



Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism

By Jeffrey J. Kripal

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William Blake once wrote that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Inspired by these poetic terms, Jeffrey J. Kripal reveals how the works of scholars of mysticism are often rooted in their own mystical experiences, "roads of excess," which can both lead to important insights into these scholars' works and point us to our own "palaces of wisdom."

In his new book, Kripal addresses the twentieth-century study of mysticism as a kind of mystical tradition in its own right, with its own unique histories, discourses, sociological dynamics, and rhetorics of secrecy. Fluidly combining autobiography and biography with scholarly exploration, Kripal takes us on a tour of comparative mystical thought by examining the lives and works of five major historians of mysticism—Evelyn Underhill, Louis Massignon, R. C. Zaehner, Agehananda Bharati, and Elliot Wolfson—as well as relating his own mystical experiences. The result, Kripal finds, is seven "palaces of wisdom": the religious power of excess, the necessity of distance in the study of mysticism, the relationship between the mystical and art, the dilemmas of male subjectivity and modern heterosexuality, a call for ethical criticism, the paradox of the insider-outsider problem in the study of religion, and the magical power of texts and their interpretation.

An original and penetrating analysis of modern scholarship and scholars of mysticism, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* is also a persuasive demonstration of the way this scholarly activity is itself a mystical phenomenon.

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Editorial Review

Review

“According to Kripal, mysticism is very much a praxis, a set of techniques that lead to a goal, inner depth and self-knowledge. . . . Kripal’s book can bring much-needed clarity and depth, and no little intelligence, to the ‘subjectivity wars’ of postmodernity, which, even now, have only just begun.”

(Peter Homans *Journal of Religion*)

“Original, even constructive, in its topic, approach, candor, and scope, *Roads of Excess* is nonetheless an excellent historical and biographical study, written with clarity and charm, demonstrating patience with those who have little familiarity with the discipline in which he is working or the scholars he is exploring. . . . This is the kind of methodological challenge that I hope more people will read and seriously engage.”

(David Clairmont *Chicago South Asia Newsletter*)

“The book has the value of insisting on secrecy and eroticism as relevant elements for determining mysticism and esotericism. . . . Kripal has brought forward some fascinating material in this book and it is good to see how the academic debate on mysticism and esotericism in different religions and traditions is still alive.”

(Fabrizio M. Ferrari *South Asia Research*)

From the Inside Flap

William Blake once wrote that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Inspired by these poetic terms, Jeffrey J. Kripal reflects on how the modern study of mysticism has often been inspired by the mystical experiences of the scholars themselves. More specifically, he suggests, these "roads of excess" are often marked by erotic engagements with text and tradition that carry within themselves important theoretical insights into both the historical mystics and our own critical engagements with their remarkable texts.

To explore such possibilities, Kripal takes his readers on a tour of comparative mystical thought in Catholicism, Sufism, Hinduism, Tantra, and Kabbalah by examining the lives and works of five major historians of mysticism: Evelyn Underhill, Louis Massignon, R. C. Zaehner, Agehananda Bharati, and Elliot Wolfson. Kripal also critically analyzes his own mystical experiences in a series of revealing autobiographical essays and concludes the book with seven "palaces of wisdom" that envision the study of mysticism as a mystical phenomenon, with its own unique histories, psychosexual dynamics, ethical disciplines, existential paradoxes, and unitive goals.

About the Author

Jeffrey J. Kripal is the Vira I. Heinz Associate Professor of Religion at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, published by the University of Chicago Press, which won the American Academy of Religion's Best First Book in the History of Religions Award.

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William Pettigrew:

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