

The Best of the Best on Spiritual Formation: A Review Article

by Jerry R. Flora*

Aiden Wilson (A.W.) Tozer captured the minds and hearts of many Christians in the last generation. As pastor, editor, and author he produced substance and style that sounded prophetic. His pen seemed to be dipped first in fire, then in ice, as he both scalded the North American church and plumbed the depths of God's reality. His books *The Pursuit of God* (1949) and *The Knowledge of the Holy* (1961) quickly gained attention as near-classic in their dimensions.

Although Tozer had little formal education, wide reading and prayerful living prepared him for his task. At one point he drew up a list of books for those who want to explore "the deep things of God" (Snyder 1991, 231). But the list contains a shock. Among the 35 titles only seven come from Protestant writers. Apparently this leader who described himself alternately as an evangelical and a fundamentalist found 80% of his spiritual nurture in books written by Catholics.

As the twentieth century dashed to its finish-line, matters began to change. An explosion of publishing occurred in the area of spirituality and spiritual formation. The playing field broadened to include spiritualities of various religions, revival of old paganisms, and the so-called New Age spirituality. Along with this came a renewal of interest in the best of Christian literature, the goal of A. W. Tozer's quest.

New anthologies of devotional literature arrived on the scene in the 1990s, each of them trying to convey something of the richness of Christian spiritual writing. In this article I want to review several of these collections and offer a few recommendations among them. The bibliography at the close will give complete publication data for your further exploration.

1

Richard Foster has been a leader in Christian spiritual formation ever since his first book, *Celebration of Discipline*, appeared in 1978. Other distinguished publications have followed, climaxed by *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (1992) and *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (1998). Foster's writings always show

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depth of commitment, breadth of awareness, gentleness of spirit, and a striving for balance. Working alongside through much of the writing has been his friend and associate, James Bryan Smith.

Early in the 'nineties the two men collaborated to produce *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (1993). This anthology introduces 52 great writers of the Christian church from its beginnings to the present. The selections were originally 4-page study and discussion tools for use in small-group settings. Each contains an introduction to the author, excerpts from his or her writings (printed in two-column format), a Bible selection relevant to the theme of the excerpt, reflection questions, suggested exercises, and concluding personal thoughts by Dr. Foster. The material has found ready acceptance in many quarters, thanks to the respect in which Foster is held and its flexible, user-friendly approach.

The book is a chunky paperback (approximately 7.5 x 9.25 inches) of 353 pages (including three indexes), organized topically. After a section on "Preparing for the Spiritual Life" (eight writers) it introduces five "great streams" of Christian tradition: the prayer-filled life (contemplative), the virtuous life (holiness), the Spirit-empowered life (charismatic), the compassionate life (social justice), and the Word-centered life (evangelical spirituality). Since its publication, Foster has concluded that there is a sixth "stream" of Christian tradition, the sacramental life (incarnational).

The book's greatest strength is this topical arrangement, along with the clear language used throughout and the inclusion of selections from Scripture. The format allows readers to explore up to a dozen writers in one stream of tradition. Of the 52 authors, all but four come from the western church, both Catholic and Protestant (rather evenly divided). The exceptions are Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom from the ancient East and, more recently, Sundar Singh of India and China's Watchman Nee, both of whom were heavily influenced by English writers. Given the history of Christianity, women will always be under-represented in such collections, but thankfully there is a good handful here.

The book's greatest weakness is the obverse of its strength. How does one pigeon-hole a writer? John Wesley, for example, could fit in all the five categories proposed above. Foster admits this but feels the value to be gained is worth the risk. A few dates might be questioned, especially the birthdate of the book's first writer. C. S. Lewis was born in 1898, not 1900. The date of Sundar Singh's mysterious death is given as possibly 1933, but he disappeared in 1929, never to be seen again (Foster and Smith, 1993, 313). Apart from such quibbles, this is an excellent, clear, balanced introduction to great (mostly western) devotional writers topically presented. It was produced as a resource for both individual and group use, and it meets that goal. (A similar volume,

Spiritual Classics (2000), is now available as a complement to *Celebration of Discipline*.)

2

Robert Llewelyn is an Anglican priest noted as warden of The Julian Shrine at All Hallows Church, Norwich, England. This small chapel is built on the site of the cell where, in the 14th-15th centuries, Julian of Norwich lived and prayed. An anchoress (a solitary intercessor and spiritual director), Julian is the first known woman to write a book in English. *Revelations of Divine Love* is its traditional title, but Julian called her visions merely *Showings*. She has gained a large following in the past generation for reasons which we cannot explore here. In 1980 Llewelyn edited a much-abridged version of her book under the title *Enfolded in Love* (England) or *Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich* (USA). This began a whole series of small devotional anthologies introducing classic writers to the reading public. He then collected many of those into *The Joy of the Saints: Spiritual Readings throughout the Year* (1988).

This paperback of 374 pages offers meaty introductory material by Llewelyn, one-page readings for every day of the year, brief biographical notes on the writers, and an author index. Like the pocket-size books of which it is composed, *The Joy of the Saints* is visually inviting, with ample margins and occasional small drawings. The readings follow no discernible pattern nor are all those by any author grouped together. Rather, the reader experiences through the year a significant one-page selection for each day prepared by some great Christian writer of the past. The 4th-century desert fathers are the earliest, and the latest is Therese of Lisieux (d. 1897).

One might expect that Llewelyn's connection with Julian and the Julian Shrine would dispose him to prefer her writing above all others, and that is indeed the case. Following at some distance are Francis de Sales, Augustine, William Law, Martin Luther, John of the Cross, and John Wesley in that order, plus seven others. Aside from the desert fathers and Isaac of Syria, all represent the western church. Males predominate, but Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux offer feminine voices. Since no writers are later than the 19th century, it is important that they be presented in clear, contemporary English, and that is happily so. The book's strength is its invitation to encounter a smaller number of authors in greater depth than Foster and Smith can offer, together with its arrangement in daily readings (as brief as four lines but never longer than one page).

Day by Day with the Early Church Fathers (1999) is both like and unlike Llewelyn's anthology: Alike in that this too is a book of one-page daily readings in no discernible sequence, followed by biographical notes. Unlike in that the 39 authors here all come from the early church, with no writer later than John of Damascus (d. A.D. 749). The division is about even between East and West, but no women are among them. Augustine appears most often, followed in order by John Chrysostom, Cyprian, and Origen. The compiler-editors are J. Alan Sharrer, Christopher D. Hudson, and Lindsay Vanker, but there is no hint of who they are, what they do, or their qualification for this task.

Two items from the introductory pages help to identify how the book was produced. (1) "The devotional readings in this book have been carefully selected from the 38-volume series *The Early Church Fathers*, first published in 1885. Each ... devotion was edited in a procedure that updated the language yet preserved the original meaning the church father intended" (Sharrer, Hudson, and Vanker 1999, iii). (2) "All Scripture references in this book are taken from the *Holy Bible: King James Version*" (copyright page).

The volume is somewhat narrow in format (approximately 5.5 x 9.25 inches), a hardback of 389 pages. The introduction is a single page, followed by daily readings of one page each. Small medieval woodcuts appear at the top of every page (a different one for each month), then a scripture passage and the text from the early writer, often accompanied by a sidebar highlighting one sentence from that text. The book concludes with biographical notes on the ancient authors (more full than in Llewelyn) and a detailed index of the source for each day's reading. January 1 ("Tears and Joy"), for example, is identified as coming from John Chrysostom's *Homily 6 on Matthew*, paragraph 8.

The strength of this anthology is its focus on writers of the early centuries with an even distribution between West and East. By limiting itself to the King James version of the Bible and the 1885 translation of the church fathers, the book needs no acknowledgment of authors or publishers, nor copyright permission for anything it includes. All is in the public domain, and all is available without permission and without cost, making the publisher's task easier (and cheaper). But readers deserve at least some identification of the editors and more helpful introduction than a mere page.

Another volume of readings from the early church is *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain: A Patristic Breviary. Ancient Wisdom for Today's World* (1993). I find this book to be a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a sewn

paperback with a plasticized cover, good quality paper, and a very handy size (5 x 7 inches). Here are daily readings from about 45 writers grouped so that each month's material follows one theme. May's excerpts, for example, are titled "Come to me, O God, that I may come to you." A meaty prologue precedes the readings, and they are followed by biographical notes, a general index month by month, and an index of sources.

Most of the writers come from the eastern church with John Chrysostom predominating, followed in order by Basil (the Great) of Caesarea and a close race between Maximus the Confessor, Augustine of Hippo, Clement of Alexandria, Defensor Grammaticus, and Cyril of Jerusalem. In addition to Augustine, the West also offers Tertullian, Ambrose, and Boethius. Three authors break out of the early church period: Simeon the New Theologian and Niceta Stethatus from the East and the great western monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), the latest author to be quoted. The collection includes no female writers.

The editor, Jesuit scholar Thomas Spidlik, first published this anthology in Italian in 1971, then went on to produce *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (1986). The latter volume displays massive scholarship and must be described as magisterial. Its chapters are stunning in their compression and documentation. The bibliography runs to more than 50 pages, citing works in a half-dozen languages. Thus when Spidlik edits *Drinking from the Hidden Fountain* and identifies the ancient source for each of its readings, one can infer that he himself translated everything in the book before Paul Drake rendered it into English.

This is indeed "a patristic breviary," a prayerbook mostly from writers of the ancient church. The selections invite the reader to linger, pray, and incorporate their wisdom into daily living. Its handy size and meticulous scholarship make it doubly attractive to anyone serious about encountering the best from the eastern church's first millennium.

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Near to the Heart of God: Daily Readings from the Spiritual Classics (1998) is the most extensive of the anthologies considered thus far, if that means the number of writers who are included. Foster and Smith have 52, but this book has 60 (not counting "anonymous"). Here are readings for every day of the year, each of them titled and preceded by a short biblical passage, then followed by a suggested personal response. The book concludes with 18 pages

of biographical notes and index, recommended additional reading, and indexes of scriptures and topics.

The editor, Bernard Bangley, is a Presbyterian pastor and author of several books centered on outstanding devotional writers. In a warm, personal introduction he describes his procedure: "What I have done is to paraphrase their writings into clear, simple, modern English.... I have not put any words into their mouths.... The metaphors, examples, and illustrative comments in this book are in the original material.... I have resisted every temptation to introduce new elements. They aren't needed. These pages were lively when they were first written and remain lively today" (Bangley 1998, vii-viii).

The book achieves this goal. It is a pleasure to read, often surprisingly contemporary. Bangley's favorite among the five dozen writers is Francis de Sales followed in order by Thomas a Kempis, Guigo I, and Teresa of Avila. Although these are all Roman Catholic, about half the writers are Protestants, while four come from the Orthodox church (John Cassian, Evagrius Ponticus, Pseudo-Macarius, and the author of the 19th-century *Pilgrim's Tale or The Way of a Pilgrim*). Their dates stretch from the late first century (Hermas) to the 19th ("the pilgrim"), and eight of the 60 are women. The selection shows some special interest in the British Reformation of the 16th-17th centuries.

If one wants to begin reading in the greatest Christian devotional writers, this book might be a place to start. Its simple, modern English makes it easy to focus on the substance without getting stuck in outdated style. In fact, Bangley and Harold Shaw Publishers have gone one step further. They have produced a sampler, *Morning and Evening with the Spiritual Classics: 40 Days of Meditations* (1999). Here are 80 selections from the larger volume offered in a slim pocket or purse size (3.5 by 6.25 inches), costing only \$2.99. This is an ideal place to start. From it one can graduate to the larger volume and on to the others reviewed here.

6

Finally, we may consider a different kind of collection, one arranged in chronological sequence. *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (1999) is the work of John R. Tyson of Houghton College. An acknowledged expert on the life and thought of Charles Wesley, Tyson here collects material from 76 writers in a paperback of 474 pages. The book opens with a 50-page "invitation" in which the editor discusses the nature and themes of Christian devotion. Then begins the march through church history in five periods: the ancient church (21 writers), the medieval era (11 writers), the Reformation era (10 authors), modern spirituality [roughly 1600-1900] (17 authors), and contemporary spirituality [the 20th century] (17 writers).

Tyson offers “an ecumenical anthology,” but inclusivity remains elusive. The East, for example, disappears after the early church. Even then, the absence of John Chrysostom--possibly the greatest of all eastern fathers--seems egregious. Other notable omissions include John Bunyan (*The Pilgrim's Progress*), George Fox (founder of the Quakers and author of a famous journal), William Law (whose writings influenced the Wesleys and many after them), John Woolman (whose *Journal* details a one-man civil rights movement prior to the American Revolution), and one of the 20th century's most widely noted authors, Henri Nouwen. On the other hand, we can thank Dr. Tyson for including more women (18) than any other anthology reviewed here. He also offers selections from contemporary writers who need to be noticed; for example, the African American Howard Thurman, Mother Teresa of India, Peru's Gustavo Gutierrez, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

Tyson writes a brief introduction to each period of church history and several paragraphs for each person included, then come one or more excerpts from the writings of each author. The book concludes with a detailed general index and a scripture index. It is the most complete of all the collections reviewed here and the only one to move in historical sequence. Those are its strengths. Among weaknesses are the omissions detailed above and the use of older translations for some of the works that are excerpted. If you are looking for a church-historical survey of great devotional writers which is fairly complete, this is the book.

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In closing, let me briefly mention several works related to those reviewed here. (1) A fine complement to Tyson's anthology is Bradley Holt's *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (1993). A college professor and former missionary in Africa, Holt offers in 150 pages all a short text should be. He begins by discussing four biblical relationships: with God, ourselves, others, and the earth. Then he traces the history of Christian devotion through the same five periods as Tyson, but using other titles. (He calls the medieval period “the European era,” arguing that Christianity, after an explosive missionary start, shrank back into a European enclave within the larger world.) The book includes discussion questions, spiritual formation exercises for each chapter, a timeline, glossary, bibliography, and indexes. This is an ideal short survey, the best of its kind in print.

(2) Another brief guide is *The Inward Pilgrimage: An Introduction to Christian Spiritual Classics* (1996) by Bernhard Christensen. This simply written “introduction,” first published in 1976, is again available, this time with a new foreword and questions for reflection/discussion by Bradley Holt. What

Dr. Christensen does is to introduce, describe, and offer short quotations from sixteen devotional classics taken in chronological order. Beginning with Augustine and the desert fathers, they conclude with Evelyn Underhill and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The surprise in the collection may be Brigid Emily Herman's *Creative Prayer*, happily available once more in a new, fresh editing (1998). If you want to put just your toe into the water of devotional classics, then Christensen's book is one to consider. Its only drawback is the appearance in the new edition of some distressing typographical errors.

(3) A good follow-up might be the series called Upper Room Spiritual Classics. These are pocket or purse-size paperbacks of 72 pages, each introducing the work of one devotional master. Beginning in 1998, the Upper Room has released five of these each year. They are available in 5-volume annual sets or in individual volumes (\$4.95 each). These are one of the best buys on the market: a fine introduction, carefully chosen excerpts from each writer's work (in gracefully contemporary inclusive language), and suggestions on how to read for personal and group formation. Hearty thanks to the publishers and the editor, Keith Beasley-Topliffe, for work well done!

(4) *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading* (1994) goes beyond excerpts to complete works worth exploring. The author, Susan Annette Muto, possesses encyclopedic knowledge of the church's devotional literature, and her "guide" is a comprehensive handbook. Part I is 50 pages of help for this kind of reading. Part II (150 pages) details three reading programs involving scripture and the literature of spirituality. Part III offers an annotated bibliography that is 75 pages long. In an appendix Dr. Muto sets out "a three-part, twelve-month cycle of readings ... for classroom or home study purposes" (Muto 1994, 303). I know of nothing quite like this compendious volume.

(5) Another unique collection is *Amazing Grace: Hymn Texts for Devotional Use* (1994). Here are the words of more than 200 of our best hymns printed without musical notation as the poems they really are. The editors, Bert Polman, Marilyn Kay Stulken, and James R. Sydnor represent the Christian Reformed, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches respectively. "This volume is really a home hymnal instead of being a part of the church pew furnishings.... The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada endorsed and recommended the publication of this hymnal" (Polman, Stulken, and Sydnor 1994, viii-ix). Its compact size (4.5 by 6.5 inches), clear layout, and ample indexes make this a valuable companion for devotional use.

(6) Many collections of prayers are on the market, but few can rival *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (1985), edited by Bishop George Appleton of the Church of England. This anthology contains more than a thousand prayers, the great majority from within the Christian faith. In addition to prayers from scripture, there seem to be prayers from all periods and places the church has

existed. The three longest sections organize their material around the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and prayers from other religious traditions. Ample indexes of authors, sources, and subjects round out this excellent volume of 399 pages, available in both cloth and paper bindings. It is a treasure of material for pondering and praying.

Treasures to be admired, wealth to be gained, breadth to be explored, depths to be plumbed—our faith abounds in possibilities of discovery. We owe it to ourselves and our Lord, the church and the world, to discover and utilize the best of the best. As A. W. Tozer is reported to have said, "Life is too short to waste time reading books. You must read only the best." If I were beginning, I would choose Christensen's *The Inward Pilgrimage* together with Bangle's sampler, *Morning and Evening with the Spiritual Classics*. After that, perhaps the Upper Room Spiritual Classics, and the banquet is served. Enjoy the best of the best!

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