

Exploring the Spirituality of the World Religions: The Quest for Personal, Spiritual and Social Transformation

Duncan S. Ferguson. London: Continuum, 2010.

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Reviewed by Andrew Noel Blakeslee, McGill University

Textbooks on the world's religions offering an appreciative yet critical perspective are welcome in the religious studies literature, and this is what can be found in Duncan S. Ferguson's *Exploring the Spirituality of the World Religions: The Quest for Personal, Spiritual and Social Transformation*. Each of the main religious traditions of the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are elucidated, including some discussion of primal or aboriginal traditions, and renewed movements in the 'pagan' fold, such as Wicca and Celtic spirituality. The traditions fall under the conceptual/organizational terms of "the divine as manifest in nature and culture; the religions that understand the divine as one transcendent reality (transcendent monism); and the Abrahamic monotheistic religions" (41–42). Or roughly speaking, the traditions fit under the categories of the pantheistic, panentheistic, and theistic, respectively. Ferguson recognizes the inherent simplification and partial distortion of these and other categories, while nevertheless holding to their organizational helpfulness.

Within each tradition, Ferguson first lays-out the basic historical facts. As with all introductory one-volume texts on the world's religions aiming at accessibility and broad readership, a balance must be struck between detail and concision. The balance is fairly well judged, with key terms in bold in the text, and helpfully in a glossary at the end of each chapter. Following the presentation of basic historical information, "accents and patterns" of the religion are presented, or in other words its main distinctive concepts. This is organized under the widely used rubric of the 'Four C's': creed, code, cult, and community. While understanding the restriction of brevity, here particularly one cannot help but wish for more development of the material. Nevertheless the presentation is sufficient as an introduction, and the author does provide a select "suggestions for reference and reading" at the end of each chapter as well.

Notably, Ferguson offers two components that make his book stand out from most other introductory works in the field: a 'pros and cons' assessment of each religion in its task as a "spiritual pathway" after its exposition, and an introductory and concluding chapter on the qualities and dynamics of spirituality (distinguishing and defining 'spirituality' and 'religion' is notoriously fraught; Ferguson offers serviceable definitions from an espoused pragmatic orientation designed to bypass the thorny and in this case not-imperative-to-the-task question of fundamental

meanings). The good and the bad are construed as “life-giving” and “life-denying” beliefs and practices. Undertaken with generosity and care, likely few will disagree with his analysis and judgement. This is perhaps the most important function of Ferguson’s text: to remind us of the beneficent genius found in all of the great traditions, as well as their ethically and intellectually problematic and unsavoury aspects. Through the posing of questions at the end of each chapter the reader is encouraged to make their own assessment about what in each tradition is worth celebrating and even incorporating in the development of their own spiritual path, and what one might rightly jettison.

The introductory and concluding chapters explore “[t]he dimensions of a spiritual pathway for contemporary pilgrims.” (214) Therein the author enumerates notions and attitudes that one wishes all religious practitioners will champion, such as critically informed understandings of holy texts—intellectual honesty and credibility—and openness, and the cultivation of compassion and appreciation of other faith pathways. In the opening and concluding chapters Ferguson’s work particularly shines, providing points of entry for a fruitful consideration and discussion of religious/spiritual practice. While *Exploring the Spirituality of the World Religions* will not displace such celebrated classics as Huston Smith’s *The World’s Religions* in the freshman classroom, it is nevertheless a clearly organized, astute, and appreciative introduction to the practice of spirituality in and through the great faith traditions. It could be particularly fitting in an adult education class that uses learning about the world’s religions as a springboard for further exploration of the development of spirituality today.

With Letters of Light. Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elijor

[Ekstasis, vol. 2]

Daphna V. Arbel and Andrei A. Orlov, eds. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011.

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Reviewed by Carla Sulzbach, North-West University

This volume is a well-deserved tribute consisting of nineteen studies by colleagues and former students to the wide-ranging scholarship of Rachel Elijor. Space prohibits a detailed survey of all the contributions, and therefore just a few of those that stand out in this reviewer’s opinion will be highlighted.

Some general remarks are in order about the volume itself. These are not the responsibility of either contributors or editors but have to do with the publisher and