### The Hare Krishna Movement

1. **Description**

The Hare Krishna movement takes its roots from Hinduism, but arose as a separate movement in the 15th century AD. According to traditional Hinduism, Krishna is one of the incarnations (*avatars*) of Vishnu. In the 15th century, however, a Hindu teacher claimed that Vishnu was an incarnation of Krishna and that Krishna was, in fact, Brahman. So then, the whole of deity (that is, the *Trimurti* –Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma), are manifestations of Krishna. In addition, Krishna can manifest himself independently of these.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Consequently, the Hare Krishna movement differs from traditional Hinduism in that the Ultimate Reality is Krishna, who is not an impersonal force, but a personality. Followers of Krishna describe their relation to Hinduism in the following way: “Krishna consciousness, or *Vaishnavism*, is a spiritual philosophy… which is in no way connected to pantheism, polytheism or the caste consciousness associated with Hinduism.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

For devotees, Krishna is the eternal, all-mighty father of all the living, the energy that supports all life and the entire universe. Everything comes from him and cyclically returns to him, in order to again originate from him. The word “Hare” means “God’s energy,” and therefore the chant “Hare Krishna” attributes to Krishna divine energy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Krishna is also known by the name Rama, who, according to traditional Hinduism is also, along with Krishna, an incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Krishna mantra ascribes divinity to him under both names:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna

Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare

Hare Rama, Hare Rama

Rama Rama, Hare Hare

It is felt that the name of Krishna is part of his being. Therefore, articulating his name supposedly actualizes his presence.[[6]](#footnote-6) Allen describes the supposed influence of the mantra as creating cosmic vibrations in the atmosphere around a person’s body, which invites divine, life-giving power.[[7]](#footnote-7)

From a historical point of view, the legend of Krishna derives from the history of a certain warrior-king from the region of Mathura in India, whose story was embellished and exaggerated to the point that he became a legendary hero with divine qualities. Subsequently, in a work called *Harivamsa* (first-second century BC) Krishna was considered an incarnation of Vishnu.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The legend of Krishna is told in several Hindu writings, but the main source is the *Bhagavad* *Gita* (written in the period between the fifth and second centuries BC), which is part of the greater work *Mahabharata*. The spiritual aim of this publication is to teach devotees the way to attain perfect god-consciousness by means of certain purifying acts. Along with the *Bhagavad* *Gita*, followers of Krishna rely on commentaries written by their gurus.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Hare Krishna Movement shares several common features with its parent faith, Hinduism. For example, followers of Krishna believe in *karma* and reincarnation. In addition, they believe that the material world is *maya*, or illusion, which dissipates when they repeat the Krishna mantra. Through this repeated exercise, the devotee hopes to find liberation from *maya* and achieve perfect Krishna-consciousness.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The goal, for which the worshipper of Krishna strives, is complete devotion to Krishna. In the terms of traditional Hinduism, the Hare Krishna Movement falls into the “path of devotion” or *bhakti-marga*. The lifestyle adopted by devotees is called *sankirtan*, the primary element of which is singing and dancing before Krishna. They also attend to the idol of Krishna by bathing it, dressing it, presenting food to it, taking it on processions, etc. The devotee repeats the Krishna mantra with the aid of prayer beads, 108 in number. A consecrated worshipper will complete 16 cycles of prayer beads a day.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Four main virtues guide the followers of Krishna: mercy, self-control, honesty, and purity of body and mind. Additionally, they abstain from gambling, meat, alcohol, narcotics, coffee, tobacco and sex outside of marriage. Even within marriage, a couple will limit their sex life, employing it only to bear children. Children are raised by the Krishna community. In the community, women occupy a subordinate position. Financial support for the movement comes from soliciting funds on the street and selling religious literature.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Each devotee is under the tutelage of a guru, and subjects himself/herself to his guidance. A new initiate receives a new “spiritual” name and a sacred necklace. He/she may graduate to a “second consecration,” where he/she obtains a personal mantra, and male devotees receive a sacred thread. Traditionally, the devotees reside in the temple and devote themselves to worship of Krishna, housekeeping, and attending lectures.[[13]](#footnote-13) At present, though, more and more followers of Krishna live independently and regularly visit the temple.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 1966, the Hare Krishna Movement experienced marked progress under the leadership of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Beginning in New York City, the movement quickly spread worldwide, especially in India and Eastern Europe. After Prabhupada’s death, however, the movement split into various factions. Several scandals also weakened the movement.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In founding his movement, Prabhupada pursued seven goals:[[16]](#footnote-16)

1. the spiritual education of society with the goal of achieving world peace and unity,
2. the advance of Krishna consciousness,
3. relational development of the members of ISKCON with Krishna and each other, and awareness of spiritual unity with Krishna,
4. encouragement of the practice of *sankirtan* and chanting the name Krishna,
5. increase of sacred knowledge for conducting spiritual exercises,
6. encouragement of a more simple and natural lifestyle,
7. publication of thematic journals, newspapers, books and other materials.

The members of ISKCON actively participate in the propagation of their message through public performances of ritual singing and dancing, passing out literature, and managing vegetarian restaurants.[[17]](#footnote-17)

1. **Evaluation**

Since the Hare Krishna Movement embraces the basic Hindu worldview, our refutation of Hinduism applies to this movement as well. Yet, we note an important distinction from Hinduism, which is, in fact, a step forward from its parent faith. Devotees to Hare Krishna worship a personal being, not the impersonal Brahman.

Concerning common features with Hinduism, both faiths hold to the system of *karma* and reincarnation, which runs contrary to universal human consciousness. It is curious that no one remembers any of their previous, supposedly innumerable lives. In addition, the Hare Krishna movement accepts the concept of *maya*. Yet, universal human experience confirms the reality of the material world.

Possibly, the weakest element of the Krishna faith is its basis. We have no information on the creator of the *Harivamsa*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, or other sources of the Krishna myth. We usually rate the quality of a religion claiming Divine revelation by the qualifications of those who supposedly received that revelation. Yet, with the Hare Krishna Movement, this is impossible to trace. In addition, there is no historical evidence of the real existence of Krishna as he is depicted in these works. This means that the entire Krishna faith likely arose from human imagination.

If, in defense of their faith, devotees to Krishna appeal to their personal mystical experience, they encounter the same problem that plagues Hinduism – one cannot verify the validity of a mystical experience. It is purely subjective. In addition, every event or experience requires an accurate interpretation. Events do not interpret themselves. Correspondingly, every mystic interprets his/her mystical experience in accordance with his/her present worldview. The Muslim mystic claims to contact Allah, the Christian mystic – the Holy Spirit, the Hindu mystic – Brahman, and the follower of Krishna – Krishna. In other words, mystical experience defies objective analysis and interpretation, but instead is simply employed to confirm the already accepted religious position of the mystic.

Finally, if we view the question simply from the standpoint of classical Hindu faith, how can one prove that Krishna is not an incarnation of Vishnu, as traditional Hinduism holds? Such a radical change in Hindu faith should be based on more than just the personal opinion of some medieval teacher or guru.

**Resources Used:**

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1. Tucker R. A. Another Gospel. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986. – P. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.krishna.ru/about/hare-krishna-and-hinduism/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tucker, p. 273-274. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sometimes Krishna is identified with Christ. Tucker, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Davis R. Religions of India in practice // Lopez D. Jr. Asian religions in practice. – Princeton: Princeton Press, 1999. – P. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Allen J. Yoga: a Christian analysis – Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1983. – P. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tucker, p. 275-277. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 271-275; Taken from Mark Albrecht, New religious movements update, Vol. 5, No. 2, Aug 1981, Arhus Univ., Arhus, Denmark, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, p. 272-277; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\_Society\_for\_Krishna\_Consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\_Society\_for\_Krishna\_Consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\_Society\_for\_Krishna\_Consciousness; Tucker, p. 269, 280-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\_Society\_for\_Krishna\_Consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tucker, p. 282-283. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)