Open to Disruption

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Published by Vanderbilt University Press

Nelson, Margaret K., et al.
Open to Disruption: Time and Craft in the Practice of Slow Sociology.
Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/34408.

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Conflicted Selves

Trust and Betrayal in Studying the Hare Krishna

E. Burke Rochford Jr.

As I worried years ago about my insider status, here I am again. I keep thinking, you don’t tell secrets on your family. There are rules. There are strong pressures as an insider to avoid revealing dirty laundry in public. To do so raises questions about one’s sincerity as an insider. If one is loyal he protects the group from outside attack. This willingness to protect represents a litmus test of membership itself. Yet in writing about child abuse I have brought ISKCON to the front page of the New York Times. Some of my devotee friends are likely to feel betrayed. I feel sick about all this.

Fieldnotes, October 10, 1998

Successful field research rests on the ability of the researcher to establish and maintain trust with those under study. Trust opens research opportunities that allow for gaining an understanding of the subjects’ ways of life from their point of view. This often requires “going slow,” given that the social worlds we investigate are almost inevitably complex, multidimensional, and ever changing. But long-term involvement in the field also encompasses more than strategically establishing trust for research purposes. It may also include relationships, including friendships that lead researchers to be seen, and perhaps to see themselves, as insiders within the social worlds they are studying. Given that sociological analysis is often critical, however, trust can readily turn into betrayal.
Although establishing trust is important for any research project, it is essential when investigating marginal and deviant people and communities, such as controversial new religious movements, for such groups are often struggling to gain a measure of public acceptance, if not legitimacy. Because scholars write books and articles that may be viewed as reliable sources by the media and the public, members of new religions have legitimate concerns about those who study them. Access to the media, and through it to the public at large, can either bring about sympathetic understanding or further negative stereotypes of the group. Therefore, where a researcher’s sympathies lie is an ever-present consideration and, as Howard Becker (1967) noted years ago, those we study often want to know whose side we are on. The answer to this question determines a researcher’s access to the setting and shapes the very nature of the research process.

I have spent my entire professional career studying the Hare Krishna movement, known formally as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (hereafter ISKCON). It has been a life-changing experience for me but also one that has been punctuated by disagreement and even controversy. It has been life-changing because I have been accepted by many ISKCON members as an insider and a devotee of Krishna, something that I have at times embraced over the course of my thirty-five years of research on ISKCON (Rochford 1985, 21–42; 1992; 2001b). But this very insider status, which opened so many research opportunities for me, also produced disappointment and conflict, as some leaders and rank-and-file devotees interpreted portions of my published work as unfairly critical of ISKCON (Rochford 1992). Trust, in these situations, was replaced by feelings of betrayal that challenged my continued presence in the field. This chapter details my efforts to establish trust and how my writings on the movement called into question both my identity as an insider as well as my intentions as a researcher.

**Engagement and Establishing Trust**

My research on the Hare Krishna movement began in the fall of 1975 as I was beginning graduate study at UCLA. I had enrolled in a course on ethnographic research where I was required to find a setting for an extended research project. Initially, I planned to study political activists, but being new to Los Angeles, I had a difficult time locating an appropriate research site. After I complained about my plight, a longtime friend suggested that
I speak with one of his two brothers who had joined the Hare Krishnas. I had known both brothers from years ago but I was initially steadfast in my refusal. As I said to my friend, “I read the newspapers and the Hare Krishnas are just plain weird as far as I am concerned.” Plus, I admitted having little knowledge about or interest in religion. As time grew short and my professor began exerting more pressure, I gave in and called my friend’s older brother. At the time, he was living with his wife and two children in the ISKCON community on the west side of Los Angeles. He invited me to his apartment and made arrangements for me to speak with one of the leaders of the community. He also took me to the temple for the evening worship service, and it was there that my interest in conducting a research project on the movement was sparked. The temple was an alien world to me, with images on the altar I knew nothing about and paintings on the walls that were equally mysterious. However, the devotees I observed were young, like me, and as I would learn, most came from backgrounds similar to my own (i.e., they were middle class and had been involved for a time in both the anti-Vietnam War movement and the counterculture).

My initial entrée into the community was largely informal, and while community authorities were aware of my presence and purposes, they never confronted me directly about my research. In large part their disinterest grew from a greater reality that would define my presence in the field over the months ahead: I was seen by virtually everyone I met in the community as a potential convert rather than as a researcher. This was my greatest fear in starting the project and I was subject to ongoing conversion attempts by the devotees. Most quickly turned aside my explanation of being a student researcher by responding, “Yes, prabhu, we all have our stories but we understand why you are really here.” Whether I knew it or not, Krishna had sent me. Such statements only intensified my discomfort, as I had hoped my research role would serve as a protective shield against the devotees’ conversion attempts. During my first weeks in the field, I desperately sought to establish myself as a strict observer. Participation, I was convinced, would suggest to the devotees that I had a personal interest in Krishna Consciousness and ISKCON. Yet, as I was soon to learn, participation was a requirement for everyone in the setting, and I was expected to demonstrate growing commitment to Krishna Consciousness. During these formative years of ISKCON’s development, one was judged either as a “devotee” or, to use the colorful language of the 1970s, a “demon” or a “karmie.” Securing any degree of acceptance would depend on my willingness to
actively participate in the religious life of the community. From the moment of my first foray into the Los Angeles community, the devotees asked me repeatedly if I chanted the Hare Krishna mantra. Although sometimes I answered affirmatively to avoid an uncomfortable situation, I still refused to chant among the devotees in the temple. Chanting, I thought, was appropriate for someone becoming a devotee, but not a researcher, or at least not this researcher.

A few weeks into my research, a critical situation arose that would reshape my project and my relationship with community members. It occurred early in the morning (3:30 a.m.), when devotees chant individually before the first worship service (arati) of the day. As I wrote in my fieldnotes:

[As] all the devotees were chanting their rounds in the temple, I refrained from doing so. It was very uncomfortable to be among all the devotees while they chanted. I observed for a while, but then realized that I was being observed more than I was observing. I could see that all the devotees were noticing that I wasn’t chanting. I felt that I was being avoided (looked down upon) because of my refusal to take part in the chanting. . . . I had visions of the study coming apart at the seams. Several devotees stopped and suggested that I try chanting the mantras. I continued to refuse. (Rochford 1976)

As I contemplated the end of my project, the younger brother of my friend came into the temple. Seeing that I was not chanting, he came over and asked if I had japa beads (a string of 108 beads used for individual chanting). When I replied that I didn’t, he offered me an extra string of beads and suggested I try chanting.

At this point I felt I had better take the beads and try chanting. I succumbed to the pressure. I knew that by chanting, the devotees would be pleased and the pressures I was feeling would subside. Soon after I began chanting, things started to happen. First, a devotee came over to me and put a flower garland around my neck (flowers that had previously been on the altar and thus were very special to the devotees). He welcomed me to Krishna Consciousness. A few minutes later, another devotee stopped and showed me the correct way to hold the beads while chanting. Immediately after that still another devotee came
over and asked if I wanted to water the spiritual plant *Tulasi Devi*. We went over to the plant and he showed me the proper way to “offer” the water to *Tulasi*. (Rochford 1976)

Although I had given in to the devotees’ expectations, I continued to interpret my actions in terms of my researcher role. As I wrote in my fieldnotes following this incident, “I felt that I was surrendering more to the thought that if I didn’t show my interest (as a potential convert) my relationship with the devotees would suffer, and my research would also. I sense I am getting into a bind. I’ve got to think this out some” (Rochford 1976).

During the months that followed, I slowly became more comfortable with the role of potential convert, in large part because I realized that researching recruitment and conversion were the only topics available for study. As time went on, however, I began to participate more frequently and with less hesitation in the ceremonial life of Krishna Consciousness. Doing so provided access to a wider range of community members. To my surprise, I also gained personal satisfaction from worshiping in the temple and began attending temple functions as much for my own spiritual purposes as for my research (Rochford 1985, 26).

Although early on in the research process, building trust was largely a product of my willingness to participate in the rituals and practices of Krishna Consciousness, my role changed over time as I became more involved in the life of the community. In 1979 and 1980, as I was conducting my dissertation research, I began working in the community school, where my job was to take young boys aged five to eight years to a nearby park, or to the beach a short drive from the community (Rochford 2011). I also began expressing my views about issues in the Los Angeles ISKCON community, as well my views about issues in the movement more generally, especially about the leadership controversies that emerged following the death of ISKCON’s founder, Prabhupada, in 1977. These actions signaled both to myself and to the devotees my commitment to ISKCON and its well-being.

My membership status grew further during the years that followed. Beginning in the early 1990s, I served as a member of ISKCON’s North American Board of Education and was an advocate for children in that role. As controversy grew about ISKCON’s leadership in the 1980s and 1990s, I was asked to serve on a committee investigating the appointment of ISKCON’s successor gurus following Prabhupada’s death. In the early 1990s,
I agreed at the leadership’s invitation to conduct a survey of ISKCON’s worldwide membership as part of the centennial celebration of Prabhupada’s birth (see Rochford 1999). During these years, I also contributed a number of scholarly articles to the *ISKCON Communications Journal* about family development, child abuse, and leadership (Rochford 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2000, 2001a).  

**Insider Knowledge, Sociological Analysis, and Betrayal**

Ethnographers face a variety of challenges in the field that may call into question or potentially rupture the trust established with their informants. In the extreme, a loss of trust may push researchers out of the field or otherwise render them so marginal that research opportunities become sharply reduced (see, for example, Leatham 2001).

During my early months in the field, I made a number of mistakes that raised questions about my trustworthiness. Yet the occasions where my identity became a topic of critical scrutiny by ISKCON members occurred after the publication of my two books on ISKCON (Rochford 1985, 2007) and especially following the publication of my article on child abuse in the movement’s boarding schools (Rochford 1998a). These publications produced highly charged situations where some ISKCON members saw reason to reassess my identity and motives. Was I a devotee after all, or even a “well-wisher” of ISKCON? Several powerful and influential ISKCON leaders and members believed my writings were proof of my outsider status because of the controversial issues I chose to explore using the language and perspectives of the social sciences. As one devotee critic stated after reading portions of my manuscript *Hare Krishna in America* prior to its publication: “I am convinced that there is a serious objectivity problem in your work. A sociologist reading your work won’t see it. What you have written may be seen as good sociology but the movement [ISKCON] is not depicted accurately. . . . You have a lack of understanding of your own bias” (March, 1983). Another devotee leader challenged my argument that ISKCON’s missionary goals had been displaced because of an increased emphasis on economic gain in the devotees’ distribution of religious literature in public places. He countered my analysis by asserting that as a nondevotee, I lacked an understanding of the thinking and motives of the devotees distributing Prabhupada’s books: “It’s really hard to separate the missionary desire, or motivation, from
practically any element of our [ISKCON] society. That philosophical connection is there for devotees. Every activity is a preaching activity. That is not perceivable by an outsider. Or even—[pause]—it takes a while to get used to that principle” (March, 1983; my emphasis). Convinced that my writing was one-sided and biased, several ISKCON leaders mobilized a campaign to discredit me and my work among scholars of new religious movements. In 1983, the organizer of a conference on new religions informed me that he had been asked by another ISKCON scholar to reconsider my invitation to participate. The scholar protested my involvement based on a source within ISKCON who suggested that my work was “biased” and “unscientific.” The organizer of the conference, however, reaffirmed my invitation and I attended the gathering.

In 1985, within months of the publication of my book *Hare Krishna in America*, ISKCON held a scholarly conference on the movement at its West Virginia farm community (New Vrindaban). During the previous year, I had been in conversation with the devotee organizing the conference and had expressed a willingness to help in any way I could. The devotee in question was one of those who had previously criticized my book manuscript. I was dismayed when another scholar sent me the program for the upcoming conference. He expressed his own surprise at my not being invited to the conference. I phoned the devotee organizer and expressed my displeasure at his decision to leave me out of the conference. At one point in our conversation he remarked, “I don’t want to promote you as a scholar of the Hare Krishna movement. . . . You have allowed yourself to develop a biased view [of ISKCON]. I don’t think you would make a useful contribution to the conference.” After this conversation, I gave up any hope of continuing my research on ISKCON and moved on to another research project unrelated to new religions.

Four years later, however, another research opportunity presented itself in the form of a longtime devotee friend who had risen to a position of influence within ISKCON. I had been thinking for some time about the fate of the devotee children I had worked with in the Los Angeles ISKCON community years earlier. In conversation with my friend-turned-leader, he suggested that I might be able to start a research project on ISKCON’s second generation. It became clear from our conversation that I was no longer a controversial figure as, unbeknownst to me, a reform movement had grown within ISKCON as my book was being published. The reform movement
successfully changed the controversial guru system that had been instituted after Prabhupada’s death (Rochford 1998c). The writings that had pushed me out of ISKCON years earlier were no longer controversial to most ISKCON leaders and members.\(^7\)

**Reporting on Child Abuse**

In the summer of 1989, I began a study of ISKCON’s second generation by interviewing seventy parents affiliated with four ISKCON communities in the United States. I had been warned that many of the young people who had grown up in the movement would likely be hesitant to speak with me. At the time, no one told me why, and I assumed it was because my age placed me with their parents’ generation and that ISKCON was experiencing some degree of generational conflict. Because of this, I decided to begin my research by interviewing parents about their children’s experiences. Almost immediately after beginning my interviews, I learned something unexpected: several parents mentioned that some of the children had been sexually molested and/or physically abused in the movement’s boarding schools (ashram-gurukulas). At first, I did not know how to interpret what I was hearing, as it remained unclear whether these were rare occurrences or something more substantial. Subsequent interviews with parents, gurukula teachers, and several adolescent devotees confirmed that the abuse was more than isolated. Over the next several years, accounts of abuse circulated widely throughout the movement as young people and their parents began detailing the experiences of the children in ISKCON’s boarding schools (Rochford 2007, 41–44). By the early 1990s, few devotees remained unaware of the abuse allegations.

Once I had accepted that the abuse was commonplace, I was unsure what to do with the information I had. How would I integrate child abuse into my emerging analysis of family life and ISKCON’s second generation? What harm would this information do to ISKCON should the abuse allegations be made public through my writing? I wrestled with these and related questions over several years. Then, in 1997, the editor of the *ISKCON Communications Journal* asked me to write an article on the child abuse that occurred in ISKCON’s schools. He suggested that since the allegations of child abuse were widely acknowledged within ISKCON, the time was right to take on the issue. He also emphasized that I was the only person who
could do this. I expressed to him my worry that such an article would likely prove controversial within ISKCON. On the other hand, although I did not say as much to him, I believed the article might offer support to the young people struggling to heal from the abuse and/or mistreatment they had suffered in ISKCON’s schools. Even so, I remained anxious and conflicted about writing the article.

I wrote a draft of the article and sent it to a number of first- and second-generation devotee friends for comment. The responses I received varied (see Rochford 2001b) but one longtime friend in a position of leadership wrote: “I do have a visceral reaction to protecting the institution seeing ISKCON as the extension of Srila Prabhupada’s will and vision. While we may serve well as lab rats for some social research study, what will be the effect on ISKCON’s reputation?” (January 20, 1998; quoted in Rochford 2001b, 163–64). I was dumbfounded by his reference to “lab rats” and wrote back:

If you use it [reference to lab rats] simply as a defensive strategy, well okay. I don’t like it but okay. If you actually believe this is the way that I see you and the many devotees I have known over the past twenty odd years I have to say you are wrong, very wrong. There is more I might say here but I won’t, only because it is so off the mark and it reveals something that concerns me greatly about how you must view me as a person. I respect your honesty on this, but not much else. . . . This doesn’t make me a “demon,” or someone who sees other human beings as mere “lab rats,” although you and others may think so. I have a deep respect for ISKCON and all those devotees who have committed themselves to Prabhupada and Krishna. But understand also that I am a social scientist. I see no reason to apologize for this. (January 20, 1998)

In response, he wrote, “If it [the abuse article] blows up, I can see the worst happening. You are labeled a turncoat, mole, or the more colorful terms of ISKCON-ese; someone who has used his confidences to stab ISKCON in the back” (January 21, 1998; quoted in Rochford 2001b, 157).

These and similar responses made me want to withdraw the article from publication in the journal and I expressed my reservations to the editor. He reassured me that publishing the article was the right thing to do and I reluctantly went along. I came to regret my decision when my article became the basis of a front-page story in the New York Times (Goodstein 1998).
Thereafter, newspapers and media outlets throughout the world reported on the Hare Krishna child abuse allegations. I was devastated by what was happening and was especially concerned about the reactions of my devotee friends. Several wrote me after the *Times* article appeared and I sought out others for their reaction. One devotee teacher with whom I had worked on educational issues ended her message with, “Thank you so much for all your friendship and clear vision” (November 5, 1998). These simple words meant so much to me at the time. Another wrote, “Don’t worry. In the ultimate issue, it is not your fault. I am thinking of that old line, ‘Don’t shoot me I am just the piano player.’ This is karma coming home to rest for us. . . . Don’t worry, we are still friends. We are both trying to fight the good fight here” (October 18, 1998; quoted in Rochford 2001b, 171).

On June 12, 2000, a lawsuit was filed in Dallas, Texas, on behalf of forty-four young men and women who alleged that they had been subjected to “sexual, emotional, mental and physical abuse and exploitation” while minors in ISKCON’s boarding schools (Children of ISKCON et al. vs. the International Society for Krishna Consciousness et al., 2000). The plaintiffs sought $400 million—$200 million in actual damages and $200 million in punitive damages. Not surprisingly, the lawsuit resulted in considerable discussion and debate among devotees throughout the movement. Many, in and outside of ISKCON, expressed anger at the leaders, who were seen as ultimately responsible for the abuse that occurred. Others directed their anger at the plaintiffs because the legal complaint had directly implicated ISKCON’s founder, Prabhupada, in the abuse that occurred. The claim that Prabhupada had concealed or had otherwise tacitly allowed the abuse drew me directly into the controversy. An extreme but vocal minority viewed my child abuse article as the basis for the allegations against Prabhupada. As one wrote in a newsletter he circulated: “Prabhupada was defamed and blasphemed in Oct., of 1998 where HDG’s [Srila Prabhupada’s] teachings were given as the cause (by E. Jerk Rogueford) for all the egregious attacks these monster, child swallowers perpetuated on all the demigod-children of Srila Prabhupada. . . . Another point about Mr. E. Jerk Rogueford is that unless you expose this rascal you will be supporting his envious conclusions by this Turley [lawyer representing the plaintiffs] case” (S. Dasa 2000). Two devotees, including the one quoted above, made death threats against me because they believed I had implicated Prabhupada in the abuse of ISKCON’s children.9
In the final analysis, the lawsuit and my role in the child abuse controversy left me torn. On the one hand, I believed that the lawsuit was a proper means for those abused to gain justice. Yet I continued to feel guilty about my role in bringing ISKCON to the edge of financial ruin and possible destruction. As one ISKCON official told me, “If we lose the suit it will set us back twenty years.” Although I expected to be a target of the leaders’ ire, surprisingly little criticism came my way. One member of ISKCON’s governing body whom I had known for many years wrote: “Actually I have not heard any negative comments about you from the GBC [ISKCON’s Governing Body Commission]. I think most GBC’s recognize that you have presented the facts, the only criticism was from one GBC on the wisdom of publishing it at all without consulting the GBC. But even that comment, directed at the publishers, received little comment” (October 15, 1998).

Hare Krishna Transformed

In 2007, my book *Hare Krishna Transformed* was published. It focused primarily on how the growth of family life changed ISKCON in profound ways. It also detailed the politics surrounding marriage and family and how ISKCON’s renunciate leadership sought to limit both in an effort to preserve the movement’s traditional goals of literature distribution and the recruitment of new members. The book also discussed child abuse and the abuse and neglect of women, as well as how the organization struggled to survive in the face of a mass exodus of householders and their families after book distribution revenues declined dramatically and ISKCON’s North American communities faced serious economic problems. In order to stay afloat financially, ISKCON undertook a campaign to recruit Indian immigrants and their families into its temple communities. While successful, ISKCON’s religious culture underwent a process of Hinduization and the organization moved ever closer to becoming a Hindu sect catering to the spiritual and social needs of its growing Indian congregation.

Like my first book, *Hare Krishna Transformed* received criticism from within ISKCON. Unlike the previous book, however, it was reviewed by two devotee academics for religion journals. Both offered a combination of praise and criticism of the book (Greene 2011; Gressett 2008). More consequential for me and my research was the objection of a small number of ISKCON leaders to my participation on an ISKCON committee.
The committee had been preparing for several surveys of ISKCON’s worldwide membership as part of ISKCON’s long-term strategic planning initiative. In 2008, I was asked to join the committee to help construct the necessary questionnaires and to help establish a research methodology. After several months of work, the committee completed a near-final draft of the first questionnaire. We sent a copy of the questionnaire to several ISKCON leaders to get their feedback and their approval to go forward. Shortly thereafter, committee members became aware of disagreement among some of the leaders reviewing the questionnaire about the wisdom of conducting the survey. At issue was that the questionnaire included a number of sensitive questions about the movement’s leadership. Because my book dealt with several controversial issues affecting ISKCON’s development—including the failures of the leadership—three influential leaders challenged my presence on the survey committee. To address their concerns, I was asked to attend a meeting in New York City to meet with the leaders critical of my book. Any decision about the survey and my continued membership on the committee would come only after this meeting.

I went to New York in August of 2008. An experienced devotee mediator led the meeting, but the leaders who had expressed concern about my writings on ISKCON failed to attend. The two leaders who did were both longtime friends who were largely, but not entirely, sympathetic toward the book. As the summary of the meeting prepared by the mediator concluded:

The group described their reservations about shortcomings in the presentation of data. Key constituents were not included, particularly children of immigrant devotees and younger, more recent ISKCON members. Data was not the most up-to-date and did not reflect maturation which may have occurred among leaders in recent years. In places the book projects a narrow vision of ISKCON’s scope and breadth, giving readers an incomplete impression of the ISKCON Society’s goals and how well they may or may not have been achieved. Burke reminded the group that this was a book about ISKCON’s history, presented from a sociologist’s perspective. (August 18, 2008)

The report also concluded, “There was a general agreement that Burke is uniquely qualified to analyze the data from these [planned] research projects, but that to do so requires an understanding among ISKCON leaders that he
is fair. That understanding is not uniform across ISKCON’s leadership currently and needs to be improved."

At the conclusion of the meeting, I was asked to make contact with an ISKCON leader who was especially critical of both my book and my involvement with the survey committee. I already had a strained relationship with this devotee because of an article I had published about the ISKCON community (New Vrindaban) where he served as the temple president (Rochford and Bailey 2006). I e-mailed him shortly after returning from New York and suggested that we discuss his concerns. He failed to respond to my invitation, however, and I concluded that he had no real interest in talking with me. Rather, he simply wanted me to step down from the committee. Several weeks later, I received a phone call from the devotee responsible for overseeing ISKCON’s strategic planning initiative. He stated in very clear terms that the leaders would not support the planned survey any time soon, and perhaps not at all.

I was upset by the turn of events not only because of the criticism directed toward me and my inability to obtain face time with my critics, but also because participating on the survey committee had been both a productive and enjoyable experience. After some thought, however, I decided to withdraw from the survey committee, given the distraction I had become. Several members of the committee asked me to reconsider, but by then I had decided to disengage from my ISKCON research altogether. As I wrote to the members of the committee and to the two leaders present at the New York meeting:

Before the New York meeting I spent a good amount of time reflecting on what it would mean if the leaders decided to wash their hands of me and my research efforts. I decided that while I hoped this wouldn’t happen that I could live with it. And I can. So I think it is time for me to move on and let ISKCON, and all my devotee friends, get on with their lives and duties without my involvement. I am not bitter. I am really at peace with this. (September 5, 2008)

Only later did I realize that I was far from being at peace with my decision. Put simply, I recognized that disengaging from my research meant losing contact with the many friends I had gained over the years. No longer would there be research trips where I could catch up with my devotee friends and
their families. Nor would I be able to worship at a temple on these trips. The depth of my despair was revealed to me only when a dear devotee friend and ISKCON leader phoned to talk about my decision. To my utter surprise, in the midst of our conversation I choked up and tears filled my eyes. At that very moment, I realized how emotionally attached I was to my many devotee friends and to the Krishna Consciousness that remained within.

**Disengagement Hangover**

Exiting the field includes both physical separation and emotional disengagement (Berg 2009, 236–37). For short-term research projects, or where researcher and researched have little or no direct involvement with one another (as in survey research), leaving the field involves separation without the need for emotional work. But, as my case shows, slow sociology is fundamentally about building and sustaining meaningful relationships over time. As with all friendships, these relationships are inevitably built on intimacy and trust. Exiting the field, therefore, inevitably challenges the mutual emotional attachments between research subjects and the ethnographer. It may also communicate to those studied that the exiting researcher has been disingenuous and that self-interest rather than genuine friendship formed the basis of the relationship. This very possibility leaves the researcher with what amounts to an “ethical hangover” born of a persistent sense of guilt about betraying the people studied, especially those who have become friends as part of the research process (Lofland et al. 2006, 30). As I wrote to a devotee friend, “This is not easy for me. I have never gone through a divorce but that is the analogy I have in mind” (September 8, 2008). Today, I have occasional contact with a limited number of devotee friends and monitor several devotee websites on a daily basis to keep up with some of what is happening in the movement. But the hangover persists. As one of my devotee friends commented, “This is the ‘blue boy’ [Krishna] factor at work, Burke. Krishna won’t let loose of you” (October 13, 2008). Perhaps, but for me it feels more like some of Krishna’s followers won’t let loose of my heartstrings.

**Notes**

1. ISKCON’s historical roots have been traced to Bengal, India, in the sixteenth century. The Krishna Consciousness practiced by ISKCON members is part of the Krishna Bhakti movement of Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533). A
distinctive feature of the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition to which ISKCON belongs is the belief that Caitanya is an incarnation of Krishna. The movement was brought to the United States in 1965 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (or Srila Prabhupada, as he came to be called by his disciples and followers). ISKCON was incorporated as a religious organization in New York City in 1966 and is dedicated to spreading Krishna Consciousness, with temple communities and preaching centers throughout the world. The aim of the Krishna devotee is to become self-realized by chanting Hare Krishna and living an austere lifestyle that requires avoiding meat, intoxicants, illicit sex, and gambling. While young Westerners were drawn to the movement in the 1960s and 1970s, today the largest portion of ISKCON’s North American and Western European membership comprises immigrant Indian-Hindus and their families (see Rochford 2007, 181–200). For discussions of the movement’s growth and development in North America, see Judah 1974; Rochford 1985, 2006, 2007; Rochford and Bailey 2006; Shinn 1987; and Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004.

2. *Prabhu* is a Sanskrit word that means “master” or “the Supreme Lord.” ISKCON devotees often use the term when addressing one another as a form of respect.

3. Initiated devotees are required to chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra on their japa beads each day: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

4. Although my personal relationship with ISKCON and Krishna Consciousness changed during these years, changes also took place within the movement that facilitated my taking on a membership role. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, ISKCON became a congregational movement as its communal structure collapsed because of dwindling revenues from book distribution (Rochford 1985, 175–76; 2007, 63–64). As a result, less committed people gradually gained recognition as devotees and ISKCON members.

5. This and the previous quote are based on two face-to-face conversations with three devotee leaders who read and critiqued several chapters of my book manuscript prior to its publication. These conversations were tape recorded. My effort at bringing findings back to the field is detailed in Rochford 1992.

6. The challenge to my analysis was framed largely in terms of the discourse of social science. My critics complained that the interview data I presented were not representative and that I tended to overgeneralize my findings, given that the majority of my ISKCON research had been carried out in Los Angeles. In addition, my objectivity was called into question because of my research involvement with a group of dissident devotees in Los Angeles who had defected from ISKCON and began the Kirtan Hall as an alternative to ISKCON (see Rochford 1989). My critics believed that I had been unduly influenced by their negative views in my writings on ISKCON.
7. It is likely that *Hare Krishna in America* was controversial to a limited number of ISKCON members—mostly leaders who wanted to protect their positions and standing within ISKCON. Although many devotees know of me and my ISKCON research, it seems that few have actually taken the time to read my writings on the movement. Of course, it only takes a few powerful leaders to limit or deny research access, as the discussion in this chapter makes clear.

8. Months later, the editor admitted that asking me to write the child abuse article had been politically motivated in part. As he said, “Someone has to be a leader, even if it is someone small like myself. Someone has to take the responsibility for leading the movement” (Rochford 2001b, 173).

9. Despite these claims, I did not directly implicate Prabhupada in the abuse that occurred, although some second-generation devotees did. In my article, I quoted a young man who stated that Prabhupada was aware that he had been subject to corporal punishment while a student in the Dallas gurukula during the early 1970s but failed to intervene on his behalf. Some second-generation devotees implicated Prabhupada because, as head of the institution, he had failed to protect vulnerable children from abuse by some of his disciples. Virtually all of Prabhupada’s disciples rejected the very notion that Prabhupada had any role in the child abuse that occurred. My own research indicates Prabhupada was aware of several incidents of corporal punishment and had intervened in a number of those cases, but that he remained unaware of any sexual abuse within ISKCON’s schools.

10. After several ISKCON communities named in the lawsuit filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, the case was resolved in May 2005 by U.S. bankruptcy courts in West Virginia and California. During the lead-up to the final settlement, hundreds of additional claimants were added, for a total of 535, and each received compensation ranging between $2,500 and $50,000 from the $9.5 million settlement (A. Dasa 2005). For more details on the abuse that occurred and the resulting lawsuit, see Rochford 2007, 74–96).

11. I did finally hear from the leader in question after other devotees alerted him about my dissatisfaction with his refusal to contact me. By mutual agreement, we decided not to meet.

12. I should add that my decision was also influenced by family health issues that would have made travel for research purposes extremely difficult.

References


Dasa, S. 2000. *Kick on His Face* (e-mail newsletter), June 20.


———. 1997. “Family Formation, Culture and Change in the Hare Krsna Movement.” *ISKCON Communications Journal* 5 (2): 61–82. content.iskcon.org. (“Krsna” is a spelling used within ISKCON.)

