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Kids and Cults Two years in the Hare Krishna

temple

Editors note: This is the third in a Pioneer Press series on cults. Next week the series will conclude with a story on a national group formed to educate the public about cults and on legislation introduced in Illinois to help combat cult involvement.

By WENDY ANDERSON

Like the majority of those recruited into cult life, 20-year-old Leon (not his real name) was recruited through a friend while he was a college student. He remained a member of Hare Krishna for two years.

"I was attracted to its religious aspect," said Leon, who added that his suburban background was not a religious one. "To anyone who doesn't know, Hare Krishna seems like a modified version of traditional Hinduism. It takes a person a long time to distinguish it." Yet it is clearly distinctive, he said.

"In traditional Hinduism, monks beg for food by going out into the street and waiting for a person to put it in their plate. If you've ever seen a Hare Krishna at the airport (one of the sect's main recruiting and money-raising spots), you'll see they're a lot more aggressive."

Leon said that one soliciting method he was encouraged to use was to "get people to give you a large bill under the pretext that you will give them change." He explained, "Every day at the temple, Krishnas are given 75 singles. When you meet somebody at the airport, you say 'Give me \$1 for a good cause.' Then you say, 'Look, I have all these singles, so give me a larger bill.'

"A PERSON WILL give you \$5, expecting \$4 in change and instead the Krishna will say 'Well, won't you give \$3; it's for a really good cause.' They'll keep doing this until the person finally walks away," said Leon.

"And I've seen Krishnas get \$20 off a businessman, then simply disappear into the crowd." Critics of Hare Krishna feel that some of their solicitation methods violate laws governing charitable solicitation.

Among the literature sold at airports is "Back to Godhead." This book was first

published in English for Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, a native of India who founded the Hare Krishna movement in the United States in the 1960s as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

Prabhupada worshipped the ancient Hindu god Krishna, and believed him to be the supreme manifestation of the creator god. Prabhupada, now deceased, was replaced by 11 other spiritual leaders of which there are nine left, said Leon.

LEON SAID AIRPORT fundraising is more deceptive today than it was a few years ago. Gone are the days when Hare Krishnas wore long robes, shaved their heads and chanted and danced their way through terminals, he said. Now they are more discreet, dress in ordinary clothes and wear wigs.

"They'll sell a book that says Hare Krishna all over it, but they won't say it's about the cult but that it's about nature, or they'll talk about drug rehabilitation centers. Sometimes they'll even say they are working for a group that's helping crippled children. Actually Hare Krishnas have nothing to do with either drugs or crippled children," said Leon.

Leon was unsure where all the money goes. Some funds go to the Krishna's headquarters in Los Angeles, he said, for distribution to Krishna centers throughout the United States, Asia, Europe, Latin America, New Zealand, Australia and the Fiji Islands. Estimates of Krishna following range from 10,000 to 100,000, and the sect has 108 temples around the world and 20 farms.

SOME MONEY GOES to maintain the local temples, the closest in Chicago-area being in Rogers Park. Devotees moved there from their previous "temple," a former YMCA building in Evanston.

Leon said that Krishnas live in squalid conditions partly because they are promised rewards. "You may live with roaches and rats now, in a decrepit building, but your day will come," he said. "The spiritual leader says that Krishnas will one day be the dominant force on Earth."

"And," Leon added, "knowledge is not

received by your own thinking, but from God in a moment of intuition. You just keep going to the airport and stealing money, and one day the realization of 'why' will come to you in a flash."

Like many others who are former cult members, Leon described a rigorous, tedious schedule. "I got up at 3:30 a.m. every day for 4:30 a.m. worship service. From 4:30 to 8 a.m. is continuous worship, dancing, chanting, singing and other rituals, then you eat something. We ate only at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.," he added.

"THE MEAL AT night was a lot smaller than in the morning," said Leon. I lost 50 pounds and got incredibly skinny. I stuffed

myself to the gills whenever I could, but my skin would bleed sometimes, especially in the space between my fingers. Generally devotees keep Vaseline around to stop bleeding," he said. Krishnas practice a strict vegetarian diet that lacks many nutrients, said Leon.

The evening meal was followed by three more hours of worship, chanting and ritual, and immediately afterwards, temple members went to bed.

Chanting the holy name in mantra is one of the most important elements of Krishna, said Leon. "Anytime there was nothing else to do, we were required to chant," said Leon.

Spiritual masters of each temple are worshipped as god, he said. "We prayed to our leader and whenever he walked in, we had to bow all the way to the floor. We worshipped his picture, chanted to him, put flowers on his feet."



The Hare Krishna (right) exercises a less visible method of soliciting at O'Hare Airport. A wig now covers the shaven pate; the "sell" is smoother.