**Comparing New Religious Movements:**

**ISKCON and the Jesus Army**

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**Introduction**

The concept of new religious movements often conjures images of cults, obsessive members, and radical practices within our society. Yet, the first goal of these movements is often to stimulate an identification of community (Dawson 1996:188), similarly to our mainstream religions. Frequently these new religious movements are born from previously existing religions (Dawson 1996:185) as is the case for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Jesus Fellowship Army. These two movements are born from very different roots and are conducted in their own ways, but many similarities can be drawn between the two based on the way they fit into the typical molds of new religious movements.

**History, the Ethical Prophecy, Practices, Beliefs, and Organizational Features of ISKCON**

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness began in New York City in 1966 (Bromley and Shinn 1989:14). A man named A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada created this new religion upon his return to America from India based on the traditional roots of Hinduism called Gaudiya Vaishnava (Bromley and Shinn 1989:15). These scriptures and teachings had been around for over 500 years, but only in the Western world since 1930, where they arrived through extensive writings and translations (Bromley and Shinn 1989:37). The most sacred text to this movement is the Hindu text *Bhagevad GitaI* which was written around 250 B.C. (Bromely and Shinn 1989:37). The text was translated by Prabhupada and includes extensive commentary, and these writings are regarded as literal truth by Hare Krishnas (Bromely and Shinn 1989:38).

Prabhupada is the force behind ISKCON’s success and growth since the 1970’s, but he also appointed the Governing Body Commission, and appointed twelve members to this (Bromley and Shinn 1989:40). These disciples appointed gurus were put in place to continue to direct the organization, but after Prabhupada’s death many problems occurred (Bromley and Shinn 1989:41). Due to this, ISKCON has turned away from appointing absolute authority in individuals, although many of the original disciples act as spiritual leaders and gurus (Bromely and Shinn 1989:41). This instability holds true to Roberts and Yamane’s theory that when power distribution frequently changes, the leadership in a NRM is not stable (2012:32).

The basis of spiritual beliefs for ISKCON is based in the theistic traditions, but is a monotheistic way of believing that the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, is the only god (Bromley and Shinn 1989:14). By 1970, the Krishna movement had become more regularized in terms of its traditions and practices (Bromley and Shinn 1989:14-15). Seven purposes were created. These ranged from educating the greater society, creating a community for Krishna followers, teaching a more simple way of living according to the mantra, and showing that each soul is a part of the quality of Krishna (Hubner and Gruson 1988:88-90). Four regulative principles were also created, banning meat, illicit sex, gambling, and intoxication (Hubner and Gruson 1988:103). These principles and regulations created the doctrine for the entire movement, classifying this as an ethical prophecy, according to Max Weber (Dawson 1996:56).

The movement is based around dedicating thoughts and actions to pleasing Krishna (Bromley and Shinn 1989:12). Typical practices include bhakti yoga, chanting the Maha Mantra, and energetic active preaching, especially in public (Bromley and Shinn 1989:20). These practices are frequently organized in Hare Krishna communities and centers that exist all over the world (Case 2000:56). Hare Krishna is a growing and successful movement (Bromley and Shinn 1989:15) and uses many ways to gain new members.

**Spreading the Message of Krishna and Membership**

The distribution of writings and teachings through published works, the Internet, and at public demonstrations is a frequent way of gaining membership to the movement (Case 2000:73). The Krishna communes welcome individuals not associated with the movement to participate in their self-sufficient way of life, which is another successful way of spreading their message, which for them is the most important thing they can do for Krishna (Bromley and Shinn 1989:120). Like many other new religious movements, membership seems to be a sudden and radical conversion (Bromley and Shinn 1989:122). Researchers have found that converts to ISKCON often have “crisis conversions” or feel connected to the simple way of spiritual living that the movement offers (Bromley and Shinn 1989:122). It is also believed that the radical membership of the movement is due to the “opportunistic exploitation of local conditions,” instead of the ideology and teachings in the United States (Rochford 1982:400). Current membership is growing aided by the rise in accessibility to their teachings through technology and Krishna communities, but there are no concrete numbers about worldwide membership.

**History, the Ethical Prophecy, Practices, Beliefs, and Organizational Features of the Jesus Army**

The Jesus Fellowship Church, or Jesus Army, developed in the late 1960’s from various “Jesus movements” like the Charismatic Movement and Jesus People (Barrett 1996:117). The movement was created by Baptist minister Noel Stanton and some members of his small church in Bugbrooke, Northamptonshire (Barrett 1996:118). Stanton was a charismatic leader, which was key in order to mobilize followers and create the Jesus Army’s sense of mission (Roberts and Yamane 2012: 203). This group of people was “baptized in the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues, healing, and preaching the Gospel with new enthusiasm and effectiveness” (Barrett 1996:118). With a significant growth in membership, the New Creation Farm was created and the congregation became a community (Barrett 1996:118).

The beliefs are radical interpretations of the Baptist Church, which causes the Baptist Union to be rather uneasy (Barrett 1996:117). Traditions that often cause them flack with outside society are their requirement of celibacy, their firm, traditional gender roles, and corporal punishment of children (Cooper 2004:48). These teachings and traditions cause the movement to have an ethical prophecy (Dawson 1996:56).

Members must be over 21 before they can fully commit, and new members have to live in a community for a probationary period for over two years (Barrett 1996:119). The movement attracts mostly younger people due to the charisma and enthusiasm around it (Barrett 1996:118). Everything is shared between members, including money, which often results in few possessions for the members (Barrett 1996:119). This helps to target a disadvantaged population for membership (Hunt 1998:30).

**Spreading the Teachings of Jesus and Membership**

The movement is fueled by a love of Jesus, and they frequently engage in evangelistic activities in public to demonstrate this, and the moving of the Holy Spirit (Barrett 1996:118). When public events take place, members dress in combat gear and swarm the cities (Barrett 1996:118). They only believe in Christian ways of life, including music, holidays with solely Christian roots, and family dynamics (Barrett 1996:118). The teachings that the Jesus Army preaches are meant to provide meaning to individuals that haven’t found it anywhere else (Barrett 1996:119). This can be classified as an example of “supply sided theory,” as outlined by Roberts and Yamane (2012: 189).

The main way that the Jesus Army recruits new members is through their public demonstrations and having new members brought in by existing ones (Barrett 1996:118). Modern technology, such as TV, computers, and radio are banned (Barrett 1996:118), so they are unable to use these to their advantage. There are various levels of membership though, from only attending Sunday congregations to living in a Jesus Army community (Hunt 1998:35). The children that are brought up in the New Creation Community are not totally separated from the outside world though, because they typically attend public schools (Barrett 1996:118). Current membership is at about 3500 spread across 24 congregations throughout the UK (Cooper 2004:121).

**Comparing and Contrasting ISKCON and the Jesus Army**

A new religious movement has many aspects that differ from mainstream religions. They stress new religious individualism, personal identity development, an emphasis on experience and faith rather than belief, include transforming experiences, and are led and followed by charismatic individuals (Dawson 2006:183-184). Both of these movements fit these characteristics quite well. Yet, neither of these groups wanted to be considered new religious movements because of their association with cults (Inaba 2004:38). ISKCON frequently interacts with non-members to make their movement more familiar and less threatening with the general public (Shinn 1992:283) and the Jesus Army reminds potential members of their close ties to the Baptist Church and their teachings (Hadden 1996).

The expected people to join new religious movements are the main source of membership for both of these movements (Dawson 2006:71-94). Younger members with economic deprivation were the first to be a part of the Jesus Army (Barrett 1996:118) and young people who were unsatisfied by the values of living presented to them by society and other religions joined the Hare Krishna movement (Bromley and Shinn 1989:32).

Both of these were also born from more accepted and mainstream religions, although ISKCON came from the East and the Jesus Army from the west. Membership increased quickly during the beginning period of the movements, but has tended to slow since then (Inaba 204:45). The regulations of both movements are very similar, especially in the importance of abstinence and avoidance of intoxication.

As in most religious movements, one of the most important goals of the members is to spread their teachings and strengthen their community through gaining new members. The public outreach and demonstrations of both these movements are ways that they tried to accomplish this, although by relying mostly on these demonstrations and not modern technologies, the Jesus Army is much smaller in membership and worldwide locations than ISKCON.

**Controversies of ISKCON and the Jesus Army**

When ISKCON began, it was strongly patriarchal, which caused much public backlash to the female members of the movement from the general public (Rochford 2007:116), similarly to public treatment of the women of the Jesus Army (Barret 1996:118). But in the mid-1970’s women’s positions changed as the organization of the entire religion also shifted (Rochford 2007:116). They began to take up organizational leadership roles, yet this alteration did not give women much freedom (Rochford 2007:116). It began to be believed that with women’s viability, they were serious distractions for the male members and became segregated in temple, less praised for their devotion, and blamed for threatening the preaching mission (Rochford 2007:116-120). Unlike the Jesus Army though, where women were silently content about their lower class within their community, the female Hare Krishna followers felt that this sexism could get in the way of their spiritual advancement (Rochford 2007:120). Prabhupada was never blamed for being “behind” these acts of sexism, so the devotee women rarely left the movement because of their treatment, but instead sought to change their situation (Rochford 2007:138). In contrast, the women of the Jesus Army believe it is their place to be subservient to their husbands and male leaders and ignore the rights that women have fought for over the past decade (Barrett 1996:118). While ISKCON is aware and interested in the world outside of their movement, the Jesus Army members appear not to be.

Both of these movements have come under the public eye for similar reasons, other than their treatment of women. Outsiders frequently question the way that both movements raise, treat, and care for their children. The Jesus Army does not have many personal possessions or resources, so their children are denied toys or TV, for the most part, throughout their life times (Barrett 1996:118). They also practice corporal punishment, but because of external criticism and investigations, they have replaced “the slipper with the rod” (Barrett 1996:118). ISKCON has faced a few large lawsuits for alleged child abuse in their communities and schools (Smith 2001:14). Students in the schools came forward with accounts of abusive corporal punishment (Rochford 2007:78). There are also allegations of neglect and various forms of sexual, mental, and emotional abuse, in addition to the physical abuse most frequently found in ISKCON schools (Smith 2001:14). After the various investigations into their treatment of children, the ISKCON claimed that they altered their treatment (Rochford 2007:78).

**Conclusion**

Even though they were born in different parts of the world and under different mainstream religions, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Jesus Army can be compared. These two new religious movements are drastically different in many respects, but share the basics of practices and beliefs in a number of areas. Like most new religious movements, these shared aspects are comparable across many of the movements in the most recent century.

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