

Question authority: A study of power

THE GURU PAPERS: Masks of Authoritarian Power By Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad

The Guru Papers is a thorough, wide-ranging analysis of the way power has historically been maintained among the people of a society.

Initially one is taken in, however, not so much with the content of *The Guru Papers* as by its ambition: it purports to be no less than a diagnosis of what's wrong with the world and how, not merely to fix it, but to save it.

Though not utterly irreconcilable with popular wisdom, *The Guru Papers* may be a bit much for many people to swallow – certainly too much for those unwilling to think. But its thesis is elegant and nearly unlimited in its ramifications.

For those interested in history, in understanding how people control each other, or merely in bridging the gap between the personal and the political, this is a train of thought well worth pursuing. Alstad and Kramer feel it just might make all the difference.

Power, the authors claim, is a basic aspect of human relations, and hierarchies are necessary tools for getting things done with power. Specifically authoritarian hierarchies, however, the authors define as hierarchies which exist only to perpetuate themselves, for the good of those in power and to the detriment of humanity. Alstad and Kramer argue that it is humanity's investment in anachronistic authoritarian hierarchies which has brought the species, and indeed whole ecosystems, to the brink of self-destruction.

In the past, the authors point out, when the success of a society depended overwhelmingly on the accumulation of resources, such authoritarianism did not threaten the survival of the species. At present, however, it is management and distribution of these resources which has become critically important.

This is precisely where humanity is failing most deci-

sively, according to Alstad and Kramer.

The authors go on to demonstrate their conviction that the rejection of authoritarian hierarchies necessarily entails a "paradigm shift," because authoritarian assumptions are so deeply embedded in the human psyche.

They show that authoritarianism manifests itself at the most personal, even in the lives of the most well-intentioned. Authoritarianism is not merely a political phenomenon: it's part of the way we think.

The clearest, least veiled examples of authoritarianism, according to the writers, occur in the very close relationship between gurus and their disciples. A guru is defined as one to whom one submits absolutely, whether the submission takes place in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism or a cult hierarchy.

While the first half of the book analyzes these relationships in detail, emphasizing their common flaws, the second half applies these observations to fundamentalism, satanism, addiction and twelve-step programs and unconditional love.

Here is where the reader's work really pays off. Having meticulously assembled their theoretical arsenal, Alstad and Kramer proceed to take it after everyone in sight.

They take no prisoners, applying authoritarianism to many concepts and practices one generally tends to think of as benign.

The Guru Papers, though hopeful, does not offer easy solutions to the authoritarian dilemma. Based on a relatively simple idea, it does not settle for the usual, easy scapegoats.

If there is a traditional whipping boy which gets away in this book, it could only be history. While by no means sanctioning the authoritarian hierarchies of the past, Alstad and Kramer refuse to look at the past and be horrified by atrocities. Their concern is to pass judgment on the present, which can be altered, and to reserve their horror for a present which may not be able to escape its past quickly enough. □

– Joel Sundseth

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