



The Spirituality of Fullness of Life: A Study of the Spiritu- ality of Kurien Kunnumpuram Based on his Writings

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Abstract: People sincerely search for God experience through spiritual practises. Spirituality has to lead one to liberation and salvation. Liberation is from the oppressive and inhuman structures and situations and salvation is movement towards eternal life. One can experience God in nature, in the depth of one's own being, through the rites and doctrines of religion and in the socio-political involvements. In this sense, spirituality becomes an integrated one, integrating prayer and work and humanizing the person. Prayer improves the quality of a human person so that one may experience peace and joy in life. Christian Spirituality is meant to facilitate personal growth in the following of Christ for the service of our people. Spirituality is a life-style and a way of life. It is an internal search for growth, meaning and holiness of life, which is revealed in the quality of one's life.

Keywords:Inclusive spirituality, Abba experience, spirituality of compassion, pilgrim of the Absolute, inhuman structures, people of God.

Introduction

This is article is about the spirituality of Kurien Kunnumpuram based on his writings. He started his academic life in the context of Vatican II, which influenced his theological thinking and spirituality to a great extent. Kunnumpuram developed an inclusive spirituality faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ and Vatican II. This inclusive spirituality leading to fullness of life for all was a deviation from the traditional understanding of Christian spirituality. The traditional Christian spirituality taught that salvation is possible only in and through the church. But spirituality in the wider sense is not restricted to any particular religion, tradition or culture. The common factor in all these is the belief in a transcendent divine power.¹ Christian spirituality is partaking in the Christ event (life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus) through personalization of Christ mystery. Spirituality is a life of total detachment lived in the awareness of the indwelling and all-pervading spirit. “Christian Spirituality is, therefore, a participation in the mystery of Christ through the interior life of grace, actuated by faith, charity and other Christian virtues. Vatican II opened up the understanding of salvation and spirituality. The life that the individual receives through participation in Christ is the same life that the Incarnate Word shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.”²

Inclusive Spirituality

Inspired by the vision of the Second Vatican Council, Kunnumpuram presented an inclusive spirituality, which

1 “In its widest sense, spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one’s actions proceed. This concept of spirituality is not restricted to any particular religion; it applies to any person who has a belief in the divine transcendent power and fashions a life-style according to one’s religious conviction. In this context, one can speak of Zen Buddhist, Jewish and Muslim Spirituality as well as Christian Spirituality.” Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*. London Sheed and Ward, 1979. P. 17.

2 Jordan Aumann, 1979.p. 18.

envisages the salvation for all as the people of God. He makes a distinction between piety and genuine spirituality; the former is guided by the faithful performance of devotional practices and rituals whereas the latter is guided by the spirit of God which transforms the life and values of a person. There is an urgent need for true spirituality in the Church. Encouraged by the idea of Karl Rahner on spirituality he makes it clear what we need today in the Church is not piety but true spirituality manifested in the life and values of a person. "The Church's public life even today (for all the good will which is not to be questioned) is dominated to a terrifying extent by ritualism, legalism, administration, and a boring and resigned spiritual mediocrity continuing along familiar lines."³

Though there are a number of religious congregations and pious and devotional practices, he wonders, how many of them have genuinely imbibed the spirit of Jesus' Abba experience which became the driving force behind his radical commitment to the kingdom of God. For him, religious life is not a monastic withdrawal from the world but it is a prophetic commitment to the people to enable them to experience God in the midst of their struggles and sufferings.

Spirituality: A Way of Life

Spirituality, according to Kurien Kunnumpuram, is a life style and a way of life. It is an internal search for growth, meaning and holiness of life, which is revealed in the quality of life. In the final analysis, spirituality is the transformation by the touch of the spirit of God.⁴ Kunnumpuram argues that this life style has to be simple and detached from the material riches; because,

3 Quoted by Kunnumpuram, in his work, *Towards the Fullness of Life*. from K. Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, London: SPCK, 1972, p. 82.

4 Kurien, *Puthiya Sabhakhum Puthiya Lokathinumvendi*. Ernakulam: St. Paul's, 2016 p. 102.

“attachment to riches can prevent us from being open to God and to other human beings.”

According to him:

Spirituality is a way of life. It is our total inward quest for growth, meaning and authenticity. And it is manifested in the quality of one's life. In the last analysis, to be spiritual is to be touched and transformed by the Spirit of God. In a person who has been touched and transformed by god's Spirit the fruits of the spirit will be seen: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23).⁵

In this sense spirituality aims at “personal growth in the following of Christ for the service of our people.” Following Christ requires the reliving of his Abba experience of God as unconditional love.

In moments of honest self-awareness, we can detect in ourselves a tendency to be greedy, demanding and fastidious, and to cling to whatever we have. We also tend to use our ministry and social position for the purpose of self-aggrandizement. It is here that the call to a simple lifestyle becomes relevant. It tells us to let go, to be simple, to be modest. It also asks us to share with others not only our possessions but also our time, talents, industry and creativity. It also demands from us a more responsible use of time and money.⁶

In short spirituality is self-emptying and detachment from anything that is contrary to spiritual values. In this sense, spirituality is a call to unconditional love.

5 Kunnumpuram, *Towards the Fullness of Life*. Mumbai: St. Paul's, 2009 p. 35.

6 Kunnumpuram, “The Prophetic Dimension of the Religious Life.” in *Shaping Tomorrow's Church*. Kurien Kunnumpuram, ed. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006. P. 398.

Spirituality is a Call to Selfless Love

Spirituality is a call to ‘total and selfless love’ and demands us “to deal with all beings-plants, animals, humans-tenderly and affectionately.” He laments,

In the world today there is a lot of pain and suffering inflicted not only on human beings but also on animals. Harm is also done to the inanimate creation. Humankind seems by and large to have lost true chastity, that is, the ability to touch persons and things without hurting and harming them. That is why there is so much cruelty and violence among us.⁷

Though the spirituality Kunnumpuram advocates demand compassion and care for the entire creation it gives an important role to the full development of the human person. He writes, “Mission of the Church is to collaborate with God in His Work for the Wholeness of the Human Person, the Human Community and the Cosmos according to the Pattern Revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁸

The Spirituality of Compassion

The priests and the religious are called to live a spiritual life participating in the Abba experience of Christ. He is critical of the kind of spirituality practised today, which lacks compassion and forgiveness. “One is at times surprised that priests, religious and lay people who are obviously pious are manifestly unfair in their dealings with others. Some of them show so little compassion of Christ and are quite unwilling to forgive others.”⁹

“All spirituality is meant to facilitate personal growth in the following of Christ for the service of our people.”¹⁰ Personal growth is for the service of the people of God. Following Christ involves recapturing Jesus’ Abba experience, identifying oneself

7 Kunnumpuram, *ibid* p. 398.

8 Kunnumpuram, “The Church of My Dreams” 407; also in *Freedom and Liberation. Reflections on the Church’s Vocation and Mission*. 131.

9 Kunnumpuram, *Towards the Fullness of Life*. p. 35.

10 Kunnumpuram, *ibid*, p. 36.

with the poor and the powerless, confronting the agents of oppression. Kunnumpuram thinks that the Church in India failed to be the agents of God experience to the faithful. As a result, the people search for God experience elsewhere. It is true that the Charismatic movements in India, to a certain extent, hold back our faithful from joining Neo-Pentecostal Churches. Church in India is more concerned about the prestigious institutions and structures than leading people to God experience.

He laments:

Our liturgy, too, has largely failed to mediate an authentic experience of God. There is an undue insistence on rites and rubrics, on law and structure, in our common worship. We cannot, of course, deny the need for some general norms in this matter.... But sufficient room must be left for responsible experimentation. Since life is so rich and varied, meaningful liturgy, which is the celebration of life will always be free and spontaneous, at least to some extent.¹¹

Referring to the Asian Synod, Kunnumpuram argues that Christian spirituality in India has to resonate with the Asian spiritual traditions founded on experience. “The search for God... has always stirred the human heart and which is particularly visible in Asia’s many forms of spirituality and asceticism.” (*Ecclesia in Asia* 44). The Synod proposes faithful listening to the word of God and meaningful celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist as the means of God experience. (*EA* 22-23). Based on the teachings of Vatican II and some of the popes Kunnumpuram elucidates the main characteristics of spirituality for India.

11 Kunnumpuram, “The Crisis of Values in the Catholic Church.” in *Towards a New Humanity: Reflections on the Church’s Mission in India Today*. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2005.pp 240-251.

Spirituality is Experiencing the Divine

Christian Spirituality is a spirituality of involvement in the world and not of monastic withdrawal from it. Involvement in the world brings in the different dimensions of the experience of the Divine. Some of the main characteristics of spirituality are experiencing God in nature, in the depth of one's own being, through the rites and doctrines of religion and in the socio-political involvements. In this sense, spirituality becomes an integrated one, integrating prayer and work and humanising the person. Prayer improves the quality of a human person so that one may experience peace and joy in life.

Prayer for him is the loving contact with God, which is possible only through loving contact with people. Love of God and love of people are the two dimensions of the most important commandment in Christianity. 'Compassion and kindness enabled the good Samaritan' to transcend the narrow restrictions imposed on him by the Jewish tradition and to reach out to his neighbour who was in need. Spirituality strengthens hope. "In the final analysis, Christian hope is not about what we can foresee, plan, control and manipulate. It is about our total surrender to the incomprehensible mystery of God, who cannot be controlled or manipulated, but who is perceived as the one who ultimately blesses, sanctifies and constitutes our salvation."¹²

The Spirituality of Suffering

In his work *towards the fullness of life*, he writes:

There is a tendency among many people to practice a spirituality which may not be quite Christian. They believe that the more they suffer, the more pleasing to god they become. What kind of God is this who is happy to see us suffer? I firmly believe that God wants us to be happy here on

¹² Kunnumpuram, *Towards the Fullness of Life*. p. 20.

earth. Besides, we Christians are committed to the removal of pain and suffering from the face of the earth.¹³

He continues, “It is not that God prevented me from experiencing pain, suffering or even failure... What I wish to say is this: In and through my mistakes and sins, and in and through the wise and foolish decisions of my superiors and others, God has guided my life according to his design.”¹⁴

For Kunnumpuram, spirituality is a term with wider meaning; it doesn’t limit itself to the socio-cultural and economic aspects of this worldly life; it goes beyond the empirical existence. Because, for him “The human person is not a soul living in a body, but an animated body, so perfectly integrated that the person in his totality can express himself/herself and be apprehended in any part.”¹⁵

Spirituality of Salvation

As a soul animated body, a human person longs for liberation and salvation. Liberation is from the oppressive and inhuman structures and situations and salvation to eternal life. “The first and fundamental meaning of liberation, which thus manifests itself is the salvific one: man is freed from the radical bondage of evil and sin. In this experience of salvation, a man discovers the true meaning of his freedom, since liberation is the restoration of freedom. It is also education in freedom, that is to say, education in the right use of freedom. Thus to the salvific dimension of liberation is linked its ethical dimension.”¹⁶

13 Kunnumpuram, *ibid* p. 73.

14 Kunnumpuram, *ibid* p. 133.

15 Kunnumpuram, “Reflections of Christian Spirituality,” 212. in *Life in Abundance: Indian Christian Reflections on Spirituality*, by Kurien Kunnumpuram, 211-220. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006.

16 Cited by Kunnumpuram from “Instruction on Certain Aspects of Theology of Liberation, 23 “Freedom and Liberation. Re-

Salvation, according to Kunnumpuram, has a social dimension (*L G 9*), it is not attained through the individual, internal effort alone. “The universal plan of God for the salvation of mankind is not carried out solely in a secret manner” (*AG 3*). Nor is it limited to Christians alone; it is open to all people of good will.

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active and invisible. For, since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.¹⁷

Vatican Council teaches: “Seeds of the Word lie hidden in these cultural and religious traditions of people,” these have to be respected. (*A G.11*), “they are precious elements of religion and humanity” (*G S. 92*). Whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations is a sort of secret presence of God, because, “Doubtless, the Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified.” (*A G.9.4*). In *Perfecte Caritatis* we read, “The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, but especially in mission territories, to the requirements of the culture and to the social and economic circumstances.” (*P. C. no. 3*). Culture, tradition and belief system play an important role in the formation of any spirituality. Three factors, i.e., God, world and human are inevitable for a better understanding of any spiritual tradition.

Love for Culture of Silence and Solitude

God speaks to us in the depths of our being. In order to listen to God, we need to cultivate the culture of silence and solitude.

flection on a New Document from Rome.” p. 194.

17 *GS 22*, cited by Kunnumpuram in *Ways of Salvation: The Salvific Meaning of Non-Christian Religions According to the Teachings of Vatican II*. Poona: Pontifical Athenaeum, 1971. p.89.

He proposed two kinds of prayers, i.e., the prayer of the mind which includes vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation; and prayer of the heart where the mind is inactive. “We need to try ever new methods of prayer in order to find out those methods which help us to pray at this stage of our life. Methods that we found helpful at an earlier stage of our life may not be so right now... We learn to pray well by praying.”¹⁸

The Need for Integral Spirituality in the Indian Context

Kunnumpuram feels that there is a strong longing for God experience in the minds of the ordinary people, which is revealed in various spiritual movements. The longing for God experience is strong in the pluri-religious context in India.

Pope Paul VI during the Bombay Eucharistic Congress in 1964, addressing the non-Christian Religious Leaders said: “Yours is a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with a relentless desire in deep meditation and silence and in hymns of fervent devotion.”

On 2nd February 1986, Pope John Paul II in his address to the representatives of religions in Delhi said:

Integral human development requires a spiritual vision of man- that man is a pilgrim of the Absolute, travelling toward a goal, seeking the face of God. From this spiritual vision of man comes the strength to preserve in the cause, as well as the clarity of thought needed to find concrete solutions to man’s problems.

Pope John Paul II, more than any other pope has been keenly encouraging a culture of inter-religious dialogue among the

18 Kunnumpuram, *Towards the Fullness of Life*. Mumbai: St. Paul’s, 2009 p. 33.

faithful. Through his worldwide travels, prayer meetings, meeting with heads of religious communities; his close acquaintance with other religious traditions, etc., created a better rapport with other traditions.

Conclusion

Inspired by the Second Vatican Council and encouraged by the pioneering theological efforts of Samuel Rayan and George Soares-Prabhu, Kunnumpuram argued for an inclusive spirituality. This inclusive spirituality leading to the fullness of life for all was a deviation from the traditional understanding of Christian spirituality. His understanding of spirituality included all irrespective of caste, religion, culture or tradition. He believed that the whole of creation has a role in the economy of salvation. Though Kunnumpuram advocated for compassion and care for the entire creation, he gave an important role in the full development of the human person. The distinction he made between piety and genuine spirituality is relevant in the Indian Church today, and he believed that there is an urgent need for true spirituality in the Church. For him, religious life is not a monastic withdrawal from the world, but it is a prophetic commitment to the people to enable them to experience God amid their struggles and sufferings.

Spirituality, according to Kunnumpuram, is a lifestyle and a way of life. It is an internal search for growth, meaning and holiness of life, which is revealed in the quality of life. His thought-provoking insights that the Church in India failed to be the agents of God experience to the faithful, Indian Church has to resonate with the spiritual traditions of Asia based on experience, Christian Spirituality is the spirituality of involvement in the world and not of monastic withdrawal from it are challenges to the Church in India.

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