



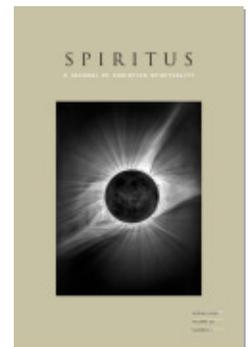
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*Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People
while the Rules Are Changing* by Joseph A. Stewart-Sicking
(review)

Paul Houston Blankenship

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the thirteenth century Dominican and others under his guidance took the scholastic interpretation even further than their predecessors, arguing from the Song of Songs for the superiority of the mendicant life. In an epilogue, LaVere notes how the scholastic emphasis on action over contemplation begins to fade by examining the commentaries of two Franciscans, Peter Olivi and Nicholas of Lyra. These commentaries retain the ecclesiological emphases of their predecessors, but they also take up earlier emphases on the mystical life, returning once again to the advocacy of a life balanced between contemplation and action.

A troubling theme shows up repeatedly throughout the two works: the sad history of Christian anti-Judaism. In both the ancient and medieval periods, the Song was employed to disparage or attack Jews, the Synagogue, and Judaism. As theologians and exegetes sought to mark the boundaries of the church or inspire the faithful to preach for conversion, heretics and Jews are scorned over and over again. Shuve and LaVere each note where these attacks appear, but leave them unscrutinized. This is an issue calling for further work: identifying the ways in which Christian spirituality and exegesis—especially as related to the Song of Songs—has been entangled with anti-Judaism.

No review, even a lengthy one like this, can do justice to all of the arguments, insights, and nuances of either of these works. Each book is full of detail that commends them scholars of Christian history and spirituality. These two significant books demonstrate that the history of Song of Songs reception remains a fertile field for research. Not only do they remind us that there are many treatments of the Song that have yet to be explored by scholars, but each work shows that there have been forms of spirituality inspired by the Song that are more diverse than we have previously imagined. Each work also makes a contribution to our understanding of how Scripture and other classic texts are received, adapted, and appropriated in light of the interests, perceived needs, and lived experiences of diverse communities in particular contexts.

TIMOTHY ROBINSON

Brite Divinity School

Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People while the Rules Are Changing.
By Joseph A. Stewart-Sicking. New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2016. 130 pp.

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Stewart-Sicking's *Spiritual Friendship After Religion: Walking with People while the Rules are Changing* is an erudite and provocative book on a matter of great importance. How does culture influence spirituality? What is spiritual friendship, why is it important, and how might one be good at it today? The purpose of this book is to answer these questions. It is also to render accessible recent scholarship on culture and spirituality for academic classrooms like Stewart-Sicking's own: vocationally diverse, spiritually eclectic, and ambivalent toward religion. His central thesis is that in order to practice the needed ministry of spiritual friendship today, Christians should accept the invitation from culture to change, practice paying attention to God in ways that are grounded in but ultimately transcend the Christian tradition, and make room for those who are truly Other

by living lives of hope, joy, and self-giving love. In this review, I briefly summarize each chapter and then discuss what I think the book's strengths and limitations are.

The first chapter argues that culture is comprised of four pervasive trends that present unique challenges and opportunities to the spiritual life, and the ministry of spiritual friendship in particular. These trends, which he returns to throughout the book, are *fluidity* (in which relationships are flippant, fragile and impermanent), *commodification* (where happiness is constituted by a consumer's infinite freedom to choose between unlimited resources), *the secular search for control* (in which meaning and value are harvested within what Charles Taylor dubs the "immanent frame"), and *diversity* (where absolute truth is contested by sacred and social difference).

In chapter two, Stewart-Sicking defines spiritual friendship broadly as "a special type of friendship that offers a space of freedom in which we can be honestly ourselves and explore our deepest spiritual longings (28)." He also draws our attention to a spiritual friend *par excellence*: the twelfth century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx. Aelred, who referred to friendship as "the guardian of the spirit" and wrote that the love and sweetness friendship produces is integral to our pursuit of the good life, is for Stewart-Sicking a striking example of the continued relevance of the Christian tradition (29).

Drawing on the work of Alexander Shai, chapter three argues that change should be our first step on the spiritual path and that, in our fluid culture, spiritual friends must help one another take it. Central to change is an attitude of "holy indifference," a reliance on grace, and the recognition that the images we have for God are ultimately unworthy of our faith. This book is strongly apophatic.

Answers are (usually) not the answer. Virtuous solidarity is. This is Stewart-Sicking's thesis in chapter four, which explores the question of how to be a spiritual friend in the grip of suffering and an individualistic culture.

Happiness is not something that can be purchased and owned. Nor is it tantamount to a good feeling. Following the work of Albert Borgmann on "focal realities" and Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of human flourishing, chapter five argues that happiness and the joy that accompanies it require "practices that must be carefully cultivated in real, embodied settings with others" such as discernment and critical consciousness raising (93).

In the end, chapter six suggests, being a good spiritual friend is about getting our hands dirty in the slow and painful process of cultivating supernatural hope. True happiness is found in service to others, not our fleeting wishes for personal and unlimited pleasure. It is the result of abiding in the love of Christ, together.

In the conclusion to *Spiritual Friendship after Religion*, Stewart-Sicking articulates his method of cultural interpretation. With the help of Christian ethicist Samuel Wells on theodrama he develops what he calls "spiritual improvisation." The aim of spiritual improvisation is "to engender trust and fearlessness in the unscripted drama of life" (126), encourage spiritual practices that exemplify radical openness, and give ourselves "up to God's purposes each moment, saying yes to where the Spirit blows and letting go of our desire for a map" (129). Stewart-Sicking hopes that spiritual improvisation will be of lasting use to spiritual friends as they encounter moral problems that necessitate novel solutions, like what to do with tradition after established religion.

For the most part, Stewart-Sicking far surpasses his goals in *Spiritual Friendship After Religion*. He lucidly renders accessible recent scholarship on culture and spirituality in a way that will be exceptionally useful in the classroom. Seamlessly, he explains how the work of Albert Borgmann, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Bruno Latour, and Alexander Shaia (among others) might inform the neglected ministry of spiritual friendship. Provocatively, and courageously, he offers a manifesto on how Christians might relate to culture today. Will we be equally courageous and live up to this call to learn how to be good spiritual friends to one another in our world?

Given the title of the book, it is curious that Stewart-Sicking does not mention when and how religion died. Or whether it really is dead. Despite the latest PEW data, to which we should all have a more critical relationship, as Robert Wuthnow's *Inventing American Religion* asks of us, the fact remains that the majority of people in the world are religious now and are likely to remain so. The first chapter is tilted "Just as it Is." So, we should ask: for whom? Methodologically, this book soars too high above the trees. A deeper discussion of "culture," a term that is itself in disrepair among anthropologists, should take ethnographies that explore local and empirical questions about religion, spirituality, and friendship more seriously.

Stewart-Sicking aims to help us make room for the truly Other by promoting responsible interfaith dialogue. He cautions us against a superficial misappropriation of another spiritual tradition. This is very good. In the end, however, he fails to do so because he does not make room for the unapologetically *religious* Other. This is unfortunate. Lest we unintentionally bury the Other, we need to think more critically about whether we should continue shoveling dirt on an imagined grave marked "religion." Like the rest of our idols, change can become an idol unworthy of our faith too.

PAUL HOUSTON BLANKENSHIP
Graduate Theological Union

Introducing Contemplative Studies. By Louis Komjathy. Hoboken: Wiley, 2018. 410 pp. \$39.95

Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer. Edited by Louis Komjathy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. 831 pp. \$32.95

Both of Louis Komjathy's texts offer much to the field of Contemplative Studies in distinct and complementary ways. As Komjathy writes, the two texts are distinct in their scope and methodology. *Introducing Contemplative Studies* outlines the field of Contemplative Studies, carefully unpacking its basic tenets and offering challenges to the field. *Contemplative Literature* "utilizes a historical contextualist and textual methodology" (*Introducing*, 4) within religious studies, while *Introducing* reaches beyond the field of Religious Studies to consider the interdisciplinary