



American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion

By Arthur Versluis

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By the early twenty-first century, a phenomenon that once was inconceivable had become nearly commonplace in American society: the public spiritual teacher who neither belongs to, nor is authorized by a major religious tradition. From the Oprah Winfrey-endorsed Eckhart Tolle to figures like Gangaji and Adhyashanti, there are now countless spiritual teachers who claim and teach variants of instant or immediate enlightenment.

American Gurus tells the story of how this phenomenon emerged. Through an examination of the broader literary and religious context of the subject, Arthur Versluis shows that a characteristic feature of the Western esoteric tradition is the claim that every person can achieve "spontaneous, direct, unmediated spiritual insight." This claim was articulated with special clarity by the New England Transcendentalists Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Versluis explores Transcendentalism, Walt Whitman, the Beat movement, Timothy Leary, and the New Age movement to shed light on the emergence of the contemporary American guru.

This insightful study is the first to show how Asian religions and Western mysticism converged to produce the phenomenon of "spontaneously enlightened" American gurus.

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Editorial Review

Review

"The first truly thoughtful history of an important aspect of religion in North America...*American Gurus* acts as a handy source of short intellectual biographies of some of the movement's lesser known figures of whom there has previously been very little publicly available information. As such, it is a valuable source for religious studies researchers."--*Books at a Glance*

"[The book] covers many figures who are little known - and some who are completely off the beaten track (perhaps its chief virtue) - and it puts them together in an interesting way to tell an original story about the history of religion in America."--Hugh B. Urban, Ohio State University

"Versluis is one of the leading scholars of esoteric traditions in the United States, and this volume nicely complements his earlier work on esoteric themes in Transcendentalism and the American Renaissance, tracing the influence of the same esoteric currents up to the present."--Daniel P. McKanan, Harvard University

About the Author

Arthur Versluis, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies and Professor in the College of Arts & Letters at Michigan State University, holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and has published numerous books and articles. Versluis was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Germany, and is the founding editor of *Esoterica*, and co-editor of *JSR: Journal for the Study of Radicalism*. He is the founding president of the Association for the Study of Esotericism.

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