

## The Amazing Story of How Krishna Came to America *Swami in a Strange Land*

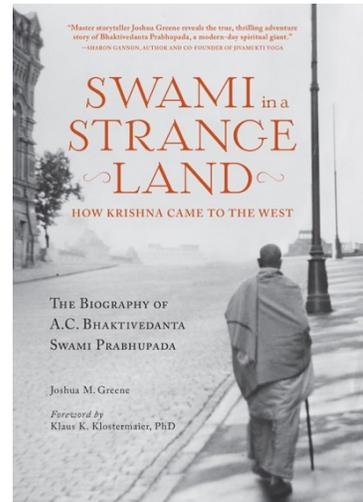
By Joshua M. Greene

Into the turbulent 1960s—with its civil rights marches, anti-war demonstrations, and challenges to traditional American life—stepped 70-year old Bhaktivedanta Swami, on a mission to save the world. He arrived by cargo ship, having suffered two heart attacks on the storm-tossed journey. He had seven dollars to his name, knew no one, and had never been outside India. But he was determined to spread the teachings of Krishna, the Supreme Being of the ancient Vedic scriptures. He passed away twelve years later. By then, “Prabhupada” (as he was called by admirers) had built an international movement with millions of followers, translated dozens of Sanskrit sacred texts, established hundreds of centers to Bhakti (devotional) yoga, and made Krishna a household name through popular recordings and street chanting parties. The world of spirituality has never been the same.

In *Swami in a Strange Land* (Mandala Publishing, May 2016), author Joshua M. Greene brings readers deeper into the spiritual journey traced in his bestselling biography of George Harrison, *Here Comes the Sun* (John Wiley 2006). Harrison was one of many well-known followers who studied with Swami Prabhupada. The late Beatle is also credited with helping Prabhupada popularize the chanting of Hare Krishna on records that climbed the charts worldwide in the 1970s and '80s.

There is a David-and-Goliath mood in this epic story of Prabhupada, who as a young Bengali boy witnessed the Hindu-Muslim strife fomented by British rule. In college, he left Gandhi's movement to become a follower of Krishna after meeting Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, the teacher who gave him the mission to spread Krishna consciousness around the world. By taking up the challenge, the young Prabhupada set himself the daunting task of proving that Krishna was not a Hindu divinity but the source of all creation, and the chanting of Krishna's names not an Indian religious ritual but a universal formula for bringing peace and prosperity back into the world.

Prabhupada was the modern-day representative of Bhakti or devotional Yoga, which experienced a renaissance in the sixteenth century. That was when Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, identified in Vedic texts as Krishna himself, wrested the



"Swami in a Strange Land is a moving account of Prabhupada's bold challenge to the dominant discourses of our time.

Joshua Greene is an accomplished storyteller, a diligent historian, and a dedicated bhakta. His biography of Prabhupada pays careful attention to historical context while honoring the transcendent power of bhakti."

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names of Krishna away from the hands of sectarian Brahmin religious leaders and distributed them publicly through massive chanting parties. These were the forerunners of the chanting parties people encounter today. Currently, there are more than 1,000 Krishna "kirtan" or chanting groups circulating each week in major cities around the world, inspired by Prabhupada's teachings.

"No one ever did as much as Prabhupada to popularize the chanting of Hare Krishna," Greene writes in his introduction. "He could look out from an airplane window, down onto Paris or Nairobi, Moscow or Hong Kong, and know that people in nearly every country had heard the chanting of Krishna's names as a result of his mission. Paradoxically, few people knew anything about him."

It took Prabhupada forty years of poverty and obscurity before he was at last able to leave India and begin spreading Krishna consciousness to the rest of the world. During that time, his businesses failed, his marriage dissolved, his letters to India's leaders were ignored, and even fellow disciples in his guru's institution offered little encouragement or assistance. Still, Prabhupada kept on, writing English commentaries of Krishna's teachings, publishing essays that challenged reductionist scientific explanations of life, and securing the papers needed to leave India. Time was running out. He turned 70 on the boat to America.

In a tiny storefront in New York's derelict Bowery neighborhood, Swami Prabhupada taught the *Bhagavad Gita*, the essential teachings of Krishna, and initiated the first Krishna followers in the Western world. In classes and writings, he revealed the mysteries of reincarnation, established the importance of a vegetarian (cruelty-free) diet, outlined the structure and purpose of the universe according to the Vedic version, and taught by example how to live a life of spiritual integrity, impeccable character, and purity of purpose. His movement grew.

Throughout the pages of this highly entertaining account, readers cross paths with some of the cultural figures of the time, including the Beatles, beat poet Allen Ginsberg, political leaders, and renowned scholars. Greene exercises a gift for melding biographic detail with authentic dialog to produce "you-are-there" immediacy in his writing. By the story's dramatic conclusion, readers have discovered that science is in effect rediscovering truths embedded in millennial wisdom books. They have encountered compelling arguments that life continues past the death of



**Joshua M. Greene**

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the body. They have met a true holy being, and many may also come to see that the title's "strange land" is the world we all inhabit, and that the Swami has come to free us all from our illusions.

Mr. Greene tells a colorful story, rich in detail, whether he's discussing the verdant forests of Vrindavan, Krishna's boyhood home, or New York's Hudson River, "as foul as a sewer." Today, as an experienced biographer and leading authority on Hindu studies and the ancient wisdom of India, Mr. Greene still retains the intimacy with his subject that he learned during his early days as a Hare Krishna initiate named Yogesvara by Prabhupada. In the role of witness to these fascinating events, and in presenting the life of a little-known but immensely influential spiritual leader, he takes us on an inspiring journey of spiritual devotion and provides an invaluable cross-cultural history.

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Biography

Rights: world

*Swami Bhaktivedanta came to the USA and went swiftly to the Archetype Spiritual neighborhood, the New York Lower East Side, and installed intact an ancient perfectly preserved piece of street India. He adorned a storefront as his Ashram and adored Krishna therein and by patience and good humor singing chanting and expounding Sanskrit terminology day by day established Krishna Consciousness in the psychedelic (mind-manifesting) center of America East....To choose to attend to the Lower East Side, what kindness and humility and intelligence!*

**Allen Ginsberg**  
from his Introduction  
to the **Bhagavad Gita**  
**As It Is**

Please go to the author's website: [www.atma.org](http://www.atma.org)

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