Hare Krishna in the Czech Republic after Thirty Years: Success or Failure?

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Abstract

The study tries to evaluate the development of the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON) in the Czech Republic. It points out that after a period of great openness and the emergence of non-traditional religious groups after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the spread of this movement gradually stagnated. After a period of “anti-cult” attacks, the movement did become part of the standard religious scene, although its attractiveness decreased. Based on two models (the model of religious success and the concept of religious memory), the study shows the limits to the wider success of the movement. However, given the widespread secularization and the prevailing “religious apathy” of Czech society, the Hare Krishna Movement’s impact in Czech society can be considered a limited success.

Keywords

Hare Krishna Movement – ISKCON – Czech Republic – social and cultural adaptation

1 Introduction

Although the foundations for the existence of the Hare Krishna Movement in the Czech environment (formerly within Czechoslovakia, which was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic in 1992) were already laid in the 1960s, the real development and standard functioning of this movement began only after the fall of communism, that is, after 1989. After the fall of the “Iron
Curtain" and the general enthusiasm for the newly acquired freedom (including religious freedom), a number of non-traditional religions began to operate in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.¹ After more than thirty years, it is appropriate to ask what their current situation is and how “successful” these movements have been in their proselytizing. This question is related to the same question asked by Kim Knott (2000), a prominent British sociologist who writes on the impact of Asian religions in the West, after 30 years of the Hare Krishna Movement in the UK. In this text, I will primarily focus on one of the most well-known new religious movements (NRMs) that are active in the West (and globally), whose roots are connected to a tradition that is ordinarily referred to as “Hinduism,” the Hare Krishna Movement, also known by its official organizational name, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).²

2 Hare Krishna in Research on NRMs and Alternative Religiosity

From the very beginning of the study of new religious movements, the Hare Krishna Movement has been a key, exemplary group out of those that have been the subject of quite a lot of analytical interest in the academic study of religion.³ The emergence of NRMs in the 1960s coincided with a critique of the secularization thesis that had dominated the sociology of religion and which offered a theoretical framework for the study of religion in modern (Western) societies. Secularization theory (in its variations) assumed a structural inconsistency in the functioning of religion in modern societies, or a weakening of

¹ E.g. Tomka, Secularization of Anomy?; Tomka, Changing Social Role of Religion; Pollack, Modifications in the religious field; Borowik, Religions, Churches and Religiosity; Crnič, New Religions in “New Europe”; Müller, Religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe; Pickel/Pollack/ Müller, Differentiated secularization in Europe.

² This text is based on a long-term empirical investigation that has been conducted with varying degrees of intensity since the mid-1990s. The basis of this research is fieldwork, participant observation and interviews with members of the movement. The author of the text has visited various centres of the movement over time, not only in the Czech Republic but also abroad, e.g. in the UK and India. Some of the information was obtained through personal conversations or correspondence or discussions on various occasions with some of the movement’s members, both rank and file and its leaders. The author is aware of the significant changes in the movement, not only in the composition of the membership but also in the functioning (formation and disappearance) of the centres of the movement. The author would like to thank all members of the movement for their openness and helpfulness.

³ See, e.g., Glock/Bellah, The New Religious Consciousness; Rochford, Hare Krishna in America; Knott, My Sweet Lord.
the influence of religious organizations on the functioning of societies as a whole as well as on the life strategies of individuals.4

The emergence of NRMs (in addition to other developments such as the rise of political Islam) has problematized the basic premises and conclusions of secularization theory and brought the topic of religious revivalism into academia. It also introduced themes that have subsequently become integral to both sociology in general and the study of non-traditional religiosity in particular. These included categorization of NRMs into the traditional division between “churches” and “sects” (a new category of “cult” emerged), an analysis of the process of conversion and entry into these movements, and a rather tendentious discussion of the dangers of these groups.5 As a result of these discussions, the question of the legal status of new and non-traditional religious groups and the question of guaranteeing and upholding the principle of freedom of religion has emerged.6

The Hare Krishna Movement (or ISKCON) has been one of the prime examples of NRMs since its emergence in the West, when Srila Prabhupada (1896–1977) began his mission in New York, and it has been one of the most debated non-traditional religious groups in the United States and Europe. Critics have accused it of both brainwashing and inducing a strong personal dependence on the movement and abusing its members.7 However, the movement gradually gained followers, and Prabhupada established other centres of the movement not only in the USA but subsequently in Europe and other parts of the world. Gradually, the movement established itself, became integrated among other (even traditional) religious groups and became an inherent part of the religious map of many countries, although the question of adaptability in different countries remained fundamental.8

Throughout the Hare Krishna period, the focus of academic religious studies (and the public) has been on converts from the countries where the movement began. Less attention has been paid to ISKCON’s work in India, where the movement has established several centres, and to ISKCON’s relationship with Indian immigrants in the West. Meanwhile, in some countries with a

4 Originally, e.g., Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*; or Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*; then especially Bruce, *Secularization*.
6 E.g. Malory, *Minority religious groups and religious freedom in England*.
7 Cf. Urban, *ISKCON (Hare Krishna): Eastern Religions in America and the “Brainwashing” Debate*.

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strong Indian migrant population (such as the UK), ISKCON temples became a place that catered to the needs of Indian Hindus. In some countries (such as the Czech Republic) where the Indian migrant group is small, the movement has remained a focus of interest primarily for the younger generation of spiritual seekers.

3 Emergence and Establishment: A Process of Social Adaptation

From the moment Prabhupada began to organize public chanting on the streets of New York and to offer tasty food to hippies, the movement became a specific part of the counterculture of the 1960s. Very quickly, prominent figures in alternative culture (e.g., Allen Ginsberg) and popular culture (e.g., the Beatles, especially George Harrison) found their way to the movement.

The first converts were recruited from countercultural backgrounds and brought some countercultural moments to the movement, which proclaimed itself as a movement that restored the original principles of Indian culture and religion. Prabhupada sharply criticized Western culture, accusing it of excessive materialism and loss of spirituality. He referred to his movement as an instrument for the return of spirituality to the consumerist and materialistic Western culture. Therefore, in its early days, the movement also separated itself from its surroundings and built its identity on the rejection of the “rotten West.” The movement wanted to offer an alternative, which was expressed by its main slogan: “simple living, deep thinking.” For this reason, it sought to create a parallel culture based on farms/centres that were to be economically self-sufficient and independent of the surrounding society. The main actors in the movement were the brahmacharis, i.e. monks who gave up the secular life, enclosed themselves in the centres of the movement from where they undertook missions to the surrounding area (mainly through selling books and selling food). The brahmacharis left their original families and renounced starting their own families, and also left their secular jobs and worked completely (full-time) for the movement (on farms they engaged in agricultural activities, whereas in urban centres they focused their primary efforts on translating and disseminating Prabhupada’s books and other printed materials, or running vegetarian restaurants).

9 Cf. Judah, *Hare Krishna and the Counterculture*.
10 E.g. Rochford, *Demons, Karmies, and Non-devotees*; Squarcini, *In Search of Identity within the Hare Krishna Movement*.
11 Cf. e.g. Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*. 
The emergence within the countercultural atmosphere of the West in the 1960s paradoxically had some common elements with the beginnings of the movement after the collapse of the communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e. a great openness and a search for alternatives. On the one hand, the collapse of the communist regime led to the emergence of a strongly materialistic and consumerist orientation of the whole society; on the other hand, there was an obvious “hunger” for spirituality and spirituality in Czech society. The emergence of “soulless” materialism was related to the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms, which were based on free market ideology and the priority importance of personal economic interests. Consumerism, one-sided materialism and egoism continued the mental principles that had already functioned during the communist regime and gradually became dominant in the new Czech society. Yet (or perhaps as a reaction to this growing trend) Czech society, like other post-communist countries, in the early years of social transformation was very welcoming to all forms of religion, including new and non-traditional ones. As a reaction to the previous period of communist persecution of religion and the proclamation of the principles of scientific atheism, any religion, and for some especially Asian ones, was a welcome offer for post-communist seekers of new orders. This was especially true in Czech society, where, compared to other Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., Poland and Hungary), the communist regime was the strongest and had the most devastating effect on religion, and where national identity was not built on a connection to a religious tradition. In the Czech society of the early 1990s there was a great openness towards non-traditional religions, which is well illustrated by the spiritual friendship of the first post-communist president Václav Havel (1936–2011) with the Tibetan Dalai Lama (b. 1935), who regularly visited Prague.

Another common feature was a certain differentiation (and an attempt at separation) of the movement, which was reflected in the fact that the first centre of the movement was a farmstead not far from the capital, located in
an isolated valley between two small villages. This centre was founded by a Czech emigrant, Turiya dás, who returned with his family from Sweden after the Velvet Revolution. Given the general interest in all things unconventional and spiritual, however, this unofficial head of the Czech Hare Krishna Movement could not keep his distance from the surrounding society and was a frequent guest of the media. Turiya dás was not a brahmachari but a gṛhastha (he had a wife and son) and was the head of the centre known as Krishna’s Court (Kršnův Dvůr), which preached the principles of organic farming and for a time was truly self-sustaining. Alongside this, a group of brahmacharis formed in Prague and established a missionary centre. From the beginning there was tension between these two groups (and centres), which subsequently resulted in the expulsion of Turiya dás from ISKCON and the departure of some devotees from the movement. This conflict was interpreted by one of the gṛhasthas from Kršnův Dvůr, who subsequently took up an academic career,¹⁶ as a victory of the brahmacharis over the gṛhasthas¹⁷ and he compared it to a similar conflict that affected ISKCON in other countries.¹⁸

In the context of the study of the social adaptation of non-traditional movements (including the Hare Krishna Movement), we can say (in accordance with Max Weber) that in its early days a movement based on a clear distance from the surrounding society can reach out to and recruit new members from backgrounds that are critical of the dominant society. Indeed, any new movement must be built on difference from other groups and the surrounding society.¹⁹ In this way it builds and strengthens its own specificity and identity. Therefore, the initial phase of any new movement or group (religious, but also political and other) must include a conflict with its social and cultural environment and first by a Czech emigrant, Dyagurudeva dasa, who became the head of the ISKCON temple in Vienna for three years in 1980, and then by a Czech emigrant, Turiya dasa, who began smuggling books from Sweden into Czechoslovakia. From the beginning, all activities were monitored and potential candidates were persecuted by the communist secret police. In its report of 1985, the latter stated that there were approximately 10 cells of the “Hare Krishna sect” in Czechoslovakia and that these cells consisted of approximately 150 persons (with the literature of the movement being distributed among about 1,000 persons). History of the Hare Krishna Movement in Czechoslovakia, 1896–1989, 108–173.

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¹⁶ Cf. Fárek, Hnutí Haré Kršna.
¹⁷ Cf. e.g. Fujdai/Lužný, Non-Church and Detraditionalised Religiosity.
¹⁸ Cf. Rochford, Hare Krishna Transformed.
¹⁹ These tensions can vary in intensity – some groups strongly criticize other religious entities and the surrounding society, accusing them of strong materialism and godlessness, while others criticize only certain parts of society or other religious groups. However, in order to defend one’s identity, demarcation against others is necessary, although it takes different forms in different groups (for some groups the tension is small, for others it is large).
building boundaries (and distances) separating the surrounding society from this new group. However, if the movement wants to establish itself and possibly seek wider inclusion (including more members) it cannot remain in isolation and flat rejection of the surrounding culture. It must partly adapt to its environment, adopt some elements from the surrounding society and seek (at least partial) acceptance. However, even in the process of adaptation, it must maintain a certain degree of criticism towards its environment, both religious (towards other religious entities) and secular (towards the state, the economic, social and political order).

Since its beginnings in Czech post-communist society, the Hare Krishna Movement has sought acceptance from the state. Indeed, it was the subject of sharp attacks from the Czech “anti-cult” movement, which not only continued the traditional anti-cult critique, but also picked up on the atheistic critique of religion from the communist regime. Together with other criticized groups (such as Scientology, but also some new Christian groups), they created the Society for Religious Freedom (Společnost za náboženskou svobodu), which was supposed to be a counterweight to the Society for the Study of Sects (Společnost pro studium sekt). The Society for Religious Freedom sought to ensure that the newly drafted law on churches would allow for easier registration of smaller and non-traditional religious movements with the Czech state. This was indeed successful, as according to the second version of the law, registration could be achieved even for religious groups with less than 10,000 members, although these groups did not receive the same privileges as traditional churches. One of the first newly registered groups was the Hare Krishna Movement. This was in 2002, and the movement gained symbolic acceptance by the state, thus removing the stigmatizing label of “dangerous sect.”

4 The Hare Krishna Movement and Hinduism after 30 Years

In describing the situation of the Hare Krishna Movement in contemporary Czech society, we can use two types of data – quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative field investigations always focus on a sub-topic or a specific part of the lives of ISKCON devotees, and although they can be very inspiring and useful investigations, they cannot answer the broader question of the status of this movement in Czech society. But also, due to the small number of followers

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20 E.g. Rochford, *Demons, Karmies, and Non-devotees.*
22 Cf. Lužný, *Sect as a Threat.*
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of believers</td>
<td>4,523,734 43.90%</td>
<td>3,288,088 32.10%</td>
<td>2,168,952 20.80%</td>
<td>1,374,285 31.70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic Church</td>
<td>4,021,385 39%</td>
<td>2,740,780 26.80%</td>
<td>1,082,463 10.40%</td>
<td>741,019 7.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>14,575 0.10%</td>
<td>23,162 0.20%</td>
<td>13,069 0.10%</td>
<td>13,298 0.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jedi (+ Sith)</td>
<td>15,055 0.10%</td>
<td>21,539 0.20%</td>
<td>21,539 0.20%</td>
<td>21,539 0.20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>713</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>6,817</td>
<td>2,617</td>
<td>5,049</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhism Diamond Way Lineage Karma</td>
<td>3,484</td>
<td>653</td>
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<td>Kagyu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3,699</td>
<td>1,921</td>
<td>5,244</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vishwa Nirmala Dharma</td>
<td>1,998</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Hindu Religious Society</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hare Krishna Movement, ISCKON</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>455</td>
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<tr>
<td>believers, not belonging to a religious group</td>
<td>706,368 6.80%</td>
<td>960,201 9.10%</td>
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of these movements, it is unfortunately not possible to use data from quantitative representative surveys (internationally comparative surveys such as the European Values Study or ISSSN, or original Czech surveys such as DIN or KODINA). However, data from censuses can be used to a limited extent.

The following table shows the representation of believers and members of selected religious groups in the censuses conducted after the fall of communism and allows us to understand the development of the religious situation in Czech society in the last 30 years.

What general trends are evident?

a. Declining number of believers in the last 30 years: the number has decreased by 3,149,449 believers, and the representation in the total population has decreased from 43.9% to 31.7%.

b. Declining numbers of traditional established churches. The largest church, the Roman Catholic Church, has lost most of its faithful, namely 3,280,366 members, over the last thirty years, and its representation in the Czech population has decreased from 39% to 7%.

c. The number of those who describe themselves as believers while not explicitly affiliating with any religious group is growing. This question has been included in the last two censuses, and their overall share in the population has increased from 6.8% in 2011 to 9.1% in 2021. Importantly, the number of believers of this type has outnumbered the traditionally largest religious group, Roman Catholics, and has thus become the predominant type among Czech believers (of all believers, this group accounts for 69.9%), although it is certainly internally very heterogeneous.

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23 In general, census data present only a very general picture of society. In the case of information on religion, the data should be taken with much more caution. In the case of the Czech Republic, the situation is complicated because several methodological changes have been made in the course of the various waves of the census, which undermine the basic advantage of censuses, which is the comparison over time and the possibility of identifying long-term trends. First of all, the nature of the question on religion and affiliation changed in the different censuses – the question was compulsory in some censuses and voluntary in others. This was certainly reflected in the answers, i.e. in the declarative subscription to particular religions. It was also significantly reflected in the two types of responses, i.e. the option to answer 'no religion', but most importantly the use of not answering the question. The variation between censuses is so dramatic that it may to some extent call into question the declarative subscription to religion. The number of those who did not declare their religious belief or affiliation (in a nation of 10 million): 1991: 1,665,617 respondents, 2001: 931,981; 2011: 4,662,455; 2021: 3,162,540. However, mindful of these methodological problems, we use census data in this text because no other quantitative data on religious minorities exist, and we also believe that, even in light of the methodological problems, the census data can be used as a guide and as a basis for further analysis.
Most of the religious groups do not have a significant number of believers and the number of their members is in the thousands or hundreds, which does not exceed even one permille in relation to the total population. In this context, it is certainly not surprising that “Hinduism” continues to be a minority in Czech society. In 2021, a total of 2,024 persons declared their adherence to this tradition, the majority of whom did not belong to any group and stuck to the general declaration “Hinduism” (1,226 persons). ISKCON members are the largest group, with the number of those claiming affiliation varying between 300 and just under 700 over the last twenty years. These numbers are consistent with estimates made by the author of this study during his field investigations.

The numbers of the other two major groups that refer to Hinduism or Indian cultural traditions are also worth noting. It is surprising that the number of members of a relatively established group, the official name of which is the Czech Hindu Religious Society (Česká hinduistická náboženská společnost, from 2015 Višva Guru Díp Hindu Mandir – české hinduistické společenství) and whose roots in the Czech environment go back to before 1989, has recently been declining (from 427 in 2011 to 93 in 2021). Yet it is a tradition in which a large number of yogis have grown up practicing a system that its creator, Mahamandaleshwar Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda (b. 1945), referred to as “Yoga in Daily Life.” The second largest Hindu group is Vishwa Nirmala Dharma (same name in Czech), whose founder Nirmala Srivastava (1923–2011) made several missionary trips to the Czech Republic after 1989. But even the number of its followers has dropped from 1,098 in 2011 to 250 in 2021.

However, it is important to note that these numbers may not accurately reflect reality and it is to be expected that the actual number of active followers may be less. Indeed, most religious groups (from the Roman Catholic Church to the Jedi) encourage their members and supporters to sign up as much as possible before the census. On the other hand, there are certainly groups of believers who, when asked if they are religious and to which group they subscribe, refuse to answer the question (especially since the question became voluntary in the last census).

Thus, the numbers of “Hindus” appear to be relatively stable (the rather pronounced fluctuations across censuses may be due to the varying strength of activation campaigns within groups), nor can we expect a significant increase in adherents of Hinduism and Indian religious traditions in the near future. This is also because the Czech Republic is not a destination for migrants from India. Therefore, the majority of followers of the Hare Krishna Movement (and other Neo-Hindu groups) are recruited from the domestic population.
5 Methods of Explanation: Adaptation Theory

Several approaches can be taken to explain the relatively small success of the spread of the Hare Krishna movement in Czech society. In this text I will try to present a mix of theoretical approaches and concepts.

As a starting point I will use the model of religious success developed in 1987, that is, before the emergence of new religious movements in post-communist countries, by Rodney Stark, later a well-known proponent of rational choice theory in the sociology of religion.

Stark argues that new religious movements are successful when they:
1) “Retain cultural continuity with the conventional faiths of the societies in which they appear or originate.
2) Maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment; are deviant, but not too deviant.
3) Achieve effective mobilisation: strong governance and a high level of individual commitment.
4) Can attract and maintain a normal age and sex structure.
5) Occur within a favourable ecology, which exists when:
   a. the religious economy is relatively unregulated;
   b. conventional faiths are weakened by secularization or social disruption;
   c. it is possible to achieve at least local success within a generation.
6) Maintain dense internal network relations without becoming isolated.
7) Resist secularization.
8) Adequately socialize the young so as to:
   a. limit pressures towards secularization;
   b. limit defection.”

I would like to complement this model with another theoretical concept which, in my opinion, allows us to understand the problem of adaptation of an NRM (or any new cultural element) to a particular socio-cultural setting. This theoretical framework is the concept of collective memory (in various specific modifications, including cultural memory, communicative memory, etc.).

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26 See, e.g., Assmann/Czaplicka, Collective memory and cultural identity; Olick, Collective memory; Assmann, Communicative and cultural memory; Roediger/Wertsch, Creating a new discipline.
Here we understand collective memory as the basis for the creation and maintenance of collective identity, including national or religious identity.

Collective memory is made up of two components – one is cultural memory, which is an established and sedimented structure of thought, notions, values and attitudes that is transmitted intergenerationally and that structures our perception of the present. It is a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by a group. Cultural memory is also the basis for creating and maintaining a national (political) identity.\(^\text{27}\) It is a memory sedimented and stored in official memory institutions or actualized in acts of collective commemoration.

The second component is more dynamic and is the domain of individual or group memory (identity), which is based on a communicative ‘negotiation of memory’ that involves, among other things, immediate communication, both between members of different parts and between members of different generations.

What is crucial for the purposes of this text is that it is conducive to the effective dissemination of a new religion if there are certain elements in doctrine or practice that link the NRM to existing forms of collective memory. In other words, if the NRM is a completely incompatible innovation without any potential for connection to the structure of collective memory, there is little hope for the success of the new religion. Or, if it does find adherents, their numbers will always be small and the permanence of the link to the group will be weak.

The second fact that emerges from the collective memory model is the necessity of intergenerational transmission and sharing of the doctrinal content, ritual practices, values, and the entire legitimizing apparatus of the new religion. Communicative memory, that is, what is transmitted and shared in immediate interpersonal communication, plays an important role in this process. For the adaptation of a new religion, it is necessary that modes of communication (meeting, discussion, etc.) between family members and between families exist and function well.

6 Reasons for the Limited Success of the Hare Krishna Movement and Hinduism in the Czech Republic

In view of the results of the recent censuses, and of course in view of ethnographic field surveys, it is clear that the numbers of supporters of the Hare Krishna Movement, and of Hinduism in general, have not increased in recent times. Thus, one can speak of a “limited success,” that is, a situation where a distinctly non-traditional religious movement (with links to a completely different cultural and geographical environment) has gained a certain place in a given society, but fails to attract a larger number of active adherents to the movement. Based on the combination of Stark’s “model of religious success”, and the concept of “collective memory” (cultural memory, communicative memory, etc.), the most important obstacles to the wider spread of the Hare Krishna Movement and Hinduism in the conditions of Czech society can be identified.

1) Although conventional beliefs are weakened by secularization (which according to Stark’s model opens the way for non-traditional religious innovations), secularization has strongly affected the whole of Czech society. In the course of Czech modern history, there have been several significant disruptions of religious continuity, and above all, there is a serious split at the core of Czech collective memory between religion and national identity, which has led (with the substantial contribution of the communist atheist regime) to a general loss of trust not only in Christianity but in all forms of religion.28

2) The Hare Krishna Movement (but also most groups that follow the tradition of Hinduism) has failed to link its specific (Indian) religious and cultural tradition to the indigenous cultural tradition and has failed to establish a notion of continuity with the indigenous culture. Although the Kršnův Dvůr organic farm project tried to claim continuity with the original (pre-communist) forms of farming (e.g., by marching from Kršnův Dvůr to the then announced exhibition of Czech agriculture “Země živitelka”), this element remained marginal in the official line of Czech ISKCON. What is more, the well-known vegetarian Hare Krishna restaurants do not in any way follow the Czech traditional cuisine: they rather (rightly) proclaim how different they are. Their number is small, and these restaurants are still rather specific exceptions. The reason is the spread of other forms of vegetarian and vegan eating, and the increase in vegetarian restaurants. Unlike in Hungary,29 no attempt has been made in the Czech context to link (even if only in a proclamatory manner) ISKCON

28 Cf. Váně, Continuity and Discontinuity.

29 E.g. Kocsis, Krishna in Heroes Square.
activity with the Czech national tradition. Hence, the group is still perceived by the wider public as something foreign and incompatible with the Czech cultural tradition.

3) While the movement has managed to reduce tensions with the surrounding society (although it maintains a distance and is still critical), it has simultaneously become increasingly “invisible.” The public is not very interested in this movement and the same applies to the media. One could say that the attitude of the Czech public is similar to that of all other religions – disinterest and apathy prevail.

4) In contrast to the open 1990s, when there was some interest in the movement as an interesting and unusual alternative and the movement actively sought to recruit new members, gradually the efforts at effective mobilization faded and the personal connection to the movement remained rather weak. However, this was evident throughout the movement’s existence in the Czech Republic, as it was characterized by a very high turnover – people came and left quickly without forming a strong attachment to the movement.

5) One of the ways in which the movement sought to create an environment for the socialization of different age groups (especially children) was by establishing its own primary school based on the principles of the movement (the gurukula). The most significant attempt to create its own school and educational system was made during the movement’s greatest momentum associated with the activities of the first generation of the Kršnův Dvůr, but this collapsed in parallel with the schism within the movement, the expulsion of the founder of this farm and the subsequent departure of many active members of the community. At present, there are activities and schemes that allow for the education of children of devotees. However, these take the form of ‘individual education’ for which the parents of the child, i.e. not the religious organization, are solely responsible. In other words: the movement has failed to move to a stage where children are born into the movement and are accordingly raised and socialized into it, and the group of Czech ISKCON devotees is still a group dominated by converts (who stay in the movement only for a period of time and then leave). But this has also not created a barrier to protect children, young new members, and older members from the general pressure to secularize.

Conclusion: The Specificities of Czech Society

In this text, I have tried to describe the relative failure of the spread of the Hare Krishna Movement in post-communist Czech society, using two theoretical
frameworks (concepts) from the sociology of religion: the Rodney Stark model of religious success and the concept of collective memory. However, if after 30 years of the restoration of religious freedom in Czech society the most important specific factors should be highlighted, including those that are not represented in these two models, then I would like to point out the two most significant ones.

The first is the strong secularization and the specific position of religion in Czech society. Czech society is affected by the process of secularization (in the sense of functional differentiation) in a similar way to other modern societies. However, unlike in other countries, secularization in Czech society has been significantly reinforced by two factors. The first is the more dramatic effects of the communist regime, which was more destructive towards religion than other communist countries in Central Europe, and the second is a more general distrust of religion, which is rooted in the contradictory position of religion in Czech national identity, or the loss of the connection between religion and national identity. Both of these factors have interconnected in a specific historical situation and have resulted in the marginality of religion in Czech society and the strengthening of distrust towards all forms of religion (primarily traditional and established religions, but ultimately also non-traditional and new religions).

The second factor is the small number of immigrants from India and other countries where Hindu traditions are active and alive. This is due in part to the general closedness of Czech society and the associated reluctance to accept migrants, especially migrants from “non-Christian countries.” Czech society is strongly liberal, but it has had no historical opportunity to adopt mechanisms of inclusion and respect for cultural differences. On the contrary, the main feature of the modern cultural and historical development of Czech society to date has been cultural and ethical homogenization – the “separation” of Jews during the Second World War, the post-war “expulsion” of Germans, and the separation from Slovaks after the collapse of Czechoslovakia. The result is a situation in which only small and culturally insignificant groups of “Others” live in Czech society. The numbers of Hindus who could possibly seek and find an environment to satisfy their cultural or religious needs in the centres of ISKCON or other Hindu groups are minimal.

In this text I incline towards the view that the Hare Krishna movement’s activities in the Czech society so far have been rather a failure in view of the limitations in various areas of the movement’s activities and outreach. However, if one takes into account the two factors mentioned at the end, I have to say that despite the limited influence, the small number of followers, the invisible activities of the movement, etc., the fact that the movement
still exists in an environment that is not conducive to religious activities and where Indian immigrant families do not live can be considered a limited success. However, no significant increase in the number of adherents nor greater cultural influence of this movement and other groups with links to Hinduism should be expected in the period ahead.

**Bibliography**


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