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Ashok Kumar Malhotra. *Instant Nirvana: Americanization of Mysticism and Meditation.*

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Ashok Kumar Malhotra. *Instant Nirvana: Americanization of Mysticism and Meditation. Oneonta Philosophy Studies in Historical and Cultural Perspectives, 1999, 121 pages alleged, 115 pages actually delivered.*

The six pages lost between the Table of Contents and actual production of this book (the bibliography, index, and end notes are missing) unfortunately illustrate its rushed nature. I enjoyed reading it and I learned some useful things, but the result is not at all comparable to Malhotra's excellent previous work of 1998 called "*Transcreation of the Bhagavad Gita*."

Professor Malhotra sets out to explain mysticism, meditation and "instant nirvana" to Americans who are in a hurry (xiii). By that he generally means the watering down of ancient South Asian disciplines into quick and simple formulae for Americans who want fast and commercially accessible answers. Later (xv), he notes that this is "neither a scholarly discussion nor an in-depth study of mysticism, instant nirvana or meditation," which certainly is true.

It is easier to understand than most books on philosophy, since as before he tries to use "simple language and accessible style to appeal to undergraduate students and the general public." He succeeds to an extent. But the book is also an aggregate of six articles that were read at conferences, so the style varies, as does the quality throughout.

Part I is on Mysticism in the Hindu tradition; Part II on "Instant Nirvana;" and Part III on meditation. Part IV is called "Encounters with Gurus and Practitioners." This last section is a collection of observations, while the first three have more structure. But throughout the appearance emerges of a production rushed a bit too much.

For one unfortunate example, they misspell Billy Graham's name on page 37, which is an ordinary typo, considering the context and the four editors he thanks for their diligent work. Since he is listing and comparing the most prominent examples of Hindu and American religious leaders, this stands out starkly and his editors certainly share the blame. But it also highlights other sloppiness in production. There are several minor grammatical errors in one chapter only, for example, which suggests that this one did not have time for an actual review by editors focused on their job.

All of which is a shame, because Ashok Malhotra certainly has the credentials and the zeal to do an excellent job of discussing these subjects. His enthusiasm for Hindu thought is unquestionable as are his

broad linguistic abilities and keen insight. Sometimes this enthusiasm creeps into proselytization, or at least exaggeration as he extols a "massive movement toward Asian spirituality among the American public."

There certainly was an increased interest in Eastern spirituality during the 1960's and praise be to God some continues to this day. But it was hardly the stampede that Malhotra describes. It is certainly relevant to the cult-like commercial enterprises which came to represent Indian religion in America during that period, several of which Malhotra describes in accurate detail. For some readers this would be the most interesting part. But Malhotra sees everywhere an interest by these expatriate gurus in enlightening America of its "spiritual poverty" even while he notes often the millions they rake in from gullible patrons. He even describes their efforts to recruit him at large for their noble causes.

There is a small section on scientific examinations of, in particular, Transcendental Meditation, and it is worth reading. But it is also crippled by the failure to include the full references cited in the end, and by his ultimate acknowledgement that much of this "science" was sponsored by the commercial enterprise, T.M. (trademark ruthlessly enforced, he notes, as when they threatened lawsuits if he used "T.M." in a course title).

Open-minded readers will all agree that there is much value in meditation, but they will also be more sensitive than Malhotra is to the distortions that commercial businesses bring to public presentations of "scientific data." And the latest reference cited here is dated 1976, suggesting that this section was written quite some time ago.

Finally, in his section on "Encounters," Malhotra presents some charmingly honest portrayals, both good and some awful, of his brushes with Hare Krishna enthusiasts in airports, with the sex-obsessed Bhagwan Rajneesh, and with more ascetic, genuine and far less greedy gurus back in his native India. In fact, the Bhagwan was convicted of immigration fraud, was deported and died in 1990. His community in Oregon, Rajneeshpuram, fell apart in 1985 after numerous serious conflicts with the law and with their neighbors, like sickening some 750 of them by sprinkling salmonella bacteria on area salad bars. None of that makes it into Malhotra's review of the growth of Indian spirituality in America.

Probably the best part of this work is Part I on Mysticism in the Hindu Tradition where his scholarship and range show through. That is

a really useful review, well and economically written.

In the end, I was glad I read this book because I, too, am interested in Yoga, in meditation, and in the eternal quest for enlightenment. I thoroughly agree with Malhotra that seekers should cast their nets widely, and he helps with that endeavor. I have wondered often about several of the individuals he examines, and the organizations they have created, most of which appear to have declined for a while, rather than “rocketing” forward as he suggests. It’s a shame this book was produced so fast, even though some essays were many years old; that is its greatest weakness. I will keep an open mind, and see what the future brings. Professor Malhotra is an extremely creative and dynamic individual. I’m sure he will be writing something new for us to learn from again.

——— Michael Andregg