

## THE FADING OF UTOPIA: ISKCON IN TRANSITION\*

STEVEN J. GELBERG (ŚUBHĀNANDA DĀS)  
THE DIVINITY SCHOOL, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Much depression of spirit has been felt, and struggling thro' dark and gloomy prospects on account of apostacies, lifelessness and backslidings of unfaithful members, and the scanty ingathering from without.

(from a Shaker journal, 1856)<sup>1</sup>

Dialogue in ISKCON has come to mean aggressive in-fighting. Fanaticism often replaces intelligent analysis. To discuss is to do battle. Our godbrother becomes an adversary, and when we are finished with him, his ego is so bruised and his self-esteem so shattered that disgraceful separation from the Movement is his only recourse.

(Hare Krishna devotee, 1984)<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly one of the more curious attributes of this world that, throughout its history, many of its most thoughtful and sensitive inhabitants have desired nothing more passionately than to leave it, and sought determinedly the means to do so. By leaving it I mean, of course, the attempt to create radical social alternatives to the way of the world, often impelled by, and based upon, deep religious convictions and precepts. There have been innumerable such attempts, and most die out within their first or second generation; few live beyond fifty years.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be something about the world and about human nature that conspires against utopian enterprises and bring about their early demise. Historians and social scientists eventually arrive to perform belated autopsies; learned dissertations, books, and articles come into being; new utopian communities and movements germinate and set out on the generally short road to dissolution, and life in the world goes on.

While it would be premature to write its epitaph, it would not be incorrect to say that the Hare Krishna movement, one of the most visible among the wave of new religious movements that arose during

\*I would like to express my appreciation to Burke Rochford, Larry Shinn, Charles Brooks, and Kim Knott for their helpful comments on an early draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Dover, 1963), 225–6.

<sup>2</sup> Viśvambharadāsa Goswami, 'Defusing the Issue' (unpublished paper, 1984), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 246–8.

the past two decades, has been in a state of deteriorating health.<sup>4</sup> Like many religious movements preceding it, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) experienced significant turmoil following the demise of its charismatic founder and leader, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, in 1977. To be more precise, after a few years of relative and apparent calm, during which it appeared that the difficult process of succession had been accomplished more or less successfully, an unexpected series of dramatic internal events broke that calm and plunged the members of the movement into protracted, contentious disagreement over fundamental institutional issues.

ISKCON is now a movement in transition. Recruitment is down, institutional cohesion has been eroded by fragmentation and schism, many centres are experiencing financial crisis – some have closed down – and many married members who formerly were supported by temple communities have been financially disenfranchised. One senses among many devotees a pessimism about the movement's continuing capacity to provide a guaranteed haven from the outside, secular world. Early missionary fervour has mellowed and, with lowered standards and weaker commitment, a prominent feature of many communities – along with a blurring of the demarcation line between core and lay members – is growing confusion about concepts of, and policies concerning, commitment and membership. All these factors have contributed to a general lowering of morale among members, for indeed, as Kenneth Westhues suggests, 'The waning of the strength of a religious community is to the members the waning of themselves'.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true among disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda, most of whom have devoted their entire adult lives to the movement. Large numbers of these elder and more experienced members have left the movement over the last several years, re-entering a secular world formerly rejected as bleak and brutalizing, in pursuit of education, skills, credentials, and job security.

There are a number of factors which have contributed to this decline, prominent among which are (1) the politically destabilizing and spiritually disorientating effect of Prabhupāda's death; (2) the effective stigmatizing of ISKCON by an organized and successful anti-cult movement, and the resultant deleterious effect upon recruitment and fund-raising; (3) decreased financial stability resulting from unreliable fund-raising practices; (4) an ageing, and thus increasingly family- and security-oriented, less committed and deployable,

<sup>4</sup> I should point out that my assessment herein of the present state of ISKCON (and its future prospects) is slightly less sanguine than that in my earlier article, 'The Future of Krishna Consciousness in the West: An Insider's Perspective,' which appears in *The Future of New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley and Phillip E. Hammond (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 187–209; and even less so than in an earlier article, 'ISKCON after Prabhupāda: An Update on the Hare Krishna Movement', *ISKCON Review*, 1 (1985), 7–14.

<sup>5</sup> *The Religious Community and the Secular State* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1968), 18.

membership; (5) insecurity among members due to a growing sense of encroachment by the secular world, in the form of entangling litigation (especially harassing apostate lawsuits) and an often hostile press; (6) an increasingly instrumentalist (institution-building) orientation obscuring value-oriented concerns such as individual spiritual development; and (7) a pervasive bureaucratizing trend inhibiting individual initiative and achievement.

As important as all these factors are for explaining ISKCON's present debilitated state, it is my belief that, more than any other factor, it has been a perceived failure of leadership within the movement, and a resultant crisis of authority, that has led to ISKCON's decline as a religious institution. It is well known that the success of high-intensity, world-renouncing or world-transforming religious groups depends largely on leadership that is perceived as exemplary. As sociologist Stuart Wright has written,

Commitment to a movement characterized by charismatic leadership emerges out of an investment of 'trust' made by members. . . . One problem all world-transforming movements face is that followers need to be convinced that movement leaders are legitimate embodiments or representatives of moral truths and, therefore, worthy of their sacrifice and dedication. If, however, invested loyalty or trust is betrayed through actions that are perceived as morally inconsistent with espoused ideals or goals, the likelihood of defection is increased.<sup>6</sup>

It is this issue of disenchantment with leadership and its consequences that I will address in this essay, with reference to ISKCON. The story that I will tell, and the analysis I will offer, are based upon my own prolonged, close proximity to the relevant events and issues as a long-time member of ISKCON.

Centred on this issue of leadership, there has occurred within ISKCON a long, bitter, divisive debate. Because much of that highly contentious debate has turned on what many outsiders might consider very fine and subtle points of Hindu theology, ethics, and ritual protocol, I will avoid an elaborate exposition of the complex historical and theological underpinnings of the debate. Neither will I document the progress of the debate itself in any great detail, nor attempt to resolve the various disputes. I will present only as much of an outline of these issues and events as is necessary to frame the central theme. For our present purposes, historical chronology and theological nuance are less important than documenting and giving voice to an attitude and a vision, held by large numbers of ISKCON members, which came to effect radical institutional change.

Finding his rapidly growing movement increasingly difficult to

<sup>6</sup> 'Defection from New Religious Movements: A Test of Some Theoretical Propositions', *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy*, ed. David G. Bromley and James T. Richardson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 118.

administer personally, in 1970 Prabhupāda appointed twelve of his most senior disciples to form a semi-autonomous Governing Body Commission (GBC) to oversee the progress of ISKCON, with each member assigned to a particular region of the world (the GBC would eventually come to double in size with the growth of the movement). Having witnessed how the religious institution founded in India in the 1920s by his own guru had quickly disintegrated for lack of unitive governance after the master died, Prabhupāda resolved that ISKCON should not suffer the same lamentable fate. From 1970 until his death in 1977, the GBC met annually in India and, under Prabhupāda's supervision, formulated administrative and financial policy, resolved internal disputes, and planned missionary strategy.

Detecting occasional displays of poor judgement, self-aggrandizement, and in-fighting among the members of the GBC, Prabhupāda sometimes worried about the future of his young movement. Once, reacting critically to what he viewed as an attempt by the GBC to over-centralize ISKCON legally and fiscally, Prabhupāda wrote to one member of the GBC, 'I am surprised that none of the GBC members detected the defects of the procedure. It was detected only when it came to me. What will happen when I am not here, shall everything be spoiled by the GBC?'<sup>7</sup> On another occasion he wrote to a disciple, 'We have worked very hard and established a great institution, but if we think for our personal benefit then it will become ruined.'<sup>8</sup> And another time, 'If you love me you will not fight. Stay united. . . . Maintain the Society in my absence. Do not let it deteriorate.'<sup>9</sup>

For Prabhupāda, it was not enough that his young leaders be competent as administrators; he wanted them to be spiritual and moral exemplars as well. He often expressed the conviction that the health and longevity of his movement depended mainly on the 'purity' (spiritual orthodoxy, genuineness, integrity) of the movement's leaders. In a movement that stresses obedience to spiritual authority, Prabhupāda felt most emphatically that ISKCON would succeed only if its leaders were true role models:

You are right to say that the example and kindly guidance of our elder members in the Society is the most profound force for motivating our students both new and old towards advanced Kṛṣṇa consciousness. . . . One should sincerely try to bring himself to the stage of devotional service motivated by pure love of Kṛṣṇa, and our personal example must set a guide for them.<sup>10</sup>

Without that purity and lofty example, 'everything will spoil very

<sup>7</sup> *Letters from Śrīla Prabhupāda* (Los Angeles: Vaisnava Institute, 1987), 3.1959.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. 2629.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami, "*Distribute Books, Distribute Books, Distribute Books!*" (Port Royal, Pa.: Gīta-nagari Press, 1982), 108.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters from Śrīla Prabhupāda*, 3. 1518.

quickly and the whole show will be a farce'.<sup>11</sup>

If a high standard was expected of members of the GBC, even higher ones were expected of those who later, after Prabhupāda's death, would one day become initiating gurus in ISKCON. In ISKCON's parent tradition, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, the guru is defined not merely as a transmitter of sacred knowledge, but as a representative of God and conveyor of His grace to the disciple. As such, he or she is expected to be a human being of exceptional quality – virtually a saint – utterly free from worldly, egoistic taints. Prabhupāda hoped that one day many of his disciples would become gurus, but warned that the absolute power attendant upon the position of guru may well corrupt a spiritually immature person, who 'may be carried away by an accumulation of wealth and large number of disciples'<sup>12</sup> and may, 'by a false display of religious sentiments . . . present a show of devotional service while indulging in all sorts of immoral activities'.<sup>13</sup> Any religious system so dependent on the absolute faith and surrender of the disciple towards the guru is easily corrupted, and there is no greater spiritual tragedy than a guru gone bad.

At their annual meeting in March 1978, shortly following Prabhupāda's death in the previous November, the GBC formally confirmed that Prabhupāda had named eleven of his senior disciples (all but one then members of the GBC) to assume the position of guru. It would be their responsibility to initiate those newer members of ISKCON who had not yet received initiation from Prabhupāda by the time of his death, as well as all future newcomers to ISKCON. Within only a few years, these eleven gurus each had initiated hundreds of new disciples and were proclaimed, and assumed by most ISKCON members, to be 'pure devotees' – infallible, spiritually advanced devotees worthy of the kind of veneration formerly reserved only for Prabhupāda. Between 1980 and 1986, however, five of those eleven were exposed for serious moral (sex- and drug-related) improprieties and various other forms of un-guru-like behaviour. Because, by the time of their downfall, all five possessed very substantial regional power and international influence – both as gurus and administrators – these incidents sent deep shock-waves throughout the movement, having a profoundly disorientating and disruptive effect.

These exposés, perceptions of abuse of power, and arrogant and authoritarian behaviour on the part of some gurus, and a feeling that these wrongs were being tolerated and even covered up by the GBC, combined to set off a rising storm of protest among many of

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3, 1952.

<sup>12</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *The Nectar of Devotion*, [second edition] (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1982), 116.

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Śrī Īsopaniṣad* (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1974), 68.

Prabhupāda's disciples. Though often articulate and deeply-felt, early protests (1979–1980) were sporadic, lacked widespread support, and were easily brushed off or suppressed by the GBC.<sup>14</sup> As abuses of authority proliferated, however, greater numbers of devotees became politicized. Through a series of large meetings of local temple administrators and other senior ISKCON members, these individuals were gradually organized into an increasingly influential movement for reform. From this grassroots movement emerged a blizzard of essays, position papers, and manifestos which, in various ways, attempted to document and make sense of the guru débâcle and to propose corrective measures. Much of the discussion came to focus on the nature of the alleged appointment which had allowed the gurus to assume such unbridled power and to claim virtual immunity from criticism.

In an incisive essay which became a rallying point for the reformers, Ravindra Svarūpa dāsa (who holds a doctorate in philosophical theology) argued convincingly that there had been no appointment of gurus as previously understood, and that the way the concept of guru had been institutionalized in ISKCON 'lies at the crux of ISKCON's most grave and intractable problems'.<sup>15</sup> As the authority for the appointment-claim derived from two somewhat cryptic death-bed conversations between Prabhupāda and some GBC members,<sup>16</sup> Ravindra Svarūpa focused on the transcripts of these two meetings and argued that their meaning had been seriously misunderstood. What Prabhupāda had intended as a limited authorization for eleven senior disciples to officiate at initiations on his behalf during his last days (with the acknowledgement that after his death these eleven – but not necessarily only these eleven – might go on to initiate disciples on their own behalf), was reinterpreted and inflated (with the degree of intentionality a matter of dispute) into a magic-wand appointment, conferring semi-divine, infallible status upon the eleven as an exclusive specially empowered group. The essay points out that the notion of appointment with regard to gurus conflicts with what Prabhupāda and his tradition had long asserted, namely that guru is not a 'post' attainable through ecclesiastical fiat, but rather an exalted preceptorial function for which one becomes qualified only by virtue of full submission to one's own guru and by the blessings of Krishna. Prabhupāda's death-bed instruction, therefore, 'indicated those whom he hoped would be able to become actual gurus; but he did not *appoint* them gurus . . . for how can one be appointed to status of full

<sup>14</sup> For more on early guru controversies in ISKCON, see E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 227–45. Cf. Larry D. Shinn, *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 48–60.

<sup>15</sup> Ravindra Svarūpa dāsa, "'Under my Order. . .': Reflections on the Guru in ISKCON' (unpublished paper, 1985), 1.

<sup>16</sup> These transcripts can be found in Rochford, *Hare Krishna in America*, 283–6.

surrender?’<sup>17</sup> Many reformers contended that this misconception had bred inflated self-image, pride, and arrogance among most of the gurus, which led them to (1) neglect the basic spiritual practices necessary to spiritual purity, (2) accept or appropriate for themselves excessive adoration and a regal, opulent style of living, and (3) assume a condescending and authoritarian posture towards their fellow Prabhupāda disciples (‘godbrothers’ and ‘godsisters’).<sup>18</sup> Many feared that, if not corrected, these shortcomings would lead to more corruption, downfall, and a fatal weakening of ISKCON.

Reformers accused the new gurus of pompously imitating Prabhupāda rather than, more appropriately, ‘following in his footsteps’. As one devotee observed:

The problem seems to be that since Śrīla Prabhupāda was the only example of a guru and *ācārya* that the devotees knew, they naturally presumed that whoever was to be a ‘*bona fide*’ guru would have to exactly imitate him in every way. Failure to do this would render one suspect of not being up to the standard set by Śrīla Prabhupāda.<sup>19</sup>

‘Our foolish mistake’, admits one of the gurus in a confession published years later, ‘was one of imitation. . . . Thus the prayers, titles, big *vyāsāsanās* [elevated seats], lavish *guru-pūjās* [worship], and *Vyāsa-pūjās* [birthday fetes], lavish living quarters, the personal comforts’.<sup>20</sup>

Many Prabhupāda disciples lamented bitterly that the gurus had grown so self-absorbed that, in effect, they had put themselves in Prabhupāda’s place as the centrepiece of ISKCON, forcing their godbrothers and sisters into subordinate, dependent relationships, expecting these elder devotees to promote them to the public and to new and potential recruits as infallible and worshippingable ‘pure devotees’. As a repentant guru, one of three added in 1981 to the original eleven, wrote:

We joined ISKCON, Śrīla Prabhupāda’s movement, to worship Śrīla Prabhupāda. . . . Where is that temple where Śrīla Prabhupāda is the center? . . . To [ISKCON] at large, the ‘big guns’ seem too preoccupied with themselves. . . . In most temples, everywhere is felt the all-pervading, penetrating presence of the new gurus – even as their tapes are ubiquitously broadcast over the temple loudspeakers. . . . I personally find the things so distasteful, and worse knowing that I myself was implicated. I feel that it is such a farce that is going on, such a big travesty, and I long to be seated more on a level with my aggrieved godbrothers and godsisters.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ravīndra Svarūpa dāsa, ‘“Under My Order. . .”’, 3.

<sup>18</sup> To be fair, not all the gurus were so affected. Though operating within a flawed system, some were viewed nonetheless as sincere individuals, themselves struggling with their new identity as gurus. Even the ‘fallen’ ones are seen by many as victims of a corrupting system, and remembered for their earlier, substantial service to Prabhupāda’s movement.

<sup>19</sup> Rohiṇi Kumār Swami, ‘Some Observations on the Latter-Day Gurus’ (unpublished paper, 1984), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami, *Guru Reform Notebook* (Washington, D.C.: Gita-nagari Press, 1986), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Pañcadraviḍa Swami (untitled, unpublished paper, 1983), 3–4, 6.

Another source of heated criticism and debate concerned the superimposition of guru authority upon the GBC system of zones of administration. That is, the gurus came to exercise more or less exclusive rights to initiate in the geographical regions already assigned to them as GBC representatives and, further, quickly extended their guru domains into the administrative territories of non-guru members of the GBC where initiators were needed (by invitation of those non-initiating GBC members). The effect of all this was to elevate each of the eleven gurus from being merely spiritual initiators to becoming autonomous heads of delimited ecclesiastical realms, somewhat in the style of Hindu *ācāryas*, or heads of expansive religious institutions. This, according to critics, ‘in effect created many separate ISKCONs or rather, Zonal Societies for Krishna consciousness. Every year the zonal walls become higher, thicker, firmer’, making interzonal co-operation on various projects difficult, regionalizing and privatizing formerly international functions such as book publication, and erecting protective barriers against extra-territorial gurus viewed as potential competitors.<sup>22</sup> As one devotee wrote:

The creation of eleven gurus in ISKCON has proven to be the most divisive and destructive event in the history of ISKCON. It has caused a polarization of ISKCON into areas of influence: ‘This is so and so’s temple. He’s the guru here. If you don’t like it, get out!’ Thus Śrīla Prabhupāda’s disciples were made to feel like foreigners in their own temples. No wonder the majority of them have left! With the instalment of eleven gurus in different regions, ISKCON ceased to be one movement, as it had been under Śrīla Prabhupāda, but instead became eleven little ISKCONs, each with its own little guru as the absolute authority.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, because the zonal *ācārya* system in effect set up regionally autonomous leaders, it was viewed by many as incompatible with the system of organizational management established by Prabhupāda, based on the collegial, oligarchical rule of the GBC and meant to ensure institutional cohesion and unity:

. . . the successor *ācāryas* . . . obscure both the role of the GBC body and the GBC member. The GBC is not a league of independently authorized leaders who unite for some common purpose. Rather, it is constituted as a unified body that deputizes individual members to act as leaders in particular areas on behalf of the whole body. The individual GBC zones, then, are [meant to be] under the management of the entire GBC. . .<sup>24</sup>

Prabhupāda’s disciples, in certain geographical regions in particular, complained of abuse by haughty, authoritarian gurus and of stifling hierarchical and bureaucratic gurudoms that punished nonconformity, rewarded sycophantism, smothered individual initiative, and jealously guarded the right to initiate and manage new members.

<sup>22</sup> Ravindra Svarūpa dāsa, “‘Under My Order. . .’”, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Rohiṇi Kumār Swami, ‘Some Observations’, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ravindra Svarūpa dāsa, “‘Under my Order’”, 6–7.

Along with the gurus, the GBC (comprised largely of gurus) lost the confidence and loyalty of many devotees, who came to view that body variously as indecisive, self-interested, disunified, inept, and generally a failure at guiding the movement. Expressions of disillusionment abound in reformist literature:

The GBC body appears rife with politics and diplomacy. The decisions made and the resolutions passed by them are often ignored by the members of the GBC body itself. The honesty and integrity of numerous GBC members is in serious question and it appears to many devotees that the GBC [members] are pitifully inept at policing themselves, while the tendency to whitewash abounds.<sup>25</sup>

Or, again:

The GBC appears insensitive to the plight of individual devotees. Their response to critical situations is slow. They act only when it becomes impossible to do otherwise and after superficial investigation of the facts. Individual GBC members are perceived more as protectors of zonal interests than as impartial guiding fathers of an international movement.<sup>26</sup>

The matter for which the GBC attracted the strongest criticism, however, was its perceived co-option by reactionary gurus and complicity with the corrupt and corrupting existing guru system. A November 1980 'Resolution to Restore Full Faith in the GBC' presented by the North American Temple Presidents Association, for example, charged the GBC with having

fully supported unqualified men as *ācāryas*, even in the face of great evidence of their unworthiness. It has misled the misguided thousands of innocent men and women by directing them to surrender to those who have not surrendered to Krishna. And still, the GBC body has not yet acknowledged its own deviations nor undertaken any fundamental rectification. It is no wonder that devotees have lost confidence in the GBC.

This, then, in mere summary, is the state of affairs which brought about wide disenchantment with ISKCON's higher-echelon leaders, broke the spirit of numerous ISKCON devotees, and left the movement, in the words of one contrite guru, 'in a seriously disarrayed state'.<sup>27</sup>

There are a variety of ways in which members of a religious community may react to institutional crisis, which can be looked at both in terms of inner states of consciousness (for example, legitimation, revision of expectations, loss of faith) and outer adaptation

<sup>25</sup> Makhanlāl dāsa et. al., 'Prabhupāda Vāni: A Proposal Outlining Constructive Reforms for Śrīla Prabhupāda's ISKCON' (unpublished paper, 1986), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Viśvambhara dāsa Goswami, 'Defusing the Issue', 19.

<sup>27</sup> Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami, *Guru Reform Notebook*, 54.

(laicization, secularization, apostasy). Rather than attempt a broad typology or survey of members' responses to crisis in ISKCON, I would like to focus briefly on two responses of the inner variety which I have noted continually among devotees in the many ISKCON communities in which I have lived or which I have visited over the past several years, and which, in their many variations, seem to determine how devotees outwardly adapt and change.

The first is religious doubt – subtle or overt, shallow or deep, acknowledged or repressed, spoken or silent – in the meaning system of Krishna consciousness due to perceiving faults in its institutional embodiment, ISKCON. For many or most devotees, ISKCON *is* Krishna consciousness; they have little access to ancient and venerable Vaiṣṇava tradition – and, by extension, to Truth – except through the institution created by Prabhupāda. Thus, institution and religious system, organizational body and ideological soul, become indistinguishable, or nearly so. Indeed, Prabhupāda's teachings explicitly sacralize ISKCON ('Kṛṣṇa has descended in the form of the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement'; 'If one associates with this movement, he directly associates with the Supreme Personality of Godhead'; 'ISKCON is my body'.) It is not surprising, then, that crisis in ISKCON will provoke troubling doubts about the higher truth it espouses.

The disgrace and fall of previously venerated gurus and other leaders in ISKCON has been particularly damaging to faith because of the special faith-building function of gurus and other role models in ISKCON. In particular, in a tradition that stresses the experiential and transformative dimension of religion over the cognitive and doctrinal, perceivable and credible models of holiness and spiritual attainment – human embodiments of ultimate Truth – are crucial. The saint is evidence, even 'proof', of the existence of a higher reality, and his or her example inspires confidence in those religious disciplines which promise elevation to the Truth. The spiritual downfall of those thought to have attained a lofty state of Krishna consciousness raises doubts, if not about the ultimate spiritual goal, then about its attainability.

For those beset by various doubts, Krishna consciousness has taken on, to one degree or another, a fragile, vulnerable, tentative appearance, no longer a sure rescue from the gaping jaws of the material world. Some, although accepting that Krishna consciousness may be true in some theoretical or ultimate sense, wonder whether it really can be lived on a human level, or at least whether it can be translated into institutional form. Of those whose faith has been affected in the various ways described, some have left the movement in bitterness and confusion, some have moved to the margins biding their time, and others continue living in ISKCON centres but with attenuated commitment and enthusiasm, often unbeknown to their religious cohorts.

The other prototypical response to institutional crisis that I have noticed is that in which devotees come to make a conceptual distinction between Krishna consciousness – as transcendent reality and system of belief and practice – and ISKCON qua institution, such that theoretically even a total collapse of ISKCON would leave spiritual commitment unscathed. Devotees having this orientation are aware that Prabhupāda himself did not preclude the eventuality of institutional failure, and are confident that, as the soul survives bodily death, so can a sincere devotee survive the death or debilitation of ephemeral institutions.

Such devotees take solace in the knowledge that ISKCON is only part, however important, of a large Krishna consciousness tradition of great antiquity, richness, and sophistication, having both historical and cosmic significance; and thus they feel that their religious identity is not tied exclusively to, or limited by, ISKCON. For that reason, some defecting members have aligned themselves with other Vaiṣṇava organizations, but it is not to them that I refer here. There remain within and without the institutional boundaries of ISKCON those who, in spite of having become at least partially disillusioned with ISKCON, continue to identify strongly as Vaiṣṇavas and as followers of Prabhupāda, and continue to adhere to the belief system, ethical observations, and spiritual disciplines of Vaiṣṇava tradition as taught by Prabhupāda. Of these, some have downgraded their involvement with ISKCON. Others remain as mainline members of ISKCON – not, as I have explained elsewhere, ‘out of loyalty to the current ISKCON leadership, but rather out of spiritual loyalty to Prabhupāda, whose sacred mission and movement they feel is important enough to redeem and renew’.<sup>28</sup>

As the reform movement within ISKCON gained momentum in the early to mid-1980s, it was met with dogged resistance by most GBC members and gurus, and some lower-echelon guru loyalists. When, in 1985–1986, three further gurus, all powerful and outspoken apologists for the status quo, were exposed for gross moral impropriety and corruption, most of the resistance to reform collapsed. At the annual meeting of the GBC in March 1987, virtually all reformist demands were approved by a humbled GBC, many members of which had by that time joined the reformers. This meant implementing new policies and fortifying some old ones: reconstituting the membership of the GBC itself (removing three errant gurus, removing – and expelling from ISKCON – Kīrtanānanda Swami, controversial guru of the New Vrindaban community in West Virginia, and adding fifteen devotees widely respected for their integrity), opening wide the door to a new generation of ISKCON gurus, dismantling the zonal-guru system,

<sup>28</sup> Gelberg, ‘The Future of Krishna Consciousness’, 206.

instituting checks and balances to regulate gurus, and establishing a judicial system for the redress of grievances and adjudication of disputes.

Although these reforms have been widely applauded within the movement, some feel that it will take ISKCON years to heal the wounds inflicted by years of turmoil and deterioration. Many of those who might have contributed to a rebuilding, including shunned and disillusioned early reformers, are gone. Many others remain, hopeful about ISKCON's future and committed to working towards reconstruction.

Some sobering and humbling lessons have been learned, albeit the hard way: the corrupting influence of power, especially absolute power, the dangers of mixing political power and spiritual authority, the sometimes deceptive nature of charisma, the rarity of true saintliness. Having had its self-confidence badly shaken, it is likely that the movement will relinquish some of its youthful arrogance and missionary triumphalism, although the invigorating idealism and enthusiasm of its earlier days will be missed.

Having witnessed that some of the most successful institution builders among its leaders became the most corrupt, there are signs that the movement might re-examine and revise its formerly somewhat instrumentalist, quantitative approach to movement development. Old instructions of Prabhupāda, now surfacing and circulating, encourage a more qualitative approach. To one disciple he wrote, ' . . . do not be so much anxious to count up so many numbers of new devotees. . . . I want to see a few sincere devotees, not many false devotees or pretenders'.<sup>29</sup> To another he speaks of the value of a single 'moon'-like devotee:

If there is one moon in the sky, that is sufficient for illumination. There is no need of millions of stars. My position is that I want to see that at least one disciple has become a pure devotee. Of course, I have got many sincere and pure devotees. That is my good luck. But I would have been satisfied if I could find the only one.<sup>30</sup>

Although ISKCON is clearly not the vigorous, unified movement it once was, it shows a sometimes surprising resilience. Despite the high rate of defection, the loss over the years of many of the movement's most gifted leaders and administrators, the laicization of many of its married members, and the generally destabilizing effects of years of internal conflict, a small but deeply committed inner core of full-time members continues to follow the demanding regimens of Krishna consciousness in more than two hundred temple communities world-wide. These devotees still rise at 4 a.m. for a rigorous course of

<sup>29</sup> *Letters from Śrīla Prabhupāda*, 4. 2184.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswami, *United Two Worlds* [vol. 6 of *Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta*] (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983), 94-5.

contemplative and ritual practices, study and discuss the *Bhagavadgītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, organize large, public festivals that attract thousands, chant and dance in the streets, disseminate literature, recruit new members. Movement intellectuals and spiritual leaders are producing a proliferating body of scholarly translations of sacred texts, apologetical and interpretative works, spiritual guides, essays, poems, and journals. Here in Boston, every Sunday evening the Hare Krishna temple on Commonwealth Avenue fills to capacity with young, inquisitive seekers, pious Hindus, and assorted others, to chant, hear a sermon, and feast. Somehow, in spite of everything, life in ISKCON dances on, if not quite as spritely as before.

Numerous factors and complex combinations of factors – historical, cultural, sociological, financial, legal – determine whether a religious movement will wax or wane, live or die, and it is not for me to predict the future of ISKCON. Perhaps it will continue as a small but cohesive international religious community. Maybe its current process of rebuilding will blossom into a renaissance. Unexpected societal change, such as a new counter-cultural youth movement, may bring it new life. On the other hand, ISKCON could fragment and atomize into small, regional, independent devotee enclaves; or gradually accommodate and secularize into oblivion; or be sued to death. Or, then again, someday a ‘moon’ might rise.

