

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Hare Krishna Transformed*. By E. Burke Rochford Jr. New York: New York University Press, 2007. pp. x, 285. \$24.00

*Hare Krishna Transformed* is sociologist Burke Rochford's latest work on the evolution of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, popularly known as the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement). It is the product of three decades of research and scholarship that trace the lives of Kṛṣṇa adherents from adolescence to adulthood. The work makes use of data from dozens of surveys and from interviews with hundreds of practitioners, congregants, parents, and children. The result is the first systematic study of generational transitions within ISKCON, one that will provide much-needed stimulus for discussion regarding the role of Kṛṣṇa culture in the greater world, and a book as important for its shortcomings as for its achievements.

The study begins with the biography of Dasa, a young man whose parents joined a Kṛṣṇa community and in 1977 sent him to a devotee-run boarding school when he was eleven years old. His life during these formative years consisted of sexual abuse, rock fights with other boarders (one is hard-pressed to call them students given the paucity of education), beatings from school staff, and coercion into soliciting money through deceptive means. Transfer to another devotee school in India only increased the trauma. At sixteen, Dasa returned to the States where the tragedies continued: his mother's death from leukaemia, a car crash that shattered three of his vertebrae, sexual advances by male ashram leaders, departure from the movement at age twenty-one, and painful attempts to integrate into college and secular society. In 1991 when he was twenty-three, Dasa attended a reunion of other former students. Their stories revealed that he was not alone in the anomie of his displacement and that the abuses he endured were more widespread and numerous than he had known. In the ensuing years he married, had a son, built a career, divorced, and initiated a summer camp for pre-teen devotees. 'My involvement is now going to head in that direction', he says. 'We need to create something for our children. And I want to do that.'

Rochford segues from Dasa's tragic past to other grim issues in the movement's history: its institutional prejudice against family life, a litany of child abuse and mistreatment of women, the erosion of its members' confidence in their institutional authorities, and an exodus of practitioners into the larger world often at the loss of their faith. The author explores schisms, financial collapse, and the 'Hinduisation' of ISKCON temples when donations from Indian congregants became the main source of sustenance. A final chapter compares ISKCON to what the author calls other 'new religions that gained prominence in the 1960s' such as the Children of God, the Unification Church, and Scientology. The book concludes that 'collectively, ISKCON and the other major new religions have been drawn toward conformity with American society as their members have become involved in mainstream institutions in the absence of communally based domestic cultures'. (p. 215) He ends his study with an admonition and a salute: 'The struggle ahead will no doubt require still more cultural work to keep this widely disparate community united in the service of Prabhupāda and Kṛṣṇa. All best wishes.' (p. 217)

While broad in its range of topics, Dasa's story and his abuse at the hands of teachers and administrators form the book's opening chapter and set the tone for all that follows. In a phone interview (10 November 2010; used with permission). Rochford explained his reason for putting Dasa's story at the beginning. It was, he said, 'to draw the reader into the story as a matter of literature. Then in the following chapters I analysed elements of his story in more general ways...So I thought stylistically it brought readers into the story.' At first, Rochford said, he did not know Dasa was a victim of abuse; but having been abused served the purposes of his writing. 'It would have been problematic if he had been "whole" coming out of his experiences', he said. 'So the connection literarily works. That was something that worked out, if you will. If you said to me, "When you found out he was abused, and many were not, maybe you should have taken someone else", I suppose so. I had a lot invested in his story and in him as a person, and the fact that it did turn out, much to my pleasure I must say—it did connect well with what I had to write about in the rest of the book since some of those chapters had been written previously, before I knew he had been abused [...]. So his story worked really well. As tragic as it is, it is something that draws readers into the book and reverberates with the rest of the book.'

There is no overt malice in *Hare Krishna Transformed*: while Rochford focuses on the failings of ISKCON his writing is dispassionate and supported

by references to current literature on the sociology of religious movements. But the most elementary student of sociology knows better than to manipulate facts with literary artifice to support a thesis. If the author's aim had been to *represent* abuse during the early years of ISKCON, he would have been more objective in his choice of data and more representative in his choice and placement of the book's sole biography. But his intent appears to be to universalise abuse, implicating the entire institution as potential participants in the crimes of the few, and Dasa having been abused was 'a story that really worked' toward that end.

There is nothing wrong with a stark exposition of wrongdoing, but researchers—even the well-intended such as Rochford—take positions, interpret their research, and are responsible for how it is presented. For instance, early in his book Rochford states that 'in essence, this is a story about how radical religious protest is tamed and transformed and how a new religious movement survives by reinventing itself in the midst of decline in crisis' (p. 8). Defining the behaviour of Kṛṣṇa devotees as 'radical religious protest' and something needing to be 'tamed' is language that suits the needs of scholarship. It is Rochford's locution, not adherents'. No one can question a scholar's academic right to use such language, but we can question its adequacy if it unfairly skews readers' perception of what is true.

One of the guilty parties in this confusion about truth is the information on which it is predicated. Apart from his own surveys and interviews, Rochford relied heavily on the 'North America Prabhupāda Centennial Survey' conducted in 1995–96. The Survey included responses from 251 'full-time members', 145 'congregational members' (defined as 'less committed and involved in ISKCON'), 94 'former ISKCON members', and 66 who 'claimed to have never officially joined ISKCON' (p. 6). Rochford calculates ISKCON's North American membership at about 50,000, and by that calculation his conclusions are drawn from less than two percent of the North American members. Who are these particular respondents? There is little offered in *Hare Krishna Transformed* to guide us in assessing their responses, little counterbalance to the portrait of a community at odds with itself and its teachings and practices. Greater representation of people at peace with their Kṛṣṇa practices would have lent weight to Rochford's portrait of a movement 'transformed'.

It may be that another quality of life exists for Kṛṣṇa devotees other than as victims of abuse, gender discrimination, and schisms; if so it is under-represented in *Hare Krishna Transformed*. Rochford has performed

a valuable service in laying out the depth and scale of the transgressions and tragedies of the movement's early years, yet he seems less interested in what else was going on. The net impression is that a moral and spiritually healthy life is at best a rarity among Kṛṣṇa devotees. From time to time he acknowledges efforts to strive for such a life with what he calls 'world accommodation', but I suspect it doesn't help much to assert for instance that 'the concept of "rights" posed another problem for pro-change women, as the very idea of "rights" is antithetical to ISKCON's religious beliefs [...]'; or propose that 'Indians also find reason to feel estranged at the Sunday program [...]' (p. 192). Perhaps a more judicious choice of wording would have avoided telegraphing the mistaken notion that ISKCON opposes human rights or that all Indians feel estranged.

Ironically, the author underplays the extent of other institutional failings, as for instance in his chapter titled 'Women's Voices' which speaks of marginalisation, insult, disempowerment, and scorn but limits abuse to kicking and pushing. How his research managed to overlook the repeated sexual humiliation and physical trauma which many women suffered in ISKCON's early years is baffling. Child abuse occupies sixty pages of a 217-page text; women's issues occupy twenty-three.

Arguably the most valuable contribution in *Hare Krishna Transformed* is the challenge it raises for those who would dedicate themselves to the future stability of ISKCON. The data compels leaders to turn away from administrative policies of the past and to evolve more mature, equitable, and progressive applications of their founder's teachings. This is not the first time faith has had to confront its failings, nor is it the last time followers will need to reconcile love of a spiritual teacher with the realities of his or her teachings in a pragmatic and often hostile world.

In an otherwise worthy and important overview of ISKCON's history, we are obliged to ask why the author found it necessary to cover the canvas with such a wide brush. Rochford offered some insight in that same phone interview:

No doubt many devotees would say, 'That's what you make of us? You are overlooking so many other important things that have positively impacted people's lives.' I haven't detailed that in some ways, and that is a limitation of the book. It was partially because of how I was trained in the study of social movements—I didn't anticipate this at all. I found myself studying a religious

movement with the tools of social movement literature, and I think my view is limited. I used the tools I have. In fact, this is a book I once thought would not be written. I was afraid of it in terms of what it might do to ISKCON and the people I know...[but] I realised I needed closure on the book. Efforts to put it aside weren't working. I was going on leave and needed to not have to think more about it. I wanted some completion on it.

Perhaps the author has reached closure and does 'not have to think more about it', but his book remains, obliging readers to think deeply and consider the limitations of both scholarship and faith.

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*The Founder of the Hare Krishnas as Seen by Devotees: A Cognitive Study of Religious Charisma.* By Kimmo Ketola. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008. pp. xiii, 234. €125.00

What is it that makes a religious leader charismatic? Is there something special about the embodiment of charisma, or should we instead examine the people who find these leaders charismatic? Perhaps there is another alternative if we look at religious charisma representations as a pan-human phenomena, something that occurs naturally.

The 'naturalness of religion thesis' in the cognitive sciences affirms religion as a human institution, which some interpret as '*only... social, political, gendered, economic, biological, etc*', in other words, completely ordinary (Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*. State University of New York Press, 2001, p. x; italics original). The 'etc.' could certainly include the cognitive aspect of religion because this aspect, Kimmo Ketola argues, 'suggests that the seemingly extraordinary cultural ideas and behaviors found in religion can be explained by entirely ordinary cognitive processes and mechanisms that the cognitive sciences have been able to elucidate' (p. 20). As he demonstrates in *The Founder of the Hare Krishnas as Seen by Devotees: A Cognitive Study of Religious Charisma*, the nascent cognitive science of religion is not involved with the current trend to deemphasize the belief aspect of religion. Instead, Ketola is inclined to analyze belief in discarnate