



Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion

Jeffrey J. Kripal

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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*

Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion Details

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From Reader Review Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion for online ebook

Jim Parker says

For anyone wanting to understand how the human potential movement in this country began this is essential reading. Besides many fascinating stories the people involved become alive and are fascinating in their own right.

Steve Wiggins says

A rare book that made me wish I had been in the right time and place to experience Esalen in its heyday. For a fuller review, see Sects and Violence in the Ancient World.

Nancy Wilson says

Was hard getting started but a book full of very important people who are involved in the evolution and innovative spiritual, intellectual pursuits of America and Beyond. A great historical perspective on the influences and outreach this school had and hopefully still has.

Mtrrim says

Not only a history of Esalen, but a history of the Human Potential movement at the same time. So interesting.

lilly says

Fascinating for bay area history buffs and dedicated counterculture history buffs, but very very thorough and long. Kripal is obviously quite taken with Esalen so he doesn't get into critical gender readings at all, despite the proliferation of hot waitresses braless under fishnet shirts in the Esalen 1970s.

Sara Gray says

I really enjoyed this engaging and comprehensive history of the founders of Esalen and the literary, psychological, and cultural discourses that sprung up around the Institute. I could have done without the long chapters going through founder Michael Murphy's speculative fiction...but other than that, Kripal presented lots of great food for thought regarding Tantra, American spirituality, and much else. The bibliography alone is a wealth of wonderful reference material.

Elyssa says

I read about 100 pages of this book and then skimmed the rest. The topic of Esalen was interesting to me because I am interested in mysticism and personal development without religious dogma. Unfortunately, this book was challenging for me. It felt like a textbook or a very long-winded dissertation. I wish it had flowed more and that the author did some editing. I did gain some new insights, but I hope that I can find a more readable book about this topic.

Alan says

Interesting chronological walk through of Esalen. Lots of familiar names like Al Huang, Capra, Perls, Rolf, George Leonard, Maslow, Gia Fu Feng, along with Michael Murphy at the center.

What went on at Esalen certainly influenced me in the 70s, although I never went there or identified these streams with a particular place.

The book didn't give me a coherent idea of the place or its meaning. It rekindled some interest, but reinforced some scepticism about the woo-hoo nature of conference people and striving after magic and entry into psychic realms and immortality, along with lots of wild sex and drugs.

I will revisit some of Murphy's books, and see what I can make of them.

John says

I liked the early chapters on the intellectual and spiritual-experiential influences and history of the founding and early years of Esalen. Some of the short biographies of principal figures in the development of Esalen are interesting. But the book is too long, repetitive, and becomes too much of a series of book summaries and reports of material produced by Esalen teachers and characters. The author is too much in love with his own conceptual schema, to the detriment of a more concrete, engaging - and likely shorter! - history of the place.

Dan says

I have a longstanding interest in the human potential movement, where Esalen stands as a kind of fulcrum between its origins in the first decades of the 20th century and its contemporary ubiquity. I picked up this book and went straight for its treatment of Terence McKenna, my late great friend and colleague, who was a major figure at Esalen for more than 15 years. Terence seems almost forgotten these days, so I was very happy to see that Kripal treats him with the weight and levity with which Terence deserves to be remembered. Kripal strikes a balance that few contemporary critics of Terence seem to reach, and it gives me confidence that this book is a worthy history of a very special place.

Santiago Villaveces says

Amazing intellectual history of Big Sur's Esalen. Well rounded and comprehensive with details ranging from founders' tensions and dreams to lifelong pursuits, from inner explorations to world diplomacy.

Lori Korleski says

I enjoyed many of the stories, but the narrative didn't hang together very well. And the goofs, well, for instance, Gov. George Brown, and putting the Watts Riots in 1963. I'm sure there are better books about this place out there.

James says

I gave it four stars because it's the most thorough history yet published on this crossroads of experimental education. John Heider's *Human Potential Papers* is a fascinating look in the the early Esalen, but not yet published.

Jeannette says

It took me three renewals of checking out this book in order to get through half of it. The writer plods through detail making reading like slogging through a morass of places, times, individuals and concepts. I wanted to read the history of Esalen the Institute and place because I am a product of the 1960's and that is when Esalen started. I actually visited it when it was just getting started because I'd moved to work and live in Big Sur. I was somewhat sad that a bunch of "wierdos" had taken over Big Sur Hot Springs and turned it into a "spiritual" development spa.

The book just didn't allow me the reader to perceive what was really happening during Esalen's formation and further development.. The author dives too deeply into personalities and jumps all over the place in time and space so it is utterly confusing. Both the scope and focus are lost in the jumble. Alas, I ended up having to look up Esalen on Wikipedia to get a more concise feel for what the place and movement was all about. Apologies to Mr. Kripal for all the work he put in trying to cover too much history with too little insight and summary.

Rod White says

I have learned so much from this book this year! I read it rather exhaustively after I happened upon it while researching something else. It was like a small treasure of revelation about how religion has been developing in the United States. What I have always been running into was given definition. Kripal gives sympathetic definition to the "religion of no religion" of Emerson, Whitman, and the hippies of Big Sur that is

intrinsically American, capitalist and democratic yet laced with Asian (Tantric), evolutionary, psychic, psychological and gnostic influences. Esalen is a microcosm of what has been happening with "spirituality" since the 50's. This book reveals that it has also been an instigator of the search for the superhuman.
