

Mainstream faiths stand by Hare Krishnas

Most of us are relieved, for the most part, that we no longer are stopped in airports by smiling, over-eager Hare Krishnas handing out literature and asking us to contribute to their love cause.

With shaved heads and saffron robes, they stood out starkly amid the hurried airport crowd. In the early 1970s when I traveled about as an Army private, my hair was not much longer than theirs. Like most people, I didn't need an excuse to abruptly go the other direction when I happened upon them.

The Hare Krishnas, though still found today in a few airports in places such as Los Angeles and Dallas-Forth Worth, say they have moved on to more effective ways of reaching strangers with their message and their quests for money.

"When our movement started 25 years ago, most of us were young, in our 20s, and we had this idea of distributing our books to everyone," Krishna communications officer Sudharma Dasi recently told *Church & State* magazine. "We felt a very strong drive to



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distribute them, but being young, we didn't know how marketing worked."

Before the United States Supreme Court begins its summer break in July, it will rule on a First Amendment case that can be traced back to 1975 when the Hindu-based Hare Krishnas commonly roamed airports and were labeled a public nuisance.

The free-speech case is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness v. Lee. The Port Authority of New York, which operates three airports in metropolitan New

York City, wants to be able to keep groups out of their terminals.

The primary issue is whether airports are a public forum for free speech. Traditionally, courts have said free-speech activities cannot be stopped by the government in a public forum, such as a street corner or public square, unless there is a compelling interest. And when any such controls are imposed, they may be only narrowly regulated.

In a non-public forum, the government may put "reasonable" restrictions on free speech activities if such constraints do not discriminate against particular viewpoints.

Understandably, numerous religious groups of every persuasion have lined up behind the Hare Krishnas by filing amicus or friends of the court briefs. Evangelism could be sharply curbed and religious freedoms restricted, they reason, if the Supreme Court rules in a narrow way of what constitutes a public forum. The case was argued before the court on March 26,

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