

Book Reviews: *Esalen. America and the Religion of No Religion* by Jeffrey J. Kripal & *Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* by Whitley Strieber & Jeffrey J. Kripal

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Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen. America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008), 575 Pages, \$20.00.

Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Tarcher, Penguin, 2016), 384 Pages, \$28.00.

With *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* Jeffrey Kripal (J. Newton Rayzor professor of religion at Rice University) has crafted an intellectually engaging story of the most famous institute of alternative culture in the world. Surrounded by an air of mystery and an aura of mysticism, Esalen Center has too often been branded a New Age phenomenon. The fruit of Kripal's passionate yet accurate work on Esalen's amazing history is his ability to overcome such a limited understanding and to propose a legitimate alternative summary. Esalen, according to Kripal, is not only a scenic place in California's Big Sur region, but an exciting intellectual adventure that apparently bends toward the emerging movement of human potential, a bridge between East and West. It is also the birthplace of a completely new understanding of Christianity and its limits, the Utopian merger of science and mysticism, and the all-encompassing gateway to the unconventional alternative spirituality. More importantly, Esalen is an audacious and visionary attempt to transcend the traditional boundaries between and within religions and finally achieve the "Religion of No Religion," a post denominational harbor where the exhausted souls of the post-modern West can finally rest.

Kripal has written an intellectually engaging and intriguing narrative about the famous institute of alternative culture. After introducing the book in Chapter One and describing the first steps of the enterprise (in Chapters Two and Three), Kripal's book moves in Chapter Four to the core of the story: the legendary encounter between Esalen and the American counterculture, then on to the less well known involvement of Esalen in the Cold War (see Chapter Five). Finally, the book provides reminders of Esalen's most recent achievements: articulating the religion of no religion (Chapter Six) and the very latest developments (Chapter Seven).

While the chapter on the history of Esalen in the Sixties is brilliantly written, the chapter fails to add any new insight to an already well documented era, it is definitively revelatory the chapter on Esalen's engagement in the Cold War (1970-85). The entire cosmology of Esalen is at work: spirits and aliens, science and religion, human potential and supernatural, Asian meditation and Western consciousness. It is Kripal's main point that Esalen played an important role in the Cold War, and that the role ultimately demonstrated the very spirit of Esalen. From the Esalen perspective, the Cold War was like the Dark Ages, an era of undisciplined rationality and controlled intuition. Kripal's narrative changes from the solar, amicable, delicate hippie tone and atmosphere of the counterculture to the obscurity and villainy of the gothic romance. Spies and scientists, mystics and gurus are the unexpected soldiers of a war with no limits or boundaries: the sky, the natural, the artificial, the supernatural, the human, the self, the universe. Any metaphysical territory, psychic weapon, scientific theory, and spiritual insights are ethically justified in order to achieve the final victory against the Soviet Union. It is difficult to escape the irony: Esalen moved from a frontal confrontation against the American spiritual-industrial complex in the Sixties to an unmistakable alliance, a decade later, with the very same complex in order to win the Cold War.

The religious history scholar will delight in this short history of an educational and experiential institute with all the ingredients of a cosmic saga. However, while the story is engaging and entertaining, topics are not investigated in depth. Kripal makes this point: "the history of Esalen can be read as an American moment in a much broader Tantric transmission from Asia to the West," yet it is difficult to find in the book a systematic and satisfying exploration of this point.¹ Instead, Kripal adopts a very specific narrative, that is, a mixture of personal account and classic historiography where the first-person narrative frequently blurs the boundaries between subject and object, intentionally playing on the confusion between author, the narrated, and a "narrating I" belonging to no one. It is a masterful and epic style that makes Kripal's work simply unforgettable.

With *Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* Jeffrey Kripal brings the religion of no religion outside Esalen, framing the inexplicable as the new normal. To put it differently, those "impossible" things that traditionally belong to the reign of religion, from extra-dimensional beings to bilocation to bumps in the night, do not belong to religion at all: rather, they are a part of our reality of life. In other words, we look at reality in the wrong way. Our materialistic view allocates the physical to nature and the rest to the supernatural. Again, it is our materialist view that creates the illusion of a dualistic epistemology. When we recognize that reality not materialistic or spiritual, but rather materialistic *and* spiritual, a consciousness reality in which the thing and the thought stand together, we become immunized from skepticism. In this regard, Kripal provides an outstanding outline of materialists' tactics for dismissing paranormal claims. I will quote this passage at length (emphasis Kripal's):

¹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen. America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 18.

At the end of the day, though, most of these objections boil down to a simple (and simplistic) attempt *to control what is on the table* so that the only permissible evidence left there is evidence that supports the materialist assumptions.²

In his attempt to change the filters through which we view reality, Kripal offers a cohesive reframing of the “pantheon of the unknown” through the lens of the natural world. He in turn reshapes our view of the “natural world” from the perspective of the unknown. He delivers a message that is at once simple and unsettling: the supernatural belongs to the order of nature. Of course, this statement aims to alter both sides of the equation. No longer does the supernatural belong to a separate sphere of reality, but the opposite is true: the unknown and the mythical, the mystical and paranormal, belong to this world—they are real. The supernatural is real. However, no longer nature is the inert substance that the scientific mindset dares to explore. This natural world is immeasurably weirder, more wonderful, and probably more populated than we have so far imagined with our current scientific categories. In this regard, Kripal suggests “to embrace science in a new way,” for a new ontological vision requires a better epistemology.³

For this book, Kripal teamed up with Whitley Strieber, one of the best-known UFOs contactees and best-selling author of *Communion*, a 1987 book that brought the subject of alien contact to the center of public attention. Kripal and Strieber write in alternating chapters, nine chapters each, each in the first-person singular. Strieber describes some of his experiences in one chapter, and in the next Kripal provides a scholarly addendum, that is, Kripal intellectualizes the unknown phenomena.

The eighteen chapters are held together as a cohesive statement by the two authors working in tandem, intertwining their unique perspectives, experiences, and educational backgrounds. What bring together the UFO contactee and the religion historian is the assumption that, in the end, UFO phenomena and mysticism are the same thing. Kripal synthesizes the point, claiming that the UFO phenomenon has something to do with the *soma pneumatikon* (spiritual body) mentioned by Paul the apostle (1 Corinthians 15:45-49). The general point is that those things which are traditionally located within the reign of alien literature, from the sinister encounters with nonhuman entities to medically mystifying, non-removable ear implants, would be better located in the reign of the spiritual experience.

This book is a thought-provoking reconceptualization of traditional notions of nature and the supernatural events.

² Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Tarcher, Penguin, 2016), p. 15.

³ Strieber and Kripal, *Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained*, p. 1.