

## FOREWORD

*One of the first signs of a saint will be the fact that other people do not know what to make of him.<sup>1</sup>*  
Thomas Merton

There is considerable unanimity among the world's religions, and especially among the contemplative traditions, that we have overestimated our usual state of mind, yet greatly underestimated our potential. These traditions, which together form the perennial philosophy, perennial wisdom, or perennial psychology, consider our usual awareness to be only semiconscious dreams, *maya*, or a consensus trance. Yet these same traditions claim that we are capable of escaping from this trance and of thereby realizing what has been variously called enlightenment, liberation, salvation, *moksha*, or awakening.

Needless to say, these claims have evoked strong reactions throughout history, especially in our own time. The most extreme reactions have involved outright dismissal and dramatic idealization. The very possibility of enlightenment—let alone of the existence of a realm of pure consciousness, Mind, Spirit, or Geist, which enlightenment is said to reveal—has been denied on metaphysical grounds by philosophies such as materialism, Marxism, and scientism. Likewise, claims for mystical insights and liberation have been pathologized by perspectives such as those of psychoanalysis and what William James called "medical materialism." In his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James commented as follows:

Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Frances of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. . . . All such mental overextensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter . . . due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover.<sup>2</sup>

At the other extreme, spiritual practitioners have sometimes been idealized to the point where their humanity and fallibility are completely denied. In such cases the teacher can do no wrong and everything he or she does is interpreted as a divinely inspired infallible teaching for the benefit of others. The dangers of this attitude have been the delight of our mass media for years.

Yet on balance, while it is hard to accept spiritual figures, or even spiritual masters, as infallible, it is equally difficult to dismiss them out of hand. After all, the great saints and sages have been said to represent the highest levels of human development and to have had the greatest impact on human history. So at least said the historian Toynbee, the author Tolstoy, the philosophers Bergson, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, and the psychologists James, Maslow, and Wilber, among others. Said Toynbee, "Who are the greatest benefactors of the living generation of mankind? I should say: Confucius and Lao Tzu, the Buddha, the Prophets of Israel and Judah, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and Socrates."<sup>3</sup>

Assuming that alongside numbers of imposters true saints and sages do exist and have realized something profound about their nature and ours, how are we to understand our reactions to them? After all, in addition to inspiring literally billions of people, they have also been tortured, poisoned, crucified, and burned, often by law-abiding citizens seeking to protect society from their influence.

The question is complicated by the fact that some religious practitioners and masters have clearly seemed bizarre by conventional standards. Some appear to have deliberately flouted convention, provoked authorities, and offended their listeners. Indeed some of them have appeared so bizarre as to have been labeled by such names as holy fools, crazy-wisdom teachers, or god intoxicants.

What are we to make of these paradoxical people? Clearly, our answers have enormous implications for our understanding of human nature, potential, and pathology, of religion, enlightenment, and sainthood, and of the effects of contemplative practices. Yet these paradoxical people have been subject to almost no serious research.

Here at last is a book that studies them carefully, confronts the paradoxes they present, ranges over a broad expanse of traditions, cultures, and times, and is open to both the potentials and the pitfalls of spiritual practice. Here is a book that seeks neither to idealize nor to pathologize but rather to acknowledge and understand both the benign and the bizarre behavior of those subgroups of spiritual imposters, practitioners, and even masters who display what Georg Feuerstein calls "holy madness."

And who better to do this than Georg Feuerstein, a writer of enormous breadth of scholarship, a person acknowledged as one of the foremost authorities on Yoga, and yet more than just a scholar, a scholar and a practitioner. Feuerstein has practiced Yoga and other contemplative disciplines of which he

writes and that is an important qualification. For it is becoming increasingly clear, both from a growing body of psychological and philosophical theory as well as from personal accounts, that one's intellectual understanding of contemplative practices, traditions, psychologies, and philosophies may be significantly enhanced by, and even dependent on, one's degree of personal experience with the practices. While there is much to be said for detached objectivity in many areas of research, it seems that in the study of contemplative practices and practitioners, careful objectivity may be best coupled with personal experience.

Prepare, then, to be educated, entertained, challenged, and confounded by the accounts of "holy madness" herein. For the men and women who are the subject of this book flout convention, polite behavior, and much that we traditionally hold dear, puncture our favorite images and illusions, and challenge our neat theories and conventional wisdom. This book tells us a great deal about them and thereby about ourselves.

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