

Perspectives

Misunderstood Hare Krishnas spread message of joy



Hadley Ross
columnist

In the past three decades there has been an explosion of new and "alternative" organizations onto the American religious landscape. One of the most visible is certainly the "Hare Krishnas". Rivaling Mormons in their persistence, the nearly bald, sari-clad devotees show up everywhere from the musical Hair to the local airport, distributing books and pamphlets with vibrant pictures of strange gods and free vegetarian food. They have attracted many stereotypes since their founding in 1966, and many people know little about their religion beyond not wanting their children to join.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is the proper name for the Hare Krishnas. It was founded by A.C.

Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in New York City after he was called by God to abandon his life in India and journey to America to teach people about Krishna. Prabhupada's faith centers on the figure of Krishna as the personal and supreme God who represents both divine energy and form. Krishna is considered a divine person as opposed to the common Indian concept of God as Brahman, the formless and eternal manifestation of spiritual energy. God manifests himself through various incarnations in which Krishna appears in human form as well as in what is called the Lord's Deity form. Devotees believe that through proper ceremony and the chanting of the holy names of God, He can

be called into the form of the Deity which may then be worshipped. God appears in the form of temples, holy books, sanctified food, pictures, and most importantly as the sound incarnation through the chanting of His holy names.

Fundamental to the ISKCON belief system is the idea that individual souls are eternal, but due to ignorance and sensory illusion, they are trapped in material bodies and subject to the moral laws of cause and effect known as karma, literally 'action'. The soul is able to overcome the material world in its love for Krishna. Through devotion, the acts of the individual are purified and thus no longer bring karmic retribution.

ISKCON has been described as 'fundamentalist Hinduism,' as members believe that the Vedas, the Bhagavad-Gita and the canonical lives of Krishna are both literally and historically true. The society seeks to define itself as a universal rather than a specifically 'Hindu' entity, but its culture is decidedly Indian in nature. The process of initiation is one by which individuals de-identify themselves with both their bodies and their own life his-

tory and culture. This is signified by a change in dress, the wearing of clay markings designating the body as a temple, and the renunciation of all previous possessions. The devotee, then is no longer distinct from the other members of the group. Their lives are closely regulated according to traditional Indian custom, and most of their activities are communal.

I arrived at the ISKCON rural community in Hillsborough, N.C. Sunday night, unaware that it was a holiday. A girl wearing a white and purple sari who identified herself as Lila Sutra ushered my friends and me to the top floor of the large geodesic dome that functions as a temple. We removed our shoes, entered cautiously, and sat down on the hardwood floor next to a velvet throne bearing a life-size plastic statue of Swami Prabhupada. In the front of the room a woman in a white sari was waving incense before an altar dedicated to the black Krishna and his consort Radha. One of the men who lives in the community was leading a small group of devotees in chanting. The devotees of all different ethnic backgrounds entered and filed past us,

most wearing robes or saris, and bowed before the altar before assuming a place in the chanting. They embraced one another warmly, some whispering and laughing. The children found their companions and played amidst the swaying congregation. The chanting resonated in the domed room, swelling to a frenzied pace and volume before dropping off.

Toward the end of the chanting, my former professor and friend, Graham, entered through a side door. I knew that he had been a disciple of Swami Prabhupada in the '60's. The man who had been leading the chanting got up and returned with a small wooden couch and a garland of flowers. Graham assumed the position of honor and began to play a type of keyboard instrument and led the group, now seated, in song.

At some point, the singing turned to prayer, and Graham selected a large blue volume from a shelf to his right. What followed was very similar in format to the sermons I have attended in Protestant churches. Graham read a passage from the holy text, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, first in Sanskrit, then in En-

glish, and proceeded to explain its relevance to modern life. Because of the holiday, which celebrated the coming of a certain teacher, the day's lesson dealt with the spiritual benefits of a master-disciple relationship. After Graham spoke, he opened the floor for comments and questions, and a discussion of theology ensued.

The final event of the evening was a vegetarian feast. Members of the farm community who meet special qualifications prepare the food in meditation as an offering to Krishna, and then they serve it free to the community.

Before I left, Lila Sutra predictably gave me a small book written by Swami Prabhupada explaining the benefits of Krishna Consciousness. It is for this practice of proselytizing that followers of ISKCON are probably most often mistrusted and misunderstood. Beyond images of men with shaved heads in orange robes distributing pamphlets in airports, the heart of the Krishna Consciousness movement lies in the kindness and sincerity of the believers.

For more information, go to www.swami.simplenr.com.

Letters to the Editor

Conroy goes too far

Dear Editor,

In response to Nate Conroy's column last week, I believe that some corrections are in order. In the past, I have made it a point to bite my tongue when reading a lot of Nate's columns. More times than I personally care to count. While the columns try to come across as edgy and right to the point, with high-brow sarcasm and scathing cynicism, it generally becomes nothing more than a misguided, self-indulging, greater-than-thou tirade aimed at nothing more it seems than just to see how well he can read and see everything into absolutely nothing. His tirade on spring break last year instantly comes to mind. I am not saying that Nate doesn't have his points at times, especially when it deals with general student concerns. What angers me is when he gets on his high horse crusades and starts tearing into everyone that may be associated with whatever the wind happens to blow in his direction that day. When he's ready to criticize or point blame, his writing is quick, vocal, and creative, but damn if it doesn't become slow, tight-lipped, and unimaginative when it comes time to give credit where it is due, especially if it involves a cause or group he is not particularly fond of.

As a black man who has been on the receiving end of more racist crap in his life than any of you, and let me reiterate, any of you, could imagine, it angers me beyond belief that someone could compare the Dog Pound, with its immature and insulting antics, to the KKK or any other white supremacist movement. How far off base can you be to compare the immature antics in a heated basketball game, to the attitudes, actions, and lifestyle of a group created solely on the basis of pure hatred? Have any of you ever been inside a white supremacist establishment (and no, Klan rallies do not count)? Every wall you gaze upon gazes back at you with pictures and literature of nothing but hateful images and propaganda aimed at you and your people, amongst others, to the point of where the hatred takes on such a physical presence that it creates a numbing feeling that stretches to every point of your body. It brings you face-to-face with the realization of how much of a force and entity hatred can be, to the point of

where it angers and frightens you as much as the hundreds of situations that have already crossed your mind given the environment you are in. And you, Nate Conroy, you chose to compare that to a damn basketball game? To say that you have reached beyond the line of couth and respectable journalism is an understatement. But, I guess that's what a creative license allows you to do, indulge in your imagination.

Secondly, as a proud member of Theta Zeta chapter of Theta Chi Fraternity, I am equally offended by the backhanded remarks made toward my organization. I would like to point out to you that our "checkered racial past," involved only one incident, due to the stupidity of one member, that the chapter, on its own, took full responsibility for six years ago! Any other incident after that was not racial in origin, but a matter of miscommunication and misinformation between the parties concerned. No, this isn't just our opinion, but that of the two parties involved. If you actually took the time to come to us and get every side of the story, you would know this. Our respectability on campus and our contribution to campus is as good as any organization around, period! As a proud member and one of the men who has had a huge hand in making this chapter one of the best organizations on campus, it angers me beyond pure hell that someone, not involved with the incident on any level, has the gall to make such an uninformed and underhanded comment. I guess we'll chalk that up to creative license as well.

If you don't like the Dog Pound, fine. If you don't like any of the organizations on campus, whether they be social or athletic, fine. A knife, being as it is, cuts both ways. I don't particularly like your writing. Destructive criticism breeds destructive results. Yes, we in the Dog Pound do need to use a little more restraint, and as time goes on, we will learn what is and isn't appropriate. But in all honesty, I am happy to see the kind of school spirit that I wish were here the past 4 1/2 years I've been here. Especially in light of a campus populated with far too many people who wouldn't recognize school spirit or school pride if it came and bit them in the butt.

It would have been easy to write a letter where all I did was rant and rave, or simply just insult you. It would have been even easier to find

you and confront you face to face. Easier, but not smarter. Your game is weak, your schtick is old, and you have just pissed off quite a few people, as you and *The Banner* are about to find out.

Only a fool goes head-to-head with an OX.

David Bruce Greene
Senior, music, recording arts

Editor's Note:

The UNCA administration banned Theta Zeta chapter of Theta Chi in 1992 after two separate racial incidents.

The first incident occurred at a UNCA basketball game. At the game, two African American students saw a Theta Chi member wearing a baseball cap with two racial slurs written on it.

The second incident was an altercation that involved Theta Chi members and members of the African American Student Association (AASA), after the university had hired the AASA members to paint over the Greek fraternity and sorority letters that adorned the Weaver Boulevard entrance to UNCA. The second incident drew a five-year ban from the campus for Theta Zeta chapter of Theta Chi.

Throughout the ban, which UNCA Chancellor Patsy Reed eventually shortened to four and a half years, the national Theta Chi organization continued to recognize Theta Zeta chapter. The administration reinstated Theta Zeta chapter of Theta Chi at the beginning of the spring 1997 semester.—ed.

In praise of Conroy

Dear Editor,

I want to take the time to first applaud Nate Conroy for his article on racism and prejudice found in different aspects of this institution. Not only did he have the courage to point out this all too common phenomenon, but he did so because it was the right thing to do.

I have heard many comments on Mr. Conroy's article from students, faculty, staff, and others in the UNCA community; Yet, what I am hearing is not praise for the content of his article, but the fact that he was courageous enough to name names. This tells me one important thing about UNCA, it is filled with cowards! Why is it that people rec-

ognized what Mr. Conroy did and said no more than good job? People need to see that injustice to one or a group, is injustice to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, or whatever else. We, as an institution, that supposedly supports diversity, has done what it normally does in situations like these, nothing!!

Let's move on to those who disliked Mr. Conroy's article. Many people have said there was nothing wrong with the chant of "Green card" or "Where's your visa?" These people (and you know who you are) are the problem with society today. You think it's okay to say prejudicial statements, as long as it is in fun; or if nothing is "meant" by it. I'm sure they would say, "Some of my best friends are African American or Hispanic." Yeah, these folks continue to live their ignorant lives, with no thought as to the consequences of their actions. These same people are now upset with Mr. Conroy because he "called them out" for who they are. They showed their disgust for Mr. Conroy at the Feb. 9 UNCA-Liberty men's basketball game by shouting things to the effect of "Where's Nate Conroy" and "Conroy sucks." They just proved his point.

From my viewpoint, the article people should have taken exception to was that of Justin Stein in the Jan. 29 issue of *The Banner*. He said some deep things about what author and activist bell hooks calls "the tripod": sexism, classism, and racism. Maybe that was the problem, he was too deep for many to understand. Since they were not directed toward the student section at a sporting event or certain sports' teams were not mentioned, it does not involve them. Yes, these are the leaders of the next millennium.

This campus needs to stop pointing fingers at Mr. Conroy or others who point out injustice and stand up for what they believe in, and start pointing them at themselves. If we are to progress passed being apathetic and ignorant to being audacious and intelligent, we must start to look out for everyone and not just #1. If anyone takes exception to this letter or took exception with Mr. Conroy's article, the problem is with you, not us. To Nate, I support and thank you. To those who disagree with him, I challenge you to become better human beings.

Adrian Tatum
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Letters should be typed, double-spaced, and should not exceed 300 words. Letters for publication should also contain the author's signature, classification, major or other relationship with UNCA. The deadline for letters is noon on Tuesday. If you have a submission, you can send it to *The Banner*, 208A Carmichael Hall, One University Heights, Asheville NC 28804.

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