



DIMENSIONS IN SPIRITUALITY

Author: J.A. McLean

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Three main tracks can be identified and followed while reading the book *Dimensions in Spirituality*, written by J.A. McLean, and recently published by George Ronald. The first one, the supporting framework of the entire book, is an organic exposition of the concepts about spirituality the Author found in the Bahá'í literature, wherefrom he quotes many interesting excerpts. The other two tracks run beside it: on the one hand, there is a survey of the most important concepts on the several dimensions of spirituality which have been expressed down the centuries by the great thinkers of the world. This track may be defined as theological- philosophical. It is a good review of the situation on the subject. On the other hand, there are many personal insights on the themes of spirituality. This track may be defined as psychological- introspective. In fact, although the Author aims at scientific objectiveness in expressing his views, yet it is not difficult to perceive through his words the stirrings of a heart which seems used to fight those daily battles against the self, that are described among the most important dimensions in spirituality. And 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 veils. What is then this eagerness which burns deep in the heart of all seekers and drives them towards an unknown goal? Wherefrom 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 dealt with.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Magna Carta for spiritual transformation” (a long quotation from Myron Phelps 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 his\her efforts of improving the quality of his\her life. For, spirituality is here explored also in its paramount practical dimensions: its results in the form of virtues which may be displayed in any act of our daily lives. It is shown very clearly that any mystical experience, albeit self-satisfying in itself, is not sufficient to define as spiritual any human being: faith, love and knowledge, spirituality’s three main dimensions, require to be expressed also in daily life. Thus, from this book we acquire new definitions of the words *spirit*, *spiritual* and *spirituality*, quite different from the meanings which are usually associated with them.

A very interesting part of the book are also those pages where language is explored, as it is used in the Bahá’í texts which deal 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 such as to address preferably an intellectual audience. Therefore sometimes 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. Moreover, most of the quotations as well as of the insights voiced by the Author convey a message which is not merely intellectual. Therefore any reader may draw from this book a

very important concept: that no Virgil of any inquiring mind will be able to go beyond its own limits while treading the paths of spirituality. 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 pursuing 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. It appears as an invitation to let the deeper feelings of the heart to emerge and take their right place beside the clear, but cold, light of logic, so that they may be expressed in words and, most important, actions apt at bringing unity among human beings. To say it in the vein of the ancient Persian poets, this book may be described as an attractive tavern's sign, that 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, which 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.

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

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, 3d ed., Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978, p. 56.