

# **FROM KRISHNA TO CHRIST**

**Confessions of a Spiritual Dilettante**

*by*  
**Mary Anne Rice**

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## **FROM KRISHNA TO CHRIST**

My involvement with cults started soon after I entered high school. After eight years of Catholic education and religion, I began falling away from the Christian world view. My view of Christianity had been one filled with the grandeur, but also the emptiness and impracticality, of ritualized worship. I had never developed a real conversion to Christianity; never had a true encounter with the risen Christ. I continued to search for ways to express my desire for a relationship with God.

My first foray into "altered consciousness" came when I was about 15. I was watching a yoga program on television and started doing the meditation technique they described. I had just enough of a taste of a "separate reality" to realize that such a thing did indeed exist. It made me feel that perhaps we were not really limited to just our physical senses. Perhaps one could know and even experience for oneself an "Ultimate Truth."

### **Road to the East**

My first visit to a cult was to a Christian Science practitioner. I had been troubled with a skin disease for about a year and could find no medical cure for it. I purchased Mary Baker Eddy's book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, and learned how this body—hence this disease—was not real. I still don't quite understand how Christian Science supports this doctrine of the unreality of anything physical, but at the time I readily accepted it. I didn't continue in this group very long because it demanded complete and total loyalty, and at that time I was not ready to sign my life over to any organization. But, having accepted the philosophy that physical life is unreal, it was very easy for me to fall into Eastern religions and reject the whole basis for the Judeo-Christian world view.

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My philosophy of life included the ideas of karma (the eastern spiritual law of action and reaction—the actions of this life indicate what kind of birth you take in the next life); reincarnation (repeated births in some form of life); and the existence of the all-time favorite eastern ideal—the concept that **I** was God. I was heavily influenced by Richard (Ram Dass) Alpert's book, *Be Here Now*. That book is a classic example of a menagerie of religion, pop psychology, dissimilar philosophies, and folk tales for the drug culture. In that book, Alpert chronicles the transformation he underwent from being Richard Alpert, Harvard psychology professor, to Ram Dass, Indian yogi and truth-seeker. The change involved rejection of the rational-mind concepts of reality and objective truth. His world view became totally experience-oriented. He figured that if he experienced something, then it was valid, and proceeded to structure his reality around these unquestioned experiences. Through that book I learned about diverse systems of thought such as Zen Buddhism, Kundalini Yoga, Taoism, and Bhakti Yoga.

After some exposure to these philosophies, I decided that I differed with most yogi's ultimate goal. I didn't have a great desire to be God. One concept I retained from my Christian faith was the story of Adam and Eve. I remembered that Satan tried to tempt them to be like God. I really believed that we are not God, and never can be. Even among the "holy men" there is imperfection, and I believed that we can expect perfection from God.

One organization I spent a lot of time with, even though it believed in our eventual "evolution" to some state of God-ness, was the Self Realization Fellowship (SRF). I studied their lessons and did their meditations for several years. They believed in acknowledging the "truth" of all religions although, of course, their system of yoga was the "highest." Eventually all other religions would come to the same level of enlightenment that they had achieved. One of the most common claims of the cults is that their church or organization is the highest one for this age, the only one that has God's full revelation.

### **Hare Krishna**

During my last year of high school I met a woman who was to be my closest spiritual friend and mentor. She worked at my school, and so we had a chance to talk every day about our personal spiritual searches and compare philosophies and experien-

ces. Her major interest and involvement was with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), better known as the Hare Krishna people.

In some ways, ISKCON was more like my old Catholicism than any Eastern religion I had experienced. Emphasis was on serving a personal god (even though there were supposed to be many millions of gods, Krishna was worshiped as the ultimate god) in a highly ritualized setting. My other Eastern experiences dealt more with the impersonal aspect of reality, and while being philosophically engrossing, left me emotionally dry.

The Krishna people offered a strange mixture of sensuality and asceticism. On the one hand, you were encouraged to live a highly disciplined life, which included abstinence from sex, meat eating, intoxicating drink, and any form of gambling (which I later found out meant "speculative thinking" or questioning anything about the spiritual orders). On the other hand, your senses were besieged with sights and sounds and colors and aromas, while your mind was filled with tales of Krishna's exploits. One aspect of Krishna's sensuality is frequently discussed and concerns Krishna's favorite pastime—having sexual relations (often adulterous) with his 16,000 or so girlfriends.

Some of my strongest memories are of going to the "love feasts" at the temple on Sunday. When we got there, we would join the others in the extravagantly decorated temple room for chanting, singing and dancing. Then as we sat down to listen to the lecture, we could smell the Indian delicacies being cooked in the kitchen. I thought to myself, "What better way to serve the Lord?"

For a long time I just participated in the Sunday feasts and occasionally read their lavishly illustrated books and chanted a few "rounds." (A round refers to the practice of using a string of 106 beads to help keep track of your chanting. You say one of the mantras for each bead, and go around the string at least 16 times a day.) At least their mantra (divine meditation word) was more engaging than sitting and staring at a blank wall, hoping to make my mind equally blank. My involvement with them began to grow to the point where I would sometimes get up at 3:00 in the morning to get to the temple by 4:00 for the first service. At one time, just before I started to live at the temple, I was getting myself up at 4:00 or 5:00 to worship my own picture of the deities and offer them things like flowers, incense, water, etc., and

dutifully chant my rounds.

## **Into the Temple**

During these years, though, my spirituality severely interfered with the rest of my life. I would drop out of school because "such temporal knowledge is so inconsequential." I would reject people because they were such materialists, or "karmis." A karmi is a person who collects karma, thus insuring him another round of hellish birth and death. Krishna people don't believe that they themselves collect karma, since they perform their actions "in the service of the Lord." Basically, this relieves them of all responsibility for their actions. I finally joined the people at the temple in the fall of 1976, hoping to serve the "Supreme Personality of Godhead—Krishna." The temple offered a haven for those who couldn't relate on their own serving God and worldly life. Little initiative was expected of you—all that was required was for you to "follow orders" for your daily bread and enlightenment.

When I first joined, I was in Los Angeles. The L.A. temple is large, with a surrounding community of a few hundred devotees. There was always something to do, like fixing flowers for the altars, helping make the food for the feasts or just going out to "sankirtan," which is to sing in the streets, or to distribute books and "encourage" donations. I cleaned the very prestigious art rooms and served the top woman devotee, who was also one of the top artists, by carrying her books when she went out to the airport to distribute and collect. It was a great honor for me to serve such a high-ranking devotee. Even though she was just a woman (definitely an inferior birth, according to Hindu society) she was revered enough to be allowed to teach a few selected early-morning philosophy classes, something no other woman did in Los Angeles.

The whole community rose by 3:30, showered and dressed for the first ceremony at 4:00. My immediate authority was a young woman who had been in the movement for a few years. She was the one who told me basically what to do and where to go. After I had been there for two or three weeks, she suggested that we go "visiting." She decided that we should go to Salt Lake City, where a small group of women had started a temporary temple for travelling devotees. I was soon to find out that this was

to be more than just a visit for me. In two days my friend left, leaving me in the company of three other women devotees.

### **On to Texas**

My new authority was called Gauri. She took very seriously her responsibility as our authority, and missed no chance to "correct" one of us. We stayed in Salt Lake City for about two weeks before we packed up and took off for San Antonio, Texas. My "fervor" for God grew with every mile, encouraged as it was by Gauri's unbelievably dangerous driving. Her driving reflected a philosophy of "everyone else is wrong and must make way for me." She is the only person I have ever seen back off a freeway onramp! She couldn't understand why people would honk at her when she would make right turns from the far left lane. "All those crazy karmis just don't have the peace of Krishna." Driving all the way to Texas made me constantly aware of how mortal we all are.

In transit to Texas we attempted to sneak into a motel every night. One person would rent a single room, and then we would all try to sneak in. Most of the time, we were caught and thrown out, and once the sheriff was even called. We justified this behavior by saying that it was wrong to give "Krishna's money" to such sinful karmis. When we were successful at our little attempts at "economy" I would get very nervous in the mornings because, wherever we were, we would still get up at 3:30 so we could do our early morning chanting by 4:00. Singing would have been enough, but we also *had* to use hand cymbals and drums. Why no one ever woke up and complained, I'll never know.

When we finally got to San Antonio, we found a house right away and set up the temple. For travelling groups, there is no separate building for the temple, but a large room in the house is used for the sanctuary itself. We used our front room, so whenever we came into the house, we had to bow down to the deities and pay our "obeisances." Even with our initially limited budget, we soon had our temple room appropriately gaudy. Our mission in San Antonio was the same as every other devotee's mission: the propagation of Krishna Consciousness and the accompanying "liberation" of *laksmi*. And, as most devotees, we were exceptionally adept at liberating *laksmi* from the bondage of sinful karmis. (It is explained by ISKCON mythology that

*Laksmi* is one of Krishna's girlfriends. She is the goddess of fortune and so is represented on earth by money. *Laksmi* is very "unhappy" when she is apart from Krishna, so any means to get them back together is considered "kosher" and acceptable service.) Since I was always too shy to go out and hound people for their money, I stayed at home and did the bookkeeping, cleaning, sewing, and whatever other odd jobs needed to be done. I was still committed to the movement during the first couple of weeks in Texas, but something was to happen soon that was to drastically alter my feelings about this commitment.

### Competition

Another group of travelling devotees from Oregon came to visit us for about ten days. They were a group of about seven young women with a rather acerbic authority. They were even more enthusiastic to "get them karmis" than we were. We soon had a "spiritual" contest going. They got up at 1:30, so we got up at 1:30. They brought in a certain amount of money, so we brought in the same. I remember once when one of the visiting girls had a really rough day on the streets, and called in crying, asking for help. Instead of sympathy, she was yelled at and told in no uncertain terms that she was going to have to stay out in the cold until she could overcome the "maya," or illusion, she was experiencing. So much for compassion. It was also by this group that I was abandoned twice while in Houston. We were distributing at the Astrodome, and as usual, I was the one who hauled the extra supply of books around waiting until someone needed more to sell. I was walking around and around and around the Astrodome., and after awhile, all the other devotees got thrown out. Since I wasn't bugging anyone, they didn't throw me out. But it took awhile for me to realize that there weren't any more devotees in the Astrodome—I was the only one making what seemed to be endless, aimless rounds. When I realized they had been thrown out, I went looking for them at an auto show at a nearby arena. After conning my way inside (I had no money for the ticket) I found them, only to be abandoned a few hours later when they left to go back to the motel. I'm not really sure why they kept forgetting me. Perhaps it was too much of a mundane matter to disturb their "devotional service." Anyway, I called the motel, and they said they would come pick me up—a couple of hours later. When they finally did pick me up, it was only to drop



me off at another location for some more distributing. This was the first day that I reevaluated what I was doing.

Things also started to go wrong in our once-smooth temple life. A dozen women living in a small, 2-bedroom, 1-bathroom house can soon get hectic. A lot of patience is needed just to be able to cope with the situation, but, unfortunately, the Krishnas rely more on discipline than patience and sympathy. While we were getting up earlier, we were still going to bed around 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. It was physically exhausting. While they were there, I witnessed a lot of spiritual pride rising in both leaders. They would chastise us for asking questions about how other philosophies compared to ISKCON, and then would sit around speculating about some esoteric and unimportant philosophical detail. I began realizing that ISKCON was not as interested in developing my spirit as it was in protecting the status quo of the Brahman (priestly) class and taking people's money.

### **Doubts About Krishna**

While all this activity was going on, I was left pretty much alone, and had time to reevaluate my commitment. I felt that I was working much too hard for negligible spiritual rewards. Once you join the organization, you are encouraged to put work before reading and meditating on the Lord. It might be a little different for the men, since they are considered so much "smarter" anyway. It is not such a waste of time for them to study. But women were encouraged to please Krishna by devotional service, and then he would reward them with spiritual knowledge and "bliss."

When our visitors finally left, I decided to get back home somehow. I was not so much afraid to tell Gauri about my decision as I was embarrassed, and didn't really feel capable of defending my desire to leave. I phoned my mother and set up a plane reservation, hoping that when the time came, I would somehow escape from the house in time to catch the plane. I tried three times. I can imagine that it was really hard on my mother, wondering what I must be going through and then not being able to do anything about it. As I said, I had to call and cancel reservations three times because in each instance, my timing would be off and I wouldn't be able to get away. The last reservation I made, I was adamant about keeping.

Up until that time, my Krishna friends had no idea what

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was on my mind. Making these plans and yet still trying to act as if I enjoyed what I was doing almost drove me crazy. Anyway, my last attempt at freedom was soon aborted, too. I had made the reservation and called a taxi. Had I been more intelligent, and less considerate of their possible inconvenience, I would have just taken the car and left it at the airport. But I didn't and so, while waiting for the taxi to come, I just prayed to God that Gauri, who had been out shopping, wouldn't come home. There are times when God lets us off easy, and then again there are times when He pushes us to the edge, knowing in each case just what is best for us. In this case, He allowed Gauri to arrive less than one minute before the taxi. At that time, I remember my mind racing, wondering what I should do. I sized up the taxi driver, questioning if he was bigger than Gauri, if it came down to a tug-of-war, with me in the middle. I realize that I should either have just pretended that I didn't know why the taxi was there or just made a run for it and told the driver to step on the gas. All these crazy James Bond fantasies ran through my mind.

I did the worst possible thing and just started walking to the taxi, with Gauri hot on my trail. Then I did what must be the unforgiveable sin, and tried to explain to her that I was leaving. (Well, actually I told her that I was going to Florida, to see my grandmother who was dying, and that I had to leave **RIGHT AWAY**. In telling her this lie, I figured that, if I did make it back to L.A., my actual destination, I didn't want any devotees waiting for me.) Of course, she didn't buy that for a minute, but TOLD me to get back inside the house, and that I wasn't going ANYWHERE. When she told me that I needed permission to leave, I said that I didn't need permission if I left the movement itself. She wasn't convinced.

I knew that I could have just run to the cab, but I was terrified that she would grab me and physically keep me from going. It was somehow easier to believe that I went back of my own volition, than to admit to the reality of being a prisoner. As I returned to the house, my hopes crumbled and I accepted the bleak reality of further incarceration in the temple. When I called my mother that evening, to tell her of my change in plans, Gauri listened on while I lied, saying that I had just changed my mind and wanted to stay, and that there wasn't anyone listening to me. I tried to make her, as well as myself, believe that I was telling the truth. My mother asked if I wanted her and my step-

father to come out and get me. I told her that I didn't want her to do that and not to worry. I figured at least both of us shouldn't worry. Gauri made me call the L.A. temple president and talk to him for a least half an hour. He made life outside the temple sound totally futile and meaningless. He made the remark that he had seen ex-devotees pumping gas—implying that that was all they could ever do.

After that night, I was never left alone for a minute, except sometimes in the bathroom. In order not to incur any more personal scrutiny, I tried to act like a "good little devotee," saying and doing all the right things. If I could have kept it up for a very long time, there might have been the possibility of some psychological damage, because I was having to act like I loved and enjoyed something that I actually hated with all my heart.

During this time I started praying. I was still confused about whether or not Krishna really was God, and so I felt funny asking him to let me out of the situation there and let me go home. I knew I sincerely wanted to serve God, but for many reasons, this just wasn't turning out to be very fulfilling. The only thing I continued to like about the organization was their food. That wasn't enough of a basis to stay with a very radical group of people.

### **Liberty in Sight!**

About a week after I began praying, it seemed like my prayers were answered: we were called back to Los Angeles! The next few days were extremely difficult, packing and then driving back to L.A. Even when we got home, I was never allowed to be left alone, and even more, we were discouraged from associating with the other girls at the temple. Even L.A. became a cold, impersonal place. My hopes of just walking off the temple grounds to freedom were dashed in light of the constant surveillance I was under. I wasn't aware of it then, but God was working on my eventual escape.

The second day we were home, we went out to beg for money in a shopping center parking lot that happened to be close to my home. I was extremely nervous and excited to think that my liberation might be at hand. The technique of begging in parking lots tends to draw devotees far apart, because they end up running all over the place, trying to catch people before they get to their cars or before they get into the stores. I had never

asked anyone for money yet, but I knew that I would have to if I wanted even a chance at breaking away. At first I was helped by a fellow devotee, but I soon found out just how easy it is to ask people for money, and just how eagerly "karmis" seem to give it to you. As I continued on my own, running after people in the lot, I found myself getting farther and farther away from the rest of the devotees. I soon decided to take my chance, and frantically started running as fast as I could through the lot to the street.

In my mental condition, I thought they would be able to track me like radar and pick me up easily. That kind of fear is a great incentive for running quickly. I thought they would know almost supernaturally exactly what direction I had taken. I kept looking for a good place to hide, and finally settled on a florist shop. I can't imagine what they thought of me as I ran in, out of breath, and ducked behind their sales counter. They were kind enough to let me use their phone, but did ask me to step around to the customer side of the counter. I called my brother-in-law, who lived less than a mile from where I was hiding, and asked him to come pick me up. While waiting for him, I hid behind a large display of Christmas poinsettias, wondering what I would do when they found me. I was still very paranoid and thought they would just drive up the street and know right where I was.

When my brother-in-law arrived, I ran into his car as if the very devil himself were on my tail. I called my family and we all had a very happy reunion. It was definitely my all-time favorite Christmas present, to be home with my family again.

I found out that when the devotees discovered that I was missing, they just went back to the temple. When my parents went to get my things, they all were very nice to them, and said they hoped I was okay. I was contacted later by one devotee friend and he told me that Gauri was being disciplined for her mismanagement of her little group, and that she had been relieved of her responsibilities. But I thank God that Gauri was there for me and was as hard as she was. Perhaps I would still be trapped in their false religious system if everything had always been as easy and fun as it was in the beginning in Los Angeles.

### **God Behind the Scenes**

Through this experience, I think I saw a little of how God acts in conjunction with our free will. I had chosen freely to join them and believe their graven image of a god. The Lord allowed

me to do that and allowed me to experience some of the consequences, but, when I then rejected Krishna, and knew that I could only depend on the real God, even though I didn't know Him then, I saw how He did come to my rescue and planned out my escape in a way that would best help me really make a total break with them.

After leaving them, I was pretty burned out on most religious systems, not even bothering to seek the God Who had delivered me. But I was soon to find myself back in the karmic rat race of Eastern religions. I actually never found any peace or spiritual enlightenment through them, though, so my search for the truth continued.

In the winter of 1978, I began to become interested in parapsychology and its religious aspects. I was still very experience-oriented, believing that you couldn't know objective ultimate truth, but that whatever you experienced, then that was "real" for you. I never did have any astral (out-of-body) experiences or anything like that, but for a few months, I talked to people who were into things like extrasensory perception. I was still pretty cautious about jumping into things that would open me up spiritually, so I checked it out for quite some time. I believe now that it was God's hand that kept me from getting into this, because it can be a very powerful and dangerous activity.

### **A New Message**

In February of 1979 I started watching TV late at night. I started watching a Christian station. I really can't remember what first attracted me to watching such programs. They were certainly a far cry from my usual "hippie-gypsy-we're-all-god" fare. I suppose it was nice to see people talk about God in such a loving, personal manner. Instead of just philosophizing about existence, they seemed to be talking about someone they knew very well. One of the speakers I saw was Hal Lindsey, a noted author of books on prophecy. I really had never had any exposure to any talk of "end times" and so listened with great interest.

After reading his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, I began wondering for the first time about the veracity and reliability of the Bible. One of the best books that I read on the subject was Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. I found out how we get the Bibles that we have today, and the

unbelievable care that is taken to ensure that our modern translations are accurate and reflect what the early manuscripts said. I had always considered the Bible an inferior revelation from God. I thought the Old Testament was full of boring genealogies and history, and that the New Testament was just a bunch of quaint parables designed for the "simple" Jewish minds of Christ's day. After understanding just a little bit of the Bible's continuity, historical accuracy, fulfilled prophecy, and resistance to persecution, I reevaluated my prejudiced and ignorant view and began to realize what a miracle it is that this book even exists.

During every program I would hear them talk about the love that God has for us, and be invited to pray to Him, asking Christ to come into my heart. I thought I knew who Jesus was from my Catholic education, and I had a superficial knowledge that He loved us and died for us. I even remembered once praying with some "Jesus Freaks" many years ago. At that time, I had had an emotional experience, but did not understand the concept of commitment, so I quickly fell away. I didn't understand that Christ calls us to make a real commitment to Him, not just a ritualized or emotional show of acceptance. I realized that it was an act that most of all required a heartfelt decision of your free will, in turning your burden of salvation away from yourself, your own "good works" or some Guru, to One Who made a claim on your life and demonstrated that by forfeiting His own life. Anyway, I realized that this was one kind of prayer that I had never prayed before. I somehow knew instinctively that this wasn't just another "trip," but was very serious if prayed with sincerity. I had the attitude of, "Well, I've tried everything else, and it hasn't worked, so why not give this a try?" I was to find out that it wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be.

It took me a whole week to work up enough resolve to begin "practicing" the prayer. I knew that the prayer was very serious, and that God was listening, so for about a week, I would tell God, "Now, I don't really mean this, Lord; I'm just practicing." Sometimes the words would be very difficult to say and even all alone in the room, I would feel like someone was listening to every word I said. In praying this prayer, you admit to the fact that you cannot save yourself; that you are not now, nor will you ever be, God. It is quite a humbling prayer after spending almost six years telling yourself that someday you are

going to be God, or Queen of the Universe, or Yogini of the Month, or whatever. When I did finally pray that prayer with a sincere heart, willing to accept the consequences, I expected to have an emotional "thunderbolt" experience—but I didn't. Instead I just felt peace and a feeling of accomplishment. I felt as if a battle had been waged for my soul and that the "good guys" had won.

### **Starting Anew**

For the first several months, my relationship with God was in a "honeymoon" stage. Everything I saw reminded me of God's great love for me and the fact that He had forgiven me for all the times I had rejected him and sinned against Him. That is one of the unique things that Christianity has to offer: the possibility of both immediate and eternal forgiveness. I suppose that anyone can just decide to "feel forgiven" but, as a Christian, I knew I had something to base that feeling on—the atoning death of Christ. I slowly began to understand what I thought I had learned so many years before, that even though God loves us, His holy and righteous nature allows Him no other choice than to punish sin. I realized that we could either accept that punishment ourselves (which is eternal separation from God) or accept His substitute—Someone Who suffered that punishment ~~in~~ on our behalf. I am not the type to obstinately choose to suffer myself, so I chose the freely offered substitute. I decided that I would much rather take a chance that Jesus was right than to assume that He was wrong, or just one great prophet among many—a nice guy, but without any real power to forgive sin.

After adopting a Christian world view, I felt that I could understand the condition of the world a lot better. Seeing the reality of sin and its consequences, I saw how people often freely chose to do wrong, and the existence of evil seemed to have a clear base. I realized that maybe we are closer to the Age of Armageddon than the Age of Aquarius. And it is all because we are beings with free will and have the ability to choose for ourselves evil over good, and our own self-centered interests over God's will. I saw that sin is not an illusion, as the Eastern religions would have us believe, but a reality with potentially far-reaching consequences.

### **Christianity and the East**

It made sense to me that since the concept of responsibility is built into the very fabric of our lives, in the end, we will be held

responsible to the One Who created us and set us in charge over the earth. If we here are so concerned about justice, how much more should God be concerned about it?

According to many Eastern philosophies, the only "sin" we are guilty of is ignorance of our "true nature" as God. Other than that, we are all perfect. I see some of that in our Western thinking of "I'm a good person; surely God could not condemn me." Many of the people who claim this truly are good people in the eyes of the world. But, as Jesus said, God sees not only our actions, but even the motives that lie deep within our hearts. And who among us can claim absolute purity of motives? I know that I can't. Even great men who spent their whole lives in service to God realized their shortcomings. Mahatma Ghandi, the peaceful ascetic leader of India's revolution, once claimed that it was an unbroken torture to him that he was still so far from Him Who governed every breath of his life, and whose offspring he was. He recognized that this was because of the evil passions within him, yet he couldn't get away from them. And the Apostle Paul recognized the fact that his own righteousness, when set before an absolutely pure and holy God, became like rubbish. So, if these men, whom the world looks upon as "holy," feel so unworthy of being in God's presence, then which one of us can honestly claim that he is good enough to stand innocent before God? But, I found someone so pure that even His enemies could not find any sin to accuse Him of—Jesus Christ. I decided that if I am going to stand before God one day, and I have a choice of presenting my own righteousness (or lack of it) or Christ's righteousness to Him, I think I would rather take a chance on presenting the One Who was referred to as a "lamb without blemish."

I found that the Christian world view affirms the reality of this life and therefore elevates our appreciation of it. The Eastern religions try to convince us that this world and everything in it are illusions. When this philosophy is held by a whole society, as in India, you can see the disastrous results. "Since this life isn't real, why care about adequate food or housing?" I mean, how serious can you get about something that's just an illusion, anyway? Young Westerners like myself never quite seem to be able to make the connection between India's impoverished condition and its philosophy of "nothing matters anyway." I think we in the West are often so eager for anything different,



especially if it's at all esoteric, available only to the "initiated few," that we accept these beliefs without really looking at the end result of what happens to a society when a large enough group of people accept the philosophy of "nonexistence." (Of course, then you hear about the gurus getting into their "nonexistent limousines" and driving to their "nonexistent mansions." There are those from the East even who have caught on to the idea that some illusions are better than others.)

### **A New Focus**

One of the big differences in my Christianity and my Eastern-influenced ideas is the feeling that I have toward other people. In the Eastern religions, there really is no commandment to love other people or to help them in any way. "Why should you help someone else when in doing so, you might be interfering with his karma?" I think the basis for this is the fact that Eastern religions are very self-centered. The only thing that you are expected to do in life is to perfect your being—to realize that you are God. This can be seen very graphically in some of the practices, where all you do is to meditate on yourself—"I am the Universe; I am it all; I am God; Me, Me, Me." Other people are only instruments for you to use on your path towards godhead. If you did help someone else, the only reasoning behind it would be that you wanted to collect good karma (cosmic Brownie points) for yourself, so they were just the means to your own end. There is no basis for altruistic, selfless giving of yourself. In contrast to that, you have Jesus telling you to love other people, even your enemies, because God in heaven so loved us, and so we should reflect that love towards others. Your world view changes from self-centered to other-centered.

After a period of time I experienced that the Christian life is not a continuous honeymoon. It is a growing experience, and your relationship with the Lord is almost like a marriage. After the first infatuation wears off, then starts the real love. I understood that love is not something you just feel, but that it is a way that you willfully choose to act towards someone, no matter what the circumstances. Your faith is sometimes tested, and you eventually learn that God is trying to strengthen you through the trials. At first, when others doubt, it causes you to ask yourself why it is that you believe. If this were an Eastern philosophy, all you could defend your faith with is the statement that "it works

for me." But then, if you use that basis, anything could potentially "work" for you—real or unreal. In Christianity, I believe that you can have a much stronger and more credible basis for your beliefs. Instead of being based on something as illusive as personal mystical experience, we can point to a historical Person and the claims that He made and substantiated. In Christianity, the weight of proof is not upon the believer, but upon the object of that belief. In other religions it doesn't seem to matter too much what you believe in, just so you believe strongly enough. Unfortunately, I don't believe that just sincerity or intensity of faith can create truth. I felt like I had believed in myths and fables for so long, I needed something **real** to believe in—a real Savior, Whose words of God and life would ring true in my mind as well as my heart.

### **But Surely Not Me!**

Many who will read these words might think the same things I thought during my yogi days. "Well, that's only one person's opinion. My way is as valid as hers." Or, "I can make it on my own; I don't need a Savior." Well, maybe yes—but **Maybe NO!** I ask you, are you really willing to take that chance with your eternal life? There are those who seek to avoid the whole question of an afterlife, and just shrug off any call for such a decision. But, as George Bernard Shaw put it, "Death is the ultimate statistic: one out of one dies." And so, sooner or later, we will all be faced with our own mortality and a need to make a decision as to where we stand with God. If there were a chance for you to know that you would spend eternity with God, and that you could have a personal relationship with Him right now (and wanted to base it on more than just your personal hopes and imagination), wouldn't you at least want to investigate the possibility? We all can think up many excuses to evade God, from "I'm too young (old, smart, rich, poor, busy, etc.)," to blaming our resistance to Him on a stereotyped view of Christianity where the extent of people's commitment is only to "sit in their nice warm churches and say 'Praise the Lord.'" Or perhaps we met a couple of Christians that we personally didn't like, so we reject Christ Himself. How many of us, I wonder, are guilty of the guilt-by-association form of prejudice? I urge you to look past the personalities of some Christians, look past the trimmings and trappings of the institutional church, past all of

your own prejudices to the place where you can see Christ alone, waiting to give you eternal life and love.

So, that's what it comes down to: eternal life and love. God offers us the possibility of a loving relationship with Him. And isn't that what we're all searching for anyway? An all-embracing love that is willing to sacrifice itself for us? The God of Israel has shown His love at a great cost — what have other gods or philosophers ever sacrificed for us? Did Krishna care enough for us to shed his blood on our behalf? Or did he, like so many others, show his "compassion" by burdening us with a myriad of rules and regulations, binding us to a life of cosmic servitude?

While others stand around, commenting on the condition of man, Jesus sees our plight and actively does something to change our hearts and lives. In taking upon Himself the punishment of death that we all so richly deserve. He paves the way for us to have a reconciled relationship with God. And in rising again, He offers us the promise of a new life in Him.

For further information about Christianity, the cults, and reasons for Christian faith, we invite you to write to CARIS, P. O. Box 2067, Costa Mesa, California, 92626 or phone (714) 957-0249. Christian Apologetics: Research and Information Service is a non-profit organization.