What is spirituality? Does it look different in women? And has it been playing a meaningful role in transforming South Africa?

These questions re-emerge with the publication of Claiming our footprints (EFSA 2000), a book by South African women in which they reclaim their spiritual roots. It has been edited by Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman, Hantie Kotze and Judy Tobler, who all belong to the Cape Town branch of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

The aim of this review article is to place this book within the history of writing and thinking about spirituality, and to establish its unique contribution to feminist, religious and reformatory thinking in South Africa in general. First, views on spirituality will be retrieved from the book. These views will then be profiled by historical definitions of spirituality, as well as by feminist definitions.

Views on spirituality in Claiming our footprints

Claiming our footprints contains contributions by 15 women, most of whom have undergone formal theological training and are practising as religion educators and/or religious officers. Most of them are Christians, all of whom are in office or teach religion as a career (or intend to do so). Apart from the eleven Christian women, the groups accommodates two Muslim women and one woman who has rejected membership of a formal religion. One of the women is (a non-South African) black, and the others non-black.

How do white Christian women in South Africa come to terms with their spirituality. The book answers this question by linking spirituality to context and identity. Growing up in a privileged white context, in a
society in which a Christian spiritual identity has dominated, is what gives rise to their first definition of spirituality, which is mystical in nature, and reads:

- Spirituality is our desire for God.

Their second definition is framed by a context of raising children in a society where safety is presupposed. This definition is also strongly demarcated by an exclusive identity of motherhood, that is, an identification with motherhood as the most primal and exclusive of all female contributions to humanity. Those among them who are raising children emphasise the following definition of spirituality:

- Spirituality is the female experience of giving birth and nurturing children.

Their experiences of motherhood enable most of the women to extend their view of spirituality to include not only God, but also human beings and nature. For them, simply,

- Spirituality is relationships.

Since the women are employed as religion workers, they view spirituality in terms of formal religion. In terms of white liberalism, spirituality, then, is defined as follows:

- Spirituality is religion, not 'pure' religion, but religion
  — which rests on rituals and community, and not on dogma, and
  — which fights for social justice.

For the black woman in the group, her definition of spirituality differs extensively. She has suffered racial and sexist abuse, and for her

- Spirituality is accepting God as comfort.

The definitions, obviously, are simple and experience-based, but could have been the carriers of great beauty. However, because of their group identity as trained theologians from various religions, their definitions of spirituality raise two questions. First, were they not influenced in their thinking on spirituality by their interreligious contact, and if so,