

AUTHORITY & ABUSE

BY GREG LAND

The Guru Papers:

Masks of Authoritarian Power

by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad

There are moments when the tide of events seem to culminate in a new awareness, spawning unique modes of thought; the Enlightenment, for instance, which sought to reconcile the fragmented Christianity of Renaissance Europe with a rediscovered zeal for reason and natural law. Such turning points in mass consciousness come neither easily nor quickly – but, according to the authors of *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, the planet is currently facing a dire confrontation between entrenched, millennia-old structures of power and an urgent need to construct methods of dealing with technological and environmental crises.

The situation is urgent, say Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad, who have undertaken the monumental task of reforming the very basis of civilization: power, authority which exists solely to perpetuate that power, and the religious, political and social hierarchies by which such power manifests and maintains itself.

Sound thick? Oddly, it's not. Half of this 385-page book deals with the relationship between any sort of seemingly infallible "leader" – guru is the term selected here, but it can apply to any priest, shaman, roshi, holy man, whatever – to whom others surrender their own will in return for the certainty and security of unquestioning discipleship. Such relationships are not only virtually certain to corrupt both leader and led, say the authors; these relationships are similarly present in the authoritarian hierarchies which rule our planet, and threaten to destroy it.

Chief among those structures is religion, both that of the West and of the East.

"The cultural taboo against criticizing religion exists partially because religion as looked upon, with good reason, as being beyond reason," say the authors. "In our view, the sacred is formally made sacred precisely to protect it from criticism, because it cannot stand on its own. Tolerance needs to be redefined to encourage discourse that can question the validity and viability of any belief based upon its impact on the world. This is especially needed when the stakes are high. We believe the stakes could not be higher."

Citing the current turmoil around the globe, the collapse of communism, a dramatic upswing in religious fundamentalism, sectarian violence and a growing propensity in the West to seek solace and shelter in Eastern religions, mysticism, occultism and the jumble of technology, superstition, scientific innovation and Medieval mumbo-jumbo loosely bagged up as "New Age," Kramer and Alstad paint a compelling portrait of a species confused and polarized between a rigid adherence to outmoded concepts and an obvious need to change those concepts in order to survive.

"This is occurring because the old order is unraveling, bringing violence, disorder and fear. Out of fear, if people are conditioned to not trust themselves, they will give away what power they have to those they think can protect them. The problem is that in doing so, one is no longer protected from one's protectors. The lessons of history unequivocally show this leads to corrupt, power-driven hierarchies that care little about the well-being of people."

But the machinations and abuse (conscious of otherwise) of authority figures are only half the story. After addressing these aspects (including a chapter on People's Temple founder Jim Jones; the book was finished just before the David Koresh Waco fiasco, which would have fit perfectly into this paradigm on both the part of Koresh and the feds who destroyed his compound), the two venture into somewhat more tenuous ground, ap-

plying their theories of authority to such diverse areas as addiction, love, satanism and mysticism, among others. While their conjectures are certain to step on the toes of nearly every sacred cow at some point, they are steadfast and unapologetic. One person's rubric is another's heresy.

"Supposedly one can be addicted to love, food, sex, shopping, gambling, power, exercise, work, crime, and even to needing to nurture addicted or dependent people ("co-dependency"). In a world engaged in dangerously dysfunctional behavior around such basic and not subtle issues as ecology, overpopulation, allocation of resources, etc., it is no wonder."

Given the authors' backgrounds – Alstad is a Yale PhD. who formulated the first Women's Studies course for that institution as well as Duke University, and Kramer is a scholar of psychology and philosophy, as well as various types of yoga, and author of *The Passionate Mind* – one might expect their work to be ponderous and laden with the arcane vernacular we lay people term "psychobabble," but such is not the case. Clearly written and cross-referenced throughout, *The Guru Papers* is a surprisingly quick read once the reader has braved the formidable "Preface and Map of the Book."

For those of us who frequently look around and feel that something is basically awry with the entire system, this work offers both affirmation and optimism. If nothing else, it at least postulates on *why* things are in such a mess, and how our own stubborn grasp of an ideology allows us to confidently lay waste the very underpinnings of that ideology.

The more repressive a society is, the more there is a bottled-up aggression that needs socially acceptable outlets," say the writers. "War, racism, wife- and child-beating, and socially sanctioned vengeance are examples of traditional outlets. The willingness to protect a belief at all costs has been one of the great sources of violence..."

"Anything designated as evil – the rule breakers, the infidel, the evil empire – all can be treated outside the rule in the name of protecting the rules." ■