Book Review


The author is a Baptist pastor with Italian roots and a well-known writer on both sides of the Atlantic in the realm of Christian spirituality. The book cover itself announces his success with the large heading “more than 500,000 sold,” raising both curiosity as well as concerned German eye brows wondering about the modesty of the author and/or the need of the publishing house to push the book. However, to be honest, American culture is very different in many ways. And that is well demonstrated throughout the whole book.

In 240 pages, the author delineates his views on what constitutes emotionally healthy spirituality, and how to achieve it. The basic premise is that most Christians have emotionally imbalanced spiritual lives, leading to distress, even mental illness and certainly a poor Christian witness. The author is quick to present examples for his thesis – including himself – which gives the book a ring of authenticity and “down to earth” qualities. In that sense it is easy and pleasant to read, yet from a social science perspective remains in the realm of “anecdotal evidence.” These “anecdotes” tend to come from an American evangelical background, and thus are more descriptive of American culture than anything else. Reading from a mental health perspective, the pseudo-scale included on p. 59 appears to be indicative of the nature of the book: “Considering that Jesus was 100 percent true to himself, or ‘self-differentiated,’ where might you place yourself on this scale?” This is followed by a detailed interpretation of the result. Lacking all quality of a psychological scale it is a subjective evaluation at best – more likely to be dangerous than helpful.

In fact, the reader wonders, is the book meant to be about theology or rather about mental health? The valiant attempt to integrate the fields of theology and social sciences would require conceptualizing the two. American pragmatism simply mixes them and applies “whatever it takes” to make a point. Thus,
Adventist readers will stumble across some Sabbath theology in the book (a topic amazingly frequent in current evangelical literature). Sabbath, as well as the Daily Office, are to provide rest and rhythm – and are described as “revolutionary disciplines for Christians today” (p. 141). However, when he later describes the Daily Office the author is not referring to the Old Testament sacrificial system, but to a monastic tradition, mentioning Trappist monks in Massachusetts. There is nothing wrong with such an example, of course. However, there is a basic difference between an old monastic tradition (daily prayers, incidentally going back much further than his example would suggest) and Sabbath theology – which the author actually unfolds in a very fascinating manner – worthwhile reading.

Perhaps this may be the point to stop going into further details. Despite all criticism, this is not a bad book. There are pearls of insight – hidden amidst stories, anecdotes and rather obvious exhortations. If the reader expects a book on mental health – they will be disappointed, despite a lot of interesting bits and pieces (and much far too obvious material). If the reader expects a solid theology of spirituality, he or she will find plenty of worthwhile suggestions (many of which again are fairly obvious from a European perspective), but not a solid, systematic work. If the reader expects a devotional book … no, not really – despite all its healthy exhortations. It is rather a typical “How-to Book” in good American tradition, offering worthwhile assistance for those who are looking for it. The irony of it remains that this encompasses an implicit emphasis on “doing” / “getting it right” (even though different from traditional works) counteracting the original intention of the author.

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