

Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion, by Lola Williamson. New York University Press, 2010. 272pp., 6 b&w illustrations. £52. ISBN-13: 9780814794494.

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This study presents a distinct mid-level category between the broad notion of Asian religions in the West and the narrow field of particular religious groups, by presenting a useful classification of Hindu Inspired Meditation Movements (HIMMs) as a distinct genre of its own. Having discovered meditation at the age of 18, been involved with Transcendental Meditation for ten years, and considered herself as a devout disciple of Gurumayi following twenty years of involvement in Siddha Yoga, Lola Williamson's study of HIMMs speaks from the privileged position of being both an insider and an outsider of the subject.

Part I begins with an overview of the proposed HIMMs category. It establishes the significance of these groups being identified as Hindu-*inspired* rather than Hindu in its more generic sense. It defines such movements as sharing the common traits of a) “a strong commitment to meditation as a means of attaining inner peace, and ultimately, of attaining a state of consciousness that is described by practitioners variously as liberation, enlightenment, or unity consciousness”, and a belief that b) “the guru who leads their movement has attained this state of liberation and, therefore, is able to serve as their guide” (5). Participants in HIMMs thus share common rituals, myths, and metaphors, as well as beliefs based on karma, reincarnation, and the ideal of enlightenment. They nevertheless mark a distinct type in that they do not prescribe to the cultural and social conventions as adhered to by Hindus in more traditional terms.

Having laid out the main features of HIMMs, Williamson documents the historical groundwork that has led to their emergence in America. Their evolution on American soil is thus traced back to the early days of Transcendentalism, Theosophy, and New Thought which offered the fertile basis for the subsequent flourishing of Vedantic influences, beginning most notably with Vivekananda's pivotal speech presented at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. This section further includes a detailed assessment of

the missionary development of Vedanta from its original South Asian roots into Neo-Hinduism today, as it was developed and translated for an international audience. These developments are in turn linked to the more recent emergence of groups such as the Human Potential Movement and the New Age.

Part II presents detailed accounts of the three HIMMs covered in the book: The Self-Realisation Fellowship (SRF), Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga. The first chapter in this section thus begins with a comprehensive summary of Yogananda's biography and lineage, including the ways in which his style of Vedantic teachings differed from his progenitors. While Vivekananda previously emphasised devotion to an impersonal God, Yogananda's style is thus identified in relatively more Christian tones of offering a much more emotional approach based on devotion to a personal God. This chapter also includes a thorough portrait of the present organisational structure of the SRF, including the initiation process into Kriya Yoga practice. This includes the completion of an extensive correspondence course lasting twelve months coupled with regular practice of the preliminary techniques taught throughout the lessons, as well as the prerequisite of making a pledge to God and the six gurus of the SRF lineage of "unconditional love, reverence, and loyalty forever" (57).

The following chapter provides a detailed assessment of Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation movement centred on the simple method of mantra meditation. It traces Maharishi's progression from being a disciple of Swami Brahmananda Saraswati, through to arriving in America in 1959, and subsequently becoming one of the most popular Hindu gurus in the 1970s. It offers useful insights into the ways in which Maharishi struck a double allegiance to both the relatively more elitist Vedic tradition of Shankaracharya on the one hand, and his mission to teach meditation to the masses on the other.

The final chapter in this section covers Muktananda's Siddha Yoga movement through an examination of the four key stages of its development. The first phase spans from Muktananda's first arrival in the United States in 1970 until his death in 1981. Phase two covers the subsequent reign of his two successors, Nityananda and Gurumayi. The third phase documents the expansion of Siddha Yoga under Gurumayi, the current guru of Siddha Yoga, until the onset of scandals related to the organisation in 1994. Finally, phase four discusses the gradual decline of the movement associated with its dwindling incomes, the intensification of negative publicity, and subsequent fall in number of participants.

Part III covers an exhaustive account of individual devotees' personal experiences of being involved in the aforementioned HIMMs. It offers valuable insights into guru-disciple relationships, emphasising in particular the fact

that such relationships are not limited to associations with the physical guru, but equally involve dealings with less tangible, but no less important, notions of the subtle as well as the transcendent guru. It draws on a wealth of first-person accounts of devotees's own daily practices and associated mystical experiences, including the details of their faith and struggles with doubt, their practices of kundalini awakening, and the ways in which they come to assess progress along the spiritual path. This final segment of the book provides valuable evidence in support of the main thesis in showing that participants of HIMMs generally follow similar trajectories of spiritual practice and share the same experiences, regardless of their respective gurus.

Overall, this book presents a thorough illustration of guru-following as a "non-institutional institution" (85), and convincingly articulates the phenomenon of HIMMs as a valuable category within present studies of religion. Given its detailed exposition of the commonalities and differences amongst HIMMs, including the controversies surrounding each movement, this book is equally suited to scholars of religion as it is to adherents of contemporary spirituality interested in the practice of meditation.