



Routledge international handbook of spirituality in society and the professions

edited by Laszlo Zsolnai and Bernadette Flanagan, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 458 pp., RRP £190 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-21467-5

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BOOK REVIEW

Routledge international handbook of spirituality in society and the professions, edited by Laszlo Zsolnai and Bernadette Flanagan, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 458 pp., RRP £190 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-21467-5

This impressive volume vigorously promotes a new paradigm for human self-understanding, one that *necessarily* includes a spiritual dimension. Providing more than a benchmark of current thinking and research, it will serve for many as a reliable signpost, a genuine beacon of hope, lighting and brightening the way forward. For both their vision and hard work, the publishers, editors and authors are to be thanked and congratulated.

Bookended by the editorial 'Introduction' and final 'Way forward', 51 chapters are arranged under six headings: 'Facets of spirituality'; 'Nature'; 'Home and community'; 'Healing'; 'Economy, politics, and law'; and 'Knowledge and education'. There are 68 contributing authors, from all the globe's six inhabited continents, making this a truly international endeavor, and proving that spirituality knows no boundaries; although this very thought gives rise to an interesting problem: 'How to define that which is boundless'.

Adrian-Maria Gellel (in the chapter on 'Children and spirituality') suggests: 'We may not agree on the precise definition but there is general agreement on the main elements that inform our understanding of spirituality' (125). Wisely, the editors offer 'a working definition [to be] used as a point of departure' in the book's first sentence: 'Spirituality is people's multiform search for a transcendent meaning of life that connects them to all living beings and brings them in touch with God or Ultimate Reality' (3).

Spiritual writer Thomas Merton (1915–1968) put it more succinctly: 'We are all already one' (1973, 308). With six chapters on the subject of Nature (in Part III), it is clear that this holistic vision of seamless connectivity between people, each other and the divine, also includes an intimate – thus spiritual – bond with everything else, animate and inanimate, the entirety of the cosmos.

The editors and authors are, in the main, academics – university researchers and teachers – so the book has a decidedly academic flavor and thrust but, taken as a whole, it seems much more than that. Whereas each of the chapters tends to be scholarly, cautious and well-referenced, attempting to encapsulate spirituality in a specific context, read together they announce something wonderful, a significant measure of agreement in every sphere of human endeavor covered.

This is important in the world today. Here, for example, is another guiding quotation from the Introduction: 'Numerous studies document that the more people prioritize materialistic goals, the lower their well-being and the more likely they are to engage in manipulative, competitive, and ecologically degrading behaviours' (3). Then a further claim:

That professions which want to surpass the ecological, social, and ethical "mess" that modernity [has] created are beginning to articulate within their own ranks the need to embrace spirituality and develop practices based on a less materialistic, more holistic worldview. (3)

It is right to include in such a book the acknowledgement that: 'Spirituality is not always beneficial ... but at times can lead to problematic outcomes for individuals, families and communities' (176). But this is insufficient as an argument to dismiss spirituality altogether. As these pages attest, a timely, thoughtful and thought-provoking movement to 're-enchant the world' (35) has surely begun.

The first six chapters – which cover spirituality and (1) the psychology of religion; (2) philosophy; (3) theology; (4) culture; (5) transpersonalism; and (6) emergent research methods – will be of value to most readers of this journal. For example, a statement in Chapter 2 concerning phenomenology notes that: ‘Highlighting the significance of experiences, provides an antidote to a tendency in science to diminish or devalue what it cannot explain’ (19). This remark is complemented in Chapter 4 by a sensitive explanation of the rise of secularism, suggesting that: ‘Although modernization led to the gradual demise of the social significance of the supernatural worldview ... charismatic religious and spiritual phenomena did not fade during the centuries of secularization’ (36).

As a further example of a comment applicable beyond the defined field giving rise to it, the authors of Chapter 6 reveal that: ‘... We came to acknowledge that the essential feature of transformative research is the scholar’s encounter with the Sacred, a journey of transformation that involves the researchers’ understanding of the topic and themselves as human beings’ (49). Within the chapters in Parts III to VII, each devoted to a specific topic, there are numerous such general observations. These are often repeated but articulated differently throughout the book, offering different shades of emphasis each time. In the chapter on ‘Spirituality and ageing’, for example, a comment reads that: ‘The intersection of gerontology and the psychology of religion [is] a place that now attracts skilled researchers, grant funding and publisher interest’ (142). This can also be said of spirituality research generally, and a similar point is made in the chapter on tourism, but with a more commercial slant. Investment in ‘Spiritual tourism’, is said to depend on it returning satisfactory financial, rather than social, rewards.

Echoing the need for researchers to encounter the sacred, Chapter 20 includes the recommendation: ‘Anyone working in the context of homelessness needs to have border-crossing experiences that evidence what life at the margins is like and what it feels like to be treated as less than human’ (171). It is equally good to be reminded in Chapter 23 that: ‘Medicine is the craft of healing a human being. The practitioner has an understanding, often implicit, of what a human being is, and how to help a human being become healthy, or whole. Medicine is therefore innately spiritual’ (193). On the negative side, however, we read that by the twenty-first century:

The patient [will be] a machine, surrounded and assessed by machines; even the doctor would be a machine, a corporate employee doing standardized tasks in a standardized way, and replaceable, at least in principle, by a robot or computer program. (195)

Far from engendering pessimism, such observations serve for most of the book’s authors as a challenge and therefore a kind of rallying call. The march of technology as part of a relentless quest for material success, profit and progress at the expense of individual people, may seem unstoppable, causing dismay and confusion in many quarters, but there is another, more humane and much better way forward.

Here, for example, is the conclusion reached by the author of Chapter 23, Athar Yawar:

Future approaches to medicine will be more successful if they have a more complete view of humanity: seeing people not only as machines, but as biological, cultural, social, and spiritual beings. Spirituality ... if consciously examined ... can allow questions of value and justice to be properly addressed, and provide healing that is deep and of lasting value to the patient and to the clinician. (200)

Many authors reach similar conclusions. The range of the 51 subjects covered is vast: from literature to sport, from ecology to theater, agriculture to architecture, education to cyberspace, law to journalism, peace to policing, landscape planning, mental health, the city, birth, gender,

disability, social work, dementia, economics and business, international development, leadership, politics, social activism, design, fashion, visual arts, music, movies, martial arts, and more.

Readers will turn naturally to those sections which seem most directly connected to their own fields of interest and expertise, but all would do well to explore much more broadly this phenomenal hybrid smorgasbord of spirituality. One of the most appealing chapters to me, for example, full of hope and wisdom, is that by Celeste Snowber on ‘Spirituality and dance’ (404–411). Using memorably poetic language, she reminds us that, ‘... Too often in Western contemporary culture, it has been forgotten [that] the primal and ancient way of articulating human expression [is] through movement’. In dance:

Physicality and spirituality are lovers and companions ... The body and dance [acts] as a sacred space, a space set apart where one can connect to the inner landscape of the heart, emotion, and journey of what it means to be human. Within this landscape can be tears and prayers, passion and possibility, reflection and rumination ... There is too much pain in the world to keep it all locked in the crevices of the body without finding expression.

Many readers will agree with the statement, taken from the chapter on ‘Management development’, that: ‘There are well-tested methods in the wisdom and spiritual traditions that offer effective ways for training the mind’ (268). One of these, a method that, like dance, allows brokenness to heal and fosters transcendent experiences, while promoting the attainment of inner peace, wisdom and advanced spiritual maturity, is the regular, disciplined practice of meditation or ‘mindfulness’. Unsurprisingly, throughout this excellent compendium, this is often referred to positively and frequently recommended.

The book contains many additional nuggets of wisdom. You do not have to be involved in education, for example, to see that the statement,

Having a deep authentic presence in the classroom, whereby a teacher stands centred, confident, and present to self, is critical to a teacher creating and generating an ambience of safety, setting boundaries, and being mindfully present to the task in hand. (435)

Implicitly contains advice for every professional, politician, parent, indeed for any person engaged in human relations at work, in community, or at home.

Finally, however satisfied, a reviewer is bound to consider possible omissions. Could there be more? In this case, two additional themes given scarce mention suggest themselves for inclusion and development in any possible second edition. First, from neuroscience, the work summarized by Iain McGilchrist (2009) on the different mechanisms and priorities of the dualist, verbal, literal, materialist left hemisphere of the human brain and the holistic, silent, poetic, intuitive right hemisphere, adds significantly to human self-understanding, and to the interplay between material and spiritual worldviews and values. Second, despite some brief references to James Fowler’s six-stage faith development model, an opportunity seems to have been missed by the editors and authors to include an overview, providing some kind of map or guide, regarding how spiritual growth towards maturity proceeds in recognizable stages, most often through adversity rather than through attempts to prevent or evade it. (See, for example, Culliford 2014, 2020.)

And there is one further problem with this otherwise supremely worthwhile volume: the eye-watering cost. You may need a wealthy benefactor to purchase a personal copy. The next best thing will be for readers to ensure that, wherever their place of work or study, at least one copy is readily available to hand. Commercialism remains an unavoidable fact of life, so pay the price if you can; and, if not the cash, then do at least spend quality time with this pivotal piece of work, which serves to back a welcome revival of spiritual reality. As Thomas Merton (1973, 308) once put it, ‘We are all already one. But we imagine that

we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are’.

Notes on contributor

Larry Culliford is the author of *The Psychology of Spirituality: an introduction* (JKP 2011) and *The Big Book of Wisdom* (Legend Press 2020). See: www.ldc52.co.uk for details.

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