

# NTR

KEEPING CURRENT

## SPIRITUALITY

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### Getting Oriented in the Field of Spirituality

These days, there is no shortage of resources purporting to offer nurturance for our spiritual lives. More problematic is how to find one's footing in the avalanche of options. This "Keeping Current" focuses on recent books, suggesting a few core resources that Christian ministers and educators will find helpful as they search for an orientation for themselves and those they serve within the confusing torrent.

One way to sort out presentations of spirituality is to notice which of three basic concerns predominates. A first concern is that of the searching human person casting about for a way to live the fullness of human potential. A second is that of wisdom traditions eager to offer a distillation of their riches to participants. Finally, there is the concern to engage in careful academic reflection, analysis, and critique. A basic orienting question is which of these is one's own primary interest, and whether that matches up with the interest of the materials offered. Of course, it is not unusual for two or more of these three concerns to be combined in one text.

Much of the current profusion of spiritual resources is in the highly popular genre of self-help, New Age, and personal growth

books. These tend to operate almost totally in terms of the first concern, assuming that the individual and his/her needs are the main norm by which choices about one's spiritual life are made. This approach is usually strongly success-oriented, draws eclectically and often in a distorting way on a range of traditions, and tends to disparage the value of institutions. While committed Christians sometimes find the techniques and attitudes advanced by these books useful, they need a good grounding in their own tradition to be able to discern the points at which the proposed approach may be antithetical to their Christian values, practices, and doctrines.

For this reason, this essay focuses on books that have been written within the context of the Christian wisdom tradition. I have selected books in each of three categories: (1) introductions to the basics of spiritual living in today's world; (2) multi-author anthologies that survey current developments in the field of spirituality; and (3) anthologies offering a taste of the historical riches of Christianity. In each category, I have chosen three books that meet different combinations of needs encountered in pastoral ministry today.

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### **Introductions to Spiritual Living Today**

*The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* by Ronald Rolheiser (New York: Doubleday, 1999) is aptly named; the author's central theme is how our desires fuel the spiritual search. After astutely surveying the current situation, he sets forth several "non-negotiable essentials" for Christian discipleship, and then develops the thesis that the Incarnation is the basis of a Christian spirituality. This delightfully written book, full of striking stories, manages to combine its agenda of presenting the wisdom of Christianity with a very refreshing openness to the reality of people's lives today.

*Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today's World* by Diarmuid Ó Murchú (New York: Crossroad, 1998) has found an eager audience among those who feel somewhat alienated from mainstream Christianity yet have not given up on it totally. Ó Murchú proposes breaking free from the moribund institutional and theological structures of established religion in favor of reclaiming deep archetypal and cosmic energies. In the concluding chapters Ó Murchú makes the case that this is a fulfillment of the authentic message of Jesus. In his view—as in that of so many people today—human vitality and progress lie in spirituality, not religion.

The third text in this category, Lawrence Cunningham and Keith Egan's *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1996) was written for use in an introductory course in an academic setting but is certainly not limited to that usage. It comprehensively surveys basic Christian themes and practices, also providing extensive footnotes, suggested readings, and exercises. References to classical texts and historical issues are ubiquitous, giving the reader at least a glimpse of the historical pluralism and

depth available to be tapped by Christians today.

### **Survey Anthologies**

Books in this category strive to introduce readers to the widest range of views on what is happening in spirituality today. To prepare *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D. Chittister* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001), Mary Hembrow Snyder invited twenty-five spiritual pathbreakers to contribute short, accessible essays on what each regards as the leading-edge issue for spirituality today. Each essay is a quick yet highly stimulating read. This would be a good place to start simply to open up one's imagination and get a sense of some of the new visions that are currently afoot in the world.

For a more in-depth and praxis-oriented survey of trends, however, a better choice is either or both of the two volumes of Robert Wicks' *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers* (New York: Paulist, 1995 and 2000). The two volumes together total over 1,300 pages and include 77 substantial essays, most by established authors. Topics covered include prayer, spiritual development and wholeness, spiritual direction, use of scripture in ministry, dealing with suffering, group work, liturgy, and ministry with special populations. These are excellent books to read straight through for updating or simply to keep on the shelf for reference as ministerial needs arise.

For those looking for more systematic analyses of spirituality, especially its relation to theology, a good choice might be Kenneth Collins's *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000). The twenty-three essays, some of them chosen from the best of previously published material, deal with issues of concern to those in academia as well as ministers; for example,

defining and analyzing spirituality, the relation of spirituality to theology, spirituality and the Trinity, spirituality and scripture, and spirituality and feminism. There is also a section with essays on spirituality in many of the major Christian denominational traditions. Strangely, in that section Roman Catholicism is represented only by an essay on Carmelite spirituality.

### Historical Anthologies

Presenting the pluralistic riches of Christian life over 2,000 years of history inevitably requires making choices. In my experience, no one who teaches spirituality is ever completely satisfied with the choices made by others. The anthologies reviewed here each have flaws, but nonetheless may be the best available.

*The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) is an ambitious attempt to offer a comprehensive and attractive historical survey. It consists of ten sections on different periods and traditions, each authored by an expert in the field. Almost every page features a well-reproduced color plate, and there are frequent timelines, sidebars, and other features to make the text engaging for the casual reader as well as the more serious student. While this is a basically solid book that could be used in an undergraduate or seminary setting as well as in adult education, it is evident that at times the desire to sell books has outweighed more scholarly considerations. For example, one significant weakness is that too often illustrative art has been selected from an era or tradition completely different from the one being presented in that section.

For those eager to sample the original texts of Christian spiritual classics, Louis Dupré and James Wiseman have recently published a revised version of their *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian*

*Mysticism* (New York: Paulist, 1988, 2001). By limiting their selection to just twenty-one mystical writers, they are able to give more ample selections than are often found in anthologies that try to be more comprehensive. The limitation also means, however, that they have room for only two Protestants and two twentieth-century figures. Nonetheless, this text will serve well for a classic yet profound introduction to the Christian mystical tradition.

A balance to this, at least in some aspects, is offered by Shawn Madigan's *Mystics, Visionaries, Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). Madigan has made selections from the writings of twenty-six women, nine of them from the twentieth century. She has clearly made a concerted effort to include women of color, women in states of life other than vowed celibacy, and women committed to social justice. Although limited to women's writings, this book gives readers a more comprehensive sense of the many flavors of intensely-lived Christian spirituality than does the Dupré-Wiseman volume.

### Conclusion

These nine books are far from the only good resources available. Another established favorite, especially for academic settings, is Michael Downey's *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1997) which surveys the state of the question for such topics as definition and method in the study of spirituality, current movements and burning questions, and the specific character of Christian spirituality. My suggestion to those seeking orientation within the field of spirituality: engage in a reflective reading of any two or three of the texts reviewed here. They will not fail to provide clarifying categories, stimulating visions, and centering wisdom.