A Comparative Study of the Native American Church

and the International Society for

Krishna Consciousness

3/28/2012

Soc 151: Sociology of Ideology and Religion / Prof. Kaelber

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**Introduction**

Many definitions have been given for religion, having different aspects that we can deem accurate, but many have flaws as well, whether it is excluding a key point, or making a point that is contradictory to something we can see in an established religion, thus proving the definition wrong. Roberts and Yamane give five points by which to describe if something really is a religion. “There is a shared meaning system, a belief system, a sense of belonging within the group, a system of ethics, and reutinized social expectations and patters or rituals” (Roberts, Yamane 2012:12). So what makes something a new religious movement? New religious movements often have different beliefs than traditional religions but does that make them any less valid, or even different? Throughout chapter two (churches, sects and cults) of his book *Comprehending Cults* Lorne Dawson (2006) points out that the idea of a spaceship behind a comet, and they idea of a man in the sky creating and controlling life are not that different in their terms of ridiculesness, and yet belief in this god (Christianity) is socially acceptable, while belief in this spaceship (Heaven’s Gate) is frowned upon, one is seen as a major world religion, the other a “cult”. This tag of cult is almost always seen in a stigmatized fashion among the general public, “the popular media…define cult as a religious group that holds esoteric or occult ideas, is lead by a charismatic leader, and uses intense and highly unethical conversion” (Roberts, Yamane 2012:175). One could argue the bible has esoteric ideas since none are explicitly proven, further more Dawson points out that some cults actually use well recognized literature such as the Hare Krishna’s with the Hindu texts (2006:29) Too many what define a cult are merely their perceptions of it, which usually is not accurate, as the three points noted above are in no way always accurate, nor a good sociological indicator of a cult. Roberts and Yamane point us to the best definition; a cult is “the beginning phase of an entirely new religion” (Roberts’s, Yamane 2012:175). To add to this Dawson points out that cults can in fact become sects (2006:31) showing even more thoroughly that it is not based on beliefs as much as the amount of time that the religion has been in existence This paper will be looking at two new religious movements, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Native American Church.

**International Society for Krishna Consciousness**

Though the International Society for Krishna Conscious (ISKON) is relatively new starting officially in the year 1966 (Burr 1984:2), the movement has much older roots, stemming from Hindu. The leader, and founder of the religion A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada or Prabhupad as he is known to his followers (Burr 1984:2) has remained adamant throughout his life in the notion that his own guru Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura ordered him to bring Krishna consciousness to the west (Burr 1984:3). Prabhupad was born in Calcutta, India to a strict Hindu family on September 1st 1896. In 1922 he met his future guru, but it was not until 1933 that he would become a disciple of Thakura in a monotheistic sect of Hindu known as Gaudiya Vaishnava. It would take him another thirty two years, at the age of sixty nine, before he was able to come to America and carry out his guru’s orders (Iskon.org 2012). Started out of a storefront with no financial backing, it was through the changing cultural and social ideals of the time that the message was really able to take hold. Taking hold among disenfranchised youth critical of the establishment, it came into public view in 1969 when noticed by pop star George Harrison of the Beatles.(Burr 1984:3) And though it is vehement and extreme in its denouncing of the western world, going as far as to denounce toilet paper, it is more than a little ironic that the movement relies on society so much (Burr 1984:7). Out of the many temples spread throughout the world few are farming communities, and even those are far from self sustainable, because of this we can conclude that the movements back to nature ideals and rejection of materialism are purely symbolic as they are totally reliant on the towns and cities in which the vast majority of temples are located (Burr 1984:7). It is ironic too that although it drew substantially from many ‘hippies’ in the late sixties and early seventies, their ideals are opposite to the image we have of a standard liberal ‘hippie’ (Burr 1984:1). ISKON’s political and social views are on the conservative end of the spectrum rejecting abortion, homosexuality and premarital sex, as well as any sort of intoxicant (Burr 1984:5). The Hare Krishna’s of today paint a very different picture then they did 30 years ago. The overwhelming majority now live within society, outside of the temple, they work standard jobs, have marriages and kids, strive for worldly pursuits. It is incredibly different from the separatist movement that it started out as, and while this transition has been difficult, and some find the new ideals troubling this was a necessary step in keeping the religion alive, and ultimately thriving (Kress 2005). Just before his death in 1977 Prabhupad appointed 11 of his closest disciples as gurus who were responsible for initiating new members, and overseeing the workings of the communities around the world. Within months secularization started occurring as factions split off, this internal conflict was due to many within the community refusing to submit to the policies of the leaders. As the boarding schools closed down, and the revenue from paper distribution slowed more and more members began to work in society, the nuclear family replaced the communal style living of previous generations and as such secularization became more and more prominent, as members looked not the organization as a whole, but rather too their local temples. And although new gurus are appointed by the governing body association (GBA) it appears that these positions are more seen as figureheads, rather than actual deciders in where the movement goes (Rochford 1995).

According to its website the International Society for Krishna Consciousness is the orthodox sect of Hinduism, the main scriptures being The Bhagavad-gita and the Srimad Bhagavatam (Iskon.org 2012). The religion is centered around the teachings of a 15th century monk named Caitanya who was seen as a incarnation of Krishna. Caitanya’s message was that Krishna Consciousness could be attained through simple living and the repetitive chanting of the lord’s name. There are four main activities that followers must abstain from, gambling, intoxication of any kind, eating meat, and illicit sex meaning sex outside of marriage, or if married only for procreation (Kress 2005). While most much of this is common across many religious sects vegetarianism is something that isn’t so common. When interviewing Hare Krishna’s about this trait three themes stand out. The first is that ‘God is vegetarian’, this view is not a belief in their eyes, but a fact, and because god is a vegetarian they too must be vegetarians. Second meat, and even some non-meat foods are bad for the body, and they affect three emotional traits, ignorance, passion and goodness directly. Thirdly they have an intense desire to share their diet and foods with non-Krishna believers, so that they too can feel better physically and spiritually (Nath 2010).

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness can be seen both as an example of both ethical and exemplary prophecies. Started by Prabhupad in 1966 he died quite young into the society’s existence in 1977(Burr 1984:3), so although his charismatic leadership was a key ingredient in getting the movement off the ground, the ethical teachings of the Hindu texts in which it is based have kept the movement going forward.

Too the outside world what is most notable about the movement is its religious practices. Chanting is the central way for Hare Krishna’s to create a direct avenue to god; the Krishna’s believe that there is a direct link between sounds a reality (Gelberg 1983:84). Similar to prayer in the Christian religion the mantra emphasizes the fact that the name of god and god himself are interchangeable (Gelberg 1983:85). The mantra’s chanted most often are paired with dancing or marching, the attire a long orange or white robe, the men with shaved heads except for a ponytail, or sikha, in the back of the head. (Muster 1997:14). Bodily movement and language in ISKCON in more than any other eastern religion is very important, dance more so than anything really exemplifies this, dancing expresses love towards Krishna, and takes place during the daily arati ceremonies as well public chanting parties. (Burr 1984:223) As well as dancing a few other notable elements exist, new inductees are taught to sit cross legged on the floor, and not use chairs (Burr 1984:222), as well as laying prostrate on the ground upon entering the temple and while praying, which some believe to be another form of protest of western customs (Burr 1984:223)

The ISKCON movement has had its fair share of controversies, but one really stands out, child abuse in boarding schools, or gurukulas in the 1970’s (Muster 1997:74). Parents were only allowed to see their children twice a year, and the overcrowding, system of older boys as “monitors, and the apparent lack of repercussions for offenders within the organization allowed this abuse to run wild (Muster 1997:76). The decentralization of education to local temples helped the plight of these children but abuse still lingered, and it wasn’t until these school were shut down completely was the controversy put to rest (Muster 1997:77).

**Native American Church**

Though the Native American church has remained somewhat innocuous compared to the Krishna Consciousness movement, it’s founding and histories are similar. Although it was officially established in 1918 (Smith, Snake 1996:169) in Oklahoma the movement originally started in the 1880’s, and the use of peyote, a central element to the religion was used long before that (Smith, Snake 1996:170). George Mooney an anthropologist from the Smithsonian institute was the first person to take seriously the study of its use. After testifying for peyotists at congressional hearings involving the use of the drug, he played a central part in encouraging tribes in Oklahoma to obtain a legal charter to protect their first amendment rights. Thus even though the religion was incorporated in 1918, it’s central ideas of peyote as a healing medicine, and the rituals that go with that were in effect long before (Smith, Snake 1996:169).

The Native American church is different from many churches in that there is no central authority, rather the church is a loose affiliation of religious beliefs that all center around peyote. According to the official Native American church website, “Peyote is not used to obtain 'visions' but to open portals to Reality” (Jones 2007). It goes on to argue that peyote allows us to see beyond the façade that everyone puts up to deal with everyday life. In revealing the truth about ourselves, and about others we are able to heal ourselves spiritually and understand more, and through the healing of the soul, healing of the body also occurs (Jones 2007). Peyote is not however used in a recreational manner, but concrete rituals that vary across different sects of the Native American church, author Omar C. Stewart writes about his observations of such rituals noting that there are two main brands, cross fire and half moon. Much of the difference in these two rituals pertains to smoking tobacco, another plant that has long been held sacred among many native tribes. Cross fire rituals do not use any tobacco in the meetings, but another large difference is that the Christian bible is incorporated in to them, the ritual ending at night with a sermon related to the bible. But even among these two different brands of ritual there are many variations, and each ceremonial leader is able to change the service as he sees fit (Stewart 1987:339). All rituals involve prayer, song, drumming and eating of the peyote which will last throughout the entire night. These rituals not only bring the members closer to god, but closer to each other as well (Jones 2007). The majority of believers in the Native American church are also in fact believers in the bible, seeing this use in peyote as a representation of Jesus much like the bread and wine in many churches (Smith, Snake 1996:39). These ceremonies take place around sacred alters, or fireplaces, an archeological survey has uncovered some alters appearing to have been used in the 1930’s in Oklahoma. The appearance of these alters seems to be relatively simples, they are large slabs of concrete in the ground with a raised fire pit in the center. Much of the surface is covered with various designs and symbols (Cast 2007).

For many years the continual problem that has arisen for the Native American church is that peyote is an illegal narcotic putting in jeopardy anyone who might use it in a ceremony, but the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994 was put into place to prevent such infringements on religious freedom. This amendment of the 1978 law states that “for many Indian people, the traditional ceremonial use of the peyote cactus as a religious sacrament has for centuries been integral to a way of life, and significant in perpetuating Indian tribes and cultures” (Lect Law Library 1995) and goes on to conclude that because of this those people who are officially considered Indian, i.e. members of an officially declared federal tribe cannot be prosecuted for consumption, transportation, distribution or growing of peyote, giving the religion plenty of breathing room within its right to practice.

Existing scholarship shows no indication that there is an organizational structure among the Native American Church. No hierarchy exists, and perhaps calling it a church is not quite the right wording, rather it is a very loose affiliation of groups whose main practice all centers are the use of Peyote and a more apt name might be just a Native American ritual. It appears to me that the religion only became official so that Native Americans could claim freedom of religion so as not to get persecuted for using peyote in their rituals.

**Comparisons:**

Both Movements have somewhat informative websites but that appears to be the extents of it, unlike other New Religious movements who have used the internet extensively to further their cause, both of my groups appear to use it only as educational material, and as an avenue for people to buy literature pertaining to their organizations. Both of my cults ideologies were started long before the official cults were, but it is not the similarities that are so striking but the differences. In terms of a public view they could not be further from each other. The Hare Krishna’s gained notoriety for standing in white in public spaces handing out fliers to try and recruit members, not only did members of the Native American church not actively try to recruit members, but legally they couldn’t. The federal government allowed only those who were legally recognized as American Indians to consume peyote a practice central to the religion. Second while Krishna’s are easily viewable to the public, Native American churches stay away from prying eyes, almost exclusively on reservations mainstream America has little chance to pear in. Thirdly, the order of Krishna consciousness is a massive worldwide religion, the Native American church is exclusively in North America.

**Conclusion**

Through these two analysis of new religious movements we can see that neither of these “cults” are the apocalyptic, brainwashing organizations that the public portrays cults to be. In fact ISKCON takes its beliefs from a religion that is significantly older than Christianity, and the Native American church also extends much further back than its official startup. They clearly are little different than recognized world religions, and are unfairly stigmatized as “cults”. It is through interpretive and hopefully objective analysis that the public can come to see these movements as just another search for meaning for those who have yet to find it.

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