

WHOLE EARTH REVIEW
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The Guru Papers

Since the Beattles made TM hip, we've seen many gurus come and go, and some have stayed. Scandals around sex, money, and child abuse abound in cult life, and yet apparently smart people still get suckered into guru-led cults. In **The Guru Papers** Kramer and Alstad give a crystal-clear analysis of the authoritarian nature of most spiritual guru-led cults, going deeply into the inherent paradoxes in much of the world's religions along the way. Swiping at monotheism, the "one-sidedness of oneness," and the impossibility of "create your own reality," they explain with blistering clarity why we get seduced the way we do, and how our inheritance of patriarchal and authoritarian organizational structures allows cults to take away our own integrity.

Kramer and Alstad are particularly harsh on gurus themselves and their capacity for abuse of their disciples' willingness to develop spiritually. I found this harshness refreshing — spiritual leaders are too often allowed to perpetrate abuse out of a confusion of values and a failure to internalize authority on the part of their followers. A real spiritual teacher helps you find the guru inside yourself, and such a teacher may not look like a guru at all. It's time we collectively woke up to the spirit within us and stopped projecting it outside.

—Lara Owen

The Guru Papers

(Masks of Authoritarian Power)

Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad.

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The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power

By Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

In the midst of being daily reminded in the newspaper of the horrifying exploits of the religious right, and with fundamentalisms of every stripe wreaking havoc around the globe, it is a relief to see a critical assessment of authoritarian religious systems. *The Guru Papers* is a very important – and very odd – book that deserves to be noticed. In it, authors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad review the authoritarian system of power in all phases of its cycle of psychological, and sometimes physical, violence.

The authors discuss the attraction of authoritarianism in a troubled world, and the temptation of surrendering one's will to the will of one who is deemed wiser by their reputation or religio-political position. "Once people do not trust themselves," say the authors, "they are subject to easy manipulation." Authoritarian systems typically instill this mistrust in a person in early childhood, and use this psychological edge to their own advantage for the rest of the individual's life. The authors posit that by "unmasking" the intentions of authority, we can begin to break free of its unconscious hold on our lives that so often ends in despair and addiction.

Though applicable to authoritarian systems of all types, the "guru" title reflects the authors' predominantly Hindu orientation. The book is odd in that, appropriately, the authors appeal to no outside authority, but only make reference to other chapters of itself and to the larger project of which *The Guru Papers* is a part. Simply and elegantly written, I predict that this will prove to be one of the most helpful books on psychological oppression of the decade. ■