

The real danger

- An answer from ISKCON, West Germany

by Suhotra das Brahmachari

In Up-Date Volume III, Issue 3/4 for December '79, the Reverend Friedrich W. Haack is stylized in the editorial section as "a pastor who simply cares so much for his flock that he reacts strongly against those who try to steal the will of other people." Elsewhere in the issue is reprinted a section of Pfarrer Haack's recent book which purports to discuss "The Real Danger" offered society by the new religious movements. Among the "sects" mentioned (all of which are established in West Germany) is the Hare Krsna Movement, headquartered at Kalkheim/Taurus, near Frankfurt. In the interest of free discussion as proffered by the Dialogue Center from where Up-Date originates, we would like to reply to the statements of Pfr. Haack in order to elicit a more complete understanding of their consequences in the light of current events in this country.

First of all it should be made clear that we are not at all interested in leveling a personal attack upon the good Pfarrer, But his arguments as a responsible authority of the Evangelical Church of Germany may have a wider and more profound effect than he is aware of, and could result in conclusions and actions which he may not be prepared to endorse. Certainly those who occupy positions as spokesmen for important organizations like the Church should not close their eyes to the far-reaching implications of their words, no matter how sincerely spoken. Therefore we feel the following thoughts should be considered.

As those of you who are familiar with recent developments in law, order and politics in West Germany may know, the Federal Government has recently established extreme "extra-legal" provisions for dealing with internal emergencies. Ostensibly, these emergency powers were brought into being to more effectively deal with the problem of terrorism, though as then-Minister-of-Interior (now Foreign Minister) Genscher is quoted in the Frankfurter Rundschau (June 14, 1975), that they are actually the result of a "lengthy, very thorough, objective and dispassionate discussion by interior ministers from all the democratic parties" which had begun long before the Baader-Meinhof period - as early as 1949, in fact. These measures have created special organs within the police and state security departments with a wide berth of action allowed them under laws covering situations which threaten society as provoked by "dangerous" and "criminal" "anti-state" or "anti-constitutional" "movements".

Now, after reading Pfr. Haack's call to alarm, The Real Danger, one does not have to be suffering from the kind of paranoia which he sometimes accuses us "sect" members of having to understand that he has lumped all of the new religious movements together and unceremoniously labelled them as having potential dangerous political designs. Nor is the paranoid of us as members of ISKCON in Germany to conceive of being dealt with in the

same controversial, heavy-handed and abrupt way as the terrorists, as a direct result of Haack's insinuations. No, because it has already happened.

In a 1974 edition of Der Kriminalist, Berlin Police President Gerd Meyer, after consultation with Pfr. Haack, described the Hare Krsna Movement as "potentially more dangerous than the Baader-Meinhof gang." A reporter from Bunte Magazine, Eberhardt Fuchs, after extensive interviews with Pfr. Haack, described (or rather slandered) a former ISKCON temple president as a "hired assaasin from the German terrorist scene." These are only 2 samples of a file which we are keeping of some 2500 newspaper articles from the period of 1974 onward. The tone of these articles' descriptions of our movement assumes a shrillness shared only by similar editorializing about terrorists, which has been succinctly summed up by Sebastian Cobler in his Die Gefahr geht von den Menschen aus (Rotbuch Verlag 1978): (these articles) "in the style of Der Stürmer ... are a perfect example of the stereotype of public enemies. They are as revolting as their aims and methods: their behavior, their activities or idleness and their interests, the disorder and dirt which lings with them. They are not merely disgusting, but dangerously mad. One can no longer talk to them because they are hard of hearing. They are unpredictable and treacherous

... They are not simply ill, but themselves a disease, a 'plague', a 'moral epidemic', 'freaks', 'a cancerous sore' ... " This sort of reporting resulted in the Hare Krsna Movement being added to the list of targets of action for the November '74 police manoeuvre "Winter's Journey" (see Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Nov 27 '74, pg. 35), an all-city move against 'problem houses' by the Frankfurt Police, which included a raid of our headquarters by some 50 armed troopers. Charges of fraud, kidnapping, forgery and illegal possession of weapons were brought against us in a criminal accusation which was prepared by a prosecutor who quoted liberally from material written originally by Pfr. Haack (Aktenzeichen 70 JS 475/74, Landgericht Frankfurt).

But what was our crime? Through the prosecutor labored for 4 years to prepare his case, the court would not accept one of his criminal accusations, save the weapons violation which was directed against one member of the movement and which resulted in a suspended sentence due to extenuating circumstances (namely, the callous display of lack of concern for the safety of ISKCON members by police on several occasions when their lives were threatened - this prompted the purchase of weapons for self-defense).

The only charge of any real substance was our violation of civil ordinance codes governing collection of funds in public areas like city street corners, which is not a matter for criminal courts, as pointed out by Judge Maul in his decision. For this, fines totalling several thousand marks were directed against the leaders of the organization. This decision was appealed on the grounds that, under the German constitution, state-supported religions are not restricted in their activities in their activities by civil codes. However, the Bundesgericht (Federal Court) upheld the lower court, finding that although Krsna Consciousness is a certified religion, it does not qualify for state endorsement, and is therefore subject to control. The decision affirms our fundamental right to believe as we do, and we may continue our preaching activities "im rahmen gewisser übereinstimmender sittlicher grundanschauungen der heutigen kulturvölker hält", or inasmuch as we do not create a disturbance in the modern day-to-day social framework (Urteil 2 str 791/78, page 7).

Our main purpose in interacting with the public at large is to distribute Krsna Conscious literature. We are not fishing for converts among the masses so as to swell our ranks to huge proportions - there has never been more than 75 full-time members of the Hare Krishna Movement during any one time of its entire history in West Germany. Our standards of dedication are high, and we follow rigid vows, so these factors immediately discourage large-scale recruitment. Those few who are accepted into the group engage in the selling of literature. So, obviously if our missionary work entails the distribution of books, there must be funds to print them.

The prices we ask are quite reasonable - DM 10.00 for hardback books of 300 pages with 6 color prints (compared to the DM 30.00 Pfr. Haack gets for his softback book of the same size, with no color prints) and DM 1.50 for small softback books of 150 pages (compared to the DM 10.00 for the same from Haack). Our accounts are open to official auditors - police investigators in Frankfurt were amazed to find that we spend only 5 percent of our income on personal maintenance. The bulk of the money earned goes for more books. There is no "black funnel" down which huge sums are disappearing.

The books we sell are considered by world-renown scholars to be illuminating translations and commentaries of rare ancient Indian texts. Dr. Alex Wayman (Columbia University), professor Edward Dimock (University of Chicago), Professor H.H. Ingels (Harvard University), Dr. Harvey Cox (Harvard University), Dr. Gary Gelade (Oxford University), and Dr. P. Aithal (Heidelberg University) and many many more have all respectfully reviewed the written works of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and their statements are on record, if anyone is interested. Not one of them claims to have found something "dangerous" or "satanic" in these books - the actual fact is quite the opposite. Many have cited these books as containing thoughtful, relevant answers to the problems of life facing us all. How, then, has reading them become "dangerous" for the West German public?

Now that the courts have placed our book distribution within a defined legal perspective we have complied on every count so that we can continue our work in a socially acceptable manner and avoid unnecessary controversy. All distribution is done only with legal permits, and in areas where the law allows. But still this has not stemmed the tide of propaganda from certain quarters whose objection to our activities is more fundamental than whether or not we are comporting ourselves within the strict letter of the law. Recently, We have noticed several newspapers (Siegener Zeitung of Feb. 13 and Darmstädter Tagblatt, Jan. 15) drawing attention to our book distribution and labelling it "criminal" and "cheating", and advising people to call the police if approached by a devotee. This is astonishing, for everything we do now is decidedly within the law, and we are having no problems with the police whatsoever. But we wonder if public opinion is being whipped up against us to provoke reflection in high circles upon the Federal Court's decision that we may continue as long as we don't create a disturbance among the people. Other newspapers (Grafenauer Anzeiger of Jan. 11 is one) have called for action on the part of the government to ban all collection by sects whether legal or illegal, revoke their tax-exempt status and appropriate all donations from private sources. Who is behind all this, we wonder?

Now Pfr. Haack inserts a political danger into the issue! He lumps us together with other youth cults who he accuses of "mixing Gnosis and fascism" to forward a "spiritual slave state" typified by "religious and political slavery." This deliberate mixing of the so-called "youth sect" issue with that of "political dangers" to the state paves the way for a complete disregard for normal legal patterns by authorities in dealing with minority religions, as has been seen with left-wing radicals. In this category, under current West German law, the criminally accused are deprived of their rights as human beings, for as Chancellor Candidate Strauss has put it, "the application of laws for human beings, is impossible because even with the (normal) criminals these laws depend on reactions characteristic of the human creature" (Der Spiegel, July 28, 1969) .The same candidate has vowed, "...and when we get in, there'll be such a clean-up that for the rest of this century not one of these bandits will dare open his mouth in Germany" (March 10, 75 ibid).

There is something disturbingly familiar about Pfr. Haack.s role as the postulator of the "Sektenfrage" (sect question), and his mixing of that question with politics. The same was done in the last century with the Judenfrage (Jewish question) by Christian writers like Baur and Dühring. It was Hitler who brought the Judenfrage to its awful "Endsolution" "Final Solution" while the Evangelical Church of Germany looked the other way.

We have one question for those who so insistently beat the "Sektenfrage" drum - what is meant by the word "sect"? Strict dictionary definitions could result in the categorization of the Evangelical Church as a sect, as well as the Church of England, Scientology, TM, Hare Krsna, a political party like the SPD or CDU or a tiny nation like Liechtenstein, by logical reduction. Applying the term "sect" in those ways might be acceptable to all concerned if the word had a neutral connotation. But it doesn't, so if I were to call the Evangelical Church a sect I would expect to hear a hue and cry of outrage as a result. But yet one dictionary definition fits - "a schismatic religious body", which indicates that any subdivision of a broad religious belief such as Christianity may be correctly called a sect. So, just as the Evangelical Church is a specific unit with unquestionable ties of tradition as a church to the great religion known as Christianity, so the Hare Krsna Movement has definitely traceable, ecclesiastically, legally, scholarly and culturally documented ties with the world religion known as Hinduism. Therefore, it is a sect in exactly the same dictionary_sense as the Evangelical Church.

Currently, there are about 60 full-time members of Hare Krsna in West Germany, a country with a total population of some 60 million. This means that, on the average, Hare Krsna is attractive as a religious commitment to one out of a million Germans. In our center in Copenhagen we have about 5 full-time members, which works out to the same proportion per capita. The Danish devotees are doing the same thing as the German ones - distributing books. Let us pose a purely hypothetical question to our Danish readers: would you expect the activities of these five vegetarian monks to result in calls from the newspapers for drastic government action to put a stop to their "dangerous potential"? Would you expect them to be cast in the same journalistic light as, say, a Danish Nazi youth organization of the Second World War period? Should their temple headquarters be raided by police as they would a Christiania heroin center? Should these five celibate students of a recognized branch of Vedic religion, who don't drink, smoke or gamble, be held up for public

mortification as an example of a danger which threatens the fundamental freedoms of every Danish citizen, a danger more insidious than terrorist extremism? Think about what your reaction would be if it actually did happen.

It has happened in Germany, and Pfr. Haack rendered valuable assistance toward that end. We are wondering what the final consequences of these trends will be. Germany, after all, has a unique place in history among the European nations. As German legal expert Sebastian Cobler points out, "The measures introduced by this state show typically German features. Their perfectionism and rigidity reflect the fears of change which have always dominated political life in Germany and can be appealed to especially in times of crisis. It is not just 'the capitalist system' which is the origin of all these measures, but the German way of dealing with this problem by 'over-reaction' and 'over-retaliation'. The German version of political crisis management has a history, a history which includes lack of a bourgeois democratic tradition, of a liberal public and of an aggressive labor movement, together with a submissiveness and respect for authority, a historical legacy which weighs on the political behaviour of citizens of this country no less than the forms in which political contradiction are dealt with here. It is "free will of other people" threatened as much by a handful of Hare Krsna followers as it is by irresponsible accusations which may serve to set institutionalized repression into motion?"

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