ACCOUNTING FOR CHILD ABUSE IN THE HARE KRISHNA: ETHNOGRAPHIC DILEMMAS AND REFLECTIONS

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Accounting for Child Abuse

> *If it blows up [the child abuse story coming out by way of my paper], I can see the worst happening. You are labeled as a turncoat, mole, or the more colorful terms of ISKCON-ese; someone who used [his] confidences to stab ISKCON in the back. Again, I don't share any of these opinions and I understand your dilemma and your conviction that ...the best way to help ISKCON is to oblige the leaders to face these problems. But as you asked me as a confidant and friend, I am giving you my view of the lay of the land.* (Thoughts of one ISKCON leader with respect to the possible repercussions related to publishing my paper "Child Abuse in the Hare Krishna movement: 1971-1986") (January 21, 1998)

> *As I worried years ago about my insider status, here I am again. I keep thinking, "You don't tell secrets on your family." There are rules. There are strong pressures as an insider to avoid revealing dirty laundry in public. To do so raises questions about one's sincerity as an insider. If one is loyal he protects the group from outside attack. This willingness to protect represents a litmus test of membership itself. Yet in writing about child abuse I have brought ISKCON to the front page of the <u>New York Times</u>. Some of my devotee friends are likely to feel betrayed. I feel really sick about all this.* (Field notes, October 10, 1998)

For more than 20 years I have been involved in studying the Hare Krishna

movement. This has been a research journey that, from time-to-time, has been punctuated by challenges from within the movement concerning whose side I am *really* on. These challenges have inevitably come about when I have taken on a topic of inquiry that remains deeply controversial within the movement itself. For example, in the early 1980s, before anyone in the movement felt able to openly and publicly talk about succession problems, and related scandals involving ISKCON's newly appointed gurus, I was writing about these issues for a forthcoming book (see Rochford 1985:221-255). As I have discussed elsewhere (Rochford 1992), my doing so resulted in a number of direct and indirect efforts, by some influential members of the movement, to discredit me and my work, both in and outside of ISKCON. In fact, by the time my book *Hare Krishna in America* was published, in 1985, I felt like an outcast from ISKCON.[1]

In this paper I want to again return to questioning my research role, as well as my personal sympathies and involvement in ISKCON (see Rochford 1985:21-42, 1992). I do so not simply because interest in the personal dimensions of fieldwork has become a legitimate topic in recent years (see e.g., Emerson 1988), but because the researcher often represents an ongoing concern for those studied. This may be particularly so in the case of new religious

movements, which often must struggle to gain some measure of public acceptance and legitimation. Because scholars write books and articles and are generally viewed as sought-after and reliable sources by the media, new religions have legitimate concerns about those who study them. Access to the outside media, and through it to the public at large, can bring about sympathetic understanding, or further negative stereotypes and images of the group. Therefore where a researcher's sympathies lie is an ever-present consideration for those we study.[2]

In the summer of 1997, I was asked by the editor of the *ISKCON Communications Journal* to write an article on child abuse for the journal (Rochford 1998a). After some initial hesitation I decided to do so. I wasn't completely naive in making this decision, as I did anticipate a negative reaction to such an article, both in and outside of ISKCON. Yet the media's reaction to my paper was still surprising. Having made its way to the front page of the *New York Times* (Goodstein 1998), my treatment of child abuse in the Hare Krishna became news worldwide.

The present paper details the negotiations over "the reality of child abuse" as they occurred between myself, movement members, and representatives of the media. I begin by describing the reactions of both first and second generation ISKCON members, several of whom reviewed a preliminary draft of my child

abuse paper. This effort at bringing findings back to the field resulted in confrontation but also change in the final published version of the paper. I also consider my interactions with members of the media, and with ISKCON officials, after my paper about child abuse became a major news story. Here I highlight the tensions I felt between my roles as sociologist and movement insider. I will suggest how these very tensions and my responses to them revealed the boundaries of my identity as a sociologist and ISKCON insider. This effort at reflexivity became easier, if not easy, because of the constant strain I felt between my dual roles as sociologist and insider; both in writing the paper and in responding to the media's interest in the story. Before turning to these concerns, I first describe how I came to know about child abuse, the dilemmas this knowledge posed for me as a sociologist, and how I came to publish a paper in an ISKCON journal detailing child abuse in ISKCON's schools.

WRITING ABOUT CHILD ABUSE

In the summer of 1989 I began a study of ISKCON's second generation. I started by interviewing 70 parents from four ISKCON communities in North America about children growing up in the movement. I wanted to learn about the children and their experiences without starting with the children themselves. I

suspected correctly, but largely for the wrong reasons, that many of them would be hesitant to speak with me. Initially I thought this would be the case because I was clearly of their parent's generation. Almost immediately after beginning my interviews, I learned that some of the children had been sexually molested and/or otherwise abused in the movement's boarding schools (i.e., *ashram-gurukulas*). I was unsure what this meant exactly, and certainly never expected that a substantial number of young people had been abused sexually, physically or psychologically. Yet subsequent interviews with parents, *gurukula* teachers, and with young people who had attended the schools, confirmed that child abuse in ISKCON's schools during the 1970s and 1980s had been more than an isolated occurrence.

Over the course of the next several years, stories about the abuse of ISKCON's children circulated widely within the movement. Many among the second generation took it on themselves to tell of the abuse and mistreatment that had occurred. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a second generation newsletter, "ISKCON Youth Veterans," began openly discussing the abuse and neglect that had occurred in the *gurukula*. Thereafter young people began to share their experiences of abuse with their parent's generation. Groups of second generation devotees told their stories of abuse and neglect in a variety of ISKCON and

devotee forums; Social Relationships Conferences, ISKCON Board of Education meetings, and at several well attended *gurukula* reunions for former students. Certainly by the early-1990s, there were few inside the movement who hadn't heard allegations of child abuse.

But what was I to do with this information? How would I integrate child abuse into my emerging analysis of family life and ISKCON's second generation? Surely, I couldn't avoid making mention of it. But how would I make mention of it, and how extensively? Should I *just* say that child abuse represented one reason, among others, that led many of ISKCON's second generation to withdraw from, or otherwise remain marginal to, ISKCON? Frankly, I wrestled with these questions in the back of my mind over the course of several years.

All this changed however when I was asked by the editor of the *ISKCON Communications Journal* to write an article on the child abuse that had occurred in the movement's *ashram*-based *gurukulas*. While certainly hesitant, I also felt, "Okay, here's your chance to finally address the issue." The editor said that child abuse had become a public issue in ISKCON and that he felt it the right moment for the journal to discuss it. He also said, "Burke you are the only one who can do this. There is no other person qualified to deal with this but you" (August, 1997). I expressed to him my worry that this might well prove controversial

within ISKCON. He assured me that he didn't believe this would happen as virtually every devotee in and outside of ISKCON was already well aware of the issue. Therefore the potential for backlash seemed minimal in his estimation. I agreed to write the paper yet I couldn't shake the thought that the messenger might well be sacrificed on this one. It was a risky endeavor for sure but I wanted to do it, if only to lend support to ISKCON's second generation whom I thought might feel validated by an article on child abuse appearing in an official ISKCON journal.

Accounting for Child Abuse: Member Responses and Negotiations

After completing a preliminary draft of the child abuse paper, I circulated it to a number of first and second generation devotees both in and outside of ISKCON. The responses to the paper, as one might expect, were quite different for the first and second generation devotees who read it. First generation devotees, especially those who were disciples of ISKCON's founder Srila Prabhupada, challenged any suggestion that ISKCON's founder was aware of the excessive corporal punishment used in the Dallas *gurukula* during the 1970s. There was also the more general fear expressed that my paper might well bring harm to ISKCON, and thus to Prabhupada's movement.

Among the three second generation devotees who read and commented on the initial draft of the paper there were different concerns.[3] All *strongly disagreed* with my statement that most children in the *gurukula* were not abused. They also challenged data I presented from a second generation survey which I conducted in 1992-1993, suggesting that most who attended the *gurukula* were generally satisfied with their experience. Unlike their parent's generation, there was little reaction to the suggestion that Prabhupada was aware that corporal punishment was being used and did little to stop it. One did say that my decision to even broach this subject was, as he described it, "gutsy."

Below I discuss the challenges offered by my critics and how the final paper was changed in response. I begin with the responses of first generation devotees, virtually all of whom were Prabhupada disciples.

First Generation Responses

After reading the initial draft of the paper, the editor of *ISKCON Communications Journal* raised two points. The most significant had to do with ISKCON's founder Srila Prabhupada. He wanted me to understand that implicating Prabhupada, if only indirectly, had to be thought out and done very carefully. "No one is yet ready for Prabhupada to be challenged, concerning his

possible role in the abuse that took place," he said. He asked me to review that portion of the paper where I stated that Prabhupada knew about the use of corporal punishment in Dallas during the early and mid-1970s. He worried specifically about a quote from a young man who described his father's efforts to get Prabhupada to do something about the physical punishment being used in the Dallas *gurukula*. In the quote, it becomes clear that Prabhupada made little effort to stop the mistreatment of children by teachers (i.e., being hit with sticks). He thought it wrong, and regretted it, but Prabhupada failed to directly intervene, or otherwise see to it that such behavior was stopped. It was on this basis that some second generation youths have implicated Prabhupada in the abuse that occurred. Prabhupada, as head of the institution, and the one who mandated that children should attend the *gurukula*, wasn't willing to see to it that the movement's children were protected from his own disciples. For Prabhupada disciples such a challenge couldn't be taken seriously. They weren't willing to consider the possibility that Prabhupada had *any* role in the abuse of ISKCON's children, however remote and indirect. To allow for Prabhupada's culpability was to challenge his position as a pure devotee who was Krishna's representative.[4]

Just prior to my beginning to write the paper the question of Prabhupada's role in the abuse that occurred became a topic of some significance

on a web site founded by several former *gurukula* students to expose child abuse in the *gurukula*. One report on the VOICE web site, "Our View of Prabhupad's Responsibility" (Hickey et al. 1997), was circulated and discussed within ISKCON. Many Prabhupada disciples, while sympathetic towards the second generation, nonetheless, were upset that Prabhupada was being implicated in the abuse that took place.

Is wasn't long before I found myself in the middle of the debate about Prabhupada's role in child abuse. My participation had the effect of clarifying both to me and presumably to those devotees involved in the exchange just what the nature of my identity was -- both as an insider and a sociologist. I wrote the following to a group of Prabhupada disciples who were discussing the issue on an Internet conference to which I contributed:

> I think the first generation of devotees has to realize that child abuse has tarnished Prabhupada's image as well as ISKCON's. Children were hurt by abuse in an institution -- the *gurukula* --created by Prabhupada. The second generation from what I can see does not view Prabhupada in the same way as their parent's generation (i.e., Prabhupada having absolute authority). Rather he is a learned and charismatic spiritualist

> who created a movement, but one where they and/or their peers were abused and exploited. Therefore, through their eyes, Prabhupada is far from perfect--at least in a material sense. Lets face it, mistakes were made, serious mistakes. Should anyone be surprised that the head of the institution should be questioned/challenged? I think it time that the leaders and the first generation be introspective about these issues and not simply respond by finding ways to protect Prabhupada, especially if such efforts mean that children who were abused/mistreated are not given the attention [they] so clearly deserve (April 23, 1998).

Soon after my statement several others followed from Prabhupada disciples determined to maintain the innocence, honor, and purity of ISKCON's founder. As the statements below suggest, other (non-Prabhupada) sources of causality for the child abuse that occurred were offered for the abuse that took place:

> Srila Prabhupada [is] exempt...of responsibility for the *Gurukula* crimes. He formed the GBC [ISKCON's Governing Body

> Commission] to make sure that managers were maintaining proper standards of spiritual purity. Srila Prabhupada expected his senior disciples to be his eyes and ears, arms and legs, so he could he free to translate the scriptures for us. This was to the benefit of devotees for thousands of years to come. How can we fault Srila Prabhupada for our shortcomings and lack of Krishna Consciousness (April 23, 1998)?

Another Prabhupada disciple sought to place blame for the child abuse on the victims themselves:

> I did not see that the authors [of "Our View of Prabhupad's Responsibility"] seriously considered another target for assignation of responsibility--namely the *gurukula* graduates themselves....Can the *gurukula* graduates assure us that there is nothing in their past lives or previous histories that might have warranted some kind of reaction that came forth in the manner experienced by them? Perhaps they were cruel *gurukula* teachers in their past lives? I know this is going to sound harsh and cruel, and I am aware that it may inspire emotional reactions,

but hopefully, those who might want to respond in that way, will appreciate that I am trying to express myself in a way that is reasoned and based on considerations from *shastra* [scripture] (April 23, 1998).

This statement resulted in the following exchange between myself and this devotee. I responded:

Please excuse me but I feel your response deflects intelligent/useful discussion on this issue. Everything in this world can be traced back to Krishna. Why is it that only in situations such as this we reach for Krishna... The same goes for *karma*. Perhaps the children somehow deserved to be abused because of misdealings in a past life. Perhaps. But perhaps things were done to innocent children for other reasons (How, by the way, can the *gurukula* grads assure you that *karma* is not involved in their abuse. How is that possible?) (April 23, 1998).

He followed with:

I would expect even a secular sociologist to pay attention to the

> underlying worldview that governs behavior in a particular group, particularly a religious one....I find that attempts at ISKCON sociology, especially when we are talking about cases involving abuse and suffering and discontent (and the inevitable assignations of blame and responsibility), almost always eliminate what I call "the Krishna factor" and the "karma factor." That makes the results of such studies less useful for devotees... (April 25, 1998).

Finally, I came back with a statement that only highlighted my status as an outsider:

> I believe there are evil people at work in the world. There really are demons. I believe that innocent people can be hurt by such people, whatever their *karma*. I have felt on numerous occasions that devotees use the *karma* explanation when all else fails, or worse, when they seek to blame the victim further. This troubles me greatly. I am prepared to believe in *karma*; I am less prepared to use it as a form of explanation; or to accept it as a form of explanation. You may be correct about the role of *karma* in the tragedy of child abuse. Its just that I am not

> prepared to settle for this. Rather I want to know what ISKCON can do to keep young people from being victimized by adults who are evil in their intentions (April 27, 1998).

Having rejected *karma* as a basis of explanation in favor of more sociological causes for child abuse. I displayed for all to see that I was clearly more a social scientist than an insider. Yet even here my credentials were suspect because I had overlooked ISKCON's religious worldview as a source of understanding.

One leader, who I have been friends with for many years, and to whom I sent the early draft of the paper, responded in a way that again pointed to my identity as a social scientist, ultimately unconcerned about how my work might negatively influence ISKCON:

> ...without having read it, in my role as "company man" I do have a visceral reaction to protecting the institution, seeing ISKCON as the extension of Srila Prabhupad's will and vision. While we may serve well as lab rats for some social research study, what will be the effect on ISKCON's reputation (January 18, 1998).

SECOND GENERATION RESPONSES

As I mentioned previously, the second generation devotees who read the initial draft of my paper all disagreed with two of my statements: (1) My assertion that most young people who attended the *ashram-gurukula* were not abused; and, (2) That data from my second generation survey suggested that most former students were generally satisfied with their *gurukula* experiences.

Both of these statements were added to the paper only after I thought I had completed the first draft of the paper. As the time arrived to send my draft of the paper to the editor of *ISKCON Communications Journal* I went through a personal and professional crisis of sorts. I thought that the paper as written would inevitably invite criticism from within the movement because it lent support to anti-cult views of ISKCON. I was greatly concerned about this possibility for I had absolutely no interest in furthering the anti-cult agenda. It also directly and indirectly implicated ISKCON's leadership in the abuse that took place. I found myself thinking over and over about the varied audiences my paper was likely to reach. I kept trying to think of ways to deal with the topic without mobilizing ISKCON's enemies, or overly antagonizing ISKCON leaders and other devotees. Just prior to mailing the paper to the editor, I made two

changes meant to soften the paper's impact. In the introduction I added the following two sentences which were then restated latter in the body of the paper:

> It is important to make clear from the start that a considerable majority of ISKCON's children were <u>not</u> abused in the *gurukula*. In fact, many express general satisfaction with their *gurukula* training and experience (emphasis in the original).

Not only did my second generation readers disagree with both points, but they also sensed that I was struggling to please too many potential audiences. As one wrote to me:

> ....it is very important to consider who the intended audience is for such an analysis. To me it would seem clear that the appropriate audience for this proposed analysis/article would be both the intellectual and public community...It does not seem appropriate that the intended audience for this article should be the managing body of [ISKCON], or even the community of people who would consider themselves as members of the religion [ISKCON]... I sense in the tone of your article that you are treading light on the subject matter, almost as though you are

softening the picture (April 18, 1998).[5]

With respect to my statement that "a considerable majority of ISKCON's children escaped abuse in the *gurukula*," my second generation readers said the following:

> This statement is made several times in the paper. My question is what "considerable majority" was that? I have been active in researching this subject as well and do not come to the same conclusion. When discussing this topic I have found it easier to list the people who were not abused than the ones who were. That list is much shorter (January 18, 1998).

I strongly disagree. A large percentage of children suffered emotional, psychological abuse, and some suffered abuse by neglect (insufficient food, shelter, clothing, medical care, etc.). This is also child molestation and abuse. Not just punching kids and sexually abusing them.... So to say that most were not abused is a blatant understatement (April 2, 1998).

About my survey data suggesting that most students were generally satisfied with their experience in the *gurukula*, they had this to say:

I realize that in your profession you rely on facts and figures and you spent a great deal of effort trying to collect these. All I can say is that these statistics are not correct,... If you took the same poll you took in the early 1990's today, with the majority of the people you [surveyed] then, you would get a much different response. The responses then were from people who were for the first time being able to express themselves [about their *gurukula* experience]. We were speaking openly, but we had not yet really understood the magnitude of what was experienced....As these same people drift further and further from ISKCON their need to "protect" the society and Prabhupada lessens and their views change as well (January 18, 1998).

I seriously doubt your statement that "many had a generally positive experience."...What is positive or negative based on? When I read your paper I realized I had a negative experience. Before reading your paper I would have liked to believe I had a positive experience. But as children we don't know better. We had nothing to compare it to. For us, the way we were raised is

> the way every kid gets raised in the world. "Oh, nobody tried to sodomize me. I guess I had a positive experience." But how do you define positive when you have to measure it against other ways of life? This is what your survey does not show....So how do you know if a kid...had a "positive" experience? Not being raped or beaten to the point of bruises was a positive experience for me (April 2, 1998).

Because of these reactions I removed my previous statements meant to soften the impact of the paper. Rather I gave further emphasis to the fact that no one knew, with any degree of certainty, just how many of ISKCON's children were abused. Moreover, I was convinced (though not as completely) that the data from my second generation survey might be flawed. As my readers suggested, there was reason to believe that many of the former *gurukula* students I surveyed lacked a frame of reference that might have allowed for a more critical assessment of their *gurukula* experiences.

In the end, I realized that I had to write the paper without feeling the pressures of conflicting audiences looking over my shoulder. Yet I also resisted the idea of publishing the article at all. As I told one first generation devotee

who had read the paper:

> Right now I am leaning toward not publishing the paper in the *ISKCON Communications Journal*. It just doesn't feel right after speaking with [editor of the journal]. Also the paper will be controversial and the conservatives among the leadership will no doubt be up in arms. I don't need it and neither does ISKCON. (February 11, 1998)

Right up to the last minute I held out hope that the editor would reject the idea of publishing the paper on grounds that it was too controversial. After writing the preliminary draft of the paper I had insisted that he use his editorial board (a practice not commonly employed it seems) because of my concerns about the paper. I had even sent the paper to two leaders precisely because I thought there was good reason for the editor of the journal to change his mind. In my last conversation with him before the paper was published I said, " I am glad I wrote the paper, but not for you to publish in *ISKCON Communications Journal*. If I include the paper as a chapter in my [in progress] book very few devotees would ever read it. But going into the journal many will no doubt read it" (April 1998). The paper was published in June of 1998.[6]

The child abuse article in *ISKCON Communications Journal* was first noticed by a reporter from the Religious News Service, after he received a copy of the journal with my paper in it and another one in the same issue addressing ISKCON's efforts at child protection (see Das, Bharata Shrestha 1998). He called me explaining that he was writing an article about my "report." He completed his interview and then wrote a story that I was to see the next day after being contacted by the Religion Editor at the *New York Times*. She had read the Religious News Service article and wanted to interview me about what I had reported in my paper. I was busy when she called and asked if she would call me back in a couple of hours. In the meantime, I called a devotee who worked with ISKCON Communications. I had spoken with him previously about the Religious News Service reporter's plan to write a story on child abuse in ISKCON. Now I was anxious to see the article he had written and find out what, if anything, the Communication's people knew about the *Times*' interest in the

story. The Communications office had in fact faxed the *Times* reporter copies of both articles. They then faxed me a copy of the Religious News Service article. I was anxious to find out what the *Times* reporter knew about the child abuse issue before my interview with her. That afternoon she called and interviewed me. Like other reporters I would later speak with, she was particularly interested in knowing why ISKCON authorities had published my paper in an ISKCON journal, thus making public the child abuse that had occurred. I also, of course, was asked to speak further about the factors that had contributed to the abuse of children in ISKCON's schools.

The next morning, before leaving for the College, I received a call from an Associated Press reporter. He had seen the article in the *New York Times* that morning. He wanted to know more about my report on child abuse, especially why ISKCON had chosen to publish it. The AP reporter asked how he could contact the editor of the *ISKCON Communications Journal*. I gave him the editor's phone number, feeling relieved that he had little interest in talking with me further. I then called a colleague at the College who I knew received the

Times on a daily basis and asked her to look for the article. Within a few minutes she called back saying, "It wasn't hard to find. It's on the front page."

For the next several days I was overrun by members of the press calling my home and office. At one point I had to leave my office and hide in the library to avoid the many phone calls. I was basically overwhelmed emotionally. It had proven difficult enough to write the article and now the story was coming back at me in a most uncomfortable way. I really didn't want to talk any more about the question of child abuse. Every time I did I couldn't help but feel that I was betraying ISKCON and my many devotee friends. I began wishing again that I had never written the paper, or at least had not published it in *ISKCON Communications Journal*. In thinking this I became angry with myself because this implied that I no longer supported the young people abused in the *gurukula*. I was tense, upset, and more than anything I just wanted to be left alone to sort out my own thoughts and emotions.

Yet I knew I had started something I had little choice but to stick with. This seemed all the more apparent every time I spoke with my contact at

ISKCON Communications. He too was overwhelmed and struggling emotionally. He asked me to keep speaking with the media, and fight off my urge to disappear for a few days. In the end, I was contacted by a half dozen major city newspapers, National Public Radio, *Time* and *Newsweek*, and other news organizations interested in the story. Predictably, but regrettably, I was also contacted by two people who I identified as being sympathetic with the anti-cult movement. I hated the very idea that my paper and the resulting publicity made people believe that I was a scholar who supported anti-cult ideas. One man who contacted me for a copy of my paper said that he was actively pressuring the legislature in the state of Maryland to investigate "cult" (his word) recruitment practices on campus. His daughter, he explained, had joined a cult after being recruited at the University of Maryland. I remember saying to him, "You can have a copy of the report but I am not trying to harm ISKCON." He must have thought this an odd comment under the circumstances. I felt simultaneously angry and embarrassed when I got off the phone.

In the remainder of the paper I want to address how media coverage of

my paper, and the child abuse issue more generally, created still further dilemmas concerning my dual roles as sociologist and movement sympathizer. Frankly I really didn't want to speak with the media. To do so certainly brought attention to my research and to me as a sociologist. In fact several people in and outside of academia congratulated me for the publicity my research had received. One colleague outside of my Department offered me a "high-five" the day the *Times* article appeared; I refused his invitation. He seemed perplexed by my reaction. Other colleagues talked excitedly about the attention I was receiving. The public relations people at the College were also delighted. But I wasn't. I agonized about how all this was putting ISKCON in jeopardy. In time my anxieties only grew as some ISKCON leaders began to express their concerns about the possible legal implications involved.

DEALING WITH THE PRESS

My interactions with the media were largely defined by my effort to create *distance* between my roles as movement sympathizer and professional

sociologist. I had to display for reporters my independence, my objectivity, my professionalism. In dealing with them I avoided any mention of my sympathies or involvements in the movement, other than as a long-time researcher of ISKCON. Yet it seemed that because I had been studying the movement for such an extended period of time that my relationship with the movement became an issue. I was asked by several reporters about my ties to ISKCON. One directly asked me if I was a member of the Hare Krishna movement! I said, "No." Others were more subtle, wanting to know about the details of my research involvement. How was it that I had come to write this article? What was the nature of my relationship with ISKCON? Here I found myself listing my academic accomplishments, most significantly, my book *Hare Krishna in America* as well as another one currently in progress on family, children, and ISKCON's North American development. For reporters, my credentials seemed important to pin down. Yet I wondered, "If I had broken a similar story about child abuse in a mainline denomination would I have been questioned about my affiliation with the Church?" I couldn't imagine that my having been raised a

Catholic would have meant much had I revealed child abuse in the Catholic Church. I was reminded again of how studying the Hare Krishna meant that I too shared in the stigma attached to the movement, in spite of being a Professor of Sociology at a reputable College.

I was particularly interested, but also anxious, when a second AP reporter called me. The reporter had some inside knowledge about me, having gone to divinity school with a former high-ranking ISKCON official. I had known this devotee rather well and considered him a friend, until we lost touch with each other after his defection from ISKCON in the late 1980s. The AP reporter had spoken with this former ISKCON devotee just prior to contacting me. She told me with some excitement in her voice that she wanted to pursue the child abuse story from a different angle. She was interested in my role as participant-observer. She asked how I came to learn about the child abuse? How had I responded to finding this out? How had twenty years of researching the Hare Krishna's influenced me spiritually? Was it true that I was a member of ISKCON's North American Board of Education? What role did I play on the

Board?

I remember feeling that this was an interesting reporter, but one who was also risky for me. Her questions suggested that she knew a great deal about my involvements in ISKCON. Did she also know that I prostrated myself on the floor in the temple before Prabhupada's image during the morning worship? Did she know that I felt as much or more at home in an ISKCON community as I do where I live in Vermont? As I have done before, when someone I have no reason to trust asks me about my relationship with ISKCON; I told her that, while certainly sympathetic, and having my own spirituality awakened by my association with ISKCON, I was not a member. As I said to her, "I certainly eat very little meat, and never beef, but I do eat meat. I also have a normal sex life and enjoy drinking a beer now and then." As in the past, this put a halt to any further efforts to delve further into my personal ties to ISKCON. In reading her article the next day in the local newspaper (which did not deal with participant-observer issues to any degree) I was relieved to read, "The report was written by an *independent* sociologist, Professor E. Burke Rochford Jr. of

Middlebury College in Vermont" (My emphasis) (Lieblich 1998).

In the other interviews I did with members of the media I felt relief when I wasn't asked to retell the story of child abuse within ISKCON's schools. Several reporters asked me only about why the movement had revealed the abuse. Others wanted to know about present efforts at child protection within ISKCON and how child abuse had changed ISKCON as a religious organization? In these interviews I was able to speak more positively about ISKCON. I could emphasize that it was highly unusual for a religious group to speak openly about past child abuse; that ISKCON leaders wanted the story out as one way of addressing the issue honestly and forthrightly. I also talked about ISKCON's ongoing child protection efforts and how the movement is attempting to help those young men and women abused previously in the movement's schools. Moreover, I was able to say that family life was being redefined in more positive terms within ISKCON, and that the leadership was beginning to respond to the needs of children and families.

Just as issues of identity represented an ever-present topic for me

throughout the writing of the paper and in dealing with the resulting publicity, my identity also represented a topic of some significance for members of the media. Figuring out who I was *vis a vis* the Hare Krishna's represented a critical piece of the story for reporters. My job was to maintain a professional stance, giving no indication of my sympathies for ISKCON and Krishna Consciousness. To have revealed my dual role, in all likelihood, would have made me a far less credible and, therefore, persuasive voice on *ISKCON's behalf.*

SECOND GENERATION DEALINGS

Perhaps surprisingly I had relatively little contact with second generation devotees after the story received media attention. I heard indirectly through several first generation devotees that at least some young people were delighted the story was out. In one instance, several young people at a Sunday feast in one ISKCON community were reading the *New York Times* story aloud to their friends. Yet I was contacted by two second generation devotees, none of whom were readers of the initial draft of my paper. One wrote the following:

> I must congratulate you on exposing the abuse. I am thrilled, excited, joyful. Of course, there are *gurukulis* in denial who are upset about the publicity, but it's time to let the world know our pain....*These people need to pay dearly for the suffering they have caused*, and I can't tell you how grateful I am that you have let the dirty laundry be aired. We can't be shut up any longer. I have been jumping for joy (my emphasis) (Words of one second generation devotee woman responding to media coverage of my paper on child abuse in ISKCON, October 12, 1998).

When I read these words my heart sank. On the one hand I was pleased that some members of the second generation felt validated by my article and the related media attention, but I also became concerned when she mentioned that "people need to pay dearly" and her further descriptions of the "physical aliments, mental stress galore, lack of self-esteem" endured by her boyfriend who had been abused years earlier in the *gurukula*. As she said, "He desperately needs to be

compensated to have any peace in his life." Having just spent the early part of the day talking with devotees in ISKCON Communications, as well as one of the movement's lawyers, about the legal implications of the child abuse story, I was shaken by her comments. I worried, as I told my wife, that my article might "take ISKCON out." Because of my own anxiety, I found little reason to make contact with any of the second generation devotees who had previously reviewed my paper. I didn't want to hear anything about possible lawsuits. I was increasingly concerned about ISKCON, as well as with my personal and professional ties with the movement.

OFFICIAL ISKCON DEALINGS

During the one week period when the media remained interested in the child abuse story I maintained regular contact with ISKCON's Communications office. I told my contact in that office what news organizations had contacted me. In return I was told about media interest that they had received. The ordeal was wearing and I both gave and received support from the devotee's working in

the Communications office. Because of the media onslaught I became ever more concerned about what my article had led ISKCON into. I was also concerned about my standing in the movement in terms of future research, but more important still were my many devotee friendships. With every communication I received, I found myself searching to see if there was any sign of anger, resentment, or an effort to establish distance from me. One teacher who I have known and worked with for years on ISKCON's Board of Education ended her message to me, "Thank you so much for all your friendship and clear vision." These simple words meant so much to me. A leader, who I had known for years, wrote:

> Actually I have not heard any negative comments about you from the GBC. I think most GBC's recognize that you have presented the facts, and the only criticism was from one GBC on the wisdom of publishing it at all without consulting the GBC. But even that comment, directed at the publishers, received little echo (October 15, 1998).

But I also took the initiative to let several leaders know that I had not meant to bring harm to ISKCON. In a message to one I said:

> I never wanted or intended to do anything to harm ISKCON. I assure you that while I had some reservations about the wisdom of publishing the paper in the *ISKCON Communications Journal* that I never for one minute wanted to hurt ISKCON...I never imagined in my wildest dreams that this would end up on the front page of the *NY Times*; and I take absolutely no pleasure in the fact that it is there (October 18, 1998).

He wrote back.

> Don't worry. In the ultimate issue, it is not your fault. I am thinking of that old line, "Don't shoot me, I am just the piano player." This is karma coming home to rest for us...Don't worry, we are still friends. We are both trying to fight the good fight here (October 18, 1998).[7]

Although working to smooth over what I imagined to be hard feelings I also sought, in one instance, to directly intervene when it became apparent to me that some leaders were less than pleased that my article had been published. I feared that if these disagreements spilled out into the open that whatever public relations gains had been achieved because ISKCON had exposed the child abuse story, would be lost. I wrote the following to one leader who I knew was working behind the scenes to respond to the publicity generated:

> If I may be so bold, I have one other comment. I worry that the PR high ground gained (I believe) might be undermined if the press and then the public should come to understand that the leaders disagree about the wisdom of revealing the abuse story. Many in the press have been impressed by ISKCON's apparent willingness to acknowledge its past failings on this issue. ISKCON hasn't followed the example of the Catholic Church and so many others which have tried to hide abuse at all costs.

> Be smart here. If the leaders disagree behind the scenes, fine, but there should be a unified "public face" about all this. Should the press hear...that some leaders didn't want this exposed the press will turn particularly ugly in my estimation (Rochford, 1998d:66).

The next day he sent me a copy of a memo he had written to members of ISKCON's governing board. In it he advised the leadership to close ranks and support the efforts of the Communications office until after the media spotlight had passed.

I also decided to write a short essay for the next volume of *ISKCON Communications Journal*. I had already learned from the editor that there would be a number of responses to my article from scholars and others in the next volume of the journal. My attempt was to point to some of the positive changes that had occurred to protect ISKCON's children and to offer support to those who had been abused while students in the *gurukula*.

Because of my participation on ISKCON's Board of Education, and from my own research, I have come to appreciate the commitment of ISKCON's educators toward the movement's children....ISKCON now has an International Office for Child Protection, it screens candidates for teaching positions in ISKCON schools, and children movement-wide are taught about child abuse.... Moreover, when an ISKCON school has been found lacking in its efforts to protect children, it faces probation or, in one instance, has been pressured by the leadership to close down, or face being decertified as an ISKCON school. The movement's leadership has also been a force behind the creation and funding of Children of Krishna, Inc., an organization with the purpose to help young people who were formally students in ISKCON's *ashram*-based *gurukulas*....[Y]oung men and women abused as children have been helped with counseling, funds for vocational training, college study, and so forth. The tragedy of child abuse within ISKCON has thus resulted in a number of positive changes that have helped protect ISKCON's children and lent support to those young men and women abused years earlier. (Forthcoming in *Hare Krishna World* and in

ISKCON Communications Journal)

CONCLUSION

In the past ethnographers often disregarded the personal dimensions of field research viewing them as largely irrelevant, or perhaps as challenges to their objectivity and the authority of their written texts. Today the writings of field researchers more often than not deal explicitly with the personal dimensions of ethnographic research. As Emerson concludes, "Fieldwork,...is a deeply personal as well as a scientific project, and the subjective, emotional experiences of doing fieldwork are intricately tied to the interpretations and theories ultimately produced" (1988:184). Here I have sought to describe some of these personal dimensions by considering the ways that my loyalties to ISKCON conflicted with my role as a sociologist and vice versa.

I want to conclude by making two further observations:

(1) As I mentioned earlier, it is possible, and perhaps likely, that I would never have written a paper on child abuse had the editor of *ISKCON*

Communications Journal not asked me. But there is an interesting twist to the story that I only became aware of after the media took an active interest in my paper. In talking to one ISKCON leader about the problems created by my paper, he said that no one held me to blame for the negative publicity, but he couldn't say the same for the editor of the journal. He explained that the devotees working in ISKCON Communications had become *advocates* for change within ISKCON. They weren't just representing the movement to outside parties, they were also actively pushing for change within ISKCON itself. At one point he described the editor of the journal as someone who is known for trying to stir things up from time-to-time. Several days later, when I spoke to the editor, he admitted that asking me to write the article had political motives. He said, "Someone has to be a leader, even if it's someone small like myself. Someone has to take the responsibility for leading the movement." Essentially I had been drawn into writing the article and exposing child abuse within ISKCON to promote a partisan political agenda.

(2) Because ISKCON in North America has become a congregationally-

based movement, defined by marriage and family life, I have found it easier to fit within ISKCON as an insider, and to be seen as such by ISKCON's members. In fact despite my earlier claims about having gained some measure of membership standing in ISKCON during the 1970s and early 1980s (Rochford 1985:21-42), I am now far more a part of ISKCON today. My insider status has grown in large part because of fundamental changes within ISKCON itself. Quite simply in a movement that has become increasingly pluralistic and less sectarian, it is far easier to become an ISKCON member and it is thus easier for me to see myself in those terms. I no longer feel the same pressure to manage interactionally my commitments, points of view, and lifestyle in order to be seen as a movement insider, as I felt forced to do years ago. This very fact means that I feel a kinship with ISKCON that made my role in exposing child abuse within the movement an uncomfortable and sometimes painful experience.

POSTSCRIPT

On June 12, 2000, a lawsuit was filed in Dallas, Texas, on behalf of 44

young men and women who claim they were subject to "sexual, emotional, mental, and physical abuse and exploitation" while minors in ISKCON's *gurukulas* during the 1970s and 1980s (Children of ISKCON, et. al., vs. the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, et al.). The plaintiffs, who reside in the United States, Canada, and England, seek a total of $400 million -- $200 million in actual damages and $200 million in punitive damages. Defendants in the case include: ISKCON as the lead defendant; 16 specific ISKCON communities, businesses, and organizations; the executors of Prabhupada's estate; and, 18 members, or former members, of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission who were serving on the GBC during the time of the alleged abuse. Defendant's in the case were also charged with federal racketeering and Rico violations. In a press release, Windle Turley, the lawyer for the plaintiffs, stated, "This lawsuit describes the most unthinkable abuse and maltreatment of little children which we have seen. It includes rape, sexual abuse, physical torture and emotional terror of children as young as three years of age." (June 12, 2000)

Not surprisingly, the lawsuit resulted in considerable discussion and debate within the movement. Many devotees both in and outside of ISKCON expressed anger at ISKCON's leaders, who were viewed as ultimately responsible for the abuse that occurred. Others directed their anger at the plaintiffs, and other former *gurukula* students supportive of the Turley lawsuit. Yet the most vocal and angry responses were provoked because the complaint directly implicated ISKCON founder, Srila Prabhupada, in the abuse that occurred. As stated in the plaintiffs' original complaint:

> The founder of the institution, Prabhupada, was informed in 1972, at a time when he totally controlled the institution, that extensive physical and sexual abuse of minor ISKCON children was occurring, but he concealed the wrongdoing from the public, parents and all but a handful of close advisors. (2000:15)

This statement brought protest from many quarters of the movement. Although virtually every devotee was willing to acknowledge that abuse had taken place,

few could accept the idea that Prabhupada had any knowledge of the abuse, or had played any role whatsoever in covering it up.

The charge that Prabhupada had concealed abuse of ISKCON children drew me directly into the controversy. Within days after the suit was filed I became a target for some of those angered over allegations of Prabhupada's involvement. Although my original article (Rochford 1998a) in no way suggested that Prabhupada knew anything of *sexual* abuse in the *gurukula*, I did acknowledge that he was apparently aware, "as early as 1972, that physical punishment was being administered to children in the *gurukula*" (Rochford 1998a:66). I also cited evidence suggesting that Prabhupada had, on several occasions, actively intervened to stop the mistreatment of children in the *gurukula* (Rochford 1998a:66). I did, however, report on one case where he apparently did not (Rochford 1998a:56). Moreover, I also presented material from a group of former *gurukula* students who claimed that Prabhupada shared responsibility for the abuse of ISKCON's children.

Some former *gurukula* students believe that Prabhupada '…did not

> implement appropriate measures to guarantee the safety of children in the movement from his disciples. [And] that the programmes he established and interpretations of this words greatly fostered an environment under which child abuse flourished (Hickey et al. 1997).' (Rochford 1998a:66)

I suggested further that Prabhupada's emphasis on book distribution (i.e., *sankirtan*) indirectly contributed to the abuse. Because of the importance placed on book distribution, the *gurukula* gained importance organizationally primarily for its child care function rather than as an educational institution (Rochford 1998a:51-53). For the *gurukula* served to free parents from child-rearing responsibilities, thus allowing them to distribute Prabhupada's books on a full-time basis. Parents felt pressured to place their children in the *gurukula* at the age of five years. Furthermore, because marriage and family life were viewed as evidence of "spiritual weakness" (Rochford 1998a:49-51), the *gurukula* received little attention from the renunciate leadership. As a result, the *gurukula* system

as a whole failed to receive adequate staffing, funding, and oversight. It thereby "became an institution defined by neglect, isolation, and marginalisation. Because of these qualities, the *gurukula* also became a context in which ISKCON's children became subject to abuse" (Rochford 1998a:53).

A vocal minority of devotees viewed my article as a conscious attempt on my part to implicate Prabhupada in the abuse of ISKCON's children. While I was certainly concerned about such claims when writing and revising the article (as was the journal editor), there was in fact little public commentary along these lines after its publication. This changed however with the filing of the lawsuit. Suddenly public criticism began to emerge on the internet, especially about my contribution to the *New York Times* story on child abuse in the movement's *gurukulas* (Goodstein 1998). As one of my critics wrote.

> ….Prabhupada was defamed and blasphemed in Oct., 1998 where HDG's [Srila Prabhupada's] teachings were given as the cause (by E. Jerk Rogueford) [E. Burke Rochford] for all the egregious attacks these monster, child swallowers perpetrated on all the

> demigod-children of Srila Prabhupada….Another point about Mr. E. Jerk Rogueford is that unless you expose this rascal you will be supporting his envious offensive conclusions by this Turley case….He should be informed very strongly that the cause of these children being physical[ly]and sexual[ly] abused is not due to Srila Prabhupada's teachings but due to his teachings being totally neglected by his so called di[s]ciples (June 16, 2000).

The effort to absolve Prabhupada from any wrongdoing in the abuse of ISKCON children itself must been seen in the context of the movement's recent history. As I have written elsewhere (Rochford 1985, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c), ISKCON has faced an ongoing crisis of leadership since Prabhupada's death in 1977. Various scandals involving Prabhupada's *guru* successors and other leaders, including their role in child abuse, has resulted in the demise of religious authority within ISKCON. In an effort to restore authority to the *guru* institution -- if not the present *gurus* per se -- Prabhupada has been promoted as *the* ultimate source of purity and authority within the institution (Rochford 1998c). In fact,

Prabhupada has been elevated to God-like status among many. Because of this, charges that Prabhupada knew of the abuse and either didn't respond, or sought to hide it, amounted to an attack on the "pure devotee." This was justification enough for several devotees to go on the offensive against me. As one wrote in his internet newsletter "Kick on His Face."

> So write to this rascal, and remind him of the absolute level of bad karma already heading his way (according to Sastra [scripture]-and Sastra-Personi[f]ied, Srila Prabhupada, whose boots are smashing on the Rogueford-asuras like no other), traveling thru [sic] the universe at great speed….[I]s it nearly time for us to assemble there [Middlebury College], publicly burn Rogueford's books (ALONG WITH AN EFFIGY OF HIM AND HIS CHILD-MOLEST RURU F[R]IENDS) , burn *New York Times* for publishing Laurie Badst[i]en's [Goodstein's] 'Rogueford-rubbish'-attack on SP [Srila Prabhupada],in the *NYTs* Oct.9,1998 front page story on the rurucoolies [abused *gurukula* students], car[r]y

> placards alleging what a rascal with no integrity he is, an envious attacker in league himself with child molesters, trying to let…[them] off the hook for their ongoing crimes, and sliming Srila Prabhupada with his pseudo-intellectual 'sociological theories'? Is THAT time nearly arrived? (July 1, 2000)

Two devotees, including the one quoted above, made death threats against me because they believed I had implicated Prabhupada in the abuse of ISKCON's children. As one of them stated in his newsletter distributed on the internet.

> So, this rascal, Rogueford [Rochford] is passing…..as 'more than Guru', the critic and chastiser of Sri Guru. So he thinks he's more than God's Representative [Prabhupada]? Therefore, he must think himself God, since only God Himself is greater than Sri Guru. Therefore? "The real process is to kill him," according to Representative of God, Srila Prabhupada. Yes, that's the real process....(though that power we haven't [yet] got...). (July 1, 2000)

Similar threats, including decapitation, continued over a period of several weeks. Death threats were also made against other devotee critics of ISKCON who were accused of failing to act decisively against my "attack" on Prabhupada.

Through all this I remained silent, except for one phone conversation with a long-time critic of ISKCON's leadership who was also threatened for failing to challenge my blasphemy of Prabhupada and for supporting the plaintiffs in theTurley lawsuit. I called him because I wanted to assess what danger I might actually be in. Unfortunately, his words were not entirely reassuring. One of the devotees making the threats lived nearby in a surrounding state and was, as he said, "mentally unstable." I couldn't shake the thought this was just the sort of person who might choose to martyr himself by killing the "Rogueford demon."

I sought the advice of a lawyer friend who agreed to look over the threatening material to see what, if any, legal recourse I might have. I also contacted the company where one of those threatening me purchased his e-mail and internet services. I sent the company's postmaster copies of the threatening material. I regularly monitored the several devotee internet sites looking for any reference to me and my child abuse research. I was relieved to find that while the suit was certainly a topic of considerable discussion and debate my name was rarely mentioned.

I continued to receive the two newsletters from the devotees making the death threats. Thankfully, I became less of a focal point in the internet discussions, as threats and arguments went back and forth between ISKCON

critics and reformers holding different views about the lawsuit and the need to protect Prabhupada. I was also pleased to learn that some devotees were removing themselves from the mailing lists of those issuing the death threats and publicly criticizing their tactics. Clearly the child abuse lawsuit, and my research of the topic, had caused a rift in the reform movement outside of ISKCON.

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, I remain concerned that my article on child abuse continues to have a significant impact on ISKCON. While it is impossible to know for certain whether or not the lawsuit would have been filed without my discussion of child abuse, there is little doubt but that it encouraged it. Not only did the paper present evidence of abuse but it also provided a framework that allowed for understanding the context in which it occurred. In fact, in reading the plaintiffs' complaint, I saw how elements of my analysis were used to frame various legal claims and arguments. In addition, the publication of the article and the worldwide publicity that followed further mobilized the young people abused in ISKCON's schools. In the final analysis, the lawsuit and my role in the child abuse issue leaves me torn. On the one hand, I believe that the lawsuit is a proper means for those abused to gain justice. Yet I also continue to feel guilty about my role in bringing ISKCON to the edge of financial ruin and possible destruction. I especially feel this way because of the many sincere devotees whose

lives will be negatively influenced should the plaintiffs be successful in their lawsuit. As one ISKCON official stated to me, “If we lose the suit it will set us back 20 years.”

Endnotes

1. Unbeknownst to me, however, the climate began to change rather dramatically within ISKCON beginning in 1985 and 1986. An organized reform movement emerged among ISKCON Temple Presidents and other members to alter the existing *guru* system because of continuing scandals and abuses of power involving ISKCON *gurus* (see Rochford 1998a). As public discussion and protest grew within the movement my book no longer appeared as controversial as it had just two or three years prior. It was precisely because of this that I was able to negotiate another research project on family and the second generation in 1989.

2. During my initial studies of the movement, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some ISKCON officials cooperated with my research efforts because they viewed me as a sympathetic insider who would write a positive account of the movement. When I didn't exactly do this I became an object of criticism and scorn by some ISKCON leaders and officials (see Rochford 1992).

3. Each of the three second generation devotees who reviewed my paper have

been activists in the struggle to expose child abuse and have ISKCON leaders respond responsibly to those abused in the movement's schools during the 1970s and 1980s.

4. The need to maintain Prabhupada's purity had even more hanging in the balance. Because of ongoing scandal and controversy surrounding ISKCON's current *gurus*, a number of efforts have been undertaken to further elevate Prabhupada as *the* source of spiritual purity within the movement (see Rochford 1998b). One such effort in this regard has resulted in a significant movement within ISKCON to make Prabhupada the *guru* for all newly initiated devotees, with present *gurus* serving as little more than officiating priests (Desai 1996). Even among those ISKCON members who disagree with the *ritvik* philosophy of initiation, efforts have been made to promote Prabhupada's religious authority while limiting the position of the present *gurus* (Rochford 1998b, 1998c). Thus efforts by second generation devotees to implicate Prabhupada in child abuse promised to undermine his purity at the very moment when devotees in and outside of ISKCON were seeking to further elevate Prabhupada's religious authority. As this suggests, there was a great deal more at stake in the allegations by some second generation devotees that Prabhupada shared some of

the blame for the abuse of ISKCON's children.

5. Another women, who is a first generation disciple of one of ISKCON's fallen gurus, and who is herself writing a book on child abuse within ISKCON, responded this way to the *final* draft of the paper.

> It is dangerous to straddle the fence and please everyone. Your statement: child abuse did not occur uniformly undermines the case you are building. Also, you let the kids down by siding with [this] perspective....They want someone to tell the real story for them (April 27, 1998).

6. Interestingly the issue of the journal with my paper in it was out several months before the media picked up on it. It circulated in Europe, where the journal is published, three months before it finally arrived in North America. In fact, at one point, I was slightly annoyed that virtually no ISKCON devotees in North America knew anything about the paper as late as the end of September, 1998.

7. Two days later this same leader wrote me saying that a major building project that involved, among other things, a school with wonderful facility was in

jeopardy because of my article and the resulting publicity. A congregational member in his temple who had previously pledged $50,000 toward the project "was deeply disturbed" by the *Times* article. There was a real possibility that he would withdraw his financial support thus jeopardizing the project altogether.

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