

of Esalen emerged the vast therapeutic-cum-spiritual culture that morphed into the New Age and has come to permeate contemporary society.

Jeffrey Kripal's chronicle of the history of Esalen is the first full-length account since Walter Truett Anderson's classic but obviously rather dated *The Upstart Spring* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1983). Kripal follows the fortunes of Esalen from its early days as a hotbed of countercultural experimentation to its present incarnation as an intellectual version of the New Age milieu. Although written by a scholar and published by a university press, his saga of Esalen is a rather untypical specimen of the scholarly genre. It is written in an engaging style, is accessible to the general reader, and is so loyal to the self-understanding of its founders and supporters that it—perhaps uniquely among academic books on religion—carries an enthusiastic endorsement by New Age guru Deepak Chopra.

Much of the fascination that one derives from reading Kripal's book is due to the remarkable cast of characters portrayed here, ranging from the delightfully charismatic (not least Esalen cofounder Michael Murphy) to the truly eccentric (such as Terence McKenna, who was convinced that mushroomlike alien life forms played a crucial role in human history).

Kripal's choice of a semipopular genre and his role as consummate raconteur inevitably force drier issues, including many that may be of interest to readers of the present journal, into the background. What, for instance, does the position of Esalen as an ambiguous space between academia and popular culture tell us more generally about the modalities of religious innovation in contemporary culture? What made it possible to draw inspiration from a very narrow selection of traditions (e.g., Western esotericism, Zen, and Hinduism) yet perceive one's own religiosity as truly universal, as a "religion of no religion," in a phrase borrowed from Frederic Spiegelberg? How did a countercultural intelligentsia come to grips with the inherent contradiction of offering tools for a social and spiritual transformation only to those privileged enough by "the system" to pay quite dearly for them? How was authority constituted in a place where nobody has been allowed to capture the flag?

The strengths of this book lie elsewhere; Kripal's documentary style is eminently suited to describing the events and people that have made the Esalen Institute a place like no other. This makes his book an engaging read, whether or not one agrees with his generally positive assessment of the many heterodox passions pursued at Esalen. Kripal has written a well-crafted chronicle that will be of great interest to anybody curious about the emergence of the counterculture and of contemporary "alternative" religion.

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