

Weaving an Empowering Spirituality for Women

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Abstract: So far the world was run on man's genius. And the world is on the brink of disaster – terrorism, armed conflict, nuclear arms, ecological disaster, communal violence: all these are clearly man-made disasters. All these are the fruit of a dualistic mindset, 'power-over' relationships, domination and exploitation of the weak. That's why today a holistic spirituality springing from women's perspective is needed to save the world. So the 'feminine genius' would be to keep alive this "Attention to Life" in all policies and programmes. It was also the mission of Jesus, "I have come to bring life, life in abundance."

Keywords: contemplation, life-affirming spirituality, feminism, holistic spirituality, empowerment, embodiment.

Introduction

Lived experience of spirituality has always been very personal for every individual. Hence it is obvious, that given the wide range of psycho-social, cultural and historical variables at play in the differentiated socialization of men and women, the sensitivity of the two sexes too has been different in emphasizing certain aspects of spirituality over the others. This was true even during those periods when 'women's question' had not yet become an issue, and the superiority of the male in spiritual matters was taken for granted.

Studies¹ among the cloistered monks and nuns, for example, have revealed that monks tend to emphasize the dimension of responsibility in front of God, which is expressed in the practise of ascetical abnegation and perseverance in observing the monastic rule aimed at attaining perfection and avoiding sins and imperfections that create a distance between God and the subject. Nuns, instead,

tend to focus their spiritual life on becoming aware of the constant presence of a loving God and a desire for a mystical union with Him perceived as the centre of their affective energies. Sin is seen as something that obstructs this close affective bond, and ascetical practices are valued as a means of disposing oneself to receive this gift. A similar pattern has emerged also in studies done among boys and girls regarding their perception of symbolism in religious rituals. While the boys emphasized the rules that govern the ritual and the efficacy of the action, the girls emphasised the meaning of the ritual as making God present in our midst. Given the fact that most religions present God in andro-centric imagery, such differences among the sexes in the perception of God is only to be expected. And such a distinctive '*Spirituality of Women*' does not necessarily imply a feminist consciousness.

Hence, in this article I would rather try to outline the contours of a "*Spirituality for Women*" which could assist them in their struggle for liberation and empowerment. It attempts to bank on their traditional psycho-social strengths – product of their gender specific socialization - such as attention to life, capacity for nurturance and body intuition, facility for relationship, connectedness and communication, sensitivity for issues of peace, non-violence and ecology, spirit of sacrifice and sense of commitment, in weaving a spirituality which could help Indian women to respond decisively to the multitude of problems they are facing due to large-scale experience of discrimination and exclusion, violence and conflict at every stage and in every sphere of their lives. Being a holistic perspective, however, it is rather difficult to illustrate the different aspects of this spirituality in categorical terms. For practical purpose, I have differentiated the characteristics of this spirituality from its specific content.

1. Some Salient Characteristics of an Empowering Spirituality for Women

The intent here is not so much to make a comprehensive list as trying to get a feel of women's perspective on spirituality. Even the very terms used to describe these characteristics are merely indicative and do not have any claim to be exhaustive and universal.

1.1 Integral

The central point of this spirituality would be a re-imaged perception of God as both feminine and masculine. It is a perception of God, neither 'shattering' as an authoritarian father-judge nor a quietistic 'acceptance' as an understanding mother (Tillich), neither 'subordination nor participation which threatens the boundaries of the individual self'.² It is going beyond the sterile rationality of our binary vision and transcending the artificial division of this world into mutually exclusive opposites; it is a spirituality that does not perceive reality in 'either-or' categories, and consequently, does not see the opposites as sources of conflict; rather it tries to integrate the opposites in one harmonious whole: the interplay of light and darkness, conscious and unconscious, head and heart, body and soul, the masculine and the feminine, are all part of one reality.

Feminism insists that male and female are two sides of the same creative principle; men and women are two ways of being human and both are called to develop their full humanhood. Both are equal, yet each is different; neither is superior nor inferior. Both are called to reciprocity and mutuality and work together as partners. Both are called to be rational and emotional, gentle and strong; both can be affectionate, nutritive and loving, for both are created in the divine image of relationality and communion; both should exercise power and leadership with sensitivity and purposefulness. And what was Jesus of Nazareth if not a harmonious blend of the human and the divine, the masculine and the feminine, gentleness and strength? A variety of episodes like 'the sinner woman of the town, the multiplication of loaves, the healings on Sabbath, woman caught in adultery' etc. beautifully throw light on a personality that was perfectly integrated beyond all dichotomies.

1.2 Circular

The circle and the circular symbolise the feminine dimension in human psyche. The very shape of a woman's body, the womb and breasts which embody her womanhood, the vessels and jars she uses, the colourful designs she draws in front of her house, all have something circular about them. It is no wonder that women feel at home in a circular network of relationships rather than in the hierarchical

pyramids. Having been always at the bottom of the pyramid in Church hierarchy – pope, bishops, priests, deacons, lay men, lay women – they have personally experienced the consequences of being excluded from the decision-making process. Hence it is in their interest to see everyone as equals, everyone as having worth and dignity.

Hierarchical value systems of their very essence, breed inequality; some have power over others; some are considered better, wiser, holier than others. Hence, feminism asks for a re-arrangement in the de-facto order in the Church. The hierarchical arrangement of things and people that governs society – God – man – woman – children – animals – plants – minerals – ‘non-living things’ – needs to be re-arranged into a circular network where everyone is equal and in relationship of mutuality with each other, God-with-us permeating the entire reality. As Christians, all of us who have received the same Baptism are equally the children of God and members of the Church. All this is just putting into practice the upside down teachings of Christ: “First among you should be last... the greatest among you must be the servants... you are all brothers/sisters... I call you friends, and not servants...”

Hence it is a spirituality that affirms the reality of sisterhood among women. It recognises the importance of a supportive network among women of all ages, races, and classes and espouses non-competitive, non-hierarchical, non-dominating modes of relationship among human beings. Being aware of the internalization of patriarchy by women, and consequently, the competitive and non-supportive ways in which women sometimes relate to one another, it consciously encourages women to work towards authentic, interdependent modes of relationship. It seeks to integrate sisterhood within a wider vision of human community with men as brothers. Thus it would not cease calling the brothers to task for their failings and to a wider vision of human mutuality, reciprocity and interdependence before a God who wills our unity and community.³

1.3 Inclusive

Respect for otherness, equality, mutuality, interdependence and nurturance, are basic components of a Feminist World-view. Hence, it is a spirituality that does not divide people into endless categories:

by sex, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, height, weight, class, caste, religion, physical ability, ad nauseam, and then exclude them because they don't fit the 'norm' set by patriarchal standards. Instead it draws larger circles to include those at the margins. As Jesus would put it, "I have come not for the righteous (read Jews, the Pharisees), but the sinners, the publicans, the prostitutes, the pagans, the samaritans, the lepers, the outcasts, that *all* (not just the chosen people, not just the Christians, but *all* which in our Asian context would mean Dalits, Tribals, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, all) may have *life in abundance*, for the kin(g)dom of heaven belongs to such as these. In a patriarchal system there are always winners and losers. In the Christian vision of the *basileia*,⁴ the patriarchal losers have the first place at the table of fellowship; while the religions seek to exclude the "unworthy," Jesus requires us to grant them a primary space of inclusion.⁵

Sandra Schneiders says:

Women have been hounded as witches, condemned and branded, imprisoned and executed by the males of the religious establishment, but they have very rarely condemned others in the name of God (...). As women enter various ministries to the so-called sinners – to the divorced and re-married, to homosexuals and lesbians, to prostitutes and alcoholics and addicts – they seldom feel called upon to threaten people with divine wrath. Women ministers often choose to circumvent or ignore questions of excommunication and of who can and cannot receive the sacraments, and to offer people what they need rather than what they 'deserve'.⁶

The insistence on using inclusive language is just the recognition of the fact that the 'norm' for being a 'citizen of the kin(g)dom' is not necessarily being Man (as was among the Romans!), mankind, brethren, fraternal, brotherhood, sons of Abraham or forefathers. Rather it is inclusive expressions like humankind, brothers and sisters, children of Sarah and Abraham, ancestors, people of different faiths (rather than non-Christians) that help us to visualise the diversity and recognise the inclusive citizenship of all people belonging to the *basileia*.

1.4 Relational

Morgan makes this very succinct observation: “If I had to name one quality as the genius of patriarchy it would be compartmentalization, the capacity for institutionalizing disconnection. Intellect severed from emotion. Thought separated from action. Science split from art. The earth itself divided: national borders.”⁷

Women, instead, perceive life in terms of relationships especially in terms of relationship with others since their very self-worth and survival often are linked to good relationships with those around them. It is from this ‘traditional asset’ that women have begun to weave a network of relationships and alliances that can transform the dominant/subordinate hierarchical paradigm into a relationship of interconnectedness, interdependence and mutuality. Women’s emerging spirituality is, therefore, not just a vertical relationship with God, but an integral one. It is shaped not only by prayer, but especially by relational experience. In fact, spirituality can be rightly summed up as harmonious circles of relationship with God, who dwells deep within, with oneself, with those around us and with the entire creation.

O’Murchu has this very insightful observation:

The capacity to relate knows no boundaries. The whole creation is included, (...) everything in our world is interconnected. We must outgrow the violent enforcement of fragmentation, separation, and division, whether done in the name of national politics, regional economics, or different religions. What unites us is far more powerful and godly than what divides us. (...) Everything is interdependent; in biblical language, everything belongs to the covenantal relationship. Only by reconnecting what we have disconnected can we truly realize the way to salvation.⁸

1.5 Empowering

Having become victims of ‘power-over’ relationships for more than 10,000 years, many women have difficulty in handling power when it their turn comes. In most professions which, until recently, have been male bastions, there are no women role models for them to emulate. Hence developing models of power other than ‘power – over’ (domination, manipulation and exploitation) ‘power – against’

(competition, rivalry) relationships is crucial for empowering women. There can be no empowering either of oneself or of the others unless we let go of our own need to dominate. Besides, 'power – over' relationships 'fuel' 'power – against' dynamics among those who are oppressed. Women, in fact, unwittingly have been victims of such power-play. 'Women-are-jealous' or 'woman-is-the-enemy-of-woman' situations in fact are the best illustrations of such dynamics.

It is in this sense, building of sisterhood among women – overcoming all 'man-made' barriers of caste, class and race - where women can trust and entrust themselves to each other is truly an empowering experience. In fact, there can be no true empowerment for women, unless women learn to recognise these dynamics and come out of it. It is a clever patriarchal ploy of keeping women under the patronage of men, however benevolent that patronage might be. Except for a refreshing exception of Ruth and Naomi, the Old Testament is full of examples of women who 'acted' as rivals of each other in the play 'directed' by the patriarchs.

That is why women's groups strongly emphasise the need for shared leadership, participatory style of governance, solidarity and networking in their functioning, all of which could be summed up as 'power – with' relationships, as key to empowerment. This is because in a 'power – with' type of governance, the group recognises individual contributions and initiatives, and the members affirm each other. This in turn releases the 'power – within' from the once timid, dependent members making them truly empowered.

This is a real challenge for women in leadership positions, especially for those who take up professions and posts so far considered to be male strongholds. Being themselves insecure and not having women role-models to look up to, many women end up imitating the 'male model' of authoritarian leadership, 'doing- unto-others-what-they-have-done-to-us' even with greater vengeance. This is no empowerment, however powerful such women might appear to be. Instead, it just underscores the internalised dependency of women on male models, thereby implying that 'man is the norm' for being human, and the difficulty women have in liberating themselves from internalised patriarchal values.

That is why women's groups are searching, experimenting and proposing new ways of handling power, encouraging women to act from the centre of one's being rather than from neurotic needs of seeking approval or complying with expectations. It is only when women are confident and comfortable with their personal identity of being women, they become capable of nutritive power, a power that engenders growth in others. They become capable of a different kind of leadership, based on principles of non-domination, non-hierarchy, non-violence, inclusion, and the conviction that the good of all is better than the good of a few. A convincing example of such power close at home is Kiran Bedi, the no-nonsense police-officer, whose compassion and creativity touched and transformed the lives of the inmates of Tihar Jail.

1.6 Contemplative

Going beyond any dichotomy, it is a spirituality that weaves harmony among differences: harmony within the different aspects of oneself – body, mind, spirit, intellect, emotions, sexuality - and harmonising self with the reality around. It invites us to live life intensely, deepening the experience of the sacred in the ordinary things of everyday life. Following Jesus, (his relationship with friends, nature, sheep, birds, food, children, quiet-spaces...) it values simple joys of life with a contemplative gusto!

It invites us to take time out to reflect, to enter within our own process, to articulate our experience and identify the presence of the sacred in these experiences, trying to pick sparks of beauty glistening even amidst teardrops. This naming of one's experience is important to let go of the dynamics of anger, bitterness and revenge, which so often can cripple one's life. It is this deeper perspective on life that keeps alive hope amidst so much of suffering. Moved from the centre within, it tries to envision a world of harmony and beauty despite so much brokenness around.

Not being bound by the rules and rubrics of liturgical prayer, women tend to give more importance to genuine affective prayer that uses a variety of expressions like music, rhythm, song, dance, poetry, colours, quiet-spaces and body gestures, all of which tend to have a lingering effect throughout the day. Prayer is perceived as the

background music that permeates life, while experiences of life lend vitality to prayer. This sort of flexibility helps them to go beyond the artificial barrier of prayer and life, facilitating a relationship between the personal and the political, the private and the public, the within and the without, stimulating new ways of relating to every dimension of life.

That is why even programmes on Women's Spirituality value a variety of expressions like creative activities, interactive explorations, quiet time, storytelling, nature walks, opportunities for self expression, play-time, alternate rituals, body work and creation of sacred space together. It is this embodying of prayer that leads to healing and wholeness overcoming the painful experiences of brokenness.

2. Some Specific Content Relevant to an Empowering Spirituality for Women

The list of contents mentioned below is just a practical way of grouping the various core issues that are at the heart of the feminist movement today. It does not claim to be comprehensive and universal.

2.1 Life-affirming

Women have an intimate relationship with life and life-processes: birthing, nurturing, supporting, and other life-sustaining processes which make them value life – in all its forms – as a precious gift, even amidst precarious situations. Timid, illiterate women often come out in large numbers to fight a life-threatening situation taking on the government machinery or other powerful lobbies. We see it happening repeatedly in different parts of the world: Women 'hugged' the trees in the Chipko Andolan defying the contractors to saw; they protested in large numbers against nuclear installations after the Chernobyl disaster; they took head on the powerful liquor lobby of the State Govt. in Andhra Pradesh; they participate in re-forestation programmes as in the Green Belt movement in Kenya; they struggle against invasive reproductive and other medical tech-

nologies that colonise women's wombs; they work against the Narmada Valley project of dams, even at the risk of facing watery graves; the Hindu and Muslim women in many slums of Bombay keep round the clock vigil during communal violence to ensure that their own husbands and sons do not allow themselves to be dragged into the riot.⁹

Why do women risk their lives in this way? Perhaps it is because of their compassion, their love, the experience most women have gone through in birthing and nurturing of life. It is because of women's deepest longing to affirm life. When women see the life around them struggling for survival their very being seems to cry out: "My womb trembles for my child, I will truly show my motherly compassion upon him/her." (Jer.31:20)

Hence an increasingly greater number of feminists are insisting that women need to bring to the public fora this 'attention to life' in policies and programmes. The crucial factor while making any decision that affects the public should be how that choice enhances or affects the life of the people rather than the considerations of mere efficiency and political mileage. Then, there would be more money allotted for researches and projects that enhance the quality of the life of the people rather than those which aggrandize personal ego. For example, there would be more money available for basic education and healthcare of the people rather than to project oneself as a superpower! There would be a more efficient net-work to freely distribute knowledge regarding food and medicine rather than invent laws regarding intellectual property rights. The criteria would be empowerment of the people rather than political considerations like power, prestige, votes and money. Choices would be made keeping in mind our responsibility towards the future generations of citizens – the care for children and attention to girl children – and vulnerable sections of the society rather than populist measures.

Women in their psycho-social history have developed the art of distributing the meagre resources of the family in an equitable manner making sure that the needs of weaker members of the family are catered to. Today, in the face of gross imbalances in the distribution of world's natural resources which have led to the North-South, First world – Third world divide, it is truly women's perspective that is

needed to correct this disparity. In fact, the unashamed contradiction of having plenty of water available for amusement parks and cola drinks, while, people have no access even to safe drinking water illustrates the importance of women's involvement in every aspect of public life. It is this 'special eye' that women have for the weaker members of the family that makes them particularly sensitive to the repercussions of a project on the weaker sections of the society, be it minorities, the handicapped, the disadvantaged or the tribals as in the case of Medha Patkar.

2.2 Creation-centred

A dualistic spirituality is eminently andro-centric as it places man at the top of the pyramid of creation. It assumes man and his needs as the focus, the norm and the final arbiter of all that exists. It believes that man is the only one who is fully alive, that proportionately everything else is less alive, and that the earth itself –trees, lakes, rocks, minerals – is dead inert matter. And, thus, it justifies man's insatiable desire to divide and conquer by invoking the command in Genesis 1:26-28 to be masters of creation with the destiny to subdue and dominate the earth.¹⁰

On the other hand, there are many similarities which somehow make women feel an instinctive bonding with mother earth. It is not only that both have received contemptible treatment from man but also both have been labelled as 'virgin, barren or fertile' in reference to how they fulfil man's needs. Both have been treated as tag-on appendix of man: 'my land, my woman' or open to encroachment if it is 'no man's land, no man's woman'. Men have fought wars to appropriate both, and both have been captured, dominated, exploited and enslaved to satiate man's greed. Even today both are continuing to be 'raped' as victims of man's lust and treated as booty during aggression.

This is perhaps because women and nature both hold in their wombs awesome mysteries of life which leave 'mankind' baffled. Both are closely linked with the life processes of birthing, nurturing, sustaining and protecting. The monthly cycle of the woman and the seasonal cycles of the earth have been wrapped in mysteries and mankind has tried to control these by prescribing a number of ritu-

als, since mankind depended on the benevolence of both for its very survival. Both, in fact, feed one's children, providing a rich array of food to all type of creatures.

With the advent of ecofeminism in 1974, women in different parts of the world, strongly felt the need to consciously identify themselves with mother earth, living in harmony with her and defending her rights. They realised that somehow their liberation and earth's liberation were intertwined and it is important to defend both to be able to provide a nurturing home for the entire human race. Women began to take lead in environmental issues, caring for the earth, keeping it clean and saving its resources also for the future generations. A Medha Patkar fighting the greed of the governments, a Vandana Shiva taking on the multi-nationals to ensure food security based on indigenous crops, a Navleen Kumar killed because of her fight for the land-rights of the tribals or the women of Chipko Andolan who embraced the trees as if they were their babies, are some of the touching examples illustrating this bonding.

Another telling example is of a Korean mother whose anguished concern for her dying daughter was transformed into an urgent concern for the dying earth. Grieving her own sorrow along with her women's group she discovered a programme:

- a. Women are prime movers of anti-nuclear movements because they are life-nurturing.
- b. Women nurture all of creation; hence, ecological action, care for the weak, simple lifestyle.
- c. A spirituality no longer of resignation, but of struggle against bondage which prevents the reign of God.¹¹

That's why a spirituality from women's perspective is sensitive to nature. It sees nature as palpitating with the divine gift of life rather than as a commodity to dominate, to conquer and exploit for one's selfish pleasures. It invites us to relate with respect and gratitude, sensitive to the demands of mother earth and thankful for its bounties. We see that even great women mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, Juliana of Norwich, Mechtild of Magdeburg and many others share a similar sensitivity towards mother earth. Hildegard, in

fact, captures and celebrates in her writings the uniquely feminine experience of the most intimate process of the natural world. She celebrates the feminine fertility dimension. Her poetry pulsates with a rapturous, sensuous, love of the earth. It is full of ardour and passion. She does not look at the earth as an area of chaos or wilderness which humans must either avoid or do battle with, in order to conquer or domesticate. Nature evokes joy, wonder, praise, awe and especially love.¹²

2.3 Embodied

The equation between women and body has been problematic since the advent of patriarchy. Women's bodies have been defined, despised, discounted, dismissed, desecrated, debased, discriminated against, detested, damaged, denounced, divided, dismembered, decimated, dissected, drugged, displayed, decorated, disrobed, dispossessed, discarded, dumped, demonised and deadened.

Women are learning to name this violence and distance themselves from a disembodied spirituality to be able to re-image God in their lives. God comes to us and we meet God within the context of our existence. Everything created is also loved and redeemed by God, and this is true also of women's bodies and body-processes. Hence reclaiming this relationship with their bodies and celebrating the power of God manifested in their sexuality becomes central to developing a holistic spirituality that values the body and mundane experiences of ordinary life as a meeting place of God.

How does a woman meet God within the context of the awesome mysteries of life she experiences? Precisely how do the hitherto tabooed body-processes of women – menstruation, pregnancy, breastfeeding and menopause - become the meeting place of God?

Historically the evolution of a male god and the subjugation of women have gone hand in hand. That is why it is important that we recover the 'femaleness' of God and recognise the creative power of God imaged by women in their bodies. For example, even a very frequent expression in the Scriptures like, 'God is full of compassion and love' is actually a visceral experience of women. The Hebrew word 'rahm' used for compassion, literally meaning 'womb moved' or the other one 'God cries out like a woman in travail' are

definitely experiences most women can identify with and, consequently, their own personal experiences in some way become the meeting place of God.

Women are increasingly beginning to accept, appreciate, honour and celebrate their sexuality. Sexuality is the recognition of the sacredness of the body and the totality of a person's identity and being. It has to do with our capacity for relationships unaffected by power, our desire to be connected, and our longing to be in meaningful relation with another. Women, like men are created in the image of God as whole persons, as sexual beings, created in order to be related to others and to creation.

Since 1992, I have been conducting workshops on Human Love and Sexuality seen from a woman's perspective. It greatly helps women to recognise the awesome power of their body and boosts their self-esteem as they become aware of the marvellous and mysterious miracle of life engendered in their bodies. They learn to be comfortable with their bodies; accept, love and appreciate one's body and its functions. They learn to listen to one's body and trust its intuitions, enjoy body processes, making them channels of God's love.

For the first time they begin to acknowledge menstruation as a source of female power. They begin to perceive it every month as a reminder of their bodies' power to bring forth life. Their new learning about menstrual blood as nutritious is very liberating as it frees them from a number of purity – pollution taboos. Some even connect it with a death and resurrection experience where after the shedding of blood and flooding of a new cycle of hormones, the woman experiences a surging of new life in her body. This helps women to gain personal and spiritual wholeness by “reclaiming” their monthly cycles and developing a holy pride in their bodies.

As Kendrick would say:

This monthly cycling of life (rise and set, fill and empty) connects us uniquely to the spiral of life in creation. Our very being teaches us the mystery of life. The blood sheds, slows us down, pulls us back into ourselves and reminds us of an embodied creativity. When we participate in the cycling of life within us, our spirituality can be awakened.

A deeper respect for the connection between our embodiment and the world we live in enables us to live authentically.¹³

The life-giving, nourishing activity in the womb of a woman may be invisible to the naked eye; nevertheless, it is the space where life is affirmed. New life, symbol of a new world, a new order, a new hope is born with the birth of each child. The power of the womb in giving birth to life is perceived as a threat to death-dealing forces. The language of the womb is the language of life.¹⁴

Female breasts, rather than a measurement for being sexy, are in fact an expression of God's warmth and tenderness. It is during the breastfeeding that mother passes on to the child a sense of acceptance, security and well-being which are an expression of God's caring presence in the life of a person.

Menopause, similarly, is not a time to perceive the woman as becoming old and useless; rather it is a time when she can discover new dimensions of herself apart from sexual activity. In fact, psychologically it is a springtime of new energies and psycho-spiritual wholeness which can help a woman to become wise and vibrant. Many women at this stage come into their own, become more assertive, take up new responsibilities and become more involved in the lives of others.

Thus a woman's body and sexuality, are far from being just instruments for providing pleasure and progeny to men. They are a means through which women experience and reflect God's creative power and attain their own psycho-spiritual wholeness. We need to create meaningful rituals that express this awesome God-experience of women through their body processes.

2.4 Promoting Non-violence and Peace

Women and peace seem to share an inseparable bonding. Way back in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, Russian women went on strike demanding, 'bread, not bullets'. Women have an extra interest in peace, for war is so inimical to their condition, no matter where it takes place. In 1976, Betty Williams, a Nobel Peace Laureate, is said to have declared: "War is essentially men's work. Now move over. Women will ensure peace." In fact, most of the wars, almost all the wars, have been fought by men. The world is always busy in wars because we have been appreciating 'masculine'

qualities¹⁵ and condemning 'feminine' qualities in people. The philosophy of condemning the 'feminine qualities' in men is the root cause of all wars in the world as it provokes in them aggressiveness and barbarianism. Our history books are full of appreciation for the 'heroic' deeds of Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte and other such men of violence. Even today, we do not see the cruel contradiction of trying to secure peace by amassing weapons of mass destruction. A dualistic spirituality, inevitably, encourages aggression, coercion and manipulation, dividing the world into 'saints and evil-ones', 'us and them', thereby justifying Crusades, Jehads and Dharmayudhs, even invoking God's blessings upon our weapons of warfare!

Women, on the other hand, have been at the receiving end of wars and conflicts. They have been left behind with dead and mutilated bodies in their hands (including Mary of Nazareth). Their bodies have become the battlegrounds on which wars have been fought; they have been captured as booty to be looted and paraded at man's whims. Is it any wonder that historically they have cultivated the art of diffusing conflicts and becoming a bond of union within their families and communities? They would rather take a step forward and talk through, even compromise with a problem, whereas boys, small or big, tend to use force and coercion to assert their supremacy. It is this art of searching for win-win solutions to conflicts, rather than humiliating the 'enemy', that has made women all over the world become champions of peace movements, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements. While Sri Lanka was torn by ethnic conflict, the Mothers and Daughters of Lanka stirred up the longing for peace among the Sri Lankans. In India and Pakistan, too, at the height of the Kargil conflict, women activists from both countries crossed borders to motivate people against war. It is not a mere coincidence that even among the Nobel Peace Laureates a large number are women.

A holistic spirituality, in fact, encourages inner peace and harmony; it encourages communication, dialogue and building of community as peaceful methods for solving conflicts. Women's groups everywhere are working today, not only to solve conflicts, but also to eliminate the potential for war and violence, by removing enmities, prejudices and conflicts existing in communities, individuals,

societies and nations. An ever increasing number of women bring their human qualities of compassion, caring, nurturing, which historically they have cultivated in the private sphere of their families, to policies and decision-making levels, adopting non-violent strategies and implementing them in order to fulfil the mission of creating a future of peace for the world-family.

2.5 Born of Suffering and a Struggle for Justice

It is important to remember the context of oppression in which the spirituality from women's perspective began to be articulated. Millennia of discrimination, exclusion and exploitation have left most women wounded in the psyche. The need for a spiritual source of power and strength in the midst of powerlessness and survival has been at the heart of women's efforts to struggle for justice and violence-free lives. Hence a new transformative spirituality slowly began to be articulated as women started to reflect on their experiences as women, both personal and social, as well as on their common struggle against their multi-faceted oppression. Beyond all divisions and barriers, across the globe, women began to identify a common pattern in the violence faced by them: Their identity is derived from the male, they are either silent or silenced, they are easy targets of physical and sexual assaults, they are invisible in decision-making processes at home, in religious institutions and in political circles.

However, the way women respond to suffering is important. There are two ways of responding. One is to succumb to suffering and the other is to find alternatives. The alternative is to choose life. This involves naming violence and oppression. This is not easy since women have been silent for so long. Once women learn and are strong enough to name the oppression, they can accept the responsibility for and control over their own lives. This is easier said than done. It is a process whereby they learn to love themselves, accept themselves, assert themselves and at the same time relate to each other, so that they build bonds of sisterhood. This bonding and community support is important because the oppression they face is multi-faceted.¹⁶

Christ is God's presence in the daily life of women living in a context of struggle. Christ is a friend and confidant. He knows what it is to be a female in a context of exclusion and violence. Jesus' relationship with the oppressed – his compassion for women – is what often sustains women in the context of their suffering. Their belief in Jesus, who always takes the side of the oppressed, accompanies them in their everyday experiences of life and in their struggles to find justice in a violence-ridden world.¹⁷

It may be a situation similar to that of the Syrophoenician woman fighting for the survival of her daughter, or the persistent widow who continues the legal battle until justice is obtained, or the woman who dares to challenge the purity-pollution taboos of her society by touching the hem of Jesus' garment, or the little girl already deadened in her body even before attaining full womanhood, or the young woman 'caught' while her lover goes scot-free, or the 'woman of loose morals' from Samaria daring to question a religious teacher, or the two sisters who weep at the untimely death of their brother - the bread-winner of the family, or the bent woman who is valued even less than a donkey, or the generous widow whose very presence is considered inauspicious, or the 'city prostitute' who is not welcomed in the houses of the respectable. In each case Jesus takes the side of the woman, intervenes with a compassionate heart, grants their petition and restores them to full human dignity. More importantly, in no case does he preach to them, "Take up your daily cross and follow me". Do women need any other justification to confirm them in their struggle for justice and violence-free lives? Even after more than 2,000 years, although much has changed, the situation looks much the same. And it is this same Jesus who continues to strengthen women in their fight against all forms of religious, political and cultural structures of sin that deny them the right to full humanhood.

2.6 Revisions of the Traditional Religious Symbols and Teachings

Women frequently support a spirituality that is restrictive because ministers/priests often preach to them identifying the religious with the domestic virtues of humility, sacrifice and selfless devotion. Indeed, this is even cited as evidence that women are naturally more

religious than men. Such male-centred visions of spirituality need to be revisited to include women's perspective on the repercussions of such spiritualities in their lives and make attempts to reformulate a spirituality that helps them to be 'fully alive'.

Exploring the new images of Jesus, some of which are female, Hyun Kyung challenges the theology of the Church which speaks of revelation from above:

Theology based on revelation from above can easily be distorted into a theology of domination because this theology is based on the abstract thinking of the head and not on the concrete experience of the body. It is based on distant (and largely male) intellectualism and not on the everyday, experiential reality of Asian women. Some Asian women find Jesus in the most ordinary, everyday experiences. They see the revelation of God from below, from the bottom, from the earth. They refuse any kind of heroism. They are not looking for great men and women to worship. Rather they want to find God, the saving presence within their daily lives.¹⁸

Women are beginning to realise that while sacrifice which is freely and consciously made, is noble and lovely and is motivated by love and gratitude, the exclusion and violence that women experience, however, is none of these. Hyun Kyung challenges the legitimisation of the suffering of women, preaching to them, 'without the cross, there will be no resurrection'. Along with other Asian women, she asks these questions: 'Why should we die in order to gain Jesus' love? Can't we love Jesus while being fully alive?' In Asia, self-denial and love are always applied to women both within the Church and in their families too. But why isn't this teaching applied to men?'¹⁹

The Cross, the central theological symbol of Christian faith, has been presented to women asking them to carry the daily cross of their suffering in imitation of Jesus who died for others. Women theologians are, therefore, calling women for a reconstruction of this symbol. This sort of preaching only serves to silence the oppressed rather than address the sin that causes such untold suffering. As an EATWOT gathering of Indian women put it:

Christ died on the Cross, because humankind could not bear his disturbing and uncomfortable message of salvation for the world (...). He was the scapegoat for a wicked and cruel world. Christ gave his

life for a purpose. The theology of sacrifice that is thrust on women is of no purpose... Women are the scapegoats of this theology. What they have to discover for themselves is the resurrection element in their sacrifice, as a step towards the discovery of their power.²⁰

Another important religious symbol that women are trying to reconstruct is the masculine image of the biblical God. As far back as 1973 Mary Daly had thundered: "Where God is male, male is God". God and man belong to the same order from which women are excluded. Women are taught to consider it a matter of divine institution that only men can 'represent God' as family heads or as ordained ministers. Imagery for God is taken predominantly from the roles and relations of men, God being named as lord, king, father or son and hence women have often perceived God in the way they have experienced men. They admire, depend upon, and defer to God. But they can also be dominated, used, undervalued, and basically despised by God.²¹ Likewise, male self-definition has shaped the metaphysical concept of God equating male reality with spirit, with mind and reason, and, most importantly, with act, reserving for female reality a contrasting intrinsic connection with matter, with body and instinct and with potency. God as absolute being or pure act necessarily excluded all potency, passivity, and prime matter, and thus could be thought only in analogy with human masculine to the exclusion or analogy with the feminine passive material principle.²²

What is ignored is the clear affirmation of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that God is spirit and thus, totally transcends sex which is rooted in matter. God is presented from the moment of creation as one whose true image is humanity as male-and-female, and that the feminine dimension of God is repeatedly highlighted in the Old Testament. It is also true that the Spirit of God is personified in the Old Testament as the feminine figure Wisdom, and it is she who appears in the New Testament as the Spirit of Jesus.²³ However, it is unfortunate that in spite of all these examples of feminine anthropomorphic language which could balance the picture the feminine language, is seldom used in liturgical texts or Church documents.

In Jesus, women are searching for a God who cures and loves, is vulnerable and receptive, laughs and dances at wedding feasts,

cries tears and feels pain. It helps women to value their own experiences as revelation of God's qualities and activities and thus boosts their self-confidence. Instead, if a woman were required to distrust her own experiences, she would soon be alienated from herself, presuming that 'the Holy' is not at all like herself.

Conclusion

It's truly an arduous task trying to free the spirit of Jesus from the clutches of patriarchy. I can only re-echo Joan Chittister's bold statement: "Feminism gives Christianity the opportunity to be Christian perhaps for the first time since Jesus."²⁴ She rightly thinks that the vision proposed by feminist spirituality could change domestic legislation and foreign policy, theology and corporate life, families and churches. The world would begin to operate on a spirituality of feeling as well as reason, of compassion rather than control, of empowerment as well as power, of dialogue rather than authoritarianism, of community as well as competition, of openness as well as strength, of non-violence rather than aggression, of circles rather than pyramids. Feminist spirituality brings with it a new image of God to liberate both women and men from the God of the mediaeval courts and ancient battlefields, who is transcendently distant and powerfully masculine.²⁵ Instead, it points us towards a new world view: it is a cry for wholeness in a world and a Church intent on division and domination, on power rather than on perspective.

So far the world was run on man's genius. And the world is on the brink of disaster – terrorism, armed conflict, nuclear arms, ecological disaster, communal violence: all these are clearly man-made disasters. All these are the fruit of a dualistic mindset, 'power-over' relationships, domination and exploitation of the weak. That's why today a holistic spirituality springing from women's perspective is needed to save the world.

So the 'feminine genius' – borrowing an expression of John Paul II – would be to keep alive this "Attention to Life" in all policies and programmes. After all, wasn't it also the mission of Jesus, "I have come to bring life, life in abundance".

The good news is that the night of oppression and inferiority is dying and that a new day is dawning – a day in which the religious experience and ministry of women will be fully at the service of the Church for the liberation of men as well as women. It is the privilege of our generation to greet this new day with the song of Miriam, who led the sons and daughters of Israel in worship after they had crossed over from slavery to the freedom of the children of God.²⁶

So, “Feminism is”, in the words of Joan Chittister, “not a woman’s question: it is the human question of the century. It is the spiritual question of all time. It is not about getting what men already have! Not on your life! That is not nearly enough. Feminism is about getting a better world for everybody!”²⁷

Notes

1. Cf. Antoine Vergote, “Religione, fede, incredulita: Studio Psicologico”, Milano, Ed. Paoline 1985, 287-292.
2. Cf. Anne Carr, “On Feminist Spirituality” in Joan Wolski CONN (ed.), *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, New Jersey, Paulist Press 1986, p.57.
3. Cf. Ibid p.54.
4. The term *basileia*, usually translated as “kingdom” or “rule”, belongs to a royal-monarchical context of meaning that has as its sociopolitical referent the Roman empire. But *basileia* is also an ancestral symbol of Second Temple Judaism and so appeals to the democratic traditions of ancient Israel. These traditions, which are located in the prophetic milieu of the north, assert a democratic counter-meaning to the royal meaning of the term. See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context”, Scotland, T&T Clarke Ltd. 1998” p.115-116.
5. Cf. Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience: A Radical Option for Life*, New York, Crossroads 1999, 111.
6. Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Effects of Women’s Experience on their Spirituality”, in Joan Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women’s*, p.44.
7. Cf. O’Murchu, “Poverty”, p.111.
8. Ibid. pp.111-112,125.
9. Cf. Aruna Gnanadason, “Towards a Feminist Eco-theology for India”, in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Women Healing Earth*, p.75.
10. Cf. O’Murchu, “Poverty”, p.116.

11. Cf. Mary John Mananzan, "The Religious Woman Today and Integral Evangelisation", in, Mary John Mananzan (ed.), *Woman and Religion*, Manila, Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College 1998, p.61.
12. Cf. Hildegard of Bingen. *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, translated by Uhleim Gabriele 1982.
13. Cf. Kendrick L.S., "A Woman Bleeding: Integrating Female Embodiment into Pastoral Theology and Practice", in *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 48(1994)2, pp.145-153.
14. Anderson Evangeline Rajkumar, "Asian and Feminist Christology", in *In God's Image, Journal of AWRC*, 22(2003)4, p.11.
15. When I say 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities I do it for lack of an appropriate terminology. By it I intend a continuum of human qualities, historically polarized and nurtured in men and women belonging to the patriarchal societies by referring to 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities I do not imply any 'essentialistic' view of male and female nature.
16. Cf. Malini Devananda, "Women's Spirituality", An Unpublished Paper, Sri Lanka, p.2-3.
17. Cf. Aruna Gnanadason, "A Christological Reflection on Women's Movements in the World", in *In God's Image, Journal of AWRC*, 22(2003)4, p.71.
18. Cf. Ibid pp.76-77.
19. Cf. Ibid p.76.
20. Cf. Ibid p.74.'
21. Cf. Schneiders, "The Effects", p.42.
22. Cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female", in Joan Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women's*, pp.244-245.
23. Cf. Schneiders, "The Effects", p.42.
24. Joan Chittister, "The Fire in the Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life", Mumbai, Pauline 2000 p.151.
25. Cf. Joan Chittister, "Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men", www.sedos.org
26. Cf. Schneiders, "The Effects", p.45.
27. Chittister, "Heart", www.sedos.org

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