
Book Review

WILLIAMSON, Lola. 2010. *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*. New York: New York University Press. xiii + 261 pp. pbk. \$23.00; £15.99. ISBN 978-0-8147-9450-0.

Reviewed by: Jeremy Rapport, The College of Wooster, Kauke Hall, 400 E. University Street, Ohio, USA. jerappor@indiana.edu

In *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*, Lola Williamson examines the history and development of these small, but important, alternative religions. Focusing on Transcendental Meditation, the Self-Realization Fellowship, and Siddha Yoga, Williamson employs descriptive historical narrative, personal experience, and interview data to examine how the mostly American converts to HIMMs, as she names them, have experienced their lives in these new religions. Although some scholars may find elements of Williamson's methodology problematic, the in-depth analysis and interview data for the three Hindu-inspired movements are a valuable contribution to a still largely overlooked element of the American alternative religious world.

The three major parts of the book each focus on a particular aspect of the overall study. Part I – “Background” – is organized into two chapters and describes the American context of the movements. Williamson's principal claim in these two chapters is that HIMMs should be considered a specific development of the American religious environment. Preceding movements such as Transcendentalism and New Thought set the stage for the emergence of HIMMS. Part II – “Three Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements” – takes up the specific histories of the Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga in America. Here, in addition to basic histories, Williamson tries to identify some of the ways in which all three movements have acculturated to the American setting as they developed throughout the twentieth century. Part III, “In their Own Words,” is an analysis of the experiences of converts in each of the movements. Each chapter of Part III frames the interview-based research with a larger issue. Williamson examines “The Guru-Disciple Relationship” (Chapter 6), “Mystical Experiences” (Chapter 7), and “Worldview” (Chapter 8) in the three movements. Within this scheme, Williamson also takes up an analysis of the various controversies experienced by them. By using this organizational method, which places each of them in a larger context and considers the bigger issues related to the source of many of their scandals, Williamson is able to examine scandals without making them a focus of her analysis – a great strength of this book.

Williamson's book addresses what most new religion scholars would rightly consider a serious lacuna in the body of work on American new religions. The innovation and cultural influence of these HIMMS, even if not their actual number of converts, indicate that they have needed in-depth study for many years. Williamson's work is certainly welcome on that front. The interview data, especially the detailed and candid descriptions of participants' meditation experiences, are extremely valuable. Williamson also does a good job explaining the various intertwined influences of Hindu practice and American Protestant forms that

make up HIMMs. By examining the networks of significance in which these movements are created and come to fruition, Williamson demonstrates how HIMMs represent a new religious creation and function to appeal to a specific religious niche in America.

Her creative integration of sources for her work will impress many, but make others pause. The insider-outsider question is a serious subtext in this book, and while Williamson is forthcoming about her own involvement as both a student and a teacher of Transcendental Meditation and Siddha Yoga, close readers will at times wonder about certain explanations. For example, Williamson describes the shock that caused her to abandon the book, and her practice of Siddha Yoga, in 2005 after her initial discovery of abuse allegations in the movement. After a brief comment on the insider-outsider issue, Williamson writes, "In 2007 I returned to the investigation of HIMMs, ready to bring a sense of balance between empathy for those pursuing a Hindu-style spiritual path and critical observation of the potential perils of that path" (p. x). Williamson gives no explanation of how she dealt with the shock of that discovery, and while subsequent examples throughout the book demonstrate a sophisticated approach to the many sides of controversial issues in HIMMs, personalizing such a potentially problematic aspect of her research project without completely explaining what, if any, process she went through to overcome her own issues unnecessarily raises questions.

Similarly, Williamson's "soft constructivist" approach to analysing the "mystical experiences" of adherents of HIMMs, in which she argues "that the cultural and linguistic background [of adherents] gives reality a particular 'twist' or 'flavor'," (p. 180) will intrigue many readers and raise doubts for others. Sceptics will argue that there is no point in establishing the possibility of any reality behind the adherents' mystical experiences, that it is the meaning participants ascribe to the experiences that is paramount. Less cynical readers will credit Williamson with finding a way to take the self-reported experiences of her subjects seriously. Despite such methodological concerns, *Transcendent in America* is, overall, an admirable addition to the extremely limited body of work on Hindu-inspired movements in America.