

A blessing in disguise

By JENNI BROWN

It is 10 years since they made their first appearance in our streets and they are still, by popular public definition, suspect.

They dress funny, they shave their heads, they are among the most persistent hawkers of goods around.

And although the cyclic chant "Hare Krishna" is by now familiar, it's not top 10.

Under Federal law, they are now recognised as a bona fide religious movement, but such bureaucratic recognition hasn't removed public suspicion of the 400 or so devotees of Krishna Consciousness in Australia.

Most passers-by avoid them as though, whatever it is they've got, it's probably contagious, or worse, expensive.

Members say they don't actually mind the hissing and muttering about "Hare Krishnas."

His Divine Grace, Bhavananda Gosvani Vishnupadad, one of the 11 initiating spiritual masters of the spreading movement who arrived from India on Saturday explained: "At least we've got them to say God's name, Krishna — God."

That, he says, is the main purpose of the Krishna affront: To remind we, of the material world, of God.

STRUGGLING

According to Vishnupadad — once Charles Edward Bachus, New Yorker, color consultant to the U.S. movie industry and acclaimed "jet-setter" — the West is in the dark ages of spiritual awareness.

The Golden Age is the height of religiousness. In 1979 he sees the West as struggling through the Iron Age, the bottom, four rungs below, manifesting symptoms of "illicit sex, meat-eating, gambling and intoxicating drugs" (including tea and coffee).

The charismatic preacher (described recently by the Rev. Ted Noffs, of Sydney's Wayside Chapel, as "like an Eastern Billy Graham") elaborates vastly on the intrinsic beliefs of Ishkon but he eventually winds down to an earthier banter.

The Krishna consciousness, he says, is approximately the same in philosophical terms as most establishment religions.

"Jesus Christ taught that we should love God

with all our heart; Mohammed taught that we should serve God; We teach the praise of God and that all power is in the hands of God," he said.

"Krishna consciousness is a conservative religion and I'm becoming more and more aware that the differences are minimal."

"Ted Noffs said that even he didn't realise the Hare Krishnas were so conservative."

'DIFFERENT'

"Other religions are amazed to find out that we're preaching the same ideals. It's just that our style is different."

And intentional. "We dress the way we do, to be recognised as devotees of Krishna — just as the Pope wears a Mitre — but of all of them, we're the trendiest and most far out."

"If we went like the mainstream, in street clothes, no one would pay us any attention. We're trying to establish in the West and we need the attention. It's most theatrical, it's very dramatic."

"But in this age of multi-media bombardment the people have become so dulled that you have to... well... chant and dance in the streets."

The 'apricot-robed devotees encircling the broad white throne at the Krishna Temple in South Melbourne laugh heartily along with their visiting spiritual master.

Vishnupadad, 40, capitalises on the mood: "Our

religion is based on missionary activities reversed."

He says the accepted missionary movements, by tradition, flow from west to east — "the churches have always sent their missionaries to convert the heathen, in India."

"Now we are coming west to convert the heathen to Hindu."

He laughs. "It is our idea to get everyone to dress like this."

As missionaries the Krishnas have concentrated on the distribution of Ishkon literature.

They claim to have distributed well over 48,000 texts and estimate that one in 12 people in this country have come into contact with the printed words.

Vishnupadad believes that opposition to the movement "save for a few atheistic crackpots" is ebbing.

'PRESTIGIOUS'

"In the U.S. the Hare Krishna movement is becoming very prestigious," he said.

"We are being recognised as a movement peopled by sincere God-minded men and women."

"In America when the Jonestown business was on (a cult-inspired mass suicide in Guyana) we survived it. Ultimately they don't classify us with those crazy personality cults."

"All in all I see nothing but a bright future coming through."



His Divine Grace, Bhavananda Gosvani Vishnupadad . . . "a bright future."