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Spirituality

Of the many shifts and changes we have witnessed in theology over the past fifty years, none have been more diffuse than in the area of spirituality. Whereas in the past, books on spirituality pertained to the interior spiritual life, today, everything from comedy to T'ai Chi Chih falls under the rubric "spirituality." Perhaps this diffusion of spirituality into every human activity underscores the fact that the human person is, by nature, spiritual, and seeks ultimate fulfillment in ordinary everyday life. After all, grace *is* everywhere, so why limit spirituality to the confines of the soul? The fact that spirituality is now ascribed to just about every aspect of human life means that there are as many spiritual trends as there are human activities. In this respect, keeping current in spirituality is a somewhat difficult task. What I have to offer, therefore, might not whet everyone's appetite but it is worth mentioning a few recent books that are of contemporary, if not popular, interest.

Philip Sheldrake's *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* is one of the best introductions to the study of spirituality. Originally published in 1991, Sheldrake's revised text was published last year in the United States and continues to be one of the most instructive books on spirituality. The new text approaches the field of spirituality from an interdisciplinary perspective, taking into account religious pluralism and postmodernity. Sheldrake's principal approach, however, is historical and he offers excellent discussions on the meaning of spirituality, the relationship between spirituality and history, the interpretation of spiritual texts, and the various types of spirituality. For anyone interested in lifting spirituality from the emotional dribble of self-help techniques and placing its development in an historical context, this is a worthwhile book to peruse.

One of the fastest growing areas in spirituality today is the interface between the human spiritual quest and the world of science. Books in this area, written by both scientists and spiritual seekers alike, continue to surface daily. As we learn more from the new science about the dynamic world we live in, we are becoming more aware that fulfillment of the human spirit is not simply a vertical ascent away from the earth, as if the physical biological world we are immersed in is simply a stage prop for the supernatural quest. Rather, we are becoming aware that life in the universe is pervaded with mystery, and this mystery underscores the religious nature of the universe itself. For those who would like to engage in the universe story but fear the darkness of scientific terminology, I would recommend *The Sacred Depths of Nature* by Ursula Goodenough. As Mary Evelyn Tucker states, "Goodenough gives us a new bridge between science and religion that is both eloquent and elegant. She offers us the poetry, power, and passion of her vision of nature, a vision born from scientific knowledge, nurtured by religious sensibility, and inspired by nature itself. Such pathbreaking interdisciplinary work illumines the way for each of us—not because it says all, but because of all it says."

Goodenough, daughter of the renowned scholar, E. R. Goodenough, is on a spiritual journey, although she struggles to profess belief in a personal God. Through the scientific understanding of the natural world, however, she experiences the mystery that is woven into the physical world and describes this in terms of religious experience, which she expresses as awe, wonder, gratitude and joy. Describing the inner workings of biological life with exquisite simplicity, she offers short reflections at the end of each chapter that integrate her scientific knowledge with her wonder at the pervasive mystery. At the end of her chapter on the origin of life, for example, she writes: "And so I once again revert to my covenant with Mystery, and respond to the emergence of Life not with a search for its design or purpose but instead with outrageous celebration that it occurred at all" (29).

While Goodenough discloses the sacredness of the natural world, Paul Brockelman addresses the influence of the new cosmology on human existence, including the human world view, ethics, and culture itself. In his book *Cosmology and Creation: The Spiritual Significance of Contemporary Cosmology*, Brockelman identifies the new cosmology as the new exploration of life which is influencing our view of reality, changing our view of life and our role and destiny within it. As a philosopher and religious scholar, Brockelman seeks to bridge the gap between the scientific and spiritual, bringing together the head and the heart. These two realms have been isolated from each other for so long, he claims, that we have begun to lose a mystical sense of our place in the universe. The new cosmology, with its penchant for complex

mathematics and scientific detail, is disclosing a new universe story that puts a whole new spin on reality. According to the author, this new understanding of the universe gives us a spiritual vision of a wider order of being to which we all belong.

Although the new science is provoking a new fervor in spirituality, the ancient wisdom of the desert tradition is still one of the most influential guides for the spiritual quest. Belden Lane's *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* is perhaps one of the most profound books on the spiritual journey in recent times. A professor of theology at St. Louis University, Lane writes with the expertise of a scholar and the penetrating heart of a man who has known human suffering, pain and loss. While Lane's interest is in apophatic spirituality, he approaches the mystical journey not from the point of objective description but rather from the "bottom up" experience of human life. The "fierce landscapes" that Lane describes refer to the desert and mountain, places of retreat and solitude in the search for God. However, these geographical landscapes also refer to the landscape of the human heart which, through the trials of life, enters the desert of purgation and the mountain of truth through the rugged terrain of life's twisted experiences. The journey ends in the cloud of unknowing and abandonment, where love is discovered in the total freedom of letting go into God.

What makes Lane's book so rich is its unusual form. Using a mixture of narrative, description, and personal experiences, Lane weaves the wisdom of the desert tradition into the struggle for meaning in contemporary life. The underlying thread of the text is Lane's mother who, diagnosed with bone cancer and then with Alzheimer's disease, lives through her fierce landscapes of pain and suffering, eventually to arrive at the cloud of abandonment and peace which is her death. As the last and only child, Lane's apophatic experience of God is intertwined with his mother's journey. He draws from the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers to describe the spiritual journey as one of risk and vulnerability in the search for God. The dilution of contemporary spirituality with "analgesic" techniques, Lane claims, has obscured the difficulties of the modern journey. As he writes: "My fear is that much of what we call 'spirituality' today is overly sanitized and sterile, far removed from the anguish of pain, the anchoredness of place. Without the tough-minded discipline of desert-mountain experience, spirituality loses its bite, its capacity to speak prophetically to its culture, its demand for justice" (20).

Lane's pursuit of God amidst the winding ravines of human life finds a counterpart in Henri Nouwen's *Sabbatical Journey*. Composed as a diary during his final sabbatical year in 1995, Nouwen, who was one of the most influential spiritual writers in this century, provides

detailed narratives of his friendships, pastoral experiences and daily encounters. While the text reads as a composite of daily diaries, it also reveals the “grist” of Nouwen’s meditations: friendships (which were extremely important to him), favorite places to visit, favorite foods and restaurants, the centrality of the Eucharist in his life, and the importance of community. Nouwen’s *Sabbatical Journey* is, in a broad sense, the kataphatic side of Lane’s *Fierce Landscapes*. Both authors are acutely aware of the human condition and of a “spirituality of brokenness.” While Lane places emphasis on the apophatic face of human experience, Nouwen emphasized the arena of human interaction—friendships, community—where God is revealed. Nouwen’s participation in L’Arche community of mentally disabled men and women testified to his own spirituality of brokenness.

This brief scan of spiritual currents simply underscores the fact that, throughout the daily rhythms and cycles of life, the search for God stretches forth in all directions from the rugged landscapes of human hearts. Amidst the violence of a disordered world, the human spirit struggles to be released from the shell of sin, to break open into the total freedom of love and peace. It is in the dynamism of the struggle that the meaning of spirituality continues to unfold, widening its embrace to include the universe, yet nurturing the solitary human spirit in its pursuit of God. For those who would like to continue reading in spirituality but have neither the time nor money to invest in books, I would suggest subscribing to the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* published by Loyola Marymount University in California. With its erudite articles and engaging book reviews one cannot help but appreciate that spirituality is really not the “warm fuzzy” of theology but rather it is theology breaking forth in the human experience of God.

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"Death comes for us all; even at our birth—even at our birth, death does but stand aside a little. And every day he looks toward us and muses somewhat to himself whether that day or the next he will draw nigh. It is the law of nature, and the will of God."

—Thomas More to his daughter Margaret,
Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*