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On Psychology's Relationship to Spirituality

John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling, Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*

Orbis Books, 2006

By Cheryl C. Munday

Until recently, mainstream academic and professional psychologists steered clear of religious and spiritual matters. Although academic psychologists have examined religiosity among specific social groups and the development of religiosity across the lifespan, for the most part, professional psychologists have remained silent about the role of spirituality in the lives of their clients. Fortunately, this is changing. Today, virtually every catalogue of recent publications in professional psychology that I receive devotes an entire section to religion, and spirituality. John Neafsey, a clinical psychologist and college theology teacher, shares his perspective in *A Sacred Voice Is Calling, Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. This book is a thoughtful presentation of Neafsey's work with college students and clients in which he explores the psychological underpinnings and spiritual context for "the high-stakes process of personal discernment and self discovery." How do we understand vocation?

How do we assist others in finding their personal calling? And in a post 9/11 world, how do we follow the call of conscience?

This is an eloquently written, easily read book that will appeal to a wide audience. Clinical psychologists, pastoral counselors, theology students and lay readers will find Neafsey's interdisciplinary approach both substantive and inspirational. He takes a broad ecumenical view of vocation, grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition of discernment and based on "the assumption that the intuition of a sacred purpose for our lives is a universal or archetypal human phenomenon." Vocation is embodied in the kind of person we are called to be, and thus, concerns our actions and character. Neafsey relies on the "notion of an essential inner self calling for recognition" to develop his major thesis that *calling* requires personal transformation toward more human responsiveness, compassionate service and global citizenship.

The process of personal transformation provides the structure of the book with chapters devoted to listening, discernment, authentic living, suffering, personal morality and social conscience. Neafsey artfully

integrates a range of cross-cultural inspirational readings, Jungian and humanistic theories, and Biblical scripture. His writing style is lively enough to captivate undergraduate or casual readers without sacrificing the complexity needed to hold the attention of professional and other more sophisticated readers. I suspect his writing also conveys how skillful a practitioner he must be, particularly his discussion of "listening and learning to live" as metaphors for the sustained engagement with self and others evident in effective teaching and psychotherapy.

"Listening and learning to live" also provides thematic continuity for Neafsey's discussion of key psychological and spiritual conceptualizations. He explores listening to "Spirit Persons" or those through whom one hears the message of God, listening to the poor and oppressed and listening to our "still, small inner voice." Here is the uniqueness of his contribution. For example, the third chapter, "Discernment, the Inner

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Compass of the Heart,” offers the reader well versed in psychology an informative framework for understanding insight as a sacred experience. Specifically, Neafsey provides a cogent discussion of Loyola Ignatius’ views on consolation, inclinations of the soul and ego-centeredness. In contrast, chapters four and five, “Authenticity: To Live as though the Truth Were True” and “Passion and Compassion: The Heart’s Calling,” offer the reader well versed in theology, a perceptive integration of psychological perspective on affect tolerance, guilt, and the development of empathy.

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Neafsey concludes his volume with a brief discussion of social conscience and a pragmatic focus on “some of the social dimensions of conscience in a contemporary world,” including exercising a preferential option for the poor and speaking out against abuses in the war on terror. I wish he had said more about how exercising social conscience provides a connection to a community of others and how these relationships provide a basis for personal authenticity. Rather, he primarily appeals to personal morality, i.e. “to quiet an uneasy conscience,” without considering, as he does so convincingly in earlier chapters, psychological aspects of social and community involvement.

But this is a minor criticism. As a clinical psychologist and faculty



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member at a Jesuit university, I found the book informative and thought provoking. It reminded me of Toni Morrison’s comments upon receiving the National Book Foundation Medal when she described her personal calling in this way:

There is a certain kind of peace that is not just the absence of war. It is larger than that. The peace I am thinking of is not at the mercy of history’s rule, nor is it a passive surrender to the status quo. The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one.

I now know, more than I ever did (and on some level I always knew it), that I need the intimate sustained surrender to the company of my own mind while it touches another’s... That I need to offer the fruits of my own imaginative intelligence to another without fear of anything more deadly than disdain. (*The Dancing Mind*, p. 36)

Morrison was speaking, of course, about her calling to read writers and write for readers. I think she describes as well the heart of Neafsey’s calling to “listen” and “learn to live.” ■