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## Review

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## Review

TOGETHER IN SOLITUDE, by Douglas V. Steere  
(New York: Crossroad, 1982), 201 pp., \$12.95.

Through his earlier books such as *On Beginning from Within*, *On Listening to Another*, and *Prayer and Worship*, Douglas Steere has provided helpful spiritual guidance for several decades. The greatest appeal of the present volume may be for previous readers who are familiar with his ability to bring the insights of the literary past to bear upon contemporary contemplative experience.

The four chapters in the first section are: "Common Frontiers in Catholic and Non-Catholic Spirituality," "The Life of Prayer as the Ground of Unity," "On Confirming the Deepest Thing in Another," and "Baron von Hügel as Spiritual Director." In the second section are these five: "Bethlehem Revisited," "Solitude and Prayer," "Contemplation and Leisure," "The Mystical Experience," and "On Being Present Where You Are."

Steere utilizes the Introduction to indicate the occasion and theme of each chapter and its publication history (the years for three chapters, unfortunately, are not included). The chapters are woven together from his bag of irenic and ecumenical quotations.

In chapter nine, "On Being Present Where You Are," Douglas Steere seems to me most warmly human. There he shares bitter-sweet childhood memories and the significance that actual as well as historical acquaintances (like Abraham Lincoln) had for him. In that chapter, too, he helps us reach out to one another for emotional support, for interfacing the requirements of truth, for crossing ethnic and religious lines, and for letting God's steady presence instruct us.

Because strengths and weaknesses offer clues to where we stand in relation to each other, I have paired these qualities in reflecting upon this book. First, the book distills pertinent material on the spiritual life from a wide body of philosophical and religious literature, offering the reader a professionally competent religious travelogue through time. Steere also provides anecdotes of his own travels. Some shadow is cast on this strength by a subtle, name-dropping elitism — a sophisticated version of the VIP syndrome. One is conscious of it in such syntax as "Anker Larsen, a Danish mystic whom Rufus Jones always admired and with whom I once spent a day at his home in a suburb of Copenhagen..." Although vital

religious experience often serves vicariously at second hand it rarely does so at third hand.

Second, there is great ecumenical strength in this book as the author ranges across the religious landscape to point out devotional beauty from many sources, Christian and non-Christian. He has contributed significantly to the Quaker-Catholic dialogue, as the publication data for several essays indicate. But this ecumenicity lies along a narrow band. Consider his treatment of intercessory prayer. He finds deficient Roman Catholicism, "conventional" Protestantism, and our "more conservative-minded" denominations with their "simple and unthinking way of trust." This type of hasty generalization is applied to all three groups. But it is particularly uninformed or prejudiced concerning a body of perceptive literature on the subject by evangelical writers such as Hallesby or Tozier.

A third strength is Steere's insights into the process of divine grace. "We are unfinished creatures even when we have been drenched with grace..." he writes, "and require all the skilled assistance that can be given us in the continuous process of increasing self-surrender and inward abandonment..." (p. 5). This is well said. But there is lurking danger of substituting a spiritual director for the living Christ, or a devotional book for the immediacy of prayer. The treasured book, with its nuances of antiquarian or aesthetic value, can turn the intellectual's icon into an idol. The chapter on Baron von Hügel awoke these reflections in me. It is good to know how this leisured man of letters was gifted — saturated with awareness of God at work, dependent upon daily religious practice, reverent toward souls, and willing to expend himself on behalf of others. Is it the spiritual giftedness of the good baron or his talent in expressing it literarily, however, which lingers in the mind of the reader of this chapter? I am not sure it is the former. In many ordinary Christians the same virtues are joyously present and observed. But their presence there seems to have fewer credentials and to be overshadowed here by an aristocratic mien.

In conclusion, pondering these fine, thoughtful essays by a well-loved Friend, brought to the surface a recurring question: Why has devotional literature remained so largely in the rational-intuitive mode, rather than the sensory-intuitive? The question reflects my phenomenalist stance, and my own interest. Perhaps that explains some of my reservations about the book. Perhaps it indicates a new direction to be taken.

*Arthur O. Roberts*