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BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI's AMERICAN SCRIPTURE

by

CHRISTA LASHER

Under the Direction of Dr. Kathryn McClymond

ABSTRACT

This essay explores ISKCON's religious text A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, as an American scripture. This commentary expressed a philosophy which attracted ISKCON's American converts and gave voice to the protest they had against the larger American culture. Using Thomas Tweed's theory of dissent, I show how the *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* gave the American converts of the 1960s and 1970s a language of dissent in the larger American conversation and allowed them to create an alternative American identity. In this way, the *Bhagavad Gita* is an American text.

INDEX WORDS: *Bhagavad Gita*, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, Bhaktivedanta Swami, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON, Thomas Tweed, Wendy Griswold, American, Identity

BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI's AMERICAN SCRIPTURE

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CHRISTA LASHER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2010

BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI's AMERICAN SCRIPTURE

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DEDICATION

To all those who have helped me in this research.

To the dissenting voices in America.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge, first, Dr. McClymond, who spent so many hours guiding me through this process as I worked my way to become a scholar. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Weiner and Dr. Sehat, who wouldn't let me get away with a simple answer. Finally, I want to acknowledge Kenny Smith, who started me in this direction in the first place and who has always been willing to listen and offer advice.

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INTRODUCTION

"[A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada] is very loyal to the tradition. . . . As far as fidelity to tradition is concerned, Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentaries are very traditional."

– Thomas J. Hopkins

"The meanings attributed to any cultural object are fabrications, woven from the symbolic capacities of the object itself and from the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object."

– Wendy Griswold

In *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna* (1983), Thomas J. Hopkins declares that the *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* (hereafter, the *BGAII*), is "very traditional," a characterization that focuses on the text's Indian roots.[1] This appears to be how most scholars have treated the *BGAII*, ISKCON's foundational text - that is, as another traditional Indian text.[2] As a result the "American-ness" of this text has been largely overlooked. The following essay will argue that the *BGAII* can be better understood as an American scripture because ISKCON devotees used it not to embrace an Indian identity, but rather to create an alternative American identity, specifically one that rejected mainstream American values. The text of the *BGAII* allowed them to do so by appealing to and authorizing values they had developed in the American counterculture

[1] Steven J. Gelberg, ed., *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), 140-141.
[2] Thomas J. Hopkins. "ISKCON's Search for Self-Identity: Reflections by a Historian of Religions" in *The Hare Krisna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, ed. Graham Dwyer and Richard J. Cole (Radha Mohan Das) (London: I.B. Taruis, 2007), 176. Hopkins declares that Bhaktivedanta Swami was frustrated by the *mayavadin* or impersonalist interpretation Radhakrishnan had given the text – the only text with Sanskrit that was easily available to his students. Bhaktivedanta Swami began to write his own translation in New York and then in San Francisco. Harvey Cox and Larry D. Shinn similarly characterize the *Bhagavad Gita* in their interviews from the same book. Larry D. Shinn and Dacid G. Bromley make a similar characterization of the Bhatkivedanta Swami's presentation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in their introduction to *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (1989).

movement, by acting as the main means of contact between the ISKCON devotees and the larger culture, and by being developed for the use of the American devotees.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, the ancient text upon which Bhaktivedanta Swami commented, is a religious Indian text recounting in poetic verse the dialogue between Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, whom Arjuna will learn is actually the supreme deity. Compiled from oral traditions between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the *Bhagavad Gita* was inserted into the middle of the larger Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. The dialogue included in the *Bhagavad Gita* occurs right before the epic battle of the *Mahabharata*, and it outlines the importance of *bhakti*, or devotional worship of Krishna. The *BGAII*, written by Bhaktivedanta Swami, is over 800 pages long, consisting of 18 chapters broken down into verses along the same lines as the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *BGAII* does not attempt to change the ordering of the traditional Hindu text. It is formatted like any other traditional Hindu commentary, as a verse by verse commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, listing first the verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit, followed by a word for word literal translation into English, then a smoother English translation, finally followed by the commentary on the verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Only occasionally does Bhaktivedanta Swami combine verses or omit a commentary. The *BGAII* does not attempt to change the story of the *Bhagavad Gita,* but rather it provides a distinctive interpretation, specifically in its emphasis on Krishna Consciousness.

However, I am not arguing that the *BGAII* is an American text *primarily* because of its content. My argument is that the *BGAII* is an American text primarily because of how it was used by the ISKCON devotees in the 1960s as a cultural object. That is, the devotees used the commentary to create an alternative American identity and as a main means of contact between ISKCON and the larger American society. The content of the *BGAII* is important insofar as it presented symbols that could be interpreted by the American devotees within their own cultural context. I will argue that the text is American primarily because it was a cultural object whose meaning for American devotees was fabricated through an interplay between its symbolic identity as a sacred text and the cultural presuppositions its American

readers brought to the text. The *BGAII* was used by its American readers – the ISKCON devotees – to dissent in the larger American cultural conversation, not primarily because of its content but through their interpretation and manipulation of it as a sacred text.

I will prove this first by examining the context of the 1960s, during which time American cultural norms were shifting and the single normative way of being American was fragmenting – from modernist unities to postmodernist pluralities. This point is important because the *BGAII* set up a legitimized and coherent alternative unity. That is, the *BGAII* was used by American devotees to interpret and then respond to a specific American historical moment, the 1960s. They reacted to the fragmented pluralities by accepting an alternative unity. Then, I will examine the Hippies, a specific group that emerged during the counterculture of the 1960s. Many early ISKCON devotees initially were Hippies and then moved into an ISKCON community. I argue that while they were Hippies they adopted specific cultural values. The *BGAII* provided sacred authorization for these values and situated them in a larger stable context than the Hippie community provided. While the Hippie communities fell apart relatively quickly, ISKCON remained stable. The *BGAII* was used by American devotees to authorize the community they created, a community with values that paralleled values they had already developed in the counterculture. Next I will examine how the *BGAII* was particularly adaptable for American reception. Bhaktivedanta Swami chose to translate and write his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* because, he claimed, no other English translation or commentary was accurate enough to be used by his followers in the West. It was targeted specifically to a non-Indian, primarily American audience in its use of English language and its special focus on Krishna Consciousness (more on this later). Finally, the *BGAII* was used in proselytizing efforts as the initial and primary means of contact with mainstream America. As such it was both a bridge and a dividing element between mainstream America and a specific community of dissenting America. In these ways, the *BGAII* was unique as a sacred text in the American context. It became the basis for a

language of dissent in the American cultural conversation. The *BGAII* provided its American converts a cultural object that both symbolized and created an alternative American identity.

I choose to organize the argument in this way because I want to emphasize that the *BGAII* is primarily important because of how the text was received and used by the early ISKCON devotees. First, then, I describe the context into which the *BGAII* came so that we may understand the culture in which future ISKCON devotees were living, a time that fomented dissent in general. I then focus on the Hippies as a specific dissenting community, describing the values that were important to those who later entered ISKCON and how they rejected the larger culture. The ISKCON devotees did not leave America. Rather, they constructed an alternative way of being American. Later in the essay, I show how the *BGAII* spoke to those important values and helped the ISKCON devotees to create an alternative identity reflecting the values that they had developed in the counterculture movement. I will also explore how the *BGAII* was used specifically in proselytizing as the main arena of contact. Finally, I will explain, using Thomas Tweed's theory as developed in his *The American Encounter with Buddhism,* how ISKCON devotees were able to create an alternative American identity, not only by embracing the values that were developed in the counterculture but also by allowing Americans to dissent while remaining part of the American cultural conversation. These Americans did not reject their American identity outright. Rather, they used the *BGAII* to reframe their American identity so that they could dissent while still participating in the American cultural conversation.

I. The American Context of the 1960s

American culture was changing when Bhaktivedanta Swami arrived in 1965, and the counterculture emerged as several branches rejecting the dominant American culture. In order for us to understand more fully what it meant to be a member of counterculture in 1965, we have to look a little further back into the 1950s, when these young people were children. The 1950s were a post-war era of growing prosperity and growing population, one of "great optimism and great fear."[3] The economy was booming, suburban sprawl was developing, and the Communist threat was being kept at bay – but just barely. It was also a time of post-World War II reflection, as theologians, sociologists, social commentators, and political leaders all began to wonder just how safe Western culture really was from the ideologies that caused World War II and the Holocaust. It was an era, then, of cultural reflection.

In the United States during this time period, we see a conceptual shift from imagining a single normative way of being American to imagining multiple ways of being American. That is, during this era, society shifted away from the idea that there was one normative way to be American, as expressed in speech, dress, religion, and customs. This shift occurred in multiple important arenas. First, in the religious arena, a shift occurred from the normative American mainstream being Protestant Christian to the normative American mainstream including one of several different religions. Second, a shift occurred in the relationship between the university and religion. Whereas historically religion had been an authorizing agent, scientific reason became the authorizing agent after this shift. Finally, the role of the university in relation to society shifted. The university had historically been a place to instill cultural values, but during this era, the university became a seat of rebellion against mainstream cultural values. Examining this cultural shift is important because it allows us to see the culture that ISKCON devotees were rejecting. More importantly, though, it is this social fragmentation against which ISKCON devotees had to de-

[3] Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2004), 7.

velop an alternative American identity with which to dissent. The *BGAII* offered an alternative unity as the American culture was shifting from modernist unities to postmodernist pluralities. The *BGAII*, therefore, allowed ISKCON devotees to create an alternative identity and authorized this alternative identity by being presented as a sacred text. Let us begin this examination of the cultural context into which the *BGAII* was received with a discussion of religion.

According to William Hutchison, the concept of religious pluralism that influenced the 1950s American culture was that of "inclusion."[4] Hutchison argued that the inclusion model of pluralism "welcomed and respected difference, but… was also triumphalist and ultimately assimilationist."[5] That is, difference was a good thing, but only insofar as it confirmed the ultimate supremacy of the dominant American culture. Eventually, the differences would be subsumed as cultures evolved toward Western civilization and Protestantism. Western Protestant Christianity was the endpoint to which all religions and societies were moving. Late inclusive pluralism, the pluralism of the 1950s, had moved from a single mainstream, the melting pot, to what Will Herberg called a "triple melting pot." In 1955, Herberg wrote *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, in which he examined the change of immigrants' religious identity over generations. For the first generation of immigrants, the biggest concern was the preservation of their ways of life, "above all, the transplanting of their churches."[6] As they attempted to preserve their ways of life, Herberg argued that these immigrants began to create a transnational "unity" within their churches and synagogues. The second generation, the children of the immigrants, according to Herberg, generally "cast off" their religious identities, along with their lingual and ethnic identities, in order to assimilate with the American culture.[7] The third generation, the grandchildren of the immigrants, was developing this triple melting pot. The third generation "began to define their place in American society in a way that would sustain their Americanness and yet confirm the tie that bound them to their fore-

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[4] William Hutchinson. *Religious Pluralism in America* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 2003), 6.
[5] Ibid., 181.
[6] Will Herberg. *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (United States: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), 11.
[7] Ibid., 19.

bears."[8] They used what their grandparents had attempted to create – transnational, unified churches and synagogues – to mark themselves as both similar to and distinct from other Americans. Religion was the way the third generation could recognize their ethnic heritage but also maintain their "Americanness." Religion acted as an acceptable way to be different in America, as opposed to difference in dress, food, or language. While this does represent an expansion of dominant American culture to include some non-Protestant groups, Herberg also saw this triple melting pot as a de-spiritualized and even secularized religion. Many of the ethnic markers had already been eliminated, and the religion that the third generation had already been thoroughly assimilated. That is, these differences were not really all that different from the dominant American culture; the churches and synagogues of this group were largely "Protestantized." Inclusiveness at this late date only went so far. That is, difference could only be so different. Acceptable forms of Catholicism and Judaism could not be too distinct from Protestantism. While dissent did exist at this time, non-normative ways of being American had to resemble to some extent the normative way of being American.

The postwar industrial boom of the 1950s, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower acting as a national father figure,[9] created what Sydney E. Ahlstrom calls "The Placid Decade" in the United States. During this period, economic and military growth was practically unstoppable. "Under the aegis of a friendly administration American industry experienced a decade of unprecedented economic growth."[10] Suburbia spread across the map. Increasing social mobility and a massive middle class introduced American society to an era of "keeping up with the Joneses." The economic growth allowed a majority of Americans to own their homes for the first time.[11] However, these were tract houses built in cookie-cutter neighborhoods, filled with "gleaming electrical appliances" that "almost compensated for the ab-

[8] Ibid., 31.
[9] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "National Trauma and Changing Religious Values." *Daedalus*. 107, no.1 (1978): 16.
[10] Ibid., 16.
[11] Isserman and Kazin, 12.

sence of individual character,"[12] according to Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin. In this architectural fashion, we again see a single normative way of being American. That is, the architecture of suburban houses implied that there was only one normative way to be mainstream American. This, along with the "triple melting pot" Herberg describes, displays what Robert Ellwood called the modernist unity of the 1950s. "In a word, the epitome of modernism was unity: unity of truth, unity of self, unity of words and meaning, a unified state, a view of history as unitary and moving in one direction, relative conformity in the way of life and the view of those who count."[13] While dissenters did exist during this time, the Beatniks for example, these dissenters lacked the political and social power necessary to challenge the dominant culture. While the dominant American culture was beginning to lose its hegemonic position – the triple melting pot, while still largely the same as the single melting pot according to Herberg, was still a small step away from a single normative way of being American – it still maintained its control in the 1950s. The dominant American culture, the modernist culture that Ellwood described, largely remained in power in the 1950s. However, that hegemonic modernist culture was beginning to shatter in the 1960s as important shifts began to occur in the culture.

The economic growth in the 1950s did not come without problems. "While the police were struggling with violent gangs in the rapidly growing urban slums, the college professors who dealt with an increasingly affluent middle class complained about a 'listless generation' of students,"[14] which Ahlstrom classifies as "a symptom of a creeping malaise of latter-day capitalist civilization."[15] This, combined with the increasing acceptability of non-Protestant religious groups (primarily Catholics and Jews) and the change in higher education's relationship with religion in society, which we shall explore in a moment, set the stage for the seekers of the 1960s, some of whom would eventually join ISKCON. Where Ahlstrom saw a symptom of malaise in the "Placid Decade" of the 1950s, we may see the roots of

[12] Ibid.,12.
[13] Robert S. Ellwood. *The 60s Spiritual Awakening* (Rutgers University Press, New Jersey: 1994), 13.
[14] Ahlstrom, 19.
[15] Ibid., 19.

social change. The listless students soon became motivated. They used the university as a place of contestation and protest against the mainstream.

For many years, the universities acted largely to reinforce Protestant hegemony in the United States.[16] However, during the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries, the position of the university slowly began to change. This shift would not become obviously visible until the late 1950s and early 1960s. "Sunday schools, denominational colleges, and theological seminaries continued, but all three were strongly affected by the university system's ideal of science, professionalism, standardization, and cosmopolitanism. Simultaneously, their share in the general education of the American population decreased."[17] Instead of numerous, small institutions receiving regional support, American universities began to imitate research universities in Germany.[18] Traditional supporters of the mainline Protestant denominations were caught up in the support of this university system. For example, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller spent millions of dollars on colleges and universities based upon the advice of experts who believed a "'comprehensive system of higher education in the United States' was sorely needed."[19] "[T]he foundation-supported triumph of a national comprehensive system of accreditation, entrance requirements, and faculty expertise marked a major change in the climate of cultural authority prevailing among almost all institutions of higher education. Denominational colleges seeking to measure up to the new standards necessarily gave relatively less attention to their traditional aims and constituencies."[20] Even some of the denominational colleges gave authority to the new secular university system. That is, some of the universities that had previously trained ministers for, and were supported by, particular denominations, began to drop their denominational ties. These universities began partici-

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[16] Dorothy C. Bass. "Ministry on the Margin: Protestants and Education," in *Between the Times*, ed. William R. Hutchinson (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1989), 48.
[17] Bass, 49.
[18] Ibid., 50.
[19] Ibid., 51.
[20] Ibid., 55-56.

pating in the nationwide standardization of accreditation and expertise. Religion reduced its reach as an authorizing agent of public education.

In this, we may also begin to understand the shift in Hutchison's pluralism. Whereas the pluralism in the 1950s was pluralism as "inclusion," pluralism in the 1960s, by contrast was pluralism as "participation." It "implied a mandate for individuals and groups… to *share* responsibility for the forming and implementing of the society's agendas."[21] Hutchison points to such changes as the Second Vatican Council, the Civil Rights Movement, and Christian theology that questioned overseas missions as indicative of a new understanding of pluralism. Pluralism as participation is a non-assimilationist form of pluralism. Before this shift from inclusion to participation, there was one normative way to be religious in America, and that was to be a Protestant Christian. However, in the 1960s, a Catholic president was elected: John F. Kennedy. While there was some concern over Kennedy's Catholicism,[22] Kennedy still became the 35th president in 1961. Certainly, anti-Catholic sentiment persisted; many feared that Kennedy would take orders from the Vatican. Still, his election implied the broadening, if only slightly, of religious inclusivism in America.

Ahlstrom divided the anxiety of the 1960s into five categories: race and racism, war and imperialism, sex and sexism, exploitation and environmentalism, and government and the misuse of power. "Moral shock, the sudden discovery that dry rot has weakened the supporting members of a very comfortable structure of values, is a traumatic experience often followed by religious doubt which then yields, gradually or suddenly, to a new religious and ethical outlook."[23] This appears to be how many of those within the counterculture movement felt about their society in the 1960s. In the Sixties, though, these unities were broken down as the shift from modernism to postmodernism occurred.[24] In this decade, people began to reject the expression of unity when cast as uniformity. They began to argue that

[21] Ibid., 7, my emphasis.
[22] Ibid., 207-208; Isserman and Kazin, p. 251.
[23] Ahlstrom, 20.
[24] Ellwood, 13.

there were multiple ways to be American. In fact, this breakdown of modernist unities, as Ellwood suggests, may have caused the "moral shock" Ahlstrom points out. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s was the beginning of this breakdown of modernist unities "when blacks and their numerous white sympathizers, fully awakened, began to require progress faster than the modern machine could grind it out."[25] Arguably, as demand for progress outpaced society's ability to provide that progress, the only outcome could be a breakdown of societal norms.

Another important arena where the breakdown occurred, and where we can see the shift from imagining a single normative way of being American, with dissenting voices, to multiple ways of being American, is in the universities. Whereas universities had acted as mainstays of the American mainstream before and during the 1950s, after the shift in the 1960s occurred they became arenas in which to rebel against that mainstream. However, it is important to note that student protest on university and college campuses was not a ubiquitous occurrence. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an important organization in student activism during the 1960s, was only present on about 300 campuses (which makes up no more than fifteen percent of the campuses at the time).[26] And yet, student protest was, and still is, considered a defining characteristic of the decade. Student protest began with the Civil Rights Movement, when, in 1960, students throughout the country began participating in sit-ins to protest stores that refused service to blacks at their lunch counters.[27] The involvement in the Civil Rights Movement by students increased through 1965, when the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed.[28] Student protest did not end there, though, for 1965 was the year that large protests against the Vietnam War started. The protest against the Vietnam War included the faculty with teach-ins.[29] In 1967, the SDS began a serious draft resistance movement, though more important was "the spontaneous out-

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[25] Ibid., 22.
[26] Nella van Dyke, "Hotbeds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest." *Social Problems*. 45.2 (1998): 205.
[27] James O'Brien, "The Development of the New Left." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences.* 395 (1971): 16.
[28] Ibid., 18.
[29] Ibid., 20.

break of campus protests, often obstructive, against symbols of the military and the war."[30] Each of these, and other, student protests represented a protest against the singular normative American identity. These student protests explicitly and implicitly asserted that there were multiple ways to be American, a move most obvious in their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In this case, one did not have to be white to participate in American society or to use the right to vote freely. Students rejected the notion that only white Americans could vote and therefore participate in government. American identity, they implicitly argued, should be extended to include black citizens as Americans by fully enfranchising them.

Ahlstrom calls the 1960s the "Traumatic Era," while Isserman and Kazin argue that those who lived through it thought of the decade as a second Civil War. Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony, and James Richardson see this decade as a time of "normative breakdown," which initiated the flourishing of alternative religions, whereas Robert S. Ellword argues that "the Sixties were fundamentally a time of transition from modern to postmodern ways of thinking and being."[31] Those who lived through the decade and those who study it have imagined the Sixties as a time of significant social upset and change. Mirroring the mid-1800s, with the American Civil War, widespread social anxiety, and a plethora of new religious movements as both Ahlstrom and Isserman and Kazin argue, it is no wonder that new religious movements would again take root in the American religious landscape. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada arguably happened to be in the right place at the right time in 1965.[32]

According to Robbins, Anthony, and Richardson, the "normative breakdowns" caused by the moral shock Ahlstrom describes, brought about the proliferation of new religious movements, such as

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[30] Ibid., 21.
[31] Ellwood, 10.
[32] While I have been unable to find whether Bhaktivedanta Swami knew what was going on in the 1960s and intended to take advantage of it, he claimed to have been told by his guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, to spread Krishna Consciousness to the west through the United States. One possibility is that 1965 was Bhaktivedanta Swami's first opportunity to go to the U.S. as that was the year the immigration quotas were lifted with the Immigration Reform Act.

ISKCON. These new religious movements "involve attempts to provide alternatives to a disintegrating social philosophy at its most fundamental level, i.e., its religious core."[33] Eastern or "monistic" groups like ISKCON "tend to project a vision of the universe in which there is an ultimate metaphysical unity or 'oneness' which dissolves polarities and imparts an ultimately illusory or epiphenomenal quality… to the material world,"[34] according to Robbins et.al. The acceptance of ISCKON, then reflects a breakdown of norms. ISKCON, like other alternative religious traditions, was possible because of the breakdown of unities that we see in the post-WWII era. ISKCON however, did not require rejecting an American religiosity; rather, it presented a new and alternative form of unity – "metaphysical unity or 'oneness.'" Specifically, ISKCON provided a spiritual alternative to the materialism with which many within the countercultural movement grew up.

Within ISKCON, the *BGAII* functioned as a sacred text for American, non-Indian devotees. The *BGAII* offered ISKCON devotees an alternative unity during a time of social fragmentation when the culture's concepts were shifting from modernist unities to postmodernist pluralities. The *BGAII*, as we shall see in future sections, presented the material world as inherently devoid of meaning, until it was utilized to serve Krishna. In recognizing the importance of serving Krishna, and in the omnipresence of Krishna, the world could be imagined as unified. For example, Krishna, as the Paramatma, or Supersoul, "is present in everyone's heart" regardless of race, species, or social standing.[35] Here, then, we can see how the *BGAII* confronts the concerns of those who rejected the mainstream way of being American about race and racism or exploitation and environmentalism. Moreover, the *BGAII* presents a concrete social order, based upon the Vedic caste system (Krishna Conscious people actually transcend this system), and the certainty that that system brings. It also discourages its devotees from accumulating

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[33] Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony, and James Richardson, "Theory and Research on Today's 'New Religions.'" *Sociological Analysis*. 39.2 (1978): 100-101.
[34] Ibid., 102.
[35] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* (Australia: McPherson's Printing Group, 1986), 294, 5.18.

excess material possessions, which confront the concerns the counterculture had with materialism, a concern we will explore more thoroughly in the next section. By presenting such a certain social structure, the *BGAII* was able to present an alternative unified society, one that spoke to the early American devotees. J. Stillson Judah, in his 1974 study on ISKCON, found that Bhakivedanta Swami "[i]n accord with their protest" used the countercultural language the early American devotees had used, even expressing such sentiments in the *BGAII* itself.[36] It is this understanding of the world – in fact, this entire philosophy – which attracted many of the early converts to ISKCON. In fact, E. Burke Rochford found that the most frequently listed highest ranked reason for joining ISKCON by the early devotees was the philosophy of the movement – that philosophy presented in the *BGAII*. It was the second most common reason in the second to fourth rank.[37] For Devi, whose experience as an early ISKCON devotee acts as a case study for Rochford, it was her search for people who lived like those presented in the *Bhagavad Gita* and whose society looked like those presented in the book that brought her to ISKCON. ISKCON and its way of understanding the *Bhagavad Gita*, for her, brought the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* to life. It presented an alternative way of life, an alternative philosophy, one that attracted her and others like her, from the mainstream way of being American.

[36] J. Stillson Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York: 1974), 114.
[37] E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna in America*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press: 1985), 70.

II. The Hippies

What might be termed the counterculture movement was an amorphous network of interconnected movements that rejected, in part or in total, the cultural norms and values of the dominant or mainstream American culture. However, it was by no means an organized, clearly definable movement. Rather, it emerged in multiple interconnected branches: the Beatniks, the drug culture, the Civil Rights Movement, the Sexual Revolution, the Hippies, the anti-war and specifically anti-Vietnam War movement, Rock 'n' Roll, etc. These movements shared a rejection of dominant values precipitated by the "moral shock" described in the previous section. While all of these movements reflected the cultural change of the 1960s, the Hippie movement is particularly important to this study because of its effect upon ISKCON. Many ISKCON devotees developed their cultural values within the Hippie movement; in fact, "Hippiedom usually marked their intermediate phase before conversion to Krishna [Consciousness]."[38] They carried those values they developed in the Hippie movement into ISKCON. These values were also reflective of the American counterculture at the time. However, the Hippie movement could not maintain an alternative identity for its members. The *BGAII* offered a more stable dissenting identity, one that was authorized by the sacred text of the *BGAII* and supported by the institution of ISKCON. However, the *BGAII* had to contain symbols that spoke to the American devotees, symbols that could be interpreted through the devotees' cultural presuppositions. In this section, then, we will explore the Hippie movement and some of its values so that we may understand the presuppositions used to interpret the *BGAII.* I will demonstrate certain values that the early ISKCON devotees developed while they were Hippies. These values, the main concern of this section, represent the presuppositions which the early American devotees used to read the text of the *BGAII* and to understand the philosophy it represents. I will also demonstrate that many early ISKCON devotees came from the Hippie movement, in fact, Bhaktivedanta Swami tended to target Hippies, such as when he moved into the Haight-Ashbury

[38] Judah, 11.

district in San Francisco where a well-known Hippie commune existed. The *BGAII* was involved in this process by presenting a philosophy which "incorporates countercultural secular value."[39] That is, the *BGAII*, and the institution that supports it, represents a religious response to the frustration those within the counterculture had with the mainstream American culture and their search for an alternative value system.[40] The *BGAII* as representative of the philosophy of ISKCON, attracted the ISKCON devotees who were not satisfied with the response the Hippie movement offered them.

The Beatniks were the antecedents of the Hippies, so it will be helpful to explore briefly the culture of the Beatniks. The Beatniks emerged in the 1950s in San Francisco around a central group of figures, most prominently Alan Ginsberg. They were a small group who experimented in art, philosophy, and sex who drew their name from "beatitude," shortened by a prominent member, Jack Kerouac.[41] While the Beats were anti-authoritarian and anti-credal, certain common values did emerge. The first was sexual experimentation, "untethered to the values of monogamy and heterosexuality that had reigned supreme in the Western world since the dawn of Christianity."[42] Also evident was the search for an "authentic" experience, expressed by both the outlaw and the primitive, which emerged in multiple ways,[43] such as in the use of drugs like marijuana and LSD and the exploration of Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.[44] Many of these traits were borrowed from the Bohemians – the Lost Generation – of the 1920s, who influenced both the Beats and the Hippies. A unique, though not ubiquitous, trait that also emerged among the Hippies, especially those that later became ISKCON devotees was vegetarianism.[45]

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[39] Judah, 106.
[40] Ibid., 106.
[41] Isserman and Kazin, 152.
[42] Ibid., 154.
[43] John Robert Howard,. "The Flowering of the Hippie Movement." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 382, (1968): 53.
[44] Isserman and Kazin, 154.
[45] Poling and Kenny, 25.

According to John Robert Howard, "[t]he values of the beats and the hippies are virtually identical."[46] Both rejected sexual and social norms, including capitalism, the middle-class, and the materialism they claimed it created; used drugs and explored alternative – mostly Eastern – traditions in search of the authentic or transcendent experience;[47] and emphasized the importance of self-expression, voluntary poverty, and the importance of "dropping out" of the larger society. Both the Beats and the Hippies engaged in what Howard calls "lateral deviance," one of two types of deviance that occur within a society that has a social hierarchy and in which certain privileges are conferred to those in the higher positions.[48] In the case of vertical deviance, those lower in the hierarchy attempt to enjoy the privileges normally only given to the higher ranks without obtaining that rank,[49] thereby maintaining the value system and power structure, such as when a teenager drinks alcohol before she comes of legal age. With lateral deviance, however, the value system is rejected entirely. Those lower in the social hierarchy develop values different from or even opposed to the values of the social hierarchy.[50] When the value system is rejected, the power structure or hierarchy cannot be maintained. With vertical deviance, conformity can be encouraged by "conditional rewards," because the value system remains intact. For example, as long as a child is willing to obey particular laws, he may have a learners' permit at the age of fifteen before he is legally old enough to drive alone. However, with lateral deviance conditional rewards cannot be used to encourage conforming behavior[51] because the value system of the superior ranks is rejected. In this case, the child simply does not care about driving and would not be deterred from breaking laws for which the punishment involves the loss of driving privileges. Both the Beats and the Hippies engaged in lateral deviance: they could not be induced to conform to appropriate behavior by the larger society because the larger society could not offer them a reward they valued, such as an

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[46] Howard, 55.
[47] Isserman and Kazin, 154.
[48] Howard, 52.
[49] Ibid., 52.
[50] Ibid., 52.
[51] Ibid., 52.

"authentic" experience of the transcendent through a "primitive" or pre-modern culture. They, then, had to find, or construct, a new society, or social movement, that recognized their deviant values. The main difference, Howard argues, is that the Hippies tried to develop a community,[52] whereas the Beats "had neither any concept of community nor any dream of transforming society."[53]

Like the Hippies and the Beats, ISKCON devotees also engaged in lateral deviance. They dropped out of the larger American culture, rejecting the values of that culture, and developed their own value system. The value system they developed, though, is the one they had developed in the Hippie movement. Therefore, it is important to see just what in the dominant culture they rejected. Scholar Sam Bluefarb described Hippies as "anti-intellectuals." According to Bluefarb, the Hippie read too many esoteric books, for which he had no training, and thereby "rejects the larger – and perhaps better – part of the Humanist tradition."[54] Bluefarb claimed that this amateur reading caused the Hippie to miss a great deal in Western, and particularly American, writers and to turn, instead, to Eastern mystics. Bluefarb's main complaint was that Hippies both selectively borrowed from Eastern traditions (through ignorance most likely) and selectively rejected elements of Western traditions. Hippies did so by "accepting what they like in Eastern religions, and rejecting what they don't like in them,"[55] even going so far as partially to borrow Eastern garments, while at the same time ignoring their American heritage. "The Hippies, however, superficially acquainted with the principles of three of these [American writers] (Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman), have largely ignored the other two, Melville and Harthorne – the dark 'Yin' to the bright transcendental Hippie 'Yang.'"[56] Thoreau, indeed all of the Transcendentalists, was imagined by the Hippies as their antecedent. The anti-materialism and anti-capitalist writings of

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[52] Ibid., 55.
[53] Ibid., 55.
[54] Sam Bluefarb, "Hippies: Another View,"*Journal of Popular Culture*. 2.3 (1968): 469.
[55] Ibid., 474.
[56] Ibid., 475-476.

Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman did provide a literary history for the Hippies and the Beats.[57] In fact, the *San Francisco Oracle*, which was published for the Beat/Hippie Haight-Ashbury community, commonly featured references to Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman.[58]

The *Bhagavad Gita* was popular reading among Hippies, and Thoreau was often characterized as a Hippie and claimed as "their model for the life of non-conformity."[59] Bluefarb argued that the Hippies thoroughly mangled both the *Bhagavad Gita* and Thoreau in interpretation, ignoring, for example, that Arjuna was told to go to war and kill his cousins and that Thoreau specifically did not want others to imitate him. What is important for our purposes is that the Hippies selectively incorporated and developed alternative value systems. The Hippies, being lateral deviants, were not satisfied with the traditional American value system, of which all five writers – Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville – were a part. They rejected the dominant value system, which in this case specifically involved Hawthorne and Melville, though not Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. In its place, they took up Eastern writings, even if understood from a different cultural perspective.

However, no religion or text can be transplanted unchanged from one culture to another.[60] A group of individuals cannot completely leave the system in which they have grown and adopt another wholesale. Interpretation naturally ensues. One theoretical lens we can use to explain this is Wendy Griswold's study of interpretation in "The Fabrication of Meaning." In this article, Griswold examined the reviews of George Lamming's novels in three areas: the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies. She demonstrated that the novels are interpreted very differently in each locale, and the literary critiques in each region focused on different aspects of the author's biography, literary style, and works.

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[57] Lois S. Josephs, "The Disadvantaged: Do Not Deprive Them of the American Literary History," *Clearinghouse*. 44, no. 2 (1969): 109.
[58] Ellwood, 34
[59] Bluefarb, 478
[60] Some previous scholars, such as those interviewed in *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna* by Steven J. Gelberg (1983), have suggested that ISKCON is, in fact, a transplant from India which was virtually unchanged by its new cultural context.

For example, American reviewers were far more likely to characterize Lamming as a black man than the reviewers in the other countries, but far less likely to be specific about the island from which he came.[61] The British were most interested in the quality of the language Lamming used, whereas the West Indian reviewers were only interested in his use of dialect, and American reviewers were hardly interested in the quality of language at all.[62] The reception of humor and the identification of major themes in the works varied widely across the countries. However, Griswold argued that there was enough consensus between the reviewers *within* each country as to make these differences *across* countries significant.

How is this important to the current project? Griswold argued that meanings of cultural objects – including the *Bhagavad Gita* – change based upon the culture into which the object is received. "The meanings attributed to any cultural object are fabrications, woven from the symbolic capacities of the object itself and from the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object."[63] Viewers identify the symbolic meaning of cultural objects through the interpretive lens developed by the value system of their cultures. Cultural meaning, then, arises from an interplay between the symbols included in the object and the interpretive framework of the viewers. In the case of the Hippies, the *Bhagavad Gita* was interpreted as an alternative to dominant American values they rejected. More specifically, the Hippies interpreted the *Bhagavad Gita* through the cultural lens provided by Emerson and Thoreau, whom the Hippies also read. Thus, the meaning of the *Bhagavad Gita* they fabricated was based upon presuppositions unique to the Hippie movement, predominantly *American* presuppositions.

Judah found that Hippies, especially those that later became ISKCON devotees, were searching for meaning. Three reasons were given for this seeking:

1. They sought an authority to give them a satisfactory alternative way of life and a worldview, when all other authorities had failed.

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[61] Wendy Griswold, "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies," *The American Journal of Sociology*. 92, no. 5 (1987): 1092.
[62] Ibid., 1093-1094.
[63] Ibid., 1079

> 2. They searched after a suitable way to validate and sacralize this perspective by means of personal experience.
>
> 3. They looked for a close fellowship with others who would have the same countercultural background and the same needs, and who would reinforce each other in routinized shared experience of this reality.[64]

ISKCON satisfied these requirements for the Hippies that later became devotees when the Hippie movement was not able to do so. The Hippie movement rejected absolute authority, which may have been the reason for its inability to offer a stable alternative community to the dominant American culture. As an authority, Bhaktivedanta Swami offered the devotees security and helped to reinforce the ISKCON philosophy as revealed in the *BGAII*.[65] Put in another way, the *BGAII*, when interpreted through the lens of the Hippie counterculture, presented an authorization for the values the Hippie community had developed. It is important to remember here, as Judah found, involvement in the Hippie movement was often a transitional stage for ISKCON devotees. He found that the majority of devotees had been drawn from the Hippie movement into ISKCON,[66] which is why understanding of particular Hippie values can help us to understand where the *BGAII* fits into that value system and how the *BGAII* mirrored those values. The devotees entered the counterculture "because they were looking for meaning they could not find in the world of the establishment."[67] However, they did not find that meaning in the Hippie movement either, which is why they were forced to look elsewhere. Using the data he gathered from his interviews with ISKCON devotees, Judah found four reasons for this. The first reason is that the counterculture culture did not have a strong charismatic leader – something the *BGAII* and the ISKCON philosophy it presents does, as we shall see in the next section. The second reason is that the Hippie movement lacked the close fellowship the devotees had been looking for. "[T]he Hare Krishna temple

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[64] Judah, 111.
[65] Ibid., 161.
[66] Ibid., 98.
[67] Ibid., 110.

became for them the alternative community they had hoped to find,"[68] offering the devotees the close fellowship they had not found in the Hippie movement. The Hippie movement also could not offer its members a common routinized experience, something the *BGAII* could do by outlining the need for service and *sankirtana*, a practice more thoroughly explored in the next section. Finally, the Hippie movement lacked a common purpose for its followers. Again, the *BGAII* was able to cope with this problem as well, by offering its members the goal of attaining and spreading Krishna Consciousness, another theme that we shall explore further in the next section. The *BGAII*, then, by presenting a philosophy that incorporated the countercultural values, that is by protesting against the "established order in favor of countercultural values,"[69] and by presenting a way to a stable community where the Hippie movement had failed, attracted members of the Hippie movement. As we have already seen, in fact, it is that philosophy, presented in the *BGAII*, that contributed to the conversion of many of the early devotees. ISKCON devotees were able, then, to use the *BGAII* to develop an alternative American identity and help to create a community, ISKCON, to support that identity where the Hippie movement failed to help them. ISKCON satisfactorily validated and sacralized its worldview by institutionalizing the philosophy presented in the *BGAII*, as we shall see in the next section. Finally, because ISKCON devotees came primarily from the counterculture movement and specifically the Hippie movement, reinforced by communal rules and authorized by the *BGAII*, ISKCON offered the seekers close fellowship and reinforcement.

Members of ISKCON had a self-appointed guide, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, to help them interpret the *Bhagavad Gita.* That is, Bhaktivedanta Swami explicitly attempted to interpret the *Bhadavad Gita* through a particular cultural lens, claiming that this interpretation was the only accurate

[68] Ibid., 109.
[69] Ibid., 112.

one, as we shall see in the next section.[70] However, ISKCON members' interpretations were also fabricated in relationship with their own social background, that is, through the values they developed in the counterculture and brought with them as they joined ISKCON. It is the interplay between the text, Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentary, the *BGAII*, and the cultural lens of the Hippie movement that shaped American converts' reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

[70] In fact, after Bhaktivedanta Swami's death, when problems arose in ISKCON, many argued that these problems arose because ISKCON had not remained faithful enough to Bhaktivedanta Swami's teachings.

III. The *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* in America

The *BGAII* was written in the United States, starting in 1965 in New York shortly after A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada first arrived. While other translations and commentaries of the *Bhagavad Gita* existed at the time, Bhaktivedanta Swami chose to translate and write his own commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* for the ISKCON devotees. As we saw at the beginning of this paper, Bhaktivedanta Swami did not begin his commentary until 1965, after he had arrived in New York. He wrote it through his time in New York and finished it in 1969, after the move to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. He wrote it, then, we can safely assume, with the philosophy that he taught his followers and preached on the streets in order to attract devotees everyday in mind. For these reasons, the *BGAII* was uniquely tailored for American consumption. It also contained certain symbols that were useful for American devotees; that is, these symbols were important for the American devotees because they paralleled values the devotees had developed in the counterculture movement. We shall explore the symbols present in the *BGAII* in this section. The values held by the devotees that were reflected in the *BGAII* allowed early ISKCON devotees, through an interplay between the symbols and the devotees' cultural presuppositions, to fabricate meaning and to develop an alternative dissenting American identity, supported by ISKCON and authorized by the *BGAII*. Moreover, the *BGAII*, after it was published, was used by ISKCON members to raise money. In their proselytizing efforts – in *sankirtana* – the *BGAII* or literature referring back to the *BGAII* was handed out to the public. Those who received this literature would, if they were interested, seek out ISKCON devotees or temples, but the devotees did not search out those to whom literature had been given. Otherwise, because few devotees were allowed to keep secular jobs and most devotees cut off communication with former family and friends, the *BGAII* became the main arena of contact between ISKCON and the larger American culture. Through the *BGAII*, ISKCON devotees were able to dissent against the larger American culture.

Bhaktivedanta Swami published the *BGAII* in 1972, seven years after having arrived in New York. It is difficult to say why it took him so long to publish the *BGAII*, the only authoritative translation and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* for ISKCON. One possibility is that Bhaktivedanta Swami was not aware that he would need to translate a copy for his followers before he arrived in America and only after being unable to find an acceptable translation and commentary in English did Bhaktivedanta Swami set about translating. In fact, in the preface to the *BGAII*, Bhaktivedanta Swami declares, "Before my presentation of *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, almost all the English editions of *Bhagavad-gita* were introduced to fulfill someone's personal ambition,"[71] which he claimed was true of English editions both in America and in India.[72] According to Thomas J. Hopkins, there was only one readily available Sanskrit version of the *Bhagavad Gita* from which he could teach his followers Sanskrit. This version also had a translation and commentary by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who was influenced by *mayavadan* or "impersonalist" philosophy arising from Shankara's Advaita Vedanta.[73] Throughout Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentary, he condemns the "impersonalists" or "Mayavadi" as misrepresenting the essence of the *Bhagavad Gita* and as being too "ignorant" to understand that essence. For example, in the commentary on verse 2.12, Bhaktivedanta Swami declares that the impersonalist philosophical theory that the soul merges with Brahman upon liberation "is not supported herein by Lord Krsna, the supreme authority"[74] or that, in the commentary to 7.24, that the theory that the "Supreme Personality of the Godhead" could not be impersonal, as impersonalist monists believe "as far as the statements of the *Gita* are concerned."[75] Moreover, other commentaries written by those not influenced by the *mayavadan* philosophy are equally suspect. "Even the most erudite scholars write on the *Bhagavad-gita* very inaccurately," [76]

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[71] Prabhupada, xviii.
[72] Ibid., 3.
[73] Thomas J. Hopkins. "ISKCON's Search for Self-Identity: Reflections by a Historian of Religions" in *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 176.
[74] Prabhupada, 89.
[75] Ibid., 403.
[76] Ibid., 449.

Bhaktivedanta Swami declares in the commentary to 9.2. In fact, ISKCON devotees "should avoid all unauthorized commentaries and interpretations" lest they are fooled and led away from Krishna Consciousness.[77] These commentators "are simply wasting their time."[78] Clearly, only Bhaktivedanta Swami's interpretation was acceptable for ISKCON.

If the *BGAII* was the only acceptable interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, why was this text one in which Bhaktivedanta Swami interested over other Indian religious texts? Bhaktivedanta Swami answered that in his commentaries as well: "One will find in the *Bhagavad-gita* all that is contained in other scriptures, but the reader will also find things which are not to be found elsewhere."[79] Moreover, "Out of many standard and authoritative revealed scriptures, the *Bhagavad-gita* is the best" (4.40).[80] The *Bhagavad Gita* was so important to Bhativedanta Swami because he viewed it as the *Gitopanishad*, "the essence of Vedic knowledge and one of the most important *Upanisads* in Vedic literature."[81] It would appear, then, that if a spiritual seeker were to read only one text, that text would be the *Bhagavad Gita*.[82] And, because so many commentators have interpreted the text incorrectly, either because they were fooled or because they had "demoniac" intentions, one must avoid their commentaries and commentators. The *BGAII* was the best commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, so it was the authoritative text for ISKCON.

The *BGAII* was attractive to the Hippies, from which many of the early devotees came as we saw in the previous section, who converted because it could act as an authoritative guide for converts in their interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita.* Specifically, it contains symbols that, when read through the cultural presuppositions of the early ISKCON devotees, address and incorporate certain values common

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[77] Ibid., 517.
[78] Ibid., 602.
[79] Ibid., 36.
[80] Ibid., 269.
[81] Ibid., 3.
[82] In fact, it appears that the *Bhagavad Gita* may have been the only Indian text many ISKCON devotees were familiar with even in 1967. See *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*, 103.

in the Hippie movement, which ISKCON devotees had carried over from their time in the counterculture movement. Those that we will consider here include the importance of a strong leader to head a community, the devaluation of the material world, and the nature of service which appeals to the "world-saver" tendency in pre-converts.

In order to understand the *Bhagavad Gita* correctly, Bhaktivedanta Swami told the devotees that they must have a "bona fide spiritual master." "The Vedic wisdom therefore advises that in order to solve the perplexities of life and to understand the science of the solution, one must approach a spiritual master who is in the disciplic succession. A person with a bona fide spiritual master is supposed to know everything."[83] So important was the "disciplic succession" that Bhaktivedanta Swami listed the disciplic succession through which he himself had "received" the *BGAII*. Krishna was listed first, followed by Brahma. Bhaktivedanta Swami himself was 32 on the list, while Chaitanya was 22. In fact, any bona fide spiritual master must be authorized through the disciplic succession. Krishna Consciousness cannot be achieved without such a master,[84] nor can it even be understood.[85] Moreover no one could be an authorized spiritual master unless his disciplic succession goes back to Krishna, like Bhaktivedanta Swami's.[86] The bona fide spiritual master is "the representative of the Supreme Lord, his direction is directly the direction of the Supreme Lord. The spiritual master, saintly persons and scriptures direct all in the same way."[87] Because the spiritual master was the representative of Krishna, his direction should be followed without question. "One should act according to the order of Krsna. This is a very important point. That order of Krsna comes through disciplic succession from the bona fide spiritual master. Therefore the spiritual master's order should be taken as the prime duty of life."[88] Bhaktivedanta Swami developed a well-defined authority by instituting this disciplic succession which then determined the

[83] Ibid., 82, 2.7.
[84] Ibid., 243, 4.17.
[85] Ibid., 603, 11.54.
[86] Ibid., 262, 4.34 and p. 588, 11.43.
[87] Ibid., 598, 10.3
[88] Ibid., 842, 18.57.

authoritative ideology. After all, the order of the spiritual master was, through the disciplic succession, the order of Krishna.

Judah argued that three elements characterized seekers, those searching for meaning, such as the Hippies and members of the counterculture movement who later became ISKCON devotees. The first of these elements was the search for "an authority to give them a satisfactory alternative way of life and a worldview."[89] This search may have stemmed from the rejection of parental authority, one of the eight common biographical characteristics of ISKCON devotees that Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenny identify. Bhaktivedanta Swami emphatically became this authority. Spiritual masters, as representatives of Krishna to whom devotees were supposed to devote themselves, were the absolute authority these seekers were looking for. Moreover, one reason Judah had enumerated for the failure of the Hippie movement for the early devotees was the lack of a single charismatic leader. Bhaktivedanta Swami became that charismatic leader, and he reinforced his position, or perhaps his position was reinforced, in his interpretation and commentary upon the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *BGAII* presents an authoritative leader as a bona fide spiritual master, recognized through his disciplic succession from Krishna and as Krishna's representative on earth.

A second characteristic that Poling and Kenny identify is a tendency to see the material world as devoid of meaning. This is tied closely both to the dangers of sense gratification and the importance of service. "Unless the senses are controlled, there is no chance of elevation to the platform of knowledge, and without knowledge and devotion there is no chance of liberation."[90] The danger here is that when one's senses are not controlled, he or she falls into an illusion of the material world and is "so engrossed in subject matters of sense gratification" that he or she is not able to consider anything else.[91] Moreo-

[89]Judah, 161.
[90] Prabhupada, 81, 2.1.
[91] Ibid., 113, 2.29.

ver, "the purpose of the *Bhagavad-gita* is not understandable to those who are sensuous."[92] To control one's senses means that one does not use them for his or her own enjoyment.[93] A devotee detaches his senses from his own enjoyment by "acting always in the loving service of Krsna."[94] "The senses require real engagements, and if they are not engaged in the transcendental loving service of the Lord, they will certainly seek engagement in the service of materialism."[95] Bhaktivedanta Swami advised preparing food for Krishna – specifically grains, fruits, vegetables, milk and water – which is later eaten by devotees after it has been offered to Krishna. A common characteristic Poling and Kenny found among ISKCON devotees was vegetarianism before conversion. Milk products, fruits, vegetables, rice, and wheat are "pure by nature. They are quite distinct from untouchable things like meat and liquor."[96] As these were the only foods presented to Krishna, they were the only foods eaten by devotees. "Remnants of food may be eaten only when they are part of a meal that was first offered to the Supreme Lord,"[97] thereby sacralizing the food, and making the enjoyment of it a sacred activity. Eating this food can destroy sin[98] while those who only prepare food for themselves "are not only thieves but also the eaters of all kinds of sins."[99] Similarly, all activity in the world could be sacralized when it is done "acting for the benefit of Krsna without expectation of sense gratification."[100] This made the vegetarian diet many devotees had before they converted sacred and confirmed the value of this diet over the more traditional American diet.

Chanting the *mahamantra*, or the "Hare Krishna" chant (for which ISKCON devotees were nicknamed Hare Krishnas) was the greatest, purest, sacrifice one can give to Krishna.[101] When one went out

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[92] Ibid., 853, 18.67.
[93] Ibid., 510, 10.5.
[94] Ibid., 210, 3.34.
[95] Ibid., 151-152, 2.62.
[96] Ibid., 779, 17.10.
[97] Ibid., 779, 17.10.
[98] Ibid., 67, 1.41.
[99] Ibid., 178, 3.14.
[100] Ibid., 126, 2.40.
[101] Ibid., 537, 10.26.

and practiced *sankirtana*, chanting the *mahamantra* in public and distributing literature in an attempt to spread Krishna Consciousness, one was doing work to attain Krishna Consciousness. This spreading of Krishna Consciousness was connected to the "world-saver" disposition, a fourth characteristic Poling and Kenny found among ISKCON devotees before they converted to ISKCON. It also connected to another one of Judah's characteristics. It provided ISKCON devotees with a "suitable way to validate and sacralize this perspective by means of personal experience."[102] This was devotional service.

Devotional service is the process that moves one away from the dangers of sense gratification, for if the senses are used in work done for Krishna, they will not be engaged in personal enjoyment.[103] "The highest perfection of self-realization is to understand that one is eternally the servitor of Krsna."[104] In fact, Bhaktivedanta Swami defined Krishna Consciousness as being engaged in service to Krishna.[105] This service began with the *mahamantra*.[106] However, any work – be it working outside the temple to earn money, cleaning the temple, going out and collecting donations, or working at the publishing firm established by ISKCON – could be devotional service. "It does not matter in what kind of work one engages, but that work should be done only for Krsna. That is the standard of devotional service."[107] This, too, sacralized all aspects of material life, by making it a sacrifice for Krishna. Moreover, by sacralizing all aspects of life and by making them a way to save the world through Krishna Consciousness, one met the demands of a "world-saver" disposition. This devotional service was the conclusion of the *Bhagavad Gita*, according to Bhaktivedanta Swami.[108] If this service was done "under the proper guidance of a bona fide spiritual master, there is no question of ignorance."[109]

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[102] Judah, 161.
[103] Prabhupada, 211, 3.42.
[104] Ibid., 141, 2.53.
[105] Ibid., 317, 6.10 and 335, 6.26.
[106] Ibid., 481, 9.20.
[107] Ibid., 619, 12.7.
[108] Ibid., 621, 12.7.
[109] Ibid., 737, 15.20.

In this way, by creating an ultimate authority, sacralizing the material world, appealing to the "world-saver" disposition, and presenting a sacralized way to use the senses, the *BGAII* allowed devotees to develop an institution that offered them an alternative to the normative way of being American. The *BGAII* established a community that would attract Hippies, one that was more successful than other Hippie communes. In other words, in this way, Bhaktivedanta Swami created an alternative culture that not only accounted for the values devotees had developed in the American Hippie and counterculture movement but also allowed them to continue to construct an alternative American identity that rejected what they saw as problematic in the larger mainstream culture. Judah, in his study, found that the philosophy that Bhaktivedanta Swami taught, as presented in the *BGAII*, often reinforced the countercultural attitudes the ISKCON devotees had when they entered ISKCON, though certain ideas did change. One such countercultural idea was the meaninglessness of the material world, that is the rejection of the materialism and the collection of material possessions they saw in the larger American culture. We have seen how the *BGAII* dealt with this, by acknowledging the meaninglessness of the material world, the uselessness of sense gratification or simple enjoyment of the material world, and by offering a way to re-value the material world through devotional service. The *BGAII* and the philosophy it represents gave the ISKCON devotes "a unified view, a rationale for continuing their belief, which forms a part of their total meaningful worldview, their new consciousness."[110] In this, and through other values that cannot be explored in this essay because of space restrictions, Bhaktivedanta Swami was able to present in the *BGAII* a philosophy that incorporated countercultural values, a philosophy which, as we have seen, attracted many early American deovotees.

In fact, one main reason early members of ISKCON gave for joining ISKCON was because of their contact with the *Bhagavad Gita* and Bhaktivedanta Swami's use of the *Bhagavad Gita*. In J. Stillson Judah's 1974 study of ISKCON, he listed "Reading the Literature about Krishna" as one of the top instru-

[110] Judah, 114.

mental reasons for conversion. He then quotes one devotee who declares that he chose to "surrender to the spiritual master" after reading a passage from the *BGAII*.[111] One devotee who had joined ISKCON in 1968, interviewed by E. Burke Rochford in his 1985 ethnography on ISKCON, declared that one of his primary attractions to Bhaktivedanta Swami was his authoritative use of the *Bhagavad Gita* when speaking to devotees and potential converts.[112] In his detailed case study of Devi, a specific ISKCON devotee, chosen because it was representative of ISKCON devotees' experiences, Rochford found that this devotee sought out ISKCON after reading a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, specifically a copy of Bhakivedanta Swami's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and expressed a desire to meet people like those from the *Bhagavad Gita*.[113] This devotee ultimately joined ISKCON. While the *BGAII* was not the only reason ISKCON devotees gave for joining ISKCON, it was an important reason for many who did. Moreover, after joining ISKCON, devotees were expected to learn the *Bhagavad Gita*, as Bhatkivedanta Swami interpreted it. Converts were expected to take classes which included study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the primary text, and other important texts according to Bhaktivedanta Swami, and both Rochford and Francine Jeanne Daner found *Bhagavad Gita* classes in each of the Temple and member schedules they cite.[114] Knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* and familiarity with ISKCON's authorized understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* appears to be both necessary and inevitable for membership in ISKCON.

ISKCON devotees often cut themselves off from the larger society. They regularly stopped communicating with family (which is one reason why ISKCON was often accused of brainwashing), dropped out of school, be it high school or college, and quit their secular jobs. Those whose friends and significant others did not join would often either quit seeing these friends or significant others or would eventually leave the movement themselves. One of the primary places of contact, then, between ISK-

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[111] Ibid., 172-173.
[112] Rochford, 71.
[113] Ibid., 96.
[114] Rochford, 15; Francine Jeanne Daner, *The American Children of Krsna*, (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1974), 41-44.

CON devotees and the larger American culture was in *sankirtana*. *Sankirtana*, as was said earlier, was imagined as the purest way to worship Krishna. During *sankirtana*, devotees would chant the *maha-mantra*, dance, distribute literature, solicit donations, and attempt to recruit new members. Once the *BGAII* was published in 1972, it was often passed out during *sankirtana*.[115] It was here that devotees demonstrated the practice by dancing and chanting the *mahamantra*. It was also here in their primary place of interaction with the larger American culture that they were able to disseminate the teachings of the *BGAII* and Bhaktivedanta Swami. In this place, they were able to demonstrate their dissenting identity.

The *BGAII* contained symbols which early ISKCON devotees could interpret using the cultural presuppositions they had developed in the counterculture, specifically in the Hippie movement. They were able to find values they held authorized there. I have looked specifically at how the *BGAII* creates an ultimate authority, how it recognizes the value-less nature of the material world and then gives it value, and how it provides American devotees with a way to serve and save the world. These are just a few; there are others that can also be examined. This section, then, has demonstrated the values ISKCON devotees found in the *BGAII* which allowed them to develop an alternative dissenting American identity. Moreover, because the *BGAII* helped to attract members through the philosophy it presented, acted as an important feature in the everyday life of ISKCON devotees and an important step in being an ISKCON devotee, and acted as a primary arena of contact between ISKCON devotees and the larger American culture the, *BGAII* allowed the American devotees to create an authorized identity that was reinforced and stabilized by a community, something the Hippie movement could not offer the devotees.

[115] Rochford, 174. In fact, the author received her copy of the *BGAII* by donating to an ISKCON group who were doing *sankirtana* on the university campus.

IV. The *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* as an American Scripture

The *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* was not an American scripture simply because it was a sacred text written within the political boundaries of the United States. After all, whether Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentary was well-established in an ancient Indian tradition or was unique to him is not in contention in this essay. Nor was this text an American scripture because it captured some essential "Americanness" so perfectly that it achieved a status of civil sacrality. In fact, while the text did resonate with concepts common within the Hippie movement, it still was strikingly distinct from the dominant American culture. Rather, the *BGAII* was an American scripture because it allowed Americans to construct a dissenting American identity in an alternative way without rejecting their American identity outright. Early ISKCON devotees were able to use the *BGAII* because they could interpret it to have the values they had developed in the Hippie movement, because they could fabricate meaning between the symbols within the *BGAII* and their cultural presuppositions. Many early ISKCON devotees were Hippies first, as we have seen. As we saw in the previous section, the philosophy represented by the *BGAII* incorporated and reinforced certain countercultural values. The *BGAII* continued the conversation the ISKCON devotees had been having with the dominant American culture before they joined ISKCON. The *BGAII* gave them a language of dissent in the American cultural conversation.

Thomas Tweed has argued that in the 19th century, Buddhism acted as a medium through which cultural dissenters could dissent within the Victorian American culture. That is, on one side of the cultural conversation in Victorian America about Buddhism were those who used Buddhism to dissent within the dominant culture, to reject the dominant social and cultural patterns of Victorian America.[116] Similarly, those who joined ISKCON were dissenters within the American culture of the 1960s. The *BGAII* provided these dissenters with the cultural language and a religious authority with which to dissent; the *BGAII* is an American scripture because it was a text that provided cultural dissenters with an authorita-

[116] Thomas Tweed. *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912*, (University of North Carolina Press: 2000), 81.

tive language with which to continue their conversation of dissent in the American culture. In the situation Tweed examined, Buddhism could only do so much for the dissenters, and the conversation that he studied outlined the limits of dissent. Moreover, very few were willing to give up certain key components of the dominant Victorian culture.[117] In the case of ISKCON and the *BGAII*, these provided more than just a language with which to dissent. The *BGAII* allowed American converts to create an identity and a stable institution, and provided them with an authoritative teacher which supported that identity as an alternative to the dominant American culture. The *BGAII* acted as an American text, then, because it allowed Americans to continue to dissent.

We have already seen how the Hippies defined themselves against a dominant American culture. Hippies saw the dominant culture as materialistic, exploitative, and devoid of transcendent meaning. They sought out alternative experiences of transcendence through the use of drugs, the emulation of "authentic" lifestyles (that is, lifestyles uncorrupted by capitalist culture), and the exploration of Asian religions. They experimented with sexual norms and voluntary poverty as well. Hippies were engaging in what Howard calls lateral deviance against the dominant American culture, or what they imagined the dominant American culture to be. What was this image of the dominant American culture?

We have explored already this conception of a unified culture of the 1950s, which was later rejected by the vocal counterculture in the 1960s. The 1950s was ruled by modernism – the modernist unity – and pluralism as inclusion – in which difference would eventually evolve toward the ultimate endpoint in Western Christian Protestantism. The 1960s saw a shift from modernism to postermodernism, from unity to disunity or pluralities. Ellwood described this as a "breaking down of unities." When the unity had broken down, Bhaktivedanta Swami and the *BGAII* offered the Hippie converts with a new unity, an alternative to the dominant American culture. As we saw, it provided its converts with a view of a unified society based upon Vedic society as Bhaktivedanta Swami outlined in the *BGAII*. It was the

[117] Ibid., xxxvi.

philosophy represented in the *BGAII* – this philosophy that presented this alternative society, this philosophy which gave voice to the concerns of the counterculture, and this philosophy which overcame the failures of the counterculture, specifically the Hippie movement – that, as we saw, attracted ISKCON devotees. The *BGAII* was a text that provided its American readers with the vocabulary to continue to dissent against the unity of the 1950s and the disunity of the 1960s. It gave them a way to re-value the material world and legitimized practices of vegetarianism or voluntary poverty, for example. It recorded the alternative value system which is necessary for lateral deviance.

Lateral deviance is an identity building exercise, and it requires an alternative worldview with which to deviate or dissent so that those participating in the identity building exercise of lateral deviance may reject the dominant worldview. According to Judah, ISKCON devotees had been seekers before they joined ISKCON. That is, they sought an authority to give them an alternative worldview, a way to sacralize their perspective, and a group of others who shared that perspective. For ISKCON devotees, the *BGAII* satisfied those desires and allowed them to join and help create ISKCON. ISKCON provided some Hippies with a total institution, as Daner argued, in which they could reject the dominant culture and find themselves as Americans.

In the third section, we saw how the *BGAII* established certain practices, rules, and values that created an alternative culture. Not only did the *BGAII* establish a definite authority within the tradition, something the Hippies had never done (making enforcement of any norms difficult), it also was able to sacralize the world for its devotees. The *BGAII* not only rejected the material world – and specifically sense gratification through interaction with the material world – as shallow and spiritually devoid of meaning, it also provided a way for ISKCON devotees to sacralize the material world, and, to some degree, sensory experience. As long as whatever work being done was done for Krishna rather than for sense gratification and personal reward that work became a sacrifice for Krishna. By making the most mundane work not only a way for serving Krishna, but also a way to obtain Krishna consciousness –

which then liberates the devotee so that the devotee may enter Krishna's domain – the *BGAII* made the material world, work within the material world, and even accumulation of material possessions, at least by the temple, sacred.

Not only does this view of work sacralize work, but it also sacralizes some activities that cause sense gratification. For example, we saw that devotees were only to eat *prasadam*, food that had already been offered to Krishna. Not only did this satisfy a vegetarian tendency that was common among ISKCON devotees before their conversion, but it also sacralized the enjoyment of that food. Once the food had been offered to Krishna, it was sacred. Enjoying that food, then, became a sacred task. Similarly, chanting the *mahamantra*, dancing in *sankirtana*, and listening to stories of Krishna may all have offered sense gratification, but because they also produced Krishna Consciousness, they are sacred work. What previously may have caused frustration – consumerism in a capitalistic society for Hippies – became a sacred task that was actually required of the devotees. The *BGAII* in this way re-sacralized the material world and the experience of that material world. ISKCON and the *BGAII* allowed the devotees to dissent by presenting a philosophy, a philosophy which attracted many of the early ISKCON devotees as we saw earlier, that succeeded where the Hippie movement had failed while still giving voice to many of the same countercultural ideals that led ISKCON devotees to "drop out" of the larger American society to begin with. The *BGAII* offered its American devotees a language with which to protest the larger American culture and an authority to sacralize and legitimize that protest as well as a community to reinforce it. The *BGAII*, then, is an American scripture because it allowed ISKCON devotees to continue to be American, but in an alternative and sacralized way.

Conclusion

The 1960s were, at least in some social sectors, a socially turbulent time in America. According to Ellwood, the turbulence emerged because the social modality transitioned from modernism to postmodernism, from unity to disunity. In the 1950s, one way of being American dominated the social world; though dissent existed in the 1950s, it did not have enough social power to effect change. However, that changed in the 1960s. Ahlstrom argued that moral shock motivated many in the 1960s to reject modernist unities in favor of postmodernist multiplicities. The Hippies were one group that rejected modernist unities. They engaged in lateral deviance, in which they rejected those norms entirely. They sought a different experience of reality and transcendence by using drugs and exploring alternative, generally Asian, religious traditions. They dissented in the American social conversation. Unfortunately for the Hippies, their communes were generally unsuccessful. The Hippies, in search of an authority and a way to sacralize their worldview, were forced to seek out another way to support their worldview.

The *BGAII* offered those Hippies who converted to ISKCON, and as we saw many ISKCON devotees had been Hippies first, a way to create a stable community because it contained symbols that, when read through the American devotees' cultural presuppositions, paralleled many of the values they had already developed as members of the counterculture. That is, the *BGAII* presented a philosophy which gave voice to the ISKCON devotees' protest against the dominant American culture. It is this philosophy, presented in the *BGAII*, that, as we saw earlier, attracted the early ISKCON devotees. One way ISKCON marketed itself to potential converts, primarily in the Hippie communities in New York and San Francisco, was by comparing Krishna Consciousness to the ultimate drug high.[118] At the same time, though, ISKCON forbade the use of any drugs, including alcohol and caffeine, and instead offered an alternative way to achieve a transcendental existence by confronting another problem Hippies had with

[118] Robert S. Ellwood, "ISKCON and the Spirituality of the 1960s," in *Krishna Consciousness in the West*, ed. David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press: 1989), 105-106.

the dominant culture. The *BGAII* declared that the material world was without meaning, something the ISKCON devotees had come to believe while they were involved in the Hippie movement. Engaging in activites – such as taking drugs, sleeping too much, and consuming meat and some other foods – purely for sense gratification, or indulging in the material world only for the sake of materialistic enjoyment, bound people to the material world. They could never be liberated in this way. That is, the dominant culture's materialism would ultimately be its own demise. But, if ISKCON devotees performed acts in the service of Krishna, for his enjoyment rather than their own, those acts became sacred tasks. The *BGAII* presented a way to sacralize the material world by using it to serve Krishna. By serving Krishna, a devotee could eventually achieve transcendence in Krishna Consciousness. This is one way, as Judah argued, that the *BGAII* incorporated countercultural values and protest.

Moreover, the *BGAII* established a definite authority, even though it was distinct from the dominant culture. Again and again, the *BGAII* declared the significance of the "bona fide spiritual master." The bona fide spiritual master acted as Krishna's representative on earth and his order should have been obeyed as such. The bona fide spiritual master gained this authority through his disciplic succession, which traced back to Krishna himself. ISKCON did what the Hippie movement could not. By using the *BGAII* to create an alternative identity – by fabricating meaning through the symbols contained in the text and the presuppositions used to read the text – the early devotees were able to create an alternative dissenting American identity and a community to support that identity.

At first, the *Bhagavad Gita* was treated by the Hippies as a mere cultural object. Over time, however, as the Hippies rejected certain elements of the dominant American culture, the *Bhagavad Gita* offered an alternative. The Hippies interpreted the meaning of the *Bhagavad Gita* through their own American outsider cultural framework. When Bhaktivedanta Swami came to the United States, he offered an understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita* that paralleled the understanding the Hippies had developed. But, because Bhaktivedanta Swami also established a hierarchy and community, he also brought

an interpretation backed by authority and legitimacy. That is, by showing his disciplic succession as coming from Krishna himself and declaring a long tradition in India, Bhaktivedanta Swami provided legitimacy to an interpretation similar to the Hippies. In some ways, Bhaktivedanta Swami legitimized the Hippies' interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. When devotees joined ISKCON as devotees, the *Bhagavad Gita* was no longer a cultural object to them. It had become a sacred scripture, one that helped to support values and a worldview the devotees had developed in the Hippie movement.

The *BGAII* was an American scripture because it allowed devotees to dissent within American society, it incorporated their values and gave voice to their protest – to their dissent – against the dominant American culture. It presented this in a philosophy that attracted many of ISKCON's early converts. Earlier scholarship on ISKCON paid little attention to the distinctive nature of the *BGAII*. Much early scholarship focused on how ISKCON is an Indian transplant, and while change within the American context was acknowledged, that change was given little attention. The *BGAII*, as another translation and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, was generally left as a new translation and commentary on an old Indian text. I have argued instead that the *BGAII* ought to be considered an American scripture because it allowed American dissenters to continue to dissent in an American cultural conversation. It provided American dissenters with a literary heritage to fill in the gaps upon rejecting some of their American literary heritage, it confirmed some of the practices they were already practicing (like vegetarianism), it sacralized the material world that they had thought of as devoid of meaning, and it authorized this dissenting language by being a scripture. The *BGAII* incorporated values important to the countercultural, it allowed devotees to continue to protest aspects of the dominant culture they found distasteful, and it gave them a religious response to the frustration they had with the larger American culture. In all these ways, the *BGAII* allowed its American converts to continue to dissent in the American cultural conversation when the Hippie movement had failed. I have shown, then, that the socially turbulent time – in which society's modality was shifting from unity to disunity – of the 1960s created those who dissented

or protested against the dominant culture, one group among them was the Hippies. But, as I have also showed, the Hippies failed to support this protest in their communities. Many Hippies, then, were attracted by the philosophy, presented in the *BGAII*, to ISKCON. That philosophy in the *BGAII* offered a metaphysical unity and a different view of a unified society where the larger American culture and the Hippie movement had failed to do so. Moreover, the *BGAII* and the philosophy that it presented, the philosophy which attracted many ISKCON devotees to ISKCON, gave voice to the dissent – the protest – that its members had within the larger American culture. It incorporated, paralleled, the values ISKCON devotees had developed in the counterculture movement, but the *BGAII* gave that dissent a voice, legitimized it, and supported it. By doing so, by helping to create a language of dissent for the ISKCON devotees and by supporting that dissent, the *BGAII* allowed ISKCON devotees to create an alternative dissenting American identity which continued to allow them to consent in the American cultural conversation. It was, therefore, an American scripture.

By examining the *BGAII* as I have done in this essay, I have presented a tentative step toward understanding how a text can be incorporated by a group when that text is moved into a new context. I have done this by applying Griswold's theory to the reception of the *BGAII* in America. I have shown some of the presuppositions that American devotees held, some of the symbols that would be important to them contained within the *BGAII*, and how those interacted to create an alternative dissenting American identity. In addition, and more narrowly, I have presented how texts that originate outside of the U.S. can contribute to American identity. The *BGAII* became an American scripture when it encouraged Americans to define themselves *in an alternative way*. The *BGAII* allowed Americans to continue to dissent; they rejected certain elements of the dominant American culture, but they stayed within the American cultural conversation. Other texts and traditions that also help to form alternative American identities can similarly offer alternative paths toward Americanization.

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