

Introduction

From Wave to Soil

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Some would argue that the term “Hinduism” is woefully inadequate because it enforces a false uniformity on such a wide variety of practices, philosophies, and beliefs. Yet this English word identifying religious propensities of the Indian subcontinent, based on a much earlier Persian designation for the people who lived in the area of the Sindhu (Indus) River, has been in use since the late eighteenth century, and it is likely here to stay. Thus, we somewhat reluctantly continue to use the word “Hinduism.” In this book, however, we move to a new problem: how does one characterize this vast array of beliefs and practices we call Hinduism after it has been removed from its original Indian context and begun to mingle with Western worldviews and customs in America?

Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Humes employ the metaphor of waves in *Gurus in America* to chart the phenomenon of Hinduism in America.¹ The first wave began with nineteenth-century teachers such as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and the second wave is dated to those Indian gurus who came in the wake of the lifting of the Asian immigration act in 1965.² This book might be viewed as a continuation of *Gurus in America*. It examines the challenges and changes that have occurred in response to the earlier two waves of Hindu gurus, as well as the legacies that have been carried forward from them.

In one sense, then, the gurus appearing here consist of what might be thought of as a third wave of gurus. Many of these gurus, for example, are students and successors of second-wave gurus and so historically

represent a third manifestation of Hinduism in America. We employ the concept of a third manifestation, however, primarily as an analytical rather than chronological category in order to signify American-born gurus in Hindu lineages. For example, Helen Crovetto discusses the innovations of American guru Swami Rudrananda, or Rudi, that occur partially in opposition to his own second-wave guru, Muktananda. The American Rudi and the Indian Muktananda were acting in the capacity of guru at the same time. Muktananda's style, however, was decidedly Indian while Rudi's style conveyed his American roots.

After more than a century of experimentation during which Hindu gurus adjusted their teachings to accommodate their American milieu, a new stage in the development of Hinduism in America appears to be taking shape. It can now rightly be called its own tradition—"American Hinduism"—rather than an imported religion. As American-born gurus are increasing in number and their innovative styles reflect a distinctively American cultural and religious ethos, the metaphor of waves washing over the surface breaks down. Given that these gurus, teachers, retreat centers, and organizations come not from across the far shore but are produced from the ground up in America, we prefer to think of them as homegrown.

What happens when we replace "wave" with "soil" or "ground" as our fundamental metaphor? One consequence is the tilting of the balance between Indian and American cultural matrixes. To understand these homegrown gurus, we need to fully comprehend the cultural soil in which they have grown as well as the foreign traditions that have sustained them. Numerous studies have discussed the influence of Western Enlightenment, Romantic, and liberal Protestant discourses on the shaping of Hinduism between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.³ One Western lineage we want to draw particular attention to here is Western esotericism.⁴ Elizabeth De Michelis's groundbreaking study of modern yoga, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, brought attention to the role of modern esotericism in the construction and promotion of Hinduism in the West.⁵ As De Michelis correctly notes, the seminal role of Western esotericism has been consistently overlooked and neglected in the study of modern and contemporary Hinduism.

Similarly, Catherine Albanese has drawn attention to the determinative role that she terms "American metaphysical traditions" has played in the assimilation of Asian religions in America.⁶ In a lineage stretching from colonial New England to the Californian New Age, and incorporating traditions as diverse as Transcendentalism and the Human Potential Movement, Albanese shows how American metaphysical traditions express a distinct American religious ethos that is strongly flavored

by American cultural values such as individualism, pluralism, antiauthoritarianism, egalitarianism, democracy, and pragmatism.

Albanese examines how early American metaphysical traditions such as the Theosophical Society and New Thought produced and promoted what she calls “metaphysical Asia,” the refashioning of Asian religious and philosophical ideas through an American metaphysical filter. She discusses how, in late nineteenth-century America, the imagined otherness of Asia was channeled into culturally available templates liberal Protestantism, evolutionary theory, and metaphysical traditions provided. According to Albanese, Theosophical leader Madame Blavatsky’s 1888 text, *The Secret Doctrine*, was central to providing a reading of Asia that met American metaphysical requirements.⁷ Here Blavatsky weds Asian religious discourse with Western esotericism and Darwinian evolutionary theory to reveal the “secret doctrine” of Asia that, in turn, would provide the vocabulary for a generic metaphysical Asia discourse. In the metaphysical Asia Blavatsky produced, Asian historical particularity was erased and ideas such as karma and reincarnation were offered as universal concepts. Albanese convincingly argues that the general American metaphysical project of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries would continue to sound themes and enact Asias that originated in the Blavatsky opus.

Indeed, many of these themes are present in the homegrown gurus documented here, from Ram Dass’s erasure of the North Indian *bhakti* context of his guru to John Friend’s reading of Tantra through a New Thought lens; from Andrew Cohen’s refashioning of enlightenment through an evolutionary lens to Eckhart Tolle’s nonsectarian, universal rendering of traditional Advaita. This book examines the results of this mixture of Hindu sources with American metaphysical traditions, as well as American values such as individualism, egalitarianism, democracy, and a Protestant work ethic. Classifying the different strains of American Hinduism that have been produced from this encounter is no simple task. A possible beginning would be to focus on practitioners and distinguish between immigrant-based Hinduism and forms of Hinduism that Euro-Americans practice. However, even this simple bifurcation lacks precision since some well-known groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Satya Sai Baba movement, originally consisted of Euro-Americans but are now populated primarily by Indian Americans. Furthermore, American-born Subramuniyaswami, founder of the Saiva Siddhanta Church in Hawaii and *Hinduism Today Magazine*, has 3 million Hindu followers from countries around the world. Another typology might look at presentation and distinguish between those forms of Hinduism that embrace Indian cul-

ture and customs and those that attempt to incorporate Western values and conventions with Hindu-derived practices. Once again, we tread in muddy waters since separating “Indian” from “Western” conventions with today’s amalgamation of cultural values is difficult. The British colonization of India from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century began a process of enculturation that continues today with the globalization of ideas and cultures. A third possibility is to examine practices and attempt to differentiate between those that have a *bhakti*, or devotional, emphasis and those that stress meditation. Yet this distinction is not always clear. For example, some Hindu meditation-based traditions, such as Transcendental Meditation, are increasingly showing a renewed interest in devotional and ritual aspects that were initially neglected or discarded in the first two guru waves of Hindu teachers.

None of these ways of categorizing is ultimately satisfactory. Just as with Indian Hinduism, the complexity of American Hinduism belies simple classification. Yet one pattern that emerges across the case studies presented in this volume is the simultaneous appearance of an increasing decontextualization of Hindu traditions and a renewal of interest in traditional forms of Hinduism. These two seemingly contrary trends—innovation and preservation, radicalism and recovery—suggest the appearance of conditions more characteristic of postmodernity than modernity. Whereas the modern is characterized by an emphasis on the universal and the objective, the postmodern is defined by its reembrace of the local, the particular, and the subjective. The return to the particular within postmodernity includes a recovery of traditional elements initially discarded in the modernization process. Yet, alongside the revalorization of tradition, one also finds increasing modernization appearing within postmodernism, as well as various combinations of the modern and traditional. Approached this way, these chapters illuminate what might be articulated as the unfolding of postmodern trends, which began with the wave of Indian Hindu gurus who entered the United States in the 1960s in the Euro-American assimilation of Hinduism. Hence, the reader will find examples of American gurus who continue to modernize and universalize Hinduism, as well as examples of those who return to and embrace tradition. Yet other American gurus combine the traditional and the modern in innovative ways.

The emergence of postmodern trends needs to be located in relationship to the modernization of Hinduism. Numerous studies have shown that first- and many second-wave gurus presented what was essentially a modern rather than traditional form of Hinduism.⁸ One of the first Hindu gurus to visit America, Swami Vivekananda, produced a modern form of Hinduism identified as “Neo-Vedanta.” In order to

make it more palatable to a Western audience, Vivekananda demythologized Hinduism and his teaching was markedly absent of the devotionism that one finds in his guru, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886). Incorporating numerous Western values such as rationality, ethics, and tolerance, Vivekananda framed Hinduism as universal and scientific, and thus a viable choice for modern Western people.

Following Vivekananda, the majority of second-wave gurus also promoted an essentially modernized and Westernized vision of Hinduism, which placed a universal mystical experience at the core of all religions and offered meditation techniques as scientific tools for accessing higher states of consciousness. As Humes and Forsthoefel note, those Indian gurus who came to America after the lifting of the 1965 Asian immigration act rarely presented a traditional form of Hinduism but rather adapted it in various creative ways to make it more suitable for an American audience. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement, was skilled at accommodating Hinduism for his American audience, consciously marketing a spiritual movement not bound by culture or ethnicity. Humes shows how Maharishi creatively used the universalism implied by Advaita Vedanta to thrust Hinduism into the global marketplace of ideas. He taught Americans that classical practices of renunciation could be discarded and “cosmic consciousness” could be attained by the simple recital of a mantra.⁹ Ramana Maharshi’s perennial appeal to Americans was due to his paradigmatic experience of realization and his insistence that such experience is accessible to all, regardless of cultural or social conditioning.¹⁰

This modern privileging of experience in Asian religions, which scholars such as Robert Sharf have discussed, is a theme of several gurus featured here.¹¹ Yet some gurus discussed in this volume most decidedly are concerned with ritual or doctrine or both, and others have explicitly challenged the modern, decontextualized experiential focus. This variability presents a formidable challenge in organizing the case studies that follow. We have chosen a structure loosely based on chronology and modern/postmodern themes. Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of individual chapters, a brief outline of the chapter progression will illuminate the variety of styles of American gurus and how they might be charted along the traditionalist/modernist spectrum of postmodernity.

The opening chapters explore two gurus, Ram Dass and Rudi, who influenced the hippie cohort of the 1960s and 1970s to exchange psychedelic drugs for Hindu-style practice. Although their styles and teachings were different, both maintained a primary modern emphasis on experience. Chapters 3 and 4, focusing respectively on the American legacies of

two *shaktipat* (spiritual energy bestowing) gurus, Amrit Desai and Muktananda, exemplify a combination of traditional and innovative forms of religion characteristic of postmodernity. In Chapters 5 and 6, two American gurus are explored: Subramuniaswami and Kirtanananda, both of whom initially continued the modernization process by decontextualizing and universalizing their respective traditions of Saiva Siddhanta and Hare Krishna (ISCKON), but, for different reasons, ended in reinstituting traditional forms. The final two chapters discuss Neo-Advaitins and Andrew Cohen—which, in their radical reframing of *advaita*, have extended the modernization process to such a degree that even to associate them with traditional Hinduism is questionable.

The homegrown gurus documented here then both reproduce and react against modern forms of Hinduism. Influenced by the Romantic defense of religion from its Enlightenment critics, one of the key characteristics of modern forms of Hinduism is its emphasis on experience rather than doctrine and belief. Ram Dass set the tone for American Hinduism's emphasis on personal experience. F. X. Charet describes in chapter 1, "Ram Dass: The Vicissitudes of Devotion and Ferocity of Grace," how he sought to create a universal message from his emotional encounter with Neem Karoli Baba, a guru from a North Indian *bhakti* tradition. This guru was particularly devoted to Hanuman, a mythical monkey who symbolizes devotion in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. How could Ram Dass make this foreign mythology relevant for a Western audience? His answer, as Charet elucidates, was to simply ignore it and focus instead on his personal experience with a miracle-working guru. Glossing over the cultural context and specificities of Neem Karoli Baba, Ram Dass concentrated on the idea of the guru, presented as disconnected from religion, from culture, and even from his family. In this way, Ram Dass represents the universalizing tendency seen in modernism.

Charet's chapter provides an appropriate opening for the volume since Ram Dass was an influential herald of second-wave gurus, whom many viewed as an original American guru himself. The former Harvard professor's book, *Be Here Now*, became a bible for the hippie faction of the baby boomer generation. Charet's account of Ram Dass's life sheds light on his deeply conflicted personality. Plagued by guilt for what he perceived to be his human imperfections—primarily his homosexuality—Ram Dass's own journey is mirrored in the trajectory of American Hinduism as a whole. While leading a generation to "turn on" by turning East, Ram Dass sought an elusive enlightenment by denying his own humanity and attempting to appear holy in the eyes of others. Only after entering a deep depression did he come to accept himself. Like many others involved in the second-wave guru phenomenon, he

suppressed his “shadow side” to his own detriment.¹² When he finally came out about his homosexuality, confusion ensued among many of his followers. Ram Dass’s life and his followers’ responses epitomize the struggle found in some American Hindu groups between the ideal of the perfected guru and the reality of the embodied person.

Although not as well-known as Ram Dass, Rudi, the subject of chapter 2, “Building Tantric Infrastructure in America: Rudi’s Western Kashmir Shaivism,” was a significant American Tantric guru. He died in a plane crash in 1973, but several of his American followers, now gurus, keep his legacy alive. Helen Crovetto describes how Rudi adapted the Shaiva Tantra of Kashmir to his American propensities for egalitarianism, a strong work ethic, and an unabashed eclecticism. Rudi was a disciple of Nityananda, Muktananda’s guru, as well as of Muktananda himself, and of Adi Da, an American Tantric guru who was also once a disciple of Muktananda. Like these other guru’s, Rudi conveyed spiritual energy to his disciples through *shaktipat*. Unlike them, however, Rudi maintained a normal worldly life, working as an art dealer and maintaining association with his relatives.

Rudi did not believe in organizations, and much of his teaching took place in informal settings such as his oriental art store in New York City. He spoke in simple, direct language and encouraged his students to maintain a “working, physical life.” The focus on experience we saw with Ram Dass is evident in Rudi as well. However, it does not take the form of devotion to a guru, which Rudi discouraged. Rather experience was sought in practices that stimulated the movement of *prana* (subtle energy). Rudi emphasized these over any type of intellectual learning. He wanted his students to develop their intuition, not their intellects. Rudi preferred to work with individuals in small, local venues, as do American gurus who hail from his teaching today, which sets them apart from second-wave gurus, many of whom established large organizations. Although Rudi distinguished the guru from the disciple regarding the spiritual function of each, he was informal in his social interactions with disciples, reflective of an American egalitarian stance.

Chapter 3, Ellen Goldberg’s chapter on Amrit Desai, “Amrit Desai and the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health,” reiterates some of the same conflicts found in chapter 1. With Desai’s “fall from grace” due to sexual liaisons, we find a confused community of followers that needed to reassess its concept of the guru as a perfect being. Their response was to reject the guru concept altogether as they ousted Amrit Desai and formed a secular and eclectic retreat center that uses multiple visiting teachers. This blurring of lines between the secular and the spiritual evident in the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health is a growing expression

of postmodern religiosity. By following the paths of both Amrit Desai and the Kripalu Center, Goldberg's chapter provides examples of both a continuation of second-wave themes and an opposition to them.

Amrit Desai grew up in a small village in India, so we cannot call him American-born, and yet "homegrown" is an appropriate descriptor. He came to America at a young age to study art and quickly learned the lingo of what Robert Bellah and others in *Habits of the Heart* call the "American therapeutic character." Goldberg describes how his style of teaching has always incorporated "narratives from Western self-help, holistic health and healing, New Age and pop psychology" into a more traditionally Indian guru-disciple relationship and ashram living model. Goldberg describes Desai's growth as a guru using Weber's terminology of slowly attaining "charismatic legitimacy" that is dependent on a group of followers and the eventual building of an institution. What is unique about this case study is that the institution did not collapse upon the guru's loss of authority. Even with the drastically different styles of the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Holistic Health in Pennsylvania and the Amrit Institute in Florida where Amrit Desai continues his work with disciples, an important similarity exists. Both employ holistic healing and pop psychology. Both also teach methods for discovering the unity of mind, body, and *prana* (breath or spirit). Given that the postmodern is associated with an embrace of embodiment and a move away from the transcendental Cartesian subject, this celebration of the body as part of spirituality marks these seemingly disparate teaching models as containing postmodern aspects.

In chapter 4, "Swamis, Scholars, and Gurus: Siddha Yoga's American Legacy," Lola Williamson explores ways in which Tantra is being disseminated to an American audience by gurus and teachers who were once linked to the second-wave guru, Muktananda, or to his successor, Gurumayi. She explores two gurus, Master Charles and Sandra Barnard, and then a network of teachers that had been part of a Teachers and Scholars Department in Gurumayi's ashrams. All of the spiritual teachers and gurus she discusses are concerned with both the preservation of traditional Tantric ideas and practices, as well as innovative ways of understanding them. Master Charles, for example, has developed a form of high-tech meditation using sonic waves that are fed into the meditator's ears through earphones. Even *shaktipat* (awakening of spiritual energy) is given through sonic vibrations delivered to the entire body with the help of a metallic grid. Master Charles continually researches and then employs the latest methods of therapeutic healing. At the same time, he supports a traditional idea of the guru-disciple relationship and engages with his disciples in traditional Hindu chanting. Shrines to

Hindu goddesses are situated throughout the grounds of the Synchronicity Sanctuary in Virginia. However, in the eclectic fashion that characterizes many Hindu-inspired movements in the West, statues and pictures of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Kuan Yin, the Buddhist *bodhisattva* of compassion, can also be found.

The same tendency toward both innovation and recovery appears in Sandra Barnard. Meditation and traditional Hindu chanting is interspersed in her weekend workshops with forms of bioenergetics, which she learned from a Turkish healer. She feels that work on the psychological and personality levels must always accompany work on the spiritual level. The integration of body, mind, and spirit is also found in John Friend's Anusara Yoga. After he was well established as a Postural Yoga teacher, he invited some of the swamis and scholars he had come to know through his time in Gurumayi's ashrams to teach his students the more intellectual and scripture-based aspects of Tantra. This type of collaboration was rarely seen in second-wave gurus and marks an innovative turn. While Friend displays the second-wave tendency to reach a global audience, create organizations, and trademark terms, some of the teachers he associates with, such as Hareesh Wallis, prefer a less-structured environment. Sally Kempton, another teacher in this network, incorporates depth psychology into her work, yet she is careful to ground her teachings in traditional texts from Kashmir Shaivism, Vedanta, and Yoga.

Some contemporary Hindu gurus have called for a return to tradition or have developed a renewed interest in elements of traditional religion, such as scripture and ritual, which had earlier been discarded in the modernization process. Richard D. Mann, for example, in chapter 5, "A Life in Progress, the Biographies of Subramuniaswami," explores how Sivaya Subramuniaswami, the American-born founder of the Saiva Siddhanta Church, established himself as a guru within the South Indian Hindu tradition of Saiva Siddhanta and, through his guru lineage, became the *satguru* (true guru) of 2.5 million Tamil Sri Lankans. Mann analyzes how Subramuniaswami's biography became an important tool Subramuniaswami and his followers used to legitimate his status within the tradition of Saiva Siddhanta and validate his authority as representing an orthodox voice within Hinduism. An examination of Subramuniaswami's biographies and the historical circumstances of their production demonstrate a steady shift in the image of Subramuniaswami from the 1950s to his death in 2001. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, his teaching is firmly located in the American metaphysical lineage, with its eclectic mixture of psychological, Hindu, and Western esoteric thought. However, after the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a backlash

against new religious movements as well as increased levels of South Asian immigration into the United States, Subramuniyaswami's biographies reframe and establish him as an orthodox Hindu guru. In tracing how Subramuniyaswami moved away from the American metaphysical lineage toward a more conservative image as an authentic Hindu guru who primarily addresses an Indian audience, Mann demonstrates the significant impact of diaspora communities on the practice and understanding of Hinduism in America.

The homegrown gurus who teach primarily to a South Asian audience might be expected to display an increasing embrace of traditional religious and cultural forms of Hinduism. The growing appetite for traditional forms of Hinduism in Euro-American practitioners, however, may be more surprising to some. E. Burke Rochford Jr. and Henry Doktorski explore the limits of innovation and the precariousness of noninstitutionalized charismatic authority in chapter 6, "Guru Authority, Religious Innovation, and the Decline of New Vrindaban": a study of the New Vrindaban community in West Virginia. New Vrindaban was led by American-born Kirtanananda Swami, one of the early disciples of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), more popularly known as the Hare Krishna movement. Following Prabhupada's death in 1977, Kirtanananda became one of ISKCON's eleven successor gurus. After he was violently attacked and subsequently charged with criminal activities and moral transgressions, Kirtanananda's authority and leadership began to waver. Expelled from ISKCON, he initiated several controversial religious innovations at New Vrindaban, including the integration of practices from Christianity and other religious traditions that were intended to Americanize Krishna Consciousness. Such radical changes in the community's core teachings, however, contributed to New Vrindaban's dramatic decline as a religious community.

The second trend toward innovation is clearly demonstrated in the last two essays, Philip Charles Lucas's "Neo-Advaita in America: Three Representative Teachers" and Ann Gleig's "From Being to Becoming, From Transcending to Transforming: Andrew Cohen and the Evolution of Enlightenment." The authors deal with gurus who have moved so far away from traditional forms of Hinduism that the question of whether the label of Hinduism is applicable to them is a legitimate one. These gurus raise questions about how much innovation is possible before the tradition becomes a fundamentally new one. They also point to differences and tensions within the innovative stream itself.

In his exploration of what he calls "the Ramana effect," Lucas highlights the increasing modernization of traditional Advaita Vedanta,

asking how Ramana Maharshi, in spite of his disinterest in founding a spiritual movement, has inspired a host of spiritual teachers in America, who are grouped under the general rubric of Neo-Advaita. Traditional Advaita Vedanta is a conservative monastic institution, which holds the view that realization of ultimate reality can be attained only through correct scriptural interpretation. Furthermore, only male Brahmin renunciators are fully qualified to study scripture. In contrast, Maharshi claimed that direct experiential realization of *Brahman* is possible for all people, regardless of caste, gender, or culture, through the practice of self-inquiry. Drawing on Thomas Csordas, Lucas identifies two essential factors—portable practice and transposable message—that must be present for a religious tradition to move successfully into a new cultural setting. Lucas argues that Maharshi's influence is attributable to both the portability of his spiritual method and the universality of his teaching, which required no commitment to institution or ideology.

By deemphasizing the traditional Hindu elements of their teaching and repackaging them within the therapeutic climate of contemporary America, Lucas shows how three Neo-Advaita gurus—Eckhart Tolle, Gangaji, and Arunachala Ramana—have further radicalized Maharshi's experiential Advaita. Moreover, he notes that these Neo-Advaita gurus can be located within a distinctively American liberal spiritual lineage, which stretches from the Transcendentalists to the New Age, and which values characteristics such as interior awakening, a privileging of the experiential over the doctrinal dimensions of religion, a mistrust of religious institutions, open-ended spiritual seeking, and an appreciation of the unity of the world's spiritual traditions.

These Neo-Advaita gurus have been criticized by more traditional Advaita followers, who have lamented the decontextualization of a nondual metaphysics from its cultural matrix and its framing as an essentially universal experiential category. Whereas such voices have rallied against the experiential emphasis by calling for a return to a traditional Hindu institutional context, American guru Andrew Cohen has advocated the development of a new "post-traditional" cultural context that unites the premodern contemplative wisdom of the East with the modern scientific achievements of the West and thereby renders enlightenment relevant for the twenty-first century. Ann Gleig charts Cohen's career from his early period as a Neo-Advaita teacher to his present manifestation as a leading proponent of "evolutionary enlightenment," a teaching that places Eastern religious understandings of nonduality in an evolutionary context.

After a short period as a charismatic Neo-Advaita teacher, Cohen had an acrimonious split with H. L. Poonja, his Indian Advaita guru,

and dismissed the “instant enlightenment” teachings of Neo-Advaita as both unethical and ineffective. Cohen insisted that enlightenment experiences must be expressed in impeccable behavior and set as the aim of his second teaching—impersonal enlightenment—the perfect expression of the absolute Self on the relative level. In his current teaching of evolutionary enlightenment, Cohen moves from ethics to evolution and posits a spiritual hermeneutic of evolution and an evolutionary interpretation of enlightenment. Framing his teaching as a shift “from Being to Becoming or from Transcending to Transforming,” Cohen reconfigures enlightenment from a world-negating and transcendent state to a unique form of consciousness that furthers the evolution of the cosmos. In doing so, Gleig notes, Cohen has aligned and legitimated his teaching with a Tantric rather than Advaitin understanding of nonduality that affirms the material world as an expression and site of the Absolute.

This Tantric-aligned affirmation of the material also fits with the postmodern celebration of embodiment and its move away from the Cartesian mind-body dualism. As noted, many of the gurus documented here demonstrate an interest in nondual metaphysics and particularly Tantric world-affirming ones. From a purely socioeconomic perspective, a Tantric embrace has been dismissed as merely the inevitable infiltration of American materialism into Asian renunciate traditions.¹³ A more generous hermeneutic, however, can appreciate it as an authentic attempt to develop more integrative forms of spirituality that include and transform rather than repress and deny embodiment and the everyday world.¹⁴ For many, such an integrative move became ethically and pragmatically imperative after the now well-documented “fall of the guru,” the series of financial and sexual scandals that rocked a number of North American Hindu and Buddhist communities in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵ In the wake of these controversies, many of these communities were forced to question the efficacy of importing a traditional hierarchical Indian guru-disciple relationship into a contemporary Western society that values individualism and equality.

Many American gurus have attempted a democratic revision of the guru-disciple relationship as one response to the controversies. The absolute barrier between the “enlightened guru” and the “lost seeker” has softened. Another response is evident in American Hindus’ hesitation to place complete trust in a single person. Thus, we see increased collaboration among American Hindu gurus and teachers, as well as a tendency from those on the Hindu path to learn from multiple teachers, either sequentially or simultaneously. On the other hand, the valorization of the guru-disciple relationship cultivated by first- and second-wave gurus has become deeply embedded in much of American Hinduism,

and in some cases, the ideal of submission to a single guru over a lifetime is still upheld. A third response appears as a distrust of large organizations. Smaller and more personal venues are growing in number, which is a postmodern rather than modern trend.

The homegrown gurus appearing here, therefore, can be dotted along an arc from the modern to the postmodern. Interestingly, David McMahan and Jeff Wilson have uncovered similar trends in their respective studies of American Buddhism, revealing that the American adaptation of Buddhism is not a progressive linear movement away from traditional Asian elements toward modern phenomena; rather, it increasingly demonstrates an interest in more traditional elements that had been discarded in the initial modernization process.¹⁶ In a survey of contemporary American Buddhism, McMahan notes that the practitioners are taking a variety of positions along the traditionalist-modernist spectrum. He sees this as a sign of the emergence of conditions associated with later-modernity or postmodernity, such as multiple interpretations of tradition, increasing pluralism, and a combing of various forms of modernism and traditionalism. Just as McMahan implies that these changes signal the development of postmodernist Buddhism, we suggest that with these homegrown gurus, we are witnessing the flourishing of a postmodern stage in the Euro-American assimilation of Hinduism.

Notes

1. Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes, eds., *Gurus in America* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005).

2. For details of the first wave, see Polly Trout, *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2001); and Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

3. Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Re-Discovery of India and the East 1680–1880*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Carl Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

4. For definitions and discussions of Western Esotericism, see Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989) and Antione Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).

5. Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (London: Continuum, 2004).

6. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

7. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (New York: Theosophical University Press, 1888; 2009).
8. De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*; Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Humes, eds., *Gurus in America*; Karen Pechilis, ed., *The Graceful Guru* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004); Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America*.
9. Cynthia Anne Humes, "Maharshi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Forsthoefel and Humes, 55–80.
10. Thomas Forsthoefel, "Weaving the Inward Thread to Awakening," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Forsthoefel and Humes, 37–54. See also Phillip Lucas in the present volume.
11. Robert Sharf, "Experience," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116.
12. See chaps 3, 4, and 5 in Williamson's *Transcendent in America* for examples of this tendency toward suppression of personal and organizational negativity in Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga.
13. See Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality* (London: Routledge, 2005).
14. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
15. Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Seeing Inside and Outside the Goddess: The Mystical and the Ethical in the Teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda," in *Mapping Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal and William G. Barnard, 230–264 (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002).
16. Jeff Wilson, *Mourning the Unborn Dead* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2009), and David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2009).