



Placebo: The Worlds of Pain, Religion, Mysticism and Medicine—an Overview

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There is no gainsaying the fact that Dr Dalip Khetarpal has meticulously and insightfully made a thorough research, thoughtful and in-depth analysis of his recent creation, entitled, 'Placebo: The Worlds of Pain, Religion, Mysticism and Medicine'. The book seamlessly weaves together historical, religious, and scientific perspectives to present a well-rounded view of the subject matter. The author's ability to synthesize information from diverse sources with his personal concept and many disciplines is commendable and greatly enhances the depth of the discussion.

The book takes a deep dive into mystical ecstasy and explicates how pain plays a role in spiritual experiences. Right from the start, it explores the complex relationship between medical science, psychology, and religious practices. It hones in on the concept of the placebo effect and how it influences the way

people perceive pain in different cultural and religious settings. The discussion covers a wide range of religious rituals, from self-flagellation in Christianity and Islam to more intense practices like firewalking, impaling, and even baby tossing in different cultures. Bringing in mystic figures such as St. Teresa of Avila and Padre Pio adds a personal touch, making the narrative more compelling. What sets this book apart is how it tackles the psychodynamic role of pain in spirituality, shedding light on both cultural and biological dimensions. The author skillfully bridges gaps in existing literature, providing valuable insights. References to works by Elaine Scarry, 'The Body in Pain';, and Robert C. Fuller's 'Spirituality in the Flesh' show the author's commitment to rigorous scholarship and building upon existing knowledge. Adding a contemporary and scientifically informed layer, the book incorporates neurochemical explanations for spiritual experiences. This showcases the synthesis of diverse perspectives, making the exploration more comprehensive and relevant to varied audiences.

What is really remarkable about the book is the way it brings in neuroscience and psychology with great efficacy, giving us a modern perspective on understanding mystical experiences and the placebo effect. The author goes into the nitty-gritty of neurological feedback functions connected to its agency. This helps bridge the gap between religious practices and what

science tells us. What especially fascinated me is the way the book compares the experience of pain with painless meditation in reaching ecstatic states. This idea is supported and fortified by references to Ramana Maharshi and studies by D'Aquili and Newberg, which adds a lot of depth to the whole exploration. The book also looks at other important works in the field, giving a nod to Elaine Scarry's, 'The Body in Pain' and Robert C. Fuller's 'Spirituality in the Flesh.' This puts the author's work into the bigger picture of pain, showing a

well-rounded and knowledgeable perspective. Bringing in references to mystics like St. Teresa of Avila and Bernard of Clairvaux, along with their vivid descriptions of mind-blowing experiences, makes the narrative more relatable and telling—human as well as celestial..

When the author compares his work to Elaine Scarry's, 'The Body in Pain,' a key difference is revealed. However, they emphasize the unique focus on psychodynamic perspectives and how pain can be transformed in spiritual contexts. Scarry's work, on the other hand, mostly digs into the idea that pain is hard to express because of certain inexplicable implications. This book takes it a step further, i.e. looking at the intricate connection between pain, culture, and spiritual goals.

One thing that really stands out is how the book covers a diverse range of mystics. They traverse from Christian figures like Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi to the Penitentes in the Southwest United States and religious practices in the Philippines. This global perspective adds a lot of depth and meaning to the narrative, showing how the quest for ecstatic experiences is universal. At the same time, the book recognizes the unique cultural expressions tied to these experiences. It makes connections to the concept of mortification, underlining its role in various religious traditions, especially within the Catholic Church and Opus Dei. The discussion on self-flagellation and its symbolic meaning during penitential processions gives a cultural context. The book also brings in references to show how these practices are portrayed in popular culture, like Paul Bettany's character in 'The Da Vinci Code,' adding a touch of modern relevance. The book makes some valuable comparisons with works by Maureen Flynn, Violet MacDermot, Cristina Mazzoni, and others, which helps place the author's work in the broader context of mysticism studies. They also give props to Elaine

Scarry's "The Body in Pain," recognizing it as a milestone in pain research, which adds a scholarly touch to the text.

The book even dives into the intriguing nature of Jain beliefs, where the pursuit of a tough and painful life paradoxically leads to healing and health benefits. It navigates through the complexities of Jain dietary restrictions, fasting practices, and the philosophical foundations, guiding their way of life. The impact of these practices on mental, physical, and emotional health, linked to the release of endorphins and serotonin, adds a scientific perspective to the analysis. A significant focus is on the Shia practice of self-flagellation during Ashura, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. It sheds light on the involvement of both men and women in these rituals, including self-inflicted pain, like walking on burning coals and the use of knives or blades in some regions. The author skillfully points out the participants' lack of awareness regarding the medical and psychological impacts, emphasizing the release of endorphins and the cathartic nature of the rituals. This research stands out by highlighting the physiological aspect, emphasizing the release of endorphins, the body's

natural painkillers, and delving into the cathartic nature of the observed rituals. However, a notable strength of the book lies in the author's critical stance, acknowledging that the actual role of physical pain remains somewhat elusive and largely unexplored until the publication of "Sacred Pain." The text effectively positions itself within the evolving discourse on pain, spirituality, and cultural influences, contributing valuable insights to the academic conversation.

The author's skillful handling of the subject matter effectively underscores the significance of his findings, positioning the research as a groundbreaking contribution to the existing body of knowledge. The discussion also gets into

the mystical experiences tied to pain, tapping into the concept of Samadhi. The text explores the otherworldly and emotional sides of Samadhi, talking about the neurological and clinical angles on mystical experiences. It brings up research on the effects of psilocybin and floats the idea that self-induced pain, be it in religious or everyday contexts, might trigger psychological states similar to those experienced by folks meditating or using psychoactive substances.

A very interesting aspect of the book is, the author points out the role of religion as a coping mechanism, how it helps people make sense even of suffering, take charge of internal and external forces, and find comfort, joy, and hope. He also discusses the placebo effect in the context of religious practices, where folks see improvements in symptoms without any active treatment or medicine. The text even takes a stroll through the historical changes in psychiatric care, from moral instruction to linking religion with neurosis and hysteria. The author recognizes the changing attitudes in psychiatry, emphasizing the need for patient-centered care that considers religious and spiritual leanings. It notes the recent shift in the American College of Graduate Medical Education's requirements for training in psychiatry, emphasizing the understanding of religious or spiritual factors influencing psychological development. The discussion extends to the contemporary research landscape, where studies on religion, spirituality, and health are growing rapidly, although psychiatrists often avoid researching the relationship between religious involvement and severe mental disorders. The text acknowledges the complexity of evaluating spirituality, which is often either linked to religion or, assessed through positive socio-psychological states.

A section of the text explores the positive and negative health outcomes associated with religion and spirituality, citing research by Harold G. Koenig. The mention of stress hormones and their impact on immune and cardiovascular functions

connects the psychological aspects of religious involvement with physiological well-being and then shifts to a discussion on trans-humanism and its intersection with religious beliefs. It outlines the conflict between transhumanism and established religions, followed by a more recent trend of harmony and collaboration between transhumanists and religious communities. The movement's objectives, including the quest for immortality, are highlighted for the first time in their broader perspective.

The most notable facet of the book is its seamless integration of neuroscience, psychology, mystical and religious studies, forging a multidimensional understanding of the interplay between physical pain, religious or mystical experiences. The language is both lucid and accessible, making complex concepts intelligible for a wider readership. The systematic approach to exploring mysticism, asceticism, and the placebo effect enhances the coherence of the narrative, demonstrating the author's organizational prowess. Beyond a historical exposition, the text prompts readers to reflect on the nuanced and individualized experiences of mysticism, encouraging a deeper contemplation of cultural variations.

This literary contribution stands as a testament to the author's scholarly acumen and commitment to advancing interdisciplinary studies. The meticulous research, insightful analysis, and compelling expression of every delicate nuance of his thought combine to make this book an indispensable resource for scholars and enthusiasts interested in the fascinating intersection of pain, spirituality, religion and mysticism.

Overall, the author successfully weaves together historical accounts, religious practices, neuroscience, and cultural observations to provide a comprehensive overview of intrinsic and extrinsic pain in mystical and ecstatic states of consciousness. By providing a global perspective on intrinsic

and extrinsic pain in mystical experiences, Dr Dalip Khetarpal invites readers to critically reflect on the intersections of spirituality, pain, and the human quest for transcendence to embrace the transformative power of true morality and Natural Law. Based thus, on innumerable merits as elucidated, the book, 'Placebo: The Worlds of Pain, Religion, Mysticism and Medicine', easily won international acclaim.



Dr. Urvashi Verma

Dr Urvashi, a dentist by choice and inadvertent public health professional in Government sector, seamlessly weaves her roles with a profound passion for literature. Her newfound poetic journey, a testament to an unwavering love for words, has yielded a multitude of compositions, some of which have graced the pages of renowned journals. These verses, born from a heart immersed in creative expression, reflect a unique perspective that echoes in her diverse professional endeavors. Driven by the guiding light of literature, she eagerly anticipates broadening her poetic horizons, sharing her profound vision with the world.
