The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for Meaning and Fulfilment,

Reviewed by Israel Selvanayagam, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, iselvanayagam@hotmail.com

Keywords
spiritual dimensions, vision, hope,

This book is a helpful addition to increasing resources on spirituality and its approach is unique. It starts with a recognition of a deep spiritual crisis in today’s world which basically means, “a loss of vision, commitment and faith.” The author in her “prologue” observes:

An immense spiritual hunger exists to find a life of deeper significance than that of material goods, consumerism, and exploitative capitalism. The current global situation with its deep injustices, numerous wars, and threats of ecological disaster calls for new creative thinking and for transformative ways of living. This requires a more reverent attitude towards people and the planet; it also calls for a spirituality that will lead to the reorganization of world economics, politics, education, business, and world governance. (x)

In such a context, where there are hopelessness, despair, chaos and confusion, the author points out “that a more ethically grounded and action-oriented spirituality is not just a necessity—it is an imperative if we want to create a world more united and whole.” She calls the readers to move beyond academic study and debate, but to expand their own understanding of spirituality by participating in a deeper dialogue with some of the challenging questions and spiritual minds of our time, and becoming “inspired in heart and mind to seek and find deeper awareness, enlightenment and transformation.”

In ten chapters of almost equal length, and a lucid and engaging style, the book starts with a discussion on the meaning of spirituality with reference to Western words and different cultures. Though much can be said for viewing religion and spirituality as closely related and mutually embedded, the author points out that spirituality cannot be confined to religion as it is wider and in some sense even separate.

Spirituality can be linked to all human experiences, but it has a particularly close connection with the imagination, with human creativity and resourcefulness, with relationships—whether with ourselves, with others, or with a transcendent reality, named or unnamed, but often called the Divine, God,
or Spirit. Spirituality can also be connected with a sense of celebration and joy, with adoration and surrender, with struggle and suffering. (3)

It is a lived experience in relationship with our own bodies, with others, and with nature. It is an experience which seeks the fullness of life—a life of justice and peace, of integrating body, mind and soul, a life that touches the hem of the spirit in the midst of all our struggles of living in a world that becomes ever more globally interdependent, yet is so painfully torn apart.” (4)

There is a “spiritual consumerism” that seeks temporary solutions and peace of mind through tourism, shopping etc. There is spirituality without any recourse to traditional forms of religion. There are instances to talk in terms of spiritual renaissance, revival and revolution.

The second chapter deals with how spirituality as both an ideal and practice is understood by rare individuals, religious orders and by scholars. It ranges from inner movements, visions and goals to being an integral part of the whole life. With the title of “spirituality in a global world,” the third chapter discusses the significance of spirituality for the contemporary and cultural realities of the whole globe. While global consciousness is achieved by the global market and all its agencies, there is an increasing sense of ecological health and balance as evident, for instance, in the so called “earth community.” The Christian notion of oikoumene is extended to cover the whole inhabited earth with its religio-cultural plurality. There are thinkers in different religious traditions who have expressed a vision of the shared unity of the humankind. The ecological concept of “flourishing” is related to the whole web of life. The Interfaith movement and dialogue has a great deal to contribute to this concept, as discussed in the fourth chapter. An interfaith spirituality is possible, if there is openness to greater realities and greater depth.

Chapter five is titled, “spirituality with life’s dance,” which signifies inner dynamism and movement towards our deepest inwardness and innermost being, which is “closely interwoven with our awareness, sensibility, and capacity for reflection.”

There is the cosmic dance, and the dance of nature, but also the closely intertwinend dance of the human and divine Spirit based on mutual indwelling, likeness, and loving attraction. Since the human spirit is embodied and earthed, spirituality must be grounded both in the experience of the body and in contemporary earth-consciousness. Yet spirituality is also drawing us to ever-larger worlds beyond ourselves, beyond the horizons of the known. The invitation to join the cosmic dance is deeply alluring, but it is not without risks and trials. Life’s dance can be whirlwind, and dancing with the Spirit can mean walking through an all-transforming fire. (80)
This definition is further explained, taking the experience of embodiment, birth, childhood, active life, aging and dying, and pointing out the resources available to help in each. It is further elaborated, relating spirituality to education and health in the sixth chapter. Psychotherapy as spiritual journey is explained in a most fascinating way.

The seventh chapter discusses “spirituality and gender”: understandably, women’s spirituality, feminist spirituality, goddess spirituality, eco-feminist spirituality, and the intellectual and spiritual attainments of women are highlighted. The hope is for an inclusive vision and progress in which women will play their important part. Repeating some of the ecological concerns already expressed, but in a more focused manner, chapter eight deals with attitudes to nature and matter and the aid of science. It is pointed out how the new understanding of the evolution and process of life provides moments for awesome wonder and understanding grace and goodness. However, it is observed that people in general gain access to spirituality more easily through art than science. This links to the discussion in the ninth chapter on spirituality, the arts and the planet. While a section in this chapter explains art as a gateway to the spirit, once again nature-mysticism, ecological spirituality with a vision for global sustainability, planetary spirituality or the earth community, dominate the chapter.

“Spiritualities for Life” is the title of the final chapter. As one would expect, it sums up the discussion, starting with a reaffirmation of life in its fullness or “a wholesome human life full of dignity and value, with all the energy, maturity, and reflective awareness this entails.” Spirituality as struggle for life is explained with reference to a woman’s struggle to bring forth a life and the struggle of certain women’s groups against domestic, military and other forms of violence. It is pointed out how an individualistic, interior and escapist spirituality, in the face of excessive consumerism etc, needs to be directed to taking the social dimension seriously and engaging in the corporate struggle for transforming society. Global responsibility, ethic and meditation are illustrated with the life and achievement of certain individuals and organizations.

The existence of so many different trends and movements is a proof of the vibrant search for, and growing awareness of, the immense importance of the spiritual dimension in contemporary personal and social life around the globe. Ever more people are becoming conscious of the need for a spirituality that is commensurate with the deepest aspirations of our world. (188)

For feeling the zest for life and realizing the power of love, the creative ideas of a few theologians and thinkers are presented as possible resources.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2011
The book ends with a reflection on a vision of hope and flourishing in which the spiritual ignorance of many and the need to educate them is pointed out. Also, the need of taking all the different dimensions of life to be interwoven with spirituality is stressed. The following words end the book: “It is in the crucible of life that spirituality is born, emerges and unfolds, so that human life, and life on Earth, can fully blossom and flourish” (195).

As a whole, this book combines old ideas with fresh experiments. In a refreshing way it updates developments in the history, practice and new forms of spirituality. It has a global outlook in which individual experience is important but not enough. Global challenges have to be met with corporate response for which a holistic spirituality is required. It is often common human spirituality transcending adherence to particular religious traditions or cultures. While appealing for education and training, one may expect a suggested form that a prophetic cutting edge or “growing edge” is to take in today’s world. In other words, what are the ways by which a call to repentance, a new orientation in life, either in the name of Life or that of a named Source of life, can be given in a complex world with overflowing communication channels? Also, illustrations of hope expressed and experienced in the midst of failure even to the extent of death, would have helped those who ask questions in this regard.