



STATEMENT DI120

Inside Iskcon

Mind control. Widespread marriage failures. A “beyond good and evil” ethic that justifies “heavenly” deception, “transcendental” trickery, and theft, when performed in service to their god. Abuse of women. Impossible ascetic demands which lead to neurotic guilt and even suicide (an act justified in the philosophy). False prophecies. The Hare Krishnas have been often accused of all of these deviations. In this issue *Forward* interviews a former leader of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) who testifies from personal experience and observation that all of these charges are accurate, and, in fact, the Hare Krishna movement is in a very sick condition.

Ed Senesi joined the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in January, 1971. An honor graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University, Ed was an idealist who wanted to dedicate his life to God. His studies in Eastern philosophy and mysticism led him to the Hare Krishna people, whom he found “sincere, intelligent, loving, and totally committed to God.” Ed became involved in the production of ISKCON’s official monthly magazine, *Back to Godhead*, and served for two and a half years as the magazine’s Editor-in-Chief. He later was involved in ISKCON’s national public relations division, where he worked against deprogramming. (He would fly to cities where Hare Krishnas had been kidnapped and present the ISKCON viewpoint to TV, radio, and newspaper reporters). After moving on to serve as general manager of the entire editorial and graphic arts division of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, which publishes all of ISKCON’s books, Ed decided to remove himself from the hierarchy of the organization.

In this interview with *Forward* Editor Elliot Miller (the first of two parts), Ed explains for us what led to his disillusionment with the Hare Krishna movement, and to his acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

FORWARD: Ed, you were deeply involved in the Krishna philosophy and movement. How is it that you began to have doubts?

SENESI: I was with the movement altogether for nine years, and it was in the last year when I really started questioning the organization. I would go on TV and debate against people who were charging that ISKCON was a cult; that we were using mind control, brainwashing techniques; and I would have to refute these arguments. But most of the time when I would go on TV — you know, it would be like that saying, “in your heart you know he is right.” I would know that what these people were saying about the organization was true, but I would say, “Oh, no, no, that may be true in the Unification Church, that may be true in the Tony and Susan Alamo Foundation; but it is not true in the Hare Krishnas. We don’t do that. These other cults do, but we are not a cult because we are the true religion of the world.” And being involved in the public relations division, I also had access to the clipping service which received articles from newspapers and magazines from all over the world — bad publicity about the movement, about people getting busted for smuggling, and the leaders of the temple shooting crowds of Bengalis in Mayapur outside of Calcutta, and all this really bizarre stuff which most of the devotees didn’t even know was going on, because the leaders selectively present what they want the devotees to hear, and they discourage them from reading any outside literature. Even newspapers and magazines are frowned on. You feel guilty about reading them. So most of the devotees didn’t even know these things were going on. But I did, and I also knew about the arguments of the deprogrammers, and I would constantly have to weigh all these things in my mind.

I finally came to the conclusion that, “Wow! this organization is really sick. But it’s the devotees who are making it go wrong.” You see, we believed it was the fault of the individual members of the organization, because we were so “fallen.” We were not spiritually evolved. We were not on a high level of spiritual purity, like the guru (i.e. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of ISKCON), because we were all, as he would call us, “mudhas” — which means, in Sanskrit, asses. He called his own disciples mudhas. So we always thought we were not measuring up to the high standard of spirituality that was expected of us; so therefore, things were going all wrong. It was always our fault and it was never the fault of the philosophy. The philosophy was perfect and pure. It’s just that we weren’t living up to it. So I would justify my involvement in the religion by this kind of

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

thinking; but I knew the organization was doing all these very bizarre things — 90% of the marriages failing, divorce, all these horrendous things going on, but I would justify it on the basis that we were so rotten, so fallen, we couldn't live up to the guru's high standards.

So what was it that caused you to move away from the philosophy? Since you were all this time justifying the philosophy, how is it that it began to break down in your eyes?

I just got to the point where I carried this thing to its logical, philosophical conclusion. I thought, "Well, wait a minute. It can't be that this thing is just an accident, that it's becoming so weird, that it's all turning out so bizarre." Because the Hare Krishna movement today in 1981 and the Hare Krishna movement in 1971 are completely different. I mean, I would have never joined the organization back in 1971 had it been what it is today in 1981. When I joined in 1971 it was like a love community; the idea was just to go out on the street and just to sing and dance and chant and to distribute the literature, ask for donations, give out food. It was a proselytizing mentality, but very low-key, very loving, the late 60's hippie-type, love-everyone kind of thing, and family type of atmosphere. Well, that changed. That changed very drastically.

When the guru, Swami Bhaktivedanta, came to America in 1965, this is what he preached. He said that God the Father, whom Jesus spoke about, was actually Krishna, only you don't know it because you are so spiritually unevolved that you can't understand these things. You can't understand that the Father actually has a blue body, plays a flute, tends cows, and has cowherd girl friends.

That's too sublime a truth for us.

That's too sublime, right; you (non-Krishna believers) are just on the ABC's. I mean, after all, you are meat eaters, and you have sex with your wives, so you are really on a low level of spirituality; and, therefore, you can't understand these higher truths. We really believed this; believed it and lived it. He preached that God the Father is Krishna and that Krishna appeared 5,000 years ago, and gave us the Bhagavad-Gita (the basic Hindu holy book). But also, the most recent incarnation was Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who appeared in India 500 years ago, and sang and danced his way into the hearts of all the Indians. The idea was that society has degraded into what is now known as the age of Kali, the age of quarrel and confusion, where people are all fornicating meat eaters, and the whole of society is composed of very low subhumans. (They don't even consider people who do these things [i.e., have regular sexual relations and eat meat] human beings. They have human form, but they are not living up to the high human nature, which is to be celibate and vegetarian). And so things are so degraded and so fallen that Krishna, out of his mercy, incarnated as Sri Caitanya 500 years ago, and taught that you didn't have to be born in a Brahmin family [the priestly caste in India]. All you have to do in this age to attain complete spirituality is just chant the holy name of God. You can achieve the highest level of spiritual consciousness and freedom from material desire just by repeating the names of God. This vibration will elevate your consciousness to such a platform that you will have no material desire. You will have no desires of the flesh. You will be totally enraptured in thought of Krishna, in ecstatic consciousness of God twenty-four hours a day. When you reach that level of consciousness, then you are liberated. There's no need for you to come back to the material world because you have no material desire; you just want to be eternally connected to Krishna, to God. So therefore, when your soul leaves your body, you go to be with Krishna.

This movement dropped dead in India shortly after Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu; it really dropped dead. Then it was resurrected in the later 1800's by Bhaktivinada Thakura, and then by Swami Bhaktivedanta's guru, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. And he told Swami Bhaktivedanta, "Go to the West. Preach this gospel to the West" [presumably because the Western countries have the technology and influence to spread the message of Krishna all over the world].

So he came to New York's lower east side (Greenwich Village) and sat down on a little rug in Tompkins Square Park and started chanting with little hand cymbals — very quaint, very ascetic, very attractive to the late 1960's hippies who were already possessed by LSD and all kinds of hallucinogenic influences, and they really took to it. And this was his message: All we've got to do is just sit out here in the park and chant and distribute these little sweet foods that are offered to Krishna to people as they go by. By eating this sanctified food and by hearing the vibration of the names of Krishna (God), everyone's heart will become cleansed of all the dust, all the material desires that have been piling up for hundreds of thousands of years in countless lifetimes. So all these people walking by in the park, all these executives going to work, they will hear you chanting, they will be "zapped" by the vibration, and their hearts will become cleansed and purified. Pretty soon, they will be chanting in their homes, they will be joining you in the streets, there will be a grassroots movement, and the whole world will begin to chant God's holy names. They always stressed Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, since God himself (Lord Caitanya) gave those names. They teach that to use them is the most direct way to get to him.

When I joined, I bought that. I really believed that this was the way to revolutionize the spiritual life of the whole world. Stop wars. Stop hate. Stop killing. Stop crime. Everyone would become spiritual by getting saturated by this holy vibration.

Swami Bhaktivedanta came to America in 1965. I joined in 1971, and it was that same philosophy that was being preached. In '71 and '72, we were still going out, but the people were not coming. I mean, there were people joining the movement, it was growing; but only young people, and only those who wanted to cut themselves off from society — the hippies, the people who were into back-packing, “back to the farm,” you know; not the mainstream types of people. Lawyers were not starting to chant Hare Krishna. Businessmen were not putting their attache cases down and joining us in the street. So the guru had been here for nine years preaching this message, and it wasn't grabbing; it wasn't catching on the way he had envisioned it would.

So, all of a sudden, in 1975, ten years since he's been here (four years since I've been in the movement), we started getting these letters from India saying, “Now there's going to be a little change.” Now, he tell us, we've really got to stress book distribution. He's got fifty volumes of Vedic literature which he's translated from the original Sanskrit into English, along with his own purport, or explanation. Because he's a pure devotee of God, he knows exactly what God means in all these. In other words, his Bhagavad-Gita is the only Bhagavad-Gita because he is the only pure devotee of Krishna. None of these other swamis, or philosophers, understands the Bhagavad-Gita. Only he does, because he's a pure devotee.

He said the chanting is still important. But what's more important is to get his books out. Because if the person on the street gets a book, he is getting Krishna (in book form). The name, the book, the statue of Krishna — it's all Krishna. If you come in contact with it, you will become purified. So if we get the book out, the book is as good as the chanting. So he said, “Don't talk to people on the street. Don't bother wasting time, spending twenty minutes, half an hour, preaching on the street. My books are so potent that if they read one page, their lives will be changed,” because he is so pure and perfect. We are such mudhas. If we preach for half an hour, it is useless. But if he speaks one sentence, it will go right to their hearts and change their lives. So just get out there and sell those books.

So how are we going to sell those books? In this western civilization, who could relate to them? Nobody wants to buy these books, especially at five bucks a clip. You know how hard it is for people to part with five bucks, especially when someone walks up to them in the street and offers them a book they don't want in the first place, about a blue god.

We've got this absolute order from the guru, which is as good as having an order from God, to go out and sell the books. His word was, no matter what you have to do, get that knowledge out because people need it, even if they don't understand it. Just get the books into their hands. They'll be blessed. It will sanctify their whole household, if they have a book in their house. So now we get this really fired-up missionary zeal to go out and sell these books. The only trouble is that people don't want them. They won't even take them for free. So what do you do? You find out ways and means to employ transcendental trickery: heavenly deception. In other words, it doesn't matter what you tell the person to get him to take a book; the only thing that matters is the end result. Get that book — that knowledge — into his hands. That will eradicate his ignorance. That will stop his sinful life. That will stop his suffering. Give him that book because that's the only thing that is going to save him from going to hell.

The only thing that is good is what promotes Krishna's cause — and any means that promotes Krishna's cause is justified.

That's their relative morality.

They also rationalize their behavior through philosophizing that everything belongs to God. Your body, your clothing, your car, your family — everything belongs to God. You are a thief. You've stolen God's resources for the earth and you are using them for your own selfish benefit instead of using them for the service of God, like the Hare Krishna people are. Everything they have is sanctified, free from karmic reaction¹, because they are not using it selfishly; they are using it in the service of God. However, you are using it for your own “sense gratification”; you are using it to gratify your own body. You've got that shirt on because you want to look attractive to your girl friend. You've got that car because you want to impress your wife, or improve your sex life. You've got all these selfish sensual motivations, whereas the Krishna people are pure, and all they want these things for is to glorify Krishna. They have vans and they have cars, but that's OK because those vans and cars are being used to get the books out. But your wallet is full of Krishna's money that you have stolen from him. Not only are you implicated in stealing money from Krishna, but you are going to use it to further involve yourself in sinful activity. Therefore, we have the right — not only the right, but the duty — to take that money from you, even if we have to trick you, because by getting that money from you we are getting Krishna's stolen money back. We'll use it in Krishna's service. We'll save you from the sinful reaction of having stolen the money from Krishna in the first place, and we'll save you from the added reaction of spending that money on more sinful things. So we are saving you all across the board by getting your money, no matter how we have to do it.

So they had to use these shuck-and-jive, con-man techniques to get the books to people, and to get the money out of their wallets. They'd lie, cheat, and do things like tell them, "We are with muscular dystrophy," "We are collecting for children, the Christian Children's Fund," "We are with the Salvation Army; won't you give us money?" "We are feeding children all over the world." And the Americans, being big-hearted, would go for it and give them money. This is going on even to this day. That's how the movement changed. It got so deceptive that anything went, because the mission was so important.

As a matter of fact, we wrote the guru a letter, back around 1976, saying, "At the airport girls are cheating. While in line they are stealing servicemen's wallets. All these things are going on. It's being written up in the papers." We sent one of the clippings to Swami Bhaktivedanta in India. And I was waiting. I was so idealistic, I said, "Finally, we are going to get this thing straightened out. Finally, we are going to blow the whistle on what's going on. The Swami is going to find out, and he's going to put a stop to it. Everything is going to be pure, perfect, and utopic again."

Well, a letter came back from India. The article we sent was printed in a Chicago newspaper by a syndicated columnist, and all these cases of deceptive solicitation techniques at O'Hare Airport were documented. So he sends a letter back after having read the article, and he says, "This is very good. This man has said 'Krishna' many times in his article. Therefore, when people read this article, they will have the name 'Krishna' in their minds, and they will be benefitted and purified. It does not matter good or bad; all we are interested in is having the name of Krishna implanted in people's consciousness, because this will purify them. And as far as these techniques are concerned, it's not important. The main thing is, get the literature out; by hook or by crook, get them to take a book." And then he added, "The end justifies the means."

I almost fell over. I remember being in Brooklyn and almost falling over. I thought: "This can't be. He can't say this. How can he say this? He's bursting my balloon. I thought he was pure and perfect, holy and sinless!" And then I thought: "No, no, wait a minute. He is! He *is* pure and perfect and holy and sinless. *I'm* the one that's envious. Because after all, I've got to admit I still have sensual desire. When I'm out there singing in the street with my shaved head and robes, and a beautiful girl walks by, my head turns. I've got sinful, selfish desires. He's a swami from India. He doesn't have a wife or a girlfriend. He has completely transcended material desire. He's got complete control of his tongue. He only eats what he needs to maintain his body. I *always* overeat. I've got all these sins in my life. I'm imperfect. He's perfect. Whatever he's saying is perfect. What I'm saying is imperfect. Therefore, the fault's not in *him*, it's in *me*. It's because of my envy that I can't accept what he's saying as completely pure and absolutely perfect. I'm the sinner. He's the saint. It's hard for me to swallow, but what he's said is absolute truth, and I've got to accept it."

So now this is 1976, and things are getting worse and worse in the organization: the deprogramming, and all this stuff coming out in the media about the drugs in Laguna Beach and the guns in West Virginia; what's going on in India. I made a report to the governing body of ISKCON concerning abuses of women in the movement.

A pack of six girls would go out across country in a van, to collect money 12 hours a day, sleep in the van, or all six of them would sleep in a hotel room. One girl would go in and rent the hotel room, while six would sneak in the back door and stay in the room so they wouldn't have to give the sinful hotel owner Krishna's money. It's all justified. They'd go out and collect ten, twelve hours a day, and come home and have a bowl of rice, some salad, or something. So I was protesting how the women were being treated. And, of course, that was sentimental, as far as the leaders were concerned, because these girls were really doing Krishna's work. They were really "surrendered," really going out there and dedicating their lives. And because I was finding some fault with the system, I wasn't really transcendental.

So, things were going really bizarre in the organization. Then, in 1977, Swami Bhaktivedanta dies and eleven of his most high-ranking disciples take over. The one here in L.A. is this young guy from Rosalyn, New York, and he changes his title from "His Holiness" to "His Divine Grace." And everybody is supposed to fall down at his feet and worship him because he is one of the eleven who have inherited the mantle of Swami Bhaktivedanta.

I say, "Come on, now, I've worked with this guy. He's like everyone else. He's got a bad temper, he swears. You're going to tell me that he's one of *the* gurus of the universe? I can see through that."

So I really started turning off to the organization — as I saw it getting more and more corrupt — with more and more weird things happening. Also, my own personal married life — what a bizarre scene that was: maintaining celibacy and living with my wife like brother and sister.

All these things came together at once, and I started to doubt the philosophy. I couldn't believe that it was so perfectly, purely, and sinlessly conceived, and now it's coming out so weird and evil. I couldn't believe any more that it's all our fault. There's something about the philosophy that's perpetuating all these problems. And I guess the straw that broke the camel's back was

when I heard what happened to a friend of mine who was very close to me. He had been president of the New York temple — a brilliant guy; good-looking, intelligent, personable. He had taken the order of Sanyasi which is a renounced order, which means that they can never get married. They take a vow of complete celibacy, monk-like, for the rest of their lives. A lot of guys who do that can't handle it. They can't maintain it, and most of them leave. But then they beat themselves with guilt and shame and fear for the rest of their lives, knowing they could never live up to that promise they made to Krishna and the guru. This started happening with this guy. He took this order and it started blowing his mind. Then literally, one day — I think it was in St. Louis — he walked into a lake in the middle of January with his chanting beads in one hand, chanting Hare Krishna, and a .45 in the other, and blew his brains out.

When I heard that, I thought: “Hey, I’m getting away from this organization. This is sick. I don’t know where I’m going, or what I’m going to do, but I am completely cutting myself off from this organization.”

What were the responses of the Hare Krishnas to this act of suicide?

There’s a story in one of their scriptures, *Sri Caitanyacaritamrta* about one of the disciples of Caitanya Mahaprabhu who, on a “Sankirtana” party (a singing and dancing party), lustfully glanced at a woman, and he was banished from the association of Caitanya (who was supposed to be God). He felt so bad that he committed suicide. And when they brought the news to Caitanya, he said, “Very good; this is very good. Because next lifetime he will evolve.” He supposedly became an angel after that.

So the reaction of the people was, “Well, it’s a little unfortunate that he chose to destroy his present fleshly incarnation; but we have to see these things in the eternal perspective. He is an eternal soul who never dies. He’s just going to go on and get higher and higher until he actually comes to the platform of complete renunciation, able to give up all material desire.”

So I started dealing with this whole question of being “able to give up all material desire,” because I certainly hadn’t been able to do it for nine years, and I was really following the program. For nine years I got up practically every morning (there might have been a few times out of the year when I missed) at 4:15, took a shower, went to the temple, attended the services at 4:30, chanted and meditated on my beads for two hours, and would go to class. I faithfully followed the rugged principles: no illicit sex, no intoxication, no meat eating, no gambling. I had lust, I had anger, I had greed, I had unwholesome feelings towards other people, I had a tendency to exploit others and be insensitive and unkind, and untruthful. I had all these things in me, after nine years of practicing this stuff.

So I started saying, “Hey, wait a minute! How many people are really free from all these little sins?” I’m not talking about the gross sins like smoking dope, or illicit sex. I’m talking about the little sins, the little nasty, ugly things in all of us which are sins. Who’s really free from them? Is it possible — even given the belief of reincarnation, that you come back to perfect yourself — to get rid of all these ugly things gradually, incarnation after incarnation? Who in the whole world has done it? Is it possible? I started thinking: “I don’t buy it. I don’t think it’s going to happen that way. I’m not going to be able to purge these things out by my own austerity — raise myself by my own spiritual bootstraps. Then, what’s the consequence? I’m doomed to hell, and I don’t want to go to hell. I want to be saved, but I know I can’t do this alone.”

So I started thinking, “Maybe I’ll investigate Christianity. I don’t know what that is all about. I was raised a Catholic, but I never studied the Bible. I don’t know what the Bible is. I know what the catechism is, and I know what the Catholic doctrine is, but I want to study the Bible first-hand, and I want to know what a genuine Christian experience is, first hand.” So I would still get up at 4:30 in the morning, but I would study the Bible every morning, instead of chanting and going to the temple.

I started watching Christian television. I was always intrigued by Bible prophecy, so I started watching these shows on Bible prophecy, like *The King Is Coming*, and Charles Taylor’s *Today in Bible Prophecy*. Now these guys stood up there with the Bible and said, “Here’s what’s going on in the world and here’s what it says in the Bible.” What was predicted was happening exactly as it said.

It blew my mind because in the whole Vedic literature there’s nothing mentioned about what is going on in the Middle East. And it’s such a tinderbox. It seemed to me that if it’s so profound, there should be something said about it. As a matter of fact, the guru, Bhaktivedanta, about four years ago, predicted that there would be a war between Pakistan and India. There’s this whole counterfeit parallel between Christ and Krishna, and the Middle East and India. The Hare Krishnas think that what’s going to come down in the very near future will involve not Arabs against Israel, but Pakistan against India.

This was when I started to discern that he was a false prophet. First of all, he said the chanting was going to spread by just going out into the street, but it didn’t. And he started to take some desperate measures to try to push this movement on the world. So number one prophecy turned out to be a false prophecy.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

The number two prophecy was about building these temples in India. He thought that if he built these huge temples in India, people from India would flock to them and say, "Wow! these Americans have taken to our culture; we must revive Indian culture," and they would all become Krishna-conscious. And then the whole world would become Krishna-conscious. And *that* didn't happen. And it isn't going to happen. I've been there three times, and I know what's going on in India. So that's prophecy number two that didn't come true.

The third false prophecy involved this conflagration, this huge nuclear war supposedly to take place over India and Pakistan. Well, who cares about India and Pakistan? Where it's really heating up is in the Middle East, over the oil which is powering all the industrial nations of the world. That's where it's going to come down. Not in India or Pakistan.

So I started getting attracted to prophecy on the basis of those truths. I started becoming really convinced about Christ and about prophecy; about the Second Coming; and about the other things He said in the Bible. I thought, "If these things were all true, what about the other things He said?" So I really started studying the Bible seriously.

Then I was watching Christian television, and I called up Channel 40, which was the first time I really talked to a Christian. They have a hot line. I was a little embarrassed. I didn't want to call them up. I thought, "I'll probably get some little old lady on the other end of the line. She won't relate to what I'm talking about at all. She'll just tell me about Jesus. Oh, well, I'll give it a try anyway."

So I called and this guy answers the phone and tells me that he was into TM for five years. We started talking about the Bhagavad-Gita, and he said, "Oh, you're a Hare Krishna! What do they believe?" I said, "Well, they believe that by spiritual austerity, by chanting, by rising early, and purifying yourself, that gradually you can evolve to a platform where you are completely free from material desire."

He said, "Well, how many people do you know that have actually achieved that state?" I thought, "Well, certainly not myself. Certainly not all my brothers and sisters in the Krishna movement." And then I thought about the guru and all his false prophecies, and how he was so opportunistic to push this movement on, ostensibly "for Krishna" but how much was it really for his own empire, so that he could be the greatest spiritual star the whole world has ever seen, and so that *he* could lead a worldwide revival for Krishna? How much of his motivation was really pure? I thought, "Well, I don't think that anyone is completely purely motivated. I don't think anybody's on the platform where they are completely free from selfish desire."

So I said, "I don't believe that anybody's come to that platform."

"Well," he said, "that's what I believe. I believe there's only one sinless person that ever walked the face of the earth, and that's Jesus Christ." I thought, "Well, that's pretty interesting." I said, "I'll think about that one." That's all he said, and that's all I really needed to hear at that point. Just that one sentence.

That really started me thinking. I started reading the Bible in a whole different perspective, because I wanted a perfect, pure spiritual master, and I had been disappointed. So, I started to look toward Jesus. And this, combined with all my study and research about prophecy, started really convicting me about the truth of the Bible and the fact that Jesus Christ was indeed the way, the truth, and the life.

But I still had a lot of questions, so I went to see a friend of mine. I was driving to her house. She was involved in the Ambassador College², and I thought that if she knew about Bible prophecy, I was going to ask her questions.

On the way there, driving to her house, on the Harbor Freeway, I was thinking: "Lord, I know that I'm never going to reach this level of purity where I'm free from all material desire. I can't reach that level of consciousness. I'm a sinner. I need your help. I don't want to go to hell; I want to be saved. I want to be your man more than anything else in the world, but I can't live up to your standards, and I need your help. I'm asking you, I'm imploring you, please take me, please save me. Don't let me go to hell. I want to be yours, but you have to take me. I can't do it."

At that point I felt completely immersed in an ocean of love and acceptance and warmth. I felt the embrace, I felt the presence of Jesus. I felt His warmth and His embrace, communicating to me that He loved me and accepted me and wanted me. It was all right. He forgave me.

It was a very emotional experience. I cried and poured out my heart; tears from the very core of my heart. At one and the same time, I cried tears of sorrow for my past life, and tears of joy for being forgiven and loved and accepted. I felt like a brand new

person. I felt like I had been washed clean of all the dirt and all the darkness that was in me. I felt like the burden of the world, like a tremendous weight, had come off me, and I felt completely light. I was so incredibly blessed.

When I finally got to this girl's house, I told her, "Hey, you know what happened to me in the car on the way up here?" ... and I told her my whole experience.

She said to me, "Oh. That's very good. But you know, we really have to understand things the way Mr. Armstrong explains them."

I thought to myself, "Wait a minute: I've heard that line for nine years. I just had a One -to-One experience with God — the true and living God. He has just forgiven me of all my sins. I didn't have to go through any man. It was just between me and Him in my car on the Harbor Freeway. And you're telling me I have to go through a man? That's what I've been hearing for nine years. I don't want to hear that any more."

It was so suspicious. I wasn't even asking any questions. She just started coming on to me real heavy, like: "You know there's no such thing as the Trinity. Jesus was a very rich man. That's why they cast lots for his clothing, because he was so rich." All these things were not witnessing to my heart at all. She's saying, "Well, the Passover is coming up, you know; we have to celebrate the Passover, and we have to do these and I thought, "What she's saying to me sounds completely phony."

I said, "Thanks, but no thanks," and I just left. I didn't know where to go or what to do. I didn't know any Christians. So I went down to Melodyland Christian Center and heard Dr. Charles Taylor speak. I told him that his show helped bring me to the Lord. That was the first church service I went to.

After that, I saw on the program that there was a cult workshop with Prof. Martin. I got to meet some people who were involved with cult ministries. I mean, the Lord really arranged the whole thing.

Inside Iskcon – Part 2

In the last issue of *Forward* we met Ed Senesi, former Editor-in-chief of *Back to Godhead*, the official magazine of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Ed told us the story of how he became disillusioned with the Hare Krishna movement and eventually found, in Jesus Christ, the authentic spiritual master he'd been searching for. In this concluding segment of *Forward* Editor Elliot Miller's interview with Ed, further insight will be offered into the current state of affairs in ISKCON, and helpful advice given on how to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Hare Krishnas.

FORWARD: Could you delineate for us the exploits of Prabhupada³ in India in the Seventies, and how the movement is going over there flow?

SENESI: His plan for India was to pour in American resources and money, because people in India are completely enamored by the American way of life. They don't have anything, and they look here and they see color TVs, two cars, while families there don't even have a bicycle, let alone two cars, or a house. They don't even have bathrooms. They look at America and it seems like everybody lives like a king. So that's what they want, and they don't want anything else.

Prabhupada's strategy was to show them that Americans are turning off to their own culture and turning on to Indian culture, and at the same time are being materially blessed in an opulent way. He thought this would make them want to revive Indian culture, and think that by worshipping Krishna they will get all these things. Prabhupada wanted them to see the American devotees riding around in brand new Ambassador automobiles in India, building temples of marble and gold. So he would have the money the American devotees were making off the streets, in airports, and the shopping malls sent to India in order to build these huge monuments with beautiful marble, gold, silver, and oak wood carvings, so people would be amazed and say, "Wow, just by worshipping Krishna I can get all this opulence in my life. And these Americans have turned away from their way of life, so I should revive my whole Krishna worship and I'll have all these things, too. I'll have the best of both worlds."

But the people in India didn't buy it. ISKCON has a large following of "life members," as they call them, who pay something like 1100 rupees (which is equivalent to approximately \$100). They also have Indian TV and movie stars and government officials who are "life members" of ISKCON, but "life membership" is more like a social thing. It's like the "in" thing to do is to be a life member of ISKCON so you can tell all your friends, "Yes, I am supporting the Hindu missionaries in the world, the ISKCON movement."

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

They have all these prominent rich people, big industrial families that own car manufacturing plants, and so forth, who give money and who are life members of ISKCON, but it's more like a prestige thing and a way to alleviate their guilt. They've accumulated so much money that they feel they should give some of it to the Hindu missionaries in the world. And no one else is doing Hindu missionary work in the world like ISKCON. Ananda Marga, Self Realization Fellowship, and others are doing some work, but not with the flare with which ISKCON is doing it all over the world. The temples, shaven heads, the whole Brahminical culture — these are the *real* missionaries.

So the Indian people look upon them favorably, but they are not really interested in practical involvement?

No. No more than just giving some money and saying "Yes, I'm a member."

On the other hand, there's been a lot of bad publicity over in India because of things the American devotees have done there. A lot of Indians have been turned off, and there are no Indians joining the movement. These temples in India are staffed by American and European devotees. No *Indians* have joined.

And the attitude of the American devotees toward the Indians is very condescending, very racist, like: "We are the great white Brahmins of the world and you are just the black, lower-class Hindus. We have come to give you the highest knowledge — which we have accepted and which you have rejected." They call them "buff brains" because they drink buffalo milk. They have all these derogatory terms referring to the Indians, a very demeaning, derogatory attitude toward the locals.

But, when they are coming on to someone for a donation, then it's "Oh, you are such a wonderful man. You have become so great, and Krishna has made you such a rich industrialist man, why not you give something back to Krishna?"

You know, another funny thing is that Americans take on this Indian way of talking. It's a real symptom of the cults. They all try to imitate Prabhupada. I don't try to imitate my pastor. I love my pastor, he's a great guy and a beautiful Christian, but I don't try to imitate the way he talks

One of the interesting marks of the Hare Krishna movement is that you see the personality of Prabhupada stamped all over it. Being somewhat familiar with Indian culture, I can say that what ISKCON esteems to be spiritual and what Krishna devotees in India esteem to be spiritual are not always the same. Sometimes they are meticulously preserving the idiosyncracies of one man in the name of Hindu culture.

Exactly. That's another thing. I never really studied Indian culture objectively. I went there always as a Hare Krishna devotee, so my perception of Indian culture and religion was always tainted with that angle of vision.

But, that's essentially what happened. The thing didn't go over as he planned. People didn't come to the temples, so it just fell apart, and that's the state it's in now. The whole operation is supported by American dollars, practically speaking. How has Prabhupada's death affected the movement?

It's in a state of great disarray right now. When Prabhupada was here he was a great unifying factor. He unified all the temples of the world. Whatever he said was absolute. Everyone pledged their allegiance to him. Whatever he said went, and everyone was *his* man.

Now they have these eleven regional gurus. They've got a guru for Europe, and for this and that section of the world. They all have their allegiances regionalized.

So the movement is splintered in that sense, and it's like every man for himself, or every zone for itself. It's fractionalized, although they still have some sentimental feeling for "Let's all forget our differences and cooperate for the sake of our dear, departed guru." But that, of course, is taking a back seat to their own opportunism. They learned how to be opportunistic from their guru; they were cut in his mold.

So, anyway, there's another problem in that they have these gurus who were appointed by Prabhupada before he left, and they were his disciples, right? But there are other people who were also his disciples, but aren't gurus. In one sense they are on the same level with the eleven gurus because they are all "god-brothers." So there's some real in-fighting going on now, because these gurus have taken all the new people coming into the movement.

The new people coming to the movement are not worshipping Prabhupada directly. They're worshipping one of these new eleven gurus. So these eleven gurus all have their little armies of followers, but then they've got these god-brothers on a lateral level to

contend with, and these god-brothers are saying: “Hey, wait a minute, you’re not on the same level with Prabhupada. What are you doing with these kids?”

So, now these gurus are trying to eliminate the old god-brothers out of the picture so that they’ll have absolute authoritarian reign. They want all the people in their zones to be people who accept them as pure and perfect gurus, and the god-brothers don’t accept them like that, while the new disciples do. So, they want to move out all the old god-brothers and just have the new disciples. That’s another fight.

Now some of these older god-brothers are saying, “Wait a minute, you guys are unauthorized to be gurus in the first place. Just because he appointed you to accept disciples in his behalf doesn’t mean that when he left the planet you would be on the same level as him.

You are not. You are not even pure devotees. If you are not pure devotees, what are you doing accepting disciples? That’s heretical. What about these poor kids who are accepting you as pure devotees, gurus capable of delivering them from material life, and you are not even delivered yourselves?” The gurus don’t want that kind of talk to get out.

So it’s becoming more and more internalized, paranoid, and “Jones-townish.” It’s becoming really bizarre.

When I left it was bizarre, and now it is even *more* bizarre, because when I left that sparked a lot of people to start thinking and start questioning these false gurus. They’ve looked at the movement from a different perspective, and a lot of them have left. They’ve not necessarily become Christians, but they’ve left the organization, and are really challenging the guruship of these people; they’re even challenging points of the philosophy, like: “What kind of merciful god is this that sends a pure devotee to deliver the world, but now you’ve got these eleven guys posing as pure devotees when they’re not? What do all the people on earth do now?” You see, they teach that you have to have a living, pure devotee guru on the planet to deliver people. You can’t become a disciple of somebody posthumously. Once a guru dies, he cannot accept new disciples. So now God in all his mercy has not left pure devotees to carry on his work.

Wouldn’t they expect just one master?

Yes, they would, but the thing is nobody could come up to the level that Prabhupada was on. He had the whole trip down. He always talked about “God,” he was very “guruish,” and he had complete control of his tongue and his sexual urges — just like a perfect, “transcendental” person. They know nobody is going to come up to that platform, so it’s ridiculous to even think about it.

So they had to adjust their philosophy, in a sense, to accommodate the fact that nobody could fill his shoes, and as a result they are becoming more and more fragmented under these various gurus?

Right.

Are the “god-brothers” drawing disciples after themselves?

No, not after themselves, but they’re planting doubts in the new disciples’ minds about the guys they’re worshipping. “Hey, look, I know him, you know, he’s my god-brother and I know where he’s at. He’s not what you think he is.” That’s the subtle message that’s filtering down.

Is there any underlying basis of unity?

Well, yes, in the sense that they still have the sentimental desire to cooperate for the sake of the dear, departed guru. In other words, this is the way these gurus are reigning: they say “Look, don’t cause factions or fractures in the movement, because you’re breaking Prabhupada’s heart. Let’s all keep it together, and forget these differences. They are all minor things anyway. Let’s cooperate for the sake of Swami Bhaktivedanta.”

Are they trying to keep it organizationally one?

Yes, but that’s a problem too, because it used to be that the whole economic basis of the movement was selling books. That was their moto: “Books are the basis.” Prabhupada always discouraged other business. He said that the only business is preaching or book distribution. He said that the only way to maintain this temple, the devotees, everything, is by selling the books.

So then, where do you think power is in terms of finance? It's the person who's running the book publishing company. You've got all these kids in Chicago going out selling, but where are they buying the books from? They're buying the books from here in L.A. It costs them here in L.A., maybe \$1.00 or \$1.25 to print the book and they're selling it to the temple in Chicago for \$3.00. So the BBT (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust) in L.A. is making \$1.75 on each book. When you multiply it by millions, that's a lot of money. It's all piling up here at the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust in L.A. Prabhupada said the finances could then be used to give loans to different temples and support the projects in India.

So, the guy who's in control of that chunk of money is a powerful guy, and that's the guru here in L.A. The gurus in the other parts of the world started rebelling against this, saying: "My guys are out there collecting money the whole day long, and sending half the money to Los Angeles, and you're using that money in the BBT to build up your zone. You're buying buildings on the basis of the equity that's in money that's being collected from all around the world. That isn't fair! You're getting a bigger zone and doing more wonderful things than I am."

Then a few of them start saying, "Well, I'm not going to sell books anymore." But the guru in L.A. pulls these letters out and says: "You can't say that because your own guru said that you're only supposed to sell books." Then these gurus would say: "Well, I'll print my own books." But the L.A. guru would answer: "Prabhupada said we shouldn't do that," and he pulls out Prabhupada's letters.

Now the thing has degraded so that they are not selling books so much because that's become such a sore spot. It's also become very difficult. As soon as they try to sell a book with a line like, "We're helping starving kids," people think "Oh no, Hare Krishna." But when they go out with a rock and roll record, which is what they've been doing, and say they are from Muscular Dystrophy and they are having a marathon to help children, people respond. They've been buying discontinued rock and roll records, that aren't selling anymore, in these warehouses for 25 cents each and selling them to the public for \$2.00 or \$3.00; and they tell the people they are giving to Muscular Dystrophy, this or that, and they collect all this money without even mentioning the Hare Krishna movement.

So, that's what's been happening. These different zones have been concentrating on selling paraphernalia rather than selling books.

This way they can keep the money for themselves?

Right — they don't have to send the money to the book trust in Los Angeles.

What do you think is going to happen with ISKCON in the next five years?

They are going to get more and more paranoid. The zones are going to get more and more selfish, localized, and isolated. It's going to get increasingly bizarre.

For example, I've got the most recent newsletter in my car, where they're interviewing the guru of L.A. He's talking about ERA. "Actually," he says, "the Americans, they do not believe in this ERA because the ERA failed. Therefore, they do not believe in equal rights for women. So, we agree with that! Women are not equal!" They've got this weird train of reasoning. And he says, "Just the other day my servant was telling me... (this is a twenty-six year old kid from Rosalyn, N.Y. talking like this) Just the other day my servant, he was telling me, that his father, he lived in Kentucky and the mother had a female child. And the father was cursing, because what is the use of a female child? So, you see, Americans, they do not even believe in equality of women."

This is the way the guy's talking. All of a sudden he's become the "Jagat-Guru" of the universe; this twenty-six year old Jewish kid from Rosalyn, Long Island. It's so ludicrous. But this is the way he's passing himself off, and it's going to his head.

Who do they expect to believe this stuff? Maybe you can get by with these eighteen year old kids, but who do they expect to attract? Are they going to attract the intellectual community at Los Angeles, the art community, the entertainment community? They've just got delusions of grandeur. And, what goes hand in hand with delusions of grandeur? Delusions of paranoia! "We're so great, and so holy and perfect, exclusive, and sanctified that everybody must be out to get us." So, I'm afraid it's going to get more and more "Jonestownish."

How would you say the chanting relates to the mind programming that goes on within the movement?

It opens you up to spiritual influences that will convince you that what the Hare Krishnas are saying is true — this philosophy that you have to concentrate 100% of your time on the name of Krishna, that Jesus isn't the only way, and that there are many paths to the godhead. You are taken over by that spiritual influence.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

Did people have mystical experiences or visions where they saw Krishna or had some other kind of contact with spirits?

No, that was really discouraged. It was held that you couldn't have those visions unless you were on a really pure platform like Swami Bhaktivedanta. If you were on that platform of purity, then it was possible to see Krishna, and to hear Krishna. Otherwise, you're just a lusty, sinful guy who has trouble getting up in the morning and is still looking at pretty girls. "What are you saying, that *you* are going to see God? You are going to talk to God? You're not in any position to say that." Therefore, if you did, you were considered a liar or a lunatic.

These things were really discouraged, and any time that anybody said, "You know, Krishna spoke to me in a dream last night," we'd say "Yeah, sure. We know you. You're the guy who overate at the feast last Sunday. What do you mean, Krishna spoke to you?" The whole idea was that we were so low, rotten, and fallen that Krishna would never speak to us. He would never appear to us.

Would you describe for us what Krishna consciousness is like?

There are two different sides to it. First, when you do the chanting on the streets or in the temple you definitely feel a certain kind of euphoria, a certain kind of high, a certain kind of joy. But, I've come to realize that that's not necessarily of God; actually, it is definitely *not* of God. It's a whole other force, but it *appears* to be of God, and *that's* the counterfeit.

The catch is that when you do that kind of chanting you open yourself up to all these spiritual influences like we just talked about, and those influences can really get you disturbed. The idea that you have to constantly be chanting and thinking about God, and knowing that you're not able to do that, creates such a burden of guilt and anxiety that you become very agitated and disturbed. So, you need more chanting. It's like a drug; a vicious cycle.

That's the state of Krishna consciousness. You feel at times very ecstatic in the chanting, but then you have feelings of guilt and remorse that you can't always be on this platform, and psychologically you start to berate yourself. So there's always a feeling of inward aggression where you hate yourself because you can't live up to that high, perfect, pure platform, and you're not happy with yourself. You don't love yourself. You're not happy with your relationship with God because you're always falling short, and then there's always a very strained situation in your relationship with others.

Another thing is the way you view people outside the movement. I had a lot of good friends when I had my business. After I was moved away from the direct brainwash network I was still influenced by it. I had a lot of business friends who I really liked, and I would go out and have lunch with them. I'd put my arm around these guys, yet I still knew in my heart that these people were meat-eaters. They were like the lowest element of society, the most degraded subhuman creatures. It was such a conflict for me, because on the one hand I liked them as persons, yet I knew that they were so sinful (because of meat-eating). I always had these feelings of guilt because I was associating with them. And even though I did have love for them, deep down inside there was always this feeling of contempt for them, because they weren't believers in Krishna.

That's the attitude of the devotees you see on the street and at the airport collecting money — even more so, because they're really into a fanatical frame of mind, and they really believe that anybody that's not into Krishna, and is eating meat, is a demon; a *real* demon. So when they meet you at the airport and say, "Oh hey, how you doin'?" You're looking real good, that's a neat shirt you got there," inside they're thinking: "This guy is a fornicating meat-eater." They have a very contemptuous mentality toward non-devotees.

Do they even theoretically teach that you're supposed to love those people, or do they condone despising them?

No, the way they get around it is by saying: "Don't try to love people individually, it's like trying to water the leaves on a tree. If you want to water the leaves of a tree you water the root. You don't water each individual leaf. Don't try to love people individually. Love Krishna. He's the root, and because everybody's part of Krishna in the same way that every leaf is part of that tree, when you water the root, when you love Krishna, automatically you will be loving everybody." You see how it all logically fits together, and can be real deceptive?

The *New York Times* News Service reported last year that the Krishnas are under scrutiny by the police in California because they've been stockpiling large stores of weapons and ammunition to ostensibly protect their god-brothers. A spokesman for the Berkeley Police Department said that the Berkeley Temple has spent "many thousands" of dollars on weapons in recent months. One person who was arrested and later released was Srila Hansaduta Swami, one of the eleven gurus. What can you tell us about this?

Well, the Hare Krishna people have weapons, but they justify it on the basis that they are private citizens and any private citizen can have weapons. My experience was that they never kept weapons in the actual temple building here in L.A., but many of the devotees in the apartments around the community had guns, some automatic weapons. They seem to be preoccupied with this.

Would you say that there's a *growing* concern to protect themselves and to amass weapons?

Yeah, I think so, and I think that it will continue to increase as a result of what we talked about earlier.

This is one of the reasons why you see the potential for another Jonestown.

Right. I don't know if it will ever come to that, but it's conceivable.

The potential is there, though it's unlikely it would reach the same proportions. What is their rationale?

They feel that they really have a handle on the truth. They are the ones who are exposing the truth and really coming up against the establishment, which is trying to keep people locked into material consciousness and the treadmill of buying consumer goods. Therefore, there are going to be some forces coming down on the Hare Krishnas to try to stop them from their preaching work, because it's upsetting the establishment's status quo. They feel that they are really doing the work in society to change people's consciousness, to turn them away from materialism and consumerism, and *toward* devotion to God. Therefore, it is natural that they would be targets of anyone who has vested interests in the establishment.

Also (and I think this is the big point), their guru told them a few years ago that there's going to be war, and severe economic dislocation and collapse. They're trying to buy all this farm property so that when it happens they will be able to go to the farm and live off the fruit of the land instead of depending on an urban type of situation. And they feel that when society does collapse, there will be people coming to the countryside and ravaging the farms just to stay alive, and the Krishnas are going to have to be able to defend themselves from the onslaughts of these ravaging urbanites in the midst of the economic crisis.

In your observation, what kind of success have the programmers had with Hare Krishnas?

From my observation I'd say it's about fifty-fifty, in terms of people actually being sprung from the movement. But there's even a greater success in that even if they don't spring people out immediately, the fact that they've opened their minds up to another way of looking at reality aside from the Hare Krishna way stays with them, even though they may go back to the movement. They still have to live with this gnawing doubt. The other thing is the overall affect it has on the movement—that there are people out there who not only think that you don't have the "right-on" truth, they say you are definitely being deceived by an evil force. That can really prey on your mind, it was always preying on mine. And even more so, because I was involved in public relations and had to deal with these people on T.V. and so forth. It always preyed on my mind that maybe I *was* being deceived by an evil force.

What should a Christian who is trying to reach the Hare Krishnas for Christ emphasize in his witness?

I don't have any one answer for that. Since you have more experience than I, what do you usually do when you witness?

In my evangelism experiences with Hare Krishnas (I've helped a couple of them find the Lord), I've usually first of all established rapport by commending them on their belief that God is personal, and that devotional service to God should be our top priority in life (since they're always arguing against the impersonal God of Vedantic Hinduism, this gains their favor).

Then I give a brief historical account of how this personal God revealed Himself uniquely to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and established a covenant with their descendants. This was preparatory to the coming of the Messiah, who through His death on the cross and resurrection would provide a way for us to reach God. Because our sin demanded death, the only way that we could escape that penalty was through a sacrificial death, that Jesus is the one who paid that penalty, not Krishna.

This very personal God in the Bible disassociates himself with the gods that were worshipped in all other nations. In Psalm 96:5 it says that Yahweh alone is the God that created the heavens, and all the gods of the nations are idols.

And also in Exodus 20:3-5 the Second Commandment says, "Thou shalt not create any graven images or bow down and worship them."

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

Then you can ask them: “You believe in the Bible as the Word of God, right?”, because they do; their guru taught them “Yes, Bible is Word of God, Bhagavad Gita is also Word of God.” But how can that be, since the God of the Bible disassociates himself from any graven image, and they worship God in a graven image? It’s completely incompatible.

The other thing I would share with them in my witness relates to what I discussed at the beginning of our interview: the futility of trying by my own spiritual austerity, to raise myself to a level of consciousness where I was completely free from all material desire. It’s not possible. I’ve never seen it done.

Another good, logical argument to use is: “Where is the mercy of God if, in the past 100 years, for example, billions of people have walked the face of the earth, and only five pure devotees in the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sam Pradaya, the line of gurus that you worship, have walked the planet? Since only pure devotees are saved, nobody has been saved except for them. They’re the only pure devotees! Is that the mercy of God, that only five people out of billions get saved? Does that sound logical?”

Now, is that something that is officially taught in ISKCON?

Well, they have a couple of conflicting teachings. They’ll say, “I think other people have been saved.” I’d answer: “How do you know? You don’t even know *if you* are saved! How do you know *other* people have been saved?”

Prabhupada taught that even if you have a desire for one sweet ball you have to come back to the material world to take another body. Any kind of material desire is enough to bring you back to the material world, so you can come to the point of having to work it out again, until you come to the platform on no material desire whatsoever! Now, how many people living on this earth do you think are on that platform, including the people in the Hare Krishna movement? Do you think that this is the plan of salvation from a merciful and loving God?”

It would seem that just as your experience of inability to live up to these standards taught you that you were unable to earn your own salvation, the experience of other Hare Krishnas should also prepare them for the Gospel message.

Yes.

One other thing is that you can give some very practical arguments against reincarnation. For example, the whole idea of reincarnation is that you get more and more chances to evolve yourself higher and higher on the path of pure consciousness. If you come to eighty percent pure consciousness in this lifetime, then in your next lifetime you start out at eighty -one percent. Theoretically, then, the whole human race is gradually bettering itself. How is it then that even the Hare Krishnas believe that everything is going downhill, and now it’s the age of “Kali,” or quarrel, and people are becoming more and more degraded? How is it that if everybody is reincarnating higher and higher on the basis of experience in past lives that the human race is going lower and lower?

It would make you want to despair of ever attaining your salvation.

Yeah, really. But they are very strong on reincarnation, and if you can get some good, solid arguments to defuse that, it will really help.

NOTES

1 “Karma” in Hindu theology is the law of cause and effect on a spiritual plane. All of one’s actions, good or bad, return to him in like reactions. – Editor

2 Ambassador College provides ministerial training for Herbert W. Armstrong’s Worldwide Church of God in Pasadena, CA – Editor

3 A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON.