
Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote of spiritual seekers that people have an implicit but true knowledge of God perhaps not reflected upon and not verbalized, but one which is nevertheless a genuine experience of God, which has its origin in their ‘spiritual existence’ or personality. This might explain why so many people continue to try and make sense of their unarticulated spiritual longings and experiences even when they profess themselves alienated by church and organized religion as a whole.

Liz Hoare’s book is based on her many years as a priest, spiritual director and tutor on courses for trainee spiritual directors. Her book is principally aimed at such trainees and at spiritual seekers thirsty to explore their soul journey and its implications. Set out under simple and practical headings the book gives an account of the development of spiritual direction and the way in which it has broken loose from its moorings as a skill reserved to a professional religious elite and become a gift and grace offered to lay Christians.

From her considerable pastoral experience the author takes on board the very disparate circumstances and needs of those seeking spiritual direction and the equally varied people who find themselves called to a ministry that can be hard to pin down. She does not hesitate to place spiritual direction in its ecclesial setting and to challenge the decontextualized way in which it is often practised, as if the tradition and faith practice of the Christian community were an irrelevance or purely a personal option with little bearing on the spiritual life. In this sense her concentration on the use of the bible in spiritual direction is refreshingly welcome and
offers a counterbalance to the therapeutic discourse which often dominates literature around this topic.

Given that, it is somewhat surprising to find that, despite the book’s title, there is a proportionately small concentration on the bible itself either as a text for contemplation or as a source for spiritual challenge, nurture and accompaniment. What there is sounds eminently sensible, and it proves particularly effective to have someone from Hoare’s ecclesial background urging readers to go beyond using the scriptures only as proof texts. The very nuts and bolts practicality of the approach nevertheless takes up the lion’s share of comments about scripture and leaves something of a gap in terms of exploring how differing engagements with the word of God might prove the bedrock of spiritual growth.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes the word of God as something alive and active, able to pierce through the hidden motives and defences of the complex human heart. With exploration at depth of human relationship with God the primary purpose of spiritual direction, more about how this actually happens would have been welcome. Nevertheless this is a solid and well-grounded book both for directors and for searchers which will prove useful for those starting out on that journey.