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R **review** **for** **religious**

Christian Heritages and Contemporary Living

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1998 • VOLUME 57 • NUMBER 1

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Understanding Christian Spirituality

*Michael Downey. New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1997. Pp. 156.
Paper. \$12.95.*

For anyone who has marveled at or been baffled by the remarkable surge of interest in spirituality in recent years, this book will prove an excellent guide. The author, editor of the highly regarded *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, brings both a sense of balance and theological depth to the task of describing and interpreting where we are at the close of the 20th century in our understanding and practice of Christian spirituality.

Of the book's seven tightly written chapters, the first two consider definitions, asking first about the term *spirituality* in its broadest and most inclusive sense and second about a specifically *Christian* spirituality. This distinction is helpful and important, reflecting as it does the increasingly widespread use (at least within contemporary American

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culture) of *spirituality* to refer to a diverse range of experiences of the transcendent not necessarily connected to a particular religious tradition or understanding of God. Downey acknowledges the reality (and significance) of this wide sense of the term while also defining a specifically Christian spirituality shaped by a rich biblical and theological tradition, grounded (for Catholic Christians anyway) in the insights of the Second Vatican Council and deepened by the contemporary theological reflection of Karl Rahner and others. Reflecting the increasingly holistic sense of spirituality that has emerged in the contemporary era, Downey notes: "Properly understood, spirituality is not merely an aspect of Christian life concerned with devotions, forms of prayer, fasting, and other disciplines. Spirituality refers to the whole of Christian life in response to the Spirit" (p. 46).

In the chapter titled "A Living Tradition," Downey tackles the important question of how contemporary Christians can retrieve and reinterpret the Christian past. He rightly rejects the idea, popular in our current climate, of the Christian past as a kind of "refuge," a safe place free of the problems and complexities of our time. He suggests, to the contrary, that the history of Christian spirituality is, like all history, flawed and complex but full of possible meaning if we are prepared to approach it critically and honestly. He cites Philip Sheldrake's *Spirituality and History* and Bernard McGinn's *Foundations of Mysticism* as examples of the kind of historical study in the history of Christian spirituality that can point the way forward.

In chapters 4 and 5 ("Conciliar Orientations" and "Currents in Christian Spirituality"), the author probes further into what it means to reappropriate the Christian spiritual tradition(s) from our current vantage point. He notes three particular areas in which we are still living out the vision of Vatican II: our understanding of the universal call to holiness, our rediscovery of Scripture in Christian life and prayer, and our attention to the transforming power of liturgy. Similarly, Downey notes several "currents" in Christian spirituality that challenge us to broaden our understanding of the Christian spiritual life (for example, our increasing attention to women's experience, to the need for a just social order, to ecological concerns, to the connection between psychology and spirituality). In the last chapter the author surveys recent advances in the scholarly study of Christian spirituality, demonstrating the important shifts taking place.

The book is synthetic in its aim and helpfully clarifies much of the recent scholarship in the field. It will no doubt be useful both to undergraduate and graduate students in spirituality and to anyone who wants to get a better view of Christian spirituality's current intellectual landscape. My only reservation has to do with the book's general descriptive tone. Almost nowhere is one exposed to the rich vitality of the Christian spiritual tradition the author proposes to interpret. The unwary reader—and I am thinking especially of the student for whom

this book might serve as an introduction to Christian spirituality—could easily come away with only the vaguest feeling for the sources, both contemporary and ancient, which feed the Christian spiritual life. Perhaps, then, this book ought to be considered a helpful, interpretive companion, to be read alongside those very sources.

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