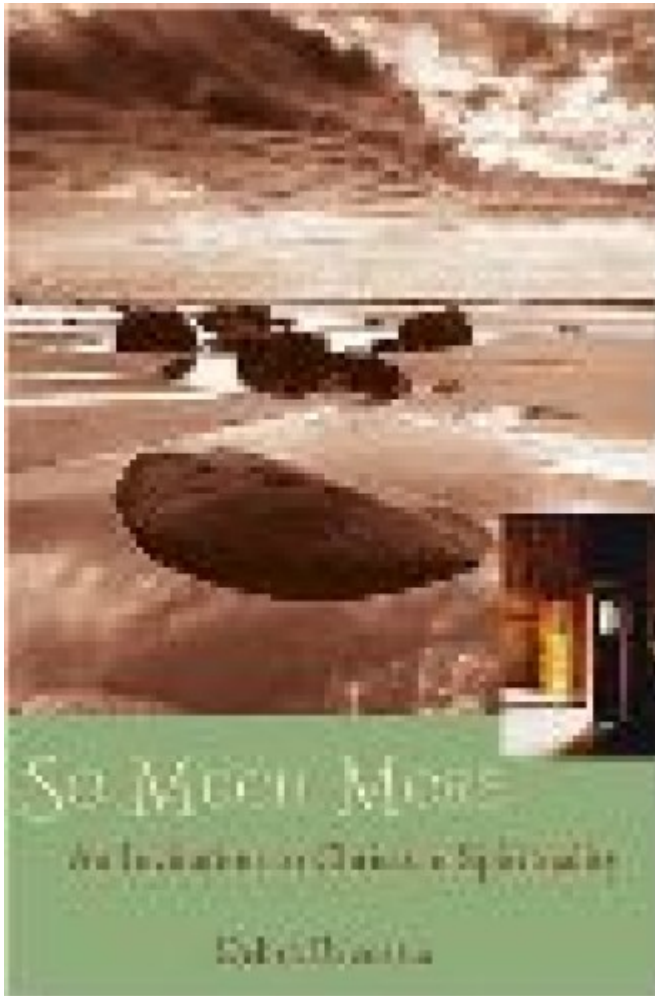


So Much More

reviewed by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

In Review



So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality

Debra Rienstra
Jossey-Bass

I once owned an ambitiously titled book, *All the Doctrines of the Bible*. Too many apologetics are muscularly evangelical, seeking to answer definitively all questions,

enumerate every important theological theme, and quash questioners. One thinks of John Stott's *Basic Christianity*, J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* or Josh McDowell's gauntlet, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. The classic *Mere Christianity*, by C. S. Lewis, is more irenic and deservedly retains a good reputation. Yet even its style of persuasive charm and logic is not as compelling in the postmodern milieu as when Lewis penned it.

Debra Rienstra writes a gentle and winsome introduction to Christian faith, beliefs and practices as "a gesture of welcoming friendship for people who are new or newly returned to the Christian faith—those who are searching, lurking, longing, or learning." She blends a "broad overview and a sense of my own experience."

Rienstra, like Lewis, teaches literature. Not surprisingly, one attraction of this book is her deft writing and frequent references to literary classics, particularly Milton, Dante and Shakespeare. She also shows a fondness for Lewis, both *Mere Christianity* and his novel *Till We Have Faces*.

She sets an ambitious goal: articulating key Christian practices and beliefs, but not primarily through argument. She portrays how in Christianity "belief, practice, passion, and imagination" come together into a spirituality of "so much more" which allows God to "bind together all of ourselves, all parts of our lives into a vibrant, enduring wholeness."

Rienstra explores how Christian faith is imagined (the mysteries of God, Trinity, incarnation, sin, atonement, redemption, suffering and hope) and lived (prayer, scripture reading, worship, community and service of God and others). That is a tall order for one volume. Yet she achieves her unlikely agenda. Writing from within her own Dutch Reformed understanding (for which she shows deep gratitude), she carefully thinks through many topics. At the same time, she celebrates and appreciates nuances and approaches of other Christian traditions.

While *Mere Christianity* can be grasped by literate high schoolers, Rienstra writes for a more sophisticated audience. If her reader is not college-educated, her literary references would be lost.

Several aspects of this book are especially commendable. Rienstra unapologetically sees beliefs and practices as deeply and inextricably intertwined. Convictions lead to actions and are, in turn, shaped by them.

She often brings in insightful stories from her experiences as a daughter, friend, wife, professor and mother. Her anecdotes are self-deprecating and winsomely humorous. The personal is never intrusive or inappropriate, but invariably evocative. Perhaps this is a gender-related approach to doing theology; notably, the aforementioned cerebrally focused apologetic texts are all by men.

Wit and intelligence are evident in Rienstra's style. Her insights are communicated through carefully crafted wording. More than once, sentences leap out as worthy aphorisms: "We serve out of obedience, but obedience is gratitude at work." Or, in making a case for the unlikely blessings of being church-ed: "A person who believes she can homeschool her own soul has a rather high view of her own ability."

As a high schooler and college student I was enamored of some of the apologetics texts mentioned above. That changed when my only sibling died of leukemia at the age of 17. Those "answer men" were not much help on suffering or theodicy. Later, when I was a pastor, such matters were among the most important ones for my ministry. Thus I appreciate Rienstra's chapter on suffering and hope, an exploration that includes the Christian mandate of protest and doubt. She shows "where great evil is countered with great hope." She gives a ringing call to address and redress suffering.

Rienstra treads gently with dicey theological questions: universalism, eschatology, human freedom, open theism. She does not resolve everything, nor does she try. She delicately negotiates the conviction that "Christian faith rests on great pillars of certainty; yet those certainties are mysteries." Thus we believe, without fully comprehending. And we live out our convictions even as we grow into them.