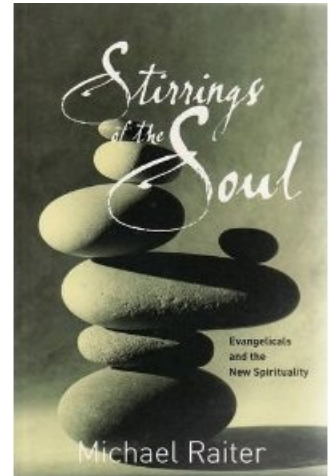


Review: Stirrings of the Soul

Mike Raiter is someone I, and many others, would place in the extreme upper echelons of biblical exegetes and expositors. A book by Raiter that deals with spirituality therefore grabbed my attention. I was expecting something that interacted with my two passions of studying the things of God and experiencing the things of God. With *Stirrings of the Soul* I was not disappointed.



I will therefore begin by dealing with the three annoyances of this book so I can finish with the good stuff.

1. It's an Australian book, by an Australian author, based initially on lectures to an Australian audience. The adaption of it to a British audience is obviously forced and looks like it's been done by an editor with search-and-replace "Australian" with "British" functionality on their word processor. I'm all for adapting to market contexts, but...
2. Don't be put off by the beginning. Yes, working from the ground up is good. And yes, it was written in 2003 when 'The Internet' wasn't yet broadbandy, let alone all 2.0-ish. But the first couple of chapters talking about the "spirituality explosion" and the outlining of postmodernity have dated significantly – it presumes a naivete about such things that has long since passed.
Persistence through these chapters is worthwhile because the strength of the book lies in its dealing with more eternal concepts.
3. The structure of the book moves from New Age spirituality to Mysticism-in-general to Christian Mysticism to an Evangelical Response to Christian Mysticism. What you don't get is the completed circle

(or the finished return journey) of an Evangelical Response to New Age spirituality. How does a Christian respond to a New Age mystic? I don't know if this book fully answers that. I think it does more to protect against New Age infiltration into the Christian world than it does to help the Christian world to outreach to the New Age. In this way it is typical Matthias Media and can come across on occasion as an extended *Briefing* article.

There is plenty of good stuff. Raiter achieves his aim of not pulling apart one form of mysticism in depth but looks at the forest more than the trees. What he slowly reveals is that this spiritualistic forest is very human shaped. Raiter lists the following characteristics within the appeal of spirituality:

1. *Hunger for relationship (p75)*
2. *Thirst for experience (p80)*
3. *Non-rational (p84)*
4. *Non Judgmental (p86)*
5. *Inclusive (p89)*
6. *Everyday Spirituality (p92)*
7. *Market Place Spirituality (p95)*
8. *Therapeutic (p98)*
9. *An Immanent, Inner-directed Spirituality (p99)*

Not only are these found across the breadth of (post)modern spiritualities of today but also across history. The point is that the appeal of spirituality is a common thread in the human fallen predicament. Not only the God-shaped hole, but also the methods of spiritual enlightenment that rely on human endeavour or self-focussed technique, are indicative of human pride and self-realisation.

By this means Raiter brings Scripture to bear on these spiritualities and this is where his exegetical mastery kicks

in. And he is somewhat no-holds-barred in doing so. I delight in the application of Romans that acknowledges that the base state of the human person is not to seek truth but “in their wickedness, suppress or restrain or hold the truth back.” (p109) and he concludes...

*“As we live in a society of so many competing spiritualities we desperately need to hear Paul’s words on the human condition. We need to listen to God’s diagnosis of the real character of people’s spiritual motivations. We can be tempted to look at the new spirituality... and see it as the genuine longing of sincere spiritual seekers... People are looking for God and longing to get in contact with the One they know is there... There is, of course, an element of truth in all that. **The phenomenal growth of the new spirituality does point to people’s awareness of the presence of God. But, says Paul, such movements are not the signposts of spiritual seekers. They are in reality, the hallmarks of spiritual hidings, of religious runaways, of deniers of the Divine.**” (p118, emphasis mine)*

It may seem harsh, but this attitude of Paul (both a “passion” and a “revulsion”, p130) is at the heart of Paul’s evangelistic zeal and his desire to connect with, but not commend, those who build spiritual idols but need Jesus.

Here Raiter’s engagement with the world outside of the Christian sphere ends. The second half of the book looks at spirituality (in the guise of mysticism) within the church. He presents something of an overview and introduces some key figures (Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila etc.). He considers ascetism, quietness and other spiritual disciplines. He looks at the philosophical foundations in neoplatonism. His critique is helpfully Christocentric

“If the Lord has told us about himself and how he wants us to relate to him, then we will want to listen to him, and listen

to him carefully. We will want to respond to him in the way that best pleases him, and therefore in the way which will both change and transform us, and bring us the most God-honouring joy... Yet here are mystical classics where the Lord of glory is barely mentioned, and the benefits of his atoning death are misunderstood or marginalised.” (p174)

I appreciate that he does not ignore the over-reactions to spirituality. In the last chapter he critiques evangelicalism and the tendency to reject emotion, not just emotionalism, and to glorify gospel more than Jesus. The balance that Raiter strikes is commendable – it hits the truth point between the two reactive edges of charismania and dry dogmatism (for whom the chief end of man is to “read the Bible and study it forever”! – p224). In the second last chapter Raiter paints a picture of Christian Spirituality as portrayed in Romans 8. It is a piece of exegetical wisdom which seems good to conclude with:

“Firstly, the spiritual life is intimately related to the saving work of God in Christ...

Secondly, for Paul spirituality, or life in the Spirit, was much more about living a life of righteousness, than performing personal and private acts of devotion...

Thirdly, Christian spirituality recognises the importance of the mind in pursuing a life pleasing to God...

Fourthly, there is a deeply experiential dimension to an encounter with the Spirit of God...

Fifthly, suffering is the context in which Christian spirituality is lived out...

Sixthly, frustration will be one aspect of life in the Spirit for each and every believer.” (pp203-208)