



REFLECTIONS ON MY OWN DIALOGUE WITH HARE KRISHNAS

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As I type this, I am getting ready to leave for Washington, DC, where I will take part in the annual Vaishnava (Hindu)-Christian dialogue group that is partly sponsored by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. My history with this group goes back several years, when I was invited to give a paper. This is a small, by-invitation group that has built up a history together, and has grown into a very special community: we truly care for each other, and pray for each other's needs.

The community consists of scholars, pastors, and people involved in campus ministry and social ministries. The Christians are Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran and other. The Hindus are Vaishnavas, that is, they believe in God is personal, (their name for God is Vishnu), who loves the world and comes to earth in human form. The most famous of these avatars, or incarnations, is Krishna. One line of Vaishnavas worships Krishna as the Supreme form of God. Among this group are the Hare Krishnas.

The Hare Krishnas have come a long way since they began in this country in Manhattan, and were seen in every major airport in the country. Like the early Franciscans, they took their message to the street and relied on the contributions. Like the early Franciscans, they were often ridiculed, and even attacked. The group I meet with every year are devotees who want to get back in touch with their intellectual tradition, rather like SFO's who are re-discovering Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. One of them, a man with a PhD in philosophy and a delightful sense of humor, is their equivalent of a cardinal in the Curia.

Each year, one Vaishnava and one Christian give related papers, and then we discuss the issues raised. We have discussed many topics over the years: attitudes toward other religions, attitudes toward atheism, secularism and consumerism. The year I gave my paper, the focus was why God would become human to teach us how to be true disciples. We rejoice in our similarities, we celebrate our differences.

All of this makes me remember my first encounters with the Hare Krishnas. I had visited their temple in St. Louis, and when they appeared on the campus of the University of Missouri in Columbia, I invited them to stay in my dorm room (breaking many school rules, by the way). I still remember one fellow in the dorm saying, "There was a bald guy in a bathrobe, sitting in the stairway, saying 'Harry Reasoner, Harry Reasoner,' over and over." I always enjoyed discussions with my visitors. I remember talking about the similarities between chanting Hare Krishna on beads and praying the Rosary (their understanding of chanting the Name of Krishna, by the way, is very similar to Louis de Montfort's teaching about "The Angelic Salutation.") One of my visitors explained how they believed that true teachers could be traced from disciple to teacher until you got back to Krishna himself: "This is what Catholics believe about Peter and the pope," he said. He explained that when they ask Krishna to bless their food, Krishna dwells in it, and we consume his energies: "That's the Catholic idea of Communion," he said. In one conversation, a man following a Hindu path reminded me of the Catholic ideas of Apostolic Succession and Real Presence.

I've since had many visits with Krishna devotees, some official, some on the street. I am always impressed with their simplicity and sincerity. They are really trying to live "the Vedic life." It reminds me of Francis simply wanting to live the Gospel. They continually read and reflect on their main Scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, going, as it were, from Gita to life and from life to Gita. One local Hare Krishna said that their goal was, "in the words of my Catholic friends," to recognize the sacramentality of daily life. Do we agree on everything? Of course not. Do we learn from and inspire each other? You betcha.

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