NEW VRINDABAN:
PILGRIMAGE, PATRONAGE, AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

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ABSTRACT: If you were to visit New Vrindaban, West Virginia (or any number of ISKCON centers in the United States) in the late 1960s or early 1970s, you would have primarily encountered young, white, counter-culturists. These Americans, with their Sanskrit spiritual names and Indian garments, moved to the commune to live off of the land in exchange for their service to the community and to the growing movement. These devotees would have been intimately familiar with the teachings of their guru and ISKCON’s founder, Prabhupada, and many would have denied a Hindu identity. If you visit the community today, you will discover a radically different scene. Driving up the long, winding road, you will pass a number of abandoned dormitories that are the only remaining vestiges of New Vrindaban’s communal past. Devotees now own their own homes and generate their own incomes. If you enter the temple on a weekend or during a holiday, you will find that roughly ninety percent of those in attendance are Hindus of South Asian descent. This thesis explores the historical and social processes which have allowed for and informed such a profound demographic transformation. It argues that New Vrindaban’s devotee and Hindu populations are strange bedfellows and, consequently, New Vrindaban’s temple is a coterminous social space in which religious and ethnic identities are reinforced, resisted, and renegotiated.
Flanked on both sides by traffic signs, gas stations, suburban homes, and Appalachian foliage, the road leading to New Vrindaban is not unlike other roads in the rural United States. As one drives further into the West Virginian hills, however, a unique landscape unfolds: A single golden cupola emerges behind a massive wall of pink Indian sandstone. On the other side of this wall stands a magnificent palace, once fondly referred to by tourists as the Taj Mahal of the West. After passing one or two flocks of Indian peafowl, a sizeable manmade lake, and a statue of an elephant bearing the mark of Vishnu, a striking South Indian style temple awaits at the bottom of the hill. Despite the obvious Vedic influence that permeates this religious community, one cannot easily forget that New Vrindaban is nestled within the heart of Appalachia.

New Vrindaban, an early farming community of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), was once home to approximately six hundred “Hare Krishnas,” the majority of them young, white American counter-culturists. Following a period of widespread scandal, financial decline and internal turmoil lasting through the mid-1990s, it seemed certain that the community was standing on its last leg – that New Vrindaban would close up shop like so many other intentional communities whose golden ages had passed their expiration date. Through a creative reimagining of the community’s purpose as a place of pilgrimage, however, New Vrindaban has survived.
New Vrindaban now caters largely to an audience of Indian Hindus in exchange for their patronage and donations. It is precisely this transformation that I am interested in tracing. ISKCON devotees generally do not identify as Hindu and most of the Indian Hindus who visit New Vrindaban do not exclusively subscribe to ISKCON’s message of Krishna Consciousness. For many Indian Hindus living in the Midwestern or Eastern United States, New Vrindaban is often the closest or most accessible deity temple and the community provides an idyllic haven in which pilgrims can reaffirm their Indian heritage and expose their children to Hindu practices. The ISKCON devotees who live in and around New Vrindaban depend upon Hindu tourists for the continued survival of their community. This strategic, symbiotic relationship has necessitated certain theological and social compromise, the extent of which is a primary concern of this research. I will argue that New Vrindaban’s temple is, for both Indian Hindus and IKSCON devotees, a coterminous social space in which religious and ethnic identities are reinforced, resisted, and renegotiated.

**Terminology**

Before we proceed, I must say a few words about terminology. As will soon become apparent, “Hinduism” is an umbrella term that can be rather ambiguous and, as such, has been notoriously difficult to define. I will therefore use the term with this limitation in mind. Hinduism will be used to refer to the various polytheistic religious traditions which have historically been associated with the Indian subcontinent.
Hinduism will be treated as something quite distinct from the religious affiliation of ISKCON’s adherents. By extension, when I refer to “Hindus”, I am talking specifically about the Indian-bodied pilgrims who visit New Vrindaban. I do not mean to make a statement about the status of their citizenship. Whether these Hindus are first- or second- generation Indian Americans or whether they are in the United States permanently or temporarily, I will – for the sake of clarity – refer to them in rather general terms. The residents and community members of New Vrindaban refer to themselves as “devotees” and I will honor their self-identification by using that term as well. To be clear, when I speak about Hindus, I am generally talking about individuals who are from India or are of Indian descent; when I use the term “devotee,” I am referencing members of New Vrindaban’s residential population which is comprised mostly of white Americans.

ISKCON is largely indebted to the religious and social culture of ancient India and, as such, devotees often use Sanskrit terms to refer to various aspects of their spiritual practice. The spellings used by devotees may differ considerably from popular spellings as found in the literature. For example, the devotees refer to their community as New Vrindaban because it is a modern replication of Vṛndāvana, the childhood home of Krishna in present-day India. It is here worth noting that I will most often refer to “Krishna” as such, though other common spellings include Krṣṇa or Krushna. When referencing academic works, I will use the agreed-upon spellings employed by those authors. Otherwise, I will use the transliterations that are to be found at New Vrindaban and other ISKCON centers across the United States.
Data and Methods

The seeds of this research were first planted in the fall of 2013, when I visited New Vrindaban on an undergraduate class field trip. Since that time, I have visited New Vrindaban on four separate occasions. The latter two visits, in January of 2016, were taken with this specific research in mind. During my most recent visit, I formally interviewed six devotees and spoke casually with many others. I spent much of my time at New Vrindaban in the Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra (RVC) Temple observing ritual practice and devotee worship. I have visited the community both during festival weekends and during typical weekdays. Additionally, I attended a devotional gathering at the home of a devotee who has lived at New Vrindaban for over four decades. Finally, I administered an online survey which yielded twenty total respondents, though not all survey questions were answered by every respondent. The names of research participants will be withheld or changed so to preserve anonymity. In the discussion of this research, my own findings will be supplemented with data from other studies of ISKCON communities so that we may consider the extent to which the situation at New Vrindaban reflects the broader institutional changes occurring in ISKCON centers across North America.
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

Gaudiya Vaishnavism

Most studies of ISKCON communities begin with a brief biographical sketch of the founder-āchārya, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977). Certainly, I will discuss the life history of Prabhupada in great detail throughout the course of this paper. However, for the purpose of this research, our story begins significantly earlier – in sixteenth-century Bengal. It was here that Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534) first popularized the Krishna-bhakti movement, a Hindu devotional tradition which distinguished itself from other, polytheistic bhakti sects by elevating Krishna as the supreme manifestation of God.\(^1\) Caitanya preached *bhakti-yoga*, a practice which emphasized devotional service to God as a superior means of spiritual salvation.\(^1\) Because Caitanya committed very few of his own words to writing, what little we know about his preaching comes from his students’ hagiographic works which contain reported dialogues and biographical episodes.\(^2\)

Caitanya called for a missionary movement and insisted that salvation was achieved through the recitation (*japa*) and communal singings (*sankirtana*) of the

various names of God or Krishna. The Maha Mantra (“Great Mantra”), chanted at New Vrindaban and ISKCON temples world-wide, was popularized by Caitanya at this time: *Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare, Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare.* The teachings of Caitanya were maintained through an extensive lineage of gurus.

**The International Society for Krishna Consciousness**

One such guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura (1874-1936) was the spiritual teacher of Abhay Charanaravinda (A.C.) Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhuqapa (1896-1977), the founder-ārācharyā of the Hare Krishna Movement and the man credited with bringing Gaudiya Vaishnavism to the United States of America. Prabhupada was born on September 1, 1896 in Calcutta, India to a Hindu cloth merchant family and studied English, philosophy, economics, and chemistry prior to his religious endeavors. Abhay married and opened a small pharmaceutical firm to support his growing family. Prabhupada met Bhaktisiddhanta in Calcutta in 1922 and, after studying the teachings of Lord Caitanya for some time, took initiation in 1932. In a

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1936 letter, Bhaktisiddhanta encouraged Prabhupada to “preach Krishna consciousness to the English-speaking world.” The charismatic devotee was initiated into the renounced order of śāṇīyaṣa in 1959 and, after authoring several popular translations of various religious texts (including the Srimad-Bhagavatam), Prabhupada boarded a steamship bound from Calcutta to New York City in 1965 at the age of sixty-nine.

Upon arriving in the United States with a handful of rupees, Prabhupada opened a small teaching center in a rented storefront on 26 Second Avenue in the Lower East Side of Manhattan; his first classes were largely attended by hippies and others who identified with the growing counter-cultural movement sweeping the country at that time. Prabhupada’s followers were colloquially referred to as the Hare Krishnas. It is important to note that the majority of Prabhupada’s initial congregation was comprised of young, white middle-class Americans; at that time, Indian immigration was limited by Asian exclusion laws. The movement, which was further popularized by the likes of George Harrison and Alan Ginsberg, exploded and in July of 1966 Prabhupada officially established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (hereafter referred to as ISKCON). By July of 1970, there were already 34 ISKCON centers in

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7 Ketola, “The Hare Krishna and the Counterculture in Light of the Theory of Divergent Modes of Religiosity,” 312.
As his movement grew, Prabhupada continued his translations and commentary. Over the course of his lifetime, he published a number of books including *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, the thirty-volume *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, the seventeen-volume *Sri Caitanya-Caritamrta*, and dozens of small devotional and instructional books. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust was established in 1972 and has since published over 500 million books and magazines and has translated Prabhupada’s writings into over seventy-six languages.

Near the end of his life Prabhupada suffered from an array of illnesses, including persistent heart attacks (he had at least two on his initial voyage to the United States). Nevertheless, before passing away on November 14, 1977 in Vrindavana, India, Prabhupada managed to establish 108 temples, write more than sixty volumes of transcendental literature, initiate five thousand disciples, and circle the globe fourteen times on tours that took him to six continents. As stipulated in Prabhupada’s will, international authority within ISKCON was passed to the Governing Body Commission (GBC), a managerial board which, as of 2004, consists of thirty-four senior devotees who convene annually in Mayapur, India to discuss major strategies

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and guidelines.\textsuperscript{13} According to ISKCON’s own estimates, there are approximately 10,000 temple devotees and 250,000 congregational devotees internationally, as well as 350 centers, 60 rural communities, 50 schools, and 60 restaurants.\textsuperscript{14}

**New Vrindaban**

In early 1968, under the instruction of Prabhupada, two American initiates were tasked with establishing ISKCON’s first intentional farming community. Kirtananda Swami (born Keith Ham) responded to an advertisement in the *San Francisco Oracle*; a land owner in Marshall County, West Virginia was looking for a buyer to establish a religious community in the Appalachian hills.\textsuperscript{15} With the assistance of friend and fellow devotee Hayagriva Swami (Howard Wheeler), Kirtananda initiated a 99-year lease on approximately 132 acres of uncultivated land for $4,000 in order to establish a self-sufficient community that was based entirely upon the spiritual ideals of Krishna Consciousness.\textsuperscript{15} The community, which

\textsuperscript{13} Ketola, “The Hare Krishna and the Counterculture in Light of the Theory of Divergent Modes of Religiosity,” 314.


Prabhupada called New Vrindaban, took as its prototype traditional Vedic life in Vṛndāvana, India – the transcendental childhood home of Krishna.\(^{16}\)

The community originally consisted of four devotees who moved to the farm and began the arduous task of preparing the land for human occupancy.\(^{17}\) The farm was located two miles up a steep road that was impassible by car and was financially supported by Hayagriva’s salary as an English professor at Ohio State University.\(^{18}\) In July of 1968, the community was first advertised to other devotees in Back to Godhead, a popular ISKCON publication:

*Our latest center is called New Vrindaban, and is considerably more ambitious than any of our past endeavors. Located outside the Appalachian mountain town of Moundsville, 10 miles south of Wheeling, West Virginia, its purpose is ‘to serve as a holy place of transcendental pastimes, dedicated to Krishna, the Personality of Godhead.’ New Vrindaban consists of 133 acres of land, including a stream with a waterfall and bathing ghats, woods, fields, and pasturage; and a knoll called ‘Goverdan Hill.’ Only a house and a barn stand there now, but plans for future are evolving quickly.*\(^{19}\)

Hayagriva wrote about the early challenges at New Vrindaban in an article he penned for Back to Godhead:

*Communal living isn’t all honey and wild-flowers, though there are plenty of both. First there is the seemingly eternal problem of finances, then manpower. There must be money to buy property and building materials; then the building must be carried out by members who know more about construction than just*


nailing. Wells must be dug, sewage disposed, roads built, land plowed, supplies brought in. Then there must be heat for the winter – stoves, firewood or oil – and hay and grain for the cows and horses, which are quite expensive for the winter when there’re a dozen cows. And there’s more to crops than just throwing in seeds. In brief, there is so much involved in getting a commune functioning that it is no wonder that most of them fold out and die before the first spring flowers bud. The advice: don’t try to start one without Krsna.

It was during this period of establishment, on May 21st, 1969, that Prabhupada made his first visit to New Vrindaban. The founder-achārya stayed for approximately one month and expressed his desire to see the community grow in size. By the time Prabhupada visited New Vrindaban for a second time in 1972, New Vrindaban had expanded its land holdings to 365 acres.

As word of the community spread through ISKCON circles, an increasing number of devotees moved to New Vrindaban and took up communal life under the motto “Plain Living and High Thinking.” By the time longtime devotee Radha Dasi moved to the community in August of 1974 there were approximately forty full-time residents. During our interview, she discussed the primitiveness of earlier times:

*I remember a lot of mud. We all had mud boots. The first thing you got was some kind of bowl to eat out of – very important and people had no money so they were using plastic containers. And boots were important and then a bucket – a five-gallon bucket – and you would wash your clothes in there or you could carry your food. So those were the three main essential things – the bowl, a bucket, and some boots. BBB. Bowl, bucket, and boots.*

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Not much remains from this period in New Vrindaban’s history. The original temple complex (a modest house where many of the devotees also took up residence) at Bahulaban (Old Vrindaban, the site where the community was first established) was demolished after renovation plans went awry. We can, however, learn about life at New Vrindaban in the early 1970s through archived copies of the *Brijabasi Spirit*, the community’s staple publication. Originally a mimeographed 10-12-page newsletter, the *Spirit* documented weekly events, construction updates, prasadam recipes, reports from the community gardens and cow protection program, and minutes from meetings of the Board of Directors and proceedings of the Judicial Board.

Through the publication, we can trace both the physical and organizational development of the community (see *Fig. 1*). On May 25, 1974, the *Spirit* reported that New Vrindaban had four cows in its possession; just seven months later that number had increased to twenty-one.\(^{24}\) By the end of 1975, the cows were producing upwards of 140 gallons (1200 pounds) of milk daily.\(^{25}\) The community added a lending library and jewelry, sewing, canning, blacksmithing, brickmaking and landscaping departments. Residents established a shoe shop and the management acquired grain mills, septic tanks, steam boilers, a hydronic heating system, a cement mixer, bulldozers and John Deere diesel tractors.

The early community appears to have emphasized order and obedience. Members of the armed Kshatriya (warrior) department trained in karate and visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina to see about acquiring uniforms and combat boots. The Spirit printed the names of those devotees who were absent from mangala arotika (the early-morning devotional service). The Judiciary Board oversaw violations such as consistent failure to attend mangala arotika, leaving the community without permission, passing stool in public and disorderly conduct. The Board allowed defendants to enter a plea, after which time a fitting punishment was prescribed. Ordered atonements were typically spiritual in nature (i.e. brushing teeth with a stick, circumambulating the temple, reciting a specified number of mantras, or reading from

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the *Bhagavad-Gita*) but the most severe offenses (such as persistent undermining of the management’s authority) resulted in definite or indefinite suspension.

For all its insistence on regulation and procedure, the management was at least equally committed to the spiritual advancement and general well-being of New Vrindaban’s residents. The *Spirit* often featured devotional treatises and for some time ran a section where devotees could write in asking for advice. The newsletter also published the medical dispensary’s activity log – reporting on ailments such as small and large cuts, cramps, nail punctures and fungus infections for which stitches, bandages, hydrogen peroxide and mint tea were prescribed. On occasion, the *Spirit* published crossword puzzles, taking as clues words associated with Krishna’s transcendental pastimes or Prabhupada’s teachings. The publication was also instrumental in preparing the community for Prabhupada’s third visit to the community in 1974 (see Fig. 2).

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Fig. 2: Details of fundraising contest printed in Volume 1, Issue 9 of the Brijabasi Spirit.30

From July 18th through July 23rd of that year, Prabhupada visited with New Vrindaban residents and admired the community’s progress. During his stay, Prabhupada’s health proved troublesome. He suffered from heart palpitations and often had to miss morning walks. Nonetheless, Prabhupada commented that the community had realized “much improvement.”31 Several months after his visit, Prabhupada wrote the following:

*Regarding New Vrindaban I was very happy when I was there. Not only myself but all devotees and GBC members all enjoyed the atmosphere of New Vrindaban, especially the cow protection scheme. May Krishna give more facilities to advance*  

the cause of New Vrindaban, and I am expecting very soon to go there and live in my proposed palace at least for some time.³¹

This proposed palace was to become the community’s crowned jewel. As soon as Prabhupada made known his wish to see seven temples built on the surrounding hilltops and his intention to one day retire at New Vrindaban, devotees began building Prabhupada’s Palace of Gold. The structure was to serve as Prabhupada’s residence upon completion. Construction began in 1972 and Prabhupada toured the partially-completed building during his fourth and final visit to New Vrindaban in June of 1976.³² During his visit, he was shown the central hall, deity room, marble inlay work, decorative arches and ornate furniture.³² When Prabhupada died (devotees say “disappeared”) in 1977, the residents of New Vrindaban continued to work on the Palace, motivated to construct a proper memorial for their guru.

The majority of the Palace was built by the devotees themselves, who had little or no prior training or experience in construction:

*Acquiring advice and help along the way, they learned architecture, bricklaying, carpentry, plumbing, electrical work, casting, marble cutting and polishing, stained-glass making, and landscaping. Mothers with their children, men you and old, friends and neighbors – each person worked in the spirit of Bhagavad Gita, the main text of Krishna devotees; “All that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as any sacrifice that you may perform, should be done as an offering to Me.”³³*

Thus, the devotees enhanced their Krishna Consciousness as the Palace, in all its opulent grandeur, came to fruition. The completed Palace featured marble floors, teakwood doors, crystal chandeliers, stained-glass windows, and gold-leafing. The exterior of the Palace, which was modeled after Jaipuri architecture, is covered in 8,000 square feet of 22-karat gold leaf sheets, each one one-thousandth of an inch thick, sealed by four layers of shellac. Forty-two chandeliers assembled from 11,000 pieces of Austrian crystal adorn the main hallway. The 35,000-square foot Palace boasts 254 tons of marble, comprised of forty varieties imported from Italy, Turkey, France, and Brazil. The main temple room is lit by a 185-year old French chandelier and the ceiling, which features ornate paintings of Krishna’s childhood pastimes, is a miniature rival of the Sistine Chapel. Outside, the Palace is surrounded by twenty acres of sculpted gardens and terrace. Some have estimated that the Palace is worth between ten and fifteen million dollars; because devotees did most of the work themselves, the community only had to invest $600,000 in the project for the purchase of construction materials and equipment.

The Palace of Gold was officially dedicated on September 2, 1979, nearly 2 years after Prabhupada’s death. Soon thereafter, New Vrindaban received an influx of tourists eager to see the strange anomaly tucked away within the West Virginian hills (see Fig 3 on next page). In 1982, the Palace was visited by over 100,000 tourists; by 1985 that number had reached nearly 500,000. The national media also began to take notice, with the Washington Post and the New York Times praising the structure.

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as “Almost Heaven” and “America’s Taj Mahal,” respectively. The Wall Street Journal reported, “The flow of traffic into this coal and manufacturing outpost [Moundsville] on the banks of the Ohio used to be as slow as the river on a dusty summer day. But now, a daily confluence of buses packed with gawking tourists is a common sight.” In general, the New Vrindaban community was enlivened by this tourist attention. As such, Kirtananda, New Vrindaban’s leader at the time, wished to expand the community’s appeal and even expressed interest in building what he called “Krishnaland” – a transcendental amusement park of sorts.

Fig. 3: Tour buses in front of Prabhupada’s Palace of Gold during the 1980s.

In part due to New Vrindaban finding itself in the tourist and media spotlight upon completion of the Palace, the community’s population grew extensively over the proceeding decade. By 1985, New Vrindaban supported a population of over 600 devotees, including 110 grade-school aged children, 60 pre-school aged children, and 10 teachers.\textsuperscript{36} At this time the community employed over 180 non-devotees from the surrounding region as secretaries, gardeners and construction works and was thus one of the largest employers in Marshall County, West Virginia.\textsuperscript{37} Additionally, the community’s land holdings had increased to over 3,000 acres, allowing the construction of additional buildings vital to New Vrindaban’s vitality – a small temple, a school, a nursery, a community store, a printing facility, craft shops, dairy barns, and dormitories.\textsuperscript{38} The community ran a successful dairy operation which, by this time, boasted a herd of nearly 300 cows.\textsuperscript{38} Additionally, the community even had a pet elephant, Malini, imported from India.\textsuperscript{39} Kirtananada said she was to be the first of thirty elephants that New Vrindaban planned to acquire. Funds for these various projects were obtained by sankirtan teams, consisting of devotees who travelled across the country selling various items (candles, hats, records, stickers, etc.) in public spaces or at sporting events.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Rochford and Doktorsi, “Guru Authority, Religious Innovation, and the Decline of New Vrindaban,” 147.
\textsuperscript{40} Rochford, “Almost Heaven,” 8.
Beginning in 1986, New Vrindaban was plagued by a plethora of legal allegations that were brought against the community’s leader. Kirtananda Swami, by this time referred to by many devotees as Bhaktipada, was suspected of having had some form of involvement in the murder of Steven Bryant (Sulocana Das), a disgruntled former New Vrindaban resident.\textsuperscript{41} Bryant had previously accused Kirtananda and the larger New Vrindaban community of various infractions, including fraud, drug smuggling, and child abuse.\textsuperscript{41} On January 5, 1987 agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) arrived at New Vrindaban to conduct a thorough investigation.\textsuperscript{42}

Amidst his legal troubles, Kirtananda initiated a period of radical religious change that would come to significantly alter life at New Vrindaban. Kirtananda’s innovations, by and large, called for the Westernization of Krishna Consciousness. Under Kirtananda’s instruction, devotees began to sport Franciscan-style robes and grow long beards.\textsuperscript{43} Worship in the temple also changed remarkably with the introduction of many Western elements: silent prayer, the presence of a pipe organ and other Western instruments, and the use of English in temple services in place of the traditional Sanskrit.\textsuperscript{43} The community formed a 20-voice choir, the Krishna Chorale, which sang “Krishna-ized” versions of Bach and Handel classics in addition to a variety of adapted Christian hymns.\textsuperscript{42} For a short time, a murti (statue) of Jesus Christ

\textsuperscript{41} Rochford, “Almost Heaven,” 9.
\textsuperscript{42} Rochford, “Almost Heaven,” 10.
\textsuperscript{43} Sankirtana Das, “City of God Era,” \textit{New Vrindavan: A Community in Transition}. 
was even placed next to the murti of Prabhupada in the temple (see Fig. 4). All of these modifications were enacted to realize Kirtananda’s changed vision for New Vrindaban; Kirtananda wished for the community to reinvent itself as an “Interfaith City of God” – a walled city of over ten thousand residents. The various westernizations that were a part of this interfaith experiment alienated some of the devotees, particularly those who were of Indian ethnicity. As these devotees left the community, their generous financial donations – upon which the community had come to rely – so too disappeared.

Fig. 4: The murti of Jesus Christ seated in a vyasanana (guru throne) next to Prabhupada’s murti (not shown). Kirtananda’s vyasanana (not shown) sat to the right of Prabhupada’s.

Senior Hare Krishna devotees took notice of Kirtananda’s unauthorized actions and on March 16, 1987 he was excommunicated from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.\textsuperscript{45} Within a year, the New Vrindaban community had also been expelled.\textsuperscript{45} Unencumbered by ISKCON’s formal provisions, Kirtananda continued to make changes in favor of Western and Christian culture. During this time, the community renamed itself: the Eternal Order of the Holy Name, League of Devotees International.\textsuperscript{45} In May of 1990, Kirtananda was indicted on three counts of violating the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (for his illegal use of trademark logos during fundraising), six counts of mail fraud, and two counts of conspiracy to commit murder.\textsuperscript{46} Kirtananda was convicted on the RICO and mail fraud counts and sentenced to thirty years in prison, but that conviction was overturned in July of 1993, when the appellate Court ruled that the District Court had wrongly allowed evidence of child molestation and other controversial matters to be presented during the trial.\textsuperscript{46}

The community was largely divided over the question of Kirtananda’s authority, though a significant number of devotees remained loyal to the man they revered as their guru. Much of this changed in September of 1993, however, when Kirtananda was discovered to have had an inappropriate sexual relationship with at least one young adult male devotee.\textsuperscript{46} After six years, the interfaith experiment was terminated in July of 1994 and New Vrindaban returned to its original, Indian style of living and

\textsuperscript{45} Rochford, “Almost Heaven,” 10.

\textsuperscript{46} Rochford, “Almost Heaven,” 11.
Two years later, in 1996, Kirtananda pleaded guilty to one count of federal racketeering and was sentenced to twenty years in a federal prison. Kirtananda’s sentence was eventually reduced to twelve years and he was released early in 2004, after which time he lived at a Manhattan temple before moving to India in 2008. It was there, in a hospital near Mumbai, that he died on October 24, 2011 at the age of 74.

Kirtananda’s legal problems and religious modifications had a devastating effect on the New Vrindaban community. In July of 1986, at the start of Kirtananda’s interfaith experiment, approximately 377 adult devotees resided at New Vrindaban; by July of 1991 that number had dropped to a scant 131. Thus, in just five years, the community lost a total of 246 adult members – a total reduction of nearly 65%. It is not immediately known whether or not these devotees left ISKCON altogether. In the absence of sankirtan revenues and donations from Indian pilgrims, New Vrindaban was no longer able to support its communal style of living and beginning in 1990, householders were required to financially support their families independently.

Faced with serious financial decline and in desperate need of revenue, New Vrindaban sold its construction equipment and printing presses as well as a large number of land parcels. In 1999, the community’s private school was closed and the children of New

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Vrindaban began attending public school. Furthermore, the once-lucrative dairy operation was significantly downsized – old cows were permitted to die naturally and impregnation was limited.

In 1997, New Vrindaban and ISKCON formally renewed their relationship and, after a waiting period of one year, New Vrindaban returned to ISKCON officially in 1998. Upon re-admittance, Hindu pilgrims again began to visit the temple regularly and contribute much-needed funds. In an act of survival, New Vrindaban refocused its mission and has since channeled its efforts towards becoming a respected institution of Hindu pilgrimage. New Vrindaban thus survived because it created a niche for itself by becoming a place of pilgrimage for Indian Hindus; as a trade-off, the community also had to forfeit its goal of sustaining a self-sufficient residential community.

Today, New Vrindaban’s culture of pilgrimage is quite viable. According to New Vrindaban’s official website, every year several thousand pilgrims – both from the US and from India – visit the temple for various festivals. The nature and importance of these festivals will be further discussed momentarily. The main temple hall, located within the Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra Mandir (Temple), has a daily schedule of activities, beginning at 5:00 A.M. and ending at 8:30 P.M. A longtime devotee unofficially estimates that the community is currently home to approximately 170 residents who either live in the temple building, in temple-owned apartments, or in

privately-owned homes, with the latter being the largest of these three groupings. New Vrindaban has embraced the cyber-age and even maintains a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. For a brief period of time in 2004, the site administrator posted weekly vintage photographs from an earlier era of the community as part of a series called “New Vrindaban’s Transcendental Throwback Thursday.”

Ritual and Pilgrimage

The daily rituals at New Vrindaban are those which are repeated on a daily basis during temple worship within the Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra Mandir (RVC Temple). New Vrindaban’s website notes that this temple is often the first stop for all visitors and pilgrims. Temple activities begin with the mangala arati at 5:00 A.M. During the mangala arati, the temple bell is rung and ancient slokas (verses) are recited while offerings are made to the deities during the auspicious morning hours before sunrise. Next, the Tulsi plant is ritualistically watered and devotees individually chant on their prayer beads. At 7:40 A.M., the guru puja is performed and the devotees offer prayers to the murti of Prabhupada. Throughout the day, the devotees maintain and decorate the altars, preparing vegetarian food offerings (prasada), stringing flower garlands, and dressing the deities. Essential to these daily rituals is the Hindu concept of darshan – the act of seeing and being seen by the divine

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55 “Devotee Interview.” E-mail interview. Nov. 2014.
image.\textsuperscript{58} For the devotees, the divine images in the temple are charged with religious power and are, in fact, the very presence of the deity itself.\textsuperscript{59}

Throughout the day, a number of activities take place inside the temple. At 8:00 A.M. devotees convene for a class on the Srimad-Bhagavatam. The temple schedule varies from weekdays to weekends to accommodate for pilgrims and visitors. For example, the altars are closed from 1:00 P.M. to 4:30 P.M. on weekdays but on Saturdays and Sundays the altars remain open throughout the day. The final \textit{darshan} of the day, the \textit{shayan darshan}, commences as 8:30 P.M., at which time the divine images are said to retire. Ritual items (including conch-shells, water, incense sticks, ghee lamps, matches, bells, whisks and flowers are utilized in the temple at various points throughout the day.\textsuperscript{60}

As a site of pilgrimage, New Vrindaban regularly hosts various festivals and celebrations. Devotees observe Janmastami (the celebration of the birth of Krishna), Ratha-Yatra (the Chariot Festival associated with Lord Jagannath), Gaura-Purnima (the celebration of the birth of Caitanya), Diwali (the festival of lights), and Prabhupada’s Disappearance Day, as well as a number of other celebrations.\textsuperscript{61} The community also holds special events on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s because the extended weekends give

\textsuperscript{58} Michael, “Heaven, West Virginia,” 208.
\textsuperscript{59} Ketola, “The Hare Krishna and the Counterculture in Light of the Theory of Divergent Modes of Religiosity,” 306.
\textsuperscript{61} “Community,” \textit{New Vrindaban: The Land of Krishna}. 
visitors an opportunity to travel. During festival celebrations, visitors enjoy chanting ceremonies, swan boat events, dramatic storytelling and performances, and *prasadam* feasts.

Additionally, New Vrindaban hosts *kirtans* where devotees chant, sing, and dance – sometimes for up to twenty-four hours at a time. During these *kirtans*, devotees may first sway from side to side or clap their hands. As the tempo of the music increases, devotees may begin jumping up and down or engaging in what is called the “swami step” – a simple form of dancing in which the devotee sways his or her leg sideways while taking a small jump with the other leg. Other forms of dancing require devotee collaboration: forming circles, forming queues, taking the hands of a partner and swirling around, etc. Devotee and visitor participation levels during these *kirtans* are quite diverse.

Because the temple is central to pilgrimage and ritual at New Vrindaban, it is worth further exploring its spatial composition (see Fig. 5). Constructed in 1983, the interior of the Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra Temple in many ways rivals the beauty of Prabhupada’s Palace of Gold. The massive temple doors are flanked by two godly golden guards. Inside, twenty-four pillars featuring sculpted lions draw attention to the four-story high stained glass atrium ceiling. The central altar, which is wrapped in gold, enshrines from stage left to stage right Lord Sri Sri Gaur-Nitai (a representation of Lord Caitanya), Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra (Radha-Krishna, Ketola, “The Hare Krishna and the Counterculture in Light of the Theory of Divergent Modes of Religiosity,” 306. “Attractions,” America’s *Taj Mahal: Palace of Gold*. New Vrindaban, 2013. Web.
the embodiment of the feminine and masculine nature of God), and Sri Gopalanathaji (a representation of the young Krishna). Lord Nrisimradeva and his devotee, Prahlad Maharaj, are seated upon an altar that is right of center. The seven-foot-tall, 400-pound murti of Nrisimradeva, which received its jet-black color from local coal, was installed on January 6, 1986. Moving in a clockwise fashion, one encounters the murti of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada. Next to Prabhupada, a table displays devotional books and japa beads which are for sale on an honor system. Here devotees find a sign prescribing proper temple etiquette (i.e. “One should not expose one’s feet towards the Deities”).

On the right side of this table is the door which leads to the prasadam (feast) hall. To the immediate right of the main temple entrance, sits a peacock chariot of hand-carved teakwood and polished brass. To the immediate left of the main temple entrance, there is a table where devotees sometimes string floral garlands for the deities. To the right of this table, is an opulent golden swing wrapped in flowers, upon which an image of Radha-Krishna is seated. Moving clockwise, one comes to the altar of Lord Baladeva (an incarnation of Balarama, Krishna’s elder brother), Lady Subhadra (Krishna’s younger sister), and Lord Jagannatha (an avatar of Lord Krishna/Vishnu). These three deities, which are made from local West Virginian

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wood, were moved into the temple in 1986. The Six Goswamis of Vrindavana (students of Caitanya Mahaprabhu) are enshrined to the immediate left of the central altar.

Most of the deities enshrined at New Vrindaban are incarnations of Krishna (Vishnu) and each invokes their own unique mythology. Apparently for a brief period of time in the mid- to late-1980s, murtis of Rama (another avatar of Vishnu), Sita (Rama’s wife), Lakshman (Rama’s brother) and Hanuman (Rama’s monkey devotee) were installed in the Sri Sri Radha Vrindaban Chandra Mandir under the instruction of Kirtananda Swami. The fate of these murtis is unknown.

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Fig. 5: Schematic layout of New Vrindaban’s main temple hall.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{66} New Vrindaban floor plan with photos, New Vrindaban, West Virginia. Personal photograph by author. 2016.
From personal observation, it seems that Hindus and devotees tend to interact with the deities in slightly different ways. Upon entering the temple space, almost all devotees who are able-bodied lower themselves to the ground, lay on their stomachs, and stretch their arms out in front. This act of prostration is most frequently directed at the central altar or at the murti of Prabhupada. In general, the devotees spend a much greater amount of time interacting with the murti of ISKCON’s founder- ārāchārya than do the Hindus. Like the devotees, the Hindus circumambulate the temple. However, they less frequently prostrate before the deities. Their interaction with the murtis appears to be more informal. In some cases, their darshan (seeing) is through an artificial lens; many Hindus use their mobile phones or personal cameras to take photographs of the deities. Devotees were rarely observed participating in this form of worship.

In order to accommodate pilgrims and visitors, New Vrindaban has constructed a guest wing within the RVC temple building. Guests have other lodging options in the immediate vicinity of the temple complex, including cabins and apartment suites. Additionally, New Vrindaban operates a vegetarian restaurant, Govinda’s, which serves a variety of American and Indian snacks and specialties during the community’s peak tourist season (April through November). In addition to the Palace of Gold and the RVC Temple, tourists and visitors can also enjoy the palace and temple gift shops, expansive gardens, Goshalla (cow protection barn), large manmade
pond, painted swan boats, quaint gazebos, towering thirty-foot tall Gaur-Nitai statues, playful elephant and cow statues, and live peacocks.\textsuperscript{67}

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

What follows is a presentation of data collected in an online survey that was distributed to devotees and visitors via an internal New Vrindaban email list. The survey yielded responses from nine men (45%) and eleven women (55%). According to that survey, 75% of respondents (fifteen individuals) were residents or community members, 10% of respondents (two individuals) were pilgrims or visitors, and 15% (three individuals) were former residents of New Vrindaban. The average age of respondents was 50.4 years (min = 27 years, max = 73 years). 95% of respondents (eighteen individuals) indicated that they speak English at home, while one individual (5%) indicated that he or she is most comfortable speaking in Telugu, a South Indian language.

The majority of respondents (85%) identified themselves as Caucasian or white (seventeen individuals). One respondent (5%) identified as Latino and two respondents (10%) identified as South Asian. 70% of respondents (fourteen individuals) were born in the United States and 30% (six individuals) were not. These individuals were born in Switzerland (one respondent), Canada (one respondent), Mexico (one respondent), Poland (one respondent), and India (two respondents).

50% of respondents (10 individuals) indicated that they live at New Vrindaban. One respondent (5%) lives in or near Moundsville, West Virginia. 15% of respondents (3 individuals) live within 60 miles of New Vrindaban and 30% (6 individuals) live more than 60 miles from New Vrindaban. One respondent (5%) had been associated
with the New Vrindaban community for six months or less. Two respondents (10%) had been associated with the community for between one and five years. Four respondents (20%) had been associated with the community for between five and ten years. Two respondents (10%) had been associated with the community for between ten and twenty years. Three respondents (15%) had been associated with the community for between twenty and thirty years and eight respondents (40%) had been associated with the community for more than thirty years.

Seventeen respondents (90%) identified themselves as Gaudiya Vaishnavas or ISKCON devotees. One respondent (5%) identified as Hindu and one respondent (5%) identified as pagan (other). 60% of respondents (twelve individuals) were raised in Christian households, while 10% (two individuals) were raised Hindu, 15% (three individuals) were raised Gaudiya Vaishnava and 15% (three individuals) were brought up in Jewish households.

Residents of New Vrindaban spent the majority of their time in the temple (59%), Goshalla/Go-Seva (8%) or somewhere else, including the guest lodge or welcome center (33%). Comparatively, a greater percentage of visitors or pilgrims of New Vrindaban (88%) spent the majority of their time in the temple.

75% of respondents (fifteen individuals) had been formally initiated into ISKCON while 25% (five individuals) had not. 100% of respondents (twenty individuals) indicated that Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness are not the same. Eighteen respondents (90%) indicated that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead while two respondents (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed.
The survey included a short answer portion, in which respondents were permitted to type an extended response. When asked why they visit New Vrindaban, the respondents provided a variety of answers: “I visit New Vrindaban to render service and purify my consciousness”; “I work there”; “To enjoy peace, simple living, high thinking, love nature and Krishna”; “Krishna lives there”; and “It is the closest temple for me, so I attend as often as possible and consider it my community/congregation.”

Respondents were also asked to describe the relationship between Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness. As this is a central concern of my research, I will return to this in greater detail momentarily.

First, please allow me to describe the responses of two individuals. One will represent our prototypical Hindu and the other we will take as our prototypical devotee. While certainly not meant to represent the whole Hindu and devotee populations of New Vrindaban, these individuals’ responses highlight some of the fundamental differences between the two devotional groupings and the disparate ways that the community’s purpose is conceptualized.

Bhakti Dasa is our prototypical devotee. He is a sixty-two-year-old, Caucasian male who was born in the United States, as were both of his parents. He lives at New Vrindaban and has been associated with the community for over thirty years. Bhakti Dasa identifies as Gaudiya Vaishnava rather than Hindu, though he was raised in a Christian household. Bhakti Dasa has been formally initiated into ISKCON and does not believe that Hinduism and Gaudiya Vaishnavism are the same thing. Bhakti Dasa strongly agreed with the following statements: “I am familiar with the teachings of
Prabhupada” and “Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead.” Additionally, Bhakti Dasa strongly agreed that his religious beliefs could be best described as monotheistic – he does not worship gods other than Krishna. At New Vrindaban, Bhakti Dasa does not spend the majority of his time in the temple. Rather, he can most often be found at the Goshalla/Go-Seva (cow barn). Bhakti Dasa believes that New Vrindaban’s primary function should be cow protection, followed by the fostering of an intentional, self-sufficient community. Least important to Bhakti Dasa was New Vrindaban’s function as a holy place of pilgrimage.

Santosh, a sixty-year-old Indian male, is our prototypical Hindu. He was born in India and neither of his parents were born in the United States. Santosh has been a pilgrim of the community for between ten and twenty years. He lives more than sixty miles from New Vrindaban and visits approximately one to three times per year. Santosh self-identifies as Hindu and grew up in a family home where Hinduism was practiced. Santosh has not been formally initiated into ISKCON and does not believe that Hinduism and Gaudiya Vaishnavism are the same thing. He strongly disagreed with the statement that his religious beliefs were best described as monotheistic. Additionally, Santosh disagreed with the statement that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead and neither agreed nor disagreed that he was familiar with the teachings of Prabhupada. Santosh indicated that, in addition to Krishna, he worships other gods. When visiting the community, Santosh spends most of his time in the temple. Santosh believes that New Vrindaban’s primary function is to serve as a holy place of pilgrimage.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

At this point, we will turn our attention to the integration of Indian Hindus into ISKCON’s social framework. First, we must look at Indian immigration in its own right. Then, we will consider the important role that Hindu temples have come to play in transnationalism and diasporic identity formation. We will take New Vrindaban as a case study and attempt to conceptualize the interactions that occur there between the community’s devotee and Hindu populations. Lastly, we will see that for both its residents and visitors, New Vrindaban’s temple is a social sphere where religious and ethnic identities are bi-directionally reinforced, resisted, and renegotiated.

Though there were certainly Indians visiting and living in the United States prior to 1965, the Immigration and Naturalization Act that was passed that year quite literally opened the country’s door to an unprecedented number of immigrants who began moving from India and establishing themselves permanently in the U.S. There are estimated to be 3.2 million Asian Indians presently living in the United States (as of the 2010 U.S. Census). There are no official figures to be found on the religious composition of this Asian Indian population. Though Hindus constitute more than 80 percent of the population in India, we cannot reliably use this percentage as a benchmark because India’s religious minorities (Sikhs and Christians, for example)

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immigrate to the U.S. at a comparatively-higher rate than do their Hindu counterparts.\footnote{Kurien, “Multiculturalism and ‘American’ Religion,” 725.} It has been estimated that between 45 and 76 percent of the Indian American population is Hindu.\footnote{Kurien, Prema. “Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion, and Diasporic Nationalism: The Development of an American Hinduism.” Social Problems 51.3 (2004): 365. \textit{JSTOR [JSTOR]}. Web.}

Scholars have argued that the American emphasis on multiculturalism necessitates that immigrants organize themselves along the basis of cultural and ethnic similarity and construct a public ethnic identity – one which transcends national borders.\footnote{Vande Berg, Travis, and Fred Kniss. “ISKCON and Immigrants: The Rise, Decline, and Rise Again of a New Religious Movement.” The Sociological Quarterly 49.1 (2008): 80. \textit{JSTOR [JSTOR]}. Web.} The construction of such a public identity has much in common with the phenomenon of transnationalism, which has been explored in great detail elsewhere.\footnote{Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion and Diasporic Nationalism,” 366.}

For our purposes, it will suffice to say that Basch, Glick, Shiller and Blanc define transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.”\footnote{Vande Berg and Kniss suggest that transnationalism is cultivated and sustained at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.}

In the United States and other secular societies where national identity is assumed before religious identity, religion is often the least politically-threatening agent of mobilization available to immigrants.\footnote{Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion and Diasporic Nationalism,” 366.} Thus, for immigrant populations, religion becomes an important anchor of ethnic identity. In the context of this
research, an individual’s self-identification as a Hindu may become more important in the United States than it had been in India. Kurien, who has extensively studied the Hindu diaspora, reports that many of the immigrants she interviewed explained that they had become more religious upon coming to the United States because they “for the first time, had to think about the meaning of their religion and religious identity, something they could take for granted in India.”

For Christians in the United States, the church is the basic unit of organization and serves as the congregational home of the worshiper. Additionally, churches foster fellowship networks and provide religious education. Hindu temples in India are quite different in this regard. The temple is first and foremost the home of its enshrined deity or deities. The concept of “membership” is one quite foreign to the Hindu temple; individuals are free to visit and patronize temples as they please. Additionally, temples in India do not generally provide religious education classes; Hindu doctrine and rituals are learned primarily in the home.

In order to receive the benefits granted to churches by the International Revenue Service, religious organizations in the United States are required to meet a number of criteria. Because Hindu temples do not generally have “regular congregations” or “Sunday schools for the religious instruction of the young,” it is no surprise that few Hindu temples have achieved IRS recognition. And so, Hindus in some parts of the United States have turned to non-traditional, neo-Hindu temples.

74 Kurien, “Multiculturalism, Immigrant Religion and Diasporic Nationalism,” 370.
(such as those managed by ISKCON) to satisfy their needs. New Vrindaban, which is recognized as a church by the IRS, is one such alternative.\textsuperscript{76}

In August of 1970, Prabhupada began the ISKCON Life Membership program, whereby Indians could receive access to all ISKCON centers in exchange for a one-time payment of $1,111.\textsuperscript{77} Despite this initiative, there is little evidence of Hindu participation in New Vrindaban’s early community. Visits from Indian life-members where apparently so rare that when a Bengali family visited the community in 1974, the occasion was deemed news-worthy and a write-up was printed in the \textit{Brijabasi Spirit} (see Fig. 6 on next page).


\textsuperscript{77} Vande Berg and Kniss, “ISKCON and Immigrants,” 87.
One devotee who moved to the community in 1974 described that at that time the residents were “all young hippies.” With the opening of Prabhpada’s Palace of Gold in 1979, the community saw an influx of visitors. Another devotee, who has lived at New Vrindaban since 1976, estimated that only between 15 and 20 percent of those visitors were Hindu. As was previously described, New Vrindaban’s public reputation was sullied beginning in the 1980s by an unrelenting series of scandals. In the midst of these controversies, New Vrindaban’s charismatic leader undertook a

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79 “Interview #1.” Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2016.
80 “Interview #3.” Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2016.
period of radical religious change and innovation within the temple. Rochford has explained that these modifications resulted in the temporary “de-Indianization of Krishna Consciousness.” Kirtananda implemented the use of Western music and clothing in devotional activity at New Vrindaban, saying, “We’re not interested in Indian culture as such. We’re interested in what is productive for Krishna consciousness – whatever is useful.”

The sum of all these changes left the community’s Hindu supporters feeling unappreciated and alienated. Many had given monetary donations for the construction of a Vedic style temple and were angered when they learned that Kirtananda was instead using their money to build the “Cathedral of the Holy Name.” Insult was added to injury when Kirtananda publically stated, “I do not care about Indian people.” The remark did not go unnoticed by New Vrindaban’s Indian patrons. One Hindu supporter expressed his frustration in a letter to Kirtananda:

_I was extremely distressed by your ridiculous remarks about Indians...If you have such racial inner feelings about Indians, you should realize that Indians do not need you for the spiritual knowledge but you need them for the lakshmi [money] all the time._

For years, New Vrindaban had provided Hindus with the facilities and tools to reaffirm their Indian identity within the secular landscape of the United States. When New Vrindaban withdrew these facilities and tools, the Hindus so too withdrew their patronage.

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In the absence of a consistent source of revenue, the community desperately began selling off anything that it could – construction equipment, printing presses, and land. New Vrindaban was unable to financially sustain itself as an intentional community and, beginning in 1990, householders at New Vrindaban were required to support their families independently.\(^{84}\) One devotee, who bought land from New Vrindaban during this time, explained the changes:

*For twenty years it [New Vrindaban] existed as a commune but that began to break down around 1990. The community shifted from being a commune into a full-fledged community where people owned their own things – they had their own cars and their own homes and they generated an income for themselves.*\(^{84}\)

These developments further reinforced the relationship between Hindu patronage and New Vrindaban’s viability. And so in 1994, after nearly a decade of internal upheaval, New Vrindaban abandoned the interfaith experiment and returned to its traditional, Indian style of dress and worship.\(^{83}\) Additionally, Kirtananda was imprisoned in 1996 and, two years later, New Vrindaban was officially readmitted to ISKCON.\(^{83}\) Hindu pilgrims returned to the community and so too did their much-needed financial contributions. Pilgrimage thus presented itself as New Vrindaban’s most profitable function and thereafter the leadership turned most of their attention to expanding the community’s tourist appeal.

When Indians come to New Vrindaban, they often bring food and monetary donations. Other IKSCON temples similarly rely heavily on visitor donations to sustain operations. The Chicago ISKCON temple, for example, received over $37,000

\(^{84}\) “Interview #3.” Personal interview. 18 Jan. 2016.
in donations during a two month period. In fall of 2012, the Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism Resources at West Virginia University conducted a study to evaluate the brand identity and image of New Vrindaban. Through their research they found that approximately 70% of pilgrims had a college degree and 59% had a postgraduate degree. The average household income of pilgrims ranged from $66,000 to $75,000 and 30% had an annual household income of over $100,000. These findings quantify the extent to which pilgrims are vital to the community as a significant source of revenue.

Because pilgrims are essential for New Vrindaban’s continued financial stability, the leadership has invested considerable time and money into the buildings and activities that attract them to the community. This reprioritization has engendered some tension between the leadership and the community’s full-time residents. According to a survey conducted by Rochford in 2003, nearly three-quarters (73%) of New Vrindaban’s residents agreed that, “New Vrindaban is more concerned with pilgrims of Indian descent than with its local congregation.”

Bhakti Krishna Dasa, who has lived at New Vrindaban for forty-one years, recently established the New Vrindaban Village Association in an attempt to give community members more of a voice in the decision making process. He explained

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that there is somewhat of a disconnect between what the community members want and what the leadership thinks is best for the continued success of New Vrindaban:

There are big plans for renovation and building this and building that and that’s always important because that was the dual vision of our founder, Prabhupada. [He] wanted New Vrindaban to be a simple village and at the same time be a place of pilgrimage and pilgrimage in our line means big temples, guest houses and all of these things. And so that has caused some dynamic tension in the community – how do you do both? It would be one thing if Prabhupada had just said, “Come here and live in harmony with the land and the cows and then you’ve done it.” But at the same time it’s like, “Now I want you to build these big, expensive temples and maintain them.” So it’s almost like there are two tracks – two tracks to accomplish the same thing. The thing that we’re trying to accomplish is to spread the word of Krishna, to attract people to the message of Krishna and to show, in a practical way, that you can still practice Krishna Consciousness in the modern world.88

Bhakti Krishna Dasa went on to explain that these two tracks are somewhat analogous to the Democratic and Republican parties in the contemporary United States in that they are the manifestation of fundamental differences in opinion about the way the community should be run. Many of these debates rely upon implicit assumptions about the relationship between ISKCON’s Krishna Consciousness and Hinduism.

“Hinduism” is notoriously difficult to define and I am not here prepared to undertake such an arduous task. I am, however, interested in articulating those elements of Hindu traditions which are similar or dissimilar to theologies or practices which belong exclusively to ISKCON. Prabhupada was seemingly aware of the ambiguity and addressed the matter on several occasions. We must remember that Prabhupada did not think his movement was a religion as such. In the introduction to his 1995 commentary on the Gita, he writes the following:

Sanatana-dharma does not refer to any sectarian process of religion. It is the eternal function of the eternal living entities in relationship with the eternal Supreme Lord…it refers to the eternal occupation of the living entity…The English word religion is a little different from sanatana-dharma. Religion conveys the idea of faith, and faith may change. One may have faith in a particular process, and he may change this faith and adopt another, but sanatana-dharma refers to that activity which cannot be changed...Those belonging to some sectarian faith will strongly consider that sanatana-dharma is also sectarian, but if we go deeply into the matter and consider it in the light of modern science, it is possible for us to see that sanatana-dharma is the business of the people of the world – nay, of all the living entities in the universe. 

Elsewhere, Prabhupada more explicitly distinguished between Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness:

There is a misconception that the Krishna consciousness movement represents the Hindu religion. Sometimes Indians both inside and outside of India think that we are preaching the Hindu religion, but actually we are not. 

Prabhupada affirmed that Krishna Consciousness was distinct from Hinduism in its disavowal of pantheism, polytheism and caste consciousness. Most devotees that I interviewed seemed to be refer to their guru’s sentiments when discussing the relationship between Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness:

It’s kind of interesting because we may appear to be a Hindu religion but Prabhupada never saw it that way. He saw this as a path that anyone can avail themselves to and maintain their own religious traditions, whether they are Christians or Jewish or Buddhist or whatever...Prabhupada presented this as what is referred to as sanatana-dharma. So even in India the term Hindu is a misnomer. So many people identify themselves as Hindu but if you asked the devotees they wouldn’t really identify themselves as Hindus. 

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90 Sebastian and Parameswaran, “Hare Krishnas in Singapore,” 73.
In qualifying “Hindu” as a misnomer, this particular devotee was referencing a caveat that came up at least once during every devotee interview that I conducted at New Vrindaban. The devotees believe that the words “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are themselves empty Western constructs. Scholars have elsewhere discussed the notion that the term “Hindu” – which was inspired by the word that Persians used to denote the people living in the vicinity of the Sindhu/Indus River – relies upon implicitly orientalist assumptions.92 Therefore, most devotees shied away from using the term “Hindu” and instead referred to the pilgrims as “Indian-bodied devotees.”

Nonetheless, most devotees distanced themselves from theologies or practices which many would consider to be Hindu. Generally, devotees articulated two fundamental points of deviation. First, devotees do not worship demigods as do their Hindu counterparts. ISKCON devotees believe that Krishna is the “Supreme Personality of Godhead” and that worshipping Him satisfies all lesser gods which are simply manifestations of His divinity. Several devotees mentioned that Hindu worship of the demigods (such as to Laxmi, the goddess of wealth) is motivated by materialistic desires that are contrary to the goals of Krishna Consciousness. Second, devotees at New Vrindaban describe themselves as “personalists” – they believe that they have a personal, reciprocal relationship with Krishna. One devotee pointed out that, in this way, Krishna Consciousness is more similar to Judaism or Christianity than it is to Hinduism, which most devotees believe to be an impersonalist tradition.93

Many devotees, though, acknowledge that Hinduism and Krishna Consciousness share some basic theological elements – namely an appreciation for Krishna as a divine being. In 1977, Prabhupada remarked, “As far as the Hindu religion is concerned, there are millions of Krishna temples in India and there is not a single Hindu who does not worship Krishna.”\(^{94}\) One devotee who has lived at New Vrindaban for over forty years, said the following regarding areas of theological convergence:

The forms that are available in the New Vrindaban experience are familiar to all brands of what we would call Hinduism. And Krishna is accepted, the Bhagavad Gita is accepted by every Hindu. So their [the Hindu visitors’] experience here is always uplifting because they see the deities, the forms of the Lord, and that’s what they expect to see – to stand in front of the Lord and offer some prayer, offer some donation. They’re accustomed to that tradition.\(^{95}\)

Another devotee explained that they way Hindus relate to Krishna is similar to the way an individual relates to a member of his or her extended family:

So a lot of the time when Indians come – not all Indians – but they’re like, “I know Krishna. I know Krishna,” because they know about Krishna and it is part of what they learned growing up but it’s kind of like you’ve got a huge family and you say, “I know Uncle George.” “I mean, I know Uncle George is married to Aunt Vivian and they’ve got three kids but, you know, do I really know Uncle George?”\(^{96}\)

While researching at New Vrindaban, I interviewed an Indian gentleman who was temporarily living in the temple’s ashram while his immigration paperwork was being resolved. This particular individual identified as Hindu rather than as a devotee

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94 Sebastian and Parameswaran, “Hare Krishnas in Singapore,” 74.
or a Gaudiya Vaishnava. He echoed these sentiments about the Hindu familiarity with Krishna:

Krishna is treated as part of Hinduism. [He] is well-known. But in India, Krishna is worshiped along with many other gods. Here [the] focus is different."

In the aforementioned survey, all respondents who were residents of New Vrindaban identified as Gaudiya Vaishnava rather than Hindu. Nonetheless, they were willing to admit some compromise. One devotee, who self-identified as Gaudiya Vaishnava, pointed out that his answer would depend on who was asking: “For instance, if I was filling out some legal form or statistical form and they asked you for your religion, I might put down Hindu because most people don’t see a distinction.”

Another devotee explained that if an American asked her about her religion outside of the temple she might say she is a Hindu while if an Indian/Hindu asked her, she would say she is Gaudiya Vaishnava.

Some of these questions of identity manifest in the way that devotees and Hindus experience themselves and one another in the temple. As was previously mentioned, Hindu pilgrims spent more time taking darshan with the enshrined deities than they did with the murti of Prabhupada, which was more commonly frequented by devotees. One devotee explained that these alternative forms of worship are the product of cultural differences:

When we offer guru puja, we line up and we take the Charitamrita and take the flowers like this [demonstrates with hands]. Indians don’t get the concept of lining up. It’s just a cultural thing, you know? And after a while you begin to

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understand it and smile and stand back until they’re done and then go and do your thing. It’s nothing that is really a disturbance.99

Another explained:

_A lot of Hindus come and they do crazy things. They put flower petals down in the hundi [place where individuals can give money or offerings] and when you’re sorting the money you have to pull out the flower petals. But that’s how they were taught. Or they’ll throw flowers at the deities and we’ll say, “Please don’t throw stuff at them.” But that’s how they were raised. And so, of course, we joke about it. You know, this one particular group – whenever they come, everybody goes, “Oh! They’ve been here!” – there are all these flowers and there’s all this mess here._100

Despite the underlying sentiments, the encounters between the devotees and the Hindus seem to be mostly amicable. Tulsi Dasi, who recently moved back to the community, spoke to this cordiality:

_For the most part, 99.99 percent of the time it’s just a very nice relationship. We’re happy to see them. They’re happy to see us. They appreciate that we’re here – that we’re maintaining the community so that they have a place._101

The other devotees that I interviewed seemed to understand the value that New Vrindaban has for the Hindus who visit it. New Vrindaban deviates from the prototypical Indian temple in many ways but nonetheless provides Hindu visitors with the facilities and tools to reaffirm their religious and ethnic identity. There seems here to be particular emphasis on the cultural and religious instruction of Indian youth, who – unlike some of their parents – are growing up in a landscape largely devoid of the ubiquitous forms readily available in India. Beginning in 1983, New Vrindaban ran a

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summer camp program for children of Indian immigrants. Camp Gopal offered the traditional American summer camp activities (swimming, boating, horseback riding, etc.) alongside training in hathavidya (hatha yoga), mantra meditation, kirtans, bhajanas (Hindu devotional songs), and pujas as well as instruction in Vedic philosophy and vegetarian cooking. Camp Gopal no longer exists by name but New Vrindaban advertises its current program, the Kid’s Camp, as “a good way to hand down Indian heritage to the next generation.”

These kinds of youth programs are virtually unknown to Hindu temples in India. Other programs unique to American temples include language classes, dance recitals, Sunday schools, and weddings. For Hindus living in the United States, temples and ISKCON centers like New Vrindaban have become the one-stop shop for all things Indian. Surinder M. Bhardwaj, a scholar of American Hinduism, argues the following regarding the temple as the locus of Hindu identity in the United States: “In the very process of serving as a symbol of Hindu regrouping, the temple’s role has transformed from just a place of worship to a broader cultural institution.” For the Hindus who visit New Vrindaban, the temple has quite uniquely become the nexus of both religious and cultural activities and thus the primary social space in which religious and cultural identities are forged. In his analysis of American Hinduism,

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102 Michael, “Heaven, West Virginia,” 204.
104 Bhardwaj, “The Temple as a Symbol of Hindu Identity in America,” 128.
105 Bhardwaj, “The Temple as a Symbol of Hindu Identity in America,” 141.
Norris W. Palmer writes about the importance of the temple as a social space in which religious and ethnic identities are reinforced, resisted, and renegotiated:

*Temple spaces serve not only as places to replicate imported cultural patterns but also as arenas in which resistance and assimilation to the new host culture may be both measured and moderated... The temple becomes a space for signification – a site in which identities must be constructed and negotiated while the demands of multiple (at times competing) ideologies are worked through.*

Many devotees expressed an interest in imparting “knowledge” on the Hindus who visit. In other words, they were interested in introducing Hindus to Prabhupada’s nonsectarian message. However, most devotees felt unqualified or unauthorized to approach the Hindus on this matter:

*But I’m one that I don’t say anything unless they ask me. I mean I’ll say, “Hare Bol,” and, “How are you? And where did you come from? And it’s nice to see you. Is there anything I can do for you?” But we have a whole department dedicated to preaching and I kind of leave it to them. Most of the people in the preaching department are Indian-bodied so they know how to approach the Hindus in a better way.*

It should be noted that a small number of Hindus who associate with New Vrindaban eventually “convert” to ISKCON’s Gaudiya Vaishnavism. While researching, I met and interviewed a Bengali who had grown up in London and joined ISKCON in 1999. He was hesitant to use the term “convert” to describe his experience with ISKCON, though he has been formally initiated and has taken a spiritual name (which is different from his given Bengali name). As a student at Oxford, he met

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devotees on the streets and started visiting the London ISKCON temple. He was given two of Prabhupada’s books which, he said, “opened his heart.”

He explained that his integration into ISKCON’s framework was initially appealing because it allowed him to reconnect with his Indian heritage. He said, “I started feeling a little bit of a connection because, coming from an Indian origin, it felt like, ‘This is my culture but I’ve never really thought about it before.’”

These Indian devotees, whose experiences of conversion are fraught with the negotiation of ethnic and religious identity, are crucial to ISKCON’s attempts to legitimize itself both to internal and external audiences and therefore are deserving of further analysis. These Indian devotees, however, constitute a small minority of the Indians at New Vrindaban. The vast majority of Hindus continue to patronize the temple according to their own religious or cultural preferences.

The Hindus and devotees at New Vrindaban thus have fallen into a mutually-beneficial albeit peculiar arrangement. In addition to their obvious financial worth, the Hindus provide both internal and external legitimation. Internally, the Hindus serve as exemplar models of Indian culture, the replication of which is central to ISKCON practices. Externally, the public recognition of ISKCON by Hindus allows New Vrindaban to establish itself as a legitimate religious center. This legitimation was and continues to be crucial in the aftermath of the Kirtananda controversies. New Vrindaban had been accused of fostering eccentric, cultish behavior and was a popular target of deprogrammers throughout the 1990s. The religious practices of New

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Vrindaban were therefore regarded by the public as bogus at best and dangerous at worst. Conversely, Hindus are recognized by most Americans as bearers of an authentic, established religious tradition. Therefore, when Hindus travel to New Vrindaban, passing through the small neighboring towns along the way, they visibly affirm the community’s validity and therefore strengthen its local reputation.

In exchange for their public endorsement, New Vrindaban provides the Hindus with the space and tools they require to reconstruct their identities. America’s multiculturalist landscape necessitates the forging of an identity which is at the same time an expression of the Indian Hindu’s religious and ethnic/cultural statuses. New Vrindaban’s Hindu-specific amenities make it an obvious choice for nostalgic parents who wish to formally expose their children to Indian culture and Hindu religious practices. Though the Hindus do not often remain at New Vrindaban for any extended amount of time, they depend upon the survival of a permanent residential community. If the devotees were to leave New Vrindaban altogether, there would be no one to manage the guest lodge or other visitor services. The management of New Vrindaban must therefore strike a delicate balance through which both the needs of Hindu visitors and the needs of residential devotees are satisfied.

This balance has not been achieved without compromise. New Vrindaban was established as a commune with a utopian vision; young people would move to the community and live off of the land in exchange for their service to the temple and to the movement. Today, the only evidence of communal living is a series of abandoned, dilapidated dormitories that line the winding road to New Vrindaban. The majority of
devotees live off of ISKCON property and generate their incomes through independent entrepreneurial endeavors. Devotees might occasionally walk or drive to the temple to attend a special ceremony or feast but mandatory early-morning meditation is but a memory of the community’s golden past.

The temple has taken on a new role for Hindu pilgrims too. Visitors drive many hours (and sometimes days) to bring their children to New Vrindaban and expose them to Indian rituals, food, music, and dress. They socialize with other Indians and form relationships around their shared experiences. They listen to sermons and attend special lectures and cultural performances. They are sent “virtual prasadam” on their birthdays via email. The Hindus have become a part of New Vrindaban’s extended congregation, the very concept of which would be foreign to a Hindu temple in India. Nevertheless, Hindus patronize the temple. They must, given the present circumstances, utilize a space which was initially intended to promote a brand of religious practice quite different from their own.

New Vrindaban was once a commune. It is now a devotee-powered business whose primary consumer is the nostalgic Hindu. The community has, at least for the time being, achieved a moment of financial and organizational stability. However, it is exceedingly difficult to say where this point of equilibrium will drift in the near future. The senior-most members of the community – many of whom were direct disciples of Prabhupada and who have witnessed the totality of New Vrindaban’s transformations – are a dwindling cohort. One long-time devotee passed away immediately after my
third visit. In the coming decades, there will be very few people left to remind the community of “the way things used to be” and “the way things ought to be.”
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The New Vrindaban community is preparing for the celebration of its fiftieth anniversary in 2018. However, much has changed since 1968 when a handful of Prabhupada’s devotees moved to hills of West Virginia to establish their self-sufficient community. The school has been closed. The dairy operation has been downsized. Devotees have moved off of IKSCON property and are now responsible for financially supporting themselves and their families. And, most importantly, New Vrindaban now caters largely to Hindu pilgrims who drive hours from their suburbs to utilize the community’s temple. These changes can be documented and described through an analysis of the community’s controversial history, present demographic composition and emerging tourist industry. However, more important than the changes themselves are what they mean to the people who have experienced them. One long-time devotee reflects:

Things have changed. Many improvements have been made in organizational structure and building maintenance. But we have lost the Brijabasi spirit of hard work and surrender. I have seen devotees come and go. People receive salaries. There is a huge emphasis on fundraising and it is not always exactly honest. New Vrindaban has become guest-oriented and this is exhausting. ISKCON devotees rarely come to the community unless they are being paid. The temple is run by paid employees and it seems a lot like a Hindu Disneyland. Management has even bent the philosophy to serve the Indian guests. This is not so good.  

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New Vrindaban’s devotee and Hindu populations are, in many ways, strange bedfellows. ISKCON devotees do not identify as Hindu but it is clear that New Vrindaban’s present viability in indebted to Hindu pilgrimage, the resumption of which prevented the community’s collapse in the late 1990s. The Hindus who visit New Vrindaban do not often proscribe to Prabhupada’s teachings but utilize the temple with its familiar deities as a social space in which they can reaffirm and renegotiate their religious and ethnic identities in a new American context.

As a religious organization that has undergone profound change and has undertaken specific strategies to insure its survival, New Vrindaban should be of particular interest to scholars of new religious movements and American religion. Though New Vrindaban has some difficulty recruiting young people to move to the community it is, at least for the time being, recognized by both Americans and Indians as a legitimate religious center. The New Vrindaban community should thus be taken by scholars as representative of a religious movement which has successfully established itself as a religious organization.

At the same time, New Vrindaban presents a fascinating case study for scholars of diasporic religion. Traditional scholarship holds that for religious people in diaspora, temple building is a central function of identity and community formation. New Vrindaban challenges those assumptions. Here we see the incorporation of diasporic Hinduism into the pre-existent space and structure of ISKCON’s Krishna Consciousness. What transnational processes are at work when the Hindu meets the devotee in the temple? How are both the Hindu and the devotee changed as a product
of their interaction? And how do these changes inform the development of a uniquely-
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