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Resources for Spirituality: Literature on Christian Spiritual Formation

DAVID WRAY

It was only a short time ago that those of us interested in spirituality and Christian spiritual formation made our way to Catholic bookstores for literature. From those shelves, we grabbed the writings of Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil, and other Catholic scholars and contemplatives. Catholic bookstores were also among the few places through which we could build our libraries of spiritual masters (that is: Venerable Bede, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila).

For almost 200 years, little literature was produced in Protestant circles in the area of spirituality, spiritual disciplines, and spiritual formation. Because Protestants were reacting to Catholic penance and contrition, and because spiritual disciplines were associated with those Catholic spiritual practices, literature went relatively silent from the Reformation until about 25 years ago.

In 1978 Richard Foster wrote *Celebration of Discipline*. The response was so profound to Foster's writing that a movement emerged on his coattails. Today Evangelical bookstores are filled with Christian spiritual formation literature produced by Baker Books, Morehouse Publishing, Harper San Francisco, Upper Room Books, and many other mainline conservative Christian publishers.

The purpose of this article is to identify significant literature in spirituality and Christian spiritual formation. Rather than highlight spirituality classics, three contemporary seminal books are reviewed, and a short bibliography of Christian spiritual formation is recommended.

Christian Spirituality

McGrath, Alister E.

Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1999.

Alister E. McGrath, research lecturer in theology at the University of Oxford, approaches Christian spirituality through the lens of theology. After beginning with definitions and noting traditional ways spirituality is typically examined (historical surveys or exploring Catholic, Orthodoxy, Protestant streams), McGrath introduces readers to some of the great themes and texts of the Christian tradition. Some of the theological principles addressed are: creation, human nature and destiny, the trinity, and incarnation.

Perhaps most unique is McGrath's writing on biblical images and Christian spirituality. He maintains that numerous controlling images, grounded in the Old and New Testaments, offer an understanding of the nature of the Christian life and the means by which it can be advanced. The volume concludes by scrutinizing some of the classic texts of the Christian tradition. McGrath bills this book as an "introduction" to the discipline. As such, it provides readers with a good foundation on which to build a theology of Christian spiritual formation. Internet resources and an extensive bibliography can be found at the conclusion of the book.

Authentic Spirituality: Moving Beyond Mere Religion

Callen, Barry L.

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001

Because Callen edits the Wesleyan Theological Journal, and because his teaching appointment is at Anderson University, it is no surprise that this book leans toward the Wesleyan holiness tradition. Drawing on the best Christian thinkers and saints from every Christian century, Cullen presents a safe harbor for a believer swimming in the postmodern current of “anything goes” pluralistic spirituality. The book addresses Christian believers who lack an extensive knowledge of theology of church history but who hunger to better understand and pursue the Christian spiritual life.

Authentic spirituality, according to the author, requires disciples to join God in the costly ministry of redemption and justice. Cullen fulfills his goal of exploring Christian spirituality as spiritual information, spiritual formation, and spiritual transformation.

A History of Christian Spirituality

Holmes, Urban T., III

Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002.

Originally published in 1980, numerous research projects in Christian spirituality have engaged Holmes “circle of sensibility” for a theoretical model. Examining both the Western and Eastern spiritual heritages, this book proceeds from the Jewish antecedents through the New Testament period, monasticism, the Middle Ages, Byzantine spirituality, and the modern period.

Urban Holmes, an Episcopal priest, served as dean of the School of Theology at the University of the South before his death in 1981. In this volume, he seeks to answer the question, “How has Christian humanity through its history understood what it is to seek God and to know him?” To accomplish that task, Holmes provides the data for an interpretation of the tradition of Christian spirituality to illumine readers on the contemporary meaning of the experience of God in a manner that is meaningful and true.

SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SPIRITUALITY

Historical Perspectives

Foster, Richard J., *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

Mursell, Gordon (Ed.), *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, From East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

Tyson, John R. (Ed.), *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Practical Approaches

Boa, Kenneth, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

Gangel, Kenneth O., and James C. Wilhoit (Eds.), *The Christian Educator's Handbook On Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

Johnson, Susanne, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville: 1989).

Spiritual Disciplines

Cunningham, Lawrence S., and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

Foster, Richard J., *Celebration of Discipline*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998).

Thompson, Marjorie J., *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

Whitney, Donald S., *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

Willard, Dallas, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

Additional Resources

Paulist Press series, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, contains 109 volumes and can be examined at www.paulistpress.com.

Richard Foster's Web site, *Renovare* ("Renewal"), is a goldmine of resources in spirituality, www.renovare.org/invitation_a_word_from_rjf.htm.

Upper Room provides curriculum, books, seminars, and other resources in spirituality: www.upperroom.org/.

Henri Nouwen's expansive spirituality writings can be found at www.henrinouwen.org/books/bibliography/.

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