

Symphony of Life: a new spiritual anthology    Anna Jeffery, Diadem Books, December 2009, £8.99, ISBN: 9781907294112.

Anna Jeffery is to be congratulated for her Herculean efforts in bringing to fruition in print a new anthology of spiritual writings. To organize such a great variety of passages from Plato to P D James, from Marcus Aurelius to Karen Armstrong, Mrs Jeffrey has presented them in the context of a symphony.

The core of the book consists of a Prelude and four Movements. The prelude refers to early awareness of God. The first movement establishes the steady influence of God, the second a period when the Almighty appears silent. The third movement is stormy, covering when life is problematic and the final movement attends to the end of life or journey's end. Before these there are three frontispieces, a foreword by our President, a piece about the editor and an introduction. The last twenty-five pages cover four afterwords, a coda, acknowledgements and indexes.

My first reaction was "how confusing", but on reflection we are offered a variety of ways of using this compilation quite in keeping with the 'pick and mix' approach of so many in our post-modern generation.

Whilst it's a lovely collection to dip into, it deserves reading through a movement, at least, at a time. Associations, remembrances and so on that are thrown up from within oneself add sparkle to the rainbow of affirmations and insights. The inclusion of passages of the perennial philosophy or wisdom widens the scope of the compilation.

For less than the cost of a concert ticket one finds thrilling phrases: in the prelude, Gerard Hughes writes, "Our treasure lies in our inner life. it is our inner life which affects our perception of the world and determines our actions and reactions to it. ... in religious language this inner life is called "the soul", and the art of knowing it, healing it, and harmonizing its forces is called spirituality."

In the second movement, pp.103-6 give us profound and encouraging insights into silence and contemplation. Additional reading might include Professor Martin Laird's magnificent work "Into the Silent Land" and S Stephanie Iachetta's 2009 book "The Daily Reader for Contemplative Living". Maria Boulding's comment about 'islands of silence' has been pastorally explored in the Buddhist-inspired work of Dr Edward Podvoll. His "The Seduction of Madness" explores compassionate recovery from psychosis.

In Tempestosa, Fellowship members may cheer on Bishop Richard Holloway's "trusting that our confidence, however frail, is responding to some great love beyond ourselves that haunts the universe." Cardinal Newman and Dean W R Inge are amongst those who strengthen the nerves in stormy periods.

The final movement towards journey's end is overflowing with delights for QR readers; Evelyn Underhill, T S Eliot and George Eliot, Rudyard Kipling and Raynor C Johnson, R S Thomas and Rosamund Lehmann join our past patron, Hugh Montefiore and Henri Nouwen to guide our gaze firmly and happily in the direction of glories yet to be revealed. It is a pity that Dr Dewi Rees' book "Pointers to Eternity was published too late for extracts to be included. Perhaps in the next edition?

Filled with many a 'bon mot', this treasury will reward frequent browsing and is ideal for all who like to grab a phrase or sentence and ruminate upon it. Alternatively, those who prefer to read the entire book through - and listen to their classical music as the composer wrote it - will find much to celebrate.