



Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion

By 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*



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- Sales Rank: #1332682 in Books
- Published on: 2007-04-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.80" w x 6.00" l, 2.39 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 594 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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.)

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Review

"This is it: the definitive history of the original American human potential center and the people who first envisioned it and made it work. A truly astonishing story of spiritual inspiration, global vision, political adventure, and delightful humor, and just at the right time. A genuinely hopeful vision of what we yet could be in the mirror of what we have been. Stunning."

(Deepak Chopra)

"In this engaging book, Jeffrey Kripal assesses one of the world's most engaging places, and finds in Esalen a perfect metaphor for America's unique creed of science and religion. Here—literally on the western edge of the North American continent—the European enlightenment meets Asian spirituality, Einstein confronts Walt Whitman, Calvinism takes on mysticism, and secularism encounters the divine. It's a wild ride, filled with ironies and tensions, but it's also America at the start of the twenty-first century, and perhaps the future of the world."

(Robert B. Reich)

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(*Publishers Weekly*)

"In this history of the institute, readers will take a spellbinding journey through art, pop psychology, Tantric sex, Cold War physics, psychedelic drugs, and, of course, religion. Kripal becomes a raconteur of stories involving a cast of characters—from folk singer Joan Baez and Gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson to gay bathers, Hell's Angels, and others attracted to the coast of California's Big Sur country. Kripal explains the institute's mixing of popular and political culture with the transformative spiritual practices of humanistic

alternative education; its embodiment of East/West philosophies and dedication to the continual exploration of human potential. Upon finishing this book, readers will feel compelled to visit this remarkable place, where all are accepted.”—*Library Journal*
(*Library Journal*)

"An impressive new book ... [Esalen] is, by many accounts, the birthplace of the human potential movement, which advocates the raising of spiritual consciousness, human functioning, mystical awareness, and interpersonal connection. [Kripal] has written the definitive intellectual history of the ideas behind the institute."—Don Lattin, *San Francisco Chronicle*
(Don Lattin *San Francisco Chronicle*)

"Esalen Institute is a combination alt-think tank, academic community and sensual retreat perched on the Pacific-facing cliffs of Big Sur, California. Its thinkers formed the leading edge of American culture for decades. Here was ground zero of the 1960s social revolution: the sweaty hot-tub commingling of free love, tantric yoga, Buddhist meditation and Gestalt therapy—as well as the academy for the propagation of the human-potential movement. Outlaw all-stars like Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg and Hunter S. Thompson felt the pull of the place. Now scholar Jeffrey 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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(*Atlantic Monthly*)

"This history of the Esalen Institute describes how the Big Sur hot springs became a crucible for a brand of secular metaphysics known as 'the religion of no religion.' Founded in the early 1960s, Esalen drew eccentrics and artists like Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, Henry Miller, and Joan Baez, and soon became a sort of sybaritic commune, where life consisted, according to Kripal, of 'sodomy in the baths, glossolalia in the lodge, fistfights in the parking lot, folk music in the cabins, and meditation in the Big House.' ".—*New Yorker*
(*New Yorker*)

"Although several memoirs by participants and popular histories of Esalen and its creative role in American culture are available, this book is nothing less than the gold standard. Essential."
(*Choice*)

"I savored every page of this exquisitely crafted book. . . . Wisely, Kripal--having given the fairest and most comprehensive account of the Esalen story we will probably ever see--does not make any judgment."
(Harvey Cox *The Sixties*)

"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. . . . A well-crafted chronicle that will be of great interest to anybody curious about the emergence of the counterculture and of contemporary 'alternative' religion."

(Olav Hammer *History of Religions*)

About the Author

Jeffrey J. Kripal is the J. Newton Rayzor Professor in and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University. He is the author of *Kali's Child*; *Roads of Excess*, *Palaces of Wisdom*; and *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*, each published by the University of Chicago Press.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Alexander Macdougall:

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