NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# The scientific investigation that is spirituality

Rich Heffern | Dec. 11, 2009

"In love with our enormous, frightening sun and all creatures basking in the light of its being." (SOHO (ESA & NASA)

In his introduction to this yearly anthology of the world?s best spiritual writing, Pico Iyer offers us essential reading about how spirituality is expressed in words.

Spiritual writing, he points out, cannot be mere writing about religion, but rather should be something that comes from, and goes, to the spirit, ?which is to say, the human being (or that part of us that communes with what?s beyond us).?

2010: THE BEST SPIRITUAL WRITING
Edited by Philip Zaleski
Published by Penguin Books, $16

Good spiritual writing then is nearly always ?something faltering and finite and intermittent, and the more joyous for its intermittency, and being found again.? For Iyer, spiritual words do not come from someone who always sees the light, so much as from one who has seen then lost it, ?who is plagued by shadows and imperfect refractions, who wrestles with her angels constantly, but who knows, deep down, that somewhere our original radiance can be recovered.?

The spiritual writer, he says, is one driven not by certainties, ?but their absence; doubts, questions, tremors are his lifeblood. He does not belong in some other world, above the clouds, amid the boxed reassurances of some

of the Anglican hymns I sung at school.?

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Iyer cites his long, close friendship with the 14th Dalai Lama. ?What a figure like this is showing is not how warm and clear-sighted and selfless he is, but how warm and clear-sighted and selfless any one of us can be. ? The Dalai Lama?s spirituality takes the form of insisting on his humanness, his frailty, his fallibility, and so bringing the potential he represents into the room that we inhabit.?

The Dalai Lama told Iyer, ?I see the Buddha as a scientist.? The insight here is that this great leader?s religious teachings, ?if rigorously supported and meticulously investigated, could offer truths as important as the law of gravity, or the fact of light being both particle and wave.?

In other words, the spirituality found in the world?s religions is an investigation into how reality really works as surely as is physics or chemistry.

Combining essays, reflections and poetry, this anthology?s offerings are rich examples of this scientific investigation that is spirituality.

- In an essay titled ?The Thisness of What Is,? Diane Ackerman profiles Henryk Goldzmit, a pediatrician and author, and Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, a Hasidic rabbi, both of whom remained in the Warsaw ghetto during the Nazi persecution there.

Goldzmit abandoned his medical and literary careers to found a progressive orphanage for boys and girls. He organized it as a ?children?s republic,? with its own parliament, newspaper and court system. Instead of punching one another, children learned to yell, ?I?ll sue you.? Court cases were judged by the children who weren?t being sued that week. When his children were deported to Treblinka in 1942, he joined them on the train.

Shapira offered the practices of meditation and exaltation to a mutilated world. ?How could anyone reconcile the agony of the Holocaust with Hasidism, a dancing religion that teaches love, joy and celebration?? Ackerman asks. One of Shapira?s religious duties was to help heal the suffering of his community and he did it by teaching meditation and mindful attention to everyday life.

- Poet Pattiann Rogers, in ?I Hear and Behold God in Every Object, Yet Understand God Not in the Least,? pens a breathtaking tribute to love. She is in love, she writes, ?with the life of the earth, the hundred budding eyes seeking light in a water-buried nest of tadpoles, a tomato on the vine basking from blossom to ripe red, in love with our enormous, frightening sun and all creatures basking in the light of its being.? We can love this order of the world, and we can give it love despite fear, despite horror and grief, despite suffering, despite our ignorance. We can love unconditionally despite death.
- Meir Soloveichik tells us of the spiritual value of facial hair, in ?Why Beards?? The Bible explicitly instructs, ?Do not cut the edges of your beard.? Clearly Jewish men were encouraged to have beards. The origin of this is found in the slavery in Egypt, where body hair was scrupulously removed from dead bodies in the mummification process. Shaving was a key element in the Egyptian rejection of bodily change and death. The wearing of a beard became, for the Jews, a deliberate repudiation of the false blessing of eternal youthfulness and an underscoring of our inevitable mortality. Immortality for Jews is found in an afterlife but also in one?s children and in the legacy of the Jewish faith passed on to those

who follow.

Other selections look at the concept of a ?chosen people,? the images of God that come from desert dwellers, and a tribute to church bells -- plus much more.

This is rich, nourishing fare from some of spirituality?s best scientists.

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