

2015

Book Review: *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism*

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Recommended Citation

Forsthefel, Thomas A. (2015) "Book Review: *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 28, Article 17.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1616>

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***Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism* Edited by Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013, xi + 234 pages.**

THIS rich collection of essays extends and develops what Cynthia Ann Humes and I did in our volume published now ten years ago, *Gurus in America* (State University of New York). Our book considered the cultural and philosophical negotiations that obtained in the migration of Hindu ritual and conceptual systems in and through the migration of Indian gurus—or their ideas (e.g., Ramana Maharshi) or cult (e.g., Sai Baba)—to America. We spoke of this as a second wave—roughly beginning in the 1960s—of the Hindu guru phenomenon in America, the first begun with Swami Vivekananda’s virtuoso performance at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. In effect, our use of gurus was a lens by which we examined religious and cultural change, and this we did by examining the various adaptations and interfaces that occurred in the mission of Indian gurus and their (re-) constructions of Hinduism. Jeffrey Kripal’s essay in that book—on the American born guru Adi Da (Franklin Jones)—effectively anticipated Gleig’s and William’s book.

Their volume addresses not a third wave of *Indian* gurus in America, but a new generation of *Hindu* gurus in America, that is, American (and white) spiritual seekers and adepts, some of whom are spiritual descendants of the second wave of gurus.

The apt metaphor, here, is less that of water and waves, but the effective transplantation, fertilization, and grounding that occurs in soil. The gurus examined here are thus ‘homegrown’; all, except for one, were born in America. They very much represent an eclectic mix including ethnic whites, females as well as males, former Jews, Christians, and hippies. One Indian, Amrit Desai, is featured, largely because of the ‘homegrown’ nature of the center he founded, Kripalu, which has been reinvented as an eclectic center for spiritual development following Desai’s sex scandal and subsequent resignation.

Breaking new and fascinating ground, some of the issues and concerns of this book are nevertheless shared with our earlier collection. For example, what precisely happens—sociologically and philosophically—when a non-Indian American guru adopts and adapts—or appropriates—Hindu concepts and practices? What interpretive changes are made to a host of traditional Hindu philosophies—and for which reasons were they made? How do American sensibilities—such as egalitarianism and a resistance to hierarchy—impact an ‘American’ Hinduism? How do these sensibilities challenge or contest traditional patterns of leadership? And how do

traditional Hindus react or respond to innovations in leadership or substance? (Sometimes not well, at least in the case of Sivaya Subramuniyaswami).

The book is fascinating with its detailed accounts of the personal histories of the featured gurus (a curious number of whom had—or reportedly had—‘mystical’ experiences as very young children) and the manner by which they absorb, adopt, and adapt Hindu notions and lineages. Intriguingly, as these American Hindu ‘children’, as it were, ‘grew up’, not infrequently they rebelled against their ‘parents’, i.e., their former guru masters, sometimes setting a course of estrangement which only further maximized or stretched their particular—and sometimes peculiar—interpretations of Hinduism, sometimes to the understandable consternation of traditional Indian Hindus. So, for example, Swami Rudrananda (Albert Rudolf) severed ties with Muktananda and Kripalu with Desai; ‘Master Charles’ (formerly Swami Vivekananda) also becomes distanced from Muktananda in significant ways, as does Swami Kirtanananda (Keith Ham) from Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKON. Indeed—and not un-coincidentally—some of the most striking innovations in their expressions of Hinduism comes from these American gurus who part ways with their former masters.

One of the most intriguing accounts is that of Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Richard

Hansen), an American white male who over many and complicated years of development—often carefully represented in creative biographies, as Richard Mann details—became recognized by many Hindus as an authentic and orthodox voice within Hinduism. But this was achieved only with considerable difficulty, including meeting sustained challenges to his authority by Tamil Hindus, first, on the basis of linguistic limitations (S.S. could not read Tamil) and second, owing to ‘unacceptable’ theological innovation (S.S. emphasized a monistic theism in Saiva Siddhanta, which traditionally favors a theistic and devotional dualism). Weathering those challenges, Subramuniyaswami eventually won an elevated stature and prestige as a Hindu ‘world teacher’, indeed, even being endorsed by the VHP as “the Hindu Voice of the Century.” Thus, what began, in his youth, as a flirtation with Theosophy and American metaphysical traditions blossomed into a fully developed socially conservative and orthodox expression of Hinduism.

What is particularly fascinating about the book—and, I hope, in our earlier study—is the implied or explicit engagement of what counts as ‘Hinduism’. Indeed, what emerges in such studies finally is the rejection of monolithic versions of Hinduism, just as there is no ‘one size fits all’ version of Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. This may be dismaying to

those who prefer tight boundaries and a measure of control, whether doctrinal or ideological. But, as the adage goes, the cat is out of the bag. The empirical record testifies to the fact that religions typically change—just as everything else changes—under specific conditions, including, here, historical and social conditions. The beauty of Gleig’s and Williamson’s book is its careful and detailed accounting of that

phenomenon as Hinduism, after washing across the shores of America with earlier gurus, took root and grew in specific and innovative ways under the charisma and creativity of America’s own homegrown gurus.

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The Truth Within: A History of Inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism Gavin Flood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xviii + 310 pages.

A sense of religious inwardness persists, even after such philosophical game-changers as the deconstruction of the privileged subject and the demise of cosmology. What can we make of this persistent, maybe even perennial, inwardness? In his careful study of the medieval religions of Europe and South Asia, Gavin Flood uncovers collective, cosmological senses of inwardness and inquires about their implications for religious studies today.

In this ambitious book, Flood’s reach is thrillingly wide: three world religions—Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, throughout the Middle Ages, across Europe and South Asia. After surveying the concept of the truth within in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity in Part I, Part II draws on part I to develop a theory of religious inwardness while addressing critiques that emerge.

The book examines the metaphor of interiority and explores the relation of interior truth to ideas of the self. Flood’s previous book,

The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition (2004) explored how asceticism functions to intensify subjectivity while decreasing individuality; that is, the practitioner becomes embedded more deeply in the cosmos and in religious history. The intensification of subjectivity in the ascetic self, while being an erosion of individuality, is not thereby a depersonalization. He refines these ideas further in *The Truth Within* when he trenchantly names the practices and traditions of inwardness a “transcendence of restriction” (193). Inwardness as a shared subjectivity thus differs from individualism “where individualism is a kind of social value that emphasizes the particular carrier of the ‘I’ as self-assertion against the social group” (194). He claims that human subjectivity is cultivated in all three religions through their respective spiritual practices, but he distinguishes this subjectivity from “the kind of private, romantic inwardness we are familiar with in late