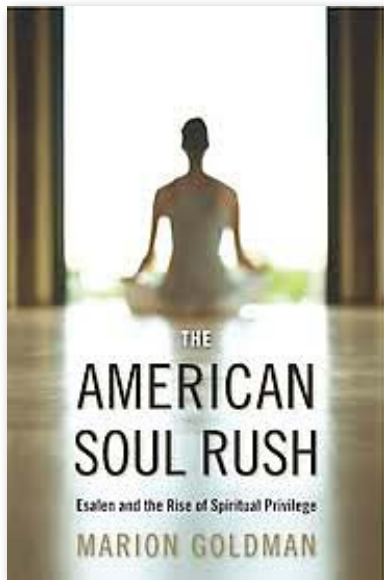


Reviews

..... Democratizing the privilege?

Marion Goldman: *The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege*. New York: New York University Press 2012, 240 pp.



Over the past five decades Western societies have been going through a significant religious change. Since the 1960s, more and more people have been moving away from traditional religious institutions and turning to more individualistic and often eclectic forms of spirituality.

Economic growth and increasing cultural and religious diversity in the United States enabled the so-called baby-boomer gener-

ation, born after the World War II, to search for alternatives to their Christian upbringing. Many started to experiment with yoga, meditation and other forms of Eastern spirituality, as well as a variety of alternative therapies. This kind of individualistic spirituality has since become a mainstream phenomenon in most Western societies.

According to Marion Goldman, the one of the most important factors in the process of a popularisation of alternative spiritualities in the United States was the Esalen Institute, established in 1961 at Big Sur, California. In *The American Soul Rush: Esalen and the Rise of Spiritual Privilege* Goldman offers a critical examination of the origins, development and wide-ranging influence of Esalen. Goldman narrates the history of the institute and argues that Esalen made it possible for people from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds to familiarise themselves with individualistic spiritualities, thus laying the foundation for a subsequent spread of individualistic spiritualities in the West. She also uncovers certain structural tensions underlying the institution and its teaching.

The central concept in Goldman's book is 'spiritual privilege', which she defines as 'an individual's ability to devote time and resources to select, combine and revise his or

her personal religious beliefs over the course of a lifetime'. Further, spiritual privilege comprises of four attributes: 1) affinities for supernatural meanings, experiences and explanations, 2) religious and cultural knowledge, 3) participation in supportive social networks, and 4) economic resources. These dynamically interrelated assets make it possible for an individual to construct a personal *bricolage* of religious meanings and practices, which suit his or her individual needs and which may change over time if necessary. In *The American Soul Rush*, Goldman argues that spiritual privilege is not dependent on socio-economic class, gender or ethnicity. However, she also shows that these factors can be a source of tension, as can be seen in the history of Esalen. Despite its counter-cultural origins and aims, Esalen has not always exclusively challenged, but has also at times reflected prevalent cultural values.

Esalen began as a small discussion group formed by two young students with an interest in spirituality. In only a decade it grew into an influential spiritual centre, where movie stars and other celebrities explored different methods of spiritual development, alternative therapies, liberated sexuality and the relaxing effects of massage and bathing in the hot springs. While

the institute's own 'creation narrative' emphasises the role of synchronicity in its early development, Goldman argues that the seemingly unexpected popularity of the institute was a direct result of its founding members' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. However, she also discusses the complex interrelationships between cultural and economic capital and points out that while its founders were from affluent and socially well-connected families, the people who visit Esalen come from very diverse economic backgrounds. It seems that while the institute initially attracted mostly members of the economic elite, over the years its flexible and eclectic approach has enabled what Goldman calls the 'democratization of spiritual privilege'. To a great extent due to the influence of Esalen, people can now be spiritually privileged, whatever their economic or social status happens to be.

From the very beginning, freedom of sexuality was encouraged at Esalen. Goldman argues however, that the institute was, especially in the early years, mostly male-dominated and heteronormative. She demonstrates this with three narratives deriving from its early history. While it is debateable to what extent some of these narratives are supportive of her argument, the approach seems justifiable enough. It is easy to believe that the young men who founded Esalen were 'hypermasculine' (as Goldman calls them) in their early emphasis on sport, sexual adventurism and heroic social activism. On the other hand, Goldman also makes it clear that Esalen has explored and developed alternative approaches that challenge the earlier, heteronormative and traditionally masculine ones. It has offered many special programmes for sexual minorities and was, especially in the 1980s, influenced by the so-called men's movement, which sought 'alterna-

tive masculinities'.

The question of gender is directly linked to the issue of hierarchy in several instances, where Goldman discusses the relationship between the Center for Theory and Research (CTR) and the Esalen Massage and Bodywork Association (EMBA). Academically inclined, the CTR is comprised mostly of men and focuses on theoretical aspects and the development of Esalen's teachings and directs their implementation. The EMBA on the other hand is the association of body-workers, who do most of the practical therapeutic work at the institute. While women are in no way excluded from CTR, it has always been male-dominated, whereas most of the members of EMBA have been female. Goldman perceives this division as hierarchical and problematic, mainly because the institute's representatives seem to accept it as natural. Goldman argues that although Esalen stresses equality and social justice, different forms of spiritual, economic, gender-related and educational privilege define the power structures in the institute.

In contrast to its apparently hierarchical structure, Esalen's fundamental teaching is that of equality: Everyone has an inner 'spark of divinity' and it is each individual's right and responsibility to uncover and develop this inner potential. The teaching has its roots in the integral philosophy of the Indian mystic, Aurobindo Ghose, who has been a major influence on the institute from the early days. During Esalen's history, this emphasis on individual spiritualities has drawn criticism mainly from left-wing political groups. However, Esalen has from the very beginning also emphasised the social aspect of self-development. Members of the institute have both initiated and participated in various social causes and movements. Goldman also points out that the social activ-

ism of many activist groups seems to rest on similar social, economic and cultural privileges as Esalen's work on individual spirituality.

To sum up, Goldman's criticism rests on the fact that none of the Esalen's founding members have critically analysed the factors that enabled them to make the choices they made. She demonstrates this by uncovering the above-mentioned structural tensions in the history and the teaching of the institute. For the most part Goldman succeeds well, bringing up problematic issues as well as balancing factors. However, her own assumptions and underlying value-judgements seem to lack clear explication and justification. This makes it difficult at times to follow her line of argument and also raises questions about some of her approaches. For example, if Esalen's history contains narratives that can be seen both as embodying as well as deconstructing traditional masculinity, is feminist criticism in this case pertinent? Further, to what extent can the term 'spiritual privilege' still be used, when we are discussing the democratisation of spirituality? On what grounds is a division of labour based on education, gender or other inclinations to be seen as hierarchical? Instead of illustrating structural tensions, could Esalen's history be seen as resolving them? While Goldman's criticism may well be accurate, these questions are mostly left unanswered in the book.

The American Soul Rush is based on extensive research. The material includes interviews, archive material, diaries, letters, recordings and participant observation. The book thoroughly documents the history, development and influence of the Esalen Institute. An interesting aspect of the book is the addition of practical exercises for each chapter at the appendix of the book. They range from simple concentration and relaxation techniques to more

demanding psychodrama exercises. The exercises are similar to those practised at the institute and are intended to provide the reader with a personal experience of the themes discussed. This idea is quite original and exemplifies the conscientious and thorough quality of research on the part of the author. Despite raising, for this reader, some questions about the writer's own stance, *The American Soul Rush* is a valuable source of information as well as an enjoyable and thought-provoking book.

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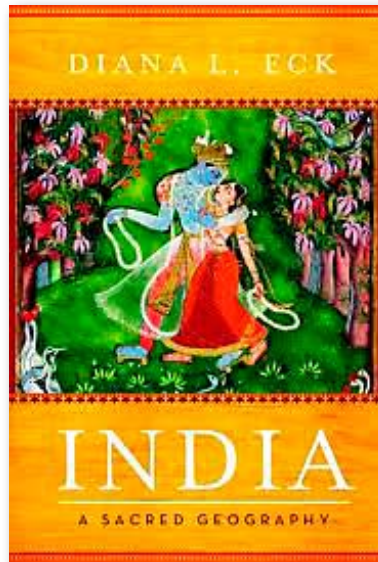


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In the footsteps of pilgrims

Diana L. Eck: *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony Books, 2012. 559 pp.



The so-called 'spatial turn' in studies of religion lately has highlighted a central aspect in our understanding of religion – which can briefly be described as the importance of considering space and place when attempting to understand religious beliefs, customs and worldviews. An awareness of geography can no doubt deepen our understanding of religions in general; however, regarding some traditions, the perspective can be considered to be nearly a necessity. After reading Diana L. Eck's massive study *India: A Sacred Geography* one is at least persuaded that in the case of religion in India, space and place cannot be ignored. This is hardly a new insight, but the journey around India that Eck invites the reader on still feels quite unique.

The goal of Eck's study is not to present a new image of India, or of religion in this part of the world. Neither is it to simplify or over-complicate a religious world that everyone who is acquainted with it knows is many-faceted. What Eck

sets out to do is to trace India by following in the footsteps of pilgrims. Pilgrimage is and has, for as far back as we know, been a central aspect of religious life in India. The footsteps of pilgrims have also come to unite this many-faceted land. Though one can find a great mixture of beliefs and customs here, the idea that this land is in some sense a whole is not new. Knowledge of the geography and different holy places has long existed, being kept alive and dispersed by the pilgrims crossing the land. This is not to say that there exists only one religious map of India, or perfect agreement on which are the key places. Though there are holy places that are generally acknowledged, repetition of beliefs seem to be the rule. This is the place – but so is this.

Anyone acquainted with Hindu mythology has probably noticed the connection between myth and geography in the texts. Several epics take us on journeys through the land or to a specified place. However, the rivers, mountains and lands are also connected to the spiritual realm. Not least the rivers are often said to have existed in the world of the gods before they were brought down to earth to become a blessing and connection between life and death. To travel in India, then, is to travel in the footsteps of gods. The way Eck leads us through this world seems rather traditional, which is not to say that it does not work. After an introduction to the mythic geography of the land as a whole, we follow the Ganga, Shiva, Shakti and the distribution of the body of the Goddess, Vishnu and the fates of Krishna and Rama. With a basic knowledge of Hinduism it is then rather easy to comprehend and follow the structure of the journey.

A theme that returns over and over in Eck's work and feels essential from the viewpoint of religion today is nationalism and, in

the case of India, its connection to religion and the land. Recent decades have seen a great upswing of a religiously-inspired nationalism in India, a nationalism that in several cases has been involved in bloody struggles. Central to these struggles, Eck illustrates, have often been religious notions connected to specific places or India as a whole. The birthplaces of gods, for example, whether commonly agreed upon or not, have come to ignite conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. In these cases, too, space and religion are combined. What one meets surprisingly less of is a religiously-inspired environmentalism. Considering the importance not least of rivers for Hindu religiosity, their pollution has been much less of an issue than what might be expected.

India: A Sacred Geography is a very empirically driven work which does not over-theorise the world that is traced within its pages. The benefits of this could have been discussed, but the way Eck manages to find a balance between the specific and the general is still impressive. It is true, as Eck also acknowledges, that there is perhaps a bit too much detail at times, a few too many temples, too many places. However, if one keeps in mind that this is still but a small portion of what is actually to be found in the landscape of India, the impact of the image becomes somewhat different. The repetition of stories, or different forms of the same story, can sometimes feel a bit redundant, but does also fulfill a purpose, illustrating the understanding of a sacred geography that is in a way a whole, but not uniform.

Pilgrimage in India has gone through changes of late. Rapid developments in transportation, communications, and technology have also affected pilgrims. Interestingly though, these developments do not seem to have made pilgrimage any less popular; on the contrary. But

what is it that drives pilgrims today? How do they experience the places and the land? And how have new forms of transportation possibly altered the pilgrim's understanding of space? If there is something that is missing in Eck's study it is the voices of pilgrims. Though Eck in many ways brings us up close to the pilgrims, they remain an impersonal 'they'. The often-used words, 'as they say', when referring to myths and stories, do nothing to counter this feeling. Though Eck has no doubt been able to connect with many pilgrims on her travels, these voices are not heard. Considering the focus of the book, this is perhaps not surprising. However, one cannot help but wonder who the woman in white, or the man in the river, whom Eck describes, are. Still, *India: A Sacred Geography* is a fascinating journey for anyone with an interest in spatiality and religion, or India.

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