

# Introduction

## A Tale of Two Countercultures

STAY HIGH FOREVER. No More Coming Down. Practice Krishna Consciousness.  
Expand your consciousness by practising the TRANSCENDENTAL SOUND  
VIBRATION. TURN ON... TUNE IN... DROP OUT

—ISKCON poster (1966)<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 1970s, the small town of Mayapur in West Bengal has been home to a multi-national Gaudiya Vaishnava community of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) devotees.<sup>2</sup> While this community comprises a wide variety of religious, national and ethnic backgrounds, including local Bengalis, devotees here share the common goal of following ISKCON's spiritual programme of self-realisation, as was presented by founder Srila Prabhupada (henceforth Prabhupad) in the context of an ambitious preaching mission to the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the path of Krishna consciousness requires commitment to a set of spiritual practices that includes meditation, deity worship and adhering to a set of 'regulative principles,' all of which are designed to facilitate detachment from the material world and attachment to Krishna. Alongside these core ascetic practices, devotees understand the chanting of the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* to be the most effective means of attaining salvation. One cannot get far in Mayapur without hearing the sound of the holy name: *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*.

While Prabhupad's pedagogy was developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of a 'world-rejecting' (Wallis 1984) monastic movement that was for the most part shaped around young American celibate monks, ISKCON has changed dramatically in the last fifty years, evolving into a 'world-accommodating' congregational movement of lay practitioners.<sup>3</sup> Whereas renunciation was the defining ethic of the early institution, the goal for today's lay devotees is not so much to renounce the world as it is to engage in it, albeit in a strictly prescribed way. This shift is a direct consequence of an economic downturn in the late 1970s, since when the institution has not been able to financially sustain its communalist social structure (Rochford 2007). With no other

choice, devotees were forced to move outside of the walls of the short-lived temple communes and find employment in the outside world. The socio-historical context of Prabhupad's mission to the West and ISKCON's institutional trajectory in the decades after his death have had profound consequences for the ideals of self-cultivation and social transformation by which devotees understand and practise Krishna consciousness. Outside of the setting of the *ashram*, devotees have had to develop new ways of becoming Vaishnava.

With respect to wider Gaudiya Vaishnavism, to which ISKCON traces its roots, Mayapur is a particularly interesting community to examine. An important place of pilgrimage, it was in Mayapur that the ascetic saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born in 1486 AD, and it was from here that he began his mission of spreading Krishna consciousness. Almost five hundred years later, and after returning from his mission to the West, Prabhupad brought his message back to India, making Mayapur ISKCON's global headquarters in the early 1970s. During these years, he also made plans here for the development of what some devotees are today calling an 'ideal Vedic city', a spiritual city inspired by Krishna consciousness. Prabhupad's vision has been the catalyst for dramatic social, economic and infrastructural development, which has accelerated markedly in the last decade with the beginning of construction work in 2009 on what will be one of the largest Hindu temples in the world, the Temple of Vedic Planetarium (TOVP). Previously no more than a handful of small temples amidst expansive agricultural lands, the town of Mayapur is today dominated by the ISKCON complex, within which can be found several temples, schools, restaurants and guesthouses. In addition to the growing community, hundreds of thousands of devotees, both local and international, visit Mayapur every year as Prabhupad's dream of a spiritual city is widely felt to be an imminent reality.

The Mayapur project, however, is not without problems. While on one hand the growing population and new high-rise buildings are being welcomed as signs of the success of Prabhupad's divine mission, on the other, Mayapur is undergoing unprecedented, and at times, unplanned and unregulated urbanisation. As international devotees continue to arrive from all over the world, large residential developments are springing up in the land surrounding the ISKCON complex. Around the TOVP site, the centre of this imagined spiritual city, and in the place of a viable economic model for international devotees living in rural India, land speculation and property development have become popular but precarious entrepreneurial ventures, and have resulted in corruption, crime, and on occasion, violence. The commoditisation of the sacred land itself has become a significant obstacle to the realisation of Prabhupad's ambitious utopian ideal.

Against the backdrop of Mayapur's dramatic development, this book centres on how international devotees, in the context of social change and ethical indeterminacy, and often in the face of failure, strive to subscribe to Gaudiya Vaishnava ideals and practices of moral self-cultivation. Strictly following ISKCON's path to self-realisation, as we will see, is extremely difficult,

if not at times essentially impossible. And while the land of Mayapur is understood to be sacred, and therefore conducive to spiritual life, devotees often struggle with the practices and prohibitions that are deemed indispensable for their salvation. Living as lay practitioners by a philosophy that was shaped around monastic roots, they are faced with new obstacles as well as opportunities. Alongside understandings of and commitments to a prescribed set of Vaishnava virtues, devotees must also contend with the inevitability of failure along the way. However, they are also both prone to and adept at articulating their inability to consistently live up to the ideals of Krishna consciousness. So much so, I suggest, that narrating moral failure itself becomes a privileged mode of self-cultivation. Devotees do not inhabit the moral system by simply conforming to its dictates, but at times by failing to do so within shared moral narratives that subsume the inevitability of failure. In other words, they become Vaishnava by failing well. Before returning to Mayapur and the central theme of moral failure, it is important to firstly understand ISKCON's roots in two countercultures: 1960s America and late nineteenth-century Kolkata.

### The History of ISKCON

In September 1965, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Prabhupad), a sixty-nine-year-old renunciant monk from Kolkata, undertook the arduous thirty-five-day boat journey from India to the east coast of America. Penniless and in a foreign land, he began his preaching mission simply sitting under a tree in New York, chanting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*. From these humble beginnings Prabhupad soon found an unexpected following amongst the counterculture youth of America (Daner 1976, Rochford 1985, Knott 1986, Bromley and Shinn 1989). He began giving classes on Vaishnava philosophy, and within a year was initiating young Western disciples. In May 1966, he opened a small storefront temple on New York's Lower East Side and in that same year founded the 'International Society for Krishna Consciousness.' Over the next twelve years, until his death in 1977, ISKCON would become a global religious movement, with temples and centres in major cities all over the world. In his lifetime, Prabhupad authored, edited and translated over eighty books (which have since been translated into dozens of languages) and built an institution to oversee the worldwide preaching activities of his dedicated disciples. Today, with a following of over one million, ISKCON boasts more than 550 centres worldwide, including temples, educational centres, restaurants and farming communities.<sup>4</sup> Prabhupad had fulfilled a sixteenth-century prophecy that the chanting of the holy name would spread to 'every town and village' in the world. This, in any case, is the hagiographical narrative by which devotees locate the divinely inspired beginnings of ISKCON.

Although this account of the 'quasi-mythic golden days' (Bryant and Ekstrand 2004, 438) is certainly an incredible success story, the emergence of Vaishnavism in the West requires a little more unpacking. In what follows, I

will briefly describe ISKCON's history in the West, with the main aim of outlining the profound transformation it has undergone in the years since Prabhupad's death, from 'cult to congregation' (Rochford 2007). I then turn to nineteenth-century India to outline how Kolkata's own 'counterculture' has profoundly informed ISKCON's development a century later. ISKCON, I suggest, is the product not of one, but two countercultures, and belongs to a rich history of East-West syncretism, of which 1960s America is one chapter.

### *The Early Years*

It was by a stroke of luck that Prabhupad was able to travel to America in 1965, as it was in this year that President Lyndon Johnson abolished the Oriental Exclusion Act, allowing Asians once more to migrate to America (Melton 1989). Ironically, Prabhupad had had limited success with his preaching activities in India, where he had become a *sannyasi* (renunciant monk) in 1959. Although advanced in age, while in Vrindavan in India, Prabhupad had a dream where he was reminded of his guru's instruction to preach Krishna consciousness in the West. The rest, as described above, is history. Arriving in America, Prabhupad was frustrated by the failure of his early attempts to appeal to what he called the 'intelligent class of men' that he had targeted in his preaching mission. He quickly found support, however, amongst the counterculture 'hippies' of New York. The 1960s was a period of upheaval, as young Americans, disillusioned by America's role in the Vietnam war abroad and disorientated by political scandals and the civil rights movement on home soil, sought out alternatives: alternative social systems, alternative communities, alternative religions, and as intimated in one of ISKCON's early slogans (cited at the top of this chapter), alternative consciousness.

Prabhupad became an unwitting icon in the counterculture years (Deadwyler 2004, 153).<sup>5</sup> Although he was strictly opposed to a lot of what the counterculture represented, in terms of hedonism, intoxication and liberal sexuality, Prabhupad's spiritually inspired critique of Western modernity resonated with the disenfranchised youth on some important points, including the rejection of consumer capitalism and traditional forms of authority. I will return throughout this book to the development of Prabhupad's theology, but for now an overview will suffice. ISKCON identifies with the rich Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition that traces its beginnings back to the sixteenth-century Bengal and the ascetic saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Having grown up in the Mayapur area, Chaitanya dedicated his life to travelling through India and spreading the philosophy of Krishna consciousness. He preached that the most effective way of attaining salvation was to chant the holy name and participate in *sankirtan* (public dancing and congregational singing). Through cycles of demise and revitalisation, Gaudiya Vaishnavism re-emerged in the late nineteenth century under the leadership of Bhaktivinod Thakur, amongst others (see below). It was Bhaktivinod's son, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati

(Prabhupad's guru) in the early twentieth century, who founded the Gaudiya Math, from which Prabhupad emerged as one of Gaudiya Vaishnavism's most successful proponents.

Prabhupad came to America, armed with an extensive philosophical canon, but in the early years, he kept his message simple. 'You are not this body', he would repeat time and time again. From this axiomatic principle, he would explain how we are all 'spirit souls', trapped in the material world of illusion. Having forgotten our eternal identity as loving servants of Krishna, we have become entangled in the material world, and in cycles of death and rebirth. Only by taking up Krishna consciousness, following the 'four regulative principles' (no meat eating, no gambling, no illicit sex, no intoxication) and chanting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*, can we hope to escape the cycle, and be reunited with Krishna in the next life. While these four regulative principles were to become the foundation of any serious devotee's spiritual practice, in the early years it was not uncommon for Prabhupad to give classes to a room half-filled with intoxicated youths. Many devotees found the regulative principles difficult, if not impossible, to follow, and as Prabhupad became stricter, many left the movement. For those who remained, ISKCON became what anthropologist Francine Daner (1976) described, in Erving Goffman's terms, as a 'total institution'. Prabhupad's audience soon evolved from a scattered group of curious 'hippies' to a strict and committed group of disciples, the core of who were *brahmacharis* (male celibate monks). Joining ISKCON involved taking spiritual initiation, changing one's name, living communally in temples and submitting totally to the authority of the institution. It often implied cutting ties with friends and family members, and giving up one's possessions and savings. These were the markers of what in the early years was a world-rejecting monastic movement.

The ISKCON these early devotees joined was very much a work in progress, as Prabhupad was the sole conduit between America's countercultural youth and Vaishnava philosophy. Prabhupad's preaching mission, however, was not confined to the propagation of philosophy. Along with the basic tenets of Krishna consciousness, Prabhupad introduced his young disciples early on to what was referred to somewhat interchangeably as 'Indian', 'Vaishnava' or sometimes 'Vedic' culture. Many of those more committed to Prabhupad proudly wore *tilak* (forehead marking) and Vaishnava dress (*dhotis* for men and *saris* for women). Men also 'shaved up' (shaved their heads, leaving a tuft of hair at the back, called a *sikha*), making themselves immediately recognisable on the streets of America. Devotees learned Bengali vegetarian cooking, sang *bhajans* (devotional songs) and learned Indian instruments such as the *mrdunga* and *harmonium*.<sup>6</sup> Prabhupad's early disciples did not simply 'convert', or become 'believers', but enthusiastically submitted themselves as subjects of an experiment in cultural transformation. Although conversion to Krishna consciousness today manifests in divergent ways, in the 1960s almost all of Prabhupad's committed disciples felt they were making not just a philosophical, but also a deeply cultural shift. On one hand they were rejecting

mainstream 'American culture' (along with the counterculture), while on the other embracing what was considered superior 'Indian culture' (as was the rough conception at the time). Adopting a Vaishnava aesthetic and engaging in a wide array of Vaishnava cultural practices was considered fundamental to one's spiritual journey. Cultural competence was itself a virtuous pursuit that any committed devotee would have to have taken as seriously as adhering to, or demonstrating faith in, the philosophical tenets presented by Prabhupad.

### *Public Image*

After opening the storefront temple in New York and founding his international society, Prabhupad was quick to seek out opportunities for expansion. In 1967, he opened temples in San Francisco and Montreal, and soon he would bring ISKCON to Germany, England and further afield. Within a few years, ISKCON had opened centres around the world, as Prabhupad worked tirelessly on both his preaching and translating work, while travelling the world initiating new devotees. The Hare Krishnas were becoming a familiar spectacle on the streets of North America. From 1968, devotees began attracting attention with their *sankirtan* parties, singing and dancing, while engaging the public with a range of preaching strategies. By far the most successful of these was book distribution, which was the financial lifeblood of Prabhupad's mission. The capital raised from book distribution funded further preaching initiatives, temple building projects and printing expenses and allowed ISKCON to flourish, sustaining temple communities and small communes around the country, which in turn facilitated its world-rejecting ideology. This economic prosperity however was not to last.

With success came notoriety. In 1974, at the same time as ISKCON was gaining momentum in America, it was listed alongside several other 'new religious movements' (NRMs) as a dangerous cult (see Glock 1976, Barker 1982, Beckford 1985).<sup>7</sup> They were accused, along with The Way, The Family and The Moonies, for example, of 'brainwashing' and psychological coercion (Gelberg 1983, Shinn 1987, Melton 1989). In the face of such accusations and counter-conversion strategies such as 'deprogramming' (where devotees were kidnapped and subjected to a range of psychological methods to reverse their 'personality change'), ISKCON struggled to assert itself as a legitimate religious movement. It also suffered major financial setbacks as legal fees and costly settlements added up, and as families of ex-devotees sued. The situation only worsened for ISKCON in 1978 as the anti-cult rhetoric was amplified in the wake of the Jonestown mass suicide. It was not just in America that ISKCON struggled to fit in. In Argentina, ISKCON was banned in 1976, while in 1973 ISKCON's Mumbai temple was demolished by mercenaries. This would foreshadow the religious persecution that devotees would face in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. As the tide began to turn against ISKCON in the mid-1970s, and in an attempt to distance itself from the 'great American cult scare' (Shinn 1987), ISKCON turned

to an unlikely ally: American Hindus. In a series of court cases in the late 1970s (based on charges of brainwashing), ISKCON benefited from the support of tens of thousands of Indian Hindus (Melton 1989, 95). This would not be the last time that the expatriate Hindu community vouched for ISKCON's legitimacy as an authentic Hindu tradition (Nye 2001).

### *The Postcharismatic Years*

1977 was a bad year. Amidst disastrous publicity surrounding several court cases, along with mounting legal bills and settlements, Prabhupad passed away in Vrindavan, India. By this time, he had already put in place the 'Governing Body Commission' (GBC) to manage ISKCON in his absence.<sup>8</sup> The devotees who comprised this management board however were mostly in their twenties and many had only been in the movement for a few years. On their shoulders now rested the responsibility to guide Prabhupad's global institution out of the difficult 1970s and into an uncertain future. Immediate concerns included leadership, succession and financial insecurity. There was confusion, and to this day heated controversy, over the role that had been assigned to these young *sannyasis*.<sup>9</sup> They became 'proxy-*acharyas*' (spiritual leaders), and in a system that became known as the 'zonal *acharya* system', each guru was allocated a geographical region over which he (always he) exercised unquestioned authority. In the years that followed, this created a splintered ISKCON, as different regions would compete for money, resources and manpower.

The zonal *acharya* system lasted until 1987 when the 'guru reform movement' successfully pressured the GBC into addressing what had become a 'crisis of authority' (Deadwyler 2004). This crisis was not just a matter of organisational structure, but increasingly in the years following Prabhupad's death became an issue of individual integrity. What was becoming clear was that the devotees that Prabhupad had chosen to lead his movement, just recently countercultural 'hippies', were far from qualified for a life of renunciation. The guru 'fall-down' (dropout) rate was around ninety per cent (Deadwyler 2004). Every year more of Prabhupad's chosen disciples proved themselves incapable of upholding not only the rigorous standards expected of a guru, but also the basic spiritual standards demanded of a neophyte. Scandals included drug abuse, affairs, embezzlement and abuse of children in the movement's schools. On top of this, ISKCON was to face fresh socio-economic challenges in the coming years that would profoundly alter the development of the institution.

After the initial success of the 1960s and 1970s under Prabhupad's charismatic leadership, the 'postcharismatic years' (Bryant and Ekstrand 2004) were to prove disastrous for ISKCON (Rochford 2007, Dwyer and Cole 2007). As the countercultural sentiments of the 1960s were waning, ISKCON found it increasingly difficult to appeal to the American youth. With a severely damaged public reputation and ever-dwindling revenues from book distribution, it seemed that

ISKCON might not survive the death of its founder. Aside from ISKCON's difficulties in the public arena, new obstacles emerged during the 1980s that highlighted how fragile the ISKCON experiment had been from the start. In the earlier years, and thanks to the financial success of book distribution, ISKCON devotees typically lived in temples or communes, where the institution was able to pay for their maintenance in exchange for *seva* ('devotional service' or work). As an economic model, this worked well. Prabhupad had set up several *gurukuls* ('traditional' schools) to both educate and accommodate boys as young as five years old. Here they would be given a Krishna conscious education, and, it was hoped, the next generation of 'pure devotees' would emerge, untainted by mainstream society.<sup>10</sup> Centralising childcare and education in this way meant that even when devotees started a family, they would still be available to contribute to ISKCON's expansionist goals. While the *gurukul* was a fundamental aspect of Prabhupad's cultural mission, things were to go horribly wrong. In the late 1990s it emerged that in *gurukuls* all over the world, devotee children had been systematically abused, both physically and sexually. So bad was the problem that twenty per cent of children who attended a *gurukul* were abused in some form, with that number rising to seventy-five per cent of those who attended the Vrindavan *gurukul* in India (Rochford 2007, 75). The scandals in the *gurukul* system culminated in 2000 in a federal lawsuit filed in Dallas against ISKCON, involving forty-four devotees who had suffered abuse as children in the *gurukul*. Though this case was dismissed, other suits followed, with a total of 535 claimants resulting in a \$9.5m settlement against ISKCON (ibid.). This led to ISKCON filing for bankruptcy.

What had initially been conceived of as a central feature of Prabhupad's spiritual culture had become degraded and abused as a means to economic prosperity. The tension between ISKCON's missionary goals on the one hand and its social goals on the other would be a key theme in its transformation throughout the decades following Prabhupad's death. The 1980s and 1990s are today remembered for the countless scandals in which ISKCON found itself embroiled. Membership decreased dramatically during these years, with every guru 'fall-down' and new child abuse scandal. ISKCON would almost certainly not have survived these postcharismatic years if it were not for what has been termed the 'Hinduisation' of the movement (see Rochford 2007). Despite Prabhupad's priority of missionising to non-Indian American youths, as the counterculture faded, Americans seemed to lose interest in ISKCON's 'world-rejecting' agenda. At the same time, however, the expatriate Hindu community began to fill temples around the country. Although not all necessarily committed to Prabhupad's mission, and in some cases not even particularly devoted to Krishna, the Hare Krishna temple emerged as a space in which expatriate Indians could practise Hinduism, performing *puja*, taking *darshan* and gathering for major festivals. In sharp contrast to the early years, when ISKCON temples were filled by young Caucasian hippies (turned *brahmacharis*), today's ISKCON congregation for the most part reflects this 'Hinduisation', comprising mostly of ethnically Indian lay practitioners.



## *ISKCON Today*

ISKCON then has changed profoundly in the decades since Prabhupad's death. While in the early years ISKCON, as a world-rejecting movement, comprised for the most part young Western *brahmacharis*, and prioritised proselytisation over all else, today's ISKCON can be characterised as world-accommodating and is overwhelmingly made up of a lay congregation, the majority of whom are ethnically Indian. The particular presentation of Vaishnava philosophy ISKCON espouses is very much a product of the movement's monastic roots, but how today's devotees go about pursuing Krishna consciousness in a changing world does not always conform to the ideals presented by Prabhupad. Rather, the spaces that have emerged between the ideal and the real have proven generative of novel ways of becoming Vaishnava. Having exchanged 'world-rejecting asceticism' for 'inner worldly asceticism', today's devotees could be described, to borrow James Bielo's phrase, as 'new monastics' (2011, 75).

While ISKCON might be deemed a success by the very fact of its survival, it has, by devotees' own understanding, thus far failed to achieve many of the lofty ideals set out by Prabhupad. In terms of its individual-orientated goals (Gelberg 2004), and evidenced by the epidemic of guru 'fall-downs', ISKCON has failed to produce 'pure devotees'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, and as this book will show, I am certainly not suggesting that ISKCON has not produced moral exemplars. It does seem however that in its short history ISKCON has produced more exemplars of moral failure than it has of moral success. In terms of its social aspirations, ISKCON has fallen short in its attempts at instituting Prabhupad's 'Vedic culture' (see Chapter 5). If ISKCON has then, as devotees often suggested to me, thus far failed in terms of both its individual-orientated and social ideals, how have these ideals been shaped by this failure?

Where the early monastic ISKCON developed around 'coordinated, centralised and physically and socially bounded communities' (Rochford 2007, 67), today's congregations are typically decentralised, gathering once a week (on a Sunday) for temple worship and *kirtan* (congregational singing). Over the course of a couple of decades the demise of communalism, concomitant with the rise of congregationalism, saw devotees becoming less dependent on the institution. This is what Burke Rochford (2007, 54) describes as a process of 'internal secularisation'. Along with financial independence, another important consequence has been that the cultural change that ISKCON has undergone has largely taken place outside the temple, and outside the control of the GBC. Today there is a wide spectrum of commitment to the philosophy, practices and the institution itself. Some stoically stick to the regulative principles and adhere to a Vaishnava aesthetic, wearing *tilak* or a *sikha*, for example, while others are happy to drink coffee, wear 'karmi' (non-devotee) clothes, or engage in 'illicit' sexual relations (see Chapter 2). Some pursue formal initiation, chant (the *mahamantra*) every day and work for ISKCON, while others are content attending the temple programme every now and again, dedicating most of their time to their otherwise secular professional and personal lives.

Where the celibate monk was once held up as the virtuous ideal, ISKCON today has not only made room for *grihasthas* (householders), but as lay practitioners account for the vast majority of its worldwide membership, ISKCON today looks to them as the future of the movement. No longer perceived as a 'cult', ISKCON today self-identifies as a spiritual, cultural and educational movement. After decades of decline, ISKCON has in recent years again found the missionary zeal that was so pivotal to its early success (Berg and Kniss 2008). Alongside *sankirtan* and book distribution, it has embraced new preaching initiatives such as self-help style seminars, retreats and 'bridge preaching', whereby Prabhupad's philosophy is packaged in almost exclusively secular terms such as 'self-improvement'. Having just about survived, ISKCON has found a place in the pluralistic religious landscape (Rochford 2007, 7). On ISKCON's official website ([www.iskcon.org](http://www.iskcon.org)), one can find short biographies of devotees from around the world (nine out of ten are *grihasthas*). These include Krishna Lila Dasi, 'mother and film producer', Nanda Kishor Das, 'husband and IT executive' and Radha Dasi, 'grandmother and lawyer'. This is indicative of ISKCON's orientation as a world-accommodating movement. This conception, however, could be somewhat misleading. While some have certainly 'accommodated' the world, in a lot of cases, more accurately, devotees today tend to accommodate Krishna consciousness in their busy secular lives. Pursuing Krishna consciousness alongside a successful career, almost unthinkable in the early days of ISKCON, is today the very core of what it means to be a good devotee. Of course, as this book will elaborate, attempting to live by a philosophy that was shaped by the context of its monastic roots leads to a difficult set of ethical dilemmas.

ISKCON's history has typically been portrayed in terms of an Indian *sannyasi* 'transplanting' Vaishnavism to the West. In focusing on Mayapur, however, this book tells the story of how this same *sannyasi* brought Krishna consciousness back to India (see also Brooks 1989). While not denying the importance of the American counterculture in ISKCON's history, in order to understand Mayapur today we must turn to a deeper history in India. Looking at the movement 'back home', this book considers Mayapur in the context of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of revitalisation to which it traces its lineage. With this in mind, it is to one such period of revitalisation in the late nineteenth century that I now turn: Kolkata's own 'counterculture'.

### **Kolkata's Counterculture**

Despite the particularly strong impulse to turn East during the 1960s, by the mid-twentieth century America had a long history of interest in India (see Tweed and Prothero 1999, de Michelis 2004). The nineteenth-century Transcendentalists, for example, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, were heavily influenced by Eastern spirituality, as was Madame Blavatsky, founding the American Theosophical Society in the 1930s

(see Judah 1974). It was not only Indian literature and philosophy that had made it to America, however. Prabhupad's voyage, although often presented by ISKCON devotees as unprecedented, followed in the steps of several influential Indian gurus who had come to America with similar missionary goals in mind. Protap Chunder Mozoomdar was one of the first to make the journey, delivering an address in Boston in 1883 (Melton 1989, 79). Ten years later Swami Vivekananda made his famous address in Chicago at the Parliament of the World's Religions, after which he toured the country for several years. Founder of Transcendental Meditation and Prabhupad's contemporary, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi arrived in America on a preaching tour in 1959, as did many others in subsequent years. Prabhupad then was not alone in his goal of spreading Indian philosophy to the West, nor were the hippies of the 1960s the first to be receptive to Eastern spirituality. Rather, Prabhupad was one of a long line of gurus that belong to a complex history of cross-cultural fertilisation. To be sure, the 1960s were undoubtedly a serendipitous time to arrive on American shores. In Robert Ellwood's words, the 1960s was the culmination of 'a more deeply mystical current of spirituality quietly rising like water behind a dam, until the floodgates suddenly open and it streams out in torrents' (1989, 103). Although the history of this cross-cultural encounter is often recounted in terms of the West's curiosity and receptivity, however, it is to India that we must turn to properly understand the channels through which this 'deeply mystical current of spirituality' could flow in the first place.

The period between 1850 and 1950 has been referred to as the century of Christian-Hindu syncretism (Michaels 2004). It was, in Shukavak Dasa's words (2002, 48), 'a time of global awakening and secularisation' where 'Indian hearts and minds were torn between Christian missionaries and the bhadrakoka'.<sup>12</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Indians were used to what Peter Van der Veer (2013) calls 'Western imperial modernity' (see also Kopf 1979, Jones 1989, Clarke 1997, Copley 1997, Pandian 2009). As the second city of the British Empire, and the administrative centre in India, it was from Kolkata that the British exercised power. The colonial mission in India was one of many arenas of nineteenth-century globalisation, characterised by Van der Veer as 'a thoroughgoing political, economic, and cultural integration of the world' (2013, 41). Initially spurred on by an economic agenda, in time Britain's colonial mission came to subsume all aspects of Indian society and culture, from religion and law to governance and morality (see Bayly 2004). Education in particular was seen by the British as an indispensable tool in their mission of modernisation. British education was introduced in 1817, the purpose of which was to create, in Thomas Macaulay's words, 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect'.<sup>13</sup> 'The pressures applied by missionary educators', Tamal Krishna Goswami writes, 'were only part of a larger challenge quite unlike any India had faced before. Modernity seeped into all human institutions through a network of channels too numerous to be thwarted. As the principal seat of the British, Bengal was a laboratory for testing modernisation alternatives' (2012, 57).

Although Indians were considered subjects (not citizens) of the Empire, they were not, as history often renders narratives of colonial domination, passive actors in the unfolding story of their own subjection. Amidst a complex history of complicity and submission, as well as antagonism and revolt, Indians' relationship with the British was not a simple tale of repressor and repressed. Just as Britain was embarking on its mission of 'modernising' India, Indians themselves were recasting themselves and their traditions in multifarious ways. The very educational institutions that the British had built to extend their control of the colony became prototypes for Indian institutions, like the Hindu College, for example, which was founded in 1818 with the aim of counteracting missionary influence (Sardella 2013, 42). In 1830 the Scottish Church College (that both Vivekananda and Prabhupad would attend) was founded. Here, the Socratic method was taught to stimulate 'rational enquiry' (Sardella 2013, 13). Over the course of the nineteenth century, Ferdinando Sardella notes, 'the [British] schools ... succeeded in transmitting the missionaries' sensibilities to generations of students, who began viewing their own literatures, beliefs, and customs through this newly acquired cultural lens' (2013, 40). Such educational institutions were to produce an intellectual elite that would appropriate in their own various 'neo-Hindu' agendas a 'puritanism cloaked in Christian institutional dress' (ibid.).

In an effort to tighten its grip on India, the British, in large part through Christian missionaries on the ground, singled out particular aspects of Indian culture for purging. *Sati*, a custom where a widow is obliged to sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre, was seen as a particularly barbaric practice that had to be abolished. The caste system and idolatry were similarly targeted, ill fitted as they were with the individualist and rational Protestant ethic. While the British went to much effort to stamp out these elements of Indian culture, it was maybe ironically Indians themselves who, through a long engagement with the ruling power, led the charge towards modernisation, though not always on the colonisers' terms. The Western-educated intellectuals, predominantly based in Kolkata, did not simply reproduce a British disdain for certain Indian customs, but appropriated Western narratives of superiority in their own revisionist critiques of Indian traditions. With reference to the modern period, Willhelm Halbfass writes:

[Indians] tried to disengage themselves from the status of mere objects or instruments of Western curiosity, and they took more distinctive initiatives to interpret their identity for the Europeans, and to defend and affirm it against them. They began to demarcate themselves against the foreign and to recognise the other, but in a new sense they also tried to comprehend and assimilate the Western ideas within the framework of their own tradition. (1988, 173)

If one response to domination was complicity, another was what has become known as the 'Bengal Renaissance' in the early nineteenth century. One of the main protagonists in this effort was Rammohan Roy (1772–1833). Often referred to as the 'father of modern India', Roy had immersed himself in

European philosophy, becoming involved for a time with Unitarianism and Freemasonry. In 1828, Roy founded the *Brahmo Samaj* (as it would later be called). In line with British ideas of modernisation, the Brahmo Samaj called for the abolition of what were considered superstitious aspects of Hinduism (such as idolatry and *sati*).<sup>14</sup> Against colonial narratives, however, it offered an apologetic account of India's traditions, and sought to highlight the 'rational' aspects of Hinduism. The Brahmo Samaj borrowed liberally from the moral sensibilities of the ruling colonial powers. Many areas of Indian social and religious life were debated in light of the influence of Western moral discourse, such as caste politics, the role of women, and idol worship. While the Brahmo Samaj sought to recast Indian traditions, both social and religious, in what were perceived as more rational, moral and intellectual frameworks, they certainly did not wholesale adopt the culture of the West, but rather sought a synthesis, embracing the 'rationality' of the West and the 'spirituality' of the East.

Like others around him (and after him), Roy espoused the idea that India's sacred texts were indeed rational. Such a blending of rationality and mysticism was a prevalent theme in India's response to the colonial demands of modernisation, and would be foundational to the success of later spiritual leaders, such as Vivekananda, who sought to bridge the cultural gap between the East and the West. Western and Indian notions of mysticism and rationality did not just come together, but in the process they created something new. While debates emerged around social customs, as noted above, at the heart of the clash between tradition(s) and modernity, unsurprisingly for the Christian missionaries, were the themes of religion and morality. One of the controversial focal points of such debates was Krishna.

A murderer and a thief, famous for his amorous affairs with Radha and adulterous orgies with the *gopis* (cowherd girls), Krishna's apparently questionable character was an easy target for the demonstration of Christian moral superiority. As Max Weber wrote in his *Religion of India*, 'What strikes the occidental about the redeemer Krishna, and what separates him from later redeemers who are presented as free of sin is the theology of the sects in Krishna's indubitable nonvirtuousness' (1958, 189). The theme of Krishna's moral transgressions has been an interpretive battleground for centuries in India, but in the nineteenth century in particular, Krishna's character emerged as a focal point of cross-cultural (mis)understanding between the British and the *bhadralok*. How was it that on one hand Krishna was the purveyor of *dharma*, the omniscient and benevolent God that bestows mercy on his devotees, outlining for them in the Bhagavad Gita how to live a good life, while on the other he was stealing men's wives and engaging in Dionysian orgies on the outskirts of Vrindavan? He was at worst, it seemed, simply a delinquent, and at best surely ill-suited for the divine role attributed to him. As Shukavak Dasa (2002, 87) writes, 'the critics charged that the thieving and erotic pastimes of Krishna made a mockery of God and so justified the Europeans' opinion that the Indians lacked moral character. Christian missionaries used stories about Krishna as a weapon against Hinduism, challenging its ethical basis.'

It was not only the British who felt that Krishna was a dubious candidate for divinity. There were several strategies employed by the Brahma Samaj to accommodate Krishna, one of which involved rewriting his history without the moral ambivalence.<sup>15</sup> Gone were the days of violent kisses, torn hair and adulterous flings, so vividly depicted in the twelfth-century devotional poem, the *Gita-Govinda*. For Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, another pioneer of neo-Hinduism, 'the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita was rational and moral, whereas the Krishna of the Puranas was irrational, immoral, and a source of embarrassment' (Dasa 2002, 124). Chatterjee sought to present a new and sanitised version of Krishna that emphasised the sage Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita and did away with hedonistic Krishna of the Puranas. While this represented a progressive step for Indian culture for some, for others it was a betrayal and misinterpretation of Indian tradition. Alongside the leading Hindu thinkers of the time, the lesser-known Bhaktivinod contributed an important and nuanced counter-critique to the revisionist discourse that emerged from the Bengal Renaissance.

Like the majority of the *bhadralok*, Bhaktivinod was educated in the British system and had strong interest in Western philosophy, as well as Christianity. In his work *The Bhagavat, Its Philosophy, Ethics and Theology* (based on a lecture given in 1869), he confessed:

When we were in college, reading the philosophical works of the West and exchanging thoughts with the thinkers of the day, we had a real hatred towards the Bhagavat [the Srimad Bhagavatam]. That great work looked like a repository of wicked and stupid ideas, scarcely adapted to the nineteenth century, and we hated to hear any argument in its favour. With us a volume of Channing, Parker, Emerson or Newman had more weight than the whole lot of the Vaishnava works. (Cited in Dasa 2002, 119)

Although he had been attracted to Western ideas, Bhaktivinod came to reject the philosophies of the West in favour of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Like Prabhupad almost one hundred years later in the West, Bhaktivinod found himself in the middle of Kolkata's own counterculture, and made it his mission to promote the philosophical and moral superiority of India's ancient traditions. Bhaktivinod's agenda was to insist that there was nothing wrong with Krishna's adulterous affairs, but that rather the cause of misunderstanding and controversy was the lack of spiritual qualification of the ignorant Western interpreter. Krishna did not need to change, but the ontological assumptions with which his stories were approached did. Bhaktivinod argued that one cannot hope to understand esoteric spiritual topics with unqualified mundane eyes: this was to become a central tenet of Prabhupad's theology.

As will be touched upon throughout this book, Bhaktivinod was an important figure in the late nineteenth-century Vaishnava revival, to which ISKCON can be traced. Alongside a successful governmental career as a magistrate, he was a prolific writer (in both English and Bengali), preacher and spiritual leader. Bhaktivinod was bold enough to challenge the colonial (and Hindu)

critiques of Vaishnavism on the very 'rational' grounds so often assumed to be lacking in Hinduism. As nationalist movements were beginning to emerge in India, Bhaktivinod dedicated his life to re-establishing Chaitanya's mission of spreading Krishna consciousness, synthesising Vaishnava tradition and Western narratives of modernity and rationality in the process. It was his son, and Prabhupad's guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, in the early twentieth century, who carried on his mission with a focus on institutionalisation, founding the Gaudiya Math, which grew to sixty-four centres around India (with small outposts in England, Germany and Burma). It was from Bhaktisiddhanta that Prabhupad inherited the missionary zeal that would bring him to the West in the 1960s and it was to Bhaktisiddhanta that Prabhupad remained fiercely loyal in terms of both his theological and institutional commitments.

In his book *A Living Theology*, Tamal Krishna Goswami notes that Prabhupad

was heir to a revitalised Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a century of effort by his immediate predecessors to relate their tradition to the modern world. [His predecessors] ... had to work through many of the same questions Prabhupada confronted upon reaching the West ... How Vaishnava teachings can be presented to the widest possible audience, how they can be explained to the Western mentality, how new devotees can be brought into the Chaitanya movement?(2012, 103)

Like the Vaishnava tradition that was to make it to the West in the 1960s, Prabhupad himself was a product of colonial Kolkata. He attended the Scottish Church College, where he was exposed to a liberal arts education that included Christian theology, Western science and, of course, Victorian moral tastes. According to Tamal Krishna Goswami, Prabhupad 'distilled from the hundreds of hours of classes and sermons a sense of what was and was not theologically acceptable to the religious sensibility of the West ... then shaped his theology accordingly' (2012, 51). I will elaborate on Prabhupad's past throughout this book, but suffice it to say for the moment that he was well versed in cross-cultural politics long before he stumbled into the American counterculture.

Prabhupad did not simply transplant an Eastern philosophy into the West, as narratives of ISKCON's emergence in America often suggest. Shaped in the crucible of the colonial encounter, the tradition that Prabhupad inherited from Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivinod before him had already subsumed sophisticated discourses of syncretism based around a set of oppositional narratives ('East' vs. 'West', tradition vs. modernity, sacred vs. mundane) that prepared him well for the cross-cultural preaching mission he was to undertake. The institution that he built was in a very real sense a product of not one, but two countercultures. Without dismissing the importance of the American chapter in ISKCON's history, as this book will argue, the Mayapur case can only be understood through meaningful engagement with Gaudiya Vaishnava

and indeed wider Indian history. As will become clear, this is not an anthropological conjecture, but an ethnographic observation.

Before moving on to outline the book's structure, I firstly want to turn to its central theme: moral failure. While anthropologists working on ethics have begun to pay close attention to moral failure in recent years, this is quite a new development, and so some theoretical ground needs to be cleared before we proceed.

### **The Anthropology of Ethics and Moral Failure**

This book seeks to contribute to several debates within the anthropology of ethics. Since what has been termed the 'ethical turn,' ethics and/or morality have garnered a lot of anthropological attention (Laidlaw 2002, 2014a; Zigon 2007, Lambek 2010, Faubion 2011), and a comprehensive review of this now sprawling body of literature is beyond the scope of this book. Rather, I focus here on the theme of moral failure. My overall argument speaks to a particular debate between two anthropological perspectives on the twin problems of identifying and locating ethics; I argue that beyond a focus on virtue and 'the good,' the anthropology of ethics must also account for how people relate to vices, and how moral systems accommodate the inevitability of moral failure.

While there are a range of approaches and splintered debates emerging within the anthropology of ethics, the ethnographic accounts that this book engages with mostly agree on a basic distinction between ethics and morality, as put forward by Bernard Williams and Michel Foucault (Laidlaw 1995, Mahmood 2005, Robbins 2004, Cook 2010, Pandian and Ali 2010, cf Zigon 2008). Ethics, for Williams (1985, 6), is what falls under the broad question of 'how one ought to live?' or in Foucauldian terms, one's 'relation to oneself' (1994, 266). In this formulation, ethics subsumes morality, which more narrowly refers to the following (or disregarding) of rules and regulations. A common point of departure for anthropologists interested in ethics is Foucault's 'ethical system' (1994, 263–65), which comprises four basic questions or 'components'. Firstly, there is the 'ethical substance' or the part of the self or one's behaviour that is concerned with moral conduct. Does one work on the body? Or on one's mind or feelings, for example? Secondly, there is the 'mode of subjectification' or 'the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations'. How do people relate to rules and regulations? Thirdly, there are 'self-forming activities,' or 'the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects' (what Foucault also calls 'technologies of the self'). How, then, Foucault asks, with particular attention paid to ascetic discipline, broadly conceived, do we work on the 'ethical substance'? Fourthly, is the *telos* or 'the kind of being to which we aspire'. I follow here Joel Robbins' (2004) use of the term 'moral system' to refer to the combination of a moral code (the rules and regulations) with Foucault's 'ethical system' (how one relates to the moral code).



Within a broadly speaking Foucauldian framework, the anthropology of ethics has produced several influential ethnographies, which focus, maybe unsurprisingly, for the most part on ethical experience in religious contexts (for example, Robbins 2004, Mahmood 2005, Marsden 2005, Lester 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Cook 2010). As part of what has been identified as a wider shift in anthropology from the ‘suffering subject’ to ‘the good’ (Robbins 2013) – which encompasses, morality, value, well-being, empathy, care and hope, for example – these ethnographies engage with ethical life by describing processes and narratives of self-cultivation in the particular socio-historical contexts, traditions, institutions and discourses within which they are pursued. In the process, they outline a variety of ‘modes of subjectification’ and ‘technologies of the self’ that animate the ethical lives of religious subjects. While these ethnographies have proven generative of new ways of thinking anthropologically about ethics, and will be engaged with in more detail throughout this book, the anthropology of ethics has, however, been criticised for privileging ‘the pursuit of ethical perfection’ at the expense of the myriad ways that people often fail to live up to ethical ideals (see Mayblin 2017, 506; Kloos and Beekers 2017, 5). That is to say, anthropologists have tended to emphasise how religious subjects strive to cultivate religious virtues, while paying less attention to how they struggle, and often fail, in the process. Ethnographies that take as their subject ethics tend to cohere around what Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic describes as ‘positive agency’, which privileges achievement, efficacy and self-determination. Positive agency, Oustinova-Stjepanovic notes, ‘constitutes a default assumption that discounts failure or ineptitude as an “aberration”’ (2017, 339). Although, as James Laidlaw (2014a, 138–78) notes, anthropologists such as Saba Mahmood do describe moments of failure and frustration, they often present what amounts to a misleadingly coherent picture of ethical life, one in which religious subjects are presented with a ‘grand scheme’ (Schielke and Debevec 2012) that they then simply strive to inhabit (see also Van der Veer 2008, Schielke 2015, Kloos and Beekers 2017). There are, however, several notable exceptions to the tendency to privilege coherence over contradiction, and virtues over vices. Before turning to these, there are two noteworthy theoretical contributions that have proven particularly instructive in laying the groundwork for an anthropological treatment of moral failure: Laidlaw’s *Riches and Renunciation* (1995) and Joel Robbins’ *Becoming Sinners* (2004).

In *Riches and Renunciation*, Laidlaw looks at how affluent lay Jains in Jaipur aspire to the strict, and essentially unrealisable, religious values of renunciation. As most of these Jains are wealthy gem traders, such values are strikingly discordant with the lives they actually live. Based on the ethnographic puzzle of how people pursue antagonistic ethical imperatives, Laidlaw sets out to describe ‘how people can live by, without in an obvious sense conforming to, ethical and religious values; and how they can live by contradictory and conflicting values’ (1995, 12). Laidlaw points to the tendency of explaining away ethical life by recourse to categories such as culture or doctrine, which he

argues, are misleadingly well-packaged 'ontological fictions'. In its place, he gives an account of what he calls ethical complexity (see also Faubion 2011), within which ideals, however unrealisable, nevertheless retain motivational force. Conformity is then just one of many relationships one can have with a moral code. Laidlaw concludes that while this is a particularly interesting case, such ethical complexity is not confined to Jainism.

Where *Riches and Renunciation* gives an account of one ethical tradition, Robbins' *Becoming Sinners* describes how the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea live with two 'contradictory cultural logics' at the same time. Framed as a process of 'cultural adoption', Robbins demonstrates how in abandoning one moral system and striving to live by another, the Urapmin are caught between two sets of moral imperatives that often come into conflict. He details how in the context of rapid cultural change the Urapmin enthusiastically adopted millennial Christianity (curiously, despite a lack of direct missionary contact). Although they still live what he terms 'largely traditional lives in material terms' they have almost completely abandoned previously held conceptions of personhood and virtue in the pursuit of conversion to Christianity. Such a dramatic shift however has not been as smooth as it has been quick. Robbins underlines the antagonism between these two moral systems: 'How does one live as a good person while existing in the midst of a social world that routinely draws one into sin?' (2004, 254).

Focusing on the Christian notion of the will, Robbins explains that while the suppression of the will is understood to be a fundamental Christian virtue, imposing the will remains central to the creation and maintenance of traditional Urapmin social relations (as in when a woman must choose a man to be her husband, to take his example). In order to live within the traditional Urapmin social structure it is understood (and at times celebrated) that one must be a wilful agent. However, in order to be a good Christian one must renounce the will entirely. In Christian ethics, then, the individual alone is the moral unit of salvation, an 'essentially non-social moral being', Robbins notes (2004, 293): an essentially non-social moral being nevertheless that is embedded in social relations.

In so far as the Christian life is impossible to live for the Urapmin, Robbins argues, one way or another they must contend with what he describes as the 'inevitability of moral failure' (2004, 208).<sup>16</sup> This results in what Robbins calls moral torment. Although the very notion of moral torment might seem to suggest dysfunction, as is the case with *Riches and Renunciation*, Robbins' ethnography is not an account of how a moral system has failed. It is a description rather of how people fail within a moral system (and between moral systems). Even though Urapmin efforts are indeed destined to fail, they remain determinedly committed to Christian moral precepts. And despite the apparent contradictions at the heart of their endeavours, they can still inhabit the moral system. In part, this is because moral weakness itself is integral to what it means to be a Christian. As Robbins notes, it is one of the 'ingenious design features' of Christianity 'that they make the ever-renewed conviction of

sinfulness an important condition of salvational success' (2004, 252; see also Robbins and Williams Green 2017). The Urapmin then do not inhabit the moral system by being 'good Christians' but by failing to be good Christians within particular Christian moral narratives of sinfulness. In other words, it is not through virtue or moral success that the Urapmin inhabit the moral system, but through sinfulness and moral weakness.

Both *Becoming Sinners* and *Riches and Renunciation* draw our attention to the fact that beyond normative accounts of ethics that cohere around ideals, virtues and exemplars, moral systems also comprise conflict, contradiction and failure. From both a systematic as well as a subjective perspective, such features are not to be understood as deviations from an otherwise coherent moral system – indeed, as Laidlaw (1995) argues, logical coherence is not always there to be found (see Simon 2009). In both of these accounts, the apparent ethical indeterminacy is not where moral systems necessarily fail. Rather, this indeterminacy is itself the fertile terrain of ethics. Inconsistencies are not aberrations. As Laidlaw notes elsewhere, 'life ... is not a puzzle to which there can be a solution. The essential perplexity will always have to be lived with' (2014a, 127). How, both Laidlaw and Robbins ask the following question: do people inhabit a moral system when they are not always able to live up to the moral dictates they are presented with? It is a central concern of this book to address that very question.

I have already briefly pointed to the fact that despite going as far as to relocate to rural West Bengal, devotees in Mayapur often struggle with the basic prescriptions and prohibitions of Krishna consciousness. There are those who struggle with meditative chanting on a daily basis, for example. There are a smaller number who seem incapable of following the most basic prohibitions, as I found out when a devotee joined me for a coffee and a cigarette across the road from the ISKCON complex. My conversations with devotees in Mayapur seemed overwhelmingly to cohere around their struggles with Krishna consciousness. A sense of personal failing was pervasive, to the point that devotees were often reluctant to even refer to themselves as 'devotees'. As Robbins describes in the case of the Urapmin, in Mayapur moral failure 'hung in the air' (2004, xix). Despite this, however, devotees have a range of resources to help them both navigate and narrate their inability to live up to the ideals of Krishna consciousness.

Over the course of my fieldwork I came to understand that failing to adhere consistently to the ascetic practices and prohibitions of Krishna consciousness does not constitute an aberration of an otherwise coherent moral system.<sup>17</sup> Rather, given the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of spiritual life, failure is, maybe counterintuitively, at the very heart of what it means to be a devotee. It is an important aspect of the spiritual journey, and an integral feature of the moral system. So while devotees often struggle with their spiritual life, they are also well practiced at articulating their failure to live up to the expectations of Krishna consciousness. They are, in other words, well equipped, both practically and theologically, to deal with the fact that in this material world the

spiritual journey back to Krishna is not easy, and many of the ideals of Krishna consciousness are essentially unrealisable (in this lifetime, in this physical body). They still, however, find ways to inhabit the moral system. And they do so not simply by conforming to a set of Vaishnava prescriptions and prohibitions, but by articulating their failure to do so within Vaishnava moral narratives that account for the aperture between precept and practice. In other words, they inhabit the moral system by failing well.

All this talk of ambivalence, contradiction and moral failure might well lead the reader to assume that devotees in Mayapur are not very committed, that the community I describe throughout this book are simply not 'good' devotees. This is not the case and points to an important distinction that should be made clear from the outset. In describing the various struggles that devotees face in striving to live a Krishna conscious life, I am not imparting a judgement, nor am I offering an evaluation of their efforts. Rather, I am describing the centrality of unforgiving self-assessments in their ethical lives. Self-perceived senses of failure are pervasive in Mayapur, but as will become clear, this is not in spite of, but rather because of devotees' deep commitment to Krishna consciousness.

Of course, an anthropology of ethics that emphasises virtue (at the expense of vice) and 'the good' (at the expense of the ambivalent) is not very well disposed to account for the centrality of experiences and articulations of moral failure. Given anthropologists' penchant for virtue ethics generally, and the frequent reliance on Aristotelian ethics in particular (often read through Foucault or MacIntyre 1981), it should not come as a surprise that anthropology has smuggled a tacit preference for virtue into its engagement with ethics. Aristotle (unlike Kant) was famously optimistic, and while his ethical treatises do include some discussions on vices (*kakia*) and moral weakness (*akrasia*), he tends for the most part to privilege virtue (*areté*) in his account of a good life. His famous 'doctrine of the mean' defined virtues as lying somewhere between vices of deficiency and excess; so modesty, to take one example, is flanked on either side by the vices of shyness and shamelessness. Vices, then, appear as framing devices for Aristotle's extensive musings on the virtues. As Karen Nielson notes, Aristotle's account of vices 'emerges mainly as a long shadow cast by his analysis of virtue of character in the first books of the Nicomachean Ethics' (2017, 3–4). The little direct attention he does pay to the vices, furthermore, is scattered and less than coherent, if not at times quite inconsistent (see Brickhouse 2003, Roochnik 2007, Müller 2015). But of course, vices are not ethical epiphenomena. Just like virtues, they are constitutive aspects of any given moral system. As Cheryl Mattingly has observed, 'hope and despair, moral aspiration and moral failure ... are close travel companions' (2014, 62). In the case of Mayapur, I suggest, it is impossible to describe the moral system without properly accounting for the role(s) that vices play in devotees' everyday ethical lives.

This idea that moral failure is itself a constitutive aspect of a moral system has been reflected in entrenched philosophical debates on 'moral dilemmas'

(Gowans 1987, Sinnott-Armstrong 1988) that typically respond to the long-standing Kantian maxim 'ought implies can' (see Stern 2004). The philosophical debate presents a particular understanding of 'moral dilemmas' as (typically hypothetical) situations in which people are met with two (or more) conflicting obligations, and where choosing to satisfy one means that they cannot satisfy the other(s), and are therefore doomed to fail one way or another. Rooted in these same debates, more recent philosophical treatments that seek to both acknowledge the importance of moral failing and challenge the validity of the 'ought implies can' principle have focused more specifically on 'inescapable moral wrongdoing' (Gowans 1994) and 'the inevitability of moral failure' (Tessman 2014). Against the tendency to privilege virtue as the lens through which we might understand ethical life, there has been an analogous turn in anthropology of ethics.

Growing unease with the tendency within the anthropology of ethics to privilege the 'pursuit of ethical perfection' has brought increased attention to the seemingly pervasive, but all too often overlooked, problem of failure. Where anthropologists were once finding moral coherence, it seems, they are now finding moral ambivalence. This trend can be considered a concerted response to the earlier 'earnest turn' (Mayblin 2017) in the anthropology of ethics that tended to present conspicuously consistent and coherent religious lives. Accounts of inconsistency, imperfection, frustration, failure and moral uncertainty have emerged from both the anthropology of Islam (for example, Marsden 2005, Schielke 2009, 2015, Simon 2014, Kloos 2017a) and the anthropology of Christianity (for example, Engelke and Tomlinson 2006, Pype 2011, Robbins and Williams Green 2017) in particular.

In a recent volume, *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion* (2017), Daan Beekers and David Kloos set out to document how everyday experiences and self-perceived senses of failure animate religious life for Christians and Muslims. Against earlier accounts that tended to gloss over moral uncertainty, rather than engage meaningfully with it, Beekers and Kloos' volume centres on the question of 'how senses of failure constitute productive grounds for believers to reflect and work on their moral selves' (2017, 11). Moral failure, it is argued throughout the volume, is 'part and parcel' of ethical formation for Christians and Muslims alike. In his chapter on Dutch Salafi Muslims, for example, Martiin de Koning suggests that 'the idea of weakness is an intrinsic part of [Muslims'] self-fashioning as pious Muslims' (2017, 48). 'The state of weakness', de Koning continues, 'gains a virtuous moral value; realising one is weak is an important step in becoming a pious Muslim' (2017, 49). Recognising and responding to one's lack of capacity to realise certain ideals, in other words, itself becomes a mode of self-cultivation. Articulating one's propensity for moral failure is constitutive of the moral system Muslims are striving to inhabit. Kloos similarly argues in his own chapter on the negligence of prayer amongst Muslims in Aceh, Indonesia, that his informants' negotiating such moral incapacity reflected 'an ethical mode that built on and incorporated, rather than excluded, senses of failure'

(2017a, 93). In *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*, Kloos elaborates on the implications for the broader anthropology of ethics: 'a comprehensive approach toward the religious subject should ... include both questions about religious commitment and related notions of piety, success, social mobility, transformation, and progress, and questions about its drawbacks, including feelings of shortcoming and stagnation, doubt, religious negligence and sinfulness, and concomitant experiences of stress and disillusion' (2017b, 13). Samuli Schielke makes a similar point, arguing that '[anthropologists] need to be sensitive not only for the successful ordering of a social experience but also for ambivalence, contradictions, and experiences of failure' (2015, 19).

While the majority of anthropological arguments put forward for the importance of ambivalence in ethical life have emerged from the anthropology of both Christianity and Islam (cf Parish 1994, Pandian 2009, Pandian and Ali 2010), this book contributes to this development by offering a Hindu perspective on moral failure. Furthermore, while I embrace the increased focus on failure, I want to take the argument a step further. A central claim of this book is that not only is moral failure constitutive of ethical experience, but in certain cases, if responded to appropriately, it becomes a privileged mode of self-cultivation. In other words, in situations where moral ideals are essentially unrealisable, failing to uphold them in prescribed ways becomes a rather expedient means of being 'good'. In the case of Mayapur, I describe how devotees' inability to adhere consistently to the precepts of Krishna consciousness does not lead them to abandon the spiritual path. On the contrary, in so far as Vaishnava ethics subsumes the likelihood, if not inevitability, of failure, narratives of becoming and articulations of weakness are integral features of ethical life, without which it becomes difficult to imagine a viable moral system. Devotees then must learn not only to aspire to the lofty virtues, but also identify with the lowly vices that Krishna consciousness presents them with.

Paolo Heywood has recently noted that it has become somewhat of a truism within the anthropology of ethics to suggest that 'people are not always faithful to the moral codes they espouse' (2015, 204). It then becomes the task of the anthropology of ethics to describe the various ways in which people can otherwise inhabit a moral system. Looking past the case study at hand, this book argues that in order to present a more fully developed account of ethical life, the anthropology of ethics must go beyond virtue and describe the ways in which moral systems articulate and accommodate the problem of moral failure, and how people manage its inevitability.

## Fieldwork

This book is based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork amongst international devotees in Mayapur between 2013 and 2014, before which I spent three months in Kolkata learning Bangla. I have been in close contact

with quite a few devotees since, and visited Mayapur to catch up with informants in 2018. Over the course of my fieldwork, I also undertook several trips to other important Vaishnava centres in India, including Puri (Odisha) and Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh). The decision to focus on the international rather than the local Bengali community was a natural one, as it was with the former that I found myself spending the vast majority of my time. While the two communities are not wholly distinct, there is a widely recognised, if at times tacit, distinction between the two that has both socio-cultural and practical dimensions. Depending on their country of origin, international devotees are typically more affluent and live in air-conditioned apartment buildings. They tend to employ locals as domestic workers, and in many cases socialise predominantly with devotees of similar linguistic or national backgrounds. Only in very rare cases would international devotees speak Bangla, as English is the de facto lingua franca in Mayapur.

During my fieldwork, I lived both inside the ISKCON complex in what is called the '*grihastha* area' (where families live) and later in a newly-built residential area, a short cycle ride to the north of the complex. I spent a lot of my time in classroom settings, from the morning class in the temple (see Chapter 3) to the seasonal courses run by the Mayapur Institute, including cooking classes, deity dressing and short courses on meditation and *kirtan*. I tried to attend the temple for *mangala arati* (at 4.30am) as often as possible, but there were days when I would not make it there until 7am for the 'morning programme'. As it turned out, this was also the case with the vast majority of devotees, who for various reasons only rarely attend *mangala arati*. Alongside devotees in the temple, I would spend somewhere between one to two hours every day chanting the *mahamantra*. Although I often struggled to concentrate, as I was soon to learn, so did almost everyone else. My very inability to keep up with the spiritual practices, or in my mind, to play the part of a devotee, turned out to be what in my informants' eyes made me a devotee, whether or not I knew it at the time (see Chapter 2).

Outside the temple and the classroom, there was no shortage of activities. Every Thursday, for example, I helped out with the 'Food for Life' programme, which involved visiting nearby villages and distributing *prasadam* (food offered to Krishna) to the locals. I also went on a *parikrama* (pilgrimage) around the Mayapur area (see Chapter 1) and spent a lot of my time doing *seva* (service) for the community. I offered free photography services and so was invited to weddings, conferences, festival celebrations and initiation ceremonies, and was given access to a wide variety of events that were otherwise private affairs.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I conducted forty interviews and two focus groups, for the most part with international, but also with some Indian devotees. I spent hours every day in conversation with devotees, mostly discussing the trials and tribulations of Krishna consciousness. I was extremely fortunate to have been able to sit down with some of the most influential leaders in the movement today to discuss the history, development and future

of ISKCON generally, and Mayapur in particular. While I scheduled my days around the temple worship programme and the various classes I attended, I also, to borrow Paul Rabinow's words (1977, 125), 'spent a great many hours merely wandering around ... engaging in casual talk while sitting around the stores, setting up interviews, waiting for informants'. If I was not to be found in the temple, in a classroom or with a camera in my hand, I was sure to be found sitting in Madhu's Bakery, a small Russian restaurant where I regularly met with friends. This book is then, again to borrow Rabinow's phrase, 'a studied condensation of a swirl of people, places and feelings. It could have been half as long, or twice as long' (1977, 6).

### **Outline of Chapters**

Based on a history of 'two countercultures', and in light of ISKCON's profound transformation, Mayapur has emerged as an important site for the contestation between tradition and modernity, East and West, the sacred and the mundane. How international devotees in Mayapur strive, and at times struggle, to cultivate themselves as subjects of particular institutional discourses, themselves emergent products of individual attempts to pursue Krishna consciousness in a changing world, comprises the core of this book (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5). Rather than conceiving of ethics as a sub-discipline, I bring familiar anthropological categories into dialogue with emergent debates in the anthropology of ethics. Individual chapters then advance an ethnographic argument, in each case speaking to a particular anthropological theme, namely place (Chapter 1), the self (Chapter 2), knowledge (Chapter 3), emotion (Chapter 4) and culture (Chapter 5). In the Conclusion, I bring together these strands to speak to the theme of moral failure.

Chapter 1 ('Land of the Golden Avatar') locates Mayapur in ISKCON's broader history, outlining both its historical and spiritual significance in the wider Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. It presents an overview of the history of Mayapur, from the sacralisation of the land in the nineteenth century to its sporadic, but nonetheless dramatic, development since the arrival of ISKCON in the 1970s. Ethnographically, this chapter explores how devotees themselves learn to engage with and inhabit the sacred land today, which despite its special place in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, is being commodified and fought over in the pursuit of material prosperity.

Beginning with an introduction to the Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy to which ISKCON traces its roots, Chapter 2 ('Changing the Subject') examines the basic tenets and practices of Krishna consciousness. With particular emphasis on conceptualisations of the self, the world and Krishna, this chapter centres on how devotees narrate and evaluate their own spiritual journeys. I describe how a rich and sophisticated theology is distilled into mundane idioms of detachment, dependence and purification, and outline how devotees



understand and struggle with the soteriological strategies by which they understand one can live a good life. This chapter also sets up an ethico-aesthetic trajectory from knowledge to emotion that will be unpacked over the course of the book.

Based on ethnographic accounts of various pedagogical settings in Mayapur, and situated in wider Indian epistemological traditions, Chapter 3 ('Practices of Knowledge') examines how devotees strive to 'realise', rather than simply acquire, knowledge. Moving from a central distinction in Indian epistemology that differentiates between the accumulation and the assimilation of knowledge, this chapter describes how knowledge can only be defined as such in so far as it facilitates a profound transformation of the knowing subject. While the case presented is an ethnographic one, this chapter speaks to broader anthropological debates that have been informed by what I suggest are inherited Western philosophical assumptions that frame knowledge as 'justified true belief'.

Chapter 4 ('Learning to Love Krishna') revolves around the following basic ethnographic puzzle: what did devotees mean when they said they were 'learning to love Krishna'? In response to this, and focusing on the ultimate *telos* of spiritual life, Krishna *prema* (or 'pure love for Krishna'), this chapter investigates how emotions become sites of moral self-cultivation. While *prema* is unambiguously understood as the goal towards which spiritual practices are geared, in my time in Mayapur I never met anyone who claimed to have attained it. With reference to the systematic Gaudiya Vaishnava theology of moral emotions that prescribes ascending modes of relationality with Krishna, this chapter describes how owing to the pragmatics of Prabhupad's preaching mission, devotees have inherited the goal of *prema*, but not necessarily the traditional means of attaining it.

In light of ISKCON's apparent failure to implement Prabhupad's ambitious socio-cultural ideals in the decades since his death, Chapter 5 ('Simple Living, High Thinking') describes devotees' divergent understandings of and commitments to the concept of 'Vedic culture'. This chapter examines how institutional narratives that cohere around the concept of culture are appropriated by devotees to both frame their own spiritual practices and conceptualise the idea of an 'ideal Vedic city'. I outline how culture becomes an object of both knowledge and practice, with which devotees fashion themselves as ethical subjects, and Mayapur itself as an ethical object. As is the case with the persistence of the anthropological concept of culture, I suggest that the ambiguity at the heart of 'Vedic culture' is a precondition for its enduring appeal.

The Conclusion ('Failing Well') brings the various thematic strands together to elaborate on the book's central argument about moral failure. I situate the core theoretical contributions within emergent debates by suggesting that beyond a focus on virtue, the anthropology of ethics must also account for how people relate to vices, and how both they and the moral systems they strive to inhabit accommodate the problem of moral failure.

## Notes

1. Cited by Ellwood 1989, 106.
2. Vaishnavism is one of the four major Hindu traditions, and although it generally centres on Vishnu, in the case of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (derived from the locative 'Gauda', which refers to pre-partition Bengal) Krishna is held to be the Supreme Lord. It is also referred to as 'Chaitanya' or 'Bengal' Vaishnavism.
3. Early ISKCON was a monastic movement in so far as the majority of devotees were celibate monks. In line with Prabhupad's proselytising agenda, however, devotees were not cloistered within an *ashram* but spent much of their time preaching to the wider public.
4. These are ISKCON's own estimates. While these figures are often presented with pride, they are quite modest compared to other transnational Hindu movements. The Sathya Sai movement, for example, boasts around 8,000 centres in over 167 countries (Srinivas 2010, 12).
5. For more on 1960s America, see Roszak 1969, Tipton 1982.
6. A *mrdunga* is a two-headed drum, while a *harmonium* is a small portable reed organ. Along with *kartals* (hand-cymbals), these are the staple instruments for *kirtan* in ISKCON.
7. Although in a broader sense not 'new' at all, the particular institutional form of Gaudiya Vaishnavism that Prabhupad founded in the West was also not simply an extrapolation of an Indian tradition. As Tamal Krishna Goswami writes, 'If ISKCON [was] not a new religion ... it certainly [was] a new religious movement' (2012, 21).
8. Like his guru in the early twentieth century, Prabhupad decided not to name a successor, but instead felt the institution would be best managed by a board of senior representatives.
9. Despite the elevated spiritual position of the renouncer in Vaishnava theology, Prabhupad gave first *sannyas* initiation to Western disciples in 1967, just one year after founding ISKCON.
10. Although the term 'pure devotee' is used in various ways, it is most often used to refer to a devotee who has rid themselves of all material desires and serves Krishna without selfish motivation (in other words, one who has truly become Krishna conscious).
11. There is a widespread sentiment amongst other Vaishnava sects (particularly the Gaudiya Math) that ISKCON has failed to give adherents access to the highest Vaishnava teachings (see Chapter 4).
12. *Bhadralok* literally means 'gentle or respectable people' (Sardella 2013, 17) but refers particularly to the cultural and intellectual elite of Bengal society who tended to sympathise with the British.
13. Cited from Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' of 1835 (see Hall 2008).
14. This was one of many such reform movements founded in the nineteenth century. Another prominent example is the *Arya Samaj*, notable for its veneration of all things Vedic (see Chapter 5).
15. In the early nineteenth century, for example, Sahajanand Swami of the Swaminarayan sect rejected the more licentious aspects of Krishna's character.
16. Speaking to the particular philosophical debate about 'moral dilemmas', Lisa Tessman (2014, 3) describes the inevitability of moral failure as 'moral requirements that remain binding even when they become impossible to satisfy'.
17. Asceticism should be understood here in the broad Foucauldian sense of 'self-forming activity' (see Laidlaw 1995, Cook 2010).