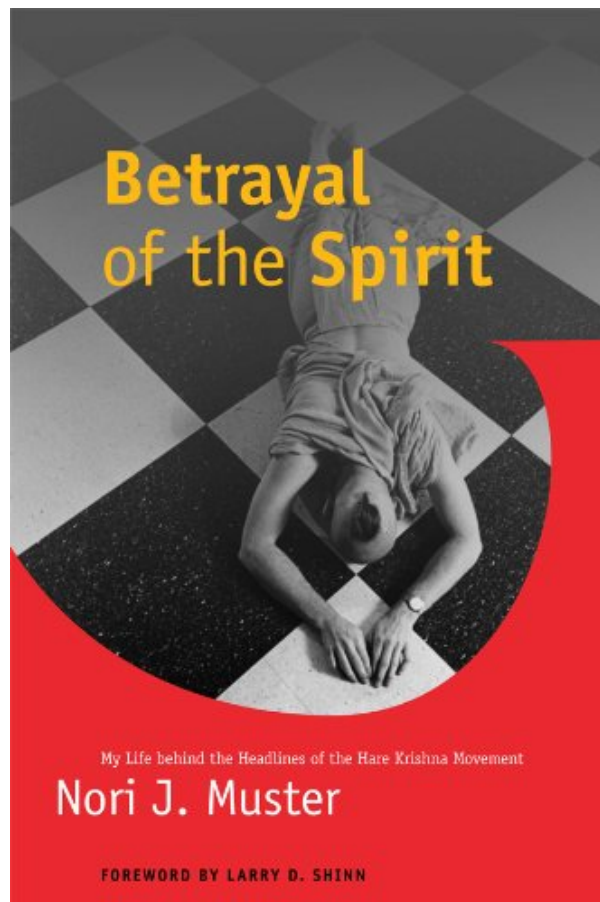
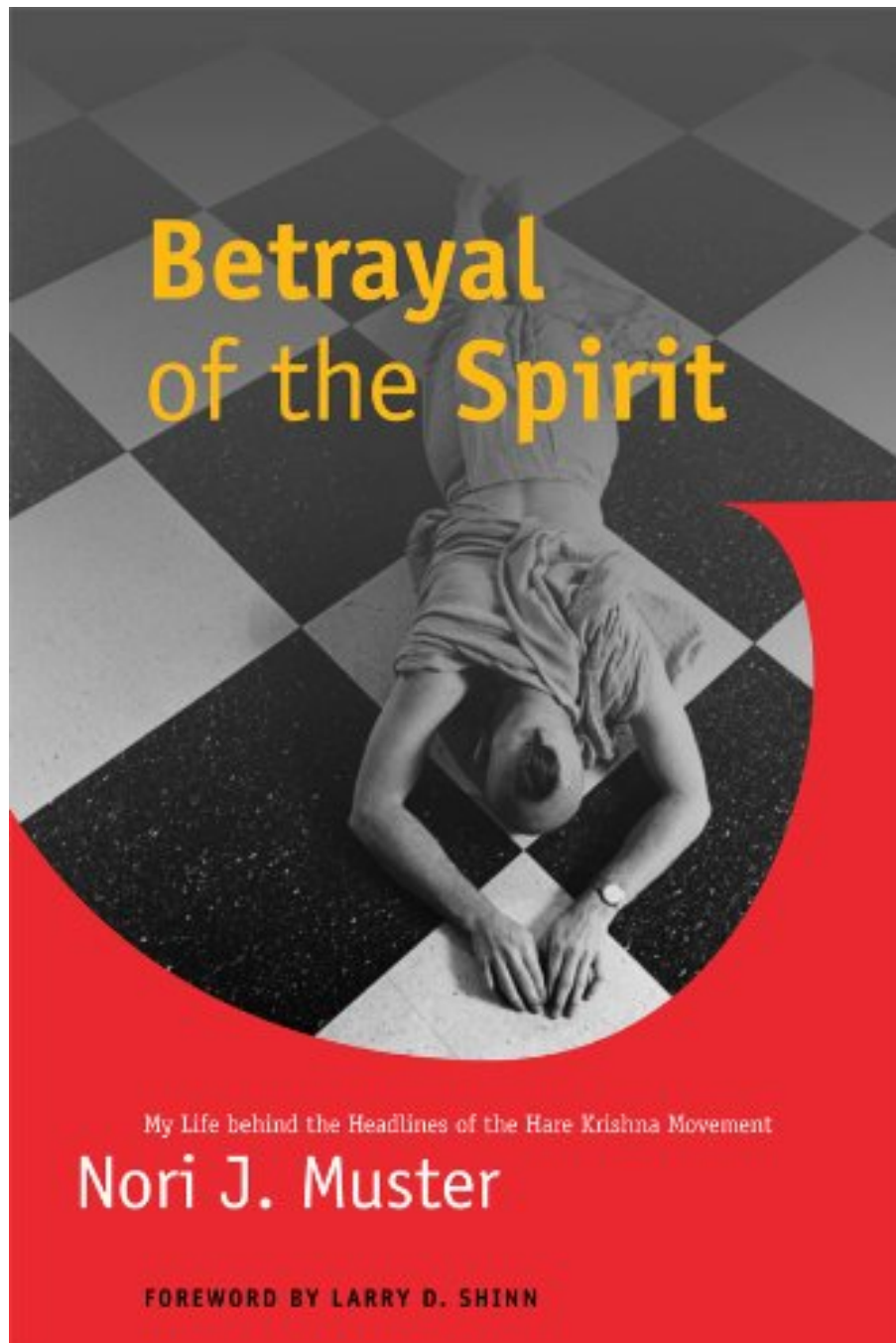


BETRAYAL OF THE SPIRIT: MY LIFE BEHIND THE HEADLINES OF THE HARE KRISHNA MOVEMENT BY NORI J. MUSTER



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From Publishers Weekly

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Combining behind-the-scenes coverage of an often besieged religious group with a personal account of one woman's struggle to find meaning in it, *Betrayal of the Spirit* takes readers to the center of life in the Hare Krishna movement.

Nori J. Muster joined the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)--the Hare Krishnas--in 1978, shortly after the death of the movement's spiritual master, and worked for ten years as a public relations secretary and editor of the organization's newspaper, the *ISKCON World Review*. In this candid and critical account, Muster follows the inner workings of the movement and the Hare Krishnas' progressive decline.

Combining personal reminiscences, published articles, and internal documents, *Betrayal of the Spirit* details the scandals that beset the Krishnas--drug dealing, weapons stockpiling, deceptive fundraising, child abuse, and murder within ISKCON--as well as the dynamics of schisms that forced some 95 percent of the group's original members to leave. In the midst of this institutional disarray, Muster continued her personal search for truth and religious meaning as an ISKCON member until, disillusioned at last with the movement's internal divisions, she quit her job and left the organization.

In a new preface to the paperback edition, Muster discusses the personal circumstances that led her to ISKCON and kept her there as the movement's image worsened. She also talks about "the darkest secret"--child abuse in the ISKCON parochial schools--that was covered up by the public relations office where she worked.

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Most helpful customer reviews

16 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

An example of those who follow and those who don't.

By A Customer

This book is an account of what happens when those who claim to follow the world's oldest scriptures (the Veda's) are actually acting to the contrary. I am sure there are many good Hare Krishna and other Hindu devotees who are sincere, but in all religions there seem to be a group of people who are hypocrites. No religion should be condemned because of these people, or all religions would be victims. The book tells about those who are good and strict devotees who don't strive to do sinful things and also accounts those who don't exemplify a real Hare Krishna and are not following the Vedic scripture, but just claim to be. This is account that could be applied to all religious paths and their followers. It draws a picture of both sides of a coin and looks at what scholars call the "world's oldest religion" and what other people call a "cult".

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A FORMER KRISHNA LEADER TELLS THE STORY OF THE "DARKEST" TIME OF THE GROUP

By Steven H Propp

Author Nori J. Muster joined ISKCON in 1977, lived in their western world headquarters, and worked for ten years as public relations secretary and editor of their newspaper, the ISKCON World Review. She has also written books such as *Cult Survivors Handbook: Seven Paths to an Authentic Life*, *Child of the Cult*,

Learning to Flow with the Dao: The 64 Hexagrams of the I Ching, etc.

She wrote in the Preface to this 1997 book, "As a devotee of ISKCON... I wore a sari, studied the philosophy, and chanted every day. During the course of my work for the public relations department, I learned about many troubling organizational issues. This book focuses on my experiences in Southern California... Millions have found peace through chanting Hare Krishna, and I believe A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada brought genuine spirit to the West. The word 'betrayal' refers to the attitudes and event that betrayed the spirit." (Pg. xv)

She recalls, "After a lecture on the Bhagavad-gita, everyone sat in rows ... to wait for the feast... I asked [a senior devotee] why the Hindus didn't dance. He said they liked ot worship in a more subdued way, especially through ... the viewing of the deities. Hardly any Hindus gave up their jobs and homes to move into a temple, he said, but that was okay because they were 'householders,' and rules for householders were less strict... Prabhupada wanted the full-time devotees to uphold the most orthodox Vedic customs and monastic life-style in order to build a foundation for a Vedic social system that would last ten thousand years." (Pg. 21)

After Prabhupada's death, "The transition of power seemed to go smoothly, but Prabhupada's death and the resulting zonal guru system were devastating turns of fate. Behind-the-scenes politics were concealed from newcomers like me. I could hardly imagine that the Governing Body Commission's position paper amounted to a bloodless coup, but it did. The gurus claimed the mantle of power and called themselves the 'collective body' of Prabhupada. There were severe consequences for any Prabhupada disciple who disrespected the zonal guru system. A scholarly devotee in India... was silenced and forced out of the organization... They made an example of him, and the incident chilled the atmosphere for anyone else who wanted to speak out. All ISKCON temples became the gurus' territory. Many people were unhappy... but no one could do anything about it." (Pg. 31)

She states, "Considering [ashrams'] apparent prudishness, it's surprising that only months before the women lived with a male leader, and a different one slept with him each night. This scandalous form of management took place in several U.S. temples, but it did not come from Prabhupada, nor did he know about it. The GBC passed resolutions to ban it in 1977 and 1978." (Pg. 37)

She writes, "Over Labor Day weekend that year [1979], New Vrindaban's grand opening of Prabhupada's Place of Gold was the media's place to be... I believed that New Vrindaban was great, but devotees who came from there had strange tales to tell. One former resident said that lax attendance at the morning program meant no food in the communal dining room. Rumors of child abuse dated back to 1974... The place of women at New Vrindaban was low, possibly the lowest in all of ISKCON. Women who left ... told stories of physical and sexual abuse, and... they still slept with their male sankirtan leaders..." (Pg. 58-59)

Although there was a murder connected to ISKCON drug trafficking, she recalls, "At the time I didn't know that in the 1970s ISKCON accepted money from a number of different drug-dealing operations. I was unaware of these facts and defended ISKCON because I believed the overall organization was benign. Thousands of devotees in a hundred temples innocently worshipped Krishna and led a Vedic religious life-style. I was naive. Like many devotees, I believed that book distribution provided all the money that built ISKCON." (Pg. 64-65)

She admits, "Ramesvara's band of ... 'warriors' took to guarding the temple twenty-four hours a day... I didn't realize they were armed, but they were... To those of us who lived there and trusted the temple, the men were nothing more than private security guards... truth be told, the organization was in deeper trouble than anyone

outside could know. Without Prabhupada, there was no accountability, no place for the buck to stop. An organization with no ultimate accountability is a dangerous thing..." (Pg. 85)

This is a fascinating account of the "darkest" time in the ISKCON movement, and this book [along with *Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness, and the Hare Krishnas*] will be of great interest to anyone wanting to know more about this period.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Swami Prabhupada is still worthwhile even if ISKCON has had its problems.

By Hamza Philip

I am not and have never been a part of the Hare Krishna movement, as it is popularly called, but my interest in comparative religion has led me to read books by Swami Prabhupada, and so I have some interest in ISKCON and the stories of those who stayed in the movement and those who left the movement. The author still considers herself a follower of the late Swami Prabhupada, which I believe is a good thing despite her experiences within ISKCON. In modern secular America, many movements are given the label "cult" because individuals have had to horrific experiences while a part of a particular group, and the experience seems strange to those who may be part of a traditional religious movement with beliefs and practices that have been a part of their lives since childhood. I certainly believe there are groups that are very dangerous, but ISKCON is not one of them. That doesn't mean, however, that ISKCON hasn't had its problems. What Swami Prabhupada established in the USA beginning in 1965 was traditional religious movement with a long history in India. I doubt any traditional resident of India in 1965 would have considered the teachings and methods of Swami Prabhupada as being "cultist". I'm sure other sects who use some of the same scriptures might have considered Swami Prabhupada to have an ineffective religion, or to be a "wrangler" or even a heretic. Swami Prabhupada at times complains of other sects and other gurus who he believes have published faulty commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and other scriptures. As one who has studied the history of both Christianity and Islam, criticism of competing movements is standard practice for both Christian and Muslim writers. In Evangelical Christianity, there are Christian ministers who make a living with a ministry solely dedicated to selling books and other media on cults. The largest religious organization in the World, the Roman Catholic Church, is considered to be a "cult" by many fundamentalist Evangelical Christian cult ministries. Because the "Hare Krishna" movement, as a very conservative non-Western religious movement, was considered a "cult" from the very beginning by fundamentalist Evangelical Christian "cult-hunters". When one thinks about it, what happens if a young person from the late 1960s counter-culture, who may come from a, say, Conservative Lutheran background suddenly writes home and tells his or her parents "I'm not doing drugs anymore, but I'm chanting Hare Krishna and the eating vegetarian and you should try it!" This is not the case in the book *Betrayal of the Spirit*, but other young people in this situation who were in their early 20s, so legally adults, found themselves held hostage by deprogrammers hired by their parents, who are attempting to force (not persuade) the young person to renounce this religion. What about their responsibility as adults? What about their Constitutional Rights as an American Citizen?

While the author of this book did not have that particular experience, when I see the word "cult" in a review of a book written by someone who left a new religious movement, it does make me think of television specials I saw as a teenager in the 1970s and makes me wonder who gets to decide if a religious movement (old or new) is a cult, or not? Someone in a religious movement that is established and considered part of the American religious scene? Is that even constitutional?

All in all, I do believe *Betrayal of the Spirit* gives a good critical look at ISKCON during the period the author was a part of the organization. However, just because an organization has the kinds of problems outlined in the book does not mean that it is a "cult". The Gaudiya Vaisnava school is a legitimate Hindu

religious movement based on Vedic teachings. I believe that ISKCON, like any large organization, can develop problems and have corrupt leaders, yet the actual religious movement itself is not a cult, unless only politically correct (by modern Western standards) religious movements are the only ones allowed to exist in the USA. I'm not giving an opinion either way on whether or not the teachings of Swami Pradhupada are true. I am making the case that the religion propagated by ISKCON is not a cult, whatever problems the organization may have had in the past, or may have now.

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