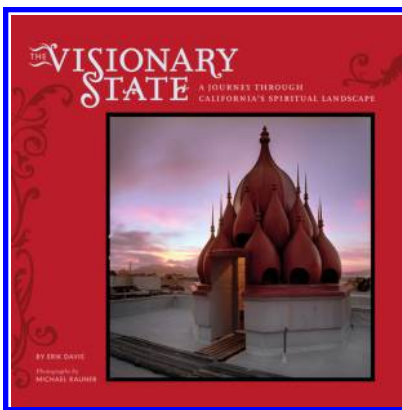


EDWARD J. BLUM

Gods of the Golden Coast

Sacred topographies



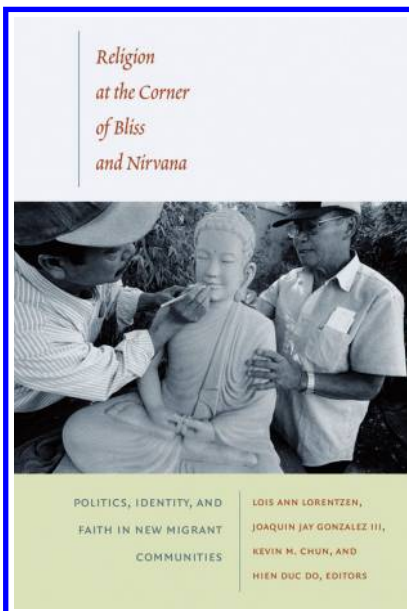
Erik Davis and Michael Rauner, *The Visionary State: A Journey Through California's Spiritual Landscapes* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006).

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Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008).

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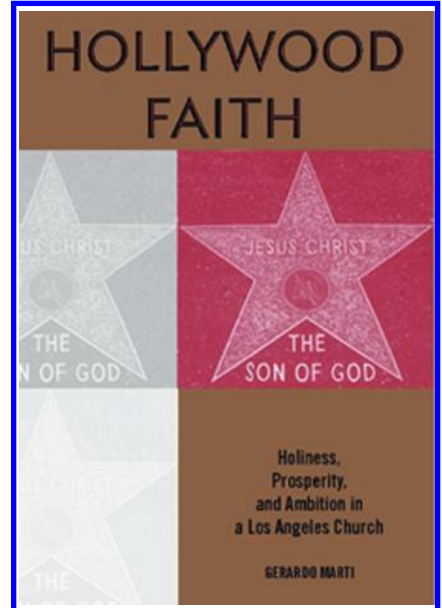
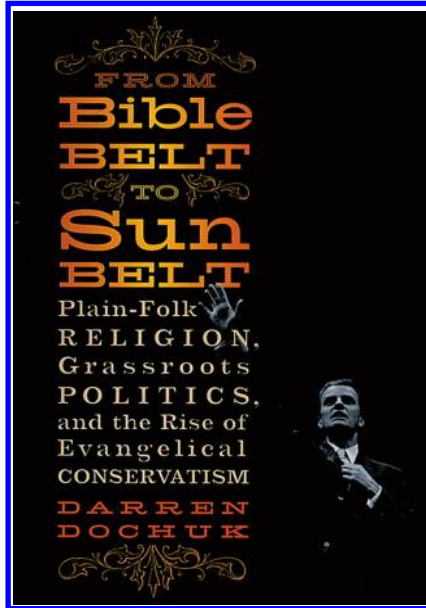
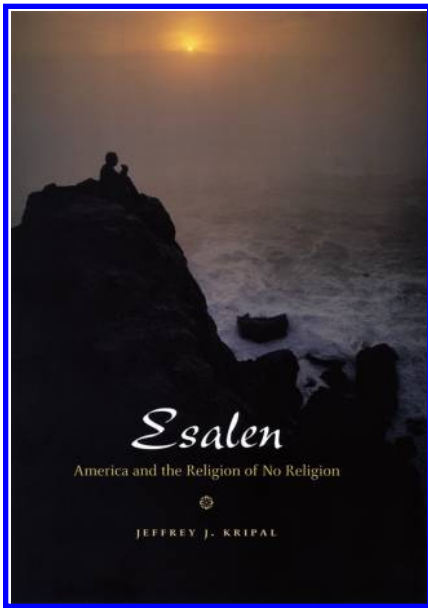
Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).



California is, famously, a land of contrasts. Where else can one snowboard and surf on the same day? Where else can one drive in less than an hour from the hub of the film industry to the center of Christian-based twelve-step recovery programs at Rick Warren's Orange County megachurch?

Confining our survey to the religious sphere alone, California's diversity astonishes. Where else can one find within miles of one another Buddhist shrines in old Native American storehouses, Pentecostal revival meetings in defunct rent-to-own shops, psychological innovators who prescribe mescaline-based spirit journeys, and Mexican-American Catholic support homes for those who suffer from AIDS? If we look for the gods along the golden coast, we find them just about everywhere, multiplying and morphing into a theological landscape that seems to defy the easy categories of other eras and locales. New gods and gurus are born and flourish, while

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others rise and fall. Fortunately, several new books on religion in California take on the challenge to display the facets of our “visionary state” in all their contrasting forms. What we find, it turns out, is that California is not one state of visions, but rather many states of many visions.

The easiest way to travel the sacred topography of California is through Erik Davis and Michael Rauner’s *The Visionary State*. It is a coffee table book in format, but it shouldn’t collect dust. It should be enjoyed with a cup of coffee or aromatic tea, each page savored in the same way one leisurely reads *The Atlantic* or watches CBS’s “Sunday Morning.” Rauner’s photographs beautifully set the stage for Davis’s enriching reflections. Whether showcasing wildflowers, missions, or cathedrals, the pictures and the discussions unveil California’s visionary splendor. This is more than a land of interstate congestion, Hollywood drama, urban blight, or suburban sprawl. California is a series of sanctified spaces, and this book lets readers enjoy the glorious diversity, silly sacredness, and divine depth of the state. Particularly stunning is the photograph of the Mayan Theater in Los Angeles. Brown and gray sculpted walls frame the psychedelic orange and purple colors of

a mystical circle. Each page is a little piece of heaven, or nirvana, or Zen, or whatever one needs at the moment.

For those who wish to get to know more deeply the people who created these sacred sites and to think about their cultural and political links more critically, several recent scholarly books can help. *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana* is one of them. It is a collection of twelve essays on immigrant groups from Mexico, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, and San Salvador who ended up in and around San Francisco. Based on four years of observation, participation, discussion, and interaction with these groups, the authors take us on a fascinating ride from the transnational journeys of gay, lesbian, and cross-dressing Catholic Mexicans to the quiet halls of a Chinese Mahayana Buddhist monastery. Overall, the essays make two critical points. First, religion offered immigrant communities direction and guidance in moments of transition, dislocation, and relocation. Second, faith was a critical player in how the groups adapted to their new cultural and physical environments and how they created new syntheses from their backgrounds and the differences within their new communities. Readers should be warned, though. Unless you know what “hermeneutic

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phenomenology” means or how “epistemological liminality” applies to LGBT sex workers, this collection may be a little too academic in its prose to be savored.

Many of the communities in *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana* have about a thousand members, and each group gets about thirty or forty pages of attention. In *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Jeffrey J. Kripal fills almost 600 pages to discuss a community that often holds only thirty to forty persons. But if the Harry Potter saga taught us anything, it is page numbers be damned if the book is worth it. And *Esalen* is worth it. Kripal offers on one hand a delicious history of this eclectic community. With the other hand, he provides an entirely new spin on American religious culture for the past fifty years. The California coast turns out to be the place where East meets West, psychology meets tantric mysticism, and experiment meets experience.

Esalen was founded in Big Sur by two mystics: Michael Murphy and Richard Price. Both were born in 1930; both went to Stanford; and both were influenced by religious theorist Frederic Spiegelberg and his path-breaking book *The Religion of No-Religion* (1948). In it, Spiegelberg chastised traditional religions for either taking their symbolic statements as literal truths or for valuing one side of life, such as the natural world, at the expense of another, such as feelings or experiences. For Spiegelberg, a religion of “no-religion” rose above them all and linked them all together. It was an experience in which feeling met physical reality and every moment became sacred. Murphy and Price became fascinated by how Western psychology and eastern mysticism could work together to unleash or cultivate this kind of human potential. After its founding in the early 1960s, the Esalen Institute became a who’s who of psychological innovation and counterculture experimentation. Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs were welcome; Timothy Leary, though not a major force there, guided Murphy on an LSD trip; and the Manson family wanted to stop by shortly before their killing spree. Esalen’s doors, however, were shut that night.

But the story didn’t stop with the counterculture. In the late 1970s and 1980s, as much of the counterculture turned apolitical, the leadership of Esalen became more engaged in politics. They helped bring Boris Yeltsin to the United States in 1989, and that trip helped undo Soviet Communism. They pushed for encounter groups between Russians and Americans, and they hoped to ease United States military production.

In his beautifully written book, Kripal is able to explain some of the most complicated psychological and spiritual concepts with ease and clarity. *Esalen* could be brought to the beach, read while catching some rays, and then talked about with friends at a coffee shop later. Through the eccentric figures and odd moments, Kripal crafts an amazing history of Esalen. He finds there the creation of an American Tantric tradition where new psychological theories crashed into old mysticisms of Asia. The result has been a religion of no religion, which is paradoxically a religion of all religions with the goal of human fulfillment, growth, joy, and sensuality. It’s a big faith befitting its location atop a cliff on the Big Sur coast.

All kinds of religious orientations were and are welcome at Esalen, except one. The Esalen Institute and its worldview exclude any faith that claims absolute authority and attempts to force itself upon others. Of course, those kinds of faiths reside in California too, perhaps nowhere more powerfully than in the Southland. There, and especially in Orange County, evangelical Protestants have created citadels of conservative power. They wouldn’t be accepted at Esalen and they wouldn’t want to be accepted there. Although Esalen’s forms of metaphysical psychology and Asian mysticism have probably influenced conservative evangelicals more than they would want to admit, Esalen would stand for them as a sign of everything wrong with liberal America.

To understand those folks and their place in the Golden State, all we must do is crack open Darren Dochuk’s brilliant *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*. It is the gripping story of how a ragtag group of white Southern evangelicals moved west during the Great Depression, established churches, universities, and communities throughout Southern California, and transformed themselves politically from populist New Dealers to conservative Reaganites. In fact, they didn’t just convert to conservatism: they converted conservatism to themselves. As they planted Texas

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evangelicalism in the suburbs of Southern California and encountered liberalism in its many social, economic, racial, and ethnic guises, these white transplants from the South gave modern conservatism a new shape, face, and grace. Through Dochuk's dazzling analysis and spellbinding storytelling, we encounter the personalities who helped fashion a "creative conservatism" that Ronald Reagan rode to the White House and that conservative politicians have been trying to recapture ever since.

From Bible Belt to Sunbelt is historical analysis at its finest. Dochuk dug through church archives, waded through sermons and school curricula, and listened to the most hackneyed of sermons. We find in *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* that California has been just as important to the history of religious conservatism as it has been to the history of religious liberalism in the United States. If Esalen helped create an America that was "spiritual, but not religious," then Pepperdine University and minister Tim LaHaye taught evangelicals how to run together patriotism, fiscal conservatism, and faith. When it comes to religion, culture, and politics, California is both a red state and a blue state.

If Dochuk reveals one side of California's evangelicals, sociologist Gerardo Marti shows another side in *Hollywood Faith*. It's a study of Oasis Community Church in Los Angeles, a multiracial congregation where most of the members aspire to work in the entertainment industry. According to Marti, the spiritual focus speaks less to their political worldviews and more to their economic aspirations and woes. As wannabe entertainers sing of Christ's unending love, as they worship a god who never fails to cast them, and as they pray for healing after another week of no callbacks, the church provides a space for them to be creative and to understand failure. Oasis, as Marti brilliantly examines it, is an example of how new evangelical megachurches like Oasis—or Rick Warren's Saddleback Church only eighty miles south in Orange County—can be large, but flexible. Shorn of any denominational ties, they can meet their congregants where they most need it. And at Oasis, amid their narcissistic dreams for fame on the silver screen, Los Angeles evangelicals create a gospel that prizes prosperity while accepting routine failure as all part of God's plan.

Historians of early America often look to New England and Puritanism to understand the founding of the United States. Now, they can look to modern California and its pluralism to behold the nation's future. These books show what so many of us see and feel. California is a land and a state of mind that holds and expands our many visions. **B**