GCE A LEVEL

WJEC A-LEVEL
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Theme 2A :
The Reasons for the Development and Growth of ISKCON

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Glossary Key terms

Bhakti – Devotion - in bhakti traditions it is believed that devotion to God is the path to liberation.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) – Hindu Vaishnava movement, founded in the USA in 1965 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. It follows the tradition of Caitanya (a.k.a. Chaitanya), and aims for the state of permanent Krishna consciousness. Dancing and chanting the maha-mantra are important features of worship. It welcomes non-Indians who are willing to commit to its stringent rule and regulations.

Swami Prabhupada – A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who founded ISKCON in 1965.

Other useful terms

Bhagavad Gita – Part of the Mahabharata, though it also stands alone. An important scripture in which Krishna teaches Arjuna the importance of dharma, Karma yoga and the path of bhakti.

Bhaktivedanta Manor – Headquarters of ISKCON in the UK. A stately home near Watford bought for ISKCON by George Harrison of the Beatles.

The reasons for the growth and development of ISKCON with special reference to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977)

Prabhupada's life and influence

Prabhupada was born into a Vaishnavite family and originally named Abhay Charan, meaning "*one who is fearless, having taken shelter at Krishna's feet*". He received a Western education courtesy of the Scottish Church College in Calcutta. He married at the age of 22 while still a student, had children and owned a small pharmaceutical business.

In 1922 Prabhupada was convinced by his spiritual master, **Bhaktisiddanta Sarasvati**, to dedicate his life to teaching Vedic knowledge and in 1933 he was formally initiated as his disciple. At their first meeting, Bhaktisiddanta Sarasvati asked Prabhupada to broadcast Vedic knowledge in English. In the following years Prabhupada wrote a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita and in 1944 started an English magazine called 'Back to Godhead' which is still in circulation today. He single-handedly edited, typed and distributed copies. He personally designed the magazine's logo with the motto: ***"Godhead is Light, Nescience is darkness"***. In his first magazine he wrote: *'Under the circumstances since 1936 up to now, I was simply speculating whether I shall venture this difficult task and that without any means and capacity; but as none have discouraged me, I have now taken courage to take up the work.'* (A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, Back to Godhead magazine (Vol.1, 1–4, 1944)

In 1947, the Gaudiya Vaishnava Society recognised his scholarship by awarding him the title Bhaktivedanta, meaning *"one who has realised that devotional service to the Supreme Lord is the end of all knowledge"*.

In 1950, aged 54, he took vanaprastha (retirement) to devote his time to his studies and writing. He accepted the renounced order of life (sannyasa) in 1959 and was given the name **Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada**. He subsequently began work on a translation and commentary on the 18,000-verse Srimad-Bhagavatam.

Religious and cultural reasons for the growth of ISKCON

In 1965, aged 69 Prabhupada sailed to the United States in a cargo ship arriving in New York to preach Krishna Consciousness. After almost a year of great hardship in July 1966 he established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness to check *"the imbalance of values in the world and working for real unity and peace"*. Despite being established at a time when New Religious Movements were emerging in the Western World and thereby attracting some 'anti-cult' criticisms, ISKCON was successful in appealing to young people during the religious and social upheavals of the 1960s. "*The counterculture of the 1960s enthusiastically embraced Eastern ideas, and many of the 'flower children' who travelled to India in search of cheap drugs and self-realisation found peace and fulfilment in spiritual practices taught by gurus within Hindu traditions."* (Jamison, Ian, 'Hinduism', p.175, Phillip Allan, (2006), ISBN: 9781844894208)

One reason for the appeal of the movement in the 1960s and 70s may lie in the purposes which clearly laid out a new way of living and worshipping that had not been seen before in the United States or other Western countries. Prabhupada's seven purposes may well have struck a chord with people looking for something new spiritually, which offered something different to established religion. These seven purposes are:

(Taken from http://iskcon-truth.com/Seven-Purposes-of-ISKCON.html)

(1) To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.

(2) To propagate a consciousness of Krishna as it is revealed in the Bhagavad-Gita and Srimad Bhagavatam.

(3) To bring the members of the Society together with each other and nearer to Krishna, the prime entity, and thus to develop the idea, within the members, and humanity, at large, that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of Godhead (Krishna).

(4) To teach and encourage the Sankirtan movement of congregational chanting of the holy name of God as revealed in the teachings of Lord Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu.

(5) To erect for the members, and for society at large, a holy place of transcendental pastimes, dedicated to the personality of Krishna.

(6) To bring the members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler and more natural way of life.

(7) With a view towards achieving the aforementioned purposes, to publish and distribute periodicals, magazines, books and other writings.

From the outset Prabhupada maintained that ISKCON was not a part of Hinduism, criticising Hinduism in a lecture in New York in 1967 *"Although posing as great*

*scholars, ascetics, householders and swamis, the so-called followers of the Hindu religion are all useless, dried-up branches of the Vedic religion."*When it was suggested to Prabhupada that a broader term like "God Consciousness" would be preferable to "Krishna Consciousness" in the title, he rejected this recommendation claiming the name Krishna includes all other forms and concepts of God. In 1974, he further emphasised this in a lecture in Mumbai *"We are not preaching Hindu religion. While registering the association, I purposely kept this name, 'Krishna Consciousness,' neither Hindu religion nor Christian nor Buddhist religion."*

After a group of devotees and a temple had been established in New York another centre was started in San Francisco in 1967. Prabhupada continued to travel throughout America with his followers, popularising the movement through street chanting (sankirtana), book distribution and public speeches.

ISKCON continued to grow and spread across the world, with the first members of the society arriving in Britain in 1968. They gained the attention of George Harrison (one of the Beatles), who had already met with devotees in America. Recording a single of the Hare Krishna maha mantra raised money which enabled them to rent a building near the British Museum and convert it into a temple. Prabhupada himself arrived in England in September 1969 and stayed with John Lennon and Yoko Ono at their home near Ascot. When in 1973 it became obvious that a new building was needed George Harrison purchased a manor house in Hertfordshire naming it 'Bhaktivedanta Manor'.

Prabhupada is often described as having been a charismatic leader. Certainly, the movement he started, and which continues to grow is testament to his determination to fulfil his mission. In the last ten years of his life, despite his advanced age, Prabhupada gave lecture tours in six continents, made over 5000 disciples and established the Ratha Yatra street festival in most of the major cities of the world.

In keeping with his vow to broadcast Vedic knowledge to the English-speaking world, Prabhupada also wrote over sixty volumes of authoritative translations, commentaries and studies of the philosophical and religious classics of India. His writings have since been translated into twenty languages. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust has become the world's largest publisher of books in the field of Indian religion and philosophy. Today Prabhupada is recognised as having been one of India's greatest spiritual ambassadors of the 20th Century.

Background - Prabhupada's motivation - Sri Krishna Caitanya Mahaprabhu

Vaishnavism is one of the major traditions within Hinduism. Vaishnavas teach that the ultimate reality is personal. Vaishnavas teach that by chanting God's names the soul can reawaken his original spiritual knowledge, live peacefully in this life and return to the spiritual realm, or Vaikuntha, the place of no anxiety, at the time of death.

ISKCON is a branch of the monotheistic Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition dating back 5000 years to Krishna. When Prabhupada travelled to New York from India, it was

with the purpose of introducing the teachings and devotional practices of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. Sri Krishna Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) was devotee of Krishna and prominent Hindu saint in the 16th century. He is also regarded as an avatar of Krishna by his followers and for some, he is a combined incarnation of Krishna and Radha.

In his youth, Caitanya started a Sanskrit academy in Navadvipa and earned a reputation as a scholar. Ay the age of twenty-four he renounced everything to travel throughout India, encouraging everyone he met to chant the Hare Krishna mantra. He also taught that Krishna consciousness, or worship of the Supreme Person, is life's highest purpose. On his instruction, the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan (disciples of Caitanya) made a thorough analysis of the Vedas to show that Krishna bhakti is the essence of all Vedic teachings. Caitanya's extensive conversations with his devotees form the philosophical and scriptural basis of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, or Krishna Consciousness.

In starting ISKCON Prabhupada was continuing Caitanya's movement. Caitanya's method of devotion expressed through chanting devotional songs (kirtan) is still very much evident in ISKCON today. It is also interesting to note that ISKCON believes that Prabupada and his work in establishing Krishna consciousness was predicted,

"My commander-in-chief devotee will spread the chanting of the holy names around the world."
(Caitanya 500 years ago)

"Very soon a great personality will appear who will spread Krishna consciousness all over the world."
(Bhaktivinode Thakhur, a Vaisnava scholar, in 1881)

Key Practices - regulation of life, an austere code of behaviour;

ISKCON has what appears to be quite strict rules for its followers, but are designed to help devotees achieve Krishna Consciousness, which is an extremely difficult thing to achieve. This austerity is referred to as the **Regulation of life**, and is important to discipline the mind, and overcome human attachment to the sensory world that is believed to distract us from developing a relationship with Bhagavan.

Members of ISKCON are prohibited from gambling, the use of drugs, and casual sex (sex for the procreation of children, within marriage, is, however, permitted). Certain foods are also forbidden such as meat, fish, eggs, garlic (garlic is believed to disturb the mind, and may make it difficult to meditate). Their 'Yoga of eating' is based around Krishna's commandment that "*All that you do, all that you eat, and all that you offer…should be done as an offering.*" (Bhagavad Gita Chapter 9 v27). Krishna also describes the types of offerings he will accept: "*if one offers Me… a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, I will accept it*." (Bhagavad Gita Chapter 9 v26) Krishna does not include meat, fish or eggs on this list so a devotee does not offer them to him and avoids their consumption.

At the same time members of ISKCON are encouraged to do certain other things:

Reading (Sravanam)

Devotees should regularly read sacred texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Srimad Bhagavatam as well as the books written by Prabhupada.

Friendship (Satsangam)

Devotees should aim to associate with other devotees. New members of ISKCON usually link up with others in the same town or country at local meetings. The large social gatherings at the Ratha Yatra festival also allow for members to enjoy each other's company.

Gurus

Devotees should listen to the teaching of a Guru as often as possible. They believe that one can only learn genuine religious knowledge or be initiated by a Guru who is a recognised member of a tradition, who can trace his lineage back to the founder of that tradition. Prabhupada was such a Guru in the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya, and both he, and Shri Caitanya are held in very high regard by devotees, many of whom regard them as avatars of Krishna.

Chanting

One of the key practices for all devotees is the chanting of the Maha-mantra (the great Mantra). The result of chanting such a mantra is the attainment of peace of mind, knowledge of the self, liberation from karma and freedom from reincarnation. It also enables the devotee to *"awaken his love for Krishna and taste transcendental bliss.'* (Prabhupada, 'Chant and Be Happy', Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, (1990), ISBN: 9780892131181, p.107). ISKCON publicity material often sums up their teaching in the simple phrase 'Chant and be happy'. The word mantra comes from man (mind) and tra (to free), so a mantra is a sound or prayer that frees the mind from the miseries of the material world. It is therefore a powerful utterance and by chanting the names of Bhagavan as often as is possible, the devotee is constantly bringing Krishna constantly to the front of their mind. "Hare", "Krishna" and "Rama" are all names used in the Vaishnava tradition that refer to God. Chanting God's name which is spiritual and all powerful means the devotee will become purified.

The Maha Mantra
Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare Hare Rama, Hare Rama Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

There are two main ways in which the Maha-mantra is used. The first of these is nama-japa, where the devotee chants quietly, usually in total isolation. This is a daily practice for most devotees, who use a Mala of 108 beads to count the repetitions of this mantra. The devotee holds a bead, and chants the mantra, then moves onto the next bead and repeats the process – one "round" of the Mala is 108 repetitions of the Mantra, and initiated devotees vow to chant a minimum of sixteen rounds every day. (The process takes about 2 hours). The number 108 is regarded as sacred in Hinduism, e.g. 108 Upanishads, 108 Puranas and the number was regarded as connecting the Sun. Moon and earth in Vedic times.

The other way that the Maha-Mantra is used is through Kirtana, or congregational singing. Kirtana is often performed as part of worship, or in public as a consciousness-raising exercise. Devotees often accompany themselves on musical instruments, particularly drums, cymbals and the harmonium, and will frequently break into spontaneous dancing, moved by their love for Krishna expressed in the singing.

Worship

Traditional Hindu temple practices, such as the care of murtis, and seeking darshan, are also a major feature of ISKCON worship. Although few members of ISKCON live within easy reach of a temple, they are encouraged to have an altar at home, with images of Krishna. The key idea is that these images should be treated as honoured guests – the altar should be in the main part of the house, and the murtis should be washed, and dressed daily. Images of Caitanya and Prabhupada are often honoured on the altar as well. A typical puja will include service to the murti by offering the following: water (to wash and drink), fire (aarti), food (prashad), kirtana, clothing, fanning (punkah) and incense. The aarti rite is most commonly practiced in temple pujas, where a flame is offered to Bhagavan, the priest then turns to the congregation who reach out and cup their hands over the flame, trapping some of the hot air, and then pulling this over their heads. The meaning of this practice is that the flame, being offered to Bhagavan, becomes God's, thus the devotees can see and feel God's blessing when they experience the flame.

The practice of eating prashad is a very similar idea to that of aarti: food is offered to Bhagavan (and thus becomes God's food); it is then distributed and eaten by the devotees, who are thus eating special, divine food. This food has a particular spiritual significance which makes it different from normal food, as Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita:

"Holy men who take as food the remains of sacrifice become free from all their sins; but the unholy who have feasts for themselves eat food that is in truth sin." (Bhagavad Gita 3:13)

While this is a fairly common practice across Hinduism, it is particularly important in ISKCON, where devotees are encouraged to only eat prashad, to make sure that all their food is offered to Krishna, so that every meal may be of spiritual benefit to them.

The emphasis upon loving devotion serves to bring the devotee closer, in love, to God. The austere way of life, and the emphasis upon particular practices are all designed to help with this gradual transformation which seeks to make ordinary human life sacred and centred upon Krishna. The purpose of this way of life is made clear in the Bhagavad Gita – to gain control of the mind and focus it upon Krishna, and so draw closer to God:

“When a man dwells in the solitude of silence, and meditation and contemplation are ever with him; when too much food does not disturb his health, and his thoughts and words and body are in peace; when freedom from passion is his constant will. And his selfishness and violence and pride are gone; when lust and anger and greediness are no more, and he is free from the thought 'this is mine'; then this man has risen on the mountain of the Highest: he is worthy to be one with Brahman, with God.” (Bhagavad Gita 18:52-53)

Key Beliefs e.g. importance of bhakti for Krishna consciousness;

The main beliefs of ISKCON are found in the Bhagavad Gita, many of which are also accepted by orthodox Hindus:

Extract below taken from https://iskconeducationalservices.org/HoH/further-information-and-teaching-resources-secondary/fact-sheets/the-hare-krishna-movement/

- *"We are not our bodies, but are the eternal spirit (atman) and therefore a part of Krishna. Although we are essentially spiritual, we have temporarily forgotten our true identity.*
- *We are trying to achieve permanent happiness within this temporary world, but our karma causes us to remain (samsara).*
- *Enlightenment can be achieved in this lifetime by learning from and following a self-realised teacher or guru.*
- *Krishna is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent and all-attractive. He is the sustainer of the universe.*
- *The devotee's dormant relationship with Krishna can be reawakened by the practice of bhakti-yoga.*

Other Notable Features of ISKCON

Festivals

ISKCON celebrates a number of Vaishnava festivals including Janmashtami, celebrating the birth of Krishna, Ratha Yatra or Festival of Chariots, Diwali and Holi.

Cow Protection

Vedic texts describe the cow as Mother Earth, so Hindus are always careful to treat cows well. The cow is considered in the same way as we may think of our mother, giving milk and nurturing us. Indeed, one of the Vedic teachings states quite clearly that to take milk from a cow and then kill it is no different to killing your mother. Cows and bulls also produce dung which can be used in farming and as fuel. So just as cows are protected in India, in ISKCON cows are also well cared for. Those ISKCON centres which have farms are likely to keep cows, where they are protected.

Food For Life

The Hare Krishna Food For Life programme is a food distribution charity providing vegetarian food for the poor and homeless throughout 60 different countries. Based on the Hindu idea of charity (dana) it was inspired by Prabhupada who stated, "*No one within ten miles of an ISKCON temple should go hungry." (*See further notes on Hindu attitudes to poverty in Theme 2C)

Key Quotes

"The Krishna consciousness movement has nothing to do with the Hindu religion or any system of religion.... One should clearly understand that the Krishna consciousness movement is not preaching the so-called Hindu religion." (Prabhupada in Science of Self Realization), Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, (1977), ISBN:9780892131013.

"India, they have given up the real religious system, Sanatana Dharma. Fictitiously, they have accepted a hodgepodge thing which is called Hinduism. Therefore, there is trouble." (Prabhupada in an interview in 1976)

Key Issues/Questions

Is ISKCON Hindu?

Why does the Hindu community accept ISKCON as a Hindu organisation?

Could ISKCON have existed without the work of Prabhupada?

Is ISKCON a new religious movement?

Why was ISKCON so popular in the 1960s?

Further Resources:

https://resources.wjec.co.uk/Pages/ResourceSingle.aspx?rlid=2941

WJEC Unit 3E: Scheme of Work

Websites

http://iskcon-truth.com/Seven-Purposes-of-ISKCON.html
The 7 purposes of ISKCON as found on www.iskcon-truth.com

http://www.iskcon.org/
The official website of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

http://truth.prabhupada.org.uk/who-is-prabhupada
A brief summary of the life of Prabhupada on truth.prabhupada.org.uk

https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=4499
An article from Hinduism Today on whether ISCKON is a divergence from Hinduism.

http://www.bhaktivedantamanor.co.uk/home/
Website dedicated to the UK home of the Hare Krishna movement.

http://www.iskconwales.org.uk/
The website of the Hare Krishna movement in Wales.

https://bit.ly/2yGaaAj
a link to a Teacher's Sharespace file about matching Hare Krishna beliefs.