British Academy Networks Data Base on Modes of Religiosity
Case Study: The International Society for Krishna Consciousness
By Kimmo Ketola

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2. List of publications and unpublished sources:


3. Dates and precise locations of field and archival research:

My study of the Hare Krishna movement is based on both field and textual data. The field research has been conducted mainly in Finland (Helsinki temple). During the period of May 1997 – December 2000 I have visited the temple regularly for observation and interviews. The field data also includes briefer visits to temples in other European countries and India, but for the sake of simplicity, the “field location” is here taken to mean the Helsinki temple.

The written sources include theological writings, speeches, taped discussions and letters of the founder guru A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896 – 1977), in the form of a computer database, and historical and autobiographical works of the Hare Krishna devotees from the United States and Europe. The written sources are found in my own collections.

4. Name of country and region to which the following data relate:

My data relates to a new religious movement that is operating on a world wide basis. In the following account, I shall deal with the case on two levels. Firstly, I shall give information concerning the movement as a whole, on the world wide level; and, secondly, the more detailed information is based on the situation in Finland. The questions 5 – 11 are dealt only on the Finnish level.

5. Population(s) with which your research is primarily concerned, including an outline of the range of ethnic affiliations, language distributions, approximate population size(s) and density(ies), and rates of literacy:

Finland has population of 5 125 000, spread over 338 145 km2 with the average density of 15/km2. Rate of literacy is 100 %. Ethnic groups are Finnish (93 %), Swedish (6 %), Sámi, Tatar, Gypsy. Majority language is Finnish, but there are also Swedish and Sámi speaking minorities.
6. Nature and extent of state and/or church involvement across the region in the running of local affairs (including education, public health, law and order, roads and infrastructure, agriculture, housing, benefits, etc.):

Finland is a modern, institutionally differentiated and secularised society. Education, public health, law enforcement, roads and infrastructure, social security benefits are all state governed.

Although Finland has a State Church (Evangelical Lutheran Church) with the membership of over 85% of the population, its public influence has become increasingly marginalised during the past 150 years. Education, social security, and local government were all previously maintained by the church, but the state has gradually taken over all these functions (Local government was separated from parish in 1865; freedom of religion was granted in 1923; social security system was reformed in the 1960’s).

7. General features of non-state political organization (including details of all types of local groups, for instance based on residence, kinship/descent, cult membership, shifting alliance, etc. and the ways in which these are managed):

Political organization is one typical of modern western democracies.

8. Nature and extent of involvement in cash economy:

Practically total.

9. Nature and extent of subsistence-oriented activities:

Negligible.

10. Patterns of ownership and distribution of material resources (including details of any arrangements for pooling, inheritance, exchange, barter, etc.):

One characteristic of capitalist market economies of the West, although the state involvement and ownership has been relatively high until recently (as in all Nordic countries).

11. Brief account of documented history/archaeology (including major events/processes such as invasion, colonization, resettlement, rebellion, demographic change due to technological changes, disease, homicide, etc.):
The first settlements in the present day area of Finland date from about 8000 BC during the mesolithic period. Neolithic cultures were introduced probably from central Russia around 5100 BC. Finno-Ugrig language probably spread to Finland at about this time. Around 3200-2350 BC a new form of cultural influence arrived from eastern Baltic region and which eventually lead into different cultures on the coast and in the interior Finland. The latter developed the Sami language and retained its hunting culture. The current area of the Sami settlement is in the far north.

During the early of the 12th century the area was still ruled by numerous tribes such as the Karelians and the Tavastians. However, the area was of interest to its more politically unified neighbor states of Sweden and Novgorod and their respective religions, the Catholic and the Greek Orthodox church. The Russian-Swedish struggle for control over the area ended with Swedish rule in 1323, when the peace treaty assigned major parts of the area to Sweden. From 1397 to 1523 Scandinavia was united under Danish Crown (so called Kalmari Union included Denmark, Sweden an Norway). In 1809 Finland became an autonomous grand duchy in Russian empire. After the revolution in Russia, Finland’s declaration of independence was recognised by the new government. In 1918 there broke the civil war between the leftist and rightist sections of the society and won by the latter. During the World War II Finland fought against the Soviets and the Germans. Although Finland had to pay heavy war indemnities, the post war era has been marked by a strong economic, social and technological development – slowed down only by the recession in early 1990’s.

12. Details of named religious traditions (e.g. churches, local cults, shamanism, etc.) in the region, and extent of involvement/distribution among populations distinguished under question ‘5’:

The religious organization my study is concerned with is known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. ISKCON is today an internationally operating new religious movement, with more than 350 centres worldwide. Its religious roots are in Indian (Bengali) Vaishnavism, but the organization was founded in New York in 1966. The European and Indian missions started in 1968, and subsequently the movement spread rapidly all
over the world. Today its headquarters is located in Mayapur in India, and its biggest temples are also situated in India.

The movement started its missions in Finland in the late 1970’s. The first centre was opened in 1982 in Helsinki and the movement was officially registered as a religious association in 1984. The movement is one of about 130 religious minority groups operating in Finland today. In addition to ISKCON there are about 15 other movements of Indian origin operating in Finland (Ketola 2000a). The minorities are all rather small. I have estimated (Ketola 2001) that about 1 percent of the Finnish population participate in one or another non-christian minority groups. (Evangelical Lutheran Church has little over 85 %; Orthodox Christians have about 1,1 % and about 12 % do not have a religious affiliation.)

13. Scale of religious traditions (approximate numbers of members in the locality/ region for each tradition listed, also given as a proportion of total population):

According to its own statistics, ISKCON has approximately 6000 full time members (monks and nuns) and 190 000 congregational devotees world wide.

In Finland the movement has 15 full time members (monks and nuns) and an additional 25 initiated devotees living outside the temple. Altogether about 60 people have received initiation into the movement in Finland; of these about 10 individuals have moved to some other countries and about 10 have left the movement completely. In addition to initiated members there are at least about 200 – 300 individuals who have a looser affiliation with the movement (congregational devotees), judging from the regular turnout in larger public events in the Helsinki temple. The mailing list of the movement has around 2200 individuals listed from all over Finland. These numbers are miniscule in terms of Finnish population of about 5 million. Similar situation holds in most countries where ISKCON operates; it is a minority religion. The only place where this characterization has to be qualified is India, where it is generally considered part of orthodox Hinduism. (For more information, see Ketola 2000b)

14. Patterns of religious affiliation (e.g. based on kinship, residence, occupation, etc.)
ISKCON is a minority religion whose membership is based on voluntary choice, although some of the congregational devotees are migrant Hindus. The Hindus living outside India have scant opportunities to practice their religion, and therefore ISKCON temples attract them to participate, especially during the traditional festivals.

15. For each named religious organization, list all varieties of rituals locally performed and by whom in relation to those cases for which have reasonably detailed information (where appropriate, indicate what the rest of the range - on which you lack detailed information - is roughly like):

ISKCON lifestyle is very much structured by rituals. These may be classified into five distinct categories:

1) the daily cycle of rituals (temple worship);
2) the annual cycle of rituals (festivals);
3) public chanting of God’s names (harinama sankirtana),
4) initiations; and
5) other rites of passage (marriages, funerals).

16. For each ritual listed, on which you have detailed information, describe the procedures typically performed indicating any elements likely to raise levels of physiological arousal (e.g. sensory/ emotional stimulation):

(1) The daily cycle of rituals consists of offerings made to the “deities” housed in altar-rooms in temples, the tulasi plant and the founder guru. The deities are visual representations (statues or pictures) of Krishna and his avatars and associates.

The number of offerings made to the deities varies from temple to temple. In the Helsinki temple (which represents a medium standard), the schedule is as follows:

4:00 waking up the deities and offerings
4:30 arati
5:00 puja begins
7:15 deity greeting, which ends the puja
8:00-8:15 breakfast offering
10:30-11:00 lunch offering
17:00 evening meal offering
18:00-18:25 arati
19:00-20:00 deities are put to rest

Only the aratis and the deity greeting are performed publicly, with the deity room curtains opened so that the congregation may gain a full view of the proceedings. When
the priest begins the puja behind curtains, the congregation starts the tulasi worship (5:00 – 5:10) which is followed by a period of individual mantra recitation (5:10-7:15) until the deity greeting.

Immediately after the deity greeting follows the guru puja (7:25-7:45), in which a visual representation of Bhaktivedanta Swami is worshipped. The guru puja is followed by class on sacred scripture (7:45-8:30), which ends the morning program.

The evening program consists of the arati which is followed by a class on scripture as well.

The aratis consist of the pujari (temple priest) offering incense, ghee lamp, water, handkerchief, flowers, yak-tail whisk, and the peacock fan by waving each item in front of the deities in circular motion while ringing a bell in the left hand. The deity room is brightly lit, the deities are dressed in bright clothes, bejeweled and decorated with flower garlands.

While the pujari offers the items, the congregation is singing devotional songs in the temple room and watching the proceedings. The singing is performed antiphonally, everyone repeating the Sanskrit and Bengali verses sung by the lead singer. The two main instruments always used are small brass hand cymbals and a tubular clay drum, both of which can produce quite loud noise. While singing, everyone is at first standing and slowly swaying from side to side and perhaps clapping hands. When the songs are ended, the singing of the maha-mantra begins (Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare). The singing of the Hare Krishna mantra (kirtana) is usually accompanied by dancing. At first the tempo may be slow, but it usually builds up in intensity, until people start jumping up and down, hands up, in what may be described as a jubilant mood. The intensity and complexity of the dancing and jumping depends very much on how many people are present and what the nature of the occasion is. The simplest form of dancing is what is called the “swami step”, swaying one leg sideways in front while taking a small jump with the other leg. But there are also forms of dancing which require cooperation from the devotees (i.e. forming circles, queues, taking hands together with a partner and swirling around, etc.). Performing the kirtana at its most intense can be physically demanding, although devotees
report that one never gets tired of it. (For a more detailed description, see Ketola forthcoming b.)

(2) The most important festivals include:
- **Janmashtami**, or Krishna’s appearance day (August-September),
- **Srila Prabhupada Vyasa puja (appearance day)**, (one day after janmashtami),
- **Gaura Purnima**, Caitanya’s appearance day (March-April),
- **Narasingha Caturdashi** appearance of one of Krishna’s avatars (May)
- **Ratha Yatra**, cart festival modeled after the one in Puri (June-July) (not held in Finland),
- **Diwali**, festival of lights (October – November),
- **Govardhana Puja**, commemorating Krishna lifting the Govardhana hill (October – November)

All the festivals celebrated in ISKCON add up to about 15 different ones throughout the year. The important festivals are big events which attract lots of people. Even the Helsinki temple is packed full in most occasions (up to 250 people may attend). In bigger temples, especially in India, there may be tens of thousands people present. Most festivals begin by fasting in the previous day. The main event includes more colourful pujas in which the deities may be bathed in various auspicious liquids by the attendees (abhisekha). The kirtanas are longer, more crowded and more enthusiastic than the regular ones. Sanctified food (prasada) is offered in large quantities to all the quests in a big feast. There are usually some form of entertainment in the form of dramatic performances, dance and musical performances. Gifts may be exchanged. Fire sacrifice may be offered and lectures given. Usually the festivals last well into the night. People come with their whole families and the presence of children playing adds to the festive atmosphere.

(3) Harinama sankirtana means public chanting of the maha-mantra. This may take every day or once a week, depending on the temple. It generally consists of a group of devotees who walk in procession through central places in the cities and towns singing the mantra, thus attracting attention. The term sankirtana is also used to refer to book distribution or street solicitation, in which devotees distribute books in exchange of donations.

(4) There are two initiations in ISKCON. The first, the so called harinama initiation means that one is linked to the disciplic succession. The initiated devotee receives from
his or her guru a rosary made of 108 tulasi beads. The devotee pledges to chant the maha-mantra 16 rounds of the prayer-beads per day. He or she also pledges to follow the four “regulative principles” (no meat eating, no intoxicants, no gambling, no illicit sex). The disciple also receives a new, spiritual name.

The second, brahminical initiation qualifies one to priestly occupation and it consists of the disciple receiving the gayatri mantra and the sacred thread. Henceforward the devotee pledges chant the gayatri mantra three times daily, at sunrise, midday and sunset.

Both of these initiations generally include a fire sacrifice performed by a priest or the initiating guru sitting in front of a small fire altar set in the middle of the temple room. The disciples should be appropriately dressed, shaved (men) and marked by the Vaishnava tilakas (clay markings). First they perform purificatory rites as shown by the priest. Then the initiating guru gives a lecture explaining the meaning of the initiation and chanting. Then the guru calls upon the disciples and asks them to take their vows after which he gives them their rosaries and their spiritual names (harinama), or the sacred threads and mantras (brahminical). After this the fire ceremony begins. This consists of an elaborate procedure of offerings made to the fire by the priest, each offering is accompanied by appropriate mantras. The disciples are also required to chant certain mantras in front of the fire, repeating after the officiating priest. The ceremony ends with a kirtana, with everyone turning around the fire. The disciples are also required give a gift to the guru, which usually takes place at this point.

(5) Marriages, funerals, and name giving ceremonies also consist of ceremonies structured around the fire sacrifice. they also include purifications, lectures, offerings made to the fire, and final kirtana. The rituals are generally rather complex and they are mostly performed by the priest, although the main recipients (e.g. couple being married), are required to follow certain procedures or cant chant certain mantras during the ceremonies. At some point the guests may also take part of the worship in some such ways, such as throwing grains into the fire, or chanting certain mantras after the priest.

In sum, the initiations and other rites of passage are more low key events as compared to other rituals. In contrast to regular temple worship, the guests sit on the
floor most of the time during the ceremonies. They are more in the position of spectators than active participants. They may, however, sing devotional songs. Only the priest knows all the details of the complex procedures and difficult mantras. The guests especially have to follow the prompting of the priest in order to know what to do.

17. In relation to each ritual listed, indicate whether informants’ accounts of these would be based primarily on recollection of specific performances or on scripts for typical procedures:

In each case, the informant’s accounts are predominantly based on scripts of typical procedures. However, in the case of major festivals, people may remember specific particularly striking episodes. The initiations and marriages also may include recollections of specific performances – their own. The harinama sankirtana may also occasion some unexected event (harassment or admiration or other striking form of reaction from the onlookers), which may be stuck in memory.

18. For each ritual listed, indicate typical frequencies of exposure per relevant category of individual (e.g. child, initiated male, post-menopausal woman, etc.) as (a) participant (indicating nature of role, e.g. initiator, candidate, master of ceremonies, assistant, etc.) and (b) observing non-participant:

The ISKCON social structure may be divided into two main categories: congregational devotees vs. full time devotees; full time devotees include brahmacaris (monks), brahmacarinis (nuns), and sannyasis (male renounced order members) who are fully supported by the movement; congregational devotees include sympathisers, candidate devotees, and initiated members who have married and therefore moved out of temple (ashram). Congregational devotees generally support themselves (married temple presidents and temple priests are typically an exception to this rule). In each group there are gurus, senior devotees, who are entitled to initiate disciples.

(1) the daily cycle of rituals (temple worship): The morning program is mandatory for all full time devotees. They attend it daily, or at least they should. Congregational devotees may attend according to their capabilities, but it is strongly recommended that they attend as often as possible. The evening program is optional for all.
The annual cycle of rituals (festivals): Both full time devotees and congregational devotees attend numerous, if not all of the annual festivals. Very often people travel to far away places in order to attend the biggest festivals. For example, hundreds of devotees from all over the world gather in Mayapur in North-East India to celebrate the Gaura Purnima festival.

Public chanting of God’s names (harinama sankirtana): This is mandatory for prospective and newly initiated full time devotees, who typically take part in the harinama parties at least once a week. The older devotees attend less often, perhaps only during some major occasions (few times yearly).

Initiations; and

Other rites of passage (marriages, funerals, etc.): In normal circumstances, one can only get initiated once in one’s lifetime, and the same holds true for all rites of passage. Even remarriages are rare and generally discouraged. In the role of the temple priest and officiating guru, one can however be a participant in the proceedings more often. However, as these occasions are public, everyone may attend these ceremonies as an onlooker more often. In a small community like the one in Helsinki, these do not occur very often, though. Marriages occur perhaps once a year, and initiations perhaps a little more frequently.

19. For each ritual listed, indicate whether your characterization of 'typical' procedures is based on informants’ descriptions or direct personal observations, or both. Indicate likely degree of variance of ritual procedures (a) among informants’ descriptions and/or (b) in performances observed directly:

The above characterizations are based on both direct personal observations and informant’s descriptions. The informants themselves describe the rituals in fairly standardised ways. On observation, one is struck by the similarity of the ritual life in different ISKCON temples around the world. The variations are due to the resources available in particular temples. And even then the different standards of worship are carefully monitored.

20. For each ritual listed, distinguish between (a) any procedures common to different rituals but not to any non-ritual activities; (b) any procedures common to both ritual and non-ritual activities; (c) any procedures unique to the ritual in question:

(a) A recurrent element in ISKCON worship is the procedure known as puja: offerings of various items
to an image or to the sacrificial fire. The five standard ones are: incense, ghee lamp, sandalwood paste, flowers, and foodstuffs. In simplified procedures there may be less items, and more elaborate worship includes more items. The arati ceremony (“waving of lamps”) described above is structured similarly, although it has dropped some items and included other ones. Some form of puja is performed in all other rituals except the harinama sankirtan. Kirtana, singing of God’s holy names is however included in every single ritual event.

(b) The exotic procedures encountered in ISKCON rituals do not seem to be found very much outside the ritual context. Eating sanctified food, however, occurs both in festival contexts and in everyday life. Offering things and services to one’s superiors, whether deities or gurus, is a general theme that is encountered both in rituals and more everyday interactions. Chanting God’s names may be done everywhere and at all times, not only during worship. All these things may, however, be described as ritual activity in themselves.

(c) The rites of passage are distinguished by certain changes in the appropriate mantras during the fire sacrifice and the actions of the participants (the ones to be initiated, the couple, etc.) Festivals are distinguished by the entertainment element. Other than that, the elements seem to recur in more than one ritual.

21. For each ritual listed, indicate whether any particular experience(s) of involvement is / are remembered in the long run (e.g. in the course of a lifetime) as a distinctive episode (or set of episodes).

From the list, it seems that the most likely events to be remembered are the events and circumstances of one’s own first initiation, marriage and taking of sannyasa. In other words, the rites of passage. Sometimes the harinama sankirtan may occasion episodes that are memorable. For example, many people who later become devotees recall the event when they first encountered the devotees singing on the street. Some especially lively festivals may also prove memorable, especially if taken part in distant parts of the world.

22. For each ritual listed, recount in general terms the content of any exegetical commentaries that exist (if none exist, please indicate):
The daily cycle of rituals (temple worship) is said to be modelled on the service offered to a great king in his palace. The images are thought to be actual incarnations of God after they have been consecrated in proper ceremonies. In other words it is emphasised that it is not the wooden or brass image that is worshipped but God himself, who has mercifully provided this way to approach him, for ordinary persons cannot see God directly, because God is spiritual. The purpose of the ceremonies is to purify the devotee, so that he can approach God. God, being supreme being, does not actually need any service from the human beings, but being merciful to humans, has provided a way for humans to purify themselves through serving him.

The annual cycle of rituals (festivals). The logic is very much the same as above.

Public chanting of God’s names (harinama sankirtana). According to ISKCON theology, the authorised method of achieving salvation in this age of Kali is devotional chanting of the holy name of God. In the previous ages the methods of brahminical rituals and yogic exercises have been authorised, but nowadays they are far too complicated and demanding for the degraded inhabitants of our age. Again, the name of God is his “sound incarnation”, in other words, there is no difference between God and his name. Hearing the “spiritual sound vibration” of the Hare Krishna mantra is extremely potent agent of spiritual purification. Therefore one should chant the mantra aloud so that everyone can hear it and thereby gain some spiritual benefit.

Initiation. In order to advance in spiritual life, one needs to accept a spiritual master (guru). Initiation is the formal ceremony that links one to the disciplic succession originating from Krishna himself, and descending through Brahma, Narada, Vyasa, Madhva etc. all the way to Bhaktivedanta Swami and his successor gurus today. In initiation the spiritual master accepts his disciples’ bad karma (“sinful reactions”), the disciple is as if born anew on the spiritual platform. It is understood that one cannot apprehend the spiritual truths of scripture unless one hears them from an authorised spiritual master.

Other rites of passage (marriages, funerals) are considered in essence as purificatory rituals.
23. For each exegetical commentary, indicate likely origin(s) (e.g. spontaneous exegetical reflection (SER) triggered by interview; SER triggered prior to interview, indicating likely triggers where possible; authoritative verbal source (e.g. priest, shaman, etc.); non-authoritative verbal source (e.g. non-specialist exegete with no special access to other-worldly knowledge); textual source (specify); other origins?; combinations of origins? etc.):

The origins of these exegetical commentaries are found in authoritative textual sources of two kinds. First, they are to be found in sacred scriptures and theological treatises of the Vaishnava tradition: Bhagavad-gita, Bhagavata Purana, Caitanya-caritamrta (biography of Caitanya by Krsnadasa Kaviraja) and Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu (theological work by Rupa Goswami, a sixteenth century theologian). Secondly, they are to be found in the translations and commentaries of these works by Bhaktivedanta Swami. Each of the above mentioned work has been translated and extensively commented upon by him and it is through these works of interpretation that the sacred scripture are approached.

24. Indicate how widely and uniformly distributed and how stable over time each of the exegetical commentaries listed are likely to be:

The distribution of these exegetical commentaries within ISKCON is practically totally uniform and very stable over time. Even the splinter groups that exist agree on these kinds of fundamentals.

25. Detail any standard forums for the transmission of ritual exegesis (e.g. sermons, secret meetings, etc.):

As explained above (question 16), there are two classes on sacred scripture every day in every ISKCON temple. The morning lecture is invariably on Bhagavata Purana and the evening lecture is on Bhagavad-gita. Each lecture is based on Bhaktivedanta Swami’s translations and commentaries of these books (i.e. Bhagavad-gita As It Is; Srimad-Bhagavatam).

There are also bigger seminars and study groups organised by the movement occasionally. Even in this case the standard format of verse per verse study is often maintained.
26. Indicate the approximate frequency with which each individual is typically exposed to each exegetical commentary:

As indicated already, full time devotees are required to take part in classes at least once per day. On the other hand, the lectures of course deal with much else besides the ritual exegesis. Of the types of exegeses mentioned above, the temple worship is seldom discussed; even more rarely are the rites of passage discussed explicitly. On the other hand, the singing of God’s names is dealt almost in every lecture. Chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra is the most central item in the movement theology and therefore frequently elaborated upon.

27. For each named religious tradition, describe the general nature of any traditions of doctrine and/or narrative that exist (indicating, as appropriate, any distinct 'genres' of narrative):

ISKCON treasures a vast tradition of Hindu sacred narratives. The most important narratives deal with Krishna, his numerous incarnations, and the tribulations of his devotees. There are also vast amounts of intricate theological and cosmological literatures. The movement emphasises that its practices and doctrines are based on solid philosophical traditions and logical arguments. Despite the prominence of chanting and dancing, they vehemently deny being “sentimental”. In fact the movement describes its philosophy often as a “scientific”, thereby denying the legitimacy of materialistic science. The movement can also be described as fundamentalistic, they emphasise that they consider the sacred literatures as literally true and criticise heavily the modern “speculative” interpretations of the sacred books. (For contents of these scriptures, see below #28.)

28. Indicate the sources to which these doctrines/ narratives owe their authority (noting, as appropriate, how this may differ also by genre):

The traditional narratives of Hindu epics (especially Mahabharata) and Puranas (especially Bhagavata Purana) form a very rich reservoir of both doctrinal discourse and mythological narratives. In addition to these, there are the sectarian hagiographical literatures dealing with the founders of the specific spiritual lineage, like the
biography of Caitanya and the hagiographies of his closest disciples (so called six Goswamis of Vrindavana).

The Puranic literatures and the Mahabharata story of Krishna in the Bhagavad-gita form the backbone of theology in the movement. Bhagavad-gita teaches a form of theistic Hinduism, which exalts the path of bhakti, or devotional service, as the supreme path to liberation. According to Bhagavata Purana, Krishna is the supreme personality of Godhead, whose worship is the supreme form of devotion. The Hare Krishna movement regards itself as monotheistic tradition within Hindu culture. Other deities Siva and Kali are regarded as “demigods”. The Purana also details a vast cosmology, theology, social philosophy (varnashrama dharma), and numerous stories of God’s incarnations and their devotees and enemies.

Caitanya (1486 – 1534) is considered and incarnation of Radha-Krishna. He popularised the congregational chanting of the maha-mantra and taught that it is the supreme path to liberation in this age of Kali. He also opposed the hereditary caste system and drew disciples from all social classes. The followers of Caitanya belong to one of the main four subsects of the Vaishnava tradition (deriving from Madhva, others deriving from Ramanuja, Nimbarka, and Vishnuswami). They are generally called Gaudiya Vaishnavas.

29. Indicate how widely and uniformly distributed and how stable over time each tradition of doctrinal/narrative transmission is likely to be (noting, as appropriate, how this may differ also by genre):

They are widely and uniformly distributed within the movement and also very stable over time. The four most important books of the movement (Bhagavad-gita As It Is, Srimad-Bhagavatam, Caitanya-caritamrta, Nectar of Devotion) are constantly being studied both individually and in groups, lectured upon, and translated into new languages.

30. Detail any standard forums for the transmission of doctrine/narrative (e.g. sermons, secret meetings, etc.):

See #25.
31. Indicate the approximate frequency with which each individual is typically exposed to various forms of doctrine/narrative:

As indicated already, full time devotees are required to take part in classes at least once per day. Others may attend less often, but each time they do attend, there is invariably a lecture to attend also.

In addition to standard lectures, there are also more intensive study sessions in the form of seminars lead by senior devotees. Devotees attend these variously, depending on their proclivity and interest.

The books are of course also read privately. The nature of the discourse (verse accompanied by a lengthy commentary) has the effect that the books contain vast amount of redundancy. The most important doctrines are reiterated in almost every commentary.

Reading other theological literatures is discouraged in the movement, as indeed most forms of entertainment. Therefore even congregational devotees are most likely exposed to the standard theology of the movement on daily basis.

32. Describe the structuring principles of doctrinal discourse:

As explained above (question 16), there are two classes on sacred scripture every day in every ISKCON temple. The morning lecture is invariably on Bhagavata Purana and the evening lecture is on Bhagavad-gita. Each lecture is based on Bhaktivedanta Swami’s translations and commentaries of these books (i.e. Bhagavad-gita As It Is; Srimad-Bhagavatam).

Each lecture proceeds in standardised way by dealing with one verse per day. First the verse is read in Sanskrit; then its translation is studied; next the lecturer reads aloud Bhaktivedanta Swami’s commentary on that particular verse; only after this can the lecturer amplify the meaning him- or herself, finally there is question and answer period.

The typical lectures proceed in associative fashion starting from the topics raised in the particular verse. The doctrinal issues are interspersed by the lengthy
accounts of narratives picked up from other sacred books, personal experience, hagiographical narratives of past saints or of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s life. Yet in each lecture the main points of the doctrine are most likely being touched upon. These may be listed as follows:

a. we are not our bodies but spirit souls, parts of God (atman), but have forgotten it;
b. having lost our original pure consciousness, we futilely attempt to achieve happiness in the material world;
c. these attempts bring us karmic reactions, tying us ever more deeply into the material world for repeated lifetimes of misery (samsara);
d. by learning the spiritual science (dharma) under the guidance of a self-realised teacher (guru), we can gain happiness and liberation;
e. liberation consists “going back to Godhead”, i.e. getting to Krishna’s pure abodes in the spiritual world and serving him eternally, which is our constitutional position re-established;
f. Godhead, named Krishna, is eternal, all-knowing, omnipresent, all-powerful and all-attractive cosmic creator;
g. the latest incarnation of Krishna, Caitanya has established the principles of bhakti yoga most suitable for the people of this age, namely, congregational chanting of the maha-mantra.

33. Identify any ritual procedures that are written down (indicate sources and who refers to them and how frequently):


For the congregational devotees there exist books which instruct them on how to perform simplified deity worship at home (e.g. Bhakti Vikasa Swami: A beginners Guide to

I do not know how much the priests generally need the manuals for the puja (it is performed behind curtains). My impression is that at least the more experienced priests have memorised the mantras.

The difficulty of the procedures including the fire sacrifice (initiations, marriages etc.) is revealed by the fact that in most ceremonies I have been able to witness, the priest has used some memory aid (books, such as the above, slips of paper) in order to be able to chant the long Sanskrit mantras.


34. Identify any ritual procedures that are recorded digitally or on tape (indicate sources and who refers to them and how frequently):

My own study (Ketola forthcoming b) includes in it sources a videotaped recording of one morning program including the lecture in the Helsinki temple.

35. Identify any visual representations, songs, chants, or stories that include descriptions or references to the ritual procedures:

All the main songs and chants sung in the various rituals are included along with translations in the Introductory Song Book of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (compiled by Rohini Nandan das adhikary. Borehamwood, England: Bhaktivedanta Books Ltd.)

[Good samples of photographs of kirtanas, initiations, deities, temples and the like can be found in histories of the movement such as Satsvarupa Dasa Gosvami: Srila
36. Indicate any other external mnemonics that are used in stimulating recall for ritual procedures prior to performances:

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37. In relation to each religious tradition listed, indicate the scale on which the tradition as a whole is envisaged by members (e.g. local, regional, national, international, etc.):

ISKCON regards itself as universal teaching, and consciously attempts to spread the message into “every town and village” – as a certain prophesy indicates.

38. Indicate how each tradition listed is conceptualized as a whole by members (e.g. as a group of known persons, as a conglomeration of general categories of persons such as a group of 'nations', or as a single general category such as 'black brothers' or 'God’s elect', etc.)?

The most frequent term used to denote members is “devotees”, or sometimes, “ISKCON devotees”. These kinds of single general categories are usually contrasted with the derogatory category of non-members, “karmis” (those whose actions produce karmic reactions).

39. Where appropriate, identify discriminable tiers of religious organization in each tradition (e.g. local, regional, national, international etc.) and indicate how widely such tiers are recognized and invoked as markers of collective identity:

On the international level, the supreme authority is held by a body of devotees known as Governing Body Commission (GBC). This consists of 34 senior devotees, who meet annually at the world headquarters in Mayapur. Major policies of the movement and standards of ritual and doctrine are decided upon at these meetings. The decisions are made by voting and in consultation with temple presidents and other leaders of the movement. A GBC executive is elected each year. GBC members are
responsible for various zones into which the world is divided for managerial purposes.

At the next level there are the zonal or national councils, which are formed by temple presidents.

Each individual temple or centre is managed by a temple president and an executive.

The effect of these levels in terms of collective identity is negligible. ISKCON conceives itself as an international family and in fact people move around and switch residence so much that localities lose much of their importance. However, each individual temple may develop a sort of identity through competition with other temples in terms of book distribution or some such activity.

40. In relation to each tradition, give details (where these exist) of the identity and biography of a founding figure (historical or mythical), indicating how widely known this information is:

ISKCON was founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896 – 1977). As the worshipped founder guru of the movement, his biography is very well known within the movement. The well researched official biography Srila Prabhupada Lilamrta by his disciple Satsvarupa dasa Goswami (1993) is the standard account which most devotees have acquaintance with. The following account is based on that work.

Bhaktivedanta Swami was born Abhay Charan De on September 1, 1986 in Calcutta, India, to a cloth merchant family. His father belonged to an aristocratic merchant community. Although the family was not itself very wealthy it was related to a wealthy Mullik family, who had traded gold and salt for centuries. The Mulliks had also patronised Radha-Krishna temple for the past 150 years. Abhay’s father was a pious Vaishnava, who raised his son according to religious principles. Abhay’s mother wanted his son to get an education in law in England, but his father did not allow this because he feared the degrading influence of the West.

In his college years in Calcutta, Abhay became interested in nationalist politics and became a follower of Gandhi. Gandhi taught that Indian people should forsake foreign schools, and so in 1920 Abhay refused to accept his diploma from college, although he had passed the final exams. His father arranged him to marry Radharani Datta from another merchant family. After graduating, Abhay
started working as a department manager in a chemical firm in Calcutta.

In 1922 Abhay met for the first time Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, who was to become his spiritual master. At the time Abhay was reluctant to meet any so called holy men, because he did not think highly of them, but due to his friend’s insistence, he agreed to meet this man. it is reported that the first thing the guru said to Abhay was that “You are educated young men. Why don’t you preach Lord Caitanya’s message throughout the world?” As a supporter of Gandhi, Abhay protested that India should first concern with her independence. However, Bhaktisiddhanta argued convincingly that God’s business was far more important than mere mundane politics. Abhay felt defeated by the argument and decided to become his disciple.

He had his formal initiation in 1932 in Allahabad, where he had moved with his family. Working as a pharmaceutical salesman he travelled a lot in Northern India, meeting with his guru as often as his family and business responsibilities permitted. One time, when Abhay met his spiritual master privately, he instructed his disciple to print books.

In 1944 Abhay began to publish a magazine named Back to Godhead in which he propounded his guru’s teachings. Gradually he became less and less interested in business, which went badly anyhow, as he turned his interests to preaching. Finally in 1950 he also came into conflict with his wife over religious principles. It is said that they had a conflict over the issue of drinking tea, because it was prohibited by religious standards. One day Abhay found out that his wife had sold his copy of Bhagavata Purana in order to buy tea biscuits. Abhay was so schocked that he left his wife and four children and moved into an ashrama. He was initiated into the renounced order of sannyasa in 1959 and was given the name Abhay Caranaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami.

Soon he decided to start writing books. Thus he started his monumental work of translating and commenting on the Bhagavata Purana, which contains 18 000 verses in 12 volumes. He was completely convinced that an English language presentation of this sacred scripture would create a revolution “in a misdirected civilization”.

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By 1965 he had managed to publish his first three volumes of Bhagavatam, and thought himself to be ready for a bigger step: to start preaching in the West. Going through great difficulties this penniless sannyasi from Vrndavana obtained permissions and sponsorship for travelling to America. Scindia Steamship Line gave him a free ticket in September on a cargo ship going to New York harbor.

Bhaktivedanta swami’s first months in the West were arduous, but by the spring of 1966, he had started to keep regular devotional classes in Bowery, where a lot of artists and students lived. In June 1966 everything changed. He had managed to rent a storefront on 26 Second Avenue in Lower East Side for his classes. He had started to attract a regular attendance of hippies. In July he had incorporated his society, International Society for Krishna Consciousness. One day in that summer he lead his students to Tompkins Square Park for a public kirtana. The dancing and singing of the Swami and his devotees and the “Stay High Forever” flyers soon created a small sensation among the hippies. Hare Krishna people soon became popular. People flocked to the storefront and newspapers wrote favorable articles.

By January 1967 Bhaktivedanta Swami had sent his disciples to open a temple in San Francisco, where they managed to get a storefront in Haight-Ashbury district. Other branches were soon opened in Boston, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, and Montreal. By 1968 his disciples started the missions in London and Germany. By April 1969 there were already 15 ISKCON centers, by July 1970, there were 34. In August 1970 Bhaktivedanta Swami started a major preaching mission in India along with his American devotees who naturally created a sensation among his Hindu audiences.

Throughout the seventies, until his death in November 1977, Bhaktivedanta Swami toured around the world initiating disciples and encouraging them to set up temples wherever possible. It is said that he flew the equivalent of 14 times around the world during that time. By the time of his death there is said to have been more than 100 temples established all over the world and more than 4000 initiated disciples. All during this time he also continued writing and publishing Krishna conscious literature, which amounted to about sixty books by the time of his death.
41. Describe the nature and relative intensity of cohesion among members of each religious
tradition (and, where appropriate, within each tier of the organization):

As ISKCON lifestyle requires a rather radical break with established conventions of life of most modern peoples, it has had a tendency of sectarian world rejection. The early ISKCON communities emphasised celibate life style of secluded temple communities. These became total environments which had a hostile attitude towards outside secular society. Likewise, the parents of many devotees were concerned of their children renouncing education and “normal” family life. In these circumstances the cohesion among the members tended to become very intense.

However, as increasing numbers of devotees have gotten married and established a householder life style, the temple devotees have turned into a minority. The concerns of congregational devotees have had an countervailing influence on the collectivistic mentality. Today’s ISKCON is far less cohesive and collectivist religion than in the 70’s and 80’s. This trend seems to be on the increase in many parts of the world.

42. For each religious tradition, provide a general description of the broad structure of religious roles:

Religious roles can be divided into following main groups:

(1) prospective devotees
(2) monks and nuns (brahmacaris and brahmacarinis)
(3) householder devotees (grihastas)
(4) retired devotees (vanaprasthas), a rare category
(5) renounced order devotees (sannyasis)

In addition to these religious statuses, there are certain specialised occupations and positions in the movement which set certain people apart, but who may belong (in theory) to any of the categories 2 – 5 above.

(1) temple priests (pujaris)
(2) temple presidents
(3) GBC personnel
(4) gurus

43. For each religious tradition, list and describe all specialist roles found locally (i.e in the field location):
In the Helsinki temple, one can find prospective devotees, monks and nuns and householders, and temple priests and temple presidents living there on a permanent basis. However, about dozen sannyasis visit the temple annually, the GBC zonal secretary being the most regular visitor. Most of the sannyasis and other visiting devotees are gurus, who have disciples locally. So practically all the categories are found locally.

44. Indicate what sorts of authority attach to these specialist roles:

The temple president is the principle managing authority in each temple. Each devotee has a personal relationship to a guru, who is the principle authority in spiritual matters. However, the the temple president has to consult the GBC for every major managerial decision (like relocating the temple) involving the temple. The GBC personnel is also responsible for overseeing the standard of ritual and life style in each temple. The GBC is the ultimate managerial authority in the movement.

45. If there is formal or informal ranking of specialist roles, describe how this works and indicate any grading of powers and jurisdictions:

See above #44.

46. Identify any mechanisms for the monitoring and policing of doctrinal and ritual orthodoxies (including any sanctions for non-conformity):

A temple president may order censure, probation, dissociation, divestiture or request the GBC to remove or disassociate a member from the temple in consultation with the Temple Board, for any of the following transgressions:
- consistent and habitual violation of any of the four regulative principles and persistent neglect to complete 16 rounds of prayers daily;
- openly inimical or defying Prabhupada or ISKCON policies or authorities;
- flagrant and repeated misrepresentation of Prabhupada’s teachings;
- being overly attached to sense gratification in a serious, prolonged or hopeless way;
- violation of national, state or local government laws;
- acting against the interests of the Society. (ISKCON law Book § 5.6.2.5.6.8.)

An ISKCON leader (temple president, regional secretaries, project leaders) may be sanctioned for transgressions during his tenure of office. The transgressions include:

- misconduct and indiscipline:
  • willful violation of GBC resolutions
  • vilification of ISKCON or the GBC body
  • misconduct in office (physical assault except in self-defence, improper relationships with opposite sex, improper sexual behavior, abusive behavior to devotees, improper dealings with external society and so on)
  • habitually and knowingly making false charges and accusations
  • serious interference in guru-disciple relationship
  • duplicitous of untruthful dealings

- misuse of funds and gross mismanagement:
  • consistent unexcused absences at divisional council meetings
  • consistent failure to submit prescribed monthly reports
  • consistent interference in guru disciple relationship
  • consistent or serious economic mismanagement
  • serious degradation of temple standards

- spiritual discrepancy:
  • failure to follow strictly the rules and regulations in Prabhupada’s books
  • philosophical deviation
  • consistent irregular attendance at the temple morning program without bona fide cause
  • failure to follow any of the four regulative principles or to regularly chant 16 rounds of prayer-beads.

Sanctions are as follows: Censure is a reprimand aimed at reformation of the member. If one is censured three times he shall be placed on probation (normally one year). If one has been on probation for at least one year, and the situation has not been rectified, the Divisional Council may by 2/3 majority vote recommend suspension. If approved by local GBC:s, he may be suspended. An ISKCON leader may be removed from his position only after being suspended.
and unable to rectify his situation. Such cases are handled by the GBC body. (ISKCON Law Book, § 5.5.)

The GBC may apply the same sanctions against a guru for misconduct - warning, probation, suspension, and removal. Considering removal, the law states that:

“If a guru becomes openly inimical to Srila Prabhupada or ISKCON; or otherwise acts demonically; or becomes an impersonalist (mayavadi); or preaches the unauthorised philosophy or apasampradaya [heretical] groups against Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu’s principles; or blatantly and consistently defies ISKCON and GBC policies; or if a guru’s attachment to sense gratification is serious, prolonged, hopeless, then as per sastric [scriptural] injunction, he shall be removed from his position as diksa [initiating] or siksa-guru [instructing guru].” (ISKCON Law Book, § 6.4.5.4.)

47. Summarize what is generally believed about the direction and rate of spread of each religious tradition historically, indicating the nature of any evidence to support this:

The spread of the Hare Krishna movement has been one of the most rapid ones among the post-war new religious movements. One indication of this is the rapid increase of temples and centres throughout the world:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1 temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>108 communities and centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>196 communities and centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>350 temples, 60 rural communities, 50 schools, 60 restaurants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

48. Indicate whether patterns of spread can be linked to proselytism on the part of known individuals, to local migration, to contiguity of groups, or to other factors:

The spread is based on proselytism of known individuals (see #40).

49. Indicate whether the process of spread leads to radical mutation of the tradition from one place to the next, or if there is substantial continuity of practice and belief:
There is substantial continuity of practice and belief.

50. Are exegeses/ doctrines/ narratives more susceptible to mutation in the course of spread than are ritual procedures, or is it the other way around (or is neither the case - if so, please elaborate):

The ritual practices do not seem to be capable of random mutation at all. The splinter groups that have emerged have always been precipitated by doctrinal disputes. One major issue during the last decades has been the position of the guru in ISKCON. Some see that the guru should have more authoritative position, some claim that since there exist no one of high spiritual attainments, their position should be circumscribed. Some even claim that there can be no gurus after Bhaktivedanta Swami’s departure, only his officiants. Other disputes have existed about the street solicitation techniques and their justification.