
Reviewed by Jeremy Rapport, College of Wooster, jrapport@wooster.edu

Ariel Gluckich’s Everyday Mysticism is an ethnographic account of Neot Smadar, an Israeli community located in the Negev desert about sixty kilometers north of the town of Eilat. The community, according to Gluckich, defies easy description, being neither commune, kibbutz, nor intentional community (ix). It is instead a group of people dedicated to the practice of “self-inquiry,” a community and work-driven process of intensive personal reflection developed by Yossef Safra (1931–2003), a former actor and the community’s founder, in Jerusalem in the 1970s. While Gluckich succeeds in peeling back the dense narratives of life and work in the community, revealing how self-inquiry functions in the day-to-day practice of residents of Neot Smadar, those hoping for more direct insights into the nature of modern mysticism as a religious and spiritual phenomenon may find Everyday Mysticism less satisfying.

The real strength of this book lies in Gluckich’s carefully detailed descriptions of the processes of self-inquiry as they are embedded in the everyday lives of the residents of Neot Smadar. Across an introduction, eleven chapters, and a conclusion, the reader encounters again and again moments of self-inquiry in the work, conversations, and daily activities of the people of Neot Smadar. Several of the chapters center on Gluckich’s own experience living and working at Neot Smadar and his own process of learning self-inquiry. For example, in chapter two, “Washing Dishes,” Gluckich describes working in the community kitchen and how the environment and the conversations with others working in the kitchen forced him to notice his own inner dialogue, which “followed [him] around all day—just as it does everybody else—like a loyal but annoying dog.... On and on went the inner voice, the white noise of mechanical thinking and unregulated feeling, running all morning long” (42). Gluckich slowly realized that this mode of work, communication, and reflection was itself a part of community-mediated self-inquiry, “a ‘group think’ in which the participants constantly appear to disagree but are perfectly content to hear another perspective” (44).

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Similar experiences working on building projects, making wine, working at the goat milking operation, and working as a mechanic demonstrate Gluckich’s developing understanding of the workings of self-inquiry to the reader. Readers willing to go on this deep dive into the practical workings of Neot Smadar’s self-inquiry process will be rewarded with richly detailed pictures of the practice. But this same spread-out, phenomenologically driven investigation also raises concerns for those looking for insight into the nature of mysticism. Gluckich refuses to categorize and label much of what he describes. As he puts it in the introduction, “Neot Smadar is unique, and it must be understood on its own terms before it can take its place in the academic spectrum of sociality” (8). It is exactly these sorts of claims that critics of studies of mysticism and religious experience have pointed to as protective strategies, that is, avoiding confronting and defining the abstract language and concepts so often used to describe religious experience of all types in order to make claims about uniqueness.

This insistence on Neot Smadar’s uniqueness may also be why Gluckich largely bypasses investigation of other types of contextual clues and social entanglements that are mentioned throughout the book. For example, the community is in Israel and the members seem to be, at the very least, practitioners of something that might be called cultural Judaism, that is, they observe the Jewish sabbath and Jewish holidays. Yet Gluckich never closely examines this issue. At several points, Gluckich mentions the influence of G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky on the community and its founder, yet the analysis here never goes beyond surface level acknowledgement of influence. In one of the more fascinating chapters to read, “A Wedding Gift for Dani,” Gluckich describes his experience participating in a sort of bachelor party structured around passages from Carlos Castanada’s The Teaching of Don Juan. Gluckich does fine work in this chapter describing how community members create, engage in, and understand an innovative ritual practice. But the source of the practice itself suggests a set of social and cultural entanglements about what religion and spirituality are that some Neot Smadar members have found influential. Yet Gluckich chooses not to engage how Castanada’s writing may shape larger conceptions of meaning for the community, instead focusing on both his own reactions to the evening and on how Dani himself was shaped by the ritual.

Communal studies scholars hoping for analysis of how Neot Smadar meets the considerable challenges of making intentional community work may also be disappointed. There are no historical details on basic issues such as how the community financed the initial land and equipment acquisitions, how
they make choices about admitting new members, or how they relate to and interact with their neighbors. Communal studies and new religions scholars may also find it strange that Gluckich seems to have missed the apparent significant similarities between self-inquiry and the mutual criticism practices of John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Perfectionists. In other words, while several pieces of evidence exist that the members of Neot Smadar have a significant number and variety of critical religious and spiritual influences, Gluckich has chosen to focus his analysis on the specifics of Neot Smadar’s self-inquiry practice, perhaps at the cost of a deeper understanding of how the community and its unique practice came to be.

*Everyday Mysticism* is a slightly frustrating read. At times beautifully written and deeply engaging with richly detailed description and analysis of how work, conversation, and the practice of everyday life can be made to serve the pursuit of deeper understandings of the self, the book nevertheless passes over many issues that scholars of new religions will find critically important. In that sense, I must concur with Gluckich’s evaluation that his focus on the founding generation’s development of the practice of self-inquiry only scratches the surface of this community.