

# Book Review

## *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*

by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad  
385 pages  
North Atlantic Books/Frog, Ltd.

### by Kathy Glass

Don't let the title fool you into thinking the book is mainly about gurus. A more apt title would be *Masks of Power* as the book has great relevance for a secular audience as well as those interested in Eastern religion.

*The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* goes far beyond an analysis of power structures in religious cults to decode authoritarianism in its more subtle and pervasive forms – in values, ideologies, religions, love, and daily life. In fact, this is where it all gets interesting – and very close to home.

*The Guru Papers* is a powerful and important book with the potential to shift readers' minds in a deep way. Authors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad are onto something big – possibly even the root of human error. This new collection of essays takes the guru/disciple relationship as a starting point for unraveling the thread of authoritarianism as it is interwoven and disguised in most arenas of human interaction. Though extreme, the guru model illustrates well the workings of authoritarian power that occur less overtly in many other relationships and contexts. Insightful analytical excursions into religion

and morality, dominance and surrender, fundamentalism, satanism, addiction, love, and spirituality ferret out the authoritarianism inherent in much of our cultural (and hence psychological) framework.

In its wide-ranging discussion of historical and contemporary social structures, *The Guru Papers* shows that although authoritarianism may have once held evolving social orders together, it has become a key factor in social disintegration today. This may be easier to observe in political systems and other institutions (particularly those blatant violators of human rights) than in the worldviews, values, and conditioned responses we each live so closely with.

Kramer and Alstad are relentless in their mission to “unmask” authoritarianism in all its various guises. The book's tone is urgent, because they feel the future of humanity is in question. There's no more time to bounce from one presumed authority to another looking for answers. On every level – personal, familial, institutional – there is breakdown and uncertainty as to the validity of old ways of thought and action. The authors attempt to show that on all these levels of societal malfunction, authoritarianism supports and is at the core of the old way, and it impedes the emergence of new ways to handle problems and structure experience. One simply cannot solve problems from within the old framework that created them, and this includes our growing ecological crisis.

The good news is that the hu-

man species isn't inherently inept or doomed to extinction. Instead, our problems are the product of authoritarian conditioning at the foundation of our morality and thus our civilization. When we see this clearly in ourselves, we can be liberated from it. This process of seeing and moving away from the influence of authoritarian power structures may hold the key to our survival.

Broad critiques of modern human society (its problems and moral underpinnings) are commonplace. We all know religious issues are unresolved and that justice does not prevail. So many problems can be traced to abuse of authority. *The Guru Papers* differs from the usual dismal and impersonal litany not only in its basic optimism that we can overcome our collective troubles, but in its innovative examination of the “inner authoritarian” – the mechanism of control within each of us that enforces morals and guides behavior. The inner authoritarian is programmed by external authorities and operates from the beliefs and ideologies we are exposed to. When we fail to ever question what we've adopted from these authorities, we allow others to control us.

Kramer and Alstad maintain that we must rely on individual judgment and experience, and that authority and hierarchy need not be authoritarian. We can utilize teachers but shouldn't let them become unchallengeable authorities in our life. Such an attitude toward authorities cuts off true learning because we get involved

with belief. Yet we are deeply conditioned to look for these authorities and accept secondhand sources for our knowledge.

Chapters on addiction and love present powerful evidence of insidious authoritarian values and ideologies in the subtle ways we control ourselves and those closest to us. Examination of the inner authoritarian provides fresh insight into why people become addicted to substances, to shopping, to emotional surrender, to anything. In essence, we have internalized a split between good and bad as defined by authoritarian power in church, state and family, and many of our morals and ideals are simply unlivable, say the authors. I found this analysis extremely valuable in perceiving the subconscious ways I push myself to achieve yet limit my growth. In the gap between who I am and the image I have of what I should be, authoritarian power structures at the foundation of human culture and society are making decisions for me.

The age-old struggle to control the hearts and minds of people is heating up in the '90s. In *The Guru Papers*, this conflict is dubbed “the Morals Wars” – it is the current friction between fundamentalist values and an emerging new paradigm (which is still unclear in its outline and fit). It is on the issue of morality and the crying need for a basic change in consciousness that our future as a species depends. *The Guru Papers* maintains that rooting out authoritarianism in society and oneself is the creative frontier and source of hope. The challenges of today will not be met out of the past, but with creativity, with new responses, with true evolution.

Sounds great, but if I'm not looking to the past or to established authorities and ways of being, and if many of my “own” values are suspect, what

am I to do? While the authors are successful in making authoritarianism the villain, it's not so clear what will take its place. This is precisely the nature of the challenge to evolve, to move beyond one's conditioning, to see for oneself what is. The response to this challenge is a personal matter for every human in confrontation with his or her self. The implications of this lead off into the esoteric realm of awareness, but this territory is only hinted at, not covered in *The Guru Papers*. (One might refer to Joel Kramer's book. *The Passionate Mind: A Manual for Living Creatively with Oneself*, [North Atlantic Books] which offers a non-authoritarian methodology for self-exploration and living.)

Because there is nothing else tangible to grasp, it is difficult to let go of authority (either being one or submitting to one – all our conditioned responses). In this sense, *The Guru Papers* is a frustrating read. I want the authors to give me answers if they are to negate what I know, to essentially become another authority for me. Or I react defensively to certain “unmaskings” of authoritarianism in structures I hold dear, such as Buddhism, my intimate relationship, my habits and my ego. The authors' ongoing denouncement of authoritarianism everywhere might make some readers think they are attempting to seize authority themselves. Perhaps resisting their “authority” is a healthy response – unless it's just another way of hearing what we want to hear and avoiding the deep look inside.

For those not necessarily seeking deep change but simply wanting to better understand how religious cults go the way of Jonestown, *The Guru Papers* deals directly with issues of religious freedom, fundamentalist violence, and authoritarian manipula-

tion in the name of religion (i.e., why do people allow themselves to be manipulated?). Except for brief chapters on Jonestown and the Course in Miracles, *The Guru Papers* does not name specific individuals or cults, though hints are dropped that reveal certain identities if you're up on who's who in the guru world. Instead the book questions the very nature of power. In the example of the guru/disciple relationship, we see how far people can go in giving away their power, and in relying on others instead of themselves. *The Guru Papers* encourages us to “grow up” as individuals and as a species, and to quit investing others with the power to make decisions for us.

In the end, *The Guru Papers* doesn't give answers; it points in a direction and the reader must look within to follow up. This isn't real satisfying emotionally if you expect to be handed pat answers. But through the process of reading the book one obtains a framework in which to integrate one's own solutions, and it can actually change the way one views the world, which in itself is movement. In readable, clear language, the authors appeal to our reason and experience and encourage us to understand the deep nature of our problem. They do not quote external sources or authorities but rely on the self-evident nature of their arguments. *The Guru Papers* elegantly and convincingly articulates many of the uncertain feelings and unformed thoughts we all have about what's happening today. If the turmoil of our world is an expression of the inner turmoil of people – confused, self-centered, violent and falling apart – then it's true that the solution won't come from outside. ■

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**Kathy Glass** is a freelance editor and writer based in northern California.