

San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday Book Review
November 7, 1993

THE GURU PAPERS:

Masks of Authoritarian Power

By Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad
North Atlantic Books, 385 pages

REVIEWED BY KEITH THOMPSON

Why people give up power and why others abuse it are two of the important questions asked by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad in *The Guru Papers*, easily the most comprehensive, erudite and timely book in print to explore authoritarianism in religion, institutions, power, the family, intimacy and sexual relations, and personal problems such as addiction.

“We are interested in unmasking the more hidden and pervasive mechanisms of authoritarian control that work by being implanted in the mentalities, beliefs, emotions and aspirations of even modern people via ideologies that breed self-mistrust,” they write. “Once people do not trust themselves, they are subject to easy manipulation,” especially at pivotal points in history when “the foundations of social cohesion break down.”

Now is such a time, the authors contend, analyzing what they call “guru ploys,” “the seductions of surrender,” sexual manipulation, messianic proselytizing, paranoia and apocalypse, as well as specific gurus, from Jim Jones to the “disembodied authority” of spiritual channelers.

The strength of *The Guru Papers* is its keen appreciation of developmental and evolutionary processes. The authors argue persuasively that any system of values that places tradition and the past above the imperative to question the present is destined to become increasingly lethal.

A prerequisite for real change involves moving beyond the artificial duality of either/or thinking, which deceives us into assuming we can construct rules for behavior, learned by rote and followed mechanically. Only by moving beyond the perennial infantilism of expecting a guru or savior to “make things right...telling the rest of us what life is about and how to lead it,” the authors declare, can we get to the crucial task of building “a future that values keeping this planet habitable for its interwoven and interdependent forms of life.” ■

Keith Thompson is the author of *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination*.