

REVIEW

Title: Network of the Human Soul

Subtitle: On Identity, Dignity, Maturity and Life Skills

Author: Daniël Louw

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The title of the book, *Network of the Human Soul: On Human Identity, Dignity, Maturity and Life Skills*, already introduces the reader to the broad topic the author wishes to address. That is, to discover the possibilities of a “soulful” living within the context of everyday life and all its complexities. That does not mean to say that one can manage life itself, but that possibilities for meaningful living are found within the context of networks of relationships with the self, others and with God. Throughout the book the issue at stake is the quest for meaning and meaningful living within the context of the network of relationships human beings find themselves in. As a vantage point for the book is the realization that one cannot change what befalls one in life, but one can change how one responds to it through changes in one’s attitude and position in life. According to Louw the intention of the book is to “help the reader to identify the different issues at stake as related to the realm of soulfulness; human identity and dignity; marriage and family life; the dynamics of society and communal life; the different options within the turning points of crises; the interplay between spirituality, healing and physical and sexual well-being; and the notion of growth within loss and mourning”, and for his discussion on this he chose to follow an existential approach to life as departure point.

The introductory note to the book, in addition to guidelines on how to read and use the book, is quite helpful in that it provides the reader with the author’s understanding of various key terms, also including an understanding of pastoral care and its underlying principles. Also, the introductory chapters help the reader to understand what is meant with soul within the existential realities of life and death, and this serves as an introduction for understanding the rest of the book. The author works with an understanding of life as a space depicted “as a dynamic network and system of interactive relationships”, and hence the strong emphasis in the book on a systemic and holistic understanding of life. The notion of soul and soulfulness in life is discussed extensively and the author concludes that “soul denotes the quality of positions (attitudes, being-functions) within the dynamics of networking and systemic relationships. As such, soul reveals an understanding of God (God-images)”. It may be of value to note that an understanding of the author’s view on an integrated pastoral anthropology, as discussed in some of his other works, will be helpful in understanding his view on life itself as well as the healing

processes in life as discussed in this book.

The approach Louw follows in discussing different coping mechanism and opportunities for a soulful (meaningful) living within the happenstances of life is by using graphic portrayals of different networks within which people may live their lives. Not to say that these graphic portrayals give the exact essence of each dimension of life, but rather that it serves as a “functional and hermeneutical approach” to relate different issues with each other. The underlying understanding here is that healing of life has a lot to do with the shifting of positions with regards to ideas, beliefs, assumptions, paradigms, and relationships for example. This positioning within networks of relationships becomes understandable only through the integrating factor of a spiritual realm determined by belief systems, meaningful frameworks and normative values.

Louw uses a graphic schema to illustrate one’s positioning in life, the effects generally associated to the different positioning options, and the likely changes related to changes in positioning. In his schema the bipolar dynamics of interaction and communication (network of relationships) are placed along both x-axis and y-axis, depicting the tension between distance and nearness (x-axis) and between responsible leadership and mutual support (y-axis). This is expanded with a discussion on how these positions co-exist in life at any time, as well as how these positions may shift to extremes whereby it becomes positions of pathology. However, returning to the idea of the shifting of positions as a means to unearth the potential for meaningful living, the author also suggest possible shifts and how this relates the various positions in the schema with each other as well as to how it may become embodied in real life. The same principles and approach is followed all the chapters (2-9), relating it to the concepts of identity, dignity, maturity, spirituality, God-images, as the relational networks of marriage, family and society, and to the process of mourning. The questionnaires the author propose to be used in conjunction with the positioning schemata are useful in that it not only helps one to gain insight into one’s own positioning within a relationship, but also in the sense that working through them further improves understanding of the underlying principles behind the notion of meaningful living within the context of networks and relationships.

The book can definitely be used for academic purposes, as training material within faith communities and within the pastoral therapeutic context. It may be argued that the author at times uses language and concepts that are not necessarily easily understood by laypeople. However, the content and wisdom of the book can be made accessible and understandable to laypeople with the help of appropriately trained individuals, and has the potential to be translated into a workbook for training sessions.

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