

DIMENSIONS IN SPIRITUALITY

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Three main tracks run through the book *Dimensions in Spirituality*. The first one, the supporting framework of the entire book, is an organic exposition of the concepts about spirituality that the author found in the Bahá'í literature, from which he quotes many interesting excerpts. The other two tracks run parallel: a theological-philosophical track surveying the most important concepts of the several dimensions of spirituality that have been expressed down the centuries by the great thinkers of the world provides a good review of the subject. The third track (psychological-introspective) offers many personal insights on the themes of spirituality. Although the author aims at scientific objectivity in expressing his views, it is not difficult to perceive through his words the stirrings of a heart that seems used to fighting those daily battles against the self, which he describes among the most important dimensions in spirituality. Thus, we do not feel indoctrinated by the book, but encouraged in our own daily efforts.

Search is described as the first step in the venture of spirituality. Truth is the goal: but Truth in its highest expressions remains covered under its thousands of veils. What then is this eagerness that burns deep in the hearts of all seekers and drives them towards an unknown goal? Whence does it come? Answers to these questions may be found in several pages of the book, but the chapters on spiritual anthropology and imagination will undoubtedly provide the richest harvest. The concept of human beings as spiritual beings created in the realm of evolution is fundamental: spiritual growth is an intrinsic human attribute.

Acceptance of the Manifestation of God for one's age is described as a turning point for any seeker. Bahá'u'lláh's statement: "Whoso is deprived thereof [recognizing Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age], hath gone astray," is examined through different approaches, so that its broader, rather than its narrower and literal, meaning may be understood. The author then quotes the example of the almost deathbed conversion of Rimbaud to explain the importance of faith in the spiritual path.

The importance of personal spiritual deepening, as an ongoing encounter with the Manifestation of God, of teaching the ways of spirituality, as "a dramatic performance" of a deeply spiritual act, of striving towards perfection, as well as the role of volition and patience, the significance of prayer and meditation, and the meaning of tests in the path of spirituality are thoroughly examined.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Magna Carta for spiritual transformation" (a long quotation in Myron Phelps's book *Life and Teaching of Abbas Effendi*)¹—far from being offered just as an intellectual contribution—is presented by McLean as a practical method anyone can follow in one's efforts toward improving the

1. Rev. ed., New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912.

quality of personal life. For, spirituality is here explored also in its paramount practical dimensions: its results can be seen in the form of virtues that may be displayed in any act of our daily lives. The book shows very clearly that any mystical experience, albeit self-satisfying in itself, is insufficient to define any human being as spiritual: faith, love, and knowledge, spirituality's three main dimensions, are also requisites to be expressed in daily life. Thus, from this book we acquire new definitions of the words *spirit*, *spiritual*, and *spirituality*, quite different from the meanings usually associated with them.

A very interesting part of the book offers an exploration of language, as it is used in the Bahá'í texts dealing with the manifold dimensions of spirituality. The lunar phase and new birth models, on the one hand, and the ten categories of symbols used in the Bahá'í writings, on the other, may prove very useful for anyone who, knowing nothing or very little of the Islamic background of those writings, is willing to go beneath the surface of their "flourished" language to the depth of their inner meanings.

The overall approach of the book seems to be oriented toward an intellectual audience, and consequently, its dialectical-philosophical aspects seem to prevail. And yet, the author always keeps in front of his, and our, eyes the essential idea that spirituality cannot be outlined in all its dimensions, nor exhaustively described in any of these dimensions, by any human intellect. Most of its quotations as well as most of the author's insights convey a message that is not merely intellectual. There are limits beyond which the Virgil of an enquiring mind cannot go. Beyond those limits, the guidance of the Beatrix of an enlightened heart is needed, supported by the daily efforts of a life wholly devoted to the pursuit of this rewarding goal. Spirituality is not a matter of discussions, but an exalting experience of living.

In conclusion, *Dimensions in Spirituality* appears as an invitation to its readers to explore new roads, where insight is more precious than mind, where purity of heart is more useful than learning, where a daily exercise in the field of human relationship is more important than a whole life of study. The book is an invitation to let the deeper feelings of the heart emerge and take their rightful place beside the clear, but cold, light of logic, so that they may be expressed in words and, most important, in actions apt to bring unity among human beings. In the vein of the ancient Persian poets, this book may be described as an attractive tavern's sign, which invites anyone to enter a special "Tavern where the wine they buy and sell."² In this book a good sample of choice and recently unsealed wine is offered, a wine that may be relished also by those who, having been disgusted by old adulterated wines, have not been willing for long years to drink even the good ones.

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2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, 3d ed., Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978, p. 36.