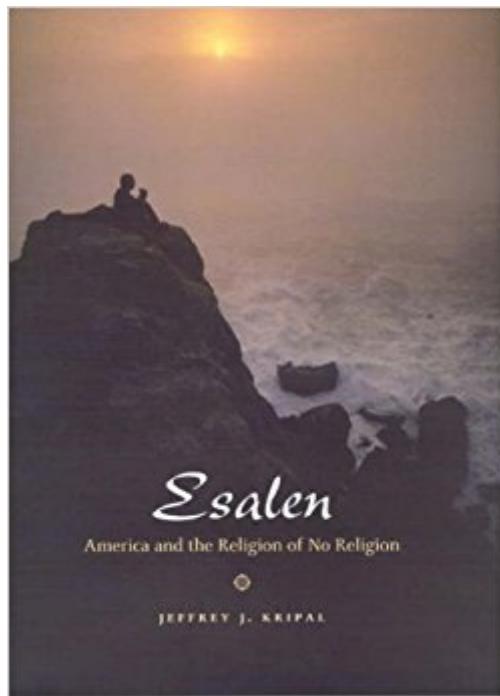


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Esalen: America And The Religion Of No Religion



Synopsis

Jeffrey Kripal here recounts the spectacular history of Esalen, the institute that has long been a world leader in alternative and experiential education and stands today at the center of the human potential movement. Forged in the literary and mythical leanings of the Beat Generation, inspired in the lecture halls of Stanford by radical scholars of comparative religion, the institute was the remarkable brainchild of Michael Murphy and Richard Price. Set against the heady backdrop of California during the revolutionary 1960s, Esalen recounts in fascinating detail how these two maverick thinkers sought to fuse the spiritual revelations of the East with the scientific revolutions of the West, or to combine the very best elements of Zen Buddhism, Western psychology, and Indian yoga into a decidedly utopian vision that rejected the dogmas of conventional religion. In their religion of no religion, the natural world was just as crucial as the spiritual one, science and faith not only commingled but became staunch allies, and the enlightenment of the body could lead to the full realization of our development as human beings. An impressive new book. . . . [Kripal] has written the definitive intellectual history of the ideas behind the institute. "San Francisco Chronicle" Kripal examines Esalen's extraordinary history and evocatively describes the breech birth of Murphy and Price's brainchild. His real achievement, though, is effortlessly synthesizing a dizzying array of dissonant phenomena (Cold War espionage, ecstatic religiosity), incongruous pairings (Darwinism, Tantric sex), and otherwise schizy ephemera (psychedelic drugs, spaceflight) into a cogent, satisfyingly complete narrative. "Atlantic Monthly" Kripal has produced the first all-encompassing history of Esalen: its intellectual, social, personal, literary and spiritual passages. Kripal brings us up-to-date and takes us deep beneath historical surfaces in this definitive, elegantly written book. "Playboy"

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Customer Reviews

Many readers will probably not have heard of Esalen "but that doesn't mean they won't find its history fascinating. Esalen is a legendary sacred place, but legendary among the privileged few like Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller and Joseph Campbell, for whom Esalen was a spiritual playground. Kripal, a professor of religious studies at Rice University, tells the story of this beautiful retreat in California's Big Sur region "its history at once sexy, salacious, intellectual and political" "with reverence and playfulness, alternating between the hushed tones of awe and the glee of partaking in Esalen's infamous sinful delights. The community itself, Kripal explains, is centered around the idea of a "religion of no religion," which provides "a kind of American Mystical Constitution" for its visitors and "a spiritual space where almost any religious form can flourish." Kripal jumps among a wide range of historical moments, from Esalen's alleged relationship to the collapse of the Soviet Union to the idea of the disembodied erotic. Readers shouldn't be scared off by the book's heft. Kripal is an engaging storyteller, Esalen a worthy subject (a kind of *Us Weekly* for the discerning intellectual), and it's as easy to jump from the introduction to chapter 14 as it is to continue in order. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"The first all-encompassing history of Esalen: its intellectual, social, personal, literary and spiritual passages. Kripal brings us up to date and takes us deep beneath historical surfaces in this definitive, elegantly written book." - *Playboy* "Kripal tells the story of this beautiful retreat in California's Big Sur region - its history at once sexy, salacious, intellectual and political - with reverence and playfulness.... He is an engaging storyteller and Esalen a worthy subject (a kind of *Us Weekly* for the discerning intellectual)." - *Publishers Weekly* "An impressive new book.... Kripal has written the definitive intellectual history of the ideas behind the institute." - *San Francisco Chronicle* "Kripal examines Esalen's extraordinary history and evocatively describes the breech birth of Murphy and Price's brainchild. His real achievement, though, is effortlessly synthesizing a dizzying array of dissonant phenomena (cold war espionage, ecstatic religiosity), incongruous pairings (Darwinism, Tantric sex), and otherwise schizy ephemera (psychedelic drugs, spaceflight) into a cogent, satisfyingly complete narrative." - *Atlantic Monthly*"

I loved Mad Men's final episode that takes Don Draper to Esalen for his series ending emotional catharsis. If you ever wondered how the human potential movement impacted our culture, this book is for you. Kripal, a Rice University comparative religion professor, spent six years developing this book. More than just a history of Esalen's "counter culture", Kripal highlights how Aldous Huxley's "human potentialities" morphed into what Esalen founders Price and Murphy termed the "human potential" of altered states and altered worlds. Kripal believes the paranormal is normal, the physical is metaphysical. On a personal note, I attended a summer program at Esalen Institute in the mid 1970's. Needless to say, for this young 21 year old midwestern college student it was psychological epiphany, my own "X" event. Meeting Judy Collins at the Big House, Ram Dass's meditation lectures on the lawn, the hot springs overlooking the cliffs and driving to San Francisco to hear Jefferson Starship at the Fillmore, those were the days! Now that I am older and reflecting back on why that summer was a pivotal "X" moment in my life. I often ask myself what Esalen and the movement did for me and can still do for our consciousness and culture. I haven't found a better voice for this answer than Jeffrey Kripal. Below is a quote from Kripal when asked this basic question: " I am often asked about the historical influence of Esalen on American culture. I reply that this influence has been vast and deep, that it has not simply involved American culture (think Europe, Russia, Latin America, China, and the Middle East), and that much of this influence almost certainly still lies in the future. I would only add one further observation here, namely, that Esalen's signature idea of the human potential is so widespread and so popular now that it is virtually invisible. It is "in the water," as we say. Or better, it is the water. I am reminded here of the story about the fish who one day met a turtle. The turtle said to the fish: "Isn't the water fine today?" To which the fish replied, "What's water?" This is sort of where we are with the human potential. It is so common and so well known that we do not even recognize it any longer as something special, much less as something "Esalenesque.". My favorite example here is American popular culture and its embrace of various "psychical" abilities or "paranormal" powers, capacities which are commonly seen, exactly as we have it in the human potential movement, as the evolutionary buds of our own latent human supernature. Think the X-Men and Prof. Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. Think television programs like Heroes. Think countless Hollywood films, from John Travolta in Phenomenon to Matt Damon in The Adjustment Bureau. The latter film is based on a short story of the sci-fi master Philip K. Dick, who was himself utterly convinced of the evolutionary purpose of mystical illuminations, his own included. My point? That the human potential movement, on its fiftieth birthday, has already instilled itself, alongside a host of other influences, in and as the very

soul of American popular culture. This particular example (there are many others) may involve fiction, film, and fantasy, but that is precisely how a worldview often first shifts -- through the cultural imagination. Nothing can be accomplished that is not at first imagined. And Esalen has inspired us to re-imagine ourselves in ways that are ecstatic, visionary, future-oriented, and, above all, big. Really, really big."

This is a very big, thick book. It's a little intimidating. But it reads so easily and is so interesting I found I was disappointed when I finally finished. I'd have liked to have had the presentation go on. The book is structured around the history of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur along the California coast, but it's about so much more than just Esalen. That's partly because Esalen proved to be very influential in West Coast thinking and then worldwide culture. So a discussion of Esalen includes all those issues of the last half of the 20th Century that are roughly called New Age and/or Countercultural. Esalen was a part of the transformation of how modern culture understands religion. The subtitle of the book is "America and the Religion of No Religion." The Religion of No Religion is the modern religion now. The popular term in social media is "Spiritual, not religious." Kripal writes about very heady stuff, but I found it easy to read and easy to understand. I've also read Kripal's *The Serpent's Gift*, and found it really enlightening. I resonate with his idea of a "gnosticism" that comes from the study of religion from over and above. Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion is wonderful both for its broad generalizations about meaning and the evolution of consciousness and for its minute details and intriguing stories of the history of the land and people that constituted Esalen.

A clear and detailed accounting of the historical significance of Esalen in the forefront of the human potential movement. The author is a scholar and so the book has an intellectual focus on the writings and philosophical import of the remarkable individuals that Esalen provided a venue. He provides a narrative that runs through the book making the reading very enjoyable and accessible. Highly recommended for those who want to have a deeper understanding of how the 60's and 70's unfolded. You won't be disappointed!

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