasons to be explained here, including a lawsuit against the organization by the children of these women. The litigants were physically, sexually, and psychologically abused while in ISKCON’s care. For devotee women, the history of the problem has its genesis in this pivotal issue—

*Women accepted the idea that they were supposed to send their children away to gurukula boarding schools.*

This was not a radical idea. Many others in the Society regularly submitted to personal austerities considered routine in the context of *vaidhi-sadhana bhakti*. ISKCON—even Prabhupada—encouraged artificial following in submission even if it went against one’s conditioned tendencies (Prabhupada, 1970: 21).¹ Men went through the same austerities (Sudharma interview). Knott has written of the devotees’ “roles which, in society at large, have been commonly assigned to women … here adopted as a spiritual discipline by those of both sexes” (ibid: 88). The submissive role is seen as spiritually feminine, and willing to perform any austerity or sacrifice for the Lord’s sake. Following the regulative principles is an austerity, rising at 3.30 am is an austerity, and so on. Even beyond the *vaidhi-sadhana* stage Prabhupada had set the example of sacrifice, because for his personal interests he had not wanted to take *sannyasa* or come to America—after all, he had already attained an enjoyable situation as an elderly *sannyasi* spending his last years in the holiest place on earth for his *sampradaya*, Vrindavana. The *Bhagavad Gita* supplies the ultimate example, for Arjuna had not wanted to

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¹ Obedience was expected (or, at least, systematically argued for) according to the teaching on *vaidhi-sadhana bhakti*. This generally refers to the regulations recommended by Rupa Gosvami in his *Bhaktirasamritasindhu* and *Upadeshamrita*, but in the new American context Prabhupada’s specific instructions concerning missionary policies and aims were every bit as important as Rupa Gosvami’s concerning individual *sadhana*. And Prabhupada requested cooperation with temple authorities for the sake of the mission. However, the nexus of obedience, *vaidhi-sadhana bhakti*, Prabhupada’s urgent desires for his mission, and the emphasis of the leaders, could actually politicize anything Prabhupada said. I have observed that devotees who pointed out the distinctions discussed here might have faced ejection from any temple.
fight a fratricidal war at Kurukshetra, but he surrendered to the Lord’s will and fought. For the first devotees in New York, Prabhupada personally demonstrated how this negation of self was supposed to work, for he was the first to awaken hours before dawn, and even submitted symbolically to the ignorance of his disciples (addressing them as Prabhu—master) for the sake of the movement—for instance, in standing in line for access to the bathroom—which is no way to treat a guru. The “feminine” position taken by Shri Chaitanya in his *Shikshashtaka* recommends extreme humility and submission “even if He handles me roughly by his embrace…He is always my worshipful Lord, unconditionally” (see Appendix II). This sentiment guides the Gaudiya path even at the *vaidhi* stage, because the devotee is supposed to submit to the spiritual master’s instructions, or what is understood to be the spiritual master’s instructions. In this connection the reader will be reminded of the protesting disciple in Chapter Three who had married only because Prabhupada had wanted it.²

ISKCON devotees eventually learned the outer protocol fit for a guru in a ritual teaching known as Vaishnava etiquette. This etiquette is supposed to encompass all Vaishnavas but it seems it was not substantially extended to others, for the inaccessibility of Prabhupada after the initial period exacerbated the high-handed way in which his teachings and scriptural examples such as the *Shikshashtaka* were represented and directed to those with little agency within the organization. This created a situation in which the desire to please the *guru* could endure insults in a cost benefit analysis that beggars the imagination of outsiders, regardless of the daily ritual of mutual prostration in the assembly of devotees in which one recites the following verse. “I offer my respectful obeisance unto all the Vaishnava devotees of the Lord. They can fulfill the desires of everyone, just like desire trees, and they are full of compassion for the fallen souls.”

² The account of the disciple who married against his will can be found in Chapter Three under the subheading “Forget the stairs, take the elevator.”
The human desire trees were taught to be generous, and in their inexperience, they certainly were. Their testimonies in the annual Vyasa Puja book published on the birthday of the founder leave no doubt that even abusive leaders frequently went to great lengths to yield to the founder’s requests. The testimonies also confirm the perception that the sacrifices were worth the cost. However, although the way and the goal of this religion are theologically the same, in the lower stages the perceived disconnection between surrender and bliss can be very disconcerting. For many women, the pain of voluntary “austerities” in submitting to institutional abuse was alleviated by the opium of a promised utopia in the afterlife—yet when austerities and abuse are conflated, “there is little basis for feeling unjustly wronged” (Rochford, 2007: 121).

Prabhupada taught a religion of the heart, but its hierarchical aspects in the hands of immature leaders could be devastating. And we should also notice that the promise of bliss in an after life in a material “heavenly planet” or in a spiritual world beyond heaven shows that a generalized Hinduism was actually included in a thorough study of Prabhupada’s books, or followed in their wake in contact with the Hindu community, even though Prabhupada specifically emphasized only Shri Chaitanya’s doctrine that the way and the goal are the same.

**The Shoestring Approach to Institution Building Invites Abuse**

When in interviews American Hare Krishna devotees look back upon their cultic experience and use the phrase “blood, sweat, and tears” to describe the price their generation was willing to pay, they are not being merely rhetorical. We have already briefly told the story of Sulochana. In their efforts to spread the rays of the sankirtana “benediction moon”, many devotees labored for years or decades with no monetary compensation, and many have shed tears of sadness and frustration, but still affirm the importance of the sankirtana movement. In an emotional interview one woman reflected on her youth and her separation from her daughter brought about by sincere efforts to be a good disciple. “What’s the use of being a wife and
mother if you never get to see your husband and child? I didn’t want her to go to a public school…so OK, if Prabhupada wants, I will send her to [the] Dallas [residential school for children] (Shyamapriya 2009). Significantly, this woman still devotes much of her day to managing ISKCON’s Prison Ministry without monetary compensation, regardless of the tragedy of being separated from her loved ones in her youth.³ Understandably, the woman was torn apart by this, and the reader may wonder how the founder formulated his policies. A compelling answer is to be found in Prabhupada’s unshakeable faith in the order of his guru, impelled by an emergency mandate to establish the Gaudiya faith in the Western world by any and all means. He frequently used the phrase “somehow or other” to characterize his approach to institution building (Prabhupada, 1973). If one would simply start a Krishna conscious project, the Lord would help and somehow or other it would succeed. This policy had mixed results for all, especially in the realm of family life.

Like most Hindus of his generation, Prabhupada presumed that motherhood was the gold standard of women’s fulfillment, although he could not emphasize the generational dimension of Hindu spirituality in which the pitris, or forefathers, were honored and nourished, jati customs maintained, and women invested in their families by religiously fasting for the husband’s health and welfare, and serving his parents, who in the American context were somewhat likely to be inimical to Hare Krishna teaching. Realizing that the Bengali Hindu cultural matrix for a woman’s devotion to family was non-existent in America, Prabhupada instead promoted a streamlined version of devotion to the husband in which Krishna was the center of their lives, and the husband set an example of religious specialist knowledge, practice, and wisdom.

³ This devotee passed away as I was preparing for my dissertation defense. Her career exemplifies the sacrificial aspect of my cost benefit focus, for she chose to live in poverty and devote a large portion of her meager income to purchasing supplies for the Prison Ministry. Although in intense pain from pancreatic cancer, she continued her work for the Prison Ministry until only a few days before her departure.
Somehow, as we have explained in Chapter Three, the wife was supposed to be a devoted mother and wife, as well as a fully dedicated religious specialist like her husband. In its earlier years of publication Back to Godhead magazine represented this situation to the public as viable, before the results of its implementation were documented and understood. As unworkable as this situation was, it became psychologically devastating for most mothers because by the age of five, the children were expected to attend residential gurukulas. An interview from Hare Krishna Transformed reveals the frustrated love of a mother for her children when they came home from gurukula on vacation. In reality there was no “home” because the mother lived in a temple—she had to rent a hotel room for the night,

but her service to the temple came first. Only after she had chanted all her rounds without interruption and she had collected at least three hundred dollars did Kapila and I get to do anything. We usually would sit for six hours in the cold van parked outside a shopping mall and wait for her…most of the time we didn’t see how tired she really was and so, whining and complaining about how little attention we got, we sometimes drove her to tears (Rochford, 2007: 90).

We don’t know where the father of these children was. He might have been a young sannyasi, in India, or in another city working on an ISKCON project. If he was alive we cannot presume he was happy with the arrangement either.

I have chosen to highlight the problems faced by women in relation to abusive cultic authorities, but the story of Sulochana reveals that men were also abused. As he explained in his paper “The Guru Business” some authorities would (often successfully) attempt to separate a man from his wife if it suited their purposes, especially if the man was not supportive of their authority (Das, 1995). Such actions preceded Prabhupada’s passing; they were exacerbated by the lacuna he left, but reports of problems resulting from that lacuna are greatly exaggerated. The problems were written into ISKCON’s “genetic code” because anything written in Prabhupada’s
books or letters could become institutionalized by the leaders. The atmosphere of somehow-or-other gave the leaders a *carte blanche* to emphasize anything of their choosing.

“I Want My Daughters to have the Hearts of Bengali Mothers and the Determination of an English Officer.”

According to many of Prabhupada’s disciples, the founder’s teachings on the position of women were eventually misinterpreted by almost everyone, leading to unequal status throughout the movement. According to the misinterpretation theory, as Prabhupada retired from management issues to concentrate on translation, male renouncers became influential in 1974 so pervasively that chauvinistic attitudes were even internalized by the first cohort of the second generation, at a time when the country was moving away from the male dominance paradigm and many American parents were teaching their children that women were entitled to legal, economic, and political rights equal to men (Palmer, 1994: 30). But beginning in the 1990s devotee observers pointed out that in the earliest years, women took leading roles in the organization (Knott, 1999: 99-100). However, even in later years, strong women continued to lead in many areas, as Susan Palmer discovered in her research on new religious movements characterized by “sex polarity.” Strong women have always been an integral part of the Hare Krishna movement in America, but their story is seldom told.

Disciple Parvati Dasi personified Prabhupada’s combination of a Bengali mother’s concern, and—suitably for preachers expanding the rays of the “benediction moon”—the British officer’s stiff upper lip. She had served as a sort of ring leader for new women recruits, among her other duties, which included supervising the male *brahmacharis* “in a confident and authoritative manner” (Palmer, 40-41). However, although she had prior experience as an organizer and a business woman, she was equally if not more esteemed as a mother figure in her devotional role.
Prabhupada’s upbringing in Victorian era Bengal by the women of his family did not prepare him for modern American norms for women. Yet now under his direction mothers, highly valued in Hindu societies—at least in theory—become valorized in a new American context as a symbol of purity and inspiration for women and men following the Gaudiya path, for a chaste woman and mother is an essential link in the system of varnashrama dharma. Because of his training, Prabhupada would not entertain any notion other than that submissive, married motherhood was natural (Palmer, 25; Rochford, 2007: 57). This natural state was part of a world view in which pious men controlled their sensual impulses. Frequently quoting the ancient moralist and royal advisor Chanakya Pandit, Prabhupada taught that “an intelligent man” saw all women except his wife as mother, and this sentiment was appreciated by many women, attracted to the promise of a non-exploitive environment where they could be valued as spirit souls, not their bodies, by intelligent men (Dasi, 2002). This was supposed to be a benefit, not a cost.

The Mean Swami Syndrome

Before looking at the very real problems faced by other women, the kind of women supervised by Parvati, it should be noted that there seems to be a correlation between preexisting personal qualities and cultic experience, as suggested by Frederick Bird and William Reimer (Bird in Barker, 1983: 225). Because of their individual natures, no two cultists have an identical experience. Women who were personally more accustomed or resigned to male dominance prior to association with Prabhupada’s followers were not disturbed by unequal social roles quite as much as independent women, who defied the sannyasa hegemony—the “mean swami syndrome” (Palmer, 1994: 30, 37). But some women, although not as extroverted as Parvati, established their own spirituality of dwelling just by being themselves.
If you showed yourself as competent and confident from the very beginning, there was very little the men could say…the only resistance I ever encountered was that they wanted me to wear a sari while cooking in the kitchen, which I wasn’t accustomed to—I didn’t feel safe around fire with all that loose cloth. They were more concerned with the outward appearance of chastity according to a Bengali standard, than chaste consciousness, what to speak of my safety. It was like, if you can’t handle me wearing other chaste clothing, not a sari—if that’s not good enough—then you don’t want me. But they did, because I worked hard and fast, even though I did not submit to all of their demands. So I stayed and didn’t experience a lot of problems (Hill, 2009).

**The Kind and Loving Father**

Prabhupada’s position as the guru who delivered Krishna’s message like a mailman without changing it has always had immediate implications for the spirituality of dwelling, but in recent decades Prabhupada has become known by his followers as a founder of more than an institution. He is now considered the builder of “a house in which the whole world can live.”  

Many devotees interpret the saying as a liberal image that contains something for everyone, but we must point out that Prabhupada never strayed from certain standards. Therefore, at the textual level the house is not a work in progress, as is typically the case for native instead of imported religious cults. This can be troublesome for a liberal view of Prabhupada’s teachings because under no circumstances is the guru—even post mortem—to be challenged by a formally initiated disciple, and this inspires a spirituality of dwelling to be conservative of whatever the guru has said or alleged to have said.5

The only relief for loyal women who chafe against unbridled patriarchy has been to attribute it to another stream of influence—Prabhupada’s sannyasi disciples. By this reasoning there is little recognition that patriarchy is embedded in puranic norms. For instance, the author

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4 The image has become popular throughout the movement since the publication of Satsvarupa Gosvami’s condensed 1983 biography of Prabhupada, *He Built a House in Which the Whole World Can Live.*

5 There is one exceptional circumstance before initiation, when the prospective disciple is allowed to doubt anything at all. After that, doubt is considered an obstruction on the spiritual path.
of the following block quote ignores passages from Prabhupada’s books that portray women in a negative light, even though it is not difficult to find a plethora of references to women’s roles in these books that could have no place in modern America (Lorenz in Bryant, 2004: 122). On the other hand, there is also no recognition of the variety of women’s experiences we have indicated here. Indeed, “exceptionally active and intelligent women” were still joining the movement after 1974, but, presumably, in spite of misogyny as a cost benefit analysis. Taken as a whole, the teachings must have represented a Jamesian live wire option regardless of the problems in presentation outside of the Indian context (the so called spots on the moon) discussed in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, Jyotirmayi Devi Dasi’s observations do ring with authority because they are endorsed by so many women (Rochford, 2007: 116-120).

For most of the women who had not known the movement at the beginning and not met Srila Prabhupada personally, these detrimental psychological effects appeared without their being conscious of it because they did not know anything else and had no other frame of reference. Belittled in such a way, lots of women lost confidence in them selves and in their material and spiritual abilities, accepted being deprived of their human dignity and played the part that was expected from them, being brainless, ignorant, and unproductive. Exceptionally active and intelligent women, who were numerous in the beginning, no longer joined the movement, and women's conditions in our temples became subject to very bad press for our movement (Dasi, 2002).

The reader will note that Jyotirmayi Dasi considered Prabhupada’s kind example to be the most important factor in his teachings on gender relations, a theme echoed throughout both emic and etic literature on women in ISKCON (Knott in Bryant, 2004: 300-301). This example was far more lenient with women than his books, and provides the idea that Prabhupada not only treated women kindly, but equally (Palmer, 25; Knott, 1999: 103).

But, what about women’s relationships to their husbands? In this area too we find conflicting reports. A particularly moving portrayal of marital oppression is provided by the submissive wife of an ISKCON guru in a letter posted online, so that she could tell her story of abuse. At one point she finally broke with her husband and subsequently went back to school.
This woman had not been a book distributor. Instead, she was treated as a menial servant to her husband’s preaching career. After graduation she applied to and was accepted into the Claremont Theological Seminary in California. In this way, I could continue to cultivate my interest in preaching and also be a concerned and responsible parent…[My husband] had always told me it was not possible to preach and have a family at the same time. I was so determined to refute this notion of his that I did my senior thesis project researching married preachers who had made major contributions establishing religious movements while remaining faithful and responsible to their spouses and children (Devi Dasi, 2004).

This woman’s letter shows that it was not submission per se that she eventually rebelled against, it was the worst kind of abuse within the submission paradigm. There are still many women within the movement who endorse Prabhupada’s teachings on gender relations but feel that men have not lived up to their obligations to “protect” them materially or spiritually.

Yet it also seems that modern American standards continue to influence marital relations even in sex polarity cults. Consequently, some devotee women laugh at the very idea of submitting to their husband, usually on account of his lack of spiritual qualifications—in spite of the Lord’s instructions that a husband’s lack of qualifications should not be an issue (Prabhupada, 1970: 197). “Where could an American devotee woman find a qualified husband anyway?” (Bhumi, 2009). Economics have also impinged upon standards of an ideal “Vedic” past, especially as householders moved out of temples and got jobs because “in many of these marriages, the woman brought in more money—so the guy gets to make all the family decisions? No way” (Hill interview). In making a cost benefit analysis, many couples have abandoned stereotyped gender roles as they reintegrated with the wider culture, realizing that—at least for them at the present time—some of Prabhupada’s teachings are not viable in modern Kali Yuga America, although they may still entertain “the notion that a patriarchal society [in India’s ancient past] does not necessarily oppress women or treat them unfairly” (Susan interview; Krishna Kirti Das, 2008: 58).
Male Authority In the Here Below

Some women, while acknowledging abuses, had (and still have) a more detached view of male authority. Yadurani Devi Dasi, one of the most prominent disciples of either gender, counseled women to rise above their problems with the men by becoming “transparent instruments for Krishna’s will” because “every living being creates his [sic] own happiness and distress” and ultimately, devotee women “can use all situations to our advantage in becoming pure devotees.” Indeed, she asserted a philosophical point that serves as an explanation of karma to women, and a warning to men. “Who knows? A man who mistreated women in his last life may come back in this life as a mistreated woman” (Back to Godhead, 25.1:56). It is worth pointing out that Yadurani, after her husband took sannyasa, was one of the movement’s strongest women, and didn’t have to submit to men like other women did. Her advice to women can be supported by a variety of Hindu scriptures, especially Shri Chaitanya’s instruction to chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind. But many devotees, male or female, argue against using the scriptures to exploit others for personal gratification, because the same instruction to be humble applies just as well to a man. So what happened to the ideal of being seen as a mother by all men, not simply being addressed as mother?

Before proposing possible answers to this question, let us note the irony in the contention that the problems stem from the relinquishment of management by Prabhupada to his sannyasi disciples at a time when devotee “mothers” were getting married and becoming actual mothers. In established Hindu societies, it is somewhat rare to find renouncers so directly influencing the lives of women and children. But in America, patriarchal notions embedded in Indic scriptures take on a new life in the building of a philosophical edifice for the Society. Rochford’s account of women’s problems in Hare Krishna Transformed describes the motives of the male celibate leadership as missionary and economic, but also points to doctrinal implications for exclusive
male leadership in Peter Berger’s “cosmization of institutions”, a reiteration in the “‘here below’ [of] the actions of creation, sovereignty, or love that have their sacred prototypes ‘up above’” (Berger in Rochford, 2007: 143). For the male renouncers, “Feminist challenges to male authority in the ‘here below’ placed at risk the very foundations of Krishna consciousness.” (ibid). A conservative faction in ISKCON has even recently endorsed Rochford’s observation. “It is significant to understand that a culture expresses its ontological conclusions by its gender ethics” (Jivan Dasa in Rochford, ibid: 139). The result of this train of foundationalist thought can be understood in the following—God is male, this world is a reflection of the spiritual world where God reigns, so human men and women should submit—a mother submits. A woman who does not submit is an example of feminism, and like communism, Darwinism, and a host of other isms in conflict with Gaudiya Vaishnavism, feminism had (and in some circles, still has) negative prestige in the institution. At any rate, Gaudiya submission in the new American context was starkly ideological, with little in the way of cultural experience to temper its application.

Instead of submitting to a family structure integrated into the life of a local Hindu community and jati customs, with a generational component providing grandparents and other valuable resources for parents trying to raise children of their faith, Hare Krishna women submitted to a belief system in the context of institutional life dominated by male renouncers. Men did the same thing. This is another reason why we should not overlook the importance of belief for cultic religion, because the first generation of this textually based cult was heavily invested in beliefs, and tended to act on them without any other context than an extraordinary precedent of the introduction of a South Asian religion among Americans in great detail.

“You Have To Use Your Own Intelligence”

The gurukuli’s opinions about their parent’s actions in regard to their compliance with institutional authority might sound more like the perceptions of outsiders than cult participants.
In short, the generation that did not have the cultic experience of searching and beginning a spirituality of dwelling in Prabhupada’s teachings, but rather has always taken the teachings for granted, simply does not understand how so many mistakes were made. They emphasize individual responsibility that their parents’ generation did not exercise. Many also dispute the notion that Prabhupada made residential gurukula training compulsory—it was not “the order of the spiritual master.” Dhira Govinda Dasa (Dr. David Wolf), a trained professional in social work who counsels New Raman Reti devotees of both generations, confirms this contention because devotees have told him that when they consulted with Prabhupada he allowed them to make their own arrangements for their children’s education (personal communication).

Prabhupada’s many letter to disciples that would have shown that there were options regarding gurukula were not widely available in the earlier decades of the movement. The way the issue of gurukula was framed by the authorities (who had the responsibility for ever-increasing efforts to spread the mission without, as they thought, children underfoot) was confusing for parents, whose “instincts screamed at them not to leave their children at the school, but they did so, thinking that they had no choice if they were to be regarded as good devotees” (Wolf in Rochford, 2007: 328).

Regardless of the philosophical argument that “we are all female in relation to the Lord” (Knott, 93: 1999), the second generation devotees at New Raman Reti do not—for the most part—calculate their actions with reference to overriding authority, male or female, in the here below. At least we can say that they do not tend to submit as their parents did, and their constant refrain is “you have to use your own intelligence” (Mukunda, 2009). Given their experience of abuse, they tend to be dismissive of the idea of a learning curve that is cited by many of the first generation.
There is very little discussion by any cohort that Prabhupada also had a learning curve, even though a careful examination of the biographical material shows that he modified some of his policies in the eleven years of his missionary career post-1965.

Many *gurukulis* remain very angry, but feel they are now defending Prabhupada’s movement against leaders who are seen as “snakes” (Gurukuli-Shyama in YouTube). Before continuing, it should be noted that the ideas and policies of the leaders were more or less formed toward the beginning of Prabhupada’s learning curve, so it is not fair to claim that they fabricated *ex nihilo* all of their ideas about institutional governance. One non-initiated devotee of the first generation has allowed that the leaders, too, were only human, and stated that “given the emergency mood of Prabhupada, the sheer volume of information that he was trying to pass along, and the lack of experience of everyone concerned—because when had a Vaishnava *sampradaya* ever exported itself to the West—it seems inevitable that sincere efforts would produce many problems along with the success” (Martha, 2009). Some *gurukulis* agree with this assessment.

**How Could These Things Happen?**

The Hare Krishna movement is still reeling from a very troubled history I have shown here, and a common discussion among the devotees is a question about how this could happen to Shri Chaitanya’s *sankirtana* movement. Some ISKCON intellectuals have rounded upon the idea that the *sankirtana* movement injured itself. ISKCON gurus Tamal Krishna Gosvami and Krishnakshetra Dasa Brahmachari discuss “disquieting modalities” that *sankirtana* may take, “mission as warfare…it’s leadership scandalized, its [ISKCON’s] population decimated, and a whole generation of Krishna kids feeling forlorn as parents trooped off to fight battle after battle” (Gosvami in Bryant, 2004: 425). Rochford’s research tends to confirm this assessment among
the second generation, for in disgust, many gurukulis have likened their experience to the rhetoric of “acceptable casualties” used by the US military.

Regardless of Dhira Govinda’s observation that some parents refused to send their children to gurukula and Prabhupada did not insist, it still remains that he clearly wanted the gurukulas to be filled. In their own words, my interviews confirm the high esteem parents felt for Prabhupada as the primary reason they agreed to relinquish control of their children to the institution. Although most admit now that the gurukulas were not the solution to the problem of their children’s education, at the time it did seem workable because the public school system was not seen as a viable option. Dissatisfaction with mainstream schooling is common among cults and sects because they tend to see this schooling as supportive of the status quo, which in fact they are. Churches, the military, and mainstream educational facilities are institutions of socialization, and Prabhupada knew that if the children of his disciples attended regular schools they would learn contradictory ideas and values. Then, his prediction that the third generation of Gaudiya Vaishnavas in America would produce pure devotees might never come true.

Like his decision to leave New York for San Francisco instead of remaining to train the new devotees, Prabhupada’s gurukula instructions set his movement on a collision course with sorrow that has been solidly documented in Hare Krishna Transformed, an ethnography linking economics, missionary aims, and cultic doctrine with inexperience, excessive zeal, and unqualified—even criminally liable—individuals. This decision is also another clue to the unequal status of women after 1974, by which time several gurukulas in America and India were filled with the second generation. When a woman has little control over the lives of her children, we can say she has no agency at all, although it seems appropriate to apply the same observation
to devotee fathers as well. But when the modern American idea that young children belong with their mothers was denied, the mothers’ ultimate bargaining chip was lost.

By sending their children away for perhaps years at a time under conditions that included an element of duress, devotee mothers traded a large portion of their actual motherhood for symbolic motherhood. This transaction has produced a tragedy that has shaken the movement to its foundations.

The Gurukulis

The story of the second generation is complex because there were several cohorts with vastly different experiences. There were children who attended earlier *gurukulas* that were poorly managed, and many of these children were physically, sexually, and mentally abused. Other children attended *gurukulas* that were managed more carefully, and still others attend(ed) public or non-ISKCON private schools. Regardless of where they attended school or the nature of their experience, they have commonly agreed to be called *gurukulis*.

The Gurukula

As Prabhupada presented it, the system of *gurukula* education has its origin and purpose in the *varnashrama system* (“the beginning of actual human life”) meant to train the higher varnas, the *brahmins, kshatriyas, and vaishyas* (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1984: 27: 100-109). Prabhupada intended to do a better job of training his disciples’ children as *brahmins* than he was able to train his disciples as *brahmins*. The girls as well as the boys would also go to the *gurukula* (ibid: 118-119). At the *gurukula* the children were be trained in basics pertaining to worship, such as rising early, singing mantras, ritual cooking and ceremonies, scriptures (ibid: 40-41) and language arts, writing, and arithmetic. For the older children, there were other subjects such as Sanskrit, history, and geography (80-81). The most important learning was learning to be a devotee of Krishna, which would be aided by learning discipline and self-control.
(ibid: 65-74). The standards for teaching children in non-ISKCON schools was not appreciated. As ISKCON’s Minister of Education at the time, Jagadish Gosvami, wrote, “Do not pursue accreditation. Have faith that gurukula will become popular, not due to the government’s stamp of approval, but due to strong preaching about the necessity of gurukula as prescribed in Shrimad Bhagavatam, for saving the students from repeated birth and death” (ibid: 55). Not only have residential gurukulas not become popular, for reasons to be explained here, at the time of this writing there are none operating within the U.S.

**The Lawsuit**

In 2000 a class action suit was filed against ISKCON leaders, temples, and businesses seeking $400 million in damages for sexual, emotional, and physical abuse and exploitation that occurred at the hands of ISKCON personnel. Eventually the number of gurukuli signatories grew to 535, and the suit was settled without being tried in court. Many devotees argued that only the perpetrators should be sued and/or tried in court. But those who signed their name to the suit were determined to see justice done for them regardless of the injustice that would be done to innocents who had contributed in many ways to the establishment of these temples, including the Hindu community that was not involved in the scandals. $9.5 million was awarded in May 2005, with compensation to gurukulis ranging from $2, 500 to $50, 000, depending upon the severity of the abuse (Rochford, 2007: 95). Rochford has stated that the abuse was not common knowledge, and he found no evidence that Prabhupada knew of the sexual abuse (ibid: 25; 237).6

In its early days New Raman Reti did not avoid the scandals and the sorrows that have plagued the movement in America, for ironically, the best intentions of disciples who moved to North Florida for their children’s sake were defeated, once again, by the institution. An early

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6 Rochford (2007: 237) acknowledges that Prabhupada was aware of some of the physical abuse, of which he did not approve. “Physical punishment is never allowed” (Prabhupada in Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1984).
coordinator of the Office of Child Protection, set up by ISKCON after many gurukulis came forward with allegations of abuse, was himself accused of abusing children at a boy’s school on the property (David Wolf, personal communication). This did not prevent the community from growing, however, and the Vaishnava Girls Academy, founded in 1988, became known as an elite institution, drawing residential students from an international pool. The directors carefully screened all applicants with the proviso that their matriculation depended upon their sincere desire, not the desire of their parents or their parents’ guru. The Academy was staffed by women only, and no reports of sexual abuse have surfaced. The Academy was a vital link in the restoration of trust in the institution, but it has not proved sufficient to repair all of the damage.

Besides having trust betrayed by the direct abusers, trust in the authorities was damaged when perpetrators were transferred from one gurukula or temple to another even after multiple complaints were made. Cultic barriers were broken down in this tragedy because abused gurukulis have since been counseled by outsiders, a development unthinkable in the earlier years. Even then, ironically, ISKCON took a step in the church direction when prestigious religious groups such as the National Council of Churches and other organizations supported the defendants’ argument that religious real properties, enjoyed by many innocent people, should not be subject to forfeiture in the suit to pay child abuse damages (clickwalla.com 2003). However, this alliance could only serve to widen the generation gap because it brought gurukuli grievances into sharper focus. Many gurukulis now reject the institution, claiming that it operates like the Roman Catholic Church, and in its narrow interpretation of Prabhupada’s teachings, resembles the attitude of evangelical Christians (Annapurna, 2009).

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7 The ISKCON Office of Child Protection was started by David Wolf (Dhira Govinda) on March 1, 1998. Prior to that, two devotees involved with education “just took responsibility of cases (of abuse) that were reported.” One of these devotees was disciplined by the community (his case never went to court) when his involvement in abuse came to light in January 1998. See Wolf in Bryant, 2004: 221-243.
What Became of the *Gurukulis*?

The thoughts of the *gurukulis* have been meticulously documented by academic researchers and themselves. Even before the mass availability of personal computers and common access to the Internet, a *gurukuli* magazine publication, *As It Is: the Voice of the Second Generation*, provided a forum for disciples’ children to vent their sadness, frustration, and anger at negligent ISKCON managers and their parents who sent them to poorly managed *gurukulas*. The very title of the magazine, reflecting the title of Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, challenges their parents’ generation on basic issues of reality in Krishna consciousness. The range of topics in this publication provides a detailed understanding of a generation come to maturity looking back at their cultic experience. *As It Is* featured articles written by *gurukulis* explaining how to succeed in college, apply for a job, run a business, have a successful marriage, and even a career in the military—without losing the religion they were born with. The reader would recognize the insulation the writers must have experienced growing up, while at the same time, the writers’ (relatively) sophisticated understanding of Vedantic thought is palpable.

The magazine also provides music reviews and other news items from a religious point of view. This development might seem insignificant to outsiders, especially since Christian groups have been doing this since the 1960s, but there was nothing like this in the Hare Krishna movement prior to the 1990s—and the kids did it themselves. They showed that they could indeed live in American society on their own, but with no thanks to their elders.

The statement of purpose for *As It Is* includes “emphasizing the individual.” This is not the emphasis of personalistic Hinduism, for, unlike their parents’ generation prior to their involvement with the teachings, that was already understood—the *gurukulis* were born with it. The new emphasis on the individual is a reaction to previous institutional neglect that left almost everyone with painfully unfulfilled needs, for it was not as if, like Shri Chaitanya in his
Shikhshtaka, they were only in interested in the Lord’s “causeless devotional service, birth after birth.”

Beside the loving association of their parents in their childhood, gurukulis were also deprived of economic security. For this and other reasons many gurukulis still hold in open contempt older devotees who have done very little for their children economically and remain living in a modest circumstances, content with scant income and the mild weather of North Florida so that they can preach without taking too much time to make a living (Nimai interview). This way of life has been specifically criticized by some devotees of both generations as a cover for neglect of dependents (Devi Dasi, 2004). Sometimes contempt for “simple living” is even extended to sannyasis, although sannyasa is seen by many gurukulis as a legitimate way of life. It is really the lack of emphasis on personal responsibility that riles many gurukulis, a “cowardly” or “nonsensical” lack of individual achievement that has generated a passion to achieve more than their parents in conventional, instead of cultic, terms. Work in the world is the current spiritual standard for most gurukulis, not unworldly renunciation, but some must create their own level playing field with the rest of society.

A recurrent theme in As It Is and other publications such as ISKCON Communications Journal agrees with anti-cult literature that very often, cultic life does not prepare young people for work in “the real world.” For those educated in the insular atmosphere of some ISKCON schools, all manner of mundane social interactions must be learned before much can be achieved in the outer world (Dasa, 2001). Gopipriya, the gurukuli featured in Chapter Four, admitted that she had to learn a new set of social skills in relating to the outer world when she graduated from Alachua’s Vaishnava Girls Academy, which closed in 2005. For instance, she had no sense of how to dress when she matriculated at the University of Florida. Other gurukulis were
considered odd in their unconscious use of movement jargon (Rochford, 2007: 39). But the latest cohort of the second generation, with no choice in the Alachua area but to attend a public or non-ISKCON private school past the sixth grade, has a much different experience.

The most common educational option after the New Raman Reti day school (preschool to sixth grade) is the Alachua Learning Center (kindergarten to eighth grade) immediately adjacent to the temple property. The ALC is a public charter school founded in the 1990s by devotees to address the concerns of parents dissatisfied with the temple’s day school, but who didn’t want their children schooled outside of the community. The ALC provides a balance for parents concerned that their children would be socialized away from the cult in a regular public school, which presents a variety of options and functions as a “laboratory of transformation” (Berger, 1967: 159). One of its most attractive features is the all vegetarian cafeteria, although students are allowed to bring whatever they want for lunch. The vegetarian feature solves the biggest concern of the parents—that their children will go astray from their most fundamental family values. The ALC cafeteria even avoids serving grains and beans on Ekadashi, a day that occurs twice a month when Gaudiyas are supposed to fast from grains and beans.

As a public school the ALC does not teach religion, and the teachers—most of whom are New Raman Reti devotees—use only their American birth names while at work. This detail shows the students how their elders balance their devotional identities with work in the world. A quick glance at the number of Sanskrit names confirms that the majority of students are affiliated with New Raman Reti, but the unaffiliated minority, unknowingly, is helping to move the community in the church direction, because it provides an opportunity for the majority to experiment socially with the rest of American society in an atmosphere that meets the cult
halfway. They will blend with the rest of society for the rest of their lives, should they choose, and do not feel “anomic terror” because of a lack of highly specific social skills required for the minutia of adolescent society, such as the latest slang, fashion, or music (Berger, 1967: 103).

Officials at Alachua’s Santa Fe High School, which likely has the largest population of Hare Krishna students anywhere in America, report no special problems for these students. Unlike the first Hare Krishna students in public high schools in the 1970s and 1980s who were obviously at odds with their classmates in their “common culture” including clothing and hair styles, musical tastes, and vegetarian diet, and considered “strange” or “dangerous” because of their Hare Krishna identity (Rochford, 2007: 103), the greater variety of 21st century American society has blunted the edges of adolescent disapproval. The sheer variety of contemporary youth culture, and the greater familiarity with vegetarian diets, makes life at Santa Fe High School as ordinary for Hare Krishna students as anyone else. Their Hare Krishna identity is too subtle for the uninformed to detect. Although hundreds of families have sent their children to this school, a Santa Fe administrator wrote, “The only statement that I can make concerning any Hare Krishna students is that I didn't know that we had more than one student on campus” (Tommie Smith, personal communication). We must also note that high schools of the 21st century are more sophisticated compared to the high school days of the first generation, when many school librarians had never heard of the Bhagavad Gita. By contrast, a recent history class at Santa Fe, celebrating the diversity of American religious life, discussed such arcane topics as Hindu moksha. Not surprisingly, this is a popular class for New Raman Reti teens.

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8 The young Vaishnavas do not realize that they are a social experiment, because they are fully integrated into the wider youth culture of hip-hop, skateboards, and devotion to the University of Florida Gators. At one Alachua home students of the ALC took prasada while watching their team win the college football national championship for 2008. This shows an integration of the extraordinary with the ordinary in the mimetic aspect of prasada. For these children, prasada is not quite as magical, for they never knew a time when it was not customary to make a ritual offering to Krishna, and it seems to fit with football.
Commensality also tends to blur lines of distinction. Although blurred lines of distinction are helpful in the cult to church process, some parents are concerned that their children will marry outside the faith. Sometimes this happens, but notices in *As It Is* indicate that *gurukulis* have been marrying each other since at least the 1980s. Yet it is not altogether uncommon to see young couples of mixed faith taking *prasada* at the Sunday program, where anyone can see that the *gurukulis* are producing plenty of children. But the general trend is for the *gurukulis* to marry each other, and some observers have noted that the Hare Krishna people are very close knit—which helps to establish a spirituality of dwelling (Shreena Gandhi, personal communication). Two New Raman Reti *gurukulis* told me that they could not think of any married *gurukulis* in the community who were not married to other *gurukulis*.

Some first generation devotees are not comfortable with blurred lines of distinction and are still upset that their children, for the most part, are not interested in the life of a religious specialist, will not agree to chant sixteen rounds or commit to any regular temple or home puja, and with the exception of vegetarianism, do not feel obligated to follow the four regulative principles. The most pervasive standard is to follow any rule out of one’s own conviction, not obligation. Some *gurukulis* feel guilty about their “extracurricular” activities, but some do not, which they take to be a normal rite of passage for Americans. Even then, the *gurukulis* often retain a philosophical outlook on their experiences of growing up in late adolescence, and are prone to admit that it would be better to avoid experimenting too much with the wild side of life (Radhika, 2008).

**Competitive Options for the Third Generation**

When the New Raman Reti School principal recently retired, the program was thrown into a confused state and the school began to lose more students to the ALC, which has always been a competitive problem for the tuition based temple school. However, some parents are eager to
enroll their children in the school because it can provide religious training as well as improved academic curricula in line with the requirements of the state of Florida. The new administrators also realized the potential for expansion against the attractions of the adjacent ALC by instituting the “self-directed” Montessori method of education, and brought in Montessori trained devotee teachers. At roughly the same time, the ALC added kindergarten to their grade 1-8 program. Not to be outdone, the NRR School added a preschool named Bambini Bhavan, hoping to keep these students for grades 1-6. This educational one-upmanship integrated the Hare Krishna community into the network of American private school-corporation charity (that mainly goes to Christian schools) because the New Raman Reti School enrollment was subsidized for impoverished families through the Florida VPK (voluntary prekindergarten) program and the Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program (Children First, McKay Scholarships) which pays roughly 90% of tuition. This is a feature of the cult to church paradigm that Prabhupada would have endorsed with gusto, for he insisted that his teachings should have support from American society—although it is not likely that the participating corporations understand what sort of school they are supporting at New Raman Reti, which receives tuition for each qualified child out of a general fund. Prabhupada was against his disciples accepting any sort of government assistance, but programs such as Children First are privately funded, and indicate a certain level of trust among influential people in government while strengthening the cult by providing a cultic education.

Some devotees claim that increased enrollment in the New Raman Reti School is due to the greater identification of gurukulis with teachers who are also gurukulis, even though the recently retired first generation principal remains highly respected. Although positive developments for ISKCON education are counterintuitive for an abused generation that sued the
institution that abused them, they should not surprise researchers of new religious movements because they are the product of favorable circumstances that override negative considerations. The movement has a distinctive market niche with no competition in the North Florida area (or anywhere in America), cultic intermarriage, and the material circumstances listed in Chapter Four. And the New Raman Reti School has funding regulated by the Florida Department of Education Office of Independent Educational and Parental Choice, making enrollment feasible for the families that are impoverished.

**Bikinis and Saris**

“There are still expectations that those who attend, or have attended, *gurukula* will become super-human, Prahlada-like devotees” (Chaitanya Mangala, 1993).⁹ The source of these expectations could be none other than the founder, who expressed a firm conviction that his disciples’ children would far exceed their parents in Krishna consciousness. Recent research at New Raman Reti confirms that many of the first generation still try to find super-human qualities in the *gurukulis*. But the son of an ISKCON guru wrote, “One day we’ll be running around and swimming in shorts and bikinis, and the next day we’ll be at the Sunday temple program in *dhoris* and *saris* singing and dancing in the *kirtana*. No one had any idea something like this would happen, no one had any idea how to respond when it did, and it seems some still don’t know how to respond…” (Yudhisthira Das in Bryant, 2004: 350). Many of the first generation have been bewildered about the budding independence of their children since the days when Yudhisthira Das and his school mates experienced “this unbelievable clash between the ISKCON culture we grew up in and the larger world that we were now more or less free to enter” (ibid). Many disciples of Prabhupada still openly admit that they can’t understand why their children...

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⁹ Prahlada tolerated all offences against him by his demonic father, and is known as one of the greatest Vaishnavas of all time.
want to take advantage of their freedom to explore the wider world. Rochford found that many in the first generation were actually surprised that their children were frankly interested in mundane enjoyment when they attained their majority.

But like any group of young people, the *gurukulis* frequently find their elders to be absurd (Glenda, 2009). Historically, the generation gap at New Raman Reti reads like a replay of social themes from the 1960s. The following excerpts from a dramatic script featured in *As It Is* describe the common hopes of the *gurukulis* for détente with their parents’ generation, with a distinctive Hare Krishna twist.

In Scene One a president of an anonymous temple chastises a mixed gender group of teenage *gurukulis* for the simple crime of associating freely with the opposite sex, especially on temple property.

In Scene Two, “two *gurukulis*, not yet married but in a serious committed relationship, visit a rapidly growing devotee farm…their visit is the last stop on a trip across America in which they have been formally introducing each other to their family and friends. This was to be the most ‘spiritual’ stop on their journey…” They are soon approached by a board member who “forewarned them that their current unwed status was under scrutiny by the board and unacceptable in the community…from this advice they decided that it was best to leave only a few hours after their arrival.” We then learn that the farm was New Raman Reti.

“Flash back: Twenty-five years ago a similar group of young men and women with long hair, short dresses, and the like approached a temple and an elderly swami saw within them a small spark of faith and hope. He took them in and fanned those sparks into a great spiritual revolution.”
“Final Scene: The *gurukulis* stand up for—and are proud of—who they are. They unify and find power in solidarity. The older devotees lay aside their false expectations of the *gurukula* alumni and accept them for who they are” (Chaitanya Mangala, 1993).

Fifteen years later, some *gurukulis* at New Raman Reti still face opposition from their parents’ generation, but it is very significant that this skit does not blame Prabhupada—rather, it exalts him as a compassionate grandfather figure. This is a very common theme at New Raman Reti—Prabhupada was perfect, and all sources of sorrow and frustration are attributed to others. But one of the greatest frustrations for this youthful cohort in relation to the movement’s direction lies in something Prabhupada emphasized, the mission’s plans for expansion.

**The Old ISKCON**

In the 21st century, when American Hare Krishna devotees find something at fault in their local devotional community they commonly refer to old ISKCON, as in “that’s so old ISKCON.” The old ISKCON is seen everywhere—in lingering sexism, undemocratic decision making, fund raising, and missionary expansion. Obviously, if there is an old ISKCON there is also a new ISKCON, and they exist side by side but not in harmony. This is especially true when gender roles are at stake.

I recently witnessed a scene of social disjointedness at New Raman Reti’s Sunday program while standing in the *prasada* line. A controversy erupted when a group of first generation men and women affirmed the old ISKCON idea that women should not be temple administrators. A *gurukuli* woman who overheard this opinion turned and expressed her disgust so forcefully that the conversation quickly faded into whispers. Many first generation devotees treat the *gurukulis* gingerly, as if their participation in the community is not to be taken for granted.
As for the emphasis on the ascetic life, with the exception of young Gopal portrayed in Chapter Four, I haven’t found a single *gurukuli* who agrees with the old paradigm of ascetic life, and as for the atmosphere and policies at the temple, more than one *gurukuli* has told me things will automatically improve when their parents’ generation passes away.

The old paradigm also persists in the way the temple tries to finance its programs by “cultivating” the Indian community, which in turn, reflects on differing concepts of *sankirtana* in ISKCON, which has always meant more than congregational or street singing of the holy names. *Sankirtana* is a term that generally refers to the growth of the Krishna mission. Competing interpretations of the purpose of 21st century *sankirtana* divides the New Raman Reti community. Many of the first generation and almost all of the second generation interpret the goal of New Raman Reti to be the development and maintenance of strong family life. The other faction sees expansion into the greater society as its primary purpose. Recently, a prominent visiting devotee expressed dissatisfaction with what he perceived to be a lack of missionary fervor, calling the community “a suburb of Krishna consciousness.” But some parents of minor children take exception, even umbrage, at this designation, because they see the welfare of the young as the primary responsibility of the movement. As an abused *gurukuli*, now a father, told Rochford, “My involvement is now going to head in that direction [tending to the needs of the third generation]. I am still involved in *gurukuli* issues, but they [the first generation] have had their day as far as I am concerned” (Rochford, 2007: 50).

When this domestic conception of the community’s purpose was expressed at a recent board meeting, however, it was pointed out by the current GBC representative that many devotees chose to settle in the New Raman Reti community so they could “retire and preach.”

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10 This GBC representative is not Sesa Dasa, the representative we met in Chapter One, who is far more sympathetic to the *gurukuli* vision expressed at the board meeting.
A faction of the community’s older members want to focus on courting the mainstream with the use of billboards for outreach, and “Love Thy Neighbor” festivals, although so far the devotees outnumber the visitors at these festivals. Many devotees find “Love Thy Neighbor” impractical because the temple is located a half hour away from a fairly small city. Instead of trying to bring visitors to the temple, they feel that Krishna Lunch at the University of Florida provides all the outreach the community needs at this time. This group also feels that the wrongs of the past must be addressed by making the second and third generation secure in family life before any broad outreach campaign would make sense. For them, the emphasis on security is seen as a natural way to become Krishna conscious in a Gaudiya community—it is not a suburb of Krishna consciousness, “it is Krishna consciousness” (Kubja, 2009).

By contrast, the external preaching contingent sees the Hindus as a source of funding for ISKCON projects such as the Ratha Yatra festivals in Gainesville and Jacksonville or for new buildings needed for the growing community. To this end, the board of directors have determined to transform a Tulasi greenhouse into a guest reception office—or as one devotee quipped, a “Hindu kiss-ass office”—so that (mostly Hindu) visitors can immediately be sequestered, specially hosted, and “cultivated” for monetary contributions. It can easily be argued that Prabhupada encouraged the integration of the Hindu community with his mission by monetary means.

However, a gurukuli interviewee who is a carpenter maintains that the building is unsuited for anything but a greenhouse, “and besides, what about Tulasi?” His disgust at the neglect of the goddess “in the wood” telescopes the frustration of devotees who complain that the institution has never sufficiently cared about the life that already exists in their midst, including the sacred plant, and the sacredness of devotees who have given their entire life to the mission and the
children Krishna sent as surely as Bhaktisiddhanta sent the first disciples to Prabhupada (Nityananda, 2009). It is important to note that this devotee is not critical of the Hindu community, but merely expresses his conviction that the temple views the Hindus “only as walking check books.” He also wants to know why Hindus cannot sing before the temple deities in their own way without the supervision of temple authorities who insist that the singing should follow the standard Prabhupada demonstrated. He grants that the first generation is concerned with Prabhupada’s instruction to not change anything, but he points out that this generation often lacks a sense of balance in applying Prabhupada’s teachings. Although, in principle, he is not altogether supportive of feminism, he admits that he remembers the day when a woman—with plenty of common sense—did a fine job as president, several years ago. But the present leaders, he said,

only care about you when they need something, just like old ISKCON—never to see how you are doing. I’m building my own house now, I’m going to be here another thirty years. So what do I do if I have a few extra dollars? I spend it taking my kids to the movies. People put their money into things they care about, but the temple does not care about me so I don’t care about the temple.

Many feel that currently the temple community is a long way from meeting the needs of householders and their children. However, there have been several attempts to establish a Sunday school, and at present a Sunday school has operated for a few weeks. There is also a bhajan (singing of Sanskrit and Bengali religious songs) group for gurukulis on Wednesday night, that is well attended, but there is no instruction, and no youth program for older youths comparable to youth groups common in Christian and Jewish religious communities where teens can study and discuss together, take field trips, and do group projects for the benefit of the community. Many parents have expressed concern about this in my interviews with them, but seem overwhelmed by the prospect of organizing their own programs for the children, a stark contrast to the earlier
years when many devotees, following Prabhupada, would attempt any endeavor whether they were prepared for it or not. But the well prepared Hindu community has set an example that the Americans could follow, for they have organized children’s and teen’s religious programs all over the country.

Adult *gurukulis* have organized their own programs for younger cohorts of the second generation. For instance, the Vaishnava Youth Harinama Sankirtana Bus Tour organized by a New Raman Reti *gurukuli* couple, ISKCON Youth Ministry directors Manu Dasa and Jaya Radhe, has been a popular summer vacation option for Gaudiya youth since 1994 (VNN.org, 2003). The tour makes a pilgrimage to ISKCON temples as well as American places of interest such as Washington D.C., and Niagara Falls, just the right mix of religion and ordinary American culture. There are not enough seats on this bus to accommodate the number of applicants. Although the faction that has retired to preach does not oppose such programs, in general their interests are directed to other projects.

**A Second Generation Bottom Line**

Anyone who knows the gurukuli carpenter would say that he cares quite a bit about the temple, as he is there every Sunday and keeps his daughter in the New Raman Reti School. But he is so frustrated with the old but continuing sankirtana-as-war paradigm that he feels the local Christians care about their people more than the Hare Krishna temple cares about the Gaudiya Vaishnavas. He goes to board meetings to try to persuade the leaders to fashion the temple program after the needs of the children, for instance, in scheduling Bhagavad Gita lectures they could comprehend. But the lectures remain cerebral, and according to one devotee, “rigid” (Karunamayi interview). According to the carpenter, the board remains committed to expansion into the non-devotee ranks instead of caring for the devotees they already have. “They don’t understand that this is not a city temple in the 1970s” (Nityananda, 2009).
At least the ascetic-householder struggle has abated, but the principle of sacrificing the family for missionary expansion still lingers—only now, the institution has little sway over devotee’s lives, so the cost of participation has been deflated. The battle rages over what the institution should be. This indicates that the shoe is now on the other foot—instead of the institution using the community, we find the divided community using the institution.

“There won’t be a very happy story to tell until the third generation grows up. Then they will get it right, and I am talking about children’s education. Once they have got that all figured out, everything else will fall in place. The gurukula is the bottom line” (Nityananda, 2009).

**The Rise of the American Hare Krishna Woman**

Cults sometimes defy normative expectations that dissatisfaction inevitably produces defection. But the process of disorganization indicated in Chapter Three, a combination of economics and a tense relationship between the rank and file and management, led to opportunity for many women and the redress of wrongs to children. As Rochford noted, “…women and youths abused in the *gurukulas* successfully organized to pressure for change. Fragmented and weak, ISKCON’s authorities were forced to negotiate reforms rather than actively resist” (Rochford, 2007: 136). Additionally, men became increasingly disinterested in management, a situation that rewarded women who stepped forward to fill leadership roles (Rochford, 2007: 132). But these developments do not explain why, in the Hare Krishna movement and other new religious movements, “women who were neglected and abused chose not to leave their religious groups but to stay and fight the injustices” (ibid, 137). Many feminists have also taken a proactive stance in churches and established sects, rather than abandoning them. As we have already discussed, one strategy, employed by other Hare Krishna devotees too, is to find fault not with the teachings of the *sampradaya* or Prabhupada, but with the “leaders who occupy the middle level hierarchy such as ISKCON’s GBC” (ibid, 138). Rochford points
out that this allows for a crucial preservation of “Prabhupada’s integrity for both themselves and a new generation of women who have committed their lives to Prabhupada and his movement” (ibid 138). Rochford also found that women’s activism “helped save a failing organization as the reshaping of gender attitudes allowed women to take responsible positions in the midst of a labor crisis” (ibid, 138). In the light of the sad story of women’s disempowerment in relinquishing control over their lives and the lives of their children, I presume that the reshaping of gender roles and women’s activism can only be a good thing for the children of New Raman Reti.

**ISKCON vs. the Hare Krishna Movement**

Rochford generally conflates the institution (“a failing organization”) with the movement, but his terminology provides the opportunity to note the difference. We must question the loyalty to ISKCON of anyone who holds the GBC in contempt—and there are many who do this openly—even if they attend ISKCON programs regularly. To reiterate, there are many devotees who use the institution for their own spiritual purposes.

The *gurukulis*, especially, consider themselves part of the American Hare Krishna movement, but most retain deep reservations about the organizational apparatus established by the Bengali *sadhu* that they revere. This tendency is often passed down from older to younger *gurukulis* without much serious discussion; it is already becoming a meme only four decades after ISKCON’s inception. This makes the Hare Krishna religion look more like church religion, because people involved with church religion frequently do not identify with its institutional side, taking a utilitarian stance instead. Because Weber specified that sect religion (for our purposes, cult religion) is elective but church religion is inherited, the church that is forming sees the authority of the institution as optional. Not one *gurukuli* has indicated to me that ISKCON commands their unquestioned loyalty.
ISKCON has always inspired people who didn’t want to have a close relationship with it, and now its second generation knows how to play hard to get, for most of them are not getting initiated. Some have taken initiation from Narayana Maharaja, the elder spiritual cousin of their parents’ generation, who does not demand the recitation of sixteen rounds a day and instead will settle for eight, four, or even one. A few have taken initiation by ISKCON gurus who are Prabhupada’s disciples. Gurukulis are in demand to lead the kirtana especially at the Sunday program throughout America because the first generation realizes it will not have credibility with its offspring without their participation at the institutional level (Pavitra, 2007). A quick glance on Sunday will verify that the average age is in the child bearing years. In statistical terms, this is the lifeblood of the movement.

Gurukulis have served on New Raman Reti’s elected board, but so far have been unable to tip the decisions toward family considerations demanded by the devotee carpenter. However, they tend to take matters into their own hands anyway. Beside the sponsoring of a Mother’s Day Sunday program—a “holiday” Prabhupada, in all likelihood, never heard of—the gurukulis recently staged a Valentines Day party by invitation only, deliberately excluding their parents’ generation. Such details may seem trivial to our thesis but they are very significant because given everything we know about Prabhupada’s views of human sexuality and ordinary love according to his writings and policies from 1966 to 1977, it is likely he would be disappointed by celebrations of Valentine’s Day among the generation that is supposed to attain a higher state of devotional purity than his disciples. But, Prabhupada couldn’t control the various American appropriations of his teachings even during his lifetime.

The calmness with which the gurukulis join their Krishna consciousness with the ordinary indicates both the present and the immediate future of spiritual dwelling for Prabhupada’s
movement in the New Raman Reti community, at least where the second generation is concerned. An important question for the remainder of this study will return us to the issue initiated at the end of Chapter Two—can the fusion of ordinary American culture with an extraordinary religious cult result in greater market share? But we will also be concerned with internal conversion, which is a process that must endure if a spirituality of dwelling is to be achieved.
CHAPTER 7
THE CULTIC CHILD IS THE FATHER OF THE CULT TO CHURCH MAN

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die
The Child is father of the Man;
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.
(William Wordsworth, 1802)

At the beginning of this work I stated that I would try to look at the hopes of the Hare Krishna movement in America. So it might seem strange that I have focused so much on trauma, but this is not antithetical to my intent because no real portrait of a social movement is possible without a frank treatment of its struggles. These struggles are meaningful for a theoretical apparatus that emphasizes cost benefit analysis and seeks to understand the search for a spirituality of dwelling, because cost benefit analysis and investment in spiritual dwelling represent sacrifice and affirm the common wisdom that people tend to care for what they have paid for. Of course, many Hare Krishna participants have decided they do not want to pay any more and are willing to let their cultic investments deteriorate—they no longer practice any of it, nor even believe any of it. But because we are focusing on hopes—the wish that their days be “bound each to each by natural piety”—any “post-Hare Krishna” lives (if that is really possible) are not important here. Instead, in the final chapter I conclude my discussion of a religious cult by focusing on cognitive adjustments to, instead of rejection of, Prabhupada’s teachings. It is cognitive adjustments that add one more (sub) category to the three categories of cultural continuity—commensality, discursive religion, and ordinary religion—we have considered so far, that bring this discussion of the merging of the ordinary and the extraordinary in the quest for a spirituality of dwelling, to its conclusion.
Human Cognition and the Krishna Cult to Church Paradigm as Process

It is in the nature of human cognition—a mental process—that religions tend to add the voices and prosaic experiences of the ordinary practitioner to the pronouncements and ecstasies of extraordinary religious adepts, or those trying to follow the path of the adepts. This phenomenon is itself entirely ordinary across the religious spectrum. “Even if prophets were the main source of new religious information, that information would still require non-prophets’ minds to turn it into some particular form of religion” (Boyer in Ketola, 2008: 20). Though this research in the cognitive science of religion does not explain why religious information offered by adepts does not constitute “a particular form of religion” (especially in this case the imported, fully developed Hare Krishna religion of Ketola’s study), for our purposes, Pascal Boyers’ statement about prophets and non-prophets describes an essential aspect of the cult to church process begun when Prabhupada stepped off the Jaladuta in 1965. “Once the founder articulates the group’s teachings and practices, they exist independently of him/her and can and do develop a life of their own” (Melton in Miller, 1991: 8).

At the very least, a process of adjustment (to the teachings by its students, and of the teachings to the host environment) is necessary because the social, historical, and psychological gulf between Prabhupada and America was immense. This process is at odds with the notion and image of transplantation. “In cultural transmission, one more often meets transformations and mutations than faithful reproductions” (ibid). Unless we presume that religion is only about what is in scripture or given by a preceptor, it is precisely because religion cannot be transplanted from India to America that it has an excellent chance, instead, to flourish as a recent addition to the complex entity that we call—for lack of a better word—Hinduism. If there is an essence to

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Hinduism, it would have to include the proliferation of new forms it is always giving birth to, so that Durkheim’s old gods never die; they just reincarnate according to time, place, and circumstance. The tendency for Hinduism in general to do this even in America expands its potential market share, and there is every reason to believe that the Gaudiya Vaishnava form of Hinduism has the same trait. And, the merging of the extraordinary with the ordinary cannot be avoided because of the cognitive process of reinterpreting the experience, significance, or relevance of the initial revelatory experience, which for a cultist is like Wordsworth’s natural rainbow in the sky.

In social terms, beside the rise of householder life, it is the variety of religious expression that is turning Prabhupada’s cult into a church as the first disciples go their own ways without the oversight of temple authorities, as the second generation—to an even greater degree—picks and chooses among Prabhupada’s teachings to suit itself, and as the third generation (and the latest group of the second generation born to the second wave of the first generation) takes its religious beliefs and practices for granted, like many of the Hindu pilgrims in their midst.

These are all expansive elements of the cult to church process not preferred in Prabhupada’s writings, yet they extend his teachings anyway to a broader public. Gradually, the movement is becoming aware of the benefits of “watering down” that Prabhupada did not want. As one might imagine, just as the term cult is rejected by the movement (but was not rejected by not its founder), American devotees do not phrase the current representation as a dilution of the teachings. But the prominent devotee who called New Raman Reti a suburb of Krishna consciousness nevertheless understands the expansive nature of cultural transformation, for in a recent lecture at the Alachua temple he reaffirmed the universal relevance of Krishna devotion at any level of realization and practice. Some devotees have suggested that it is American culture
that is diluted by the addition of pure Krishna consciousness, but at any rate “a house in which the whole world can live” is a concept taken quite seriously by New Raman Reti devotees. This chapter seeks to understand the meaning of the world house trope for North Florida in the 21st century, for the Gaudiya tradition has deep resources for the construction and maintenance of this house.

The First Generation Also Grows Up

I stated in Chapter Three that becoming a devotee of Krishna was a new birth for the first generation of Americans to experience this religion, and I have focused on the novelty of ideas and how they have influenced religious practice and lifestyle. Unfortunately for a clear picture of the social development of a religious cult, the social sciences typically are not interested in cultic life as a new birth. In *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism*, Melton, for instance, keeping the subjectivity of a new beginning at arm’s length, does not emphasize the concept of a spirituality of dwelling and the individual navigation of a brand new world. In emphasizing instead that cultists are engaging in transitional behavior in a psychologically positive “genuine religious atmosphere” leading back to their original non-cultic orientation, Melton and similar researchers downplay the ideational element important to Weber that we have emphasized since Chapter One, even going so far to suggest that “the [genuine] experience is so heartening that the name of the group [what to speak of its ideas] hardly seems relevant” (Melton, 1982: 33). We must pause here to acknowledge that the entire cultic experience as a single rite of passage, instead of containing a number of rites of passage of its own, is a fair research perspective. But we have chosen instead to take cultic ideas seriously as a cornerstone of the cult to church process, and prefer a more detailed approach, that, after all, is more suitable to an understanding of the founder’s hopes and what became of them.
In Melton’s cultic scenario, the new birth takes place after one has experienced cultic life (Melton, 1982: 46), “left the cult”, and reintegration with society, and while that is a fascinating perspective that could—as Melton, to his credit, has pointed out—show how cults prepare young people for their future life in the wider society (ibid, 59), it does not explore how cultists experience the childhood of their new life given to them by their spiritual parent such as a guru or other authoritative figure. Nevertheless, Melton’s insights about the first generation of new religious movements provide useful concepts for an inquiry into the still nascent phase of the Hare Krishna movement. “During the first generation, members are most radical in their behavior, strongest in their attachment to the faith, (there is no stronger member of any group than a recent convert), and most changeable…” (ibid, 17; italics mine).

It is not the Gaudiya doctrine in this case that has changed; what has changed is the relationship of the American devotees to Gaudiya doctrine. Many have stuck with this doctrine, physically, psychologically, and socially maturing throughout decades of adjustment to a radically different vision of reality in America. Adjustment is necessary because as Aldous Huxley suggested in The Doors of Perception—required reading for the first generation prior to their cultic life—everything is seen in a new light subsequent to the revelatory experience. If people require adjustment after a drug induced experience, it is little wonder that the myriad items of Prabhupada’s cult may be difficult to place in perspective. However, it would be a mistake to presume that the light of revelation does not vary. Ketola brings this play of shifting light into focus for the Hare Krishna movement with a term coined by cognitive scientist Justin L. Barrett, “theological correctness.” Religious people must balance a first order, “abstract” and doctrinal (or as some might see it, doctrinaire) literal understanding with a second order, intuitive and practical understanding suited to everyday life. Conceptually, basic theological correctness
reigns, but in practice we see “a rapid generation of inferences” (Ketola, 28, 15). At the very least, these inferences are necessary to separate out what must be taken literally and what not, and in this case, the necessity is pressing because Prabhupada did not dwell on the subject of literal vs. inferential understanding. Instead, he emphasized that devotees should use their common sense, and if they didn’t have common sense, they should ask someone who does. Since orthopraxy is derived from orthodoxy in the way that Prabhupada delivered his teachings, at issue in the political aspect of theological correctness for the Hare Krishna movement in America, for instance, would be the insistence by some devotees that vows must be adhered to strictly in all circumstances. For these devotees, as part of the contract of initiation, the necessity of chanting sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra is only common sense; arguments to the contrary are only nonsense. But to other devotees, common sense dictates that they cannot try to do more than they are able, initiated, or not.

The gurukulis frequently complain that their parents often lacked common sense, but it is difficult to see how common sense could be applied to the sheer volume and variety of cultic items of belief and practice new to the first generation. To make matters even more complicated, as Thomas J. Hopkins has pointed out, “a careful search of the cumulative records [of Prabhupada’s oeuvre]—an activity at which ISKCON’s various factions have been very adept—can usually turn up something to prove almost any point” (Hopkins in Dwyer, 2007: 186). The reader will probably have noticed that in this respect, Prabhupada’s legacy resembles the rest of Hinduism in its sheer range of possible interpretations.

The Hare Krishna movement in America has had a particularly challenging relationship to common sense, for when have Americans believed traditional Hindu ideas about plants as goddesses, or icons that are considered actually (not only symbolically) God, ideas that—
regardless of how they sound to non-believers—still require their own application of “common
sense”?

I will show in this final chapter that although common sense is a questionable term in the
first generation of an extremely cultic new religious movement, personal sense, or a highly
personal understanding of the world in relation to theologically correct teachings, automatically
devlops. I have described theological correctness sufficiently in previous chapters, and here we
will look at the generation of inferences critical to our thesis because, as we have mentioned,
Prabhupada begged his disciples not to change what he had given them.

The Personality—Not the Impersonality—of Godhead

Before discussing inferential developments, we must indicate a bedrock concept that has
not changed and seems impervious to inferences. Both American generations have a complex
relationship with literalism, a topic with deep roots in Hinduism. Modern Vaishnavas, whether
Hindu or American, are prone to take exception to the idea that the importance of Krishna is
mostly in only symbolic terms; in other words, a picture of Krishna or his holy name is not a
symbol of his personal self, but of something else. We have already delineated Gaudiya
personalism, but it is worth reiterating here because its literal interpretation of scripture is a
double edged sword for the effort to become a church in America. It makes for a highly
distinctive market niche yet at the same time, as a psychiatrist said who hospitalized a Hare
Krishna devotee he considered mentally unstable on account of his cultic beliefs, “You believe in
a personal God? Why are you so insecure? The idea of a personal God went out seven hundred
years ago” (Wheeler, 1985: 53).

But without accepting a literal interpretation of the first person objective pronoun *mam*, a
word Krishna uses to indicate himself as he is seated on Arjuna’s chariot, all kinds of
Vaishnavism lack their ultimate basis (*Bhagavad Gita*, 6.47). Symbolic interpretations in
Vaishnava teachings, then, have been rather spare in comparison to non-Vaishnava teachings about a personal Krishna as a symbol of something else, for instance undifferentiated Brahman or an abstraction such as human potential. So in Vaishnavism, what is “unborn within” the personal Krishna would be more of the same—personal Krishna—and what is “beyond” Krishna would be Govardhana Hill, a cow, or wherever he is sitting, standing, or flying on his carrier Garuda. No researcher doubts that one of Prabhupada’s major achievements was the singlehanded establishment of Vaishnava personalism among Americans not of Hindu parentage, who then spread this religious view, country by country, around the world to non-Hindus.

My interviews at New Raman Reti reveal that among the Americans not of Indian parentage, four decades later the personal conception of Krishna has not been compromised by symbolic interpretations. In other words, the personal conception is still a living, forced, and momentous Jamesian option as discussed in Chapter Three. Along with the belief in the Supreme Personality of Godhead came belief in all the Hindu gods as Krishna’s servants and their various activities; karma; reincarnation; the modes of nature; all the most basic teachings. In this respect literalism defines the Hare Krishna religion in America. Still, literalism is yielding to nuance in many categories introduced by Prabhupada because the utility principle is subject to the exigencies of time, place, and circumstance.

Ordinary Considerations Nuance Literalism

Material factors such as living arrangements, as pointed out in Chapter Four, define power relationships which in turn have cognitive consequences. One of the most obvious and basic influence upon devotee’s inferences goes back to the 26 2nd Ave. center established in 1966,

2 Some images in Vaishnava scriptures are obviously allegorical, such as the image of the human body as a city of nine gates from which the conditioned souls escapes at the time of death. The problem most Vaishnavas have with mythical treatments of Krishna or Vishnu is that these may imply that the literal is not as important as another interpretation, whatever that may be. This is more or less unacceptable, but many Vaishnavas would grant that there could still be many valences to the scriptures.
Matchless Gifts, which defined social relationships with “Swamiji” that could remain vague before he had his own place and lived by the kindness of friends. But Matchless Gifts brought relationships with the Swami into sharper focus, and everyone had to decide what level of practice would suit their individuality. This necessity immediately split the community into inner and outer circle in relation to the institution (but not necessarily in the minds of all these cultists). Prabhupada’s independence from earlier associates institutionalized theologically correct standards of doctrine and behavior so that the fledgling cultists were obliged to make decisive choices regarding the teachings. If they wanted to associate with him personally they had to conform to a certain standard; for instance he would not allow drugs (although he tolerated drugged people) in his presence (Wheeler, 1985: 154) and was unwelcome to men who arrived at his residence with their girlfriends apparently to impress them with a guru (Gosvami, 1980: 127). He also insisted on chanting the Hare Krishna mantra only for purely spiritual reasons, a position that was not attractive to certain of the new American participants, as well as Hindus. Also, some doctrinal positions such as the oneness of Shankara could make him very angry (Gosvami, 1980: 232; Wheeler, 1985: 50). Consequently, lifestyle and ideas could draw a line between him and the rest of the world; after all he now had disciples to filter all sorts of deviations out of his life so he could concentrate on his Society and his translations.

The many hagiographies prepared by Prabhupada’s disciples indicate that his teachings by book and example were the origin of the Hare Krishna version of caste in America, which

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3 Such things could be contentious due to individuals differing in their evaluation of costs and benefits. Support for the inner-outer paradigm comes from Prabhupada. When a disciple told Prabhupada that devotees who did not have his association could get it through his books, Prabhupada replied, “You should ask them first if they’re chanting their sixteen rounds. Unless someone follows the basic principles, where is there any question of entering into a deeper relationship?” But the antithesis to this also comes from Prabhupada. “Tamal [Krishna Gosvami—Thomas Herzog] had asked, ‘What is more important, sankirtana, rounds, devotional service, or our health?’” Prabhupada answered. ‘The highest principle is to save yourself’” (Das, 68: 2003). The complexity of Prabhupada’s total presentation was a boon to the multiplication of competing inferences.
relegates Bhakta Tom, from Chapter Four, to a low status. As explained in Chapter Four, social
ranking has little to do with occupation and nothing to do with birth in Prabhupada’s teachings.
Instead, fidelity to these teachings and following of lifestyle rules keep some devotees separated
from others. When Prabhupada started to lay down these rules, a new coterie of devotees formed.
As Satsvarupa Gosvami observed, “It was a kind of changing of the guard” (Gosvami, 1980:
153-157; 180-181). Members of the old guard may or may not have accepted the Swami’s
pronouncements as _shabda brahman_, which in America includes authoritative pronouncements
by the guru to be accepted as good as the Vedas—because in this situation the guru was the sole
embodiment of an ancient “Vedic” tradition. For those who accepted whatever Prabhupada told
them, he was, in a sense, as authoritative as God (Wheeler, 1985: 57). This development
naturally made for an intense social atmosphere that brought personal relations in line with the
teachings in one way or another. But those who were not initiated, especially if they had no
desire to be initiated, had no contract of initiation with the _sampradaya_, and could do as they
wished with a more clear conscience.

It is not likely that many devotees who did not move into a temple or an _ashrama_ ever
seriously tried to implement Rupa Gosvami’s recommendation in the _Upadeshamrita_ to limit
their association to Vaishnavas only. But for some this came quite naturally because people tend
to insult cults, even unintentionally. This can be very unpleasant for a cultist. But now, most
adult devotees of both generations at New Raman Reti during my research there relate to
Prabhupada’s teachings in a manner reminiscent of the days preceding Matcheless Gifts, before a
universal ethic took hold among the followers. In the present scenario, most devotees in North
Florida find restricted association to be impractical, or even undesirable. In general they have

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4 The Krishna conscious teaching automatically qualifies as _shabda brahman_ because persons who follow it
“transcend the limit of _shabda brahman_, or the range of the Vedas and Upanishads” (Prabhupada, 1989: 141).
become more skilled in mixing with the general public (Schweig, 2006). For the most part, Prabhupada’s strong statements about how spiritual life should proceed are generally not rejected, but as pointed out in Chapter Three and Chapter Six, their literal significance is commonly negotiated on an individual basis. At the time of this writing, the “caste divisions” that result from these negotiations remain far more important among the first than the second generation. Anyone who wishes to follow Prabhupada literally must contend with the injunction to respect within one’s mind someone who chants Hare Krishna without strict following, but not to intimately associate with such a person (Prabhupada, 1975: 50). But for most gurukulis, social ostracism based on practice is almost unthinkable, because the communitas experience of an abused generation tends to break down the universal ethic that contributed to their misery. It is difficult to hold meat eating against someone, for instance, who has shown more kindness and understanding than a vegetarian cultist who has molested you. In the new ethic of responsibility, deficits in kindness and consideration—what to speak of felonious crimes perpetrated on others, especially children—are far more significant than moral lapses that do not directly affect others.

The new ethic of responsibility dissolves consciousness of us and them—devotees and “non-devotees”—boundaries that tend to force the Bergerian heresy. Most people will not be attracted to cult religion if it is about such clear demarcations, for after all, who wants to give up Sunday dinner at Grandma’s for religious purposes? In the newer ethic one can interpret Prabhupada’s teachings in a more inclusive, church oriented manner that emphasizes the relatedness of all life as devotees of Krishna, whether or not these life forms recognize their eternal status as devotees of Krishna (Prabhupada, 1989: 19). This emphasis facilitates the inference that the concept of restricted association must be taken in stride, otherwise one cannot be educated in non-Vaishnava institutions or work in the world. Hare Krishna people in America
realize, for instance, that they can remain vegetarian, and although this might be awkward socially, most people will accommodate them. As soon as one infers that the concept of restricted association is negotiable, the whole world becomes filled, on the one hand, with opportunity to “leave” Krishna consciousness for those inclined to do so, or, on the other hand, to experiment with its boundaries—or perhaps to discover it has very few boundaries.

Cost Benefit Analysis in the Utility Principle

In time the utility principle—what could be useful to one’s or other’s spiritual advancement and what might be considered an obstacle—became politicized with the rapid institutionalization of the movement. For instance, many new devotees were advised by temple authorities to quit school because finishing school was useful, supposedly, neither to the new devotee’s *sadhana* nor to the mission, or at least not as useful. However, by the late 1970’s many devotees had returned to school because they deemed it useful to their own Krishna consciousness, which included providing for their family. When these devotees began to ignore the advice of the temple president or GBC representative, a process was set in motion that emphasized personal responsibility (or irresponsibility, as some would see it), even in the most basic aspects of their sadhana including their contract to follow the four regulative principles and chant sixteen rounds. For many, if not most, what was once seen as a standard is now seen as a goal, if not for this life, in some future life.

This stance is problematic in regard to contractual initiation, but, as one devotee put it, “‘Better to throw things overboard to save the ship’ (Mahajana interview). And how could one spend so much time with religious lectures, *japa*, and *puja*, and make a living too? For most, the typical answer to this question—make time for these spiritual practices—no longer makes sense in the householder context, for the householders understand where the time would inevitably come from—quality time with family. This is an issue throughout the movement, not just in New
Raman Reti (Lipner, 1994). But any parent who would yield this time of day has surrendered one of the most basic aspects of personal power imaginable, and the tragic history of forfeiting responsibility and repressing natural love for one’s children has made the movement hypersensitive to such issues. Some effort has been made to accommodate householders’ needs to the ritual schedule at the New Raman Reti temple, and for some, daily attendance at the temple remains an important aspect of their personal spirituality of dwelling (Rochford, 2007: 209). But very little intrusion upon householders’ personal life is possible because of financial independence. “Such communities [New Raman Reti and three other, smaller North American rural ‘householder communities’] were appealing precisely because they provided a safeguard against the influence and intrusions of ISKCON’s leadership” (Rochford, 2007: 167; 178).

The Inevitability of Ordinary Love, And the Ashrama within Themselves

We have discussed the spirituality of dwelling as an aspect of culture that develops over time in the context of community and the examples of family elders, as in the case of the Hindu community of devotees. However, in the absence of a mimetic foundation for a spirituality of dwelling, a vital element in the process of its development began for the first generation of Americans when it accepted the inevitability, validity, and necessity, of ordinary love. This is a critical point for there is no denying that for this tradition as Prabhupada represented it, ordinary love is supposed to be legitimized by an ascetic standard, but there is some confusion in

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5 Because the temple pujas are over by 7.30 am, one devotee told Rochford, “In most temples the morning program goes until 8.30 or 9 o’clock in the morning. That in and of itself is prohibitive for almost everybody. Here…the temple program is over every morning at 7.30…You could certainly go to the whole morning program and be at work at eight.” What this devotee does not mention is that it still requires about three hours a day for this program, and at New Raman Reti the Bhagavatam class is not finished until 8.30-9.00 am. So even if the morning lecture is skipped, householders would still have to strictly account for every minute of their day, and have very little time for family. Therefore, the ascetic emphasis even in householder life cannot be avoided for anyone who strictly follows Prabhupada’s program, regardless of this devotee’s claim that his temple has a “morning program more in harmony with people’s lives.” And as a gurukuli pointed out, most strict attendees at the earlier part of the morning program are older devotees without jobs, many of whom now live off of their inheritances, without any obligations to make a living. He asks, “How practical is that?”
representations of this standard. For instance, Prabhupada disciple Swami B.V. Tripurari continues the mood of his guru in claiming that chanting the Hare Krishna mantra “is not concerned with world denying asceticism”, even though the chief exemplar of this chanting has demonstrated and recommended an ascetic standard in his Shikshashtaka (Tripurari, 1993: 133). Chaitanya’s sentiments are explicitly uninterested in ordinary love for a spouse or family life.

For many members of the first generation, Tripurari’s confusing rhetoric must be set aside in the development of an inference requiring another kind of adjustment—a frank acceptance of their ordinary status. Cultists frequently see themselves as extraordinary characters in the unfolding of history—which, by the definition of cult, in one sense they are—so an inference of the sort discussed above is quite momentous and traumatic whether or not these cultists consciously reflect on this. Prabhupada’s disciples were charged with representing their guru, who was charged with representing Bhaktisiddhanta. This line of gurus and disciples goes back to the creation of the universe and is an historical obligation that is consciously reflected upon (Annapurna, 2009). This reflection makes the entire world “the locus of cosmic struggles that only the initiated [in a general sense] can understand and deal with effectively” (Melton, 1982: 37).

In the light of this historical consciousness so typical of cults, the understanding that ordinary love is acceptable and even important is one of the most important decisions of cultic life in the Hare Krishna movement, because it is a personal admission that the practitioner probably does not have what it takes to attain advanced cultic goals in this life, if the

\[\text{Shikshashtaka}\] values are as important as we have portrayed them here—the intense greed

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\(^6\) Tripurari adapts Georg Fuerstein’s “body positive spirituality” for the Gaudiya vision of erotic love in a spiritual world composed of \[\text{sat chit ananda}\]. (6) This allows him to claim that Gaudiya \[\text{sadhana}\] is not ascetic because it leads to this personal, spiritual world where people \[\text{are}\], instead of \[\text{have}\], their bodies, and enjoy eternally. There is no recognition by Tripurari that \[\text{vaidhi sadhana bhakti}\] as it was presented in America is repressive of ordinary impulses. Fuerstein would not recognize Tripurari’s adaptation.
discussed in Chapter Three. Such a cost benefit analysis works against the pristine expectations of a cult or a sect, but reinforces the more democratic values of a church, and helps to establish a spirituality of dwelling for ordinary people instead of for adepts. In other words, while a spirituality of searching as portrayed in the Shikshashtaka (see Appendix II) and intense greed for spiritual experience are compatible, a spirituality of dwelling includes and embraces ordinary love while (possibly) aspiring to intense greed for spiritual experience, if it is not already present. But the denial of ordinary love has not had the intended result—to increase the mission—because, like the teachings on women, this denial has alienated many devotees (Yadu Vendu Dasa in As It Is, 1993). My interviews with New Raman Reti devotees indicate that, after having settled into a spirituality of dwelling and ordinary love, a feeling of excitement about cultic historical consciousness tends to reemerge as a major component in the Krishna conscious ethic of responsibility. Proselytizing may be put on the back burner, but it is not taken off of the stove.

The second generation, for the most part uninitiated, has always felt more free to embrace its ordinary side without restraint precisely because most of these devotees do not have a contract of initiation with the sampradaya, although for some the extraordinary teaching of asceticism still manages to inspire feelings of guilt or shame (Nitai, 2008). Gurukulis frequently ascribe the feelings of guilt and shame to the Christianity of their parents’ rearing, instead of their parents’ sincere effort to follow their spiritual master (Gopi Priya, 2008). Moreover, there is a strong feeling that myopic understanding of Prabhupada’s teachings induced their parents to accept the ascetic emphasis without sufficient reflection. This presumes that such a level of reflection was possible in the infancy of cultic life—for both individuals and a social movement—fathered by texts and preoccupied with them, with little opportunity for nurturance by the standard memes of

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7 The contract of initiation with the sampradaya mandates the recitation of sixteen round daily and strictly following the four regulative principles.
Hinduism, and more or less left to their own wits to survive on what was provided in the way of instructions. But now, with three generations of American Hare Krishna chanting, dancing, and taking prasada, there is lots of ordinary love, and this has been critical to the cult to church process.

In a temple or ashrama situation, institutional authority played decisive roles in the survival of the institution; in post-temple life, “they [Hare Krishna devotees] had to find the means to integrate their religious beliefs with their new circumstances which required bridging the demands of the conventional world with their commitments to Prabhupada and Krishna” (Rochford, 2007: 167). Individual, instead of institutional, religious survival become the new stakes. As Graham Schweig told Newsweek magazine, “They’re not all in the ashrams, but their miracle has been to find the ashram within themselves, and still function in the world” (Schweig, 2006: 2).

Although this miracle is extraordinary, it is not surprising because the new authority governing their survival is ordinary love; the first generation has been chastened by it, and many in both generations exalt it. For instance, a May 2009 Back to Godhead article is entitled “Parenting as Service to God: Fulfilling Our Duty as Parents Requires Taking Care of Our Children’s Spiritual Needs.” The following quote will give the gist of this article for our discussion of reconciliation with the world. “Being a mother and a wife is my duty, and I don’t distinguish it from my service to God. It is my service to God” (Krishnanandini Devi Dasi, 2009). This is evidence of the spirituality of dwelling Prabhupada had hoped for when he described the ideal wife. My interviews confirm that most women at New Raman Reti agree that family—if they have one—defines their service to Krishna as much as anything else, although
usually without sixteen daily rounds, as Prabhupada would have preferred. Men describe their devotional lives similarly, especially if they are men of the second generation.

In the new ethic of responsibility, at least optimally, Krishna is to be found as much in family and relationships as in japa or kirtana, or even prasada. Many devotees point out that this has always been Prabhupada’s intention, as can be understood in the following verse from the Upadeshamrita.

Offering gifts in charity, accepting charitable gifts, revealing one’s mind in confidence, inquiring confidentially, accepting prasada and offering prasada are the six symptoms of love shared by one devotee and another (Prabhupada, 1975: 39).

As these cultists integrate Prabhupada’s teachings throughout their lives and grant themselves a license to experiment, inferences that must be negotiated in regard to the teachings resemble a spiritual supermarket where the consumer is confronted with a variety of choices. Faced with these choices, in the newer scenario each follower develops her own ideal type according to personal parameters. In many interpretations, it is not the frequency with which one finds particular ideas in these teachings (such as the four regulative principles, denigration of ordinary love, submission of women, etc.) that rules the discourse, rather, the relevance to one’s own situation becomes the deciding factor. If a woman wants to be submissive to her husband because she thinks this would be a happy life (Judah, 1974: 87), she may—otherwise, equality is now seen, by most, as a respectable option precisely because it meets the needs of an individual. This phenomenon is not confined to gurukulis, because the first generation—contrary to the notion that an all-powerful guru has transplanted an ironclad conception of puranic women’s roles—still has recourse to the way they felt about such things before contacting the movement. After all, they are 21st century Americans, not 16th century Indians. As Wade Clark Roof told Newsweek magazine, “ Boomers love options” (Roof, 2009: 2). In order to choose options within a religious context, one must take responsibility for one’s own rapid generation of inferences.
Such inferences, of course, reestablishes the individual, banished (or minimized) in the establishment of Prabhupada’s mission, and brings the community at least partially in line with contemporary American trends. So instead of only looking at individuals maturing as cultists, we are also seeing a cult maturing as a community in places like New Raman Reti, and perhaps approaching church status because of it (although there seems to be no lack of church immaturity, as well). Whenever a cult takes a step in the direction of reducing tension with society, we should be interested in looking at changes in both the cultic individual and the cult, because this will further address the question posed in Chapter One—what remains of Prabhupada’s teachings? To be more precise, what became of Prabhupada’s teachings in the minds and lives of his disciples? What is the nature of the inner ashram?

**Modifications to the Standard of Loyalty**

Some researchers of new religious movements see emic disagreements as problematic because they focus on institutions, and that is fair: “The predicament is that there is no longer a unique and unequivocal representation of a Hare Krishna devotee” (Squarcini, 2004: 66). The problem with the above statement, however, is the presumption that an unequivocal representation of any religion ever existed at all or is even possible, as if any two individuals could understand Prabhupada’s teachings in exactly the same way, what to speak of thousands of individuals involved in a new religious movement. The unity among devotees portrayed in Chapter Three was a totality of acceptance of Prabhupada’s teachings, not unity in what these teachings meant, and this tendency to disagree has been multiplied many times over since Prabhupada’s passing.

But when it comes to Prabhupada’s teachings in general, Rochford’s research during Prabhupada’s centennial year in 1996 still confirms widespread loyalty. In this sense also it can be said that these devotees keep their spiritual ashram within themselves. “In virtually every
case, those former ISKCON members who responded to the Centennial Survey affirmed their unwavering commitment to Prabhupada. It was on this basis that they remained part of Prabhupada’s movement, if not ISKCON” (Rochford, 2007: 165). Regardless of this finding, one disciple summed up a prominent sentiment that shows how the American movement has come to terms with Prabhupada’s authority by nuancing a universal ethic with the addition of an ethic of responsibility.

Prabhupada taught me a lot. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from him. However, your guru cannot live your life for you, so I believe it is imperative that you become your own being—integrating those teachings that are meaningful to you spiritually, emotionally, and practically (Rochford, 2007: 167).

Although Prabhupada may have allowed for such ideas in his voluminous writings, they are very minor themes overshadowed by the scriptural imperatives for chanting the holy name—to obey the orders of the spiritual master, to “remain a fool before the spiritual master”, etc. (Rohininandana Dasa, 1989). Disciples are supposed to buy, but after becoming disciples they are not supposed to shop. Or are they? The comments in the block quote above may seem obvious to an outsider, but for the founding generation of any textually based cult they may not be immediately obvious at all. In my interviews I have found only one devotee who claimed to understand these imperatives from the very beginning of his ISKCON career almost four decades earlier. Some devotees at New Raman Reti still do not recognize any imperative to make inferences, or admit that they do. But like enthusiasm for the brahmachari ashram, this mindset has become uncommon in America.

Cultic Rites of Passage

For the first generation, it is possible to interpret an inferential conclusion such as “your guru cannot live your life for you” as a daring and risky act illuminated by Turner’s views on rites of passage, communitas, and liminality. The key to understanding the relevance of rituals of
transition (or more precisely, states of transition as explained by Melton) for the American Hare Krishna movement is in Turner’s contention that twenty-four ritual categories (related to the cult experience by Melton) are more commonly found in “traditional” than industrialized countries, where liminality is fragmented in the absence of public ritual, forcing individuals to design their own rite of passage scenario. This explains why, in accordance with Turner, the American Hare Krishna movement typically has been involved with only a few of these. Let us observe that Turner’s model was developed by observing rites of passage scenarios within an established culture, not a new culture intruding upon an established culture. Still, the complexity that emerges from a structure-liminality dialectic is apropos to the cult to church paradigm in modern America.

For instances of fragmented liminality that are not important for the Hare Krishna movement in America, Turner’s social structural breakdown of “sex distinctions” in the liminal phase of initiation could never apply to a sex polarity cult. And the same must be true of the breakdown of social inequality in a state of communitas, because the Hare Krishna experience involved introduction to an imported hierarchy with premises unfamiliar to American society, not equality—otherwise, as we have suggested, how did all those parents decide to board their children in schools thousands of miles away? Some may have been uninterested in their children or eager to avoid responsibility, but we have shown the strong element of compliance to hierarchy at Prabhupada’s request. And some of Melton’s appropriations of Turner’s examples of applications in modern industrial societies will not work for the Hare Krishna movement if we include the initial phase of participation in the American Hare Krishna movement in the ritual grief cycle, to which all liminal states are seen as related. For Turner, the initiate must grieve for a way of life and worldview that comes to an end in late adolescence. But what if, as Judah’s
research indicates, this process was more or less complete before contacting the Hare Krishna movement? Or even only partially complete? In the light of Judah’s understanding, other Turnerian categories do stand out as compelling arguments for the interplay of structure and liminality related to the movement that individuals must negotiate and which characterize the experience of a generation. After all, Arjuna’s dilemma in grieving before the great battle indicates that, in the view of the Vaishnava traditions, there is no shortage of grief for someone who takes spiritual life seriously.

In modern industrial societies, prior to involvement with cults, at the group level heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity, typifies relationships with ideologies and worldviews; likewise with the distinction at the individual level between pre-cultic partiality and cultic totality of these relationships. For Melton and Turner, the tension between these modalities is resolved by reverting to the pre-liminal orientation, so in Melton’s scenario cultic individuals go back to sharing significant differences of opinion with their peers, and the relationship with ideologies becomes less intense, or at least more nuanced. Here we will list other modalities that seem appropriate for this study. Property and its absence, sexual expression and sexual repression, pride of position and humility, selfishness and unselfishness, technical knowledge and sacred knowledge, kinship rights along with obligations and their suspension, complexity and simplicity (this could apply even with a complex cultic doctrine prior to the rapid generation of inferences), and ultimately autonomy and heteronomy, are important, fairly undeniable aspects of the social transformation of individuals in the American Hare Krishna movement, as expressed in Chapter Three (Melton, 1982, 52). Melton addresses his discussion of Turner’s categories to cultic members and those who “leave” cults, the “successful” cultists making a
career of the Moonies (or even the Marines!), while those who leave—most—resolve their liminality by reintegrating with society.

Instead of Melton’s focus on transitions that lead to non-cultic life, in this dissertation we have been more interested in re-acquisitiveness in relation to property, the reinstatement of sexuality, etc. These categories are essential components of the cult to church process. That process is essential for the survival and growth of a social movement. That very growth, however, can contradict some of the ambitions of the movement’s founder, who set the sacrificial example by submitting to his own guru in the face of extreme hardship. In passing, there is no record of Prabhupada coming to terms with his guru’s teachings in a way that would suggest individuation, no record that he ever disagreed with his guru on any issue, so there is no literature suggesting that the careers of his disciples bear any relation to his own, or to the church atmosphere that formed his pre-America biography. This could have profound implications for the issue of purity and market share for Prabhupada’s teachings.

Is Purity the Only Force?

By the “purity is the force” doctrine, unless a determinative number of Prabhupada’s disciples could follow his example punctiliously (that is, not individuate) and after that, millions of Americans become like or at least submit to the guidance of these devotees, it is difficult to see how “the cult of Shri Chaitanya” that seemed like a church to Prabhupada could not remain cultic and lack enough market share to become a church. Taking into consideration both the cultural otherness and tendency toward ascetic religious specialization, no church in America demands the level of commitment that Prabhupada’s unadulterated teachings imply, except perhaps in the case of church religious specialists. But if Boyer’s thesis concerning the cognitive development of religion is correct—and what we have observed so far seems to bear this out—the configuration of, for instance, autonomy → heteronomy → autonomy in Melton’s
transitional model could describe an aspect of the cult to church process as individuals come to terms with their new selves in relation to the teachings. To state this another way, it is likely that without similar individuation processes involving transitional factors indicated above, no intensive, imported cult initially composed of young followers is likely to become a church, at least in 21st century America, because heteronomy, totality, etc. in relation to cultic teachings is very difficult to maintain, what to speak of attracting further market share.

At this point we can, subsequent to the preceding discussion of the basis of texts, the essence of preaching, and the principle of using (or not using) spiritual and material things for Krishna, look a bit further at forceful purity. For theological correctness, lack of purity may yield only simulacra, but our concern here is with cultic confidence and resources available for the cult to church paradigm. And we have found that simulacra is in the eyes of the beholder, for although Prabhupada’s teachings retain their original prestige, the experiences of purists may not enjoy a greater prestige than more ordinary approaches to cultic life; for many, the authenticity of their experiences is their own business and no one else’s.

Given these developments, one wonders where Prabhupada’s motto of “purity is the force” fits into the cult to church process. To explore this question, I interviewed gurukulis who seem fully integrated with the larger society. They tend to admit that the force of purity could just as well drive people away with its demands as it could attract them. But Stark insists that conservative Christianity is thriving because of—not in spite of—the element of sacrifice. However, these Christian groups are already church religion, or at least sect religion, with wide and deep (but not universal) appeal in American society. It is also true that sacrifice, as we explained in Chapter Three, remedied the lack of memes for the first generation and kept many
of these devotees cultic, in conjunction with a highly defined market niche. But the level of intensity required for this sort of sacrifice does not bode well for extensive market share.

Let us return to Prabhupada’s contention that without purity, the movement could not go on. It could neither maintain itself nor expand without sacrificial ascetic purity. Therefore, the chief business of the GBC man was to see that people were following the rules in his zone. I have discussed a significant reduction in this purity among most devotees, yet New Raman Reti is expanding and is expected to continue to expand, for one need only compare the current number of cars parked outside the temple on festival days to earlier years to verify this expansion. Why is this happening? Market niche explains much of this expansion as devotees continue to move to North Florida from areas with a similar market niche in terms of doctrine, ritual, etc., but not in terms of material factors and a social atmosphere conducive to Krishna conscious family life more than anywhere else, although imperfectly. Because natural increase among the second generation accounts for only part of New Raman Reti’s expansion (the first generation is more or less menopausal, except for a few, second wave converts), from Prabhupada’s point of view we are still left with the issue of purity in the new arrivals (although this does not deny other factors). One gurukuli I interviewed about this issue, without studying the market theory of religion, intuitively supplied a compelling answer.

“In a desert, any tree is significant!” In applying an old Bengali saying to American society as a spiritual desert, this devotee also understands the details of Prabhupada’s teachings to be attractive on account of sheer difference, or the rarity of their existence. Quite subjectively, he thinks that the teachings are like cooling shade in a desert. But for our purposes, he is talking about market niche. We must look to other causes for the attractiveness of the movement in India, but in America its difference is undeniable whether or not the social environment is
spiritually arid. By this devotee’s reasoning, every detail is “pure” and forceful even if they are not accompanied by other details which are considered essential aspects of the teaching. In Prabhu’s own words, a sugar cube is sweet, no matter that only a corner is tasted, and it doesn’t matter which corner. There is no indication that this is what Prabhu meant by “purity is the force”, but it resonates with his teaching that Krishna is All Attractive.

According to Prabhu’s tradition, there are nine processes of bhakti leading to Krishna, beginning with hearing, repeating, remembering, serving the lotus feet of the Lord, worshiping, prayer, service, friendship, and surrendering everything. These are some of the important resources bhakti has, but only the Gaudiya sampradaya, so far, has thought it worthwhile to promote these features of Vaishnavism to pursue market share among non-Indian Americans, so the Hare Krishna movement has no real competition from other Vaishnava sampradayas. And there could be only remotely related competition in the form of non-Vaishnava Hindu missions.

Equally as important, at least in the maintenance of current market share, are factors common to all human life that are easily exploited by religions, whether church, sect, or cult—the various miseries and disappointments of life and the eventual pain of death. As one devotee put it, “Even the Hare Krishnas can’t fully describe the terrors of the material world!” The same middle age and geriatric questions and fears that send the un-churched back to their pews also inspire New Raman Reti devotees to gather together for mutual support at the temple or elsewhere. Throughout the movement there are Gaudiya men’s and women’s groups, Girl Scout troops, gay and lesbian groups, etc. that were not part of Prabhu’s program during his lifetime.8 The spirituality of dwelling is also evidenced by New Raman Reti devotees that rarely visit the temple, but associate closely with other devotees at work or leisure. We must note that

8 See GALVA—Gay And Lesbian Vaishnava Association at http://www.galva108.org/
the spirituality of searching never really disappears, because it reoccurs in the context of life’s transitional cycles, and its investment in risk makes for a more concrete spirituality of dwelling. Although we have emphasized spiritual dwelling more than spiritual searching beginning in the second half of Chapter Three, spiritual dwelling and spiritual searching form a dialectic that inform and replenish religious systems. In New Raman Reti, from time to time, some have searched for an ascetic dimension that seems to be lost, but this kind of reform does not seem to enjoy broad support and so remains an elite private option.

**What Will ISKCON Endorse?**

A spirituality of dwelling must include identity and the many issues surrounding any institution with which one identifies—who are we, and what do we stand for? New Raman Reti is ambivalent about the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, because it has been decades since the majority of American devotees in North Florida attending any ISKCON function would unequivocally endorse ISKCON policies. The issue of trust in the institution became even more momentous when it was learned that many children had been abused in the *gurukula*. Although the movement continues to suffer from this period of its history, like the infamous Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 (Luscinia Brown-Hovelt, 1999)—which involved individuals of the LDS, not the endorsement of the entire LDS organization—doubt about the organization has not stopped the expansion of the movement, at least at New Raman Reti. At this point it must be acknowledged that if the Hare Krishna movement was solely defined by ISKCON, the movement may have folded in America. However, because the institution and the wider movement has dealt squarely with its problems in many areas, some scholars have suggested that this is evidence of social maturation, and in the view of many devotees, this is evidence of spiritual health. For instance, the institution now sees misogyny as a fire to put out, not a cultural standard to revere and preserve:
Today [May 29, 2008], the International GBC Executive Committee is disturbed to learn that a blog site claiming affiliation with ISKCON, and using “Hare Krishna” in its name, has included sexist and misogynist statements. Such writings are not authorized, and they are against the principles of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and our Vaishnava culture.

We condemn any effort to minimize the contributions and importance of women in our society. Instead, we offer the women of our society the highest respect. Women are of great value to our Vaishnava community, and have made immeasurable, indispensable, and saintly contributions as mothers, daughters, wives, pujaris, priests, teachers, and leaders. ⁹

Previously, ISKCON’s International Women’s Ministry, founded at the birthplace of Shri Chaitanya in 1996 by New Raman Reti women’s activist Sudharma Dasi, established a new era for the family Prabhupada created in 1966. Sudharma became a member of ISKCON’s GBC and saw to the passing of the following resolution.

**Women in Iskcon International GBC Resolution March 2000**

WHEREAS, the Women’s Ministry presentation on March 1st, 2000 to the GBC Body brought a clearer understanding of the mistakes of the past and the need to provide equal and full opportunity for devotional service for all devotees in ISKCON, regardless of gender, and

WHEREAS, it is clearly following in our line that all people are welcome to join Lord Chaitanya’s *sankirtana* movement and are capable of developing full love of God, and

WHEREAS, it is our belief that many of the social issues that confront us are exacerbated because the voice of our women, who are the mothers and daughters of our Krishna conscious family, have been hushed and stifled due to misinterpretation of our Vaishnava philosophy, and thus the human and interpersonal needs of our devotees have been minimized,

THEREFORE IT IS RESOLVED THAT:

501 [STATEMENT] 1. The members of the Governing Body Commission of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness offer their humble apologies to the women of Srila Prabhupada’s society who, because of our own shortcomings and those of the Society, have suffered due to a lack of protection, support, facility and appreciation for their service, devotion and vast contributions to the Society… (ISKCON News Weekly, 2008).

⁹ This list neglects to mention that Hare Krishna women have also distinguished themselves as traditional and academic scholars.
Cult or Church?

Robert S. Ellwood acknowledges that the movement, with a clearly defined literary tradition grounded in antiquity, is well on its way to becoming a church—it has successfully routinized the charisma of the founder (Ellwood in Gelberg, 11-13). When religious persons become steeped in tradition, a spirituality of dwelling may develop, and the movement may avoid the coming and going of American “rice Hindus” who compare their spiritual experiences to “a dozen doses of LSD” (Cox in Gelberg, 1983: 39; Gosvami, 1980: 223). Whether or not the increasing interest in more ordinary considerations such as morality and well being in the world are now more important than ecstasy, few would deny that these factors have become very important. Other factors such as endogamy based on religion may limit expansion into the wider society, but in the long run endogamy helps to solidify the movement’s generations and fosters a spirituality of dwelling. By contrast, many American Buddhists and followers of other Hindu gurus do not feel the need to pass their religion on to their children (if they even consider their meditation practices to be religion), expecting instead that their children will find their own path. But this is not a prominent feeling at New Raman Reti, for families continue to locate there specifically so that their children will be socialized in the cult and marry within it.

We have defined cult as a religious form in a precarious situation in relation to the rest of society, lacking power and influence. A religious form with a large population will likely be a church, so population is a common feature for church status. However, it is not a necessary

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10 A “rice Christian” is someone in a developing country who, supposedly, becomes a Christian for motives not entirely religious, such as when missionaries distribute food. Although spiritual ecstasy is an essential aspect of Gaudiya religion, Prabhupada discouraged immature focus on ecstasy, as in “Work now, samadhi later.”
feature, as the Jain religion in India, which has never enjoyed a large population overall, is accepted as part of the establishment.

Now, it is difficult to think of religious forms that remain in great tension with their American environment for long periods of time, for these forms either soften particular cultic features (such as the LDS and its official abandonment of polygamy), merge with the surrounding culture through marriage and other contacts, or fold completely. However, even cults that fade sometimes live on in new organizations in the form of ideas, such as the progression of Theosophical Society→ “I Am” Activity→ Church Universal and Triumphant. As Theosophy and C.U.T. still exist but I.A.A. has faded away, ISKCON could certainly fold even as the Gaudiya Math along with the sects spawned from ISKCON also continue to this day. Some researchers including Shinn and Stark think that organizational fission and schism are detrimental for cults, particularly for ISKCON and its system of many gurus in the wake of Prabhupada’s passing (Stark, 1986: 16). However, we cannot deny the possibility of an expanding market share for the entire movement if it offers a variety of similar niches instead of only one. Even Rochford, conflicted about the conflation of movement and institution (generally he conflates, but sometimes he doesn’t), suggests that we should look at the fluidity of social movements as “broader contexts in which movements operate” (Rochford, 2007: 161).

In another register, we have to wonder if New Raman Reti is really good for the rest of ISKCON in America because of devotee relocation to North Florida, depleting householder communities in San Diego or Miami, where many of these devotees have long considered themselves loyal to Prabhupada and Shri Chaitanya’s sankirtana movement, but not ISKCON. Nevertheless, if we add the observation that ISKCON is only an optional institutional expression of a social movement, we can affirm that the movement is not dependent upon ISKCON and is
already firmly—if only thinly—established in American society. But is it a church, at least in North Florida?

By Stark’s definition, New Raman Reti does not dominate the City of Alachua, so it is not a church (Stark, 1987: 12). However, the local politicians visit the temple at election time, the local supermarket has reserved a section labeled “Ekadashi” and “prasada”, devotees’ weddings and funerals are attended by Jews and Christians and vice versa, and the temple community’s representatives lead prayers at the City of Alachua’s televised board meetings. Perhaps most significantly, Dhira Govinda’s contacts and work with local law enforcement, surely an essential feature of “the establishment”, indicates that they do not care what his religion is because they like his methods and respect his previous work as ISKCON’s Office of Child Protection director. By these parameters it seems that New Raman Reti has attained the status of a church in its own neighborhood, which is more than could be said unequivocally for every Hare Krishna community in America, where the neighbors are still sometimes frankly inimical. We may include the University of Florida and Gainesville’s Santa Fe Community College as areas where the Hare Krishna religion enjoys social acceptance, largely because of the success of the Krishna Lunch program. Such social acceptance, in many small increments, is how the religion is approaching church status. However, as soon as we consider the feelings of large sections of the population outside of these areas, it is difficult to affirm the Hare Krishna religion as a church, either because the devotees have very little population, people have never heard of it, or because people are inimical. For the time being at least, it cannot become a church on a large scale in the way that Prabhupada wanted, and conversely, as Rochford has warned, we must consider that too much accommodation may dilute the teachings (Rochford in Miller, 1995: 215-223). However, it seems that a great deal of the “melted snow” of the riverine trope introduced in Chapter One still
has a way of retaining distinctive qualities. A good example would be the yearly Hare Krishna float in the University of Florida’s Homecoming Parade—whether considered a cult or church by popular definitions, no one could mistake its identity even though it has integrated with the university culture of Gainesville.

**The Rise of the Personal Growth Seminar**

According to Prabhupada, after becoming initiated, reaching the goal of pure devotion to Krishna might take a few lifetimes. But devotees have discovered that in the meantime, the original inspiration may become covered over by illusion, bad habits, sadness, fear—all the things conditioned souls are prone to become ensnared by—even though one remains devoted to Krishna at the level of belief and practice. Looking at the Hindu idea of the evolution of the soul in a personal historical context, it is possible—especially since Prabhupada explained that three generations would be required to produce pure devotees of Krishna—to see immediate causes on the family level as well as long term karma over many lifetimes as important areas of focus in efforts of self-improvement. If one’s family life before contacting the movement was dysfunctional, this may have something to do with obstacles on the path of Krishna consciousness. Dysfunction in a family of Gaudiya Vaishnavas could also impact second generation devotees. Because the movement (including the institution, ISKCON) is also a family, its dysfunctional aspects must also be considered in an evaluation of the problems faced by its devotees.

The temple at New Raman Reti, as we have indicated, does not have pastoral care as part of its agenda. Rochford notes, “Because the temple no longer serves as the foundation of religious life, religious education, which was once so much a part of temple life, has found new outlets” (Rochford, 2007: 210). In recent years one of the most important developments in the American Hare Krishna movement, as Rochford has observed, has been the addition of
extracurricular means of addressing the problems individual devotees have experienced in their sadhana, in the form of personal growth seminars. These seminars, which frequently advertize themselves as a means to attain an extraordinary life, are actually designed to address ordinary problems. The critical significance of these seminars in the life of New Raman Reti devotees, I suggest, is not an exaggeration because they represent reconciliation with mainstream American society and serve as a bridge between cult and church status for the movement. They also demonstrate the process of inferential religion that complements theological correctness, a process which, although not guaranteeing church status for a cult, seems to bear a clear relation not only to the establishment of religion in any society, as Boyer has noted, but also the maintenance of religion.

At least, interviews at New Raman Reti confirm that seeking help from these extracurricular sources has fulfilled for many the utility principle in relation to their Krishna consciousness. This is a great leap forward in the dialectic between theological correctness and intuitive application. Not all cults have a negative relationship with professionalism, but the Hare Krishna movement in America, in its devotion to shabda brahman as a panacea, has had to come to terms with the dominant institutions in their midst and the good things they have to offer, even if these institutions would reject the authority and ideas of their shabda brahman. But now, as one devotee woman told Rochford, “In most communities you will find devotees to go to for family counseling or personal counseling. So this has become much stronger within our movement, where twenty years ago it [professionalism] was a dirty word” (Rochford, 2007, 213).

Many Hare Krishna devotees have been reluctant to seek help for their personal problems outside of the orbit of information provided by Prabhupada or another ISKCON guru, so for
many the services of a psychiatrist would not be an option. Until recently the assistance offered in problem solving by personal growth seminars was unappealing, because of the feeling that cultic needs would not be understood. This has been a problematic situation for the movement from the very beginning, because Prabhupada fathered but could not mother the spiritual careers of his disciples, and the leaders he hoped would fulfill this task have proven to be—in the words of insiders—hopelessly incompetent as spiritual guides. They too came from the dysfunctional families of America.11 But if people are reluctant to seek help outside of the confines of their church, sect, or cult, how can they improve their lives if they find their religious practices, for whatever reason, are not sufficient to address their problems?

Into this lacuna stepped an ISKCON initiate who is a professional mental health worker with a doctorate in social work, New Raman Reti devotee Dhira Govinda Dasa, David B. Wolf (Relationships That Work: The Power of Conscious Living, How Transformative Communication Can Change Your Life, Mandala, San Rafael, 2008). Dhira Govinda’s work serves as a bridge to American society in the sense that his seminars devoted to personal growth are popular with the general public, and the principles he uses in facilitating self-awareness and personal responsibility have been endorsed by a wide range of professionals, including law enforcement, who have employed him to counsel sex offenders. His efforts to help people improve their lives resulted in the establishment of the Satvatove Institute and its first seminar in New Raman Reti

11 Some devotees report that their gurus—disciples of Prabhupada—have helped them significantly with their personal problems. Perhaps this is because many of these gurus do not have thousands of disciples, and can take the time to impart the benefit of their experience. Other devotees valued for their wisdom, not necessarily formally initiating gurus, have also been important to devotees seeking detailed understanding of their personal problems. All of this is in keeping with the instructions of Rupa Gosvami’s Upadeshamrita to reveal one mind in the company of bhaktas. But the mental and social atmosphere for inferences one can develop and incorporate dynamically into sadhana in the company of bhaktas is not systematized explicitly (as it is the manner of personal development groups) in the Gaudiya literatures or in the institution Prabhupada left as part of his legacy. For this reason, many people who are attracted to the teachings are not attracted to the movement. It seems that dysfunctional living is a big problem in America, and people want and demand programs that address them more directly, or at least in detail.
in 1999. It is estimated that about half of the first generation and almost all of the second
generation have participated in these seminars, and devotees and the general public travel to
North Florida to participate. Satvatove has conducted seminars around the globe in English,
including India, with thousands of participants. As one might imagine, a professional who is an
insider would be considered by many an invaluable mentor and coach for abused cultists.

Dhira Govinda, who wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the *gunas*, the qualities of nature—*tamas*,
darkness or ignorance; *rajas*, passion or exertion; *sattva*, enlightenment or goodness—in relation
to human psychology, honors Prabhupada’s teachings because they form the basis of his
understanding of spiritual life and the processes by which people can grow in their personal life,
but he flavors his seminars with mention of Prabhupada and his teachings lightly. Instead, he
uses techniques distilled from the personal growth seminar industry and his own insights to
enable people to see that they can take control of their lives and be more productive, happy, and
fulfilled. His seminars invoke a sense of wonder in devotees of Krishna or anyone, and provoke
participants to find new ways to look at possibilities instead of problems. The motto is:
“consciousness in the result.” In other words, participants are encouraged to emphasize thinking
about what they want to achieve instead of thinking about how they can achieve it. This is a
dependence upon the natural inventive and energetic good qualities of the soul, instead of the
passionate qualities of the conditioned mind and body; it is a harmonizing of the mind and body
with the soul for maximum achievement of legitimate desires, lessening of suffering, and
eventual experience of a loving relationship with God.

Dhira Govinda’s seminars are not fluff. He challenges people to challenge themselves, to
risk confrontation with their greatest fears and grieves, by a compassionate focus on the good
nature of the soul, *sattva*; hence the name Satva (derived from the Sanskrit) and tove (Hebrew,
good). In order to access that goodness, people need to learn to communicate with themselves and others without deception or bluff, dropping all pretense, all social masks. This sometimes entails an examination of life so deep that a constant feature of each seminar, like any psychiatrist’s office, is a ready supply of tissues in case of emotional release. The Satvatove presumption is fully in accordance with Prabhupada’s teaching that we are not our bodies, we are eternal beings full of knowledge and bliss. Consequently, knowledge of the individual self by a thorough examination is a direct aim, which is a shift in emphasis from Prabhupada’s books. ISKCON’s founder emphasized instead the concentration on the Lord as sufficient for self-knowledge, as the sun, when it rises, reveals itself as well as everything else. However, as many devotees have explained from personal experience, without a modicum of self-knowledge—which can be hindered by one’s karma—one may not be able to concentrate on the Lord properly, and little in the way of spiritual realization or simple self-improvement can be achieved. But one of Dhira Govinda’s main points is that we can, by self-examination, clear intent, and consciousness in the result, step out of our past. We are the authors of our karma, by the choices we make.

In order to influence our karma, Dhira Govinda (who sets an example of theological correctness in chanting his rounds) insists in his seminars that devotees should return to Prabhupada’s concept of intellect, which has more to do with a strong and clear spiritual understanding focused on one’s legitimate desires and needs than a command of any specific body of knowledge (recall that Prabhupada considered scientists who would not accept spiritual knowledge as “less intelligent”). This is the intellect of the Bhagavad Gita, which is next to the soul (Prabhupada, 1989: 208). Invested in soul consciousness, the intellect should control the mind and body (ibid: 344). But as discussed previously, people need to have a practical plan in
order to train the power of the the intellectual neighbor of the soul to dominate the mind. “For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy” (Prabhupada, ibid: 313). For many devotees, the plans they make to improve their lives by their intellect become more modest after the Satvatove experience. They engage with the spirituality of searching within themselves to find the practical steps needed to establish a spirituality of dwelling in relation to their environment. For some devotees, this could mean the establishment of a clear intent to chant one round a day, whereas previously the choice seemed to be to chant sixteen or none at all. For others, it could mean self-forgiveness, forgiveness to others, accountability, making amends, and other desirable qualities and actions emphasized in most any personal growth seminar. But first the devotee must risk the consideration that their understanding of the Bhagavad Gita might benefit from an intuitive approach that depends on no one else but him or herself—a rational choice. For many gurukulis, this is only common sense.

Probably the most important theme that stands out from my interviews at New Raman Reti is a return to basics, for in their own words Hare Krishna devotees, whether American or ISKCON Hindu, may have to reexamine their relationship to Prabhupada’s textual tradition, go back to their scriptural lessons, and begin again, at the beginning pertinent to them, not the beginning they have hitherto imagined to be pertinent to them. For many, this is not a tour of exalted topics in the works of the Vrindavana Gosvamis, or even the Shikshashtaka, even though this brief text is basic to an understanding of Shri Chaitanya’s teachings. For the carpenter we met in Chapter Three and Chapter Six, even the conclusion of the Bhagavad Gita—“surrender unto Me”—although it is fully accepted, is too advanced a topic. He feels that many devotees should study the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, not in a scholarly way, but in an intuitive
way, to learn to cry before the Lord as Arjuna, overwhelmed at the thought of doing his duty, dropped his bow and wept, and said to Krishna, “Govinda, I will not fight” (Bhagavad Gita, 2.9). Having experienced the Satvatove dynamic of transformative communication, the gurukuli carpenter insists that a real dialogue with God is the only way to break through conditioning and lead a fulfilled life of satisfaction as a Hare Krishna devotee, because dysfunction is not what Shri Chaitanya meant when he said:

One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street. One should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind, one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly (Shikshashtaka, verse three).

Satvatove is not the only manifestation of a readiness to embrace the good things that the world has to offer, to be used according to the utility principle. Hare Krishna devotees in America have always taken advantage of hospitals, cars, tractors, typewriters, telephones, etc. But at New Raman Reti, Satvatove represents the most widespread and systematic recognition that the individual is responsible for his or her own spiritual life, even if this means taking a risk in making one’s own plan about how to live. This might entail learning real tolerance instead of absolute tolerance like a tree, which is beyond the reach of a person young in spiritual life; or learning the satisfaction that comes from real improvement in character and being recognized for it, instead of pretending to oneself that no desire for prestige exists; or being ready to balance respect for others with respect for one’s own needs. These kinds of inferences, as Dhira Govinda points out, although seemingly sending the student back to kindergarten, tend to inspire respect in others and attract them on the basis of natural human interaction instead of doctrine alone. For devotees, the strength of Dhira Govinda’s system is that all of his inferences, and the inferences he helps others to make, are grounded in the theologically correct teachings of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami—just not exactly as one might have ever heard them before. Our carpenter
has declared that Satvatove, or any thinking similar to Satvatove, represents the future of the movement as it works its way into American society and culture. There are other possible explanations that could plausibly feature in the conclusion of a social history of the Hare Krishna movement in America. This is just one.

This dissertation has been written to answer the question, what happened to Prabhupada’s movement, what became of his teachings? Why should we call it the Hare Krishna movement? We have shown how the organization lured the first devotees away from their adult lives just as they were beginning. Their move back into the mainstream of society has not been easy but it has been a spiritually profound journey with clear benefits for the effort to attain church status. Prabhupada often gave the example that any piece of metal placed into fire becomes, for all practical purposes, fire. But what if the fire of Prabhupada’s teachings, embodied in his followers, is taken into the metal? Might the metal not become like fire, here and there? Only time will continue to tell, for such developments would not be new.

**Days of Natural Piety**

Prabhupada took many risks in his life, including leaving India to arrive virtually penniless in New York, and his daring initiation of unprepared disciples that surprised Alan Ginsberg. He advised his disciples, likewise, “to take risks for Krishna” (ISKCON Bangalore, 2001-2009). In looking at how risks are related to the cult to church paradigm, we must return to the issue of “ritual” grief and states of transition, because how one negotiates with the idea that “your guru cannot live your life for you” will determine the cultic fate of the individual.

The most obvious manifestation of cultic grieving, individually and corporately, would have to be the passing away of the founder, a traumatic event that has scarred the movement (Gopi Priya, 2008). Without his guiding hand, certainty about many practical aspects of his teaching vanished and necessitated the generation of inferences. However, although movement
and outside scholars alike have emphasized the passing of the founder as critical, there has been little reflection on the necessity to generate inferences even before his passing or regardless of his passing. What does this have to do with ritual grief, especially since Prabhupada did not import any rites of passage typical to Hindu culture, such as those pertaining to the onset of menarche, investment of the sacred thread in the context of physical maturity (instead of the exclusive ISKCON focus on an elite religious initiation), or elaborate marriage customs? The clue to understanding the grief of the American Hare Krishna movement must go beyond the physical passing of the founder.

Melton does not explore ritualized liminality in America’s religious cults (probably because it is not as important in cults of importation compared to the tribal people studied by Turner), but he maps Turner’s insights about liminality onto a modern model of transition between late adolescence and adult life. Here we will attempt to show the utility of Melton’s map of liminality and grief as a powerful vision of inner-cultic transition instead of the not-a-cultist→cultist→not-a-cultist paradigm. He writes,

> As serious as the death of a loved one is, one should realize that life-cycle related transition states may indeed be even more traumatic. In the transition from one psychosocial state to another the thing that is dying is not just one beloved person, but the entire life-world—the total way of being in the world that has given the person orientation and a sense of meaning for the previous period of his or her life…this rather radical loss provides the necessary context for understanding the complexities of the cult experience and the controversial phenomena related to it (Melton, 1982: 53).

The complexities of the cult experience have their own cycle. William Deadwyler (Ravindra Svarupa Dasa), an initiating guru in ISKCON, succinctly describes the initial phase of the classic cultic experience. “I left one world to join another…I became a stranger in my own land” (Deadwyler in Bryant, 2004: 149). But a continuing cultic experience is stranger still.

The challenge for American Hare Krishna devotees in managing their cyclic grief is double or even triple the magnitude faced by other modern people, who may have a church
orientation—what to speak of Turner’s African tribe—for in addition to the grief factors discussed here, they still must go through life cycle transitions common to every human and pass through these in a cultic context. For the first generation, reactions to the shocking necessity to individuate range from the “successful” career cultist (that Melton would accept as a psychologically healthy position, although many New Raman Reti devotees would not agree with this assessment of the leaders in their midst) to the complete rejection of cultic teachings. In between we find the chronically liminal (that frustrates their children with a lack of achievement, or fail to accept full responsibility for their inferences) and the majority of New Raman Reti devotees, who have decided that worldly accomplishments and spiritual life do not necessarily oppose each other, and that it is not necessary to agree 100% with everything their guru—who also had a learning curve—taught.  

This would include major issues such as the status of women and the education of children, which had previously been framed by the founder under the influence of the author of the *Shikshashtaka*. This does not mean that Shri Chaitanya has become irrelevant in a social movement descended from his teachings. He remains an exemplar for elite spirituality and ecstasy, but his status as a compassionate *avatara* is more immediately relevant for most than the elite values he expresses in his eight verse creed. A brief treatment of Chaitanya’s specific nature will help us to understand the present state of the movement in America in the light of cost benefit analysis and inner-cultic cyclic grief.

Shri Chaitanya is seen as Krishna descended to earth for the purpose of reclaiming fallen souls. But, there was a condition, for after receiving the mercy of Shri Chaitanya, the aspirant is supposed to renounce sinful behavior. As a *sannyasi*, Shri Chaitanya does not associate with...
sinful people. However, even this requirement became an opportunity for a further dispensation in the actions of Chaitanya’s “lieutenant”, Shri Nityanananda (b. circa 1474), who promotes “economic stimulus packages” for the fallen. This is very pertinent because, as we explained previously, Prabhupada reinstated sin (aparadha) in the vocabulary of countercultural youth who rejected their parents’ religious tradition. And, as mentioned repeatedly, the ascetic emphasis of the daily Shrimad Bhagavatam lecture still faithfully represents the texts and Prabhupada’s commentaries. Since the adjustments most of the devotees have made have been more concerned with practice than belief, the ascetic ideal highlights the gulf that exists between practice and belief. Therefore, the new consciousness of sin requires a corresponding theological apparatus.

The Nityananda Principle

The generation of inferences, if they are to be considered admissible in religious circles, must still retain important elements of theological correctness. In this regard, Gaudiya literatures as interpreted by Prabhupada are a rich resource for the continuing unfolding of the Gaudiya mission in America. In Chaitanya’s hometown of Navadwip, two fallen brahmins, Jagai and Madai, were adverse to asceticism, and had become very powerful. Addicted to drink and women, they terrorized the citizens and insulted religion, causing general mayhem. Nityananda requested Jagai and Madhai to chant the holy names of the Lord, but they attacked him with broken shards of pottery. When Chaitanya arrived on the scene and proceeded to invoke his Sudarshana cakra, the brilliant battle quoit carried by Vishnu, Nityananda reasoned with Chaitanya to spare the lives of Jagai and Madhai (Sarvabhavana Dasa, no date, 391-405). Since everyone in the Kali Yuga has a mentality like Jagai and Madhai, Chaitanya would be logically constrained to kill everyone, defeating the purpose of his incarnation (Prabhupada transcription, 1969). Nityananda’s inference opposed his Lord’s will in order to fulfill his Lord’s purpose.
Because Nityananda represents Krishna’s brother Balarama, the giver of spiritual strength, a theological concept of ever-expanding mercy emerges in their combination, which extends into the Gaudiya guru as a representation of (but not identical to) Chaitanya and Nityananda. This sentiment is expressed on a daily basis in the guru-puja, the formal worship of Prabhupada as “an ocean of mercy.” The forbearance of the guru is important in the market theory of religion because it makes the spiritual product affordable to devotees grieving for their original orientation to Prabhupada’s teachings. It also has dividends for the mission, for in the merging of extraordinary cultic teachings with ordinary American society, it “spreads the rays of the benediction moon”, fulfilling the sentiments of the first verse of the Shikshashtaka. A plausible interpretation follows.

Fallen souls by themselves do not have the strength to take advantage of Chaitanya’s causeless mercy (the mercy is causeless because the benefactor is causeless, “the cause of all causes”, etc.), but Nityananda as superintendent of the Nama Hatta, Bhaktivinoda’s marketplace of the holy name, slashes prices, extends credit, pays out of his own pocket—anything to elevate suffering souls. By accepting the risk upon himself, in his mood as a servant of Shri Chaitanya mahavadanya—the most liberal avatar of Krishna—Nityananda goes searching for the most fallen souls, nurturing their spiritual life at whatever level these souls may be. This can be seen as an historical actualization of Krishna’s revelations to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita—that his love is inclusive, not exclusive; it is a “love call, a song coming from his [Krishna’s] heart to all hearts, which is the unifying message of the Bhagavad Gita” (Schweig, 2007: 272). This actualization of Krishna’s “love call” makes sin an opportunity instead of a roadblock in a cultural view from Bengal that finds almost everything about America to be sinful or at least conducive to sin. The sampradaya never condones sin, but the Nityananda principle removes sin
as an impediment to beginning the path of bhakti. One can begin the path from any level, because “Krishna consciousness is a free market economy: the actual currency is love and faith. Everyone can invest in Krishna and [eventually] achieve the highest perfection of life, Krishna prema (pure love of God)” (Atlanta ISKCON Nama Hatta Sangha, 1997). By this reasoning, Prabhupada’s house is open to anyone interested in entering it, because the four regulative principles and sixteen rounds do not loom so large, so forbiddingly. In other words, a contract (or even the complete fulfillment of an already existing contract) with the sampradaya is not required, only one’s sincere desire. This development has become particularly poignant as devotees—mostly the first generation but some gurukulis too—have started to pass away, and faith becomes far stronger than rules. When the last moments come, I have observed that New Raman Reti devotees gather together to help their friends go closer to Krishna, without bothering to inquire about the status of their sadhana.

The “love call” of the Bhagavad Gita finds expression in the Nityananda principle wherein the tension between the examples of the worldly Arjuna and Chaitanya the Bengali ascetic is resolved. This is why literatures offered by Prabhupada represent a coherent whole (a house) with plenty of room(s) for inferences. Christianity has a similar principle of divine love for humans in the sacrifice of the Son by the Father, but the threat of eternal damnation puts limits on the extension of credit. The Chaitanya theology, then, expands the market niche of Krishna devotion in America, where Christianity is the dominant religious tradition, for it competes with it in conceptual terms of salvation. In other words, the extension of credit by Krishna to humanity also invests Krishna with credit, reinforcing Prabhupada’s teaching that Krishna means “All Attractive.” Without the extension of credit by Krishna to souls and souls to Krishna, the movement would be in grave danger of its cultic exuberance dwindling into
simulacra because as church religion has demonstrated, it is easy to go through the motions of worshiping God. Additionally, this aspect of the Chaitanya doctrine dissolves consciousness of alterity, especially when devotees reflect upon Shri Chaitanya’s advice to “offer all respect to others.” These inferences can only help to expand market share. But because the world goes on as it always has, problems remain.

I would like to suggest that for the first generation, the continuing application of basic Gaudiya teachings soothes and replaces the pain of grief over the passing away of a previous way of looking at the world through Prabhupada’s teachings. The replacement of this way of looking at the world with inferential vision provides a fresh venue for the original vision of the rainbow in Wordsworth’s poem, here the “Spiritual Sky” vision offered by Prabhupada (Prabhupada tape transcription, 1975). In turn, this vision encourages the taking of new risks inherent in all theological inferences and decision making, actions that bring American Hare Krishna devotees closer to their guru in the sense that children who grow up become like their parents.

Prabhupada, although he taught an established religion, was a producer of culture that was consumed by his disciples. When they take responsibility for their innovations, they move beyond the stage of mere consumption of culture and become culture producers. As for the second generation, whether or not they realize it, they have been watching their parents grow up—that is, become responsible producers of culture one way or another, like their guru. Because religion, as McCutcheon repeatedly points out, is undoubtedly a plain old ordinary human institution (McCutcheon, 2001: 14-15), it seems that forming one’s own inferences, taking responsibility for them, and seeing them through to their conclusion, is a way to hold on to the “rainbow in the sky”.
Summary

The Gaudiya Vaishnava religion arrived in the United States when many young people were experimenting with alternate cultural patterns inspired by South Asian cultural patterns. Prabhupada brought a highly specific cultural pattern of thinking and living from his experience in India and from his guru, and fashioned a way for Americans to gain entrance into a new way of life, “the cult of Shri Chaitanya.” The teachings of the founder have been broadcast and received in ways Prabhupada would have, and would not have, approved, and while trying to attain church status, this cult has had many failures and many successes as an institution and in the lives of individual devotees. Along the way it has established a stable market niche in spite of opposition by more established religious interests, and in spite of the direction taken by the so-called counterculture that has furnished most of its adherents, the cult has influenced American society at least to the extent that Hare Krishna, like yoga and karma, has entered the American lexicon.

There has always been the tendency to affirm the teachings of the founder in ways that emphasize the ascetic dimension, while denying or minimizing the legitimacy of less strenuous approaches to the same teachings. These ascetic teachings are inseparable from a worldview that elevates the perspective of the male renouncer and minimizes the equality of women in this world and the importance of family life and ordinary love. ISKCON the institution influenced and allowed a situation of abuse to torment women, children—and as we have shown, men too—and this led to a further reduction of the movement’s status in society. However, ordinary love prevailed and the rise of the Hare Krishna householder caused temples to close due to lack of personnel and finances previously secured through sankirtana book distribution. But the movement did not come to an end, because in addition to many first generation devotees who have stuck with the religion, counterintuitively, many of the abused second generation still find
the religious market niche established by Prabhupada so compelling that they continue to spread the teachings of the founder in one way or another. Throughout America new people are being introduced to this religion in less extraordinary situations and with less doctrinal acceptance or understanding, but because they have social ties with the movement through friendship, marriage, or other interests we cannot separate these people from an analysis of movement development. In New Raman Reti, many of the third generation are being educated at the temple’s school or at the charter school operated by New Raman Reti devotees, where new young people may learn about Prabhupada’s teachings through their devotee friends. This is also happening in non-charter public schools attended by Hare Krishna youth, where some of their core principles (perhaps not doctrine) such as vegetarianism are exemplified for the general student population.

Chapter Four provided a glimpse of the complexity of New Raman Reti’s social profile, where neighborhood birthday parties and devotee funerals dissolve otherness between Gaudiya Vaishnavas and Christians and Jews. We also saw the determination of an uninitiated man to remain loyal to Prabhupada even though he must accept the cost of Prabhupada’s stated condemnation of some of his activities. Chapter Five examined the Hindu community as a distinct but supportive aspect of New Raman Reti in broad terms, but not, as a whole (or not to the same extent), invested in Prabhupada’s specific vision outlined in his publications. However, I suggested that the Hindu community’s investment in family life represents an example for the devotees of American parentage. As the first generation of American devotees reverted to a pattern of religiosity they knew in their childhood—attending a congregational place of worship once a week—the Hindus also became newly accustomed to the same pattern in addition to their
customary home worship. They began to make ISKCON their own institution for their own purposes.

But, simultaneously, we saw that in Chapter Six the second generation affirmed an understanding that Krishna consciousness is an individual instead of an institutional affair. Consequently, they would like to be accepted as they are, not according to an ideal, and are less invested than their parents in discriminating between classes of devotees or even between the Hare Krishna religion and the rest of the world, mixing more freely with the world as they attend schools and go about their careers. Like the Hindus, they are more prepared than their parents to take Prabhupada’s teachings on lifestyle as an ideal, rather than a requirement. They are not very committed to the institution, but have demonstrated profound respect for its founder. The third generation has not been abused in their educational experience. Because few of this generation have attained their majority their history has not been recorded.

In contrast to previous studies, in this dissertation I have attempted to portray the cultic life of the first generation as a new life beginning with their association with Prabhupada or his disciples, and I have tried to show how rational choice theory could be applied to the cult to church paradigm. As the first generation matured many discovered that the passing of the founder, and the passing of some of his views as relevant to their lives, was an opportunity for growth instead of stagnation, and they took responsibility for decisions affecting their own lives and the lives of their families. In doing this they joined their own children who have searched for “the ashrama within themselves”, a way to affirm the goodness of the world and still be Hare Krishna devotees. Although in some ways their creativity departs from the vision of the founder, it also reflects the urgency of the founder, who tried to establish a spirituality of Gaudiya Vaishnava dwelling in America.
This dissertation has introduced a new angle in the study of new religious movements: an explicit demonstration of a close correlation between the cult to church paradigm and rational choice theory, focusing on costs and benefits influencing, and being influenced by, moods and motivations, in a religious market. It is an ethnography that emphasizes the illumination of emic categories by using etic tools. And, while attempting to give (perhaps) unprecedented voice to the supply side of a particular religious market equation, it allows for fine points—previously unresearched perhaps due to lack of interest in religious cost benefit analysis—such as how anyone could become a cultist in the first place (what to speak of remain a cultist in spite of great failures), or how many devotees tolerated abusive authorities. I also showed how ordinary life has actually been a boon to extraordinary—that is, cultic—aspirations by expanding the concept of the mission beyond its foundations in school and work, and in neighborhood situations. Satvatove is an excellent example of the merging of the extraordinary with the ordinary in the cult to church paradigm because it fosters mutual respect between cultic teachings and ordinary concerns. For many, the search for “the ashrama within themselves” has entailed a balance between authority and intuition and made the teachings accessible within the movement, while still engaging the wider public in the most basic aspects of Shri Chaitanya’s cult—kirtana, and prasada.

Finally, this dissertation has been an experiment in research reflexivity, an experiment in the dissolution of boundaries between participants and observers, and has addressed a concern expressed by one of my professors, who encouraged this project: “It takes a cultist to explain a cult.” While acknowledging that it also takes researchers such as Burke Rochford, Rodney Stark, Max Weber, skeptics such as Russell McCutcheon—and yes, even anti-cultists—to explain Shri Chaitanya’s cult in America, I am hopeful that any problems the reader may find in my
presentation is more than compensated by the rewards. As critical researchers, cost benefit analysis is not an option—it is our bounden duty.

**Conclusion**

Grief as the basis of all rites of passage explains the psychological differences that separate groups at New Raman Reti, for the second generation must grieve for their physical childhood—as traumatic as it was for the first cohort of this generation—which happens to have been informed by cultic religion. The first generation, having first experienced the cult they adopted as a new religious movement, has also to grieve for the passing away of an ascetic way of being in and seeing the world that was once new to America. The Hindu community has quite a different set of grieves, having left India and being compelled to watch the second and third generation grow up without the memes of Gujarat or Tamil Nadu, or at least, lacking the support of the wider society for the inculcation of these memes within their descendents. The third generation of all ethnic/national cohorts at New Raman Reti is now approaching the crucial transitional stage of late adolescence and we do not know what will become of them. According to Turner they will certainly grieve for their lost childhood. But the briefest of images of their unarticulated hopes, and a timely image of the experience of the first and second generation, and Prabhupada’s wish that his cult become a church in its new land, can be proffered in the expectation that much more work on cultic development could be expected to illuminate a Krishna consciousness spirituality of dwelling.

New Raman Reti retains the potential to become an agricultural and dairy community, but because devotees, for the most part, have not come forward to work in this capacity, cows are not encouraged to mate—they wander around, barren, in their pasture, producing nothing but dung for the gardens, which are quite successful. The aging herd reminds me of the passing away of parts of Prabhupada’s vision for America, but the founder would be gratified to hear the
grandchildren of his disciples as they mingle together in the schools within shouting distance of
the temple, where they gather on Sunday to chant, dance, and take *prasada*. 13

13 A fourth generation girl was born at New Raman Reti in 2008. Her name is Kumari Sunshine.
APPENDIX A
ISKCON’S CHARTER

1. To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.

2. To propagate a consciousness of Krishna as it is revealed in the Bhagavad Gita and Shrimad Bhagavatam.

3. To bring the members of the Society together with each other and nearer to Krishna, the prime entity, thus to develop the idea within members, and humanity at large, that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of Godhead (Krishna).

4. To teach and encourage the sankirtana movement, congregational chanting of the holy name of God as revealed in the teachings of Lord Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

5. To erect for the members and for society at large, a holy place of transcendental pastimes, dedicated to the Personality of Krishna.

6. To bring members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler and more natural way of life.

7. With a view towards achieving the aforementioned purposes, to publish and distribute periodicals, magazines, books, and other writings.
1. Glory to the Shri Krishna sankirtana, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditional life, of repeated birth and death. This sankirtana movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of transcendental bliss, and it enables us to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious.

2. O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings, and thus You have hundreds and millions of names, like Krishna and Govinda. In these transcendental names You have invested all Your transcendental energies. There are not even hard and fast rules for chanting these names. O my Lord, out of kindness You enable us to easily approach You by Your holy names, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for them.

3. One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and should be ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.

4. O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service, birth after birth.

5. O son of Maharaja Nanda (Krishna), I am Your eternal servitor, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up from this ocean of death and place me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet.

6. O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of Your name?

7. O Govinda! Feeling Your separations I am considering a moment to be like twelve years or more. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and I am feeling all vacant in the world in Your absence.

8. I know no one but Krishna as my Lord, and He shall remain so even if He handles me roughly by His embrace or makes me brokenhearted by not being present before me. He is completely free to do anything and everything, for He is always my worshipful Lord, unconditionally.
APPENDIX C
GLOSSARY

_Advaita_—The impersonal, monistic teaching of the Hindu philosopher Shankara.

_Advaitin_—A follower of _Advaita_.

_Aratrika_—A ceremony in which a deity is honored with lamps and other articles of worship.

_Ashrama_—A stage of life as a student, a family person, retired, or renounced. It also refers to a physical dwelling for spiritual purposes.

_Bhakti_—In Hinduism, religious devotion to a god or guru.

_Brihat Mridanga_—The “great drum” or printing press, to spread the Gaudiya mission.

_Darshan_—The act and experience of seeing divinity and being seen by divinity.

_Ekadashi_—A bimonthly observance at the waning and waxing moons when Vaishnavas fast. For Gaudiya Vaishnavas the minimal observance is a fast from grains and beans. Fasting on Ekadashi is thought to bring extra potency to _sadhana_.

_Emic_—Insider perspectives.

_Etic_—Outsider perspectives.

_Gaudiya Vaishnavism_—A form of Vaishnavism that 1) Takes Krishna to be the original form of the god Vishnu, instead of Vishnu to be the original form of male divinity; 2) takes Radha to be the original form of the goddess Lakshmi, instead of Lakshmi to be the original form of female divinity; 3) takes Shri Chaitanya to be a form of Krishna in the mood of Radha. In other words, Gaudiya Vaishnavism believes in an Absolute Truth as a divine couple, and Shri Chaitanya as an expression of this divinity on earth. God is taken as lesser truth than the divine couple.

_Governing Board Commission (GBC)_—ISKCON’s administrative apparatus.

_Gunas_—The three “modes of nature”, goodness (enlightenment), passion, and ignorance, or maintenance, creation, and destruction.

_Gurukula_—A school where the young are educated by a guru.

_Gurukulis_—The children of first generation Hare Krishna devotees who self-identify with Prabhubpada’s teachings.

_Hare Krishna mantra_—Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare. According to Prabhubpada, it means “Oh Lord, oh energy of the Lord, please engage me in your devotional service.”
ISKCON—The institution founded by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. An institution is defined as a structure and mechanism of social order and cooperation governing religious projects and people.

Jati—The position fixed by one’s birth. It also refers to the many subdivisions of the varnas, commonly known as the caste system.

Jnana—in Hinduism, the spiritual path of knowledge.

Karma—1) Action, specifically action that leads to a reaction. 2) As it has generally come to be understood in English, reactions from previous actions. 2) Ritual actions designed to bring benefits to the practitioner.

Kirtana—Glorification of Krishna, commonly performed musically with drums and cymbals.

Mandira—a Hindu temple.

Maya—The illusory potency of Krishna conceived as a goddess, who acts upon conditioned souls so that they can learn by hard lessons that their real home is in the spiritual world with Krishna. Although she behaves toward conditioned souls somewhat like the Devil of Christianity, her motive is ultimately benevolent, performing a thankless task for all concerned. When the conditioned soul is no longer fooled by her tricks, she is satisfied.

Mleccha—a barbarian.

Nama Hatta—the marketplace of the holy name.

Puja—a Hindu ritual in which a god is treated like an honored guest with incense, food, flowers, and song.

Rationality—the tendency for humans to calculate their interests.

Sadhana—Spiritual practice at different levels. Vaidhi sadhana pertains to the stage of rules and regulations.

Samadhi—as defined by Prabhupada, a high state of blissful spiritual consciousness achieved by meditation or devotional service.

Sampradaya—a Hindu religious “community” with a comprehensive and systematic religious teaching, usually claiming antiquity and a scriptural basis. Sampradayas have guru-disciple lineage (parampara) that pass down teachings and initiate new disciples.

Samsara—the incessant round of reincarnation in the material world.

Sannyasa—in Hinduism, the celibate, renounced order of life in which one commits “social suicide.”
Sankirtana—The congregational chanting of Krishna’s names, and for the Hare Krishna movement in America, any activity that expands the mission.

Seva—service to a god or a guru.

Shabda brahman—For Prabhupada, “Vedic” scripture. In America, the words of the guru, who represented the scriptural tradition, had the same status.

Shakti—Energy, sometimes personified.

Tulasi—A sacred small tree or plant worshiped by Vaishnavas as a goddess.

Upanishads—The most philosophical portion of the Vedas.

Vaishnava—A worshiper of Vishnu or Vishnu’s avatars. Although the Gaudiya tradition regards the various forms of Vishnu as Krishna’s avatars, the tradition is still known as Vaishnava.

Varnashrama dharma—The system of four social orders (brahmins, priests and scholars; kshatriyas, administrators and soldiers; vaishyas, agriculturalists and merchants; shudras, skilled and unskilled workers) and four spiritual orders (brahmacharis, students; grihasthas, married householders; vanaprasthas, retired elderly persons; sannyasins, male renunciates).

Vedas—The oldest scriptures of Hinduism, the most important of which is the Rig Veda. The main topics are sacrifices to various deities and philosophical subjects.
Diacritics are not used for transliterating Sanskrit words, so Chaitanya Caritamrita, for instance, may appear as Caitanya Caritamrta in the bibliography, Krishna as Krsna, etc.

Folio refers to Folio Corporation’s full-text indexing software for Bhaktivedanta VedaBase, designed to assist readers in locating words and phrases in Prabhupada’s writings.
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