**A Comparative Analysis of Krishna Consciousness and The Rajneesh Movement**

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**Introduction**

Since the 1960s, new religious movements have emerged in popularity throughout North America, yet these movements have managed to remain minor in comparison to larger, traditional institutions of religion (Dawson 2006:2). Functioning on “much internal discipline and with a loose-knit structure” that differs from the conventional conception of church-involvement, new religious movements are able to utilize this unusual form to yield a more dynamic, but not lesser, form of religion (Roberts & Yamane 2012:175).

As Lorne Dawson (2006) posits in his book *Comprehending Cults*,the existence of new religious movements can in part be attributed to “a new era of pluralism and creativity” that dictates the melding of ideas and patterns (Dawson 2006:4). The case of new religious movements then becomes a matter of just how to “embody larger processes of cultural integration, transformation and globalization”in a way that incorporates a specific worldview and belief set (Dawson 2006:4).

Dawson (2006) has further drawn the conclusion that there seem to be five certain sets of new religious movements in modern society. These categories are meant to ease but not limit classification, and in many cases movements may overlap among groups. The main focus of this paper, however, will remain consistent in its description and analysis of two specific movements that fall under Dawson’s “groups associated with various Asian traditions” (Dawson 2006:3).

**Krishna Consciousness: History, Beliefs, Practices, and Organization**

A.C. Bhaktivendanta Swami Prabhupada, also known as Srila Prabhupada, emigrated from India in 1965, and a year later, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in New York City (Rochford 2007:10). As he began spreading the word of Krishna in the streets of New York, his charisma drew the attention of passersby who became interested in his interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana* (Bromley 1989:14). Prabhupada’s move to the West and the subsequent birth of ISKCON is no coincidence, but rather a result of a commitment he had made to his guru who had initiated him into the Indian *Caitanya* tradition in 1933 (Rochford 2007:10; 1985:10-11). This tradition has origins in 16th Century Bengal, and its basic forms of *bakhti* worship have been adapted by ISKCON (Bromley 1989:14).

The central beliefs of the *Caitanya* tradition, and thus ISKCON, are considered to have a strong basis in ancient Hinduism of the Vedic tradition, yet there are specific splits from the orthodox view that have occurred to transform into these sub-sects (Rochford 1985:11). The extensions of the original Vedic tradition have asserted that the existence of Krishna is that of the truly divine deity and have further made Krishna worship (*bhakti*) a central part of salvation (Rochford 2007:10). These *bhakti* traditions of *Caitanya* and ISKCON stress that relationships with Krishna are attainable by any true devotee, whatever their situation within the Hindu caste system (Bromley 1989:14).

The sacred text of ISKCON is the *Bhagavad Gita*, an ancient Hindu text that introduces *bhakti* as a means to grow closer to Krishna by cleansing the soul through methods of renouncing earthly desires (Rochford 1985:12). The adoption of this text as central to ISKCON has resulted in specific practices, and devotees take part in these rites and rituals so that true Krishna Consciousness is eventually accomplished (Bryant 2004:20). These practices within the movement are considered to be varying levels of *rasas*, or “spiritual experience” (Bryant 2004:20).

“As practitioners of *bahkti*, devotional yoga,” one ISKCON follower explains, “we see spiritual knowledge as something not accessed solely through absorption of theological facts or memorization of philosophical precepts but also acquired through acts of practical devotion” (Bryant 2004:406). Devotees practice a particularly spiritual lifestyle of meditative chanting and abstinence from consuming meat, non-reproductive sex, intoxicants, and gambling (Rochford 1985:13). Specific symbols of the movement include styles of dress (*dhoti* robes for men, *sari* cloths for women), neck beads that symbolize ISKCON membership, and chanting beads (Rochford 1985:13-14). These tangible symbols are meant to signify one’s devotion to creating and maintaining a soul worthy of returning to the spiritual realm alongside Krishna.

In addition to chanting and meditative practices, a large part of ISKCON membership relies on the communication of “spiritual knowledge to society at large” (Bryant 2004:405). Circulation of beliefs has become a tradition within the movement, and the propagation of teachings has taken on a literary approach of “publish[ing] and distribut[ing] periodicals, magazines, books, and other writings (Bryant 2004:405). Solicitation of these materials for financial gain has emerged since the mid 1970s, and these *sankirtana* practices have contributed greatly to recruitment of new members to the movement (Bryant 2004:279-282).

During the years prior to his death, Prabhupada remained the primary and most respected source of spiritual knowledge within the movement (Bromley 1989:15). The organization of the movement functions on the appropriation of followers as disciples of Prabhupada (Bromley 1989:15). As founder, Prabhupada was solely responsible for translations and authorship of ISKCON literature, and the roles of the followers revolved mainly around their dissemination of the leader’s philosophies (Bromley 1989:15). This hierarchy within the movement thus creates a system of *Hare Krishna* missionaries whose assignment is to spread awareness (*consciousness*) of Prabhupada’s teachings regarding the power of Krishna (Bromley 1989:14).

As the movement expanded, however, Prabhupada founded more institutional aspects, most notably “The Governing Body Commission” (Bromley 1989:15). Twenty-four “senior disciples” were assigned to positions within this commission to handle international “business and religious affairs of ISKCON ” (Bromley 1989:15). The late 1970s marked a shift in organizational power in which ISKCON found itself in the hands of the senior disciples after Prabhupada’s death in 1977 (Bromley 1989:15). The environment of the movement therefore became much more like an establishment despite its beginnings as an amorphous movement led by Prabhupada’s charismatic character (Bromley 1989:15). It should be noted, however, that this institutionalized character of the movement does not necessarily grant the same effects upon all factions of ISKCON; “temples are incorporated separately and geographical zones vary in the policies and procedures that apply to various spiritual, economic, and institutional activities” (Bromley 1989:18).

**The Rajneesh Movement/Rajneeshism: History, Beliefs, Practices, and Organization**

The founder of the Rajneesh Movement, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, also known simply as Osho, was born Mahan Chandra Rajneesh in British India in 1931 (Lindholm 2002:362). Although he was brought up in a Jain family, he abandoned his former faith and “gave lectures throughout India, debunking all accepted truths and calling for a new kind of awareness, more life-affirming than customary Indian Asceticism and more open to change” (Lindholm 2002:362). His charisma enabled him to gain many loyal supporters, many of which gave Rajneesh money in exchange for guidance on how to live a spiritually fulfilling life (Goldman 1999:21). The support offered by his followers further allowed him to resign from his position as university lecturer in 1966, and in 1970 he moved to Bombay to promote his visions of enlightenment (Lindholm 2002:362). A year later he took up the name Bhagwan, meaning “Blessed One,” and asserted that he himself was an embodied deity whose goal was to help others discover the path to “immediate transcendence” (Lindholm 2002:362; Palmer 1992:S72).

Soon after Rajneesh’s move to Bombay, Westerners began to visit him, often exchanging money for spiritual advice (Goldman 1999:22). Once again he moved, this time to Poona, India, to establish an Ashram temple in 1974 (Lindholm 2002:362). His popularity with Westerners continued and the Ashram extended to numerous halls to house meditation and therapy groups, restaurants, classrooms, housing, and a clinic (Goldman 1999:23). This temple “rapidly grew into the center of a worldwide network of at least 40 thousand, and perhaps as many as 300 thousand, initiates” before Rajneesh abandoned it in favor of creating a commune in Oregon, USA in 1981 (Lindholm 2002:363; Palmer 1992:S74).

The “Rajneeshpuram” commune in Oregon was founded “on the utopian ideals of sharing, equality, meditative consciousness, ecological harmony, and sexual communism” and expanded quickly due to the dedication of devotees (Palmer 1992:S74). The movements’ practices of engagement in therapy and meditation took place in the commune where Rajneesh also focused on the deconstruction of gender roles as well as enhancing material comfort as a “precondition for enlightenment” (Carter 1990:20; Goldman 1999:27-28). The levels of these therapy and meditation practices varied, resulting in certain “Short courses” that could take less than one day to three days and “Longer courses” which lasted anywhere from 2 weeks to 3 months (Carter 1990:25). These workshops served as practices that reinforced the central Rajneesh belief that humans must “transcend the ‘need’ for the world but…remain in contact with the world” (Carter 1987:152).

The most significant symbol within the movement is Bhagwan Rajneesh himself as a representation of “the ultimate idividual…what all his disciples have in common: a new vision of themselves” (Palmer 1992:S82). The devotees’ understanding of this symbol’s power is shown by the extent to which followers, known as *sannyasin*, attempted to achieve Rajneesh’s enlightened state. Further, symbols reflecting the *sanyassin’s* advancement were used extensively within the organization of the movement. Inside Rajneeshpuram, residents wore different “sunrise colors” and “status badges” that represented their “relationship to the commune” (Carter 1990:21).

The position as a *sannyasin* was key within the movement in order to be considered a “full participant,” and once initiates were recognized by the organization they received new names, meditated daily, dressed in “sunrise colors,” wore a *mala* which featured an image of Bhagwan, and abstained from meat consumption (Goldman 1999:31). Three distinct categories of residents included “the elite,” “the specialists,” and “the general workers” (Carter 1990:20). Members of these categories had close relations to Rajneesh’s “personal secretary,” were professionals in some specific discipline, and did menial labor around the compound, respectively (Carter 1990:20; Palmer 1992:S74).

Overall, however, the movement stressed a hierarchy that placed Bhagwan at the top yet promoted egalitarian notions as the basis of social conduct and interactions among *sannyasins* (Palmer 1992:S80). Participation in workshops and therapy sessions emphasized the surrendering of private identities in order to strengthen the power of the group as a whole, but the “ultimate aim of Rajneesh therapy is to invoke the master’s presence” (Palmer 1992:S80). This structure is perhaps problematic, as Rajneeshism may be understood as having both a collective and individualistic orientation (Palmer 1992:S84). Although the final objective of each *sannyasin* had been to resemble Bhagwan, these goals changed once Bhagwan retired and demanded his followers to leave the communes (Palmer 1992:S84). This resulted in a change in hierarchy as devotees renounced their communal life, “and the movement became less sectarian in its attitudes toward the larger society” (Palmer 1992:S84). The movement no longer relied on any sort of institutional basis, and the resulting foundation was a very loose structure without Bhagwan as the head.

**ISKCON and Rajneeshism: Similarities and Differences**

There are certain subjects on which ISKCON and Rajneeshism are comparable. Since both movements have their roots in India they fall under the New Religious Movement set of “Asian traditions” outlined by Dawson (Bryant 2004:14; Goldman 1999:21). Interestingly, both movements mandate that adherents participate in a form of worship that stresses love and devotion to one particular entity; Krishna in the case of ISKCON and Baghwan in the case of Rajneeshism (Rochford 1985:12; Carter 1987:148).

In contrast, the main controversies within each movement have differed. In 1985, Rajneeshpuram faced forceful discontinuation by authorities in Oregon due to the commune’s history of paranoia to the point of weapon concealment, spy equipment, and poison campaigns (Lindholm 2002:363). Controversies facing ISKCON range from unappreciated solicitation of passersby in airports to child abuse and neglect charges (Bryant 2004: 274-287, 323).

Another difference is the way the two movements reacted to the deaths of their charismatic founders. Roberts and Yamane (2012) note, “When the charismatic leader dies, the group may quickly disperse” (Roberts & Yamane 2012:154). As for ISKCON, Prabhupada attempted to reorganize the movement before his death, and this resulted in “a series of succession problems culminating in factionalism, growing numbers of defections, and schism” that affected ISKCON communities but did not result in the unraveling of the movement (Rochford 1989:164-165). The death of Bhagwan Rajneesh in 1990, however, seems to have led to the Rajneesh movement’s slow fade into obscurity as shown by a rather low number (20,000) of devotees and decreasing amount of new members (Lindholm 2002:363).

These results could have much to do with the prophetic basis of the two movements. The charismatic nature of Prabhupada was crucial to the establishment of ISKCON, but once the movement gained momentum the exemplary prophecy of Prabhupada was coupled with the ethical prophecy found in his teachings (Rochford 1985:10-13). The same cannot be said for Rajneesh, however, as the sacred practices and symbols of Rajneeshism had direct ties to Bhagwan’s physical being as an exemplary prophet; there did not appear to be any doctrinal ethical prophecy (Carter 1987:148; Palmer 1992:S82).

With both movements facing the loss of their founders, the use of new digital media has created a new means for cohesion and recruitment. The internet most significantly has played an important role in the Rajneesh movement since Bhagwan’s death, and “[t]his lingering group can be reached at http://osho.org” (Lindholm 2002:363). This site, however, is password protected and cannot be accessed by those outside the community. A more current online community dedicated to Rajneeshism includes “the Sannyas Wiki” found at *http://www.sannyas.org* (Rudra). On this site, one can browse “friends of osho” by name, location, or common interest, allowing for an international connection among Rajneesh followers (Rudra). Also made available is a biography of Osho and links to information regarding his works and resulting discourse (Rudra).

There are also websites devoted to ISCKON, with *http://www.krishna.com* as the most popular and comprehensive (Bhaktivedanta). Krishna.com supplies visitors with historical information regarding ISKCON as well as audiovisuals featuring Prabhupada and devotees (Bhaktivedanta). A communal aspect is also included; links to blogs and forums are offered (Bhaktivedanta). In contrast to those of Rajneeshism, however, current ISKCON communities needn’t rely upon online recruitment and have instead splintered into factions that have become “increasingly congregational in form” (Rochford 1989:162-179; Bryant 2004:286).

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