

Preface to *Eleven Naked Emperors*

a book about the zonal-acharya era of ISKCON by Henry Doktorski

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During a single scandal-filled decade, eleven “spiritual” leaders and managers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—more commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement—(and the Governing Body Commission which created and empowered them) utilized deception and collective fantasy to enact a bloodless coup, which resulted in the hijacking of a Gaudiya-Vaishnava religious institution, the banishment of dissenters, the abuse of innocents, the suicides of two members,¹ the brutal murder of one outspoken reformer, and the near-fatal hemorrhaging of the society as thousands of once-loyal members defected or were blacklisted.

This decade-long reign of self-aggrandizement and political intrigue by the leaders appointed by the GBC, periodically characterized by strong-armed tactics, tainted the society which had been carefully and painstakingly tended to and cultivated for more than a decade (1966-1977) by the society’s Founder and spiritual preceptor, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

After Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada passed away in 1977, eleven senior disciples (who became known as “zonal acharyas”) were installed by the GBC as Prabhupada’s successors. The word “acharya” can have different meanings. For our purposes, an “acharya,” or “successor-acharya,” is the dutifully-appointed spiritual head of a Hindu religious institution who exhibits the qualities of a first-class, or *uttama-adhikari* devotee. On the other hand, the word “acharya” can also refer to a “regular guru”—a *diksha guru* or *shiksha guru* or *ritvik acharya*—who is situated in a lower stage of realization.

The word “zonal” refers to a geographic “zone” of control. Therefore the term “zonal acharya” refers to a spiritual leader who presides over a specific geographical region. Each of the eleven had their own “kingdoms” where they were worshiped as good as God. Known among their supporters as “The Magnificent Eleven,” they claimed their orders came directly from Lord Krishna, whom devotees consider the absolute truth and cause of all causes. They also claimed that Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada appointed them as perfect and pure “acharyas.” They considered themselves to be following in Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s footsteps as ISKCON “successor acharyas.”

Unfortunately, the zonal-acharya system of guru succession that the GBC established was fraught with unanticipated² and unresolvable issues, and the entire system was based on a fallacy. This book chronicles the ISKCON zonal-acharya era from their first appearance in 1978,³ through their meteoric rise to power, ten-year reign, their fall in 1987, and beyond.

For fifteen years (1978-1993) I served as a faithful disciple of one of the zonal acharyas and I lived through many of the events described in this book. More recently, during the last five or six years, I have interviewed major players in this drama, who have contributed important inside information to help us more fully understand this unfortunate and little-documented chapter in the history of a new religious movement.

By the time you have finished reading this book, I hope that you will have a clear overall picture of this period of ISKCON history. I also trust that you will better understand some of the doctrinal concepts, which were not quite clear to many of us during that time and (some claim) are still not clear to many today. This book addresses the following questions:

- How did the zonal acharyas gain control of ISKCON?
- Was the doctrine preached by the zonal acharyas bona fide?
- Who were the first critics of the zonal acharyas?
- Why were the first critics unsuccessful in combating the menace of the zonal acharyas?
- How were the zonal acharyas finally dethroned?
- Did the zonal acharyas give up their posts willingly or by force?
- After the dethronement of the zonal acharyas, has ISKCON procedure regarding the initiation of new disciples returned to the practice as propounded by the ISKCON Founder/Acharya, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada?
- What are the two main schismatic offshoots which were created in reaction to the abuses of the zonal acharyas?

This Book Is Superficial

You might find *Eleven Naked Emperors* to be (1) superficial, (2) biased and (3) controversial. It is necessarily superficial because ISKCON history is complex and Gaudiya-Vaishnava philosophy is subtle. Any attempt to give a complete historical and philosophical account of the ISKCON zonal-acharya era in a brief 490-page book is bound to ignore many of the details of actual historical events and subtleties of Gaudiya-Vaishnava theology.⁴

This Book Is Biased

This book presents a critical view of the zonal acharyas (and the GBC which created them), and, from that perspective, some (but not all) readers will condemn it as biased. This is partly due to my own personal predilection as a former disciple of a zonal acharya who fell from grace, but also to the fact that most of the devotees who permitted me to interview them were critical of the zonals. The zonal acharyas and those who supported them, on the other hand, are mostly unrepresented—except for their published writings and recorded conversations—as some whom I contacted would not grant me the courtesy of an interview, and the two men who permitted me the most brief of interviews asked me not to quote them.⁵

Curiously, literally dozens of former ISKCON devotees, when they heard I was writing a book about the zonal-acharya era of ISKCON, contacted me and wanted to share their horrific memories of that period of ISKCON history. Hardly one person who supported the zonal acharyas through their entire reign contacted me. Obviously there was much pain that these devotees wanted to share with me.

As I sincerely wanted to present both sides of the story, I contacted by email seven former zonal acharyas requesting an interview for my book. Two, the former zonal acharyas for Western Europe and Australia, did not reply. (I did not attempt to contact Jayapataka Swami, due to his unfortunate current debilitated condition.)

Another former zonal acharya, Hamsadutta dasa, responded to my email, but he attempted to discourage me from studying this era of ISKCON history. He wrote, “I have nothing more to add [to your manuscript] other than this short synopsis of our determination: the whole creation is yearning for Krishna. Our stumbling and fumbling on the way is not a worthy subject matter for attention.”⁶

Another former zonal acharya, Ramesvara dasa, respectfully declined my interview request, but nonetheless encouraged my endeavor. “It’s probably best for you and all concerned that I stay quietly on the sidelines,” he wrote. “My bad reputation with your many readers would tarnish your genuinely good and valuable efforts. I respect you greatly and offer my humble obeisances and prayers for this endeavor to be successful and that it prove to be very helpful to many devotees.”⁷

The secretary for another former zonal acharya, Satsvarupa dasa Goswami, replied to my request for an interview, “Satsvarupa Maharaja said it would be too embarrassing and painful to revisit that part of the history now. Health wise he is not up to it either—he is 80 this year and is not taking on extra projects.”⁸

Another former zonal acharya (who asked me not to reveal his name) very kindly agreed to a limited correspondence with me. We exchanged maybe a dozen brief emails. He wrote, “If you quote me for now, it will probably unleash a torrent of Internet venom. I heard that your book title is *Eleven Naked Emperors*. I hope that’s not the title, as I don’t think it applies to me. My feelings are very different from those of Satsvarupa Maharaja. I want to believe you are sincere, but the back cover text is hateful and shows no concern with historical accuracy. You say that you couldn’t get gurus to speak with you, but many other persons could have explained to you how your back cover, despite all the bad things that happened, ignores many key historical facts.”⁹

Another former zonal acharya responded to my interview request and directed me to his website where he discussed certain issues relating to the zonal acharya era of ISKCON history. We exchanged a few emails, but he was not pleased with most of the questions I asked, and finally he responded, “Dear Henry. As I said before, if you have any questions related to what I wrote on my forums, then you can ask. I do not wish to have any other quotes, materials, opinions of others sent to me for comments regardless of whether they mention me or not. I have no interest in this subject. I have no interest in dealing with such people. All I can and will contribute is any history I can properly recall because I believe history belongs to everyone and it is my responsibility to present it the best I can. This I have done to the degree I wanted to in my forums. I do not wish to have the negativity of these people in my life. Please respect that. I do not want to repeat myself again and again regarding my request. I hope this is okay for you.”¹⁰

As an aside, I am looking forward to the publication of a book about the zonal-acharya era of ISKCON by Dr. Angela Burt (Arya devi dasi), a disciple of Ravindra-Svarupa dasa. During her tenure as a doctoral student at the University of Leeds in England, she completed a thesis in 2014—“Leading the Hare Krishna Movement: The Crisis of Succession in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, 1977-1987.” The preliminary results of this work were presented at a July 2009 ISKCON Studies Conference in Florence, Italy. As a member-in-good-standing of ISKCON, she had access to many sources which I did not.

During her research, she interviewed many former zonal acharyas and concluded, “These people [the zonal acharyas] were trying to live up to impossibly high expectations. It takes an extraordinary and very rare person—such as Shрила Prabhupada—to live up to expectations like that. Most cannot. They were only human. I feel that it’s important as an institution for us to have less finger-pointing and blame, and more appreciation and understanding that everyone has their own experience and challenges in spiritual life.”¹¹

I personally look forward to reading Burt’s book (which will be undoubtedly more sympathetic to the eleven than mine), and discovering another important side of ISKCON history which I am unfortunately unable to present in *Eleven Naked Emperors*. I believe both our books will be a complimentary pair, and both will be necessary to better understand the zonal-acharya era of ISKCON in full.

This Book Is Controversial

The story I tell here is also controversial. It represents the lens through which I personally see and understand the zonal-acharya era and not the way that all scholars, historians and Vaishnavas understand it. This is for the simple reason that there is no story that all scholars, historians and Vaishnavas unanimously accept as gospel truth. If you ask ten scholars to write an essay on the zonal-acharya era in ISKCON, you will undoubtedly get ten very different accounts with varying perspectives and conclusions. One long-time ISKCON devotee, who was initiated in 1974, pointed out major areas in which, he claimed, my manuscript is deficient:

In my personal view, there are among these eleven—and especially among those who are and were their followers—many devotees in good standing, so your manuscript is extremely offensive to them. At least among those who “survived” the ISKCON zonal-acharya era, many will attest to the fact that these eleven men inspired them in Krishna consciousness at the time, no matter their personal deficiencies. You could do better than to sensationalize in this way.

Further, you omit documenting the incredible expansion of ISKCON at the time these eleven men were at the helm. While it might have increased the fodder for their illusions, the rate of growth was incredible—as you personally experienced by your service at New Vrindaban and Prabhupada’s Palace of Gold as a disciple of one of the zonals. The same kind of expansion was happening in Mayapur, and all over the world this incredible growth was going on. Yes, the eleven may have fought against each other and crushed dissenters, but there was a lot of positive stuff happening too. On this you seem to be silent. The eleven had positive motives as well.¹²

My aim in this book is not to vilify the eleven zonal acharyas. They are (and were), as most of us know by now, conditioned souls subject to the four defects of human frailty: (1) making mistakes, (2) being illusioned, (3) cheating, and (4) having imperfect senses. My book portrays the zonals as the fallible creatures we all are. For the most part, I don’t think the eleven were evil beings like so many today claim. I think (with perhaps a few exceptions) they were well-meaning but misguided people who fell into a trap and couldn’t get out by their own endeavor, without outside help. (See Chapters 11-13 regarding the Guru Reform movement and their efforts to dethrone the zonal acharyas.)

Speaking as a former disciple of one of the zonal acharyas myself, we were, from the very beginning of their reigns, taught that our gurus were perfect and infallible beings (see

Chapter 6: The Rise of the Zonal Acharyas). For most of us disciples, it was quite disappointing when we finally discovered they were/are not. Of course, that's our fault also. We really didn't question authority. We were sucked into the zonal acharya scam with eyes wide open, yet blind. No one forced us to join ISKCON, take initiation and serve our gurus with hearts, minds and bodies. We chose that path and we must accept responsibility for our choices.

Despite the faults of this book, despite the fact that "every endeavor is covered by some fault, just as fire is covered by smoke" (as Lord Krishna explains in the *Bhagavad-gita*), I nevertheless hope that you, dear reader, after scrutinizing these pages, will have a fairly complete picture of the history of the zonal-acharya era, even though that picture may be incomplete. In addition, as you read this book, I trust that you will not blindly accept as gospel truth my particular version regarding the zonal-acharya era in ISKCON. I invite you to see this effort as an invitation to further explore ISKCON history and ponder Vaishnava doctrine, in order to more deeply investigate these fascinating topics for yourself.

Regarding the title of my book, *Eleven Naked Emperors*: I hope you will notice the similarities between the eleven characters in my book who pretended to be acharyas, and the naked emperor from Hans Christian Andersen's tale who pretended to wear royal garments created from cloth which was allegedly "invisible" to the stupid or those who were unfit for their jobs or positions.¹³ *The Emperor's New Clothes* features a cast of characters: (1) the dishonest tailors who swindled (2) the foolish, proud and gullible emperor, (3) the members of the emperor's cabinet who observed that the king was naked but pretended to see his royal garments because they did not want to appear stupid or unfit for their jobs, (4) the gullible townsfolk who also pretended to see the king's invisible clothes, and (5) the perceptive and courageous young child who dispelled the illusion by calling out, "But he has nothing on at all!"

By the time you have finished reading *Eleven Naked Emperors*, you will discover (1) who was the "swindler," (2) who were the foolish, proud and gullible men who were tricked by the swindler and pretended to be something they were not; (3) who were the men that, by their votes, created the zonal-acharya system and propped up the eleven when they began to fall down; (4) who were the townsfolk who supported and worshiped the eleven; and (5) who were the astute and fearless reformers who cried out for all to hear (despite threats of expulsion, violence, and even death), "The eleven (and the committee which created them) are pretenders!"

The author

¹ One Prabhupada disciple committed suicide due to severe emotional angst; the zonals taught that he could only approach Prabhupada through the eleven, and he had a problem with that philosophy. This tragic event will be discussed in Chapter 6. Another devotee, a disciple of a zonal acharya, also committed suicide after he was expelled from the temple for refusing to accept re-initiation from the new zonal acharya who had taken over his spiritual master's zone.

² A handful of disciples, when they heard that the eleven managers had taken over, understood that great problems would soon become manifest in the society, but to most of ISKCON, the future problems were unanticipated.

³ Although Kirtanananda Swami began initiating disciples in December 1977, he was not in the strict sense a zonal acharya. He was a wild-card. The zonals became an ontological entity in 1978.

⁴ Why is this book superficial? For example, one of the greatest opponents of the zonal acharyas, Sulochan, gets only three pages in this book. The plot to murder Sulochan deserves an entire book. (In fact, that was the subject of my first book about the Hare Krishnas: *Killing For Krishna*.) In addition to historical events, my analyses in this book of the complex intellectual subtleties of Vaishnava philosophical thought are brief and hardly exhaustive.

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- ⁵ Only two former zonal acharyas agreed to correspond with me by email: (both requested I not mention their names) and I am grateful for their answers to my questions which helped make *Eleven Naked Emperors* a little more balanced.
- ⁶ Hans Kary (Hamsadutta), e-mail to the author (November 20, 2015).
- ⁷ Robert Grant (Ramesvara), Facebook message to the author (May 4, 2015).
- ⁸ Baladeva-Vidyabhusana dasa, email to the author (August 12, 2019).
- ⁹ Anonymous former zonal acharya No. 1, email to the author (August 13, 2019).
- ¹⁰ Anonymous former zonal acharya No. 2, email to the author (November 14, 2019).
- ¹¹ Angela Burt (Arya devi dasi), cited by Madhava Smullen in “PhD Thesis Tackles ‘Zonal Acharya System.’”
- ¹² Anonymous Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada disciple, e-mail to the author (May 2, 2016).
- ¹³ Don Armand (Dhanesvara dasa) also noted the similarity between the eleven ritvik acharyas and Andersen’s *Naked Emperor* in his book, *Divine or Demonic? Spiritual Movements and the Enemies Within*, 274.