

Honors World Religions  
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ISKCON New Orleans  
2936 Esplanade Avenue  
New Orleans, LA 70119

## The ISKCON Response to Hurricane Katrina

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Congregants chant the *maha-mantra* and use percussion instruments to honor the deities on March 26, 2006.



A devotee honors the deities with incense on March 26, 2006. Photos courtesy of Andrew Goodrich.

Hurricane Katrina is one of the most poignant social topics in New Orleans' history. Unlike other issues that the city has dealt with in the past, Katrina hit New Orleans and affected lives without regard to wealth, race, or religion. However, during the catastrophe and afterwards, a myriad of reactions and interpretations were garnered from the experience. It is incontestable that people's particular philosophical and religious worldviews directly contribute to their explanations, memories, and reactions to the events. One community of spiritual people in New Orleans congregates at the Hare Krishna Temple at 2936 Esplanade Avenue. As part of the Krishna Consciousness movement, these people have a unique outlook on the circumstances. With a philosophy that places a strong emphasis on the separation of what is spiritual and what is material, the Hare Krishnas in New Orleans tended to view the catastrophe as purely a material element of the earthly realm. Little emphasis has been placed on what has been materially lost. Instead, in this time of material devastation, the Hare Krishnas focus on spiritual nourishment.

### **HISTORY OF THE HARE KRISHNA MOVEMENT**

The Hare Krishna movement, formally known as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), is a Hindu sect that was founded in New York City in 1966 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The philosophical foundations of the religion can be attributed mainly to the central religious text, the Bhagavad Gita, which contains the first fully detailed lessons about *bhakti yoga*, or extreme devotion. Also, the counter cultural revolution that took place in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s led to the Hare Krishna movement's ensuing success.

Prabhupada, coming from Bengal, India, started a movement that embraced sensory gratification, but in a manner that was antithetical to nonconformist ideals of the day. "Most of those who joined Hare Krishna had first been hippies in the 1960s" (Hexham and Poewe 1986, 114). Writing in 1986, Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe asserted that Western Hare Krishna members "typically have histories of having been heavily into drug mysticism before joining" (Hexham and Poewe 1986, 146). Although Hindus believe that the spirit is an independent entity, material contamination forces the soul to reside in an incessant succession of material bodies. If a person lives a life of sensual indulgence, the person will likely be reborn as a lesser animal. Krishna Consciousness upholds that "only by denying the body certain earthly pleasures can the soul overcome the laws of karma and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and thereby become fully realized" (Rochford 1985, 12). Despite the culture of drugs and free love during the 1960s and 1970s, Prabhupada advocated a philosophy of restraining and controlling desire in a way that satisfies the senses in a salubrious, God-gratifying way.

ISKCON was formed to help spread *bhakti yoga*, specifically through devotion to Krishna. Devotees are faithful to Krishna by serving him through both gratifying and denying the senses of various pleasures. This practice usually appealed to the sensate-oriented hippie culture, because they were already searching for something to believe in beyond the secular world. "[The devotee] commits himself to ISKCON because it both validates his sensate orientation in religious terms and also provides him with behavioral mechanisms to control his sensate propensities" (Poling and Kenney 1986, 2-4).

According to Hexham and Poewe, "their primal experiences come from the sound of the mantra, which helps them achieve Krishna consciousness" (1986, 146). The *maha-mantra* (great mantra), "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare," can be spoken in solitude, or it can be sung/chanted in groups

accompanied by bells, cymbals, drums, candles, flowers, and various other visual and aural stimuli. In the early days, Krishna Consciousness called only for chanting and consuming spiritual food (*prasadam*), but today devotees are additionally called to follow four regulative principles: no illicit sex, no intoxication, no eating of meat, and no gambling (Goodrich 2006c).

Being a sect of Hinduism, Hare Krishnas have a strong belief in karma, which literally means deed or action. Broadly, karma is the principle of cause and effect. It is the sum total of our actions and their associated reactions in our previous lives and our current life, which then have an effect on our future (Reichenbach 1990, 1-3). The concept of karma heavily influences how one may interpret good or bad occurrences.

Within four years of the first temple gatherings, ISKCON grew from one temple in New York to thirty across the country. When the movement had become far too large in scope for Prabhupada to administer personally, the *Krishna Consciousness Handbook* was published in 1970 to establish codified regulations for temple discipline and worship. “Both social network ties and contacts in public places have served as important avenues by which the Krishna movement has sustained its growth” (Rochford 1985, 151). Today, ISKCON is an international religious movement with about 10,000 temple devotees, 250,000 congregational devotees, and 350 temples across the world (ISKCON 2004).

## HISTORY OF ISKCON NEW ORLEANS

The Hare Krishna Temple in New Orleans, Louisiana was founded by Prabhupada in 1971. According to Ranganatha Das of ISKCON New Orleans, the spiritual leader came from New York to New Orleans in an old Volkswagen and rented an apartment on Spruce Street in Uptown. He turned one of the rooms of the rented space into a makeshift temple room. After spending about a year in New Orleans, he purchased a dilapidated house at 2936 Esplanade Avenue and started renovating it and the property next door. After the temple building was restored, he began telling local residents about it and recruiting converts. The efforts at the Temple brought new life back to the neighborhood, and many nearby houses were then fixed up and occupied. A small community began to form slowly until there were several permanent residents living in the temple. At the time of the storm there were eighteen devotees living in the temple fulltime. Because of Prabhupada’s origins in Bengal, India, the majority of those living in the temple at any point in time have been Bengali. Devotees study the religious texts and participate in daily temple programs that require them to wake up at 4:00 A.M. The cultural expectations of a college education and fulltime career prevent most Americans from making the commitment to become a devotee. However, becoming a missionary is more practical and acceptable in India, hence the proclivity (Ranganatha Das 2006).

The Hare Krishna Temple in New Orleans, as well as those across the country, are usually known locally for their Sunday *prasadam* feasts, which are open to the public. The human appetite is a sense that Hare Krishnas believe should be satisfied (in moderation), and feasting is one way to commune with Krishna, since the food has been offered to Krishna first and is therefore blessed. While homeless and locals alike are nourished by the free, vegetarian food, the devotees and congregants view the weekly event as an opportunity to educate people about the religion as well as to network with various people around the city.

## IMPACT OF KATRINA ON ISKCON NEW ORLEANS

Located in an area of town known as Mid-City, the congregation and its members were affected but not largely harmed by Hurricane Katrina. The temple itself is located along a raised ridge on Esplanade Avenue, a feature purposely chosen by the founder, so flooding of the physical building was minimal. The immediate area had about two feet of water, while streets several blocks further experienced six to seven foot depths. Because of the potential for exposure to the elements and the possibility of looting, the devotees of the temple wanted to ensure that the deities on the altar were safeguarded. The devotees living in the temple at the time remained there throughout the storm. Nearly a week later, members of the Dallas Hare Krishna Temple came to rescue and relocate the devotees and deities. The temple devotees relocated to all parts of the country, and several even returned to their homes in Bengal (Nesbit 2006). Because members of the congregation tend to reside near the temple, few of them encountered extensive damage to their homes. Homes had relatively minor flooding compared to other parts of the city. The neighborhood encircling the temple is generally very livable, although many residents have yet to reinhabit their homes (Goodrich 2006b).

### CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSES

The Hare Krishna congregation in New Orleans is steadfast and determined to return to a semblance of normalcy. Ananta Gopal Das, the temple's president, was simply waiting for electricity to be turned on in the neighborhood before regular services and feasts could be restored. As of mid-January, the Sunday *prasadam* feast was reinstated and the deities returned to the altar. The return of the Sunday feast is considered to be a very meaningful symbol of convalescence for both the religious and secular community. As a social center for the neighborhood, the Sunday feast enables New Orleanians to network with others. Congregants and visitors exchange social contacts, information about employment opportunities, ideas, and personal experiences or advice. As a spiritual center, the temple is a focus of stability for those returning to a very changed landscape. In a time of reconstruction and recovery, the Hare Krishnas see their food as a way to nourish the community, physically and spiritually. Congregants look forward to attending Sunday services where they can dance and sing joyously for Krishna (Goodrich 2006a). The temple also participates in a Food for Life program, an initiative that existed before the hurricane, whereby food is made and delivered to various homeless shelters throughout the city.

When Tavish Nesbit returned to the Temple in mid-February he "was pleasantly surprised to see that the temple was in better shape than I had ever seen it in my life. Better than before the storm. Leaks in the ceiling had been fixed, holes in the wall that had been old were repaired, and the entire temple had been repainted" (Nesbit 2006).

During a discourse at the Sunday services, one devotee used Katrina to explain the philosophy of managing desires. In a criticism of Buddhist meditation, he explained that trying to control the mind is harder than controlling Katrina (Goodrich 2006c).

One temple devotee explained that post-Katrina it is not too unusual for him to lead a prayer or chant to an empty temple room. Although attendance is still fairly sporadic, the number of devotees returning every week is steadily climbing, as is the appearance of new faces.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

### **Ananda**

Ananda (pseudonym), a high school teacher in New Orleans, was raised across several different faiths, but has recently been spending some time in and around the Hare Krishna Temple in New Orleans in an attempt to reconnect with his South Asian heritage. When he found the temple to be less spiritually engaging than he had hoped it would be for him, he took on a more secular relationship with the temple, helping them with maintenance and various community functions. When Hurricane Katrina came, Ananda did not originally plan to leave the city, but some friends convinced him to evacuate to Baton Rouge. He moved around for about three months before finally returning to his Mid-City apartment after Thanksgiving. For Ananda, the temple did not play any significant role in his hurricane experience: “When I left here I was a little bit reluctant to associate myself with the temple because I did not see that as very spiritually motivating at the time” (Ananda 2006). After returning to New Orleans, the spiritual delinquency that he found at the temple had been made worse. “I hoped that some of the people there who had been sort of spiritual centers or guides would return, but many of them did not. And those who did may not have been quite the spiritual people that you would define as running a temple” (Ananda 2006).

One of the questions Ananda dealt with mentally during the hurricane experience and to this day is why he, who is not very reliant on his belongings, was spared, and many New Orleanians who have a heavy dependence on their belongings lost everything. Although he has not entirely made sense of it yet, he speculates that if “this material world is all immaterial, perhaps then it does make sense. If you want to make sense out of it, [you can] say well, you know, we’re really being tested or our faith or spirituality is being tested...”(Ananda 2006). After returning to New Orleans, Ananda believes that his efforts to return to teaching are his contribution to the rebuilding of the city. “I think I shifted my needs closer towards the families and children whom I teach as a teacher now.” This focus is not religiously motivated, per se; “it’s more of an ethical/moral choice of where I wanted to help or see my resources go” (Ananda 2006). He expects to see some growth at the temple because “many people are so shaken up they may be sort of looking for a rock to hold on to. You know, a stable something, or a stable faith, and things may lean towards that a bit now than before—people are a little more motivated towards fundamentalist faiths or sort of ‘cultish’ behavior” (Ananda 2006).

### **Tavish Nesbit**

Tavish Nesbit, a temple devotee, is an electrician’s apprentice in New Orleans. At the time of the hurricane, Nesbit was living in Dallas. While attending a Sunday feast at the Hare Krishna Temple there, he first heard about the massiveness of the storm. When he found out the extent of the devastation he “very much wanted to get involved in doing something...for the city of New Orleans. So the first opportunity I got, I did take it” (Nesbit 2006). He and six other members of the Dallas temple drove an eighteen-wheeler and van to New Orleans in order to evacuate the devotees and save the deities. Eventually the ad hoc team was able to do just that, but only after driving through the maze-like devastation of the city. For Nesbit, the experience was never an issue of faith:

We don't really know what our karma is. So, I mean, everything, every action has a reaction and this is the material world. Things like this happen. You know, in the spiritual world you don't have hurricanes or forest fires or things that an individual might find unpleasant, but here we do. And we have made that decision to come into this world and with all of its pluses and minuses. So it's just a part of material nature... (Nesbit 2006).

Nesbit sees the events as "a natural cause and effect of material energy." In lieu of seeing God's hand punishing the Gulf Coast, Nesbit points out how the region has always been geologically unstable. "So, there's absolutely...really nothing surprising about what happened. People in the city, we've been discussing this for decades.... It was very predictable" (Nesbit 2006).

Although he sees no religious explanation for the events themselves, Nesbit does have speculations concerning the higher purpose of going through an experience like Hurricane Katrina: "For whatever our desires are, whatever needs we have to be fulfilled, whatever karmas we have to be burned off, we're all here at this time and place for a reason. It's difficult oftentimes to see what the big picture might be, but certainly nothing is an accident" (Nesbit 2006). This notion illustrates a Hindu belief that karma may rebound suddenly and unexpectedly from this life or previous lives.

## **Ranganatha Das**

Ranganatha Das, a manager at the temple, has been part of the Hare Krishna movement since the early 1970s. Ranganatha Das and his wife barely made it out of New Orleans in time to escape the hurricane. They took refuge in Houston and became heavily involved with the Hare Krishna Temple there. Ranganatha Das found comfort in knowing that his spiritual life did not depend on a physical place. God could be found everywhere, whether he was in his hometown of New Orleans or not. He believes that if it weren't for the Hare Krishna community in Houston, he would have been much more distressed by the events. Ranganatha Das holds an opposite notion than that of Nesbit concerning the involvement God may have had in the catastrophic events:

It just proved to me that God is supreme controller.... It made me realize God's power more. No matter how much we try to enjoy ourselves in the French Quarter, if God wants us out of there, he could just blow the whole thing over or flood it. We have no power compared to God" (Ranganatha Das 2006).

While some people may feel disenfranchised by such a reality, Ranganatha Das has a positive outlook and finds it empowering. "As long as it somehow or another helps you remember God and develop more love for God, it's good. It shouldn't make you angry at God because there's a reason for everything. And sometimes something bad happens to somebody, but actually sometimes it turns out to be a good thing after all" (Ranganatha Das 2006). Ranganatha Das remembers how his friend in Mississippi believed that he was going to die during the storm, so he fell to the ground and started saying the mantra. Ranganatha Das thinks that situations like this may be important reminders when spiritual life has become lax.

Whenever you die if you remember God then you go to God. Whatever you think about when you die is what you become.... [In emergency situations] a lot of people start saying "Oh my God" or

something like that, and that's good.... We should do that even if it's not an emergency, but especially if we're going to die, that we should pray to God" (Ranganatha Das 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Although specific interpretations of Hurricane Katrina vary widely, even within the same religious community, members of ISKCON have a very hopeful outlook that does not confuse the material world with the spiritual world. The Hare Krishnas strive to detach themselves from material dependency. Consequently, Katrina did not offer anything of too much concern. In fact, congregants tended to see the experience as an opportunity to grow closer to God through spiritual enlightenment and community outreach. As in the beginning of the movement itself, ISKCON is acting as a center of spiritual assuredness and stability during a time of commotion and change. ISKCON New Orleans is actively providing the community with physical and spiritual nourishment when it is most needed.

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