

TRANSFORMATIONS:

**The Stories of Five Hare Krishna Devotees,
and Why They Converted**

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I. Introduction

Before we plunge into the strange and disorienting world of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness -- or ISKCON, as it is generally called -- it might do us well to ask ourselves a few introductory questions and reflect on a few introductory observations.

How do we confront and come to understand devotees of ISKCON, whose religion, lifestyle and values are so different our own as we lead our lives in the mainstream of secularized Judeo-Christian America? The devotees' lives seem light years away from ours, their world so alien -- driving home to sleep after a night on the town, perhaps, we hear them chanting together powerfully to celebrate the start of their day at that very same hour when we, weary and exhausted, are ready to go to sleep. They are ^{the} people of the early morning, of the sunrise, while we are people of the sunset, of the night. Though they may be our neighbors and call themselves Americans, the very rhythm of their lives transports them to another time, place and culture.

To understand a group like ISKCON, then, we have to throw away our stereotypes and our fears and confront the devotees as they are, in a dialogue, and not as we would like them to be. We have to be able to see elements of ourselves in them and elements of them in ourselves. To do so is not always easy. Truly understanding a Krishna devotee's world view is a scary process, an alienating process, potentially even a revolutionary one -- but a process that, it seems to me, is more accessible to a sensitive student of religion than, say, a student of sociology or philosophy.

People's stereotypes about Krishna Consciousness and non-mainstream religious groups like it are essentially twofold. We might call the first stereotype the popular one and the second stereotype, the academic. Both

stereotypes stem from a lack of sympathy for and understanding of a genuinely religious way of life.

The popular stereotype of the new, non-mainstream religious groups is familiar to all of us, especially since it is the basic viewpoint of the mass media. This stereotype brands anything out of the ordinary as a "cult," assumes all "cult" members to be the victims of "brainwashing" or coercion, and sees forced "deprogramming" as being an entirely legitimate means of getting devotees back to their "normal" lives. This popular view dismisses anything unfamiliar as abnormal, even while it shortsightedly refuses to posit any concrete set of solid values to serve as an alternative to the "deranged" values that the "cults" espouse. This stereotype, then, belongs to the world of the scared parents who feel deeply frightened and threatened by the radical alternative to the status quo which the new religions offer. Certainly those who hold this stereotype -- and that includes all of us, to some extent -- have much to say in their defense since ~~many~~ these modern American "cults" are more than occasionally guilty of these popular accusations. But this stereotype, like all stereotypes, is limiting because it refuses to ask the fundamental question: Why? For those who hold the stereotype, the equation is simple. We are sane: they are crazy: therefore we must make them sane again. This response may be loving and heartfelt, but ultimately it is provincial. Refusing to ask essential questions and unwilling to examine itself honestly, this popular stereotype retreats into a corner and, frightened by any type of deep religiousness, divides the world into the polarity of us-and-them. Into this stereotype, then, falls the great mass of American society which, instinctively out to protect itself -- that is, protect ourselves -- refuses to approach any sort of dialogue and stays self-confident and secure in the world of external appearances.

This popular stereotype, however, is not the only wall that stands

between mainstream America and an understanding of the new religious groups. An academic stereotype, commonly held, by sociologists, anthropologists and some students of religion also retreats from a position of authentic dialogue even while it attempts to view the new religious groups with greater sensitivity. The academic stereotype dares to ask the question "why?" but asks it from the detached perspective of an ethnologist, of a social observer, and not from one of dialogue. This stereotype sees beyond the popular stereotypes of "cults," "brainwashing," and "derangement," and perhaps even recognizes that one distant day, many years ago, Christianity itself was no more than a "cult" practiced by a few "brainwashed" members living on the fringes of Roman society. The academic stereotype, however, stemming from studies on alienation similar to those that Kenneth Keniston did in the early 1960's, sees devotees as alienated and disaffected youth who, unhappy with society and with themselves and disillusioned with a life without goals, are searching for more lasting ideals. The new religions, according to this stereotype, have helped lost young people to find themselves, for better or for worse. A study of people's conversion to Krishna Consciousness would be, for these academics, a study in alienation -- a look at those aimless, wandering individuals who, drifting in the liminal state of society's fringe, have floated into religious alternatives radically different from the structure of mainstream American life.

Until recently, I was one of those who held to this academic stereotype. To some degree, I still hold to it, just as I still hold to some elements of the popular stereotype. Undoubtedly, the academic stereotype contains many elements of truth. But, like all stereotypes, it is limiting and divides the world into us-and-them. The academic stereotype reflects the common scientific misconception -- dating back to Freud and prevalent in contemporary social thought -- that any sort of religious feeling is the

result of mental instability or neurotic insecurity, and that genuinely strong or orthodox religious feeling is nothing short of complete psychosis or hysteria. Devotees of ISKCON and groups like it, therefore, have dedicated their lives to these worlds of total meaning not because they have experienced any real religious transformation or revelation but simply because they are alienated, disaffected or unhappy. The social scientist, though, does not understand that one need not be severely alienated or liminal to join a non-mainstream religious group or undergo a religious conversion. Or, to put it better: one's being alienated does not preclude the additional possibility of a genuine religious experience. Here is where the student of religion comes in. Perhaps only someone with a sensitivity to the varieties of religious experience and practice can appreciate the Krishna devotees' vision of the world.

A study that Marjorie J. Thompson of Swarthmore College conducted back in 1973-74 on the Divine Light Mission, a pseudo-Hindu religious group led by Guru Maharaj Ji and now apparently defunct, was a key factor in jolting me into looking beyond the academic stereotype. Central to Thompson's study was a three-page survey, to which about twenty devotees or "premmies" replied. In the survey, the premmies openly answered questions about their religious upbringings, socio-economic backgrounds, views about life and society and personalities. The survey revealed that the premmies came from a wide variety of economic backgrounds, ranging from working class to upper middle class, and a number of different religious persuasions -- Catholic, Protestant, Jewish -- roughly proportionate to how many were in the local population. All were between the ages of 19 and 27. One question on the survey, however, was particularly surprising and revealing. It asked: "How did you feel about life in general or your situation in particular before finding Divine Light?" The premmies could choose among five responses: very positive,

fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative, very negative. Of the seventeen premies who responded to this question, four said they felt ^{very} positive about life in general and their situations in particular before finding Divine Light. Another seven fell into the fairly positive category, leaving two who said they felt neutral and four who felt very negative. In other words, almost three times as many premies felt good about life before their conversion experiences than felt bad about it.

Did the survey reveal the Guru Maharaj Ji's disciples to be alienated and disaffected social misfits, unable to function in the mainstream of society? Or did it suggest, rather, that the premies were essentially people like us, dissatisfied perhaps with certain aspects of modern American life but not particularly unhappy or maladjusted? Maybe the Krishna devotees are really a cross-section of society -- the happy and the unhappy -- and to label them as "alienated" without hearing their stories and knowing their motivations means reducing them to a sociological stereotype that may have only tenuous validity. It seems to me that living in modern America and being between the ages of 19 and 27 in themselves constitute a state of liminality that can push even the best-adjusted and most self-confident of people to the edge of society. Something in the ambiance and ferment of the late 1960's and early 1970's also seems to have pushed certain people to this liminal edge who otherwise would have been content to follow the values and ideals of the mainstream. But these are just speculations. The essential thing now is that we recognize that these strange people with shaved heads and paint on their foreheads who wander the streets of our cities dancing and chanting ecstatically may not be fundamentally different from those of us who go to classes every morning with our books under our arms or who commute to work each day in skirts or three-piece suits. The

Krishna devotess have made different choices, followed different paths and explored different potentials of the human -- and spiritual -- experience. To understand them we must hear them talk about themselves and their experiences from their own point of view, without any of our limiting stereotypes. In this way we can confront them in true dialogue. What follows, then, are the personal stories of a few devotees of Krishna Consciousness and, afterwards, my analysis of them from the perspective of comparative religion.

II. An Overview of Krishna Consciousness

History.

As a religion in America under the name ISKCON, Krishna Consciousness dates back to 1966, one year after the arrival of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the United States. Bhaktivedanta Swami, or "Prabhupad" as he is known to his devotees, brought the Indian form of worship to the West when he was seventy years old. But Krishna devotees see themselves as being part of a rich cultural and religious tradition that stretches back thousands of years.

In the broadest sense, the American devotees are Vaisnavas, followers of Vaisnavism, "signifying the cultural and theological tradition based upon the worship of Krishna or Vishnu," according to Steven J. Gelberg, one of the movement's scholars who, as Subhananda-dasa, was one of my contacts at ISKCON's Philadelphia temple or ashram. "We refer to ourselves as Vaisnavas."¹ ISKCON identifies itself, then, with a widespread form of devotional Hinduism which exists throughout India but is particularly common to Bengal and the north. Vaisnavism carries with it a 4500 year history of sacred texts, including early Vedic hymns believed to be of divine origin, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad-gita, an epic from 100 B.C. and earlier which places special emphasis on Krishna's wisdom and the need for one to devote oneself to Him. As might be expected, then, the Bhagavad-gita is the fountain of the devotees' philosophy -- their Bible, so to speak -- and it is this work that they are most likely to be selling in airports and shopping centers across the country. So although Vaisnavism as properly known today dates back to only the seventh or eighth century A.D., its growth and development has always found inspiration in classical Vedic literature of divine and semi-divine works like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-gita.

Linked to Vaisnavism in India is bhakti-yoga, the practice of "devotion to a personal deity" which was "first fully expounded in the Bhagavad-gita."² Since much of Hinduism comes out of a philosophic tradition emphasizing the transcendent undifferentiated nature of the One, the Absolute which underlies all appearances, the development of bhakti-yoga represents -- on the level of popular religion -- a significant step away from the pure monistic Hinduism of theology. Veneration of Krishna or Vishnu is parallel, in the roughest sense, to veneration of Jesus Christ in the Western religious tradition. Christ, like Krishna, is a personal god demanding personal devotion and yet stemming out of an older tradition which emphasizes the impersonality and oneness of God. A devotee's life today, then, is one of constant bhakti-yoga. Scholars date the practice of bhakti-yoga in India to the first and second centuries A.D., although more general forms of devotional worship in the area undoubtedly go back to prehistory.

The practice of bhakti-yoga continued throughout India during our Middle Ages. It was the revivalist charsima of Sri Krishna Caitanya (1486-1537), though, that generated a new movement centered around bhakti-yoga and serves as direct inspiration for Krishna Consciousness today, which regards Caitanya as a saint or "full avatara of Radha and Krishna."³ According to J. Stillson Judah, "Hindu religion at the time of Caitanya had deteriorated, and was characterized by esoteric cults of obsolescent tantric Buddhism and numerous cults of aboriginal origin, hardly above the animistic level."⁴ A series of Muslim invasions had left Bengal in social and cultural disorder. Into this state of decadence and disarray, Caitanya -- both a theologian and a charismatic religious leader -- led a revival of "intense religious passion" that reasserted Vaisnavism as the central religion in Bengal.⁵ Caitanya and his devotees disregarded differences of caste and expressed pure love of Krishna and His female

consort, Radha, through emotionally-charged chanting, singing and dancing, a practice known as the kirtan. It is through this same essential kirtan that most Americans today have come to know the devotees, who until recently would dance and sing ecstatically in the streets of major cities. For restoring and reviving devotion to Krishna, then, Caitanya is the direct source of inspiration for ISKCON. For the devotees, of course, he is more than an historical force; he is an incarnation of the "Supreme Lord" who "descends to this world in every age to help the conditioned living beings come back to home..."⁶ Accordingly, devotees have found prophetic evidence of Caitanya's divinity in the Upanishads and the Bhagavata Purana, an eighth-century commentary which describes the life of Krishna and thus, along with the Bhagavad-gita, plays a major role in shaping the devotees' religious belief and practice.

Veneration of Krishna through bhakti-yoga sharply declined after Caitanya's death and continued declining until Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914) led another revival in the late nineteenth century. Thomas J. Hopkins notes that "by the middle of the nineteenth century the movement had lost much of its vitality. It lacked leaders who could raise it above the level of popular religiosity based largely on heredity and habit, and it lacked articulate theological leaders."⁷ Educated in the Western tradition, Bhaktivinoda spent most of his life translating sacred Sanskrit texts into Bengali and thus making the Vaisnava tradition far more accessible to the average India. He also dedicated himself to promoting Krishna Consciousness throughout India and guided the building of an elaborate temple at the site of Caitanya's supposed birthplace. While Bhaktivinoda was not an evangelist or a charismatic revivalist, his scholarship and energy managed to restore Krishna Consciousness to a position of importance and respectability in the religious life of Bengal. His son, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, carried on his father's work well

into the twentieth century, establishing sixty-four Krishna Consciousness temples in India and gaining hundreds of serious disciples. One of these disciples was Prabhupad.

Prabhupad (1896-1977) is the individual whose creative energy, charisma and spiritual vision singlehandedly brought Caitanya's form of bhakti-yoga to the United States and institutionalized it as ISKCON. During his early and middle years, Prabhupad -- then known as A. C. Bhaktivedanta -- led a dual existence, managing a large chemical firm while at the same time studying Krishna Consciousness under the guidance of Bhaktisiddhanta. In 1959 he took the vow of sanyassi -- that is, the vow of the renunciate or ascetic -- and put all his energies into spiritual pursuits. Then, in 1965, claiming to be the commissioned missionary of the late Bhaktisiddhanta, Prabhupad brought Krishna Consciousness to the United States, a land where he had virtually no contacts and little familiarity with the culture. He was seventy years old. Within a year he had established ISKCON ashrams in New York and San Francisco and gained a small core of enthusiastic devotees.

Prabhupad was, it seems, an extraordinarily gifted man who arrived in the United States at the fortuitous moment when social disorder and spiritual decadence were leading many young people to question long-held values and search for alternative lifestyles. The soil was fertile for planting radically different ideas, much as it was in the days of Caitanya. The earliest American members of ISKCON were typically "hippies" from Greenwich Village or Haight-Asbury who, disillusioned with a transient unstable lifestyle, found in ISKCON a world of spiritual permanence. Prabhupad's long years as a businessman in India gave him the administrative and organizational skills necessary to create and promote the new religious institution. More than a mere administrator, though, Prabhupad

was also a brilliant scholar whose commentaries on the Vedic classics like the Bhagavad-gita advocated a concrete set of rituals and practices to parallel the abstract theological implications of the philosophy. His scholarship, like his work, united the philosophical and the practical in a way that made it possible for hundreds of devotees to live Krishna Consciousness and practice bhakti-yoga. However, more than any single factor, Prabhupad's personal charisma contributed to ISKCON's early success in the United States. Thomas J. Hopkins, who met Prabhupad during ISKCON's incipient years, has said:

Bhaktivedanta Swami's personal example of devotion was not only impressive, but it was compelling, as evidenced by the way in which so many young Westerners were drawn to him. What got people chanting the Hare Krishna mantra in the beginning was confronting Bhaktivedanta Swami and being just overwhelmed by the man and feeling, "I want to be near this person; I want to know this person; I want to learn from this person; I want to become like this person." And his approach was one of taking people on and saying, "Here's how." 8

Prabhupad complemented his charisma, then, with the alternative of a practical lifestyle.

Early observers of ISKCON have characterized its formative years as being unstructured, and disorganized, with most of the devotees' energy coming from Prabhupad's personal inspiration and the constant chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra: "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." Hopkins remembers meeting devotees who had never heard of Caitanya or the Bhagavata Purana.⁹ As the years passed, though, Prabhupad managed to institutionalize this initial charisma by insisting on a rigorous ascetic lifestyle, almost entirely Indian in origin, as the ideal path of total devotion. He was not going to allow himself to be, in A.L. Basham's words, "a streamlined swami."¹⁰ Rather, ISKCON came to be synonymous with a lifestyle of total commitment, as all-consuming a world as that of a Christian or Buddhist

monk. Devotees of lesser dedication were permitted but not encouraged. Being a devotee meant -- and today still means -- living as part of an ashram community, giving all or most of one's earnings to the organization, and leading a life that surrendered personal interests to those of the institution. It entailed, in effect, a complete change of identity, society and culture.

ISKCON has, for the most part, grown and prospered, although it seems to me that, in recent years, both its growth and prosperity have levelled off. Prabhupad managed to bring Krishna Consciousness to other countries as well, so that ISKCON now has centers in six continents, although about half the centers are found in North America. There is also the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, a publishing house dedicated to promoting Prabhupad's extensive writings and Krishna Consciousness; Back to Godhead magazine, "the magazine of the Hare Krishna movement;" numerous Krishna Conscious restaurants, which serve the general public; a number of self-sufficient farms; and an enormous temple in rural West Virginia, which, called New Vrndavana, is the spiritual center for all devotees in the United States. In 1974 J. Stillson Judah found that there were 68 ISKCON centers worldwide, including 28 in the United States. According to the latest issue of Back to Godhead, there are today more than sixty centers in North America, and slightly over a hundred in other parts of the world. It is doubtful, though, that there are -- or ever have been -- more than about three thousand fulltime devotees in the United States. Exact figures, though, are not available. In recent years devotees have taken a more low-key approach to proselytizing and have started selling literature and soliciting donations in street clothes rather than in their robes. Chanting and dancing in public is also largely a thing of the past, although last year in Madrid I was lucky enough to watch a group of devotees do kirtan in a big central plaza in the presence of hundreds puzzled

but respectful Spaniards. One could say that as ISKCON has left the social turmoil and turbulence of the 1960's and early 1970's for the growing conservatism and return to traditional values of the late 1970's and 1980's, it has moved away from aggressive proselytizing and the need for growth in membership and headed towards more inwardly-drawn concerns, such as the devotees' desire for marriage, the problems of educating children into the movement, and winning respect in academic circles. To its credit, ISKCON has never compromised on the rigorous demands of its ascetic lifestyle and has even more strongly aligned itself with India's Vedic and bhakti traditions. In this way, even after Prabhupad's death, ISKCON has managed to survive while other new religious groups have come and gone.

Prabhupad's role in and importance to Krishna Consciousness remains immense. As a guru in the Vaisnava tradition he possesses elements of the divine, and, according to Gelberg, "serves as a completely transparent medium" to finding God.¹¹ As a traditional Indian saying goes: "By the grace of God one finds a guru and by the grace of guru one finds God."¹² To show this reverence, devotees make daily offerings to Prabhupad and call him "His Divine Grace." Subhananda's apartment has, along with images of Krishna, Radha and Caitanya, numerous photos of His Divine Grace, and the Philadelphia ashram has a life-size statue which, the first time I saw it, I took for Prabhupad himself. In terms of religious history, then, Prabhupad is an event-making man. Krishna Consciousness existed before him but without him there would be no ISKCON.

Krishna Consciousness devotees, then, do not see themselves as crackpot cultists of a strange new religion or messianic prophets of a passing fad. Rather, they see themselves as part of a long-established tradition, stretching back through Prabhupad and Bhaktivinoda to Caitanya, and beyond them to popular Vaisnavism in India, the Bhagavad-gita and the sacred

writings. So while we sit and smile at them, many of ~~them~~ are probably secretly smiling at us. Most modern religious scholars would agree that ISKCON is a legitimate part of this aged tradition. But how would Indians -- or specifically, Indian Vaisnavas and Krishna devotees -- see the Western devotees? Would they accept them as the authentic heirs of Indian religious culture? Perhaps this question is not an important one, for what is important is how the devotees see themselves and not how others see them. Still, Shrivatsa Goswami points out in an interview with Gelberg that an Indian Vaisnava would probably deal with the question in terms of the distinction between the spiritual and the material. On a spiritual level he would see no essential difference between a sincere Western devotee and an Indian one, born into the system. The strength of each one's bhakti is what matters. But human beings must also live in the material world and, on this level, the Indian Vaisnava would see a difference between the Westerner and himself. Certain social and cultural distinctions, questions of birth and upbringing, cannot be overcome. -The spirit is one thing and social reality, another.¹³

So when we study the lives of the devotees we have to remember that, while ISKCON is part of a rich religious tradition going back thousands of years, it is also a unique social phenomenon that is new to modern America. ISKCON, then, embodies the same irony that characterizes all religious movements and revivals. That irony is the tension -- the dialectic -- between the desire for the change that brings new meaning to the world and the need to be a part of a larger tradition that goes back to the creation of the world and gives order to ~~the chaos of the cosmos.~~

Belief and Practice

The fundamental beliefs of Krishna Consciousness, like those of Hinduism in general, rest in the conception of an Absolute Reality which underlies the illusion of all worldly appearances and exists eternally. Devotees believe that human beings, like everything in the world, are not essentially material beings but, rather, ^{re}all part of the same eternal spirit which is the Godhead, the source of all life and all truth. However, devotees hold that Krishna Consciousness goes "beyond the formless philosophies" of Indian theology since it advocates that the Godhead has a personal incarnation in the form of Krishna, "the Supreme Personality of Godhead."¹⁴ Krishna, then, is the divine conceived of in human form and one can reach the Godhead by devoting oneself entirely to loving Krishna. Artists and writers have traditionally conceptualized Krishna as a mischievous young cowherd with blue skin who, playing the flute, is often accompanied by his female consort Radha. She is an aspect of Him just as He is an incarnation of the Godhead. Together, Krishna and Radha offer the devotees a concrete and humanly-understandable path to the Absolute. Following this path means practicing bhakti-yoga.

This path of devotion emphasizes two actions: "chanting and hearing the name and glories of the Lord, and rendering service unto a spiritual master who is a pure devotee of the Lord."¹⁵ Doing so will "destroy all inauspicious material contamination within the heart of the spiritual candidate and thus establish his loving service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead as an irrevocable fact."¹⁶ Chanting the Hare Krishna mantra is the devotee's single most important act. For the devotee, the mantra's very sound is holy. "According to Vaisnava wisdom, the holy name of Krishna has extraordinary spiritual potency because the name of God is non-different from God Himself....In the divine realm, however, symbol

embodies reality. Krishna self-manifests within His 'sound incarnation,' His holy name."¹⁷ Thus writes a devotee. To make Krishna manifest, then, each devotee has a string of 108 beads. When they have chanted the mantra for each bead, they have completed a round. Fulltime devotees must chant a minimum of sixteen rounds daily, or a total of 1728 mantras a day. The holy sound of Krishna's name, in this way never leaves the devotee's mind. Through the mantra the divine becomes ever-present.

The other essential process in this devotional path is having a spiritual master. As I noted before, one cannot find Godhead without the guidance of a guru, and Krishna Consciousness stresses the need for total submission to a higher spiritual authority. In the context of ISKCON, these authorities are Caitanya, Prabhupad, and a small list of spiritually self-realized men who have demonstrated enough wisdom to serve as gurus for the community. Prabhupad himself, in fact, selected most of them. The ideal guru, though, does not use his power in an arbitrary or authoritarian manner. Rather, he works with devotees to help each one find his best path of bhakti or devotion. His authority emanates more from his actions and his example than ^{from} the use of his power.

The Krishna Consciousness -- and, indeed, Hindu -- belief in the illusion of all appearances presumes a philosophy and a lifestyle that emphasize other-worldly and spiritual values over transitory, material ones. Devotees believe in the transmigration of souls, holding that the part of the eternal soul which is in each individual leaves one's body after one dies and finds another material body to be its home. Only by realizing love for Krishna can one overcome this endless cycle and find a spiritual body to match one's soul. In that world, the Messianic Age of Krishna Consciousness, there will be "none of the disappointment, despair, fear and pain that plague this world."¹⁸ Sensual worldly pleasures have no

place in the devotee's world. Each must "strictly refrain from four major sinful activities: 1) illicit sex, 2) meat eating, 3) intoxication and 4) gambling."¹⁹ Sex, then, is permitted only for married couples, and even then only for the specific purpose of procreation at a time when the woman is fertile. Any human relationship is "a mere shadow relationship" of the supreme loving relationship between the devotee and Krishna.²⁰ All actions in the material world must be consecrated towards ultimate spiritual salvation. Devotees offer their vegetarian food or prasadam to Krishna before tasting it. If they are fulltime devotees, all their earnings must go to ISKCON, and, if they have no earnings, they must spend their days either promoting Krishna Consciousness in public or serving some useful function in their ashram community. Krishna Consciousness's radically-ascetic world-denying tendency makes a life of total devotion a fundamental necessity for those who are spiritually serious. Ideally, the materialist who tries this spiritual path "automatically loses his taste for pale things."²¹

To institutionalize this radical philosophy ISKCON has imported the traditional Indian life cycle -- the Four Stages of Life -- and incorporated it, with some significant changes, into a completely alien culture. The first stage in this life cycle is brahmacharya, the life of the students, who wear saffron robes, have shaved heads (like all devotees), and live totally committed to Krishna Consciousness, usually in an ashram, surrounded entirely by other devotees. The vast majority of devotees are brahmacaris who, in effect, are cloistered monks, although being brahmacharya often entails a great deal of mobility from ashram to ashram. After having been brahmacaris, devotees may choose to marry and become grhastha or householders. The grhastha's ascetic lifestyle is no less demanding than that of the brahmachari's but, rather, less-intensive since it requires

living outside the constant shelter of the ashram and the company of the brahmacaris. Since married life is more conducive to worldly temptation, ISKCON urges members who can remain single to avoid marriage. Most, though, end up marrying. Some fall from the ideal after marrying; others maintain the same level of spiritual discipline that characterized their lives in brahmacarya.

The third and final stage of life is sanyassa, the renounced order of those select few who have shown the discipline and commitment necessary to qualify them for the sort of professional monkhood that commands a special respect among devotees. Some sanyassis take their vows after having been brahmacaris and therefore never marry. Others, as in India, leave their wives after twenty-five years or more of marriage and dedicate themselves to the life of a wandering ascetic. Obviously, ISKCON's very youth makes it necessary that the majority of the sanyassis currently in the organization are ^{of} the first type. Since all devotees are essentially monks, the sanyassi's lifestyle is not fundamentally different from the brahmacari's. His higher stage of commitment, though, often gives him the role of a teacher or a sage.

Most devotees live in or near an ashram and go through their daily rituals as part of an ashram community. Since part of every ashram is the sacred space of the temple room itself, "living in the temple of the Lord is transcendent, beyond all material modes."²² The ashram generally contains between twenty and fifty fulltime members, mostly brahmacaris, who eat, sleep and chant together. Beyond this core of fulltime devotees are a handful of less committed ones who are just starting out on the devotional path or, perhaps, closet devotees who have fulltime jobs and families and are unable or unwilling to make a total commitment to ISKCON. Some of these part-time devotees are people who, raised in Hindu families,

in the West, feel comfortable in the ashram's Indian religious culture. Less than a third of the devotees are women. Krishna Consciousness views women as the spiritual equivalent of men but on a materially different -- one might say, inferior -- plane. Thus, within the ashram, the women eat and sleep in separate places from the men and even enter the temple room at the opposite side from where the men do. The entire ISKCON life cycle, in fact, essentially serves the needs of men. Women whose husbands have become sanyassis live with their grown children as widows and occupy a place of distinct respect.

A day at an ashram starts early, often at three in the morning, since devotion is held to be the supreme goal of life and sleep only distracts from this devotion. The devotees rise, apply a mixture of white clay and water called tilaka to twelve parts of their body (including the bridge of the nose), start chanting their rounds, and collect at the temple room at about four-thirty in the morning for arati, an adoration ceremony involving burning incense, making offerings to images of Krishna and Radha, chanting hymns to Caitanya and Prabhupad, and intoning the mantra in unison. The devotees take the colorful and often life-size images of Krishna and Radha to be actual incarnations of the deities themselves. In the divine realm, idols do not exist, and symbol equals reality as it does with the holy sound of the mantra. Arati is powerful. The multiple presences of Krishna, through images and sound, along with the presence of Prabhupad, whose image often occupies the temple room too, creates an surge of energy that is often ecstatic. In arati, then, the devotees collectively express their love and devotion for Krishna and allow their individual bhakti to merge as one.

After arati the devotees chant their rounds until about six-thirty, when they attend a class on sacred scripture and, afterwards, have their first meal of prasadam. After eating, the workday, ^{begins} with some devotees

taking to the streets to promote Krishna Consciousness and others staying around the ashram to fulfill specific duties and functions. In the early afternoon the main meal of the day is served, except on Sundays when, in the early evening, each ISKCON ashram sponsors a free feast, open to the public. The most intense part of the devotees' day remains, though, the early morning, during those pre-dawn hours when the rest of the world is asleep and the material reality of day-to-day life dissolves into the spiritual quiet of the dark, of sleep.

Devotees have no days of rest and no vacations since nothing in life can match the joy of devotion. ISKCON's calendar does include a number of festivals, though, the most significant of which is Caitanya's birthday, which falls in the middle of March. Hundreds of devotees gather every year in India to celebrate it. The Rathayatra, in July, is a "chariot festival" in which devotees parade huge images of Krishna and certain Indian saints through the streets of major cities. Large-scale Rathayatras in the United States, though, seem to be a thing of the past. Regulating these festivals and, indeed, all of ISKCON is a governing board of commissioners who, since Prabhupad's death, have directed the affairs of the various ashrams and farms. These commissioners control the devotees' travel and mobility and, keeping in mind the financial interests of ISKCON as a whole, direct who may travel to India for a given festival and who may not.

Krishna Consciousness offers a lifestyle, then, that totally integrates belief and practice but which demands, in Glenn Bucher's terms, a commitment to a "world of total meaning."²³ ISKCON embodies a theological and cultural alternative to life in modern America, complete with a coherent system of beliefs, a set of practices, a life cycle, and a communal society. Its initiates, appropriately enough, shave their

and receive new names because, for all practical purposes, they are being born again. Converting to Krishna Consciousness means making a journey from one world into another. Some make the change gradually, others do it virtually overnight. The stories that follow, then, tell about this profound change from firsthand perspectives. They explain why somebody would leave everything familiar and choose a life of total surrender and devotion to an alien culture and a strange god. They show how certain people have abandoned a life of uncertainty and insecurity to follow, instead, a path of spiritual salvation which, for the devotees, is finding the Godhead through constant love of Krishna.

NOTES ON CHAPTER II

1. Steven J. Gelberg, "An Interview With Thomas J. Hopkins," in Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna (New York: Grove Press, 1983), p.173.
2. H.H. Jayadvaita Swami, "Beyond the Formless Philosophies," in On Spiritual Life in This Age: An Introduction to Krishna Consciousness (unpublished anthology of articles from Back to Godhead magazine), edited by Sūbhananda dasa.)
3. Gelberg, p.261.
4. J. Stillson Judah, Hare Krishna and the Counter-Culture (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), p.33
5. Judah, p.34.
6. Jayadvaita Swami, p.18.
7. Thomas J. Hopkins, "An Interview With Thomas J. Hopkins," in Gelberg, p.121.
8. Hopkins, p.128.
9. Hopkins, p.103.
10. A. L. Basham, "An Interview With A. L. Basham," in Gelberg, p.166.
11. Gelberg, p.79.
12. Gelberg, p.79.
13. Shrivatsa Goswami, "An Interview With Sgrivatsa Swami," in Gelberg, pp.252-258.
14. Jayadvaita Swami, p.15.
15. Jayadvaita Swami, p.18.
16. Jayadvaita Swami, p.18.
17. Subhananda dasa, "The Nectar of the Name," in anthology, p.22.
18. Mandalesvara dasa, "Six Lessons on Transmigration," in anthology, p.23.
19. Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, "Initiation into Krishna Consciousness," in anthology, p.24.
20. Jayadvaita Swami.
21. Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, "Renunciation: The Higher Taste," in anthology, p.16.

22. Satsvarupa dasa Swami, "Initiation into Krishna Consciousness," p.24.

23. Glenn R. Bucher, "Worlds of Total Meaning: An Interpretation of Cult Religion," in Soundings (December 3, 1981).

Note: The factual information in this chapter, aside from my own general knowledge of Hinduism and ISKCON, is entirely dependent on my reading in three sources: Gelberg's Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Judah's Hare Krishna and the Counter-Culture, and Subhananda's anthology of reprints from Back to Godhead magazine.

III. Five Conversion Stories

The following conversion accounts are the transcripts of five interviews I conducted in February of 1984 at ISKCON's Philadelphia ashram, a huge, aging four-storey mansion in the quiet residential neighborhood of Mt. Airy. The five devotees who speak here -- three men and two women -- do not represent a scientific sampling of the Philadelphia community. They were simply among those willing to give their time to me and share their experiences. I attempted to select, though, devotees who have spent differing amounts of time in ISKCON and who come from a variety of backgrounds. All, however, are fulltime members of the community.

The conversion stories that I present here are, for the most part, verbatim accounts of the events and decisions that led each of the devotees to join ISKCON. I have changed as little as possible, editing only when I felt it was necessary for brevity and clarity and, at a few points, paraphrasing the devotees' words while staying faithful to the spirit of the original expression. The accounts, then, are five spiritual autobiographies.

Kundali

Kundali, in his eleventh year in the Movement, has been a grhastha for six months and is now expecting to be a father. Over the years he has been in charge of an ISKCON preaching center, dealt with college students and written for Back to Godhead magazine. He has a younger brother who became a devotee for a while, as well as three younger stepbrothers from his mother's second marriage. Witty and articulate, he tends to be, in his own words, "light-hearted, frivolous, flippant." He is around thirty and speaks with traces of a Carribean accent.

* * * * *

I'm from Grenada, I was born and trained and went to school in Grenada until age sixteen. I went to Catholic schools. The schools I attended were run by Irish monks, different Irish orders, and so my religious upbringing was largely Roman Catholic. None of it ever really made a deep impression on me in the sense that I was not more religious than anybody else, but I had the theological training in religion.

Then I guess a big transition in my life was moving to New York at sixteen -- I joined my parents living in New York. My mother also went to school in a convent until she finished high school and then she went on to training as a nurse and gave up that pursuit. My father's not at all religious. My grandmother was very religious and so a lot of my early life was influenced by her -- making you go to church, making you go to Sunday school. I can't say I had a deep sense of religion. In fact, at sixteen, when I moved to New York, I declared myself an atheist and so until I graduated from high school I more or less considered myself an atheist.

When I was finishing my last semester in high school -- when I was facing that time in life which we now very coyly refer to as an "identity crisis" -- I became very concerned that the choice I would make in life would be the

right one, that I wouldn't have to go through life always being uncertain about what I am, what I'm going to be and whether the thing I'm doing is the thing for me. I wanted to settle the score, bring it down to the point where, All right, this is it, for evermore, never a question of doubting again, because I had known too many stories of people who started college with the intention of becoming this, then the next year they change to that, and then finally they graduated with a degree in so-and-so and ended up doing something still different and they're never satisfied with what they're doing. That whole phenomenon bothered me. So all those influences, being faced with the choice -- you're signing yearbooks, people asking you, "What are you going to be? What are you going to do?" A whole bunch of things would go through my mind. So all this gradually led to a really intense desire to assert myself, and that led me to looking into philosophy really for the first time.

That summer after I finished high school I started searching philosophically for reasons and justifications for my choices, my attitudes and values. Then I was thinking of going to college to major in philosophy. But then I decided that no, because the courses, they all have a direction they take and if you join a particular course you don't get the freedom to look at things from so many different perspectives. You'll be indoctrinated in a particular angle. So rather than that, I started going to the library and taking out philosophy books and reading. Quite a bit of it was over my head, not being trained in the rudiments of philosophical thinking. And some of it made sense, portions of it, and so on like that. I had friends who felt themselves in spiritual life in some way or other and we all had a loose agreement on spirituality and not being materialistic, but not that any of it had a real cohesive philosophical approach.

Gradually, I became interested in Buddhism. It seemed to have the best arguments. I joined the New York Zen Center and I participated in that.

This was in 1971, '72. I found it a tremendously dry experience, although philosophically it felt strong. There was no reciprocal taste coming out of it, and that left me always a little disappointed, not to speak of the fact that the majority of the people doing it, they had the veneer of being committed. But they weren't. It was the same thing all over again that I had seen in Catholicism and any of the other "isms," even the Communist Party in New York, which at one time was making overtures for me to participate in it. No, I felt the people there were pretentious. So then what I started doing was I became a little more eclectic, got into different yoga practices, started taking some hallucinogenic drugs, started exploring the idea, Well, you'll just seek it out on your own. So, between all these things, I was reading a wide array of books, East and West, books by occult people and by more standard religious institutions.

I had one experience which is somehow involved in my philosophical pursuit in life, although in different stages I wasn't really conscious of it. When I was fourteen I had what you call an out-of-the-body experience. It convinced me that my body wasn't my body because I was riding my bicycle in the island and I almost rode off a cliff. One of those hairbreath kind of things where you can't understand how you survive. And I saw my body on the bicycle going down the road that I was on. It took me years to mention that to anybody. I had no doubt about the experience, but I was afraid people would think I was a loon. Even though I went through another stage of my life where I declared myself an atheist, I didn't associate that experience with religion or Catholicism and all that. But underneath, one of the reasons I was reading all this stuff was I was kind of looking for some kind of plausible explanation as to what my out-of-the-body experience was. The only coherent thing that I found came out of the Bhagavad-gita when I read Prabhupad's. It was sort of an underlying thing making me look into philosophy but I wasn't conscious of it. When I was about eighteen and had left

school, I did stop one time at this church to talk to a priest. And he treated me like I was nuts. That kind of closed down my looking into Christianity again. His whole thing with me was like, "All right, all right, let's talk about serious stuff. But if you want to tell me this, I'll listen." But he just wouldn't deal with it. He didn't take me for sanity at all. Of course, you feel very miffed for one thing. For another thing, all credibility from his side was lost.

Anyway, all this philosophical searching led me to just feeling tremendous despair that actually I wasn't getting anywhere. I was still feeling completely entrenched in a life that was -- no role yet. I had a vague idea that there should be a goal. This went on for a while. The summer passed, of course, and during this period I decided that I wasn't going to go to college because, well, I had this idea that you get like a cow. Cattle move in a herd -- whatever the way the herd swings, he swings. It's not that it's his prerogative whether he moves to the left or the right. And then the herd charges off a cliff, he goes off a cliff too, know what I mean? So I didn't like it. I felt I should be able to assert and validate any choice that I made in life. That just gnawed at me all the time. But then, of course, the world puts pressure on you. "If you don't go to college, you've got to have a job." The world doesn't let you stand there and be a philosopher! So I thought, Well, it doesn't seem like materialism is the way to go, but just in case it turns out that it is the way, I'm going to work in Wall Street I'm going to cultivate my philosophical ambitions but I'm going to have a job on Wall Street, straddle the fence for a while until I'm sure which is the way, because if it's material success, I don't want to be out on the streets or live in a one-room apartment on the Lower East Side for the rest of my life. I'm going to have a yacht and an island! But if that's not the goal of life.... I wanted to set myself up in a position where I could play my options.

So I went to work at Wall Street and everyday at lunch hour I would read philosophical works. And, of course, the Hare Krishna devotees, I was seeing them all over the place. In my own mind, I just justified that they weren't that appealing. When I would see the devotees up ahead on the street, I'd cross and walk on the other side because I didn't want to be proselytized. I never gave them any real interest or prominence or commitment to check it out. Besides, I thought, It's too radical. The spiritual life you can do without having to resort to naked, going in the streets with a bald head, wearing sheets and stuff. I had accumulated some literature from them, but I never read it -- I thought the pictures were pretty, the paintings.

Two years transpired with this kind of routine in my life -- what we call in Krishna Consciousness ~~renunciation~~ renunciation and trying to enjoy the world. I would fall down from my determination to be renounced and spiritual and just really try to go all out and try to enjoy the world. I'd hold myself and say, This is wrong, let me just get spiritual again, and I'd go back and forth.

Then 1973 rolled around. I went out to New Jersey one time to visit my parents, and they gave me a present. And the present was three of Srila Prabhupad's books, because they knew I was interested in philosophy and they knew I was eclectic, I read so many things. So they gave me three of Prabhupad's books which I never thought I would even read because I just didn't see them as relevant to the issue at all. But when your parents give you a present, you take it and you say thanks, that you appreciate it. So with all of that I boarded the bus to go back to the city, not even expecting to get back to my apartment with the books. But on the bus ride back I started reading, started leafing through the pages, looking at the pictures, and they made a tremendous amount of sense. And a lot of separate philosophical issues that I had concluded about but hadn't formed into a consistent frame-

work of ideas started knitting together through Prabhupad's work. The first thing I decided was I wasn't going to throw the books away. So I took them back and I read them. I realize now I didn't get that much out of them at the time, but I got enough to learn to respect the devotees and what they stood for and the Movement -- all in one night's reading. With that I started reading all the literature that I had accumulated, mostly BTG's* that I stuck around under my stereo and stuff like that. It turned out, though, that within a three-month period I was living in a temple and committing myself to the life of a devotee.

After reading Prabhupad's works, I decided two things: one, I wanted to go to temple and see if people actually lived the way these books described, and I went there and I was tremendously pleased. I was just turning twenty. I had to admit to myself, or to speak of to anybody else, that actually everything looked very nice. The temple was very clean, the devotees behaved very nicely, the food stuff was nice, the atmosphere was very good and the devotees weren't idiots. So I got the Gita and started reading it and visiting the temple on a regular basis, and gradually I concluded that Srila Prabhupad was a self-realized person. He wasn't just philosophizing about what's beyond out there, in the metaphysical realm. He was a realized transcendentalist, as opposed to so many of our Western armchair philosophers. That had a big point with me. And then seeing how the devotees could simply live a nice regulated spiritual life. Of course, you could get it in Catholicism. But the devotees' life is real life, the temple is not a dead place. Our temple is not like a monastery. The place where I went to school, the hallways are long, dead, quiet, everyone was just so staid -- it was unreal to expect you to live year in, year out like that. But in the temple there is real life and vibrancy and I felt, This makes much more sense to me of what spiritual life ought to be. So I checked it out and then I moved in, with the idea

*Back to Godhead magazine

that I would check it out for a period of time and see if I could commit myself.

I moved in in the first week of September, 1973, and in November of that year Srila Prabhupad himself came. Seeing Prabhupad settled the whole score. Seeing Prabhupad, getting to hear him lecture, getting to see his dealings, his standard of conduct settled the whole score and I knew for the first time in my life I had seen a person that I would like to model my own self after -- my standard of ethics, morals and values. It was the first time that I'd seen somebody that I was thinking, I would like to become like him, I would like to develop those kind of human characteristics.

The circumstance was he was coming to the airport. A number of television stations were there, and Prabhupad -- he didn't just posture himself as being aloof or of such a dignity that he would be above the material interactions of people. He interacted fine with everyone. But you could feel there was definitely an aloofness and an insulation, but it wasn't a pretense, it wasn't a stilted kind of thing! It was just that this was his natural consciousness. He was detached from all kinds of material affairs. He only participated in the world as much as there was the opportunity to evoke higher standards of God Consciousness from those individuals, and there was an aura with him also -- an air -- that surrounded him so that you could feel, This is not just a person talking about God Consciousness. This is a person who is totally absorbed in a God Conscious perspective of the world. And his very utterance was like that. And his very behavior further verified the things he established as philosophical ideals. So all these things -- they're very potent when you find someone who teaches something so cogent, so coherent, that you can't really find flaw in it. It doesn't have any frayed ends. On every facet of it, it holds. So when you meet a person who can present a philosophical ideal like that, that makes a tremendous impression on you. I

can't say I'm an academically-trained philosophical student, but I'd certainly read enough to know that everyone, even though they had a good point, they all had many weird points, many openings and loopholes that didn't hold. But when you meet someone who has it all sewed up, and his very life reflected all those things from one day to the next..! I mean, the two things together are just irrefutable. If something isn't practical but sounds great, who cares? Practical and philosophical are synonymous ultimately.

So even though I had been in the temple three months and all along I never lost any momentum, seeing Prabhupad just gave it a "go for broke" kind of feeling. I made up my mind -- to myself, anyway -- that I definitely wanted to become his disciple and I definitely wanted to make this a lifelong endeavor. I was initiated a year after I first moved in, nine months after meeting Prabhupad. Initiation -- I never requested it. I just worked and stayed in the temple, and eventually the authorities in the temple, as representatives of Prabhupad, recommended me to Prabhupad for initiation. They were satisfied that I showed, by my work, enough commitment to Krishna Consciousness. Which I felt was the best way. You can ask for initiation and get it, but I thought the best way was to show that spirit of commitment.

I never did go to college ultimately. I had put it off with the intention I was going to do it when I felt I was going to get what I wanted, but I ended up in the Krishna Conscious movement. I don't feel a lack in my education -- I feel that I'm philosophically competent to deal with whatever comes up. And in some cases, I think I'm even more successful than people who went to college, if you want to look at it from a purely materialistic perspective. In the sense that in my life, I make ends meet, I'm satisfied and I'm not a dodo bird.

There's a point when you're a new convert when everything is novel -- how to eat, how to cook, how to go to the bathroom, how to take three showers a day, how to do this. It's all novel revelation to you. But after a while

the novelty wears off and it becomes duty. And then after a while duty wears away and it becomes "my way of life." And "my way of life" gradually wears away and it becomes enlightenment and revelation. So, for my own sake, I feel a tremendous amount of relish in spiritual life and I can't see how I would do anything different now. And the ritual activities in themselves, rather than becoming routine and just a yoke, they become fresh. It's like when you have a big project. Say you have to build a big building. There's inspiration as one stage of it, but perspiration is a whole other platform. There's a great saying, I don't know who said it: "Any great creativity is 98% perspiration and 2% inspiration." Spiritual life is like that too. In the beginning there's a lot of inspiration and enthusiasm, but, as time wears on, it really takes perspiration to get into the mainstream of it. In the beginning, feeling, Here's a pure devotee of God, Srila Prabhupad, and these wonderful devotees, they're so different from everybody else in the world and their ambitions are so noble, they want to realize the Absolute Truth. That gives you a tremendous amount of initial go-power. But then it wears away to, Okay, this is your whole life, you've got to do it. The goal's up ahead, it's a long way off.

Mrnalini

Mrnalini, who has been a permanent member of ISKCON for seven-and-a half years, lives in the Philadelphia temple with her four year-old daughter and her husband, whom she married only a few months after joining the Movement. She spends most of her time raising her daughter, although in the past she has done a variety of duties for a number of temples, ranging from being treasurer and distributing books to caring for the deities and cooking. She remains close to her mother and her younger sister. Talking rapidly and gesturing a lot with her hands, she gives the impression of being a socially outgoing, unpretentious person.

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I guess I come from a middle class family, there were four of us, two boys and two girls. I come from the Jewish faith. I had the typical Jewish upbringing: going to synagogue every weekend until tenth grade. Not real heavy, but there was some religious background there. Sometimes I would go in the synagogue, no one was there, and I felt like I wanted to feel something -- the presence of the Lord -- and I was waiting for something to happen. Nothing ever happened, of course. But I had a desire, on and off through my life, like that. Also, I had a fear of dying, thinking, There has to be something more than this. How can this be it? That was a recurring thought when I was a teenager. As for my parents, my mother was more religious than my father. He was a one-day-a-year person. It was kind of a drag for him. My mother was much more regular, and my grandmother. They say that, overall, women have a tendency to gather at religious functions more so than men do. Women bring the men.

As far as coming to Krishna Consciousness, I was going to college and

I was working, living in part of my family's home with a friend. My sister and the devotee who is my husband went to Tampa. I lived in Miami. I had never met devotees, I didn't know anything really about spiritualness. And they came back to Miami, and that was my first association with anything having to do with Krishna Consciousness. She was telling about chanting Hare Krishna, and still it was a complete mystery to me. I had no understanding of what she was talking about. Eventually my husband became a devotee, and we used to go to the Sunday feasts at Coconut Grove. He and I went to college together, were friends in college, and he became a devotee. So he was my friend and I wasn't frightened by it, although I had no knowledge of Krishna Consciousness. I would go to the feast. I liked the food, I liked the chanting. He would always tell me, "Why don't you just come for a weekend and see what it's like?" Eventually most everyone else stopped coming but I kept coming on, not real regularly, but on and off.

A year later I went for a long weekend. I was working in a bank and going to school at night part-time. After three days there, even though I didn't understand everything so well, I wanted to stay -- as an experiment. I said to myself, I'm going to stay here for six months and at that time I'll make some decision. So I did that. I quit my job without notice. My mother freaked out, thinking, "What are you going to do when you leave?" This was after I had finished three years of college and gone to Europe and travelled and then worked, so I was just kind of taking one course every term. I was twenty-four at the time. So I stayed there for actually ten months and, at that time, I left. I felt I wanted to do other things, but I still wanted to be Krishna Conscious, somehow balance that and integrate it into my life rather than actually be living in the temple. I felt I had other goals I wanted to attain.

I travelled cross-country with a friend of mine, stayed out of the Movement about a year, and after that I went to California. On our way we went to

different temples, and I was having a hankering for spiritual life. I was very ambivalent at this time. And when we got to California, we stayed with my girlfriend's sister, who was a born-again Christian, and she was real fired-up about her faith. They had this morning service down at the beach, and I went there, thinking, Maybe I'll find some satisfaction here, some relief -- a relationship with God will be there. And I was very dissatisfied and I felt very upset, so I said, "I want to go to the Hare Krishna temple. Let's find out where it is." We found out it wasn't very far. I went that Sunday, and that's really where I made up my mind, when I knew that this was what I wanted to do, that I achieved that relief. I felt at peace and I decided, This is what I'm going to do with my life. So a month later, I moved back into the temple. That was seven-and-a-half years ago. I was there because I knew I wanted to be, and I had some understanding of the philosophy at this point. The first time I went it was a little whimsical and I really didn't have an understanding of Krishna Consciousness.

I wasn't greatly suffering, like some people who may have had very traumatic experiences. I had a good childhood, I had schooling, I had done some travelling, I came from a decent home. It was no real traumatic thing. But I still had so much unhappiness. I would see great people, maybe somebody who's very intelligent, somebody who had everything, like so many actors. Suppose he had everything -- beauty, fame, everything -- and then he would commit suicide, or somebody would kill him, and it led me thinking, Why is this happening? I mean, if everything that everyone else is trying to attain, he has it, and he's so miserable that he killed himself -- maybe there's something a little bit better.

Anyhow, the second time I joined, I felt definite. I had just come from Colorado and I had met somebody there. He was talking marriage. I was thinking, Well, I'm twenty-six years old and I do want to be married and have a

family. Maybe it's not like all the books say. Maybe this is just it. I was kind of resigning myself to the situation. But when I started going to the temple I could see that I didn't have to resign myself. I could do my own choosing of what I wanted to do with my life. I just felt satisfied with- in myself being at the temple. I got a job, actually, working at Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. I really wasn't certain about living in the temple at that point. Since I had to work there, and it wasn't always convenient for me to get transportation to where I was living, I stayed with a friend of mine whose husband went to India. It was a gradual coming back -- I started going to the morning program, building up to sixteen rounds and working with devotees all day.

At that point it was a natural thing to go back to Krishna Consciousness. A month later the temple President inquired, "Who is this girl staying with you and what does she want to do?" At that point I made the formal commitment to myself: I want to move into the temple, I want to be a devotee. You know, everybody's life may take a different course. At some point you have to decide what way you want your life to go, be it spiritual or material, be it travelling or schooling or marriage or career.

Dhirodatti

Dhirodatti, who has been in the Movement about six years, just recently took the vows of grhastha although he has not yet moved into a household arrangement with his wife. ^{much} More of his time in the Movement has been spent doing book distribution on the streets. Of three brothers, one -- his younger brother -- is a fulltime devotee. Dhirodatti is friendly and easygoing and unassuming, with the brotherly air of someone who likes to kid around.

* * * * *

Initially I met the devotees through a friend and I went to a temple. I'm from Texas -- I went to the temple in Dallas and met the devotees. From that point forward I began to have regular association with devotees, and in the scriptures, of course, it's stated that by the association of devotees, one gains faith in the process of Krishna Consciousness.

Growing up, we went to the Methodist church up to a certain point, but my parents got divorced when I was about twelve years old or so. So, from that point forward, even though there had been some nominal religious commitment, neither side of the family went to church. At that point, as far as the boys were concerned, it was like, All right, Dad's not around. We can do whatever we want. We've got Mom and we can definitely get by with lots of stuff with Mom. So we had less parental supervision or restriction. My mother was very liberal: do your own thing. So we got into all kinds of trouble. I got into intoxication and illicit sex at age thirteen. That's too young. Actually, intoxication and illicit sex should always be avoided, but at thirteen it's a very damaging contamination. All through my teen years the modern American lifestyle of intoxication and sex life was active, throughout junior high school and high school. I consider that to be unfortunate, that I had

to go through that -- the lasting impressions created in your mind, I'd rather be without those.

I remember the first time I ever heard anything about Krishna. I must have been about twelve years old -- this is in the late sixties or 1970 -- and at that same time the devotees had just started up doing the Ratha-yatra in San Francisco. It must have caught national press attention or something because there was a news report and I heard that the devotees had shaved heads and wore orange robes and danced in the streets and played drums. And I thought that was rather remarkable. There was some obscure detail noted in the news report that they had orange high-topped tennis shoes to match the orange dotis. And my particular mentality at the time -- I was impressed. I liked high-topped tennis shoes! So I somehow or other had a favorable impression of Krishna Consciousness from the first time I heard about it, although I know sometimes through the media people get negative impressions.

Then, a few years later, when I was about fifteen, my girlfriend's mother came back from shopping one day and had a Back to Godhead magazine, which I was interested to see what it was. I remember it sitting on the coffee table of her house so I picked it up and started looking through it. There was a picture of Prabhupad and an article called, "Attaining Shelter." And of course Prabhupad is such a transcendental personality, especially the way he appears in photographs. I recall reading that the devotees chanted the Hare Krishna mantra 1728 times per day. That fascinated me. I felt, My God, that's a lot. They must spend quite a bit of time chanting these names! And it occurred to me that this must take a lot of dedication, that they're really into what they're doing. The idea of discipline came across to me. And that was just about it for that.

After that, maybe a couple of years later, a good friend of mine from the same neighborhood, he had known this devotee who had joined earlier, and he

went to the Dallas temple, and at that time Prabhupad came to the Dallas temple. They had the gurukula* there and it was a very big community at that time. So he went over and he saw Prabhupad. We were real tight, we always stayed at each other's house all the time, but somehow he didn't tell me. I had no idea he was going or I would have gone and seen Prabhupad. He went over and saw Prabhupad and he was high on LSD -- he was a pretty crazy guy anyway -- so he came back with his psychedelic impressions of Srila Prabhupad. But I was mad at him, I recall. He brought a Back to Godhead magazine with him and I saw the picture of Prabhupad in the BTG and I recognized Prabhupad. I was attracted by Prabhupad's picture, so wonderfully a spiritual personality, unlike anyone I had ever seen.

I was in high school then, I was a guitar player. There's a big thing in our culture to grow up and be a rock star. It's sort of a role model. I was interested in that, but I was interested in being very accomplished. I wasn't after recognition or money necessarily. We lived in a middle-class neighborhood, it was an old neighborhood. We had a group of young people in the neighborhood, we were very dissatisfied with the public school system. We had all dropped out and, with the help of our parents, we had formed an experimental school for the young people in the neighborhood. And everybody was into smoking marijuana, playing music, so it was pretty much middle-of-the-road American youth culture at that time, the early seventies. The school was a complete failure. If you analyzed the issue deeply, we all just didn't want to go to school, and the public school was a real drag.

It was after I was out of high school -- I was nineteen -- when I first went to the temple, to a Sunday feast. I remember my first impressions of the temple. In Dallas they have a fairly large temple room. It used to be an old church, and the temple room is formerly a basketball court, a gymnasium, so it was a large room with high ceilings. There was a big altar, like a stage

* ISKCON school community.

area, and they have fairly large deities there in Dallas -- a large black marble Krishna. I was immediately attracted by the kirtan, the chanting, and then we took prasadam. Prasadam was great -- I was really into the prasadam. And I remember leaving, riding in the car on the way back, and the guy who was driving the car -- he was formerly a devotee -- said, "Well, what did you think?" I said, "Well, very interesting." I don't know exactly what to say." But I was little overwhelmed by the experience, it was such a sensual experience, the sound and the color of the saffron robes dancing. It was almost like a vision. But I recall that I didn't really want to go back. I somehow or other had the sense within me that, If I go back to the temple, and I keep going back, eventually I'll get into it, the experience of Krishna is so ecstatic. So I wasn't interested in going back at all to the temple.

But I did, a couple of months later, remembering the prasadam at the feast and how wonderful it was. I was, I've got to go back to the temple and take some prasadam. Actually, the first devotee that I spoke to when I went back to the temple is a devotee we now have in Philadelphia, Gopal-das. I knew a little about the philosophy at that time, just by contact with this one friend who had shown me some of Prabhupad's books, so I asked him, in a sort of challenging way, "Is it possible to get back to Godhead in this lifetime?" He said, "It's definitely possible to go back home to Godhead in this lifetime." I was a little skeptical -- it was sort of a defense mechanism. But I did want to go back to the temple, so later we went back. We started going to the feast every week. This was in April, 1977. The first time I went was February, 1977. I wasn't just going by myself, it was a whole group of people that would go over every Sunday: this one fellow who had formerly been a devotee, and my older brother -- somewhat of a Taoist-Buddhist philosopher type, self-styled monist -- and this friend of mine who had been to the temple and seen Prabhupad. So we would get three, four, five, six, sometimes as many as ten people together to go over to the temple.

We went there one time, and my spiritual master, Srila Grupad, who was then Satsvarupa Maraj -- he was the Governing Body commissioner for the Dallas temple and he was there one Sunday. I heard, "There's a sanyassi here," and they explained what a sanyassi was. So I got the general impression that a sanyassi was someone who was more advanced in Krishna Consciousness. I had an idea by that time of what an advanced devotee was just from reading the books. We went to the kirtan and after the kirtan we went into the prasadam room, and he was there, sitting down, taking prasadam. I sat down next to him and he says, "Hi, my name is Satsvarupa. What's yours?" I told him my name, and he knew a little bit about me -- the devotees had told him about our little group of people we had coming, who we were. So he was saying, "So, you play in a band?" He was warming up to me, being friendly, asking me about what I do. I was a little embarrassed to talk about my material life in front of him because I considered it not very important. Already, by that time, I could see there was a distinction between pursuing a material life and a spiritual life. I was very impressed by Srila Grupad. He immediately had an effect on me. I had an overwhelming impression that, Here is a very advanced, saintly person. He indeed has sublime saintly qualities. There's an air and an aura about him that one can perceive immediately. So here was an advanced devotee -- he was a sanyassi -- and he was every bit of what I expected an advanced devotee to be.

So we kept coming regularly. I started chanting on beads and reading Prabhupad's books pretty regularly. I had a feeling that it would be nice to be a devotee, that this was a nice lifestyle, and there's a nice taste in Krishna Consciousness, a spiritual taste -- not just the taste of prasadam, though that's a wonderful spiritual taste -- but a feeling one can derive from the activities of Krishna Consciousness. That was a tangible experience. Whenever we would go to the temple on Sunday, after a while we would go early and hang around the temple all day and go to the feast and in the evening we'd

do things around the temple like mop the temple room, clean up in the ashram, wax the van one time. I was doing some service, and that's a very important part of Krishna Consciousness. I was engaging my body in the service of the Lord, and I was engaging my tongue in the service of the Lord by chanting Hare Krishna and taking prasadam, and I was associating with devotees. There was actually a lot of purification going on, even though I didn't realize I was getting spiritually purified to the point where I'd want to give up my material life. I didn't want to give up my material life -- I liked Krishna Consciousness, I liked the devotees, but I was very attached to my whole material scene which involved playing in one jazz rock band and another more straight-ahead old-time jazz band. I was going to school and studying music and classical guitar, so I was working very hard within the material sphere for musical advancement. I was nineteen, just about twenty at this point, and I was spending a lot of hours practicing music. My musical life was really just taking off. I was attached to that. And I recognized that it was two distinct lives -- the Krishna Conscious life and the material life. It wasn't that I was looking for something else besides my material life. Actually, I was very much into it. But at the same time, the opportunity to be a devotee was also there. And naturally the devotees were encouraging to make a greater commitment towards Krishna Consciousness.

In August of '77 there was the Ratha-yatra in Los Angeles and it was the first Ratha-yatra in L.A. I somehow or other developed a desire to go to the Ratha-yatra. I told a few of the devotees that I was going and that maybe if they were going, somehow I could go with them because I didn't have the means -- I had a car, I didn't have so much money, always just enough to get by. I wasn't living at home at this time. I was already out of the house and living really in the same neighborhood, renting a house. I have three brothers. We would stick together as brothers and pool our resources and therefore we'd

always have a place. We had our own little nuclear family. The devotees would come to our house regularly and bring prasadam, we'd have kirtan.

So I got a call one day, just before the Ratha-yatra. They had this motor home, Srila Grupad's motor home which they used for distributing books, and they said, "We have this motor home and we're going to the Ratha-yatra. You want to go?" I said, "Oh yeah, no problem!" So we were going to the Ratha-yatra, -- from Texas to Los Angeles is a fairly long distance, a couple of thousand miles, I think. Along the way the devotees were stopping in different towns and distributing Prabhupad's books. The devotee who was in charge of the party, who was also a devotee who I was fairly good friends with, asked me if I'd be interested to experience book distribution. I was definitely interested. So I went on sankirtan* for the first time. I had hair down to the middle of my back: long-haired musician. And all the devotees had shaved heads. It was quite an unusual combination! So I stayed with the devotees in the motor home, we took about three days to get out to L.A. I really liked book distribution. We'd go out to parking lots, people would go shopping, and when they'd come out of the store to go to their car, then we'd stop them and present Prabhupad's books. I thought it was great, this was wonderful, I was so ecstatic.

By the time we got to Los Angeles, to the Ratha-yatra, I was very enlivened. Because I had been living with the devotees for a few days, also, I was experiencing more intense purification than I had before. The sinful activities that I was addicted to -- I put them aside to travel with the devotees. It really would not be appropriate to smoke whatever I normally smoked and do whatever I normally did in the association of devotees. I knew it was contaminating to do that around them and thus I was embarrassed by that. It was a chance for me to follow all the principles of Krishna Consciousness in full, which I really had been unable or unwilling to do up to that point.

There were so many hundreds of devotees in Los Angeles, gathered from

sing kirtan in public.

different centers on the West Coast, from Denver. When we got there we stayed up all night helping to prepare some of the prasadam for the next day because we were going to serve out a big feast at the Ratha-yatra to all the guests. It ended up something like 200,000 people showed up at the Ratha-yatra. The next day was the Ratha-yatra. I went to the wangala-arati.* It was such an amazing wangala-arati because the temple room in Los Angeles is a big temple room and it's very beautiful, and they had beautiful Krishna paintings everywhere and diarama murtis** in the corner way up high and there was a balcony where the women overlooked. So it was a very impressive thing, and the Mangala-arati was completely jammed-packed with hundreds and hundreds of devotees. It was completely incredible. I hadn't really danced much kirtan at that point, but there was so much ecstasy there that I danced during wangala-arati. And everyone was dancing -- so many hundreds of bodies. It was a very enlivening spiritual experience to be chanting Hare Krishna in the association of so many devotees.

We stayed there for a couple of days and did book distribution on the way back. I was doing a lot of driving of the motor home -- I figured it was some service I could do the devotees -- and the devotee who was in charge of the party took this as an opportunity to convince me that I should surrender and be a devotee fulltime. But I wasn't ready yet to become a devotee. He tried pretty hard to convince me, but I was resisting. I said, "When I become a devotee, you won't have to talk me into it." At one point, right in the heat of the argument, I got pulled over by the cops and got a speeding ticket. If I take that as a sign from Krishna, maybe I shouldn't have argued with him!

I kept on associating with the devotees a few more months. Right before the spring semester was supposed to start -- this was in the end of December, the first of January, and I didn't have quite enough money for tuition, especi-

*The morning arati, considered in Krishna Consciousness to be the most important

**Forms; sculptures; images.

ally for my private lessons, which was an extra expense -- I got an offer to play in a hotel in this small town in New Mexico, and I had to be gone for two weeks so I'd make just enough money so I'd have tuition money. I was gone for two weeks and I didn't have the association of devotees that whole time. I actually became in distress because of not having the association of devotees and not being able to go to the Sunday feast, being stuck in this crummy little town way out in the middle of nowhere. Clovis, New Mexico. Playing in this cheap little bar, everybody's drinking -- it was really the lowest of the low, actually the opposite of Krishna Consciousness. In my mind, as a tangible experience, I had the experience of association with devotees, which is an elevated platform. And also I had the experience of associating with the lowest of men; the most sinful class of men, whose main business is intoxication and meat-eating and gambling and illicit sex. I did not relish that bodily association at all. So I was eager to get back to the association of devotees. But at the same time I was eager to get back to my guitar lessons, my band, this and that.

I got back to all that, but I was becoming increasingly disassociated with school and my friends and my materialistic associations. The taste of satisfaction that I was getting from that wasn't sufficient enough to satisfy me and the only reason that that was was that I did have the taste of something else that satisfied me: Krishna Consciousness. It was coming more and more to the point of having to make a decision between one or the other. So, it took me a while. I was a little covered over by maya* to understand that actually I should just be a devotee and be happy all the time and be satisfied, rather than to associate with low-class people or people who are ignorant of the real things in life.

So I was playing in a band with this one fellow who was a little bit philosophical -- the leader of the band, a Mexican guy, the sharp guy who

* Illusion; the seeming reality of material things.

would get the jobs. One time we had to go over to Dallas to see a booking agent. It was right in the same section of town where the temple was. On the way back I suggested, "Why don't we stop in the temple?" because I had been preaching to him about Krishna Consciousness a little. He was kind of favorable, he liked the idea and he had a copy of the Bhagavad-gita at home. So we stopped by the temple and took prasadam, and he was very moved and impressed. He was a devout Catholic, like so many Spanish people are.

There finally came a point when I decided, I think I'm going to forget about school, forget about living in the house with my brothers, where everybody was always smoking dope and listening to rock and roll, and become a devotee and live a purified life. I discussed it with this particular Mexican friend who was favorable to Krishna Consciousness and whom I worked closely with as a musician, and he said, "If you do that, I'd really respect you. You have to have a lot of guts just to give up your material life and pursue a spiritual life. That really takes guts, a commitment like that." He said, "You know, if I wasn't married and so entangled in this and that, I wish that maybe I could have done something like that." I got great encouragement from him. Other people would say, "You must be crazy." Of course, a lot of my friends, they knew I was into Krishna Consciousness and gradually, one by one, they didn't come around so much anymore. Our house had been a real hotbed of social activity, especially myself and my younger brother had a fairly large circle of friends and people would always come by and congregate and smoke dope and buy and sell marijuana. That started decreasing. I realized that my association with my friends was on the basis of sense gratification, and, when I became less interested in pursuing that sense gratification, the basis of their friendship began dissolving.

So I decided to become a devotee because, on every point where I considered a comparison between my materialistic life and the alternatives of spiritual

life, I came up with more reason for living the spiritual life. The food in Krishna Consciousness is nice, it's wonderful, and the availability of prasadam is not so great if one isn't an expert cook. And I was no cook. We used to eat at places like What-A-Burger and the Good Muck Drive-In and the pizza place. Young single men generally don't cook for themselves, they eat out all the time, and it was generally low-class garbage food. I was very attracted to Krishna Conscious music, particularly the pdanga, the two-headed drum the devotees play. So I decided that it actually made more sense, it was more intelligent for me to live as a devotee and make spiritual advancement, rather than live as a carny musician and be addicted to sinful activities which I somehow couldn't give up. And I knew that the association of devotees was powerful enough so I'd be able to. Nobody was smoking, nobody was hanging around watching TV in the temple, which were the big actions for everyone at the brothers' house.

That was pretty much it for me. I was finished. I was twenty years old. That's considered young. You're young when you're twenty and you have your whole life in front of you, different options, you can do whatever you want. The main thing for me was the mercy of the devotees. And I had the great fortune of meeting my spiritual master.

Chandrika

Chandrika, the youngest of the devotees with whom I spoke, has been an initiated member of ISKCON for less than a year. She currently co-directs the Philadelphia ashram's Food for Life Program, which operates out of a storefront in a poor part of the city and gives prasadam to the needy. She has three siblings: an older sister and two brothers, -- one younger, one older. She speaks quietly but confidently and, beneath her flowing robe, does not seem fundamentally different from an average college or university student.

* * * * *

I grew up in this area, in King Of Prussia. My father's a lawyer and my mother's a Montessori teacher. We didn't have much strong religious base, it was pretty much do your own thing. My father's Episcopalian and my mother's father was with the Quakers, and I went to Quaker school. We went to church a couple of times a year -- my father was a deacon. I went to Amherst College in Massachusetts, and after college I got involved in doing different work for world peace, disarmament, anti-nuclear kinds of things. I was doing quite a bit of organizing, living up in Washington, organizing different lobby campaigns. But at the same time I wanted to help people -- that was the real basis for doing things for world peace, different things on the bodily platform. But at the same time I was searching for the lasting truth. I wanted to find out what the human biped was or if there was a body. Different questions. I was experimenting with different spiritual and religious traditions. I did some meditation. Actually, I first started doing some kind of meditation in ninth grade. My mother took me to some transcendental meditation with her. My mother in particular was very open-minded. She's quite unusual.

So I was experiencing yoga groups, meditations, and I wasn't in particular struck strongly by any group or someone with any strong convictions. It seemed wishy-washy or "whatever feels good," kind of spiritually hedonistic in that respect. But I still tried different things. I was with a group of people, some of my friends started chanting Hare Krishna, not connected with ISKCON or anything like that. That was one of the things we would do from time to time. Sometimes we would read the Bhagavad-gita. At the same time, I was working on Capitol Hill.

I took a break for winters about three-and-a-half years ago. I hadn't graduated from college -- I left college without graduating -- so I was between twenty and twenty-one. And I went to Miami. I wasn't quite sure why I was going, I just felt a strong pull to go to Miami. After I lived there a day, I met a devotee on the street and he invited me to the local temple, so I figured I'd go. I always liked to dance. So I went and spoke quite a bit with this devotee who's very committed. She had been going to the airport distributing books for seven years. I was tremendously impressed by her character and the depth of her commitment, and I ended up working there -- they have a hotel in Miami -- and staying for a while and reading more philosophy.

Then I went back to Washington and rejoined my friends and pretty much picked up where I left off, though I still had a good introductory basis in Krishna Consciousness. Actually, it was even more apparent after that how the life I was leading wasn't satisfying spiritually. This all took a while, and actually it was another year where I got to the point where I was just like, I've had it with the material life and I'm just going to make a commitment to Krishna Consciousness. Things were normal, but I was a bit restless, trying some of this, some of that. I was feeling a hankering for something

more than what I was experiencing in my spiritual life. So it was kind of a roundabout excursion. I ended up back here in Philadelphia, finding this temple here, and I really found what I was looking for, a spiritual path which was actually true -- Krishna Consciousness. Since I've been here I've been making measurable spiritual advancement.

Actually, it was a medical appointment that brought me back to Philadelphia! But at that point, I wanted to move into a temple and I wasn't quite sure where. And I wasn't even sure, Will I try it? I contacted a friend of mine in Washington who's a devotee and he said, "You should come to Srila Gurupad's zone."* He was just saying how his character is unimpeachable and pure, his different qualifications as a spiritual master. He suggested I go to the temple in New Vrndavana. But I like to preach so much and just in general deal with people -- I'm very outgoing in that respect -- so I couldn't quite imagine myself staying at a farm. In the meantime I had to go back home for a doctor's appointment because my family's here in Philly. But I was definitely inclined to making a commitment, I just wanted to move into a temple. I was sick of my situation.

A lot of devotees have found that as soon as they get to a point where they're really crying out to God, or even if they're at the point where they don't know who they're crying out to but still they're crying out, "I just want to know what the truth is and please show me some way or something." For myself, it was like that. I was getting more sincere in my desire to know. It was coming more from the heart at the point where I was getting introduced to devotees and having more opportunity to interact. At first I wasn't yet ready. I still had this desire to not give up material life. I took my time about it, which is good, actually. I've found that devotees who really think

^{master}
*Each of ISKCON's small group of spiritual masters is responsible for a specific geographical district or zone, and thus becomes guru for all the devotees living in that zone.

about it and take their time with the philosophy and really consider it tend to stay more than those that just kind of pass through.

Since I've been here in the temple, one thing I've liked about Philadelphia -- well, I imagine all over ISKCON -- is that I've been able to do things I have an inclination towards doing anyway, only doing it for Krishna, so it's just that much more satisfying. I've also developed skills that I had before -- some business administration, and I do the temple newsletter, so I can write and publish something. And I'm the co-director of the Food for Life Program. So that's my wanting to help people -- just in general, giving them prasadam, helping them both materially and spiritually. And organizing. I set up a meeting with the mayor, the co-director and I went down and talked to Mayor Goode. That's impressed my family a lot. We also applied for some funding for a shelter for the program, and my parents -- both of them contributed towards the rent of the storefront. My mother just thinks it's wonderful. She says, "Everybody I see, I tell them about your Food for Life Program, how nice the devotees are." My father, he respects my judgement a lot, the decisions that I make. That impresses him just because it's me doing it and I'm his daughter, although he would prefer that I be a lawyer and make a mark on society that way, be a politician. But he's becoming more and more accepting as time goes on.

It's ideal, this way, to be able to engage your propensities for Krishna. Prabhupad used to say, "Just add Krishna Consciousness." He said, "If you like music, play music for Krishna. If you like to write, write for Krishna." Krishna Consciousness is so rich culturally that pretty much any propensity a person has, except if they have a propensity for meat-eating, can be realized for Krishna.

Subhananda

Subhananda, in his early thirties, has been a member of ISKCON for more than thirteen years, the last three-and-a-half of which he has been married. A respected scholar and intellectual within the Movement, he has just published his first book, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, which consists of interviews on Krishna Consciousness with five distinguished religious scholars. His dual role as ISKCON's representative to the academic community and director of inter-religious affairs, in his own words, "lets me have a foot in both worlds." He has a sister, one year older than him, with whom he is on good terms, and a brother, five years younger. Intelligent, gentle and sensitive, Subhananda also has a subtly ironic sense of humor.

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I come from a suburban upper-middle class reform Jewish -- reform, reform reform, reform -- background, and I had a fairly normal childhood, I suppose. I didn't take candy from men in cars and did all the normal things, although I probably was particularly reflective as a boy. I was a very intense, serious young boy, very philosophical, and was born with a strong sense of what's right. I think that precedes parental training, although my parents tried to instill in me ethical concepts. I didn't have a particularly eventful childhood, really nothing terribly notable. Nobody I knew was religious. In my whole youth I never met a religious person. I had very little respect for my Rabbis, who I saw as very sectarian, very narrow-minded, just concerned about Jews. I didn't see any piety there. But I was Bar Mitzvahed and confirmed.

Growing up, I had my teenage years in the late sixties and came to be very strongly influenced by and moulded by counter-cultural values. I took it all very seriously. It wasn't just a style for me the way it became some

years later, commercially co-opted. I was a counter-cultural ideologue -- I read Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, and I read the underground press. I was very much identified with the idealistic aspirations and values of hippie culture. When I really think about it very hard, I remember how deeply it affected me. That was where I was going. If I had been a little older -- perhaps if I hadn't joined the Movement at eighteen -- I would have ended up in the thick of it, but I would have soon discovered that it was fading away. Anyway, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, I was growing my hair, going to the city, very independent, seeing Tim Leary speak. I was fascinated with the whole gamut of the counter-cultural world, the psychedelic world. I experimented with LSD -- I suppose, all in all, I took maybe forty trips. I enjoyed it immensely, saw it as a means towards enlightenment. But I was not a religious person at all. I had rejected institutionalized religion so I was not on any search for God, I had no theistic language for framing my search. But I was on a search for higher consciousness. My favorite word then was "liberation." I had some vague sense that there was a higher state of being.

So I was trying to grow my hair long and on the weekends I'd go to Greenwich Village -- I had actually been a lot earlier, from about the age of ten or eleven, very into folk music, and it was folk music that led me into all this. People like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and Tom Paxton and Pete Seeger. None of my contemporaries were into it. So I was politicized by the topical "protest" folk music of that time, going even back into the early sixties, I suppose. I was very progressive, from the first generation of my high school that kind of turned hip in the late sixties. We were the first to be smoking marijuana. I identified very strongly with civil rights and all that -- I went to rallies, I heard Martin Luther King speak when he came to Long Island. If I were older, I might have gone down to voter registration down south, but I was a bit too young for that. And then the war: the Vietnam War, and I

became very strongly anti-war in high school, attended all the appropriate anti-war rallies, meanwhile experimenting with drugs and discovering that there are other universes, other dimensions. Again, that search was not articulated by any kind of theological language but just by a sense of there being a higher reality, a liberated state -- the idea that what we normally experience as consciousness is just a tiny sliver of reality. I was also reading people like R.D. Lange, who argued that definitions of psychological health are almost arbitrary. I came to accept that as a very fundamental axiomatic truth in my thinking, that talk about what is normal, what is not normal -- what is sane, what is insane -- is almost purely arbitrary and is culturally determined. Reality is arrived at consensually, not through any absolute knowledge.

That idea obviously made me very open-minded to everything. I became very experimentative in many ways, especially with lifestyle and consciousness. Experimentation with consciousness was at first defined by drugs but then later it led into two other ways of experimentation. One was psychological. I became fascinated by certain radical psychologists like Lange. And then, from an interest in Eastern mysticism, I found myself slowly drawn to the "mystique of the mysterious East." I read the Bhagavad-gita in translation and had begun to be attracted by the idea of long robes, long beards, swamis and yogis from India -- a very strong intuitive attraction. From my point of view now, it was a karmic thing -- that is, in my consciousness, there were impressions of some previous life which were now being revived. Some evidence of that is that the first time I ever heard the sound of the sitar, I was just blown away. The Beatles, "Norwegian Wood." The first time I heard that sound, I knew I had to find more of it. It just struck a very deep primordial undulant chord, and from my point of view now, that must be an indication that in a previous life -- probably my last life -- there was

life in India. Of course, you can say that's an interpretative position, but that's how I feel.

In any case, I was strongly drawn to anything Indian. During one of my last LSD trips, I had very intense and powerful Indian imagery, from ancient sages meditating on Himalayan mountaintops and so forth, very deep imagery with a powerful affective correlary. It wasn't just far-off hallucinations but very deep feelings, a sense of great profound wisdom of depth and truth coming from India. I had mystical drug experiences too. Not theistic, but mystical -- overpowering feelings of unity, of being part of other living things, not just interesting thoughts, but transforming heart-melting feelings of the inner-connectedness of all things, of wanting to go out and hug everyone in the world. They were real experiences, temporary though they were. Never any theistic experience like, There is God, but certainly a sense of a divine realm, of a sublime reality, some realm of light and love and truth and beauty.

During these years in high school and first year in college, I was taken up with this kind of experimentation, along with going to school and passing tests and doing O.K. My teachers always said that I had great potential, that I had a high I.Q., that I could be a straight-A student but that I didn't like to work at it. I always had a really hard time working at anything I couldn't really identify with. I became very cynical about "playing the game." I couldn't fathom just going to college if I didn't feel I was really getting something out of it, just so I could get a degree and fit into the economic schema. I couldn't bring myself to do it. In high school I was an A-minus student or something like that, and I got into a fairly respectable school, Washington University, which they like to call "the Harvard of the Midwest," which was ridiculous!

Anyway, once I got away to college and had independence -- I didn't have

to answer to my parents -- I went wild. I gave up any pretension of doing things right and I ended up hardly going to classes. I didn't do very much, but I ended up with a 3.5 average because, in spite of not going to class and doing practically no work -- especially second semester -- the whole second semester that year was disrupted by very active violent campus demonstrations against ROTC on campus. That was the year of Kent State, for instance. Washington University was a very political campus, a very radical student body, and so the second semester classes practically came to a halt. Everyday there were violent active demonstrations against ROTC, mass arrests, clubbings, so I really got into that.

At one point, I was suspended for participating in anti-ROTC demonstrations -- the F.B.I. was there taking pictures. I was a freshman, a new guy, just taking part, no more than anybody else. I wasn't a leader. But I got in trouble. And then there were hearings for reinstatement and I got reinstated. I was subpoenaed by a federal grand jury appointed by then-Attorney General Mitchell, the one who later left in shame, because we had burnt down both ROTC buildings, a serious matter, and so the Attorney General appointed a grand jury in St. Louis to investigate. I guess because I was a student I was called up to identify people who contributed support. It was all pretty frightening, really. I wasn't a hardened radical in the sense that I didn't care about messing up my life or maybe going to jail. I was not Che Guevara. I was just a seventeen-year old kid in college and when it came down to it, I didn't really have much guts.. If there were a lot of people throwing a rock through a window, I would do it, but I wasn't going to stand up there and have my head cut off. When the going got rough and they came in and indicted all the campus leaders, everyone ran in all directions. Years later I heard that some of those leaders ended up spending years in jail for destruction of federal property.

It was a very volatile year on campus and I was pretty wild, I suppose. I was becoming more and more alienated from conventional society. It was becoming harder and harder to play the game of being "part of it." That was, of course, helped along mainly by drugs, by reading existentialists and by just being there. I remember one day sitting in my dormitory room, stoned, and just being overpowered by a sense that nothing meant anything, just total meaninglessness -- that all those assigned meanings of things just weren't there, that the conventional structures of meaning which we are trained in, through our schooling and upbringing, were fading away. The drugs were having a really deconditioning influence. I suppose it's possible that, from a conventional psychological point of view, I was getting really "disassociated." I was identifying less and less with my world -- a college student in this part of the universe in this time. But I wasn't particularly unhappy. I was actually happy. But I was going through what can only be called ontological anxiety, a sense of meaninglessness, a sense of the fragile veneer of meaning structure coming undone and everything being up for grabs. Everything. I was purposely rejecting that whole meaning base. It wasn't just I was losing it. I didn't want it. But it came to a point where so much of it was eroded away that I started getting scared, not really having much of a basis. I was becoming vulnerable, I could have gone mad. I really needed a structure, a meaning structure. I was very ripe for a spiritual path.

So it was a period of crisis, and I began to realize I had to put myself back together. But I didn't want to put it back together in a normal way and just end up merging into the sea of mediocrity. I wanted something very extraordinary. It was almost a manic-depressive state of being very full of ontological anxiety and existential despair and yet being in a position where I would rather die than become normal. I wanted something radically different and something sublime. So I decided that I really had to find a path, some

kind of discipline, some kind of meditation -- I didn't know what, but I set out on a very specific mission to find a spiritual discipline by the end of that semester.

At the end of the semester I left college and went home. I worked. I don't mean to give the impression I was falling apart. I wan't. I was able to do things, I wasn't laying on my bed staring at the ceiling. I could talk to my family and I could hold a job for a few weeks, mow lawns, stuff like that. I wasn't going psycho or anything -- it was internal. But it got to the point where it actually began to interfere with my capacity to act normally, as it did many people of that generation. As for my parents, I was having tremendous conflict with them, had been having one since about the age of fifteen or sixteen. There was a real generation gap. I didn't know if I wanted to go to school in the fall. It was the natural thing to do, but I was resistant and didn't want to do it just because it was the thing to do. I had to find myself. I was desperate to find an acceptable identity.

At the end of the semester I had elected, along with a roommate, an apartment near campus. Being sophomores we were now allowed to live off-campus. So the plan was to hitchhike to St. Louis. The lease began in July, so I could move in anytime and I thought I'd just get into yoga. I hit the road hitchhiking, and not far out of New York, on the New Jersey Turnpike, I was picked up by a big blue bus, hippies -- a "freakbus." Anyway, one of the people on the bus was a person I knew from college, a familiar face, and he invited me on and so I went with them and their destination was California. My plan at first was just go as far as St. Louis and get off, but I decided to stay on with them until they got to California. Eventually we hit Boulder, Colorado, which at that time especially -- even now, to a degree -- was a center for gurus and swamis and Eastern religions. Anyhow, that summer there was going to be a big festival of gurus, it was a like a spiritual fair of all the Hin-

du spiritualists. It's in Boulder where I came in contact with the Movement.

Actually, in St. Louis I had had one or two minor contacts with a married couple who had recently opened a temple there. Once, or maybe twice, I went to the temple. During the second semester, I was taking a course -- it was a course on counter-culture -- and the students were divided into different sections. You could choose a section. One section was on mysticism and it was led by students, there was no teacher. It was a student seminar and we would sit around in this lounge in college and talk about mysticism. Nobody knew very much. Somebody had read the Gita, somebody had heard that, somebody had this guru somewhere, people just sat around and mused about mysticism. During one of those sessions, off in the distance I heard the sound of the Mrdanga, the drums that we use, and the ~~Cartels~~, the symbols, and that sound was very attractive to me. I heard that sound and it just took hold of me the same way the sound of the sitar did, so I just walked out of the room, followed the sound downstairs to a room where two devotees -- a married couple -- had set up a little altar and were chanting with just one other person there. There was a beautiful altar and flowers and chanting and they had a book table set up. I think I knew that they were Hare Krishnas -- I had seen devotees once or twice in New York and never taken much notice. I knew of them, not about them, practically nothing.

So I was intrigued by it. I was actually very drawn to it and ended up talking to the devotee who was in charge there. I remember being drawn to their purity -- these people were so pure, they seemed untouched by the world, and, because of my strong interest in attaining transcendence, I had a feeling these people were really advanced. But I was tied very much to a political consciousness, in the midst of the campus uprisings, and I was very much into a "social justice" frame of mind: "Help the world and change the world." I

remember having some discussion with him, asking, "How are you helping people?" I appreciated that they were doing something very far-out and mystical, yet there was a side of me that wanted to know, What about the world? Are you copping out or are you saving the world? He most likely said something along the line, "You have to change peoples' consciousness before you change the world." So I was receptive but I wasn't sold-out to it. I ended up going to the temple maybe once, we might have gone a second time. He picked me up at the university and drove me home there. I guess he thought I was a good prospect.

So I had had a few minor contacts then, but the thought hadn't crossed my mind to join ISKCON. But by the time I was out to Boulder, I had gone further along becoming disillusioned with the world and more serious about finding radical alternatives. I hadn't decided not to go back to college at that point -- I was indecisive. When we arrived in Boulder, it was nighttime. We were all sleeping, and they drove right up into the mountains, with thousands of hippies just hanging out right in the mountains, little encampments. And so we spent about a week in the mountains. I kept to myself mostly. I was trying to meditate, I didn't know how, but I wanted so badly to stabilize my consciousness and attain something higher. I remember now that I was in distress. I was so confused about my direction, not just about my future, but confused. Period. Ontological anxiety of the worst kind. I was in mental distress, I wanted relief. Somebody had taught me a little bit of hathiyoga, a few positions, so I was trying that out, but with no relief.

Then I hitchhiked down into town. One of the first days I was there -- it might have been the first day -- I saw a devotee, one single solitary devotee, chanting on the street. Boulder was just overrun with longhairs, thousands of people in the streets, it was like a Woodstock situation -- the summer of '70. Thousands and thousands of people hanging out because they'd heard, "That's the place." Even while travelling on the road we saw people

hitching to Boulder. For some reason Boulder had that appeal. I can barely remember what I was doing. I was hanging around a park for a night, we didn't have a place to stay. I ran into a guy and a girl, friends, and the three of us met up, didn't have a place to stay. At about eleven o'clock one night we were in a park and a tall, thin man with very short hair, almost a marine cut, approached us. Not a devotee. He looked super-straight, almost like a marine, and asked us if we needed a place to stay. We said we did, so he took us to his apartment. Turns out this guy is a homicidal maniac, a psychotic person. I had taken a light dose of LSD that night, but I was very lucid, and I ended up talking to the guy while the girl and the guy were asleep on the other bed. He opened his heart to me and described to me how basically he's a very gentle guy and would never hurt a fly but sometimes he becomes very violent. He described to me how once he had taken a German Shepard and strangled it -- and he seemed even on the verge of it. In the next several hours I talked him out of a state like that. It was very easy to imagine him picking up a knife and stabbing somebody. I stayed up the whole night with him, trying to keep him calm.

I think that that was the day before I actually met the devotee. The late afternoon or evening, I saw him on the street. It was the president of the Boulder temple, which a year later moved to Denver. He was alone because all the other members of the ashram, about fourteen of them, were in San Francisco at our big Ratha-yatra, the festival of the chariots. He stayed there alone to keep the temple open. So I approached him, and I had a little of a feeling for Hare Krishna people -- I thought it was a far-out thing -- and I told him I had met devotees and wanted to check it out. He drew me a map of where the temple was in Boulder.

That evening I went, with this couple -- this same guy and girl--- and I was very drawn to the whole atmosphere. It was a combination of different

sense impressions -- the sound of the kirtan, the tapes of the chanting, just the sounds had a magical effect upon me. It really seemed that I was hearing something sublime that I hadn't heard since an earlier life, a sense of calling forth from the deeply-sealed memory of a previous existence. Around the temple and the devotees, I was filled with these primordial feelings of recognition that it was like coming home. Even the smells of the vegetarian kitchen, though I was eating hamburgers up until the day I joined. I liked the atmosphere of the temple. I felt it a safe place, and the devotee was an exceptional person, saintly. These devotees weren't average people but of an intense depth and seriousness. I was just very impressed by this one person. Looking back at it, this devotee wasn't anything terribly impressive comparatively speaking, but it struck me that way, that he was very pure, above the world. I was impressed by their transcendentalness, by their being in the world but not troubled by it -- blissful, peaceful, sane, good-hearted.

I started coming around, and the devotee invited me to stay the night. What I would do sometimes is, when he would go to sleep early, like around nine, I would hit the town and go out, mess around, and he'd leave the back door open for me until around one o' clock in the morning. He was very liberal. Our temples now wouldn't be so indiscriminate. The Movement grew out of the whole counter-culture, there was that kind of openness. At times it was almost a crash-pad, that particular temple. So I began kind of coming and going for several days. I'd eat there and he'd have me sit and read aloud from the Bhagavad-gita, I'd ask him questions, he would answer. He was in no way heavy with me, he wasn't dogmatic, he didn't preach up a storm. He was actually pretty laid-back, which was good, because I think if he had come on too heavy, I would have been frightened away. I felt some real peace and satisfaction.

Then, after about a week or so, the rest of the devotees returned from

the West Coast. They all pulled in in two or three vehicles. It was during the early evening chanting in the temple -- we were chanting Hare Krishna and all of a sudden this whole chorus of voices joined in, and they just walked in the door. It was like a chorus of heavenly angels. And then after the arati we went out of the temple and sat in the outer room. I was just overwhelmed by the intensity of the devotees. The president of the temple, the one who stayed back, introduced me to everyone. It was a community. When I went out West, in addition to finding a discipline, I had a very specific idea of joining a commune where I could practice some kind of spiritual discipline. It was a commune, a real community of people who were highly dedicated to a spiritual discipline. I wasn't sure I wanted to just jump in, but it was a very attractive prospect.

Life in the temple got more back to normal. They went right back into their daily regimen, and so it got a little tighter for me, a little more demanding. Before that, I had sort of been hanging around, but now there was a hustle-bustle in the ashram and a fixed daily regimen and a schedule, and, if you were there, you were expected to follow it pretty much. I was very drawn to it, yet I had this trouble with the discipline -- all these people telling me what I should do -- and I wasn't used to that, so it was uncomfortable. But I had an inner conviction that there was a price to pay for enlightenment. I wasn't opposed to the principle. It's just that in practice it wasn't easy at first. So I started following the program of doing what they did, getting up early in the morning, attending the mangala-arati, chanting on beads and approaching sixteen rounds, eating when they did and not just taking off when I wanted to take off, being answerable, being part of the community. But it was frustrating. I was climbing the walls wanting to get out, I felt suffocated. But I didn't. I decided to buckle down, and I began my life as a devotee.

There was one important incident during that second or first week when everyone was there. We would chant all day and then work -- a forty-five minute drive to Denver everyday and chant in the street. One night we were chanting and I had an ecstatic experience, spiritual ecstasy. The chanting had had an effect upon me and I was filled with this very blissful ecstatic feeling, very intense, almost mystical feeling of happiness. "Bliss" is the word we prefer. "Happiness" comes from getting a sense pleasure. It was driving home that night in the van that I decided, I'm going to stay here because if by practicing Krishna Consciousness I can get to the point one day where I feel like this all the time, it's worth any sacrifice or effort. I wanted that kind of happiness. Previously, I was thinking, I'll give it a month and then I'll leave. Then, when I had that experience, I decided I was going to stay. At anytime I was free to go, at anytime I could have just walked out the door. But I had made the determination that, I'm going to stick this out if these are the benefits.

That began my life in Krishna Consciousness, and I gradually learned what it meant to lead a Krishna Conscious life. I attended classes and chanted sixteen rounds a day and felt myself gradually advance. The anxieties I had been feeling, which were at times acute, gradually dissipated, just left me. It had a tremendous therapeutic effect on me. After a couple of weeks I felt the burden being lifted, almost a physical pain in my chest - anxiety isolated as a physical feeling. And the philosophy made sense. Here I had a meaning. One might I would have desperately grabbed at anything. But that's not true. I would not have been attracted to any meaning system at all. When I read the Bhagavad-gita, it made absolute sense to me. It was very much aligned with my own way of thinking. It just sounded like the truth. When you're searching for the truth and you hear it, it rings a bell, it has that impression, This is true. As soon as I knew that, I accepted

the Gita as a spiritual authority.

I'm a very different person than who I was when I joined the Movement. My consciousness is in what I would consider a far better place, not only in terms of getting over anxiety, but in terms of getting spiritual knowledge, becoming aware of reality. It's not just an academic thing of mastering a body of knowledge or learning about a tradition as an outsider, but of going to the heart of a tradition in practice and feeling a massive transformation of consciousness from the material to the spiritual, yet with so much more to go, with the feeling that I'm just scratching the surface.

IV. Converting to ISKCON: Emerging Patterns

In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values they naturally appear to have.... In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery.... Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being. Cancelled as it all is by death if not by earlier enemies, it gives no final balance, and can never be the thing intended for our lasting worship. It keeps us from our real good, rather; and renunciation and despair are our first step in the direction of truth. There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other.

-- William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience¹

Reflecting on the five devotees' conversion accounts, I have trouble deciding whether it is their differences or their similarities that stand out the most. Kundali's systematic philosophical search seems worlds apart from the less-coherently conceived quests of Mrnalini and Dhirodatti, while the depth and insight of Subhananda's account appears to be vastly different from the the less analytical accounts that the two women gave me. One cannot easily graph, analyze, summarize or reduce the devotees' experiences to a mere lump of facts and conclusions. For this reason, the raw material of their very stories is perhaps more valuable than any analysis can be, for it speaks directly without need of interpretation.

Still, beneath the many differences that separate the five devotees, a rough but definite pattern emerges that characterizes their experience. Obviously, any generalizations one makes from these five examples do not form a scientific study or survey. But what the five stories lack in breadth, they make up for in depth. Their stories, I think, express what is at the heart of the conversion experience for many members of ISKCON. In a similar way, they reflect what is at the heart of modern America -- or, rather, what is

missing from the heart of America that makes these young spiritually-minded people seek out such a radical alternative.

Of course, these stories reflect not the perspective of the detached scientist but, rather, the perspective of committed devotees. Any conversion experience involves a fundamental reordering of reality so that the born-again person, looking back on his earlier life, reorganizes it in terms of what he has learned since having been converted. Conversion has changed the nature of his personality and, therefore, the nature of his reality. The world that was once the common-sense realm of day-to-day experience becomes, in retrospect, a battleground between the sacred and the profane, and all of life's decisions -- which at the time may have been arbitrary -- seem to have mystically guided the devotee to achieving his quest, to finishing his journey. Experiences which have had only marginal importance at the time become, through the perfect vision of religious hindsight, symbols and signals of the divine will. Subhananda, in his story, acknowledges this "interpretative" religious perspective,

But the devotees, in reorganizing their experience this way, are no different from the rest of humankind. Every ~~man~~^{person} "interprets" his past experience in terms of his present reality. Instinctively, he tries to order it and make sense of it. A married man looks back at his first date with his wife and sees it as a memorable, significant event, although at the time it may have been totally inconsequential. A ~~man's~~^{person's} romance with someone he never ended up marrying, though, gets relegated to the profane world of unrealized experience. History itself, in fact, is the reorganizing of the past through the knowledge of the present. Jesus is not a Jew from Nazareth but the founder of Christianity; Luther not a medieval monk but the starter of the Reformation; Washington not the first president of the United States but the "father of our country." So the devotees, in interpreting their personal histories, are doing exactly what we all do when we interpret our common his-

tory.

For the moment, then, I accept the devotees at their word and grant them the same hearing that I would grant any person telling me about his experience, secular or religious. But the question of interpretation raises fundamental questions that lie at the bottom of this study and are unanswerable. Did the devotees choose Krishna Consciousness or did events lead them to be chosen? Were their decisions conscious or unconscious? Was their ^{any} anything fundamental or inevitable that led them to Krishna Consciousness, or, under slightly different circumstances, could they have ended up leading profoundly different lives? What is the relationship between a religion of choice and a religion of destiny? These basic philosophical questions, then, are in the back of my mind as I try to make sense out of the emerging pattern of conversion that comes out of the five accounts.

* * * * *

All five of the devotees I interviewed had at least some exposure to a religious tradition in their childhoods. None were brought up as atheists or agnostics. Although Kundali never liked the Roman Catholic parochialism of his schooling, his years in religious schools seem to have imbued him with a sense of ~~there being~~ a spiritual side of life. He was exposed to people who had spiritual aims and pursuits. Mrnalini and Subhananda, although raised in Reform Jewish homes that put little emphasis on tradition, had enough exposure to religion in their childhoods to understand the importance of a ritual practice and a sacred culture extending beyond secular society. Their Judaism, perhaps, contributed to their alienation from mainstream America and made them more open to seeking a different lifestyle. Chandrika's father was a deacon in their Episcopal Church and therefore was presumably a religious leader in the community; Dhirodatti went to church regularly

until he was twelve.

Despite the devotees' efforts to discount the mediocre taste of religion that they got in their childhoods, then, it seems that all had at least some exposure to spiritual and ethical values and a sense of life having some ultimate meaning. In this way they fall into a pattern common to people who are "born again" into new religions. As Walter Houston Clark notes in his study of the psychology of religious conversion:

But no conversion ever occurred without a history, and a most important consideration in this history is what the influences were. Ordinarily the crucial factor is family training in religion. . . . Though many of the cases in the writer's study of the Oxford Group were very lukewarm or even agnostic just prior to their conversion, there was not a single person involved who had not been brought up in a religious family.²

The person least likely to become a Krishna devotee, then, is somebody brought up in modern secular America . . . who has no religious upbringing whatsoever. A taste of spirituality leads to higher expectations.

At the same time, though, none of the five devotees came from a deeply religious background, where religion was the central and most fundamental aspect of life, as it might be for an Orthodox Jew or a fundamentalist Christian. Their eventual decisions to reject their backgrounds and faiths did not involve giving away anything that was central to their lives since their commitments to their native religions were slim, at best. The devotees' situation parallels those of most of us in middle-class America, whether we come from liberal Protestant, Reform Jewish or post-Vatican II Catholic upbringings. The devotees were torn between their sense of the ^{being} meaning to life -- a sense instilled by the spiritual and ethical values of religion -- and the lack of there being a means or tradition in which they could express their sense. From a religious standpoint, they were unusually sensitive and unusually critical and thus quickly found hypocrisies in their parents'

faiths. Under slightly different circumstances, the devotees might have chosen to enter more fundamentalist or orthodox sects within their own churches. But in their own churches they had seen only the mediocrity and hypocrisy of faiths that had lost their connection to ritual and, in fact, to all aspects of life. A friend of mine who entered an extreme fundamentalist Christian "cult" when only a teenager was, at the time of her conversion, a regular churchgoer disillusioned at seeing empty beer bottles on the church's front lawn every Saturday morning after youth group gatherings.

The devotees, then, had a heightened sense of values and the need to seek out these values in a new context -- to re-synthesize them, so to speak, in a radical way. An earlier generation would have been content to make that synthesis within the old forms. Or, perhaps more concerned with a material than a spiritual search, an earlier generation would not have asked the basic questions necessary for a spiritual search. But these devotees, part of the institution-destroying generation of the 1960's and 1970's, and coming from materially-secure middle-class backgrounds, wanted a new context to express the old values. Krishna Consciousness became that context.

Having the willingness to ask the basic questions, then, is really the first step in the process that led these devotees to Krishna Consciousness. But I will return to this point later.

In addition to having weak links to their original ^{religion?} devotees, some of the devotees had only weak or tenuous links to their families. Kundali and Dhirodatti came from broken homes where parents had been separated or divorced. Subhanana, in his story, expresses his disconnectedness from his parents and their values. All three seem to have been unusually independent early on in life. Whatever sense of duty or responsibility they had towards their parents -- something a previous generation would have taken for granted -- was undermined by their own individual needs and quests. Their parents let

them "do their own thing" and they did so. Chandrika also notes how unusually liberal her parents were. In ISKCON, then, these devotees have found a new sort of family where "the association of devotees," as Dhirodatti puts it, replaces the nuclear family. In Dhirodatti's case, in fact, the nuclear family of the ashram replaces the artificial nuclear family that he had created in his neighborhood with his three brothers. For Kundali, raised on Grenada with his grandmother, ISKCON has provided him with a family he never had. For Subhananda, the ashram serves as a community in the way that his home and his neighborhood never did. Chandrika, on the other hand, has had a more integrative experience with the Movement, since it is important to her that her family supports her in what she does. It is not a coincidence that she eventually made a fulltime commitment to ISKCON after returning home to Philadelphia.

Unusually liberal or unstable situations at home, then, tend to foster the open-mindedness necessary for starting a spiritual search. Chandrika's mother took to her to meditation sessions when she was young and Kundali, ironically enough, actually first read Prabhupad's book only after receiving them as a gift from his parents! It is significant too that Kundali, Mrinalini and Dhirodatti all have siblings who at one time were either in the Movement or attracted by it. Patterns tend to run within families.

One of the ironies of Krishna Consciousness and the new religions is that, while critics see them as brainwashing helpless youths into a doctrinaire way of life, the devotees take an entirely different perspective. In fact, rather than being a form of brainwashing, conversion to Krishna Consciousness is the supreme expression of the individual's desire for total freedom of choice in his life. The devotees felt a compulsion to consider all their options and not just "go with the flow." Kundali, more than any of them, emphasizes this need for choice:

I became very concerned that the choice I would make in life would be the right one, that I wouldn't have to go through life always being uncertain about what I am....All this led to a really intense desire to assert myself....I started searching philosophically for reasons and justifications for my choices.

For Kundali, like many philosophers before him, living without a purpose is like cattle following a herd; life demands that we make intelligent choices and exercise our rationality. This desire led Kundali to choose not to go to college and thus avoid what he saw as the indoctrinating influences of higher education. For him, the rest of us who follow the beaten path are not truly free. We are being brainwashed, not him.

This decision, then, to follow "the road not taken" and let it make "all the difference" was central to the devotees' quest. Although all came from backgrounds that encouraged higher education and had the means to pay for it, none of the five devotees ever graduated from college. All ended up on roads other than what society prescribed. Subhananda, within a year of his having graduated from high school, had a sense of the relativity of all social roles and therefore was open to all possible paths. Conventional meanings had lost all their value. Like Kundali, he turns the brainwashing issue on its head and asserts that he has chosen his life while we have merely had our lives chosen for us. Subhananda's feeling of "everything being up for grabs" recalls the crisis that Tolstoy encountered in his mid-life:

I felt that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, that I had nothing left to hold on to, and that morally my life had stopped. An invincible force impelled me to get rid of my existence, in one way or another....I did not know what I wanted. I was afraid of life; I was driven to leave it; and in spite of that I still hoped something from it.³

Outwardly, like Subhananda, Tolstoy had a life that was progressing normally:

All this took place at a time when so far as my outward circumstances went, I ought to have been completely happy. I had a good wife who loved me and whom I loved; good children and a large property which was increasing with no pains....Moreover, I was neither insane nor ill.⁴

And yet Tolstoy, like Subhananda and Kundali, felt a compulsion to justify his existence in a way that transcended the social roles that he was successfully fulfilling:

And yet I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life. And I was surprised that I had not understood this from the very beginning. My state of mind was as if some wicked and stupid jest was being played upon me by some one.⁵

To choose, for both Tolstoy and the devotees, means seeing one's given role in society as only one of many possible choices.

If the first step in the devotees' conversions was their conscious or unconscious willingness to search for new answers, then the devotees are following a commonly-held American ideal to its limit. After all, the pilgrims who helped to found the United States came here in search of a liberty that was not given to them in England. They chose to come here and, unlike the Spanish missionaries who colonized Latin America, put their own desire for religious liberty above any interest in converting the natives who lived here. All Americans value their "freedom" and their "religious liberty." The devotees embody these ideals in the extreme.

But, as a line from a popular song from the 1960's goes, "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose," and the sort of complete freedom that the devotees found was very much the structural chaos of Victor Turner's liminal state.⁶ All five of the devotees were at a point in life where, with no clearly defined roles or commitments, they were most open to making life-changing choices. None had long-term plans for the future, either in terms of marriages or careers. Kundali, Mrnalini and Chandrika held a variety of temporary jobs that were not career-oriented. Dhirodatti was going to school but was really absorbed in the hectic drug-oriented lifestyle of the brothers' house, which seems to have been disorienting and disconcerting. His music provided his only discipline, and, probably, later helped him with the necessary discipline of being a devotee and chanting 1728 rounds

a day. Subhananda was a fulltime student ~~and~~ functioning within the structural framework of a larger institution, but, as he notes, the chaos of Washington University during the student uprisings only contributed to his feeling that "everything was up for grabs." What the devotees see as their complete freedom, then, is actually a reflection -- given their marginal connections to their families and their heritages, and their uncommitted lifestyles -- of their having had "nothing left to lose," or, at least, little left to lose.

This liminal journey took a variety of forms for the devotees. Four of them experimented with other forms of exotic or Eastern mysticism before coming to Krishna Consciousness. Subhananda took a class on mysticism and tried yoga, Chandrika tried meditating and chanting, Kundali joined the New York Zen Center and Mrnalini was attracted by charismatic Christianity. Clearly, in this sense, none of the five fit the popular stereotype of a young person suddenly walking into a temple one day and never coming out again as a result of being "brainwashed." Inward change always precedes outward change. There are, of course, historical examples of sudden and dramatic religious transformation: Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus or William James's account of Alphonse Ratisbonne's miraculous conversion to Catholicism.⁷ But even this kind of sudden change requires a mind open to it. The various religious practices that the devotees tried, as well as the drugs that Kundali and Subhananda experimented with, were all, in this sense, mind-expanding experiences. Thus, somebody looking at the bare facts of Subhananda's conversion may see a sudden and bizarre transformation, given that Subhananda left New York to start his sophomore year at college and, within a week, or so, was living in a temple in Boulder, Colorado as part of a strange religious movement from which he never came back. But when one starts to consider the inner psychological reality of

Subhananda's story, it becomes not only readily explicable but completely logical as well.

For Chandrika and Subhananda, this spiritual search or journey was related to a disillusionment with a more outwardly-oriented social or political quest. Chandrika was working as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill -- certainly the quintessential political pilgrimage spot in the United States -- while Sunhananda was "in a social justice frame of mind" as a result of his longtime interest in social protest music and the general campus ambience of the late 1960's. Perhaps because of a feeling of powerlessness, both lost interest in trying to change the world through political means and began to look into changing peoples' consciousness instead. After all, the political turmoil of Washington University led, in concrete terms, to violence, destruction and the jailing of campus leaders. Similarly, campaigning for world peace or social change on Capitol Hill, it is hard to emerge with a sense of concrete accomplishment since the immense forces of the political institution seem so heavily stacked against change. Even a rally of 100,00 people can seem no more than a drop of water in a well. Simply put, it is a lot easier to change one's consciousness and drop out of society than to try to have an impact on the immense institutions of modern America. Spiritual change offers more practical, tangible rewards.

This turn from changing society to changing the consciousness reflects what many people went ^{through} in the 1960's. The charisma and energy of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960's and the anti-war movement in the late 1960's eventually evolved into the chaos, violence and disillusionment of Kent State and Watergate, and, later, into the inwardly-turned pursuits of the "Me Generation" of the 1970's. Religious leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, who inspired social change, were assassinated and replaced by swamis and gurus who offered havens of stability and order in a world full of chaos. Even the Beatles, who started out as an innovative

group full of energy, optimism and unity, ended up going their separate ways in inner quests involving drugs and Eastern mysticism, preaching that, before revolution occurred, it was necessary "to change your mind instead." Bob Dylan, another symbol of that generation, abandoned topical folk songs about social issues for a surrealist, psychedelic vision of reality that culminated in a religious mysticism. Similarly, some European student movements have gone in cycles, starting with more doctrinaire Communism and Marxism and then moving towards Trotskyism, cultural radicalism, and anarchism.⁸

Out of anarchy, then, comes rebirth. Out of the anarchy of his crazy lifestyle, Dhirodatti began to sense another level of meaning. Out of the anarchy of his atheism, Kundali began his search. And out of the anarchy of his sense that "everything was up for grabs," Subhananda started his journey west. They moved through a wilderness before finding redemption from what they saw as a polluted, profane world.

Within the context of these individuals' religious conversions, certain symbolic patterns or motifs are apparent. On a figurative level, all the devotees took spiritual journeys; but, on a more concrete level, a number of them took physical journeys as well. A trip across the country, East to West, figures profoundly in the American imagination, and Subhananda, Mrnālini and Dhirodatti all made such a journey. Subhananda's trip from New York to Boulder was part of what might be called a latter-day pilgrimage to a modern Mecca of exotic spiritualism. Like Jesus, Subhananda retreated for a few days into the wilderness before descending into the city and finding his spiritual vocation. The strange, disorienting events leading up to his conversion -- the hippie bus, the freaks wandering in Boulder, the psychotic killer -- emphasize the extreme liminal nature of his last few days in the profane world. Dhirodatti's trip to the Ratha-yatra on the West Coast led to a radical break in lifestyle and his first near-ecstatic

experience as a devotee. The thousands of people who came to the Ratha-yatra made Los Angeles, at that moment, another pilgrimage spot for the spiritually-searching. Mrnalini's trip to California with her girlfriend led to a "hankering for spiritual life" and, consequently, a final commitment to Krishna Consciousness. Her rejecting the possibility of marriage while in Colorado underscores that for Mrnalini the journey was a spiritual crossroads. Chandrika, on the other hand, never made a journey to the West, but took a sudden trip to Miami after feeling "a strong pull" to go there. In Miami she had her first significant encounter with devotees. Later, after a trip to Philadelphia, she made a more definite commitment. And, in the opposite sense, Dhirodatti's trip to Clovis, New Mexico led him to realize, in a profound way, that he had a need for a spiritual life.

A journey, therefore, because it involves a change in environment or lifestyle, helps to lead to a dislocation in routine that makes one ripe for spiritual conversion or profound realization. It is part of a rite of passage. Stepping out of a regular social role -- what, in effect, one does during a journey -- points the way to new perspectives on old realities. Only by going to New Mexico did Dhirodatti realize that he needed the devotees; similarly, only by going to California did Mrnalini realize that she needed spiritual life. Unlike a vacation, which has a planned structure and limit that make it an extension of routine reality, a journey is often open-ended and unplanned. In this way it is a liminal experience. Bob Dylan articulated this liminal sense of drifting, of journeying through profound change, when he sang: "How does it feel to be on your own/ with no direction home/ like a complete unknown/ like a rolling stone?" This is the sort of experience that Subhananda went through on his journey west.-- where, ironically enough, he found the truth of the East!

Both sacred and secular literature ^{are} full of the idea of the transformative power of journeys. In the Bible, for example, Israel's open-ended journey through the wilderness led to the redemption of the Law and the Covenant; Jonah's sea voyage to Tarsus led to his being swallowed by the whale and, consequently, his conversion to being a prophet of the Lord; and Saul's journey to Damascus resulted in his swift and miraculous conversion to ^{the} vision of Christ. In American literature, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn involves a transformative journey down a river by two people trying to escape the confines of society and civilization; Herman Melville's Moby Dick is about a mystical voyage in search of a mythical whale; William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying describes a poor rural family's journey to bury their mother in a distant town; and Jack Kerouac's On the Road tells of a number of journeys, mostly by car, across the United States. The examples are endless and plainly evident. The journey, by undermining what Subhānanda calls the "meaning structures" of everyday reality, becomes an archetypal symbol of change, transformation and discovery, often religious in nature. It is deeply significant, then, that three of the devotees strongly emphasize the physical journeys that accompanied their spiritual quests.

Of course, many people make journeys or undergo spiritual and religious quests. All people, in one way or another, experience rites of passage. However, the large majority of people do not end up choosing paths as radically different and world-denying as Krishna Consciousness. Beyond all paradigms of liminality and journeys, therefore, something has to explain why the devotees have chosen the paths they have -- why they have so markedly set themselves apart from all possibilities within the mainstream. What seems to set them apart is their repeated questioning of the world and almost compulsive need to divide the world into two paths, creating what I would call a crossroads mentality. William James, in The Varieties

ties of Religious Experience, describes two types of religious dispositions: the "healthy-minded" and the "sick-souled."⁹ People with sick souls are those most likely to convert, be born again or otherwise undergo a religious transformation, as opposed to the healthy-minded, who are more likely to integrate their original faiths into a positive world-embracing personality.¹⁰ Sick-souled people tend to see pain, suffering and despair in worldly existence and therefore look for ways to transcend it. For them, there are two paths in life: the sacred and the profane.

The devotees, both through their own inclinations and under the influence of the world-denying Krishna Conscious philosophy, are examples of James's sick souls -- a term, by the way, which James did not intend to be derogatory. As their quests progressed, they more and more began to see the world in terms of the polarity between the spiritual and the material. Kundali, for example, describes the struggle he was going through just prior to his conversion:

I would fall down in my determination to be renounced and spiritual and just really try to go all out and try to enjoy the world. I'd hold myself and say, This is wrong, let me just get spiritual, and I'd go back and forth.

Or, as Dhirodatti notes:

Already, by that time, I could see there was a distinction between pursuing a material life and a spiritual life...So I decided to become a devotee because, on every point where I considered a comparison between my materialistic life and the alternatives of spiritual life, I came up with more reason for living the spiritual life.

Chandrika also says, "I got to the point where I was just like, I've had it with the material life and I'm just going to make a commitment to Krishna Consciousness." These devotees' conversions, then, rested on the fundamental assumption that there was no middle ground between the monastic life of Krishna Consciousness and the sinful activities of the world. In its orthodoxy, Krishna Consciousness encourages little integration with the world. Mrnalini, for example, decided at one point that:

I wanted to do other things, but I still wanted to be Krishna Conscious, somehow balance that and integrate it into my life rather than actually be living in a temple.

She found that sort of integration insufficient. The devotees, like James's sick-souled people, felt the need for total commitment -- and the Movement encouraged nothing less. Going to feasts once a week *was* not enough.

The Krishna Conscious world view, despite its monistic philosophy, is essentially dualistic for all practical purposes. It provides a religious perspective that, rather than integrating the sacred into the profane, polarizes the spiritual and the material into two distinct spheres, and asks potential devotees to choose between the two. This radical dualism is, ironically enough, very much a part of Judeo-Christian religious tradition. St. Augustine, for example, describes in his Confessions how fundamental it was to his conversion:

Thus did my two wills, the one old and the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, contend within me; and by their discord they unstrung my soul. Thus came I to understand, from my own experience, what I had read, how that "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh." I verily lusted both ways...¹¹

St. Augustine, in terms similar to the devotees', talks about the necessity of making a moral choice or commitment in life -- to dedicate one's will entirely to one world, because the two worlds are incompatible. His conflict recalls Kundali's. For example, St. Augustine writes:

I hesitated to be above the world and serve Thee, because my perception of the truth was uncertain; (but) now it was certain. But I, still bound to earth, refused to be Thy soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all embarrassments, as we ought to fear to be embarrassed.¹²

The more dualistic a philosophy is, then, the less compromise it permits in terms of lifestyle and practice.

The devotees, then, came to embrace this dualism, perhaps as a result of grossly alienating material experiences -- like the ones Dhirodatti had -- or just as a result of the malaise and aimlessness of modern material life.

This dualism was part of the crossroads mentality that divided the devotees' worlds into two separate and distinct paths and asked, at any given moment, that they choose the spiritual path. Thus, crossroads after crossroads, the devotees chose the spiritual path until they ended up far away from the material mainstream. They felt the need, in T.S. Eliot's words, to "squeeze the universe into a ball/ To roll it toward some overwhelming question." Of course, in any search, the questions that are being asked decide the range of answers that can be given. Krishna Consciousness provided the dualistic questions, and demanded dualistic answers. It left it up to the will of the devotees to decide which path they would take.

The crossroads or dualistic mentality actually thrives on the sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane. The more that ISKCON can see itself as being the embodiment of the spiritual path to truth, the more the rest of the world -- religious or otherwise -- takes on the role of being material sinfulness. The seriousness of ^{ISKCON'S} demands and commitments seems to have impressed the devotees, who were all serious people. After all, Jesus himself was the one who said that his followers had to be ready to reject their families in order to follow him. In this way, the paradox of rejecting the family and standing profoundly apart from society even enhances the devotees' sense of faith. As Kierkegaard writes about Abraham's faith in his redemption: "Abraham became old, Sarah became a laughingstock in the land, and yet he was God's elect and inheritor of the promise that in his seed all the races of the world would be blessed."¹³ Thus, for the dualistic devotee, being a "laughingstock in the land" only intensifies the paradox of faith and points even more to the inevitability of his getting back to Godhead in his lifetime.

Yet, despite the fact that conversion to Krishna Consciousness tends to polarize the worlds of the sacred and the profane, in a number of other

ways it integrates aspects of the devotees' two lives. No experience in life is totally divisive. For Dhirodatti, the pure "association of devotees" replaced the sinful association with his brothers that characterized his pre-ISKCON life. Mrnalini similarly forged a link with her past by marrying a friend from college whom she had always respected and, afterwards, by playing the role of a traditional American housewife within the context of ISKCON. Kundali and Subhananda both found within the Movement outlets for their philosophical and intellectual skills. Chandrika, however, more than any of the others, emphasizes the continuity between her two lives by stressing how Krishna Consciousness has allowed her to develop previous skills and interests, such as charitable social service. The fact that she ended up making a commitment to Krishna Consciousness in her hometown, Philadelphia -- close to her parents -- also suggests integration, a sort of coming home. She quotes Prabhupad as saying, "'Just add Krishna Consciousness'" to whatever proclivity one may have -- a statement recalling James's integrative "healthy-minded" religious disposition. Obviously, though, it is not enough just "to add" Krishna Consciousness to one's previous life. ISKCON's path demands a farther-reaching commitment and transformation. Dhirodatti had to abandon his musical pursuit entirely rather than consecrate it to Krishna. Similarly, Mrnalini found her part-time commitment to the Movement insufficient. Chandrika's attitude, unusually healthy-minded and integrative, perhaps reflects a lower or different level of commitment on the inside. Prabhupad's vision entails not merely adding Krishna Consciousness to previous proclivities, but, rather, a massive transformation in lifestyle to Krishna Consciousness -- and then, later, once this transformation has taken place, adding previous proclivities in order to balance and integrate it.

Beyond far-reaching theoretical explanations of the devotees' conver-

sions, though, lie other explanations that seem trivial but are important nevertheless. Religious experience, like anything in life, ranges from the sublime to the silly. In Dhirodatti's case, the good taste of the prasadam attracted him to Krishna Consciousness as much as any transcendent philosophy. In comparison to the junk food he was accustomed to eating, it must indeed have had a spiritual taste. Subhananda liked the music as well as the prasadam. And Kundali got his first intense exposure to the Movement through his parents' gifts of Prabhupad's books. In practical terms, too, the devotees are doing well, even though the mainstream does not accept their "success." Subhananda has a leadership role in the Movement, and has developed contacts in the academic world that few people without college degrees have. He has even published a book through a major publishing house -- something many intellectuals would envy. All the devotees have the comfort and security of a steady income. Chandrika, through the Food for Life Program, has managed to meet the mayor of Philadelphia and see more tangible results of her social welfare work than she did on Capitol Hill. Each of the devotees, then, would agree with Kundali when he says, "I make ends meet, I'm satisfied and I'm not a dodo bird."

Other themes, more social than religious, surface in the five conversion stories. One of them, which I have mentioned before, is the search for family and community. As Subhananda notes in his account, a spiritual path was not enough; he was also looking for a community in which to practice it. The community provides the practical context for for a life of discipline, as well as a source of security in a cold, indifferent world. As Irwin Doress and Jack Nusan Porter point out in "Kids in Cults:"

...a significant percentage of families in our society seem to be afflicted by marital discord, marital breakdown, intergenerational strife, gross immaturities and child/adolescent abuse, all of which can lead to a sense of insecurity. What does one do when one is insecure? A variety of things, one of which is to look for a replacement family. Cults/sects often act as such secure "homes," even more secure than the political and cultural groupings of the 1960's.¹⁴

From a socio-historical perspective, then, it is not surprising that new religious movements are most likely to spring up in times of profound social change and stress, when traditional institutions and values are decaying or disappearing. Caitanya's charismatic bhakti movement grew out of such a period. So did Christianity, which developed partially in reaction to the deep changes that imperialistic Rome was bringing to Europe and the Mediterranean.

While providing alternative families and communities, groups like ISKCON also offer a choice to those disillusioned with the growing bureaucratization and impersonality of modern life. Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, in their study of the Meher Baba movement, refer to a passage by Peter Berger:

Modern childhood is marked by values and by a consciousness that are emphatically personalistic. Modern bureaucracy, by contrast, has an ethos of emphatic impersonality. Put simply, an individual shaped by modern childhood is most likely to feel oppressed by modern bureaucracy. Indeed, he is likely to have a very low "oppression threshold" when it comes to the impersonal processes of bureaucracy. Thus people today feel oppressed, "alienated" or even "exploited" simply by being subjected to bureaucratic processes...that a generation ago would have seemed pragmatic necessities.¹⁵

In this way, the growth of the new religions is related to the rising expectations of a new leisure class that, already materially content, searches for spiritual meaning as well. Christopher Lasch has made a similar argument in The Culture of Narcissism.¹⁶ What this argument overlooks, however, is that spiritual searches have characterized all social classes in all historical times. Religiousness is more than the result of a "revolution of rising expectations."

With the American frontier now completely settled and developed, groups like ISKCON offer a spiritual frontier to young people searching for higher things in life. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis of American history emphasizes the optimism and belief in easy social mobility that

characterized a country that was continually expanding westward. As Ray Allen Billington writes:

The logic of expansion, and the example of constant growth in the West, meant that optimism was the common faith of frontiersman...Faith in the future became a habit of thought no less persistent than belief in equality. And as the successive Wests merged into Easts, optimism increasingly characterized national thought.¹⁷

With the closing of the frontier, though, Americans have had to find new frontiers, internal frontiers -- such as the expansion of consciousness. Devotees like Subhananda and Dhirodatti took their journeys west, only to find the East. For them, "the mystique of the mysterious East" provided a new area yet to be explored, a frontier as yet undeveloped. The spirituality of the entire world is the new frontier, and spiritual mobility has replaced social mobility.

These sociological explanations for the rise of the new religions, despite having elements of truth, are somehow too condescending and simplistic. What I see as more fundamental to the devotees' searches is the universal need to overcome powerlessness and achieve a sense of order and unity in life. As I have noted before, Americans have always valued freedom and independence, which entail the power of the individual will to direct itself to good or bad. The Protestant Ethic admires people who have "picked themselves up by their own bootstraps" and blames poor people for their poverty. Our goals are "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." But the modern world -- like many worlds before it -- seems chaotic, out of control, beyond the individual's power of will. Families are disintegrating, bureaucracies are alienating, the old social mobility is gone. How can one pursue happiness in such a huge, chaotic society?

Krishna Consciousness is a clearly-defined path of supreme order and unity amid this chaos. It offers devotees control over their destinies, a sense of purpose in life. It offers community in the association of devo-

tees. It offers a complete life-cycle, going from brahmacari to grhastha to sanyassi. It offers the possibility of enlightenment and development, both in this world and the next. It offers the practical securities of income and career. It offers both the philosophical and the practical. In devotion to Krishna, it gives every action in life a definite goal. And it allows devotees to feel they are making progress and working towards saving a world which has seemingly gone out of control.

Chandrika, in concrete terms, sees herself making more progress towards helping people through the Food for Life campaign than she did lobbying on Capitol Hill. Subhananda, instead of embracing the powerless nihilism of radical psychology, acts with meaning as he follows the path to spiritual enlightenment. Kundali has a practical and philosophical framework for his life, and conceives of his goals in concrete terms, like constructing a building. The unhappy chaos of Dhirodatti's teenage years has been replaced with stability and order. Mrnalini satisfies her maternal instincts in a context of spiritual meaning that mainstream society does not offer the ordinary housewife. Of course, all five of the devotees might have ended up stabilizing their lives and finding meaning along more conventional paths. Krishna Consciousness was not the only answer. But it was the answer that they found -- or, as they would have it, that found them.

For orthodox religious extremists like the devotees, assuming control over one's destiny means complete surrender. In life's dialectic, freedom becomes the same as submission to authority. Out of the liminal state where "everything is up for grabs" comes its exact opposite. In this way, Krishna Consciousness is something radically new and different and each person who joins the movement is saying, in effect, I choose. At the same time, Krishna Consciousness is thousands of years old, part of an ancient tradition, and each devotee who consecrates his life to it says, I am chosen.

All religious conversions contain this contradiction, this tension between fate and free choice. Did the devotees choose their spiritual vocations? Or did fate choose it for them? Subhananda talks about his freedom, about his rejection of all conventional meanings, only to assert that previous life in India influenced his eventual coming to Krishna Consciousness. The born-again person is torn between the freedom of will which led to his decision, and the will of God, which must determine all truth.

ISKCON, in its present institutional state, embodies, this tension, since it is at one and the same time an ascetic monastic community dependent upon conversion and proselytism, and a householders community intent upon raising and keeping children within the Movement. As more and more devotees become grhasthas and start having children -- as seems to be the trend now -- two distinct groups of devotees will develop: those who say I choose and those who say I am chosen. The religious experience of Kundali's and Mrnalini's children is bound to be fundamentally different from that of their parents, since their parents chose a radically ascetic lifestyle in revolt against, and not because of, their upbringings.

I think of Kundali's daughter. What will life be like for her, grow-up as a Krishna devotee growing up in a larger society which rejects -- and even mocks -- her lifestyle and her religion? Will she eventually assimilate into the mainstream? Or will she ^{be} so far from the mainstream that she will never feel its pull? At any rate, as she grows up, she will experience extreme conflict. A friend of mine raised in a strict orthodox Islamic family in the middle of a secular Judeo-Christian community has experienced this conflict and gone through many severe emotional crises. How will -- how can -- Kundali raise his daughter so that she will not feel these conflicts? He will have to socialize her in an airtight, insular community, a little world of total meaning within the larger world of

modern America. Any exposure to the mainstream will make her question her Krishna Conscious perspective on life. And what about peers? A given ashram may only have two or three children. Is she to spend her whole life with just a few playmates? And what if she is the only girl among them? Kundali will have ^{to} of necessity, expose her to the outside world. By so exposing her, he will be allowing her to assimilate.

It seems, then, that ISKCON will have to rely on religious conversions similar to the ones presented in this paper in order to perpetuate itself. Of course, its farm communities -- free from the pervasive influences of the city, and often providing schools and programs for children -- offer a new direction. Providing a more secure community for its children, then, would mean ISKCON's abandoning the city for the farm and the life of total devotion for one of farming and hard work. It could create its own rural sub-community, like the Plain People have in the Pennsylvania countryside. Or it could become a more assimilated non-mainstream community, like the Swedenborg Church in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, or like orthodox Jewish communities in neighborhoods of New York City. These alternatives, though, all imply changing or adapting its monastically-oriented life.

The devotees see themselves not only as part of a deep historical tradition but also as heralders of a new religious awakening in America. Their transformative conversions are only the initial spark of the larger fire to come. Their challenge is to keep the spark going in the United States, whether as a monastic religion of revelation that exists outside of society's structures, or as a community-oriented religion that imitates the institutions of mainstream society. Their options, then, run from complete polarization to complete integration. It seems to me that, so far, their polarization has contributed to their success and ^{has} set them apart from other groups. Christianity, after all, existed for a number of cen-

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turies as a widespread, charismatic underground movement before it began to integrate itself into the structure of society, and eventually, in the Middle Ages, became the structure of that society.

With the social turmoil of the 1960's gone, ISKCON is now looking inwardly and examining itself, relying less than before on proselytism and conversion, though by no means abandoning these means. This lull may be short-lived, since social change is inevitable. In the next time of crisis and change, whenever that may be, Krishna Consciousness and movements like it will be in the forefront again, ready to receive converts like the five described here, searching for order in a world of chaos.

NOTES ON CHAPTER IV

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Note: Ideas and concepts originated by Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, now a part of religious-historical-sociological language, have been very helpful to me in this chapter beyond the footnotes listed above.

V. Conclusion

This paper has concerned itself with spiritual journeys of one sort or another -- trips made through the strange liminal territory on the edge of society where most of us choose not to go. The five devotees compelled themselves to explore this territory and ended up experiencing immense transformations that none of them would have expected a few years or even a few months before.

By attempting to engage in a dialogue with the devotees, this paper has been a liminal journey in itself, albeit a more conservative one. By letting the devotees speak for themselves, I have tried to shatter stereotypes and misconceptions.

I could have tried to write a more "objective" paper by interviewing ex-devotees or the parents of devotees, and then balancing their testimony against those of the people within the Movement. Obviously, there is another side to the story. The relief that accompanied the devotees' finding Krishna Consciousness went hand in hand with the sadness of those they rejected or hurt. The devotees' stories conceal a lot of pain and tragedy. And, of course, ISKCON is far from being a perfect organization. Stories abound about temples doing illegal or under-handed things. A friend of mine from California tells me that the devotees there are infamous for stealing flowers from peoples' gardens!

But including these perspectives would have meant giving an entirely different focus to my story. I was concerned with finding out why people become devotees. Understanding this required taking the devotees' experience on their terms, not on my own.

By immersing ourselves in a different world, then, we come away transformed, with a new perspective on reality. We can see that we need not

become devotees in order to learn some things from them. For example:

That, in spite of secularization and the growth of science, Americans still have spiritual needs.

That these needs may be met by orthodox religions.

That new orthodox religions like ISKCON in many ways parallel traditional forms of orthodox religion.

That people who follow these orthodox religions, new or old, are not mindless zombies who have surrendered their wills.

That the young people joining the new religions are often unusually, sensitive, intelligent or serious.

That, despite outcries from the mainstream churches, people involved in the Eastern spiritual movement are involved in a quest similar to all historical spiritual quests.

We do not have to accept the radical ascetism and extreme commitment of the devotees in order to see value in their criticism of modern American life. Can those of us in the mainstream learn the importance of religion and ritual? Can we discover community, security and a sense of living for something beyond ourselves? Can we see that life has spiritual values as well as material ones?

If we can, then there will be less need for ISKCON and the radical break it demands.

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