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Krishna Santas Move In On the Ho-Ho-Ho Trade

By JANET BATTAILE

On a corner near Filene's, the flagship of Boston's downtown shopping district, a big-bellied Santa Claus hands out candy canes and solicits money for needy children.

In the bustle of the crowds, those who notice his faded blue sneakers probably see the anomaly as simply a symbol of the times. Even fewer might notice the label he wears, because it is partly obscured by his bushy beard. It says "Hare Krishna."

When Dan L. Murphy peels off his cotton eyebrows and removes his hat and beard, he looks much like his religious brothers, whose shaved heads and peach-colored saris have become familiar in cities across the country. In the Krishna community, Mr. Murphy is known as Dayadhara Dasa, or "one who possesses compassion and mercy."

Those are two attributes he often needs in his sidewalk solicitations, because there are many in Boston and elsewhere who do not take kindly to what they call "Santa impersonators."

Bad Image for St. Nick

The harshest complaints come from competing charities. They fear that the Krishnas are not only usurping their territory but are also giving jolly old St. Nick a bad image.

Indeed, a photograph of Santa being frisked by the police in Akron, Ohio, appeared in newspapers across the country earlier this month, when a Krishna Santa Claus was arrested and charged with assaulting a businessman who objected to his aggressive behavior.

In Boston, the Salvation Army called a news conference on Dec. 6 to urge residents to shun Santa's buckets for their traditional red or black kettles. A spokesman for the Salvation Army said the organization's sidewalk receipts plunged to half those of the previous year after 15 Krishna Santas appeared on the streets the first week of December.

In New York, Elliot Schneps, supervisor of the Public Solicitation Registry Office, said that he had received a half dozen inquiries about Krishna Santas this Christmas season, and added, "We tell everybody that there is nothing we can do."

The International Society of Krishna Consciousness is an incorporated religious group, and the New York City Administrative Code does not require religious corporations to register if they intend to solicit on the street.

"Complaints," Mr. Schneps said, "must be a police matter — disorderly conduct, for instance."

Romapada Dass, the temple president in New York, said there were about 16 Hare Krishna Santas in Manhattan this year. There were a few more last year.

Regional spokesmen for the Salvation Army and other charities, such as the United Way and Volunteers of America, said that, in general, the Krishnas were not as much of a problem this season as they were last year.

'Hundreds of Dollars' Lost

However, Reginald Russell, coordinator of the Salvation Army in Akron, said his organization lost "hundreds of dollars" the week that seven Krishna Santas were soliciting, but added that they all disappeared after the arrest of Jonathan Kaufman on Dec. 5, who is scheduled to be tried Jan. 9 in municipal court on a charge of assaulting Jerome Depaer, a jeweler.

Mr. Russell said he sought help from the authorities after his volunteers complained that the Krishnas were horning in on Salvation Army territory.

The Krishnas, for their part, see themselves as the victims and maintain that the violence is instigated by their critics.

Lon L. Solomon, treasurer of the Krishna temple in Boston, said some Krishna Santas had been beaten by mobs that stole money from the collection pails, and maintained that at least one of the mobs was organized by a Salvation Army volunteer.

'Doing Their Religious Duty'

"The Santas are not provoking any of this," he said. "They're just doing their religious duty."

Richard J. Sinnott, chief of Boston's licensing division, said that more than 100 people complained to City Hall in the first week of the Krishna campaign.

"But we had no grounds to deny them a permit," he added. "We can't tell a nun to wear a habit or a priest to wear a collar. And we can't tell the Krishnas not to dress as Santa Claus."

He said he did suggest, however, that the Krishnas wear a nameplate identifying their organization, and Mr. Solomon said he accepted the suggestion.

Mr. Murphy denied that his appeal to help needy children was deceptive, and said the collections were used for the dissemination of Krishna literature, for education and building drives and other projects.

"I'm not bound to tell them anything," he added. "When people ask where the money goes, I tell them we help kids worldwide."

"We have nothing against the Salvation Army," he continued. "But we think our welfare work is much higher than theirs. They're working with bums and winos. That's important, but we're trying to teach young people to live a spiritual life."