

Towards a Spirituality for Life

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Abstract: Elements of a spirituality that fosters life in its totality, taking into consideration some of the grave problems of today, are traced in this article. The author pleads for a spirituality that preserves and fosters life both in this world and in the next.

Keywords: life, threats to existence, human fulfilment, fundamentalism.

Introduction¹

Humans are fundamentally open to the spiritual. Though spiritual exercises are varied and the experiences they give rise to are unique, there is a commonality in all genuine spiritual experiences.² In this article, I make a modest attempt to argue that, given today's particular context of the world, the many spiritualities have one common denominator: an ardent desire to protect, promote and perfect life in its totality.³

In this article on spirituality for our times, I attempt to point out some of the agonies and ecstasies faced by the world today and assert that the uniqueness and validity of any spirituality is tested in the actual life situation of the community: how far it promotes life, fosters joy and furthers love.

After understanding spirituality primarily as an experience, I try to situate spirituality in the wider context of today's world. I shall then deal with the human longing for fulfilment that is embedded in every spiritual quest. This leads to appreciate spiritual exercises as experiences (and expressions) of love conditioned by our context and open to the whole of reality. Finally, I hope for a spirituality that leads to a renewed vision of God, world and hu-

mans. The focal point of our spirituality is life in its varied forms searching for fullness.

1. Understanding Spirituality as Experience

Spirituality as beyond religion and theology: Though the term ‘spirituality’ is widely used, it is difficult to define it. For the purpose of this paper, I would like to contrast spirituality with related terms like religion and theology.

Religion forms a community that shares a common world-view in which the members reinforce each other in their faith-commitment. Religion can be traced to a charismatic personality or significant experience shared by a community. Such a religion tends to be institutionalised and tends to face the “dilemma of institutionalisation” that Max Weber has powerfully popularised.⁴ Religious practices are the self-expression of a community of faith. They articulate the vision of a faith community and try to perpetuate the original experience (“originary experience”)⁵. Religion manifests itself through symbolic rituals (sacraments), structures and official articulations.

Theology may be considered as the conscious articulation of a community to relate the original experience to the contemporary world in a rational and systematic manner. Theology is an attempt to understand the community through rational categories. Though religion and theology are vital to the existence of a faith community, they are secondary compared to the spirituality. Spirituality refers directly to one’s way of living, to one’s aspirations, hopes, ambitions and visions.

Spirituality as an enriching relationship among God, world and humans: Unfortunately the term “spirituality” denotes the primacy of the “spirit” as opposed to the “body.” It presupposes that the material or the bodily is unimportant compared to the really important realm, that is, the “non-material.” The basic assumption when we use the term “spirituality” is that God or the Divine is a spirit (as opposed to the material) and so this realm is superior. Though some attempts have been made to coin different

terms (like “carnality”), we have not come across any term that goes beyond the dualistic understanding of the human person and does justice to the depth and richness indicated by the term “spirituality,” where our embodied nature is given justice to.

With this caveat, we can understand “spirituality” as an enriching relationship that draws us deeper to the world, to humans and to the Divine. Spirituality may be understood as a deeper way of relating to ourselves and to the whole reality in a way consonant with the “originary experiences” found in any of the religious traditions. The mystics point to a deeper and dynamic relationship with the Divine that transforms their whole existence. So we may roughly denote spirituality as a relationship that evokes a religious experience, providing us with a profound sense of meaning and significance in our life. Such an experience enhances the horizontal, vertical and inner dimensions of our existence.⁶

Fostering of life in all dimensions: A spiritual experience that originates in a profound experience of reality, necessarily leads to the fostering of life in all its dimensions.⁷ One of the uniquely religious experiences of humans is the awareness of the brokenness (sinfulness, contingency, limitedness) of life in all the dimensions (physical, biological, psychological, metaphysical and spiritual). Evil threatens our existence and finally as individuals we are swallowed up in death. Our life and particularly our spiritual life, is an attempt to respond to this possible nihilism. A meaningful spiritual relationship enables us to confront our *facticity* and brokenness, to undertake everything within our power to preserve and foster life in its totality. Spirituality is not just an attempt to overcome only death, the final human experience of finitude. It is our human attempt to rise above all the forces of darkness that impede the flow of life through us.

Therefore, a meaningful spirituality has to respond realistically to the threats of ecological calamity, economic disparity, nuclear annihilation and terrorist violence facing human beings, individually and collectively.

Towards a deeper experience of existence: Therefore, spirituality is an experience of the threats confronting humanity and responding to them not merely from our own limited resources, but also with the providence of God. A spiritual person is one who believes, with Albert Einstein, that reality is basically friendly to us. Thus the forces of evil and the experience of tragedy that we encounter should make us realistic, not desperate. For we know that life is not our exclusive responsibility. We are “handmaids” or “instruments” or “agents” of the Divine, who acts in and through us. In acting to overcome evil, we are consoled and comforted by a loving and personal power that is beyond us. As spiritual persons, we affirm that existence is benevolent in spite of contrary experiences, that we are living in the hands of God in spite of the paradoxes that we encounter. So the equanimity that a spiritual person radiates, is one drawn from a deeper experience of tragedy. Going beyond the tragedies of life, it affirms that reality is fundamentally meaningful and trustworthy. A genuine spirituality is drawn from an authentic experience of the depth of existence as meaningful, friendly and affirmative.

2. Spirituality as the Deepest Fulfilment of Human Longing⁸

The basic spiritual quest, is for human fulfilment that is multifaceted. The human longing is the result of the innate limitation of human existence which can be satisfied only through a fulfilment that is integral.

Fulfilment, more than material: The Indian psyche longs for a fulfilment that is more than the material. Our basic human needs are not merely food, clothing and shelter. Deep down we long for a fulfilment that goes beyond the material to the psychological, philosophical and spiritual. “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Mat 4: 4) The “word of God” gives us the assurance that our lives are more than the bodily and have a destiny which is beyond the grave.

Fulfilment, more than individual: The overemphasis on the individual soul and destiny has led us to believe in a human salvation (realisation) that is over-individualised. The original human societies (be they the Jewish tribes or the Indigenous people) visualised their human search and fulfilment as a collective affair. “No man is an island.” Humans can achieve their salvation only in a society that is oriented towards God and receptive to other human beings.

Fulfilment, more than that of the soul: Again, too much emphasis has been given in traditional religious practices to a fulfilment that is other-worldly and not-bodily. The soul has been blown up in importance at the expense of the body. Today, we long to return to a holistic integration that takes our corporeality seriously and our physical nature earnestly.

Fulfilment that is dialogical and relational: Thus, our contemporary spiritual exercises and experiences are both relational and dialogical. A genuine spiritual experience calls for a dialogical interaction among other human beings and with God. The old paradigm of seeking God in isolation, “alone with the Alone” is giving way to a common, creative and interactive search for the depth of human existence that is essentially related and relational. We realise that we are bound to each other and it is only from the experience of the other that we gain our identity.⁹ At the spiritual level too humans remain essentially communitarian, and human search and fulfilment – that is spirituality – retains this collective character.

3. Spirituality as Exercise of Love

It is within the context of the resurgence of fundamentalism, poverty and violence in the world and in India, that we can visualise spirituality as an exercise of love: love for the whole of humanity and for God, without neglecting love for the concrete individual persons around us.

Fundamentalism vs Returning to the fundamentals: We may very well visualise spirituality as an encounter going back to the roots. “Returning to the original charism” of the religious tradi-

tion is imperative for us, so that we can learn once again that the basic creed of every religion is love. Going back to the fundamentals of religions (both historically and existentially) challenges us to be open to the core message of compassion and sensitivity that is at the root of every religious experience.

A proper antidote to today's growing fundamentalism is to rediscover the fundamental values and vision of the religious tradition. It is only when we are firmly rooted in the tradition of our own faith, can we bend forward and receive warmly other traditions which may think, feel and act differently.

Other religions as partners in dialogue: In the significant quest for the meaning and fullness of life, gone are the times, when we used to look at other religions as competitors. Today, the world has become one. We are so much united at a global level that we form one world.¹⁰ We are in a common search for the meaning of existence together we search for the Ultimate, who remains ever elusive, giving us some glimpse of Him at times. Further, at the human level, the other religions and traditions serve as partners in bettering the life situation of three fourths of humanity, who are still deprived of a rightful place in human life.

From saving our souls to saving humanity: Confronted with the grave threats facing the world today from nuclear, economic, ecological and justice issues, we must collectively change our religious priority from saving the soul to saving the world. It is definitely true that our final fulfilment includes definitely the other world, but as spiritual persons, we just cannot live in a dream world where we become irresponsible to the critical challenges confronting humanity. Today, more than the individual souls of believers, the soul of humanity cries out for redemption. That is the desperate groaning of all living beings (the yearning of the creation) which is being trampled upon by human selfishness and cruelty. Faced with our own collective extinction, as spiritual persons, we have no option but to save and preserve the precious life on planet earth.

Working for the protection and promotion of life: Therefore, the responsible religious challenge is to undertake everything to preserve, protect and promote all dimensions of life. Today not just human life, but also planetary life, is threatened. The beautiful creation of God is reduced to money which may be sold at random. Precious life has become an object of commerce. Even enlightenment is sought after as a commodity. Human beings tend to be treated as things. In this situation of inhuman betrayal of life, we are called to foster life unreservedly. For this purpose we need to collaborate with all people of good will, who are scholars, scientists, philosophers, bureaucrats, politicians and leaders of all types. The simplest and ordinary persons also have something profound to contribute to the furtherance of life.

Living the religion for life: Thus religion and spirituality need to rediscover the significance of life on this planet. Too long have we lived as if we have “enough religion to kill, not enough to love.” As spiritual people, we need to reaffirm our commitment to life and to celebrate it. Sacraments need to be recharged with the grandeur of life so that this world becomes sacred. Our sacredness needs to rediscover the beauty of life and reaffirm and celebrate it. Our life of faith needs to reassert the uniqueness and dignity of life (not just human life) that is so precious.

Living the tension of belongingness (roots) and openness (wings): For this we need to belong to the world totally and at the same time be open to future possibilities, which are God’s gift to us. The invitation of God to embrace the whole world and to go beyond in love, has to be taken seriously. Without belittling the material, we need to soar high and experience the profound joy of being alive. Without desecrating the everyday, we need to consecrate the particularly sacred moments of our life. We need a spirituality that takes wings to reach out to the ever beyond in us, while remaining creatively loyal to our past.

A flexibility based on “at-home-ness” in the universe: We need a spirituality that enables us to be truly at peace with our own selves. This calls for a spirituality that enables us to be truly at

home with the cosmos, so we can afford to be flexible and open in our relationship to God and to the world. We need not have fear when faced with a future that may seem to be threatening. In spite of the dehumanising forces operating in the world, we know that we can let ourselves be in the hands of God. We are here because our God is alive and active.

4. Uniqueness & Versatility of Spiritual Exercises

In the context of the need to save and promote life, we now explore some of the salient features of the contemporary Indian spiritual exercises that are emerging. The focus is on a holistic integral understanding of human beings in the world.

Beginning with this world (incarnation): We have begun to realise that spirituality, just like corporeality, has to begin with the world. The other-worldly spirituality that tends to deny this world has become outdated. Though traditional spirituality lays heavy emphasis on bodily mortification and running away from the world, that is the “vale of tears,” we are rediscovering the beauty of God’s creation as the source of our spiritual insight. No human being can claim to have any experience (leave alone spiritual experience) apart from the material reality surrounding him. Though such exercises evoke in us the desire for the other world, we need to focus primarily on this world. The best case for such a reaffirmation of the world is to be found in the Christian notion of incarnation. The incarnation, together with the doctrine of creation (as original blessing) asserts that for a believer, this world has to be taken seriously. This world is the paradigm for divine activity and can never be excluded from the plan of human fulfilment.

Emphasis on body (yoga): One of the significant spiritual rediscoveries is the significance of the body as a means of spiritual realisation. Though the extreme forms of it use sexual energy¹¹ as a means of spiritual realisation, we can observe that the body has regained its legitimate role in spiritual experiences and exercises.

One of the significant bodily spiritual exercises is through breathing. By regulated breath or by its awareness, various schools have tried to foster spiritual awareness. The Buddhist meditation, Vipassana, for instance, focuses on awareness of breath as leading to enlightenment. The transcendental meditations also focus on the body as a very important source of realisation. Classical yoga is the best way of using bodily exercises as spiritual exercises in order to realise total fulfilment.¹²

Rediscovery of the human face (Levinas): Just like reaffirmation of the bodily, another feature of the emerging spirituality is experiencing the beauty and uniqueness of the human face or the eyes. If we cannot see the trace of infinity in the human face, the tenderness of love in human eyes and the eagerness to know in the human look, we just cannot remain human, leave alone spiritual. This rediscovery of the human face (the ability to transcend oneself and see the other as other, with compassion, love and tenderness) is a unique feature of human living and spiritual experience.

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Openness to life and death (resurrection): The experience of transcendence in the human face also helps us to experience another still more significant transcendence: that of going beyond life and death. Death is a daily experience of humans. And a spiritual conviction and openness enables us to prepare for a life that is beyond the material, beyond that of bodily and spiritual death. It enables us to see the infinite possibilities that are open to us even in death – the most cruel and excruciating self-annihilation. Since love can never be extinguished from the human heart and compassion from the human face, we affirm gently and tenderly that life can never be wiped out by death! This is genuine spiritual versatility and openness.

Towards a future that is beyond ourselves (the Divine): For such a spiritual openness, we are called to go beyond ourselves in self-abandonment and surrender. To be open to the more, to the infinite appearing dimly before us and to trust gently that life will take us beyond ourselves, we need to trust ourselves to the un-

known but loving affirmation of life. To be able to experience the fullness of life, we need to let ourselves go and open ourselves to the mystery that is beyond ourselves. Realising totally that we are in safe hands, we need to open our fists and give up the little attachments we childishly cling to. When we let go of ourselves – our selfish ego, our petty plans, our childish desires – we are transported to a domain that is full of life, beauty and love. There we realise ourselves, just as the seed that flowers forth by dying to itself.¹⁴

5. Renewed Vision of World, God and Humans¹⁵

The spiritual exercises discussed above and the experience derived out of them, lead to a renewed vision of God, world and humans. This also leads to further commitment to humans and to the world and openness to the sacred and divine in nature.

An exercise/experience of crises in today's world: Such a tender, loving and caring affirmation of life forces us to look realistically at the threats and dangers confronting today's life. Not just the threats of nuclear or ecological disasters, but that of human tragedies like large scale starvation of millions, dehumanised enslaving economic oppression of the powerless and the calculated and systematic disinformation campaign for the political and economic expediency of the powerful few. Realising the grave dangers posed to life, the genuine spiritual person resolves to do what is individually and collectively possible, gently and firmly. An openness to the beauty and preciousness of life helps us to feel in our own body, the grave threat to our precious planet, without giving up hope and trust in humanity.

Positively responding to the technological revolution: This concretely demands responding creatively and constructively to the technological marvels that we experience today. It is true that most of the dangers that we face are directly or indirectly caused by the profound technological revolution. But condemning all technological progress as the devil's work will not help; nor does regarding technology as the only solution for human evils. With a spiri-

tual vision and openness we need to evaluate technological progress and befriend technology without demonising it.¹⁶

Deeper understanding of reality and life: Does such a healthy befriending demand from us a deeper and healthy understanding and appreciation of life and reality? We need to ask ourselves: What is life? What do we want to achieve individually and collectively? What is the meaning of our life? How do we justify our existence to ourselves and find happiness in life? Then, we need to turn to the traditional answers (given by culture, religion) and open ourselves to experience the beauty, bliss and mystery of life and reality. Spirituality then becomes a celebration and affirmation of the beauty and depth of life with the capacity to respond creatively and lovingly to the challenges that we face. It is here that our understanding of God also becomes crucial. In the whole drama of life that is being played in the universe, what is the role of God, the Divine or the Sacred? Each religious tradition answers these questions differently, with varying nuances. But genuine spiritual exercises and experiences enable us to appreciate the reality of the Divine in a very profound and mystical manner.

Widening of human consciousness: For such an enterprise, we need to be aware that what we are is our own awareness of ourselves, our self-consciousness. Our notion of who we are, what our problems are and how we can confront our problems depend on our human consciousness. At the moment, in spite of the development of human knowledge and ability, we are unfortunately stuck with a consciousness that is narrow and anthropocentric. We need to broaden our vision, enlarge our horizon and widen our consciousness. It will enable us to experience the genuine problems that humanity faces and overcome them with genuine tenderness and universal compassion.¹⁷

From evolution become conscious of itself, to evolution capable of eliminating itself: We need to reaffirm the fact that we are in a unique position: we are evolution become conscious of itself. In the recent decades, we have advanced still further! We have become evolution that is capable of eliminating itself or enhancing

itself. The choice is open to us! Standing at the threshold of life – human, animal, vegetative – we can decide for the whole of life, whether to enhance it beautifully or to annihilate it violently! That is a tremendous spiritual responsibility and task! Are we ready for it? Our actions in the next few decades will decide whether we can, in any way be called a spiritual generation and whether there will be a next generation to evaluate us!¹⁸

Fulfilment of the whole living family: A genuine spiritual experience calls us to realise the beauty of life and to fulfil the whole of life. We are in an honoured position! As humans – genuine, committed, spiritual, versatile and flexible – we can open ourselves and the whole of life to further enhancement! That is the tremendous spiritual challenge and openness. In this openness, abandonment and realisation of ourselves, we shall be contributing to the overall development and realisation of life itself! So, our spiritual life urges us to remain deeply embedded in our earthly existence, embracing at the same time the whole of life including the Divine!

Conclusion

The crucial spiritual experiences available to us through various exercises are values that promote life holistically: transparency, gentleness, sensitivity, openness, transformation, innocence, bliss, at-home-ness with oneself and with the whole reality, unitive vision and loving compassion! We are urged to be authentic so as to let life flow in and through us so that we can resonate with the grandeur of life and partake in the flowering of love. Every genuine spiritual exercise is a call to such a tremendously life transforming experience of openness to oneself, to the world and to the Divine. Such spiritual exercises (and experience) make life on the planet earth viable, opening itself to a fullness that is the Divine. That is the ecstasy open to every mystic, the bliss shared by every martyr and the delight lived by every saint.

Notes

1. This article is adapted from a larger article which will be published

in USA and edited by Oga Dun on “Spiritual Exercises and Versatility.”.

2. One excellent study on religious experience leading to a case for theism is Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidence of Religious Experience*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999. See specially pp. 19-55 on the nature of religious experience. It may be noted that the ecstasy and depth of a spiritual experience is something open, only to the one who has genuinely experienced it.
3. I could have better formulated it as, “life in its diversity and totality.” See my article, “Priests for Life” *AUC: Asian Journal for Priests* 48/3, 2004.
4. The “dilemma of institution” denotes the inherent dilemma present in the evolution of any structure. A charism needs the institution to preserve itself. But the very growth of institution suffocates the very charism it is meant to serve. See M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1904 and Thomas F. O’Dea, “Five Dilemmas in the Institutionalisation of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol 1, October 1961.
5. See Salvino Azzopardi, *Metaphilosophy*, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, 1984.
6. As is generally implied, by horizontal dimension, I understand our relationship with the world and human beings. Similarly the vertical dimension points to the transcendent, divine level. The inner dimension is that which takes us to the depth of our own human consciousness (or the soul).
7. See K. Pandikattu, *Let Life Be! Jnanam*, Pune, 2002.
8. See J. Quitterer and K. Pandikattu, *Human Longing and Fulfilment: East Encounters West*, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Pune, 2002.
9. Sociologists speak of the “looking-glass self.”
10. The choice confronting us is that of one world or no world (“eine Welt oder keine Welt”).
11. This is particularly true of some sects like tantrism, Shaktism and Bhagawan Rajneesh.
12. For a detailed analysis see Joe Kunnumpuram, *The Miracle of Awareness*, Media House, Delhi, 2002. He has been involved in promoting a spirituality that is bodily and integrated and Atmadharshan, Patna, has been focussing on demystifying spirituality and fostering a spiritual vitality that is truly holistic. In Pune too Matthias Altrichter has been attempting such a synthesis for a decade now.
13. Following Emmanuel Levinas, we can speak of the face symbolising

infinity and transcendence. This may be related to love. .

14. Human values like self-abandonment and self-surrender are crucial here. In this process we become capable of bearing fruits of compassion and love by being open to the whole universe.
15. Definitely the renewed vision is an integrating spiritual vision that is interrelated.
16. The recent attempts at dialogue between science and religion are such a positive enterprise. See www.templeton.org, www.jnanam.org or www.ctns.org, www.metanexus.net, etc.
17. The works of Ken Wilber and Bede Griffiths, are relevant here.
18. This reminds me of an apt caption for the nuclear bomb as an “invention that eliminates all other inventions.”