

---

## BOOK REVIEW

---

Jacobs, Stephen. 2015. *The Art of Living Foundation: Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Global Context*. Farnham: Ashgate. 241pp. ISBN 978 1 4724 1268 3. £65.00.

*Reviewed by:* Benjamin E. Zeller, Lake Forest College, 555 N Sheridan Road, Lake Forest, IL 60045, USA.  
zellerbe@gmail.com

*Keywords:* Art of Living; ethnography; meditation; new religious movements; Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

Stephen Jacobs's new book on the Art of Living Foundation provides a solid foundation for scholars and students interested in the rise and current social dynamics of this important contemporary religious movement. Art of Living has achieved a remarkable global footprint and influence, and as Jacobs notes, is representative of an impressive wave of Hindu derived meditation movements reshaping the spiritual lives of adherents in both East and West.

Jacobs does a superb job of locating Art of Living in its cultural, social and historical context. The book's first chapter provides a historical and cultural background on the development of Hindu meditation movements such as Art of Living. He looks to the colonial and postcolonial context and forces at work in both India and the West. He traces the rise of the human potential movement and the therapeutic turn in alternative spiritualities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Scholars familiar with new religious movements will find much of this familiar, but it will serve as a useful primer for readers new to the study of such groups.

The second and third chapters consider the beliefs, practices and history of Art of Living. The author's scholarship is rooted in his ethnographic work within this movement, and he labours to present not only his own analysis of the group but also to demonstrate how practitioners understand their involvement and the nature of Art of Living. He quite deftly handles competing claims, for example those over the biography of the group's guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, or the way that different practitioners within the group draw from distinctive parts of its "coherent, yet diverse package of symbolic resources" within the group (p. 126). Jacobs also provides an excellent description of the central practice of Art of Living, the *sudarshan kriya*, a meditative yogic breathing technique that adherents believe transforms them and the world.

Questions over the nature of authority serve as the central theme in the fourth chapter. Here Jacobs considers some of the central issues in the social-scientific study of new and alternative religions, such as leadership, charisma, conversion and socialization. Those with an interest in the sociological study of religion will find this chapter fascinating, as it is well rooted in the research and contemporary debates over the sociology of new religions.

The fifth chapter turns to globalization and the media techniques employed by the group in seeking to create and expand its “one world family.” Such attention is timely, implicating Art of Living in important trends redefining the contemporary religious world. Jacobs concludes that the group “is highly significant as it is not only a manifestation of wider cultural shifts, but also makes an impact on the global context in its articulation that spirituality is the panacea for individual, social and global problems” (p. 215).

This conclusion is apt. The heart of this book is a consideration of how a movement predicated on a fundamentally individualistic practice (yogic breathing) is able to create community and transform more individualistic concerns about stress relief and healing into *seva*, or service to the broader society, and seeking a peaceful transition of the world. Jacobs does an apt job of showing how in practice adherents of Art of Living are able to envision their spiritual practices as transformative in both the individualistic and social sense. With nuance, he shows how it sometimes creates community and sometimes not. This book provides a data point in the continued debate in the study of therapeutic spiritualities about how individualism and social considerations interrelate in practice.

As the product of extensive fieldwork, the book demonstrates the value of the sort of ethnographic thick description that we have come to expect of high quality studies of new religions. Jacobs makes use of participant observation and interviews, as well as analysis of written primary sources and other media produced by the movement. Jacobs is reflexive about his methodology, its advantages, and its shortcomings. He writes in the introduction that “[his] research is informed by standpoint theory ... the recognition that sociology, and indeed all the other academic disciplines including the hard sciences, is situated” (p. 11). He carefully situates himself and demonstrates cognizance of the need to straddle insider/outsider boundaries. He is aware of his informants’ voices and his own voice, and aptly includes both throughout the text.

I recommend the book for researchers interested in contemporary religions. It will be the definitive study of Art of Living, and future scholars will respond to Jacobs’s work. Graduate and advanced undergraduate students will benefit from not only the content matter of the book but also the manner in which Jacobs explains and employs his ethnographic methodology, for it serves as a fine example of how to research a contemporary religion.