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As the Spirit Moves Us: Embracing Spirituality in the Postsecondary Experience

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Reviewed by Polly A. Graham and Matthew J. Graham

As the Spirit moves us: Embracing spirituality in the postsecondary experience is a collection of professors' perspectives on the way in which their spirituality influences their professional lives. The nine authors are Christian communication professors at secular institutions who are writing in response to a higher education trend that represents spirituality in "unconventional, and to some extent shocking, ways" (p. 3). While the authors are responding to ambiguity with regard to spirituality, their efforts do not sufficiently clarify or make useful how spirituality, and specifically Christian spirituality, can inform their educational philosophies. While they seek to legitimate a place for spirituality in education, their examples lack substance, leaving the reader wondering what exactly constitutes the embracing of one's spirituality in a professional setting. Many of their presumed spiritual experiences could simply be considered good pedagogical practices. However, their assertion that spiritually-infused pedagogy can address the fragmented education that many college students experience is refreshing, as it is representative of the current openness to spirituality in higher education (Astin, 2003; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Kuh, 1995). It is this openness that provides Christian educators a platform from which to speak, and in view of the fact that this work falls short of providing constructive methods and practices, it is clear that there is a need for Christian practitioners to contribute rigorously and perceptively to the spirituality conversation.

The authors communicate their spiritual experiences by means of autoethnography, which Ellis and Bocher define as "... an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (2000, p. 739). This makes for a very readable volume as various theoretical ideas are woven into personal stories. Also noteworthy is the observation that the autoethnographic approach lends itself, quite naturally, to the existential orientation of this book. Narrated by a first-person voice, the notion of the objective researcher is jettisoned and replaced by the idea that even the researchers' own experiences are subject to critical reflection. Quickly, one notices an emphasis placed on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the authors in relation to the ethnic and cultural milieu in which they are situated. All told, the autoethnographic approach makes for a readable, accessible personal narrative which places a premium on the experiences of the authors and their own reflections on the cultural situation in which the research was conducted.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to ask whether or not autoethnography is a suitable platform from which spirituality in the classroom and in research should be discussed. As noted above, the product of such an approach yields a subjective reflection that is flexible; the author is not bound by any strict stylistic structure. In an organic way,

issues surrounding ethnicity, culture, and gender are brought into clear sight by virtue of the autoethnographic approach. This allows for very diverse research to be included—from being on the scene of a fatal car accident to serendipitous friendships. Thus, the autoethnographic approach can be helpful in that it allows authors to speak personally and freely, yet, in the case of this book, autoethnography becomes a means by which existentialist spirituality infuses otherwise ordinary teaching practice with, at times, a hollow sense of spiritual meaning.

While some authors present their spiritual experiences in more helpful ways than others, it is clear that these Christian professionals work in a secular environment. For example, a typical evangelical would not be accustomed to using the terminology that the authors of this text rely heavily on, words such as *synergy*, *life spirit*, *spiritual connection*, *center within*, and *inner work*. The name of Jesus is only used once in the text. The varying diction could point to a different understanding of some important spiritual issues, but it could also be indicative of the authors' understanding of and consistent interactions with non-Christian professionals and students. Perhaps some of this terminology should be incorporated into the work of Christian professionals (even those at evangelical institutions) as they seek to speak in terms that others in academia would both understand and welcome. To be sure, one should follow this suggestion with great caution as the vocabulary of Christian theology is quite precise whereas spirituality terminology seems to be broader in its scope. Moving away from a traditional Christian terminology and into broader spiritual terms may mean a significant loss of explanatory power. However, it could also help in having a respected voice in the spirituality dialogue.

Through what seems at times like audible voices, this work reveals some of the struggles and hostilities that Christians at secular institutions must endure. Their call for “character education, meaning development, and improvement of ethics, morals, and the spiritual qualities of a person” is clearly in line with what all Christian and many non-Christian higher education professionals desire for their students' education (p. 90). However, as previously mentioned, their methods come up short. Some of what was represented as spiritual pedagogy felt more like good teaching practices than something inherently spiritual—e.g., writing narratives, role-playing, using stories or fables, practicing a theory vs. simply memorizing, etc. However, much of their nominal spiritual activities served to affirm practices that Christian student development professionals already perform, such as building relationships, being compassionate, listening to students' stories, being good stewards, and encouraging reflection. With the current openness to spirituality in higher education, Christian practitioners should seize the opportunity to share the knowledge that they have regarding this subject matter. *As the Spirit moves us* demonstrates there is a need for thoughtful and sophisticated Christian voices on the topic of spirituality. Christian student development professionals are in many ways poised to speak articulately and knowledgeably on this topic, as their daily work involves the intersection of spirituality and education. As the Spirit moves us, may we be willing and motivated to speak.

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