



Review

Spirituality

De Villiers, P.G.R., Kourie, C.E.T. & Lombaard, C., eds. 2008. **The Spirit that empowers: perspectives on spirituality.** *Acta theologica Supplementum*, 11. 265 p. Price: R100,00. ISSN: 1015-8758.

Reviewer: J.L. van der Walt
School for Educational Sciences,
Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University

This supplement is a collection of fourteen articles/essays on topics and problems in the broad field of theology and spirituality. Among the authors count some of the best known names in the field of spirituality research, and they cover topics ranging from methods of interpretation through a spirituality of peace, mysticism and mystagogy, contemporary Christian spirituality, the meaning, definition and/or circumscription of spirituality, spirituality in art, spirituality formation in theological institutions in South Africa, contemplation and social transformation, spirituality in the context of HIV and AIDS and feminism, awe and respect in the Psalms to the theory and practices of the Carmelite program in the Netherlands.

Unfortunately, the editors did not introduce the collection to the reader. An introduction to the topic and the rationale behind the selection of contributions would have helped the reader to understand how they all fit together, and to what extent they cast light on the central topic as summarised in the title. An introduction would have helped clarify how each of the essays discusses how the Spirit (in some cases, also spirit) empowers. An introduction would have helped to show who or what is being empowered through and by the Spirit/spirit.

This is not a book that one would normally take and read from beginning to end. Because of its specialised nature, it would not ap-

peal to the casual reader. Some of the essays will appeal to people interested in art, others will draw those interested in theology, and to a certain extent also education. A prospective reader would typically scan the table of contents and select an article/essay or two, depending on his/her needs or interests at that particular point in time.

A reading from the beginning to the end has merit, however. It leads one to several insights. Firstly, the supplement reiterates the fact that scholars have in recent years taken a new and/or renewed interest in spirituality both in and outside of mainstream religion. Secondly, it shows that spirituality will always remain hard if not impossible to define, and that one often has to make do with a working definition, despite the obvious shortcomings of doing so. Thirdly, it shows that spirituality, both as a phenomenon and as an academic subject (with a capital "S"), has been making inroads in a variety of scholarly fields, including theology, art and education. As far as theology is concerned, the supplement is especially eloquent about one point, namely the importance of returning to the Scriptures and/or to a basic and personal relationship with God. (Whereas several of the articles/essays were written from a Christian point of view, some also discussed spirituality in other contexts, such as that of Islam and the New Age.) This return to theological "basics" is symptomatic of a current movement to circumvent dogma and doctrine. In one of the essays the author goes so far as to make a plea for spiritual formation (education) in theological institutions such as seminaries.

As indicated, the book is not for the casual reader interested in spirituality. As an academic contribution, it is meant for scholars interested in spirituality and the way it empowers people in their work, and in doing science in their respective fields. Academics specifically interested in spirituality will find some of the essays interesting, in the sense that they explore the depth and width of "spirituality" both as a term and as a phenomenon. Non-scholars would find the supplement interesting in view of the fact that mainstream religion has of late come under pressure from all sides, not least because of the growing insistence on a personal, spiritual connection and/or relationship with God (or a god, as the case may be). One of the essays even explains why some believers have proclaimed themselves as God.

As indicated, the absence of an introductory chapter is a shortcoming. The reader finds it difficult to understand the background of this academic work, how all the authors came together, what

interests they shared, what criteria were used for inclusion of contributions, what the philosophical points of departure of the editors were, and how and to what extent the various contributions cohere. It is therefore difficult to understand the sequence of the essays/articles, and to follow a logical thread. The fact that all the articles seem to have passed a rigorous process of peer review is a redeeming point, however.

As a “book”, the supplement is pleasing to the eye, with a colourful cover page with Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity as its focal point. This striking icon immediately catches the eye and calls the reader to a search for a discussion of it in the book. Reimer’s discussion of it is as striking as the icon itself.