

HARE KRISHNA

"Who are the Hare Krishnas and what do they believe?"



The origin of the Hare Krishnas (International Society for Krishna Consciousness or ISKCON) dates back to the fifteenth century (1486), when Chaitanya Mahaprabhu first taught that Krishna was the supreme Lord above every other god. Mahaprabhu advocated a devotional method of faith where adherents to Krishna entered into a relationship with Krishna expressing adoration to Krishna through dancing and chanting. His public displays of adoration earned a large following, in part, due to its sharp contrast with dispassionate and ascetic expressions which common to Hinduism. This Hindu sect however distinct it is in its unique adherence to Krishna, is still quite Hindu since even Krishna is but a manifestation (or "Avatar") of Vishnu—one of the classic deities of Hinduism. Moreover, Hare Krishnas retain the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu Scripture, as well as the doctrines of Reincarnation and Karma. The ultimate goal for Hare Krishnas however is a transcendental loving relationship with Lord Krishna. "Hare" itself refers to "the pleasure potency of Krishna," similar to the Christian idea of man's highest goal being to worship God and enjoy Him forever. Some Christian overtones should be obvious at this point, even though the ISKCON is a distinctly Hindu cult. Due to the mystical "devotion" expressed in chanting and dancing, the Hare Krishnas can be compared to Sufi Muslims ("Whirling Dervishes") and some mystical expressions of Christianity which emphasize ecstatic experiences and mystical transcendence.

In 1965, The Hare Krishna movement came to America by means of Abhay Charan De Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, an aged Indian exponent of the worship of Krishna. The Swami forsook the world in 1959 at the age of 63 to be a guru in total devotion to Krishna. At the age of 70 he traveled to New York to popularize his views. The Hare Krishna movement sprouted quickly in the ready soil of the 60's.

Western values were being questioned and Eastern thought was becoming fashionable. The larger culture of the United States was shifting to a new religious paradigm of which ISKCON was another player. A tireless evangelist, the Swami founded ISKCON and remained its leader until his death in 1977. The ISKCON is a wealthy organization today, having gained its wealth largely through soliciting funds and distributing its lavishly illustrated literature, including the Bhagavad-Gita and its periodical Back to Godhead. During the 1960s and 1970s, Hare Krishnas were so prevalent in public places such as airports that laws had to be passed to prevent them from accosting people with their often aggressive and intimidating requests for money.

The ISKCON is quite demanding of its adherents. Becoming a member involves choosing a guru and becoming a disciple to him. This guru is so critical that it is said, "without [the Guru] the cultivation of Krishna consciousness is impossible. From the devotee's side, initiation means that he accepts the guru as his spiritual master and agrees to worship him as God." (Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* 2001, pg. 176). And the whole of one's life is to be encompassed by Krishna centered practice and devotion. As such, ISKCON pulls its members into commune-type settings where all discussion and life is deliberately centered around Krishna. Very intricate rules are established in these communities to make sure that all activity is Krishna centered. Much of Indian/Hindu culture is imported into these communes. It must be noted that these communities have been questioned by ex-members and outsiders alike alleging illegal and immoral practices within the safety of their relative isolation. The ISKCON has been accused of great evils in this regard even though such allegations, were they true, should not be hastily attributed to ISKCON doctrine specifically but rather to the practices of some Hare Krishnas. A similar example could be made, for Christians, with the moral downfall of certain Christian Leaders and Televangelists.