

BOOK REVIEW

Spirituality That Makes a Difference

By Charles R. Kniker

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022, 322 pages

In *Spirituality That Makes a Difference*, Charles Kniker offers a guide for navigating spirituality for people across religious traditions. This guide accompanies readers in their search for a flourishing spirituality, providing opportunities for self-reflection as well as markers to look for in healthy spiritual communities. Although his own spiritual affiliation is with mainline Christianity, Kniker does not seek to connect readers with only his own tradition. Instead, he works to guide readers along the path to finding a community that resonates with their big questions, while also motivating them to make a difference in the world.

In part one, Kniker introduces the image of a family home as a metaphor for spirituality. He uses the metaphor to communicate the necessity of being part of a healthy spiritual community for a fulfilling life, as homes “prepare us for personal fulfillment, service to our neighbors, and a planet that survives” (x). Kniker describes the searching individual with a second metaphor, that of a spiritual traveler. The journey of a spiritual traveler requires self-reflection, which plays a prominent role throughout the book. Part of this self-reflection is identifying whether the reader considers themselves spiritual, religious, neither or some combination of both (63). Despite the emphasis on the personal journey of the traveler, Kniker insists upon the necessity of commitment to a community (76), particularly to a spiritual home that is a safe space which makes room for questions of meaning-making, a place that challenges the individual toward transformation and maturity, within a context of relationship.

In part two, Kniker explores various qualities readers should look for in a home, qualities that support its community members in a journey of spiritual growth. The first quality is the “yearning” for joy and the transcendent, demonstrated through practices such as worship, spiritual disciplines, and corporate celebration (126). The second quality, truth, is demonstrated in the work of education by spiritual homes for the purpose of transformation (161). This education is intended to complement the spiritual practices of the individual, resulting in robust spiritual formation (162). Third, spiritual homes should care for individuals and tend to their doubts, resulting in individual growth which prompts individuals, in turn, to care for those outside the community (204). Finally, Kniker highlights the importance of justice, arguing that meaningful spirituality must work to impact the world for the better (230).

Kniker embraces subjective approaches to spirituality and religion, encouraging readers to explore various traditions, communities, and practices in order to become part of whichever religious community resonates most with the individual. He uses this approach to address the

Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) in particular. Although Kniker attends directly to the spiritual searching and care of the individual in this book, he criticizes what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton detailed as “moralistic therapeutic deism” (64), calling instead for “transformational” spirituality that fuels collective action which makes a difference in the world (65). Moreover, Kniker resists the idea that spirituality be mixed-and-matched from various traditions in order to create a personal vision of the good life with limited accountability or support, saying “[SBNR] offers the supremacy of the individual at the cost of the common good” (246). Instead, he emphasizes the importance of a community, for the benefit of both the individual and the world.

As part of his efforts to accompany people in exploring spirituality in its many forms, Kniker is explicit about shaping the book as a conversation. He accomplishes this partly by citing other writers on spirituality frequently and broadly, creating a book that is filled with a breadth of voices and ideas that are not limited to quotes which advance his argument. These citations are not necessarily academic, either. They contain soundbites of others’ work often tightly arranged in the same paragraph, exposing readers to a broad range of thinkers and encouraging them to dig in and pursue whichever ideas catch their attention (45). While many of his citations are from writers within mainline Christian traditions, they are not exclusively from that corner of Christianity, nor are they strictly from Christian traditions. The breadth of quotations included is a rich starting place for “spiritual travelers” that help shape the book as a conversation, while also reinforcing Kniker’s commitment to helping the reader find a community. Not only does he quote widely, but he also includes reflection prompts and activities, inviting the reader to engage in the conversation with their own voice. Although the citations and prompts appear a bit scattered for the SBNR “travelers” that make up his target audience, the collection is a rich starting place for self-reflection or a resource for guiding others through a similar journey.

Kniker takes on a bold task – guiding SBNRs and others into exploring spirituality, without the goal of guiding them to any particular tradition. As noted above, he does an admirable job of accomplishing this task by citing a range of voices from various traditions. He also successfully points back to the importance of spiritual communities, no matter which tradition they fall under, rather than walking the spiritual journey on one’s own. However, these two priorities create a tension in the book. Because Kniker is not pointing to any one tradition, when he describes and explores practices that are part of various traditions in part two, the practices are not linked to the deep meaning they take on in a particular community. Without that rootedness, it is not always clear how they differ from individual wellness practices. Since Kniker explicitly encourages individual readers to find a spiritual community to call home, this is a missed opportunity to demonstrate how belonging to a community makes a difference to the spirituality of the individual, helping them resist a consumptive, individualistic spirituality. Although readers would benefit from a deeper vision of the relationship between

spiritual practices and particular traditions, Kniker does make clear that spiritual communities can mobilize individuals to promote justice, making a difference in ways merely individual spiritual journeys cannot.

Spirituality That Makes a Difference is a timely book that engages with current trends in spirituality that are increasingly relevant among emerging adults. A resource for spiritual travelers and guides alike, this book provides an approachable and welcoming introduction to spirituality that prioritizes the individual's experience while championing the importance of finding a community for the good of the world.

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