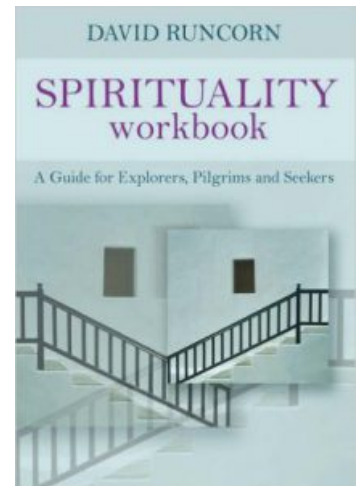


Review: Spirituality Workbook – A Guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers

Some books are wide-ranging and broad. Some books are deep and specific. David Runcorn, in *Spirituality Workbook*, deals with some of the nitty gritty of everyday expressions of Christian spirituality, and manages to do both; it is both deep and wide. I read the slightly older 2006 edition.



The breadth comes from the simple amount of material covered. Runcorn has put together work from years of the rhythm of theological formation. The chapters are short and independent from each other, but each is a gem of insight and reflection. The content ranges from topical analyses, to reflections on historical persons and movements, to unpacking specific spiritual disciplines.

It is impossible, therefore, to condense the book down into a governing argument, or to give a fulsome summary. For myself, I take from the book a number of insights that interact with, subvert, and even blatantly combat some of the ways in which Christians and churches have capitulated to the spirit of the age.

Consider his early chapter on the spirituality of the desert, which draws on the example of the early monastics. He identifies the motivation of a “longing for God” that cannot be satisfied in an “increasingly worldly church” (page 10). And his enumeration of the value of the wilderness experience includes concepts such as “judgment” and being “confronted

with the sheer depth of our need of conversion" (page 11) that are anathema to the comfortable pews of the western world which idolise success and fanfare.

"In the desert you leave behind all your familiar securities. You come to a place of confessing your absolute need and the emptiness of all you have been placing your trust in... The desert is a place that weans us off addictions and false dependencies. If your god is not the true God the desert will find you out. Only the true God can sustain you in the wilderness." (Page 11)

Consider the irony in his reflection on exile in a changing world, that the word from which we get "parish" and "parochial", *paroikia*, originally meant "a place of refuge or exile" for Christians who experienced themselves as "resident aliens, non-citizens... sojourners in the world... shaped by the experience of enforced mobility, vulnerable exile and disorientating change" (page 23).

Consider the frustration that recognises that "finding and sustaining *community* in today's society is a real struggle" even when "the Christian vision of community is central to spiritual formation, prayer and faithful discipleship" (page 51). Hear the challenging wisdom, quoted from Bonhoeffer:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian community in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty, if we only keep on complaining to God, we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ." (Page 55)

Ponder his counter to the addiction of churches to self-actualising mission management, as he values a rule of life that resists that greatest of all Christian predilections: the

inability to say “no” to something that is good but wrong.

*It is quite common for churches to have their own mission statement these days. What is less common is to find churches that have gone on to think and pray through together a shared, sustainable shape of living that might make that vision realizable. Without an agreed boundary to its life and mission, church life proceeds on the assumption that Christian time and energy can extend limitlessly into an ever-increasing range of worthy projects. That this is all “for God” just makes the burden worse! **The result is corporate exhaustion, guilt and frustration.**” (Page 65, emphasis mine)*

He gives important correctives for our corporate life: “Worship that is organized to impress outsiders is no longer true worship – which is offered to God alone” (page 70). He gives insight into culture: “The defining identity on offer today is that of consumer” (page 89). He plumbs the depths of spiritual practices that may have become staid: “Intercession involves seeking to be where Christ already is... [it] is a participation in Christ’s costly and life-giving presence in the world.” (page 122).

And whether it be in the presentation of the Jesus Prayer or a discourse on sexuality, Runcorn takes us deeper, *uncomfortably* deeper, *blessedly* uncomfortably deeper. Here is the constructive *challenge* of an effective spiritual director. Such challenge disabuses us of immature and insipid notions of Jesus and what it means to follow him.

It presses us beyond superficiality and the ubiquitous ecclesial shallows and *provokes* us.

Where we would settle for peace & tranquility, he would take us to the *shalom* of Christ, who also challenges, and provokes and questions our assumptions until we rely on him: the Christ who counters our agendas with “Unless you repent you will all

perish" (page 177). Where we would like to waft on clouds of easy ecstasy, he reminds us that "Christian prayer is more often marked by conflict than by feelings of peace" (page 179). Where we would prefer the stagnancy of unrocked boats, we are reminded that true hospitality and receptivity "does not mean becoming neutral" (page 193).

It is neither polite nor respectful to just sit agreeing with everything your guest says. We are to offer a real articulate presence, sharing our own beliefs, opinions and lifestyle clearly and distinctly. 'An empty house is not a hospitable house,' [Nouwen] says, 'Real receptivity asks for confrontation.' (Page 193, emphasis mine)

We have challenge, confrontation, provocation, uneasiness. This is the stuff of life. What we have then, is a book to return to, and a book to recommend. It takes us to depths that are rare in the salt-pan of contemporary corporate Christianity. It is both comfort and correction, broad and deep, and therefore utterly useful.