

ISSN 972-33315

# ***jnanadeepa***

**Pune Journal of Religious Studies**

**The Quest for a  
Meaningful Spirituality**



**Volume 7 No. 2**

**January 2004**

## *Contents*

Editorial -----	3
Towards a Relational Spirituality: Psycho-Social Perspectives -----	5
<i>Anthony da Silva SJ</i>	
Integration through Spirituality according to the Bhagavad Gita Sebastian Painadath SJ	17
Trans-Religious Spirituality of Gandhi -----	29
<i>A. Pushparajan</i>	
Towards a Spirituality for Life -----	44
<i>Kuruvilla Pandikattu SJ</i>	
The New Age Spirituality: A Quest to Break Boundaries -----	58
<i>Jacob Parappally MSFS</i>	
A Missionary Spirituality for Our Times -----	73
<i>Jacob Kavunkal SVD</i>	
Weaving an Empowering Spirituality for Women -----	89
<i>Philomena D'Souza fma</i>	
Body Spirituality: Incarnation as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality --	112
<i>Mathew Jayanth SJ</i>	
Women and Globalisation -----	136
<i>Kiran Moghe</i>	
Single Women: Problems and Prospects -----	148
<i>Nirmala and Jeyaraj</i>	
Book Reviews -----	164

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***Jnanadeepa*** (=“Light of Wisdom” pronounced as *Jñānadīpa*) is a biannual interdisciplinary journal of religious studies from an Indian Christian perspective. It is closely associated with Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth: Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune 411014, India.

***Jnanadeepa*** is published biannually, in January and July. Views expressed by the writers are not necessarily those of the editors. Manuscripts submitted for publication should be original and cannot be returned (writers' style sheet is available on request); they could be sent (preferably as Word or RTF file) in a computer diskette or through E-mail as file attachment.

All **correspondence** (requests for subscription, manuscripts, books for review – two copies, please – exchange copies of journals, advertisements, etc.) to:

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**Subscriptions** could be sent from India either by Money Order or Demand Draft. From foreign countries International Money Order or Crossed Cheque is preferred. From Commonwealth countries British Postal Order is preferred. All payments are to be made in the name of ***Jnanadeepa Journal***.

Typeset & print: JDV Computer Centre  
Publisher: Kurien Kunnumpuram for JDV Publications.  
ISSN: 0972-3331

### ***Subscription Rates***

<i>Country</i>	<i>One year</i>	<i>Three years</i>
India	Ind. Rs. 80	Ind. Rs. 200
SAARC Countries	Ind. Rs.140	Ind. Rs. 400
Other Countries (Surface Mail)	US \$ 16 (Euro)	US \$ 45 (Euro)
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Institutional Rate	US \$ 40 (Euro)	US \$ 110 (Euro)
Personal Life Subscription	Rs 3,000(India)	US \$ 350(Foreign)

## Editorial

There is a growing interest in spirituality all over the world today. This is particularly true of India. Large numbers of people turn to godmen like Satya Sai Baba or Rajneesh (Osho) for help in their quest for God-experience and a meaningful spirituality. Others flock to the different meditation centres which are proliferating these days. Yet others go in for therapies of various kinds. Among Christians the phenomenal growth of the charismatic movement, the popularity of retreat centres like Pota and the rapid expansion of the neo-Pentecostal churches all testify to their hunger for God-experience and a life-giving spirituality.

It is in this context that this issue of *Jnanadeepa* has chosen as its theme: *The Quest for a Meaningful Spirituality*. The aim here is not to propose any one kind of approach to spirituality as a meaningful spirituality for all. Rather it is to discuss a variety of spiritualities, both past and present, so that it becomes clear that a person today has many choices available to him/her.

Three of the articles included in this issue are historical studies. The first one examines the *Spirituality of Courage* practised by the Beguines of Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Theirs was one of the first known movements by women in the history of Christianity to assert their independence from the oppressive structures of the Church and show that there were choices available to women other than “the husband and the convent”. These women chose to live a gospel-inspired life apart from the framework of the Rule. They adopted a simple life style, engaged in manual labour, worked in hospitals, read and taught the scriptures and had a strict regimen of prayer. They also produced an extraordinary body of mystical literature. All this is of great significance for us today. Another article studies the spirituality put forward in the Bhagavad Gita, the most known book of the Indian spiritual heritage. The Gita offers a way to spiritual integration which includes the four basic relationships of human persons – with themselves, with the Divine, with others and with nature. It helps them to be rooted in the divine centre of their being and from there to be engaged in the liberative work of God in the world. A third article investigates the trans-religious spirituality of Mahatma Gandhi. It is the author’s contention that Gandhi’s conception of Truth will provide us with a common framework, interweaving different religious conceptions of the Spirit and validating the variety of their truth-claims. Gandhi’s understanding of spirituality both transcends and comprehends the wide variety of approaches to religion and spirituality to be found in India.

Another group of three articles study contemporary trends in spirituality. One of them examines the New Age Spirituality and finds that it is a quest for

breaking boundaries. Unlike other movements and spiritualities which define themselves in opposition to other movements and spiritualities, the New Age spirituality seeks to absorb and integrate into itself opposing and even contradictory views and ways of life. It makes space for all world-views and ideologies that promote human well-being and cosmic harmony. However, there is some danger that this spirituality may be co-opted by the forces of the global market to legitimise their unjust policies and practices. Another article discusses the emerging Relational Spirituality from psycho-social perspectives. It explores the emotional-relational dimension of spirituality that would make spirituality more easily accessible to most people. Theories of modern psychology, like emotional intelligence and attachment theory, offer insights and perspectives that enrich the practice of relational spirituality. A third article explores Body Spirituality and proposes the thesis that the Incarnation is an invitation to an embodied spirituality. The main argument of the article is that the body is a source of the experience and knowledge of God. Hence Christian spirituality ought to begin with the foundational truth that the human being is an embodied being and, as an embodied being, he/she experiences and knows God in the body. The author underlines the importance of multifaceted human relationships for body spirituality.

A third set of three articles proposes new kinds/forms of spirituality. The first one seeks to weave an empowering spirituality for women. It outlines the contours of a spirituality which will assist women in their struggle for liberation and empowerment. It bases itself on their psycho-social strengths such as attention to life, capacity for nurturance and body intuition, facility for relationships, connectedness and communication, sensitivity for issues of peace, non-violence and ecology, spirit of sacrifice and a sense of commitment. A second article advocates a spirituality for life. It discusses the essential elements of a spirituality which will foster life in its totality in the context of the grave threats to life in today's world. And third set of articles deals with a missionary spirituality for our times. The author points out that Christian discipleship is a continuation of the sending of the Son by the Father in the Spirit. Hence "Sent-ness" characterizes Christian existence in the world today. He also described some of the ideas and attitudes that should shine through the life of a Christian.

Included in this issue are two articles originally written for the last issue of *Jnanadeepa* which had as its theme: *The Situation of Women*. The first one deals with the problems and difficulties faced by single women. And the second one discusses women and globalization and points out that globalization has had disastrous consequences for women.

It is our fond hope that the articles in this issue of *Jnanadeepa* will be of some help to our readers in their search for a meaningful spirituality.

Kurien Kunnumpuram SJ

Editor

## **Towards a Relational Spirituality Psycho-Social Perspectives**

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*Abstract:* Today, scholars are daring to wade into spiritual waters in order to discover and encounter the healing powers of hitherto unknown spirits and forces. A new perspective is emerging on how we can be spiritual. It seems a lot more diverse than previously envisaged. Now spiritualities are expressed not only in religion-based contexts but also in a variety of other human experiential contexts. This article has explored and emphasized the relational-emotional dimension of spirituality that we think would make spirituality more easily accessible to most. Theories of modern psychology, like EQ and attachment theory, offer insights and perspectives that enrich the meaning and practice of relational spirituality.

*Keywords:* Spirituality, EQ, attachment theory, psychology and spirituality, relational spirituality

### **Introduction**

In recent years, psychologists and medical personnel are daring to wade into spiritual waters in order to discover and encounter the healing powers of hitherto unknown spirits and forces. As the connection between religion and health becomes more salient and even respectable in scientific circles, questions and queries about spirituality and personal faith seem to be growing ever stronger. Cover stories in global magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest* about God and health or mind and body, provide abundant anecdotal evidence to reinforce peoples' beliefs in the spiritual.

*Newsweek's*, Claudia Kalb tells the story of:

how on a quiet afternoon, Ming He, a fourth-year medical student in Dallas, came across a man dying in the VA hospital. Suffering from a rare cancer and hooked up to an oxygen tank, the man, an Orthodox Jew, could barely breathe, let alone speak. There were no friends or relatives by his bed to comfort him. When the young student walked into his room, the man looked at her and said, 'Now that I'm dying, I realize that I never really learned how to live.' Ming He, 26, had no idea how to respond.

I thought, 'My God, the chaplain doesn't work on weekends, what do I do?' She held the man's hand for a few minutes in silence; two days later, he died. And as soon as she could, she signed up for "Spirituality and Medicine" at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, a course that teaches students how to talk to patients about faith and illness.<sup>1</sup>

This little episode of the young medical student needing to learn more about spirituality and how it could help her professionally, seems indicative of a new trend acknowledging the power of spirituality in the healing profession. In same issue of *Newsweek*, Kalb reports that 72% of Americans say they would welcome a conversation with their physician about faith; the same number say they believe that praying to God can cure someone even if science says the person doesn't stand a chance.

Since psychologists are co-players in the field of healing, spirituality has also aroused their interests particularly in the area of mind-body-spirit inter-connections. Since psychology has its origins in the study of the psyche=mind=spirit, it seems natural that the renewed interest in spirituality is opening new doors of collaboration between spirituality and psychology. For example, recent studies report that:

- i. People with strong religious faith are less likely to suffer depression from stressful events, and if they do, they are more likely to recover from depression than those who are less religious.
- ii. Elderly people with a deep, personal faith have a stronger sense of well-being and life-satisfaction than their less religious peers.
- iii. Religious people live longer.<sup>2</sup>

This and similar research point to the value and importance psychologists are starting to place on spirituality. Psychologist Todd Hall sees, “a trend toward the study of spirituality in the psychology of religion which emphasizes personal experiences related to transcendence, and the search for the sacred, among other things.”<sup>3</sup> An emphasis on personal experience rather than on the compulsive performance of repetitive and sometimes monotonous rituals and rites is psychology’s unique contribution to enriching the concept of spirituality.

The purpose of this article is to explore further, psychology’s contribution to understanding spirituality. Thanks to its emphasis on personal experience, psychology brings out the intimate connection between experience and emotion in the realm of spirituality. This enables a further refinement of the concept of spirituality with the introduction of the notion of a “relational spirituality.” The striking parallels between a relational spirituality and the psychological theories of attachment and emotional intelligence (EQ), seem to hold challenges for an integrated spirituality, where body-mind-spirit mingle in harmony.

Finally, the article will highlight some of the implications of a relational spirituality in contrast to spiritualities, particularly within the Christian tradition, that are a lot more focused on performances and observances of rituals. In this latter situation, the obsession is with fulfilling obligations and duties rather than experiencing or searching for the sacred.

## **How does Psychology Look at Spirituality?**

In the world of psychology the term “spirituality” says different things to different psychologists. Ranging from extreme secular, non-theistic spiritualities to theistic ones, psychologists have started to sense the importance of spirituality in the lives of their clients. In a recent PracticeNet survey of 203 American psychologists, more than 50% said that they asked their clients about spirituality in their last treatment session. About 70% of the psychologists said that their clients expressed belief in a divine being.



The clients to the tune of 35% said that spirituality was a source of strength and coping.<sup>4</sup> While a clear definition of spirituality remains elusive, it seems there is a broad understanding that spirituality has to do with the “spirit” and therefore touches the realm of religion. However, religion need not necessarily be of an institutionalized variety or its deities of a personal nature. The New Age religions are an example of non-institutionalized religions whose spiritualities seem to resonate with many; the spiritualities associated with cosmic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism may sometimes subscribe to non-personal deities or to no deities at all.

For our purposes, a broad definition of spirituality offered by psychologist Hill et al. is adequate. According to these researchers, spirituality is characterized by “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred...” (p.66).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if the sacred is to be explored from the perspective of a personal deity then such a spirituality would be essentially theistic and “relational.” By relational is meant that there is an interpersonal relationship between the divine and the human, analogous to a relationship between humans. From a psychological perspective this opens many doors for a fruitful collaboration between psychology and spirituality. Not unlike spirituality, the principal preoccupation of all psychology is to understand the relational dynamics within the self and between the self and the other.

In order to study further the relational dynamics of spirituality, psychology researchers Rayburn and Richmond have created an Inventory on Spirituality.<sup>6</sup> Distinguishing spirituality from religiousness, they define spirituality operationally, “as the vital, animating fervor transcending earthly boundaries in some small way and in some instances, inasmuch as is possible for humans to do.”<sup>7</sup> They characterize spirituality as possessing qualities such as, caring for others, transcendence, seeking goodness and truth, forgiveness, cooperation and peacefulness. For those acquainted with religions, the connections are quickly visible. However, even if one were not an adherent of a formal religion, one could be

spiritual and cherish one's spirituality as a driving force in one's life. Psychology does not wrestle with the problem of the origins of spirituality and is open to a theistic as well as atheistic understanding of spirituality.

A key notion that comes across in the discourse on "spirituality" is that it has to do with, "spirit" which means force, energy, vitality, drive and the like. The concept embodies power. Spirituality empowers one to perform deeds of virtue. Hence spirituality frequently drives the religious minded, for example, to heroic acts. In fact, religion without spirituality would be a mere impotent ideology, a bag of lifeless rituals. Given that spirituality thus acts as a motivating force in human behaviour, there is a growing realization among clinical psychologists and counsellors of the role of the spirit in shaping and transforming human behaviour. Interestingly, although the psyche=soul=spirit was the starting point for the psychologists' quest for understanding human behaviour, the spirit, being non-empirical, was relegated to a secondary role in the face of scientifically more alluring empirical criteria of measurement and verifiability.

Furthermore, since an inner spirit may drive some human behaviour, there exists the real possibility that we naturally tend to seek "kindred spirits" for communication, for forming communities and for building relationships. Hence the relational aspect of spirituality comes to the fore again, both at the interpersonal as well as the transcendental levels.

## **The Psychological Foundations for a Relational Spirituality**

A psychological theory that would provide a broad framework for understanding spirituality is "attachment theory." Attachment refers to strong and enduring emotional bonds that develop between an infant and a caregiver in early infancy. Mary Ainsworth (1973), the developmental psychologist, defines attachment as an "affectional tie one person or animal forms between himself and another specific one – a tie that binds them together in space and

endures over time.”<sup>8</sup> Hence the relationship is reciprocal and there is a shared desire to also maintain physical proximity. The attachment process is a mutual system. Some psychologists even believe that the closeness between the caregivers (attachment figures) and the infant, is biologically determined and essential to the survival of the infant. In other words, we seem to be “hard-wired” towards relationships from birth. Moreover attachment is not limited to the infancy and early childhood stages, it is a life-long process. However, it is believed that attachment in the early years forms the basis for all future relationships.

Most researchers are of the opinion that attachment figures provide us with comfort and security; however, the role of the attachment figure can also occasion distress or anxiety through actual or potential separation, as is easily observable not only with infants but with adults as well.

The emotional bonding with attachment figures provides a “haven of safety” for individuals alarmed by fears, anxieties and distress; it also provides a “secure base” from which to explore the environment and have the reassurance of returning to a place of emotional security when faced by threats, etc. The two constructs from attachment theory capture well the role of attachment figures while at the same time pointing to similarities in the areas of spirituality and religion.

Human emotions mediate the attachments in relational spirituality. Hence great value is placed on spiritual experiences since these can be communicated and shared with others via the language of emotions. Since the repertoire of emotions is common to all humans, one experiences a certain amount of reciprocity, a kind of give-and-take. In the light of these dynamics, an overview of the psychology of emotional intelligence (EQ) may further enhance our understanding of relational spirituality.

## **The Psychology of Emotional Intelligence (EQ)**

During the second half of 1990’s the concept of emotional intelligence (EQ) became popularized in the international press.

It seems there was a realization that cognitive intelligence (IQ) alone was not sufficient to understand human behaviours and to conduct oneself in human relationships.

Daniel Goleman (1995)<sup>9</sup> described EQ as having the following five domains: knowing one's emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. While IQ and EQ are not opposing concepts they are distinct realities, which need to be developed in an integral manner within the personality. Sometimes emotional intelligence is also referred to as "interpersonal intelligence" (Gardner, 1993).<sup>10</sup>

EQ seeks to harmonize the rational with the emotional with the aim of turning out humans who relate better to fellow humans and the cosmos in general. EQ is other-directed and emotions provide the connectivity between self and the other. Finally, understanding emotions enables us to encounter others and act wisely in human relationships.

## **An Elaboration of the Five Domains of EQ**

The five domains can be broadly categorized under two competencies: personal competence and social competence.

**Personal competence** determines how we manage ourselves. Three domains belong here:

1. *Knowing one's emotions*: This path to greater self-awareness, recognizing a feeling as it happens, is essential to EQ. One should develop the ability to read one's own emotions and recognize their impact. In the process, one acquires a better sense of self-assessment, knowing one's strengths and limits. In turn, this should contribute towards greater self-confidence and enhanced self-worth.
2. *Managing emotions*: Emotional self-control is key to managing emotions without at the same time repressing them. For this, the earlier step of self-awareness is crucial. One can develop the capacity to be adaptable and flexible in the face

of emotional challenges. Also, one develops the ability to quickly recover from setbacks and upsets.

3. *Motivating oneself:* Emotions are put at the service of greater achievement, striving towards a goal. Such persons tend to be highly productive, take initiative and are generally optimistic about their performance.

**Social Competence** determines how we manage relationships. Two domains belong here:

1. *Recognizing emotions in others:* A certain sense of social awareness developed through empathy is essential. Empathic people are more attuned to the needs and feelings of others, are sensitive and caring and highly appreciative. They also have a greater ease in reading the moods and emotions of others and relating to them accordingly.
2. *Handling relationships:* Managing relationships are in large part managing emotions in others. Greater social competence ensures greater success in leadership and interpersonal effectiveness. Such persons are good candidates for teamwork and collaboration.

The theory of emotional intelligence opens up the richness and value of the emotional life of humans. Tremendous stress is laid on managing our emotions with a view to improving the quality of relationships. Just as in the case of spirituality, the relational aspect of EQ is brought to the fore.

## **The Nexus between Attachment Theory, EQ and Relational Spirituality**

Several common threads of thought run through these three constructs. Our focus has been to see in what way modern psychology can help us understand the dynamics of the spiritual yearnings of humans. Also, in what way can spirituality be enriched by the insights of psychology?

Social psychologists Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975)<sup>11</sup> have observed that religiosity or spirituality plays a significant role in crisis situations. They noted that people turn to prayer in stressful situations. From an attachment perspective, it parallels the fact that people turn to attachment figures for comfort and security. Prayer and God seem to provide a safe haven in times of distress and fear. Similarly, in cases of death of loved ones, the bereaved people feel more religious and engage in more prayer than they did prior to the death (Loveland, 1968).<sup>12</sup> For the bereaved, God can serve as a substitute attachment figure when a spouse or other attachment figure has died. Lee Kirkpatrick (1997) observes that “people turn to religion, and to God in particular, in response to the same sorts of events known to activate the attachment system and that doing so often provides the comfort and security associated with attachment relationships.”<sup>13</sup>

Attachment figures take care of many emotional needs, e.g. belonging, security, care, protection, etc. Also, they provide strength for the person to grow in emotional self-awareness as well as social competence, both of which form the essence of EQ.

Since spirituality is characterized by its inner workings and inner vitality, it essentially relates to the emotional life of the person. Hence a healthy emotional life would also provide a base for a healthy and productive spirituality. Relational spirituality with its thrust towards the other has strong interpersonal and transpersonal aspects to it that can be strengthened and affirmed through the timely development of EQ.

A spirituality influenced and shaped by EQ would emphasize the emotional-affective qualities in the relationship with the sacred/divine. Furthermore, it would do so in an intelligent manner, that is, with due regard to reason and other cognitive abilities available to the human. Also, spiritualities unduly focused on the cognitive/rational, tend to be “dry” and run the danger of lapsing into compulsive and meaningless religious practices that fail to nourish the soul of the person.

## Implications of a Relational Spirituality in the Christian Context

1. A relational spirituality would highlight the qualities of a covenant relationship so pervasive in the Old Testament. There is a personal, emotional relationship between God and His people; a sense of mutual attachment runs through the whole story of how God liberates His people while they in turn remain attached to Him. Here spirituality has the connotation of a journey, which implies mutuality of companionship. The presence of God brings joy and strength and confirms the attachment while absence brings about anxiety, confusion and pain.
2. A relational spirituality would also help one to come to terms with the ups and downs of emotional relationships. Given that EQ equips one to manage one's emotions and those of others, it has an impact on the quality of relationships. Such management skills could be brought to bear in our relationship with the divine. Spirituality then takes on a perspective of partnership with a high degree of reciprocity and emotional awareness.
3. Since by and large the emphasis within the Christian tradition seems to be on the cognitive, reason-based approach in relating to God, the emotional is sometimes looked down upon as of lesser value. Hence, liturgical celebrations and other practices leave little or no room for emotional expressions of joy, happiness or gratitude. Emotions are sort of suppressed with a liturgical decorum of silence and stylized actions in the form of official rubrics. A relational spirituality creates room for individualized expressions of one's relationship with God and fellow-humans.
4. The theories of attachment and EQ can facilitate the process of making spirituality relevant and meaningful by pointing out the emotional needs of people. Spirituality is essentially a search for the sacred in the context of relating to fellow humans, the cosmos and the divine. A relational spirituality would assume an openness to engage present day realities and thus remain relevant.

5. A God-experience, which at times seems so elusive in certain Christian traditions, would seem within easier reach when understood and experienced as part of the emotional life of every individual. In the context of relational spirituality, a God-experience parallels a fellowship-experience between humans. Then, God-experience is no longer a distant or a privileged experience of a chosen few. God-experience would be more readily accessible since God is sought in the daily reality of life.
6. A relational spirituality would seem more integral in so far it seeks to bring together the emotional and the spiritual, in other words, the personal and the transpersonal. In the world of today, the immanent and the transcendent, the human and the cosmic, all form part of the total spiritual experience of the human.

## Conclusion

A new perspective is emerging on how we can be spiritual. It seems a lot more diverse than previously envisaged. Now spiritualities are expressed not only in religion-based contexts but also in a variety of other human experiential contexts. This article has explored and emphasized the relational-emotional dimension of spirituality that we think would make spirituality more easily accessible to most. Theories of modern psychology, like EQ and attachment theory, offer insights and perspectives that enrich the meaning and practice of relational spirituality.

In addition to strictly religious factors, scientists also highlight psycho-social factors as constitutive of spirituality. Hence healthy and functioning relationships also contribute to wellness and an experience of harmony and inner peace similar to experiences reported in religious contexts. A new branch of psychology, labelled, positive psychology, explores the concept of wellness and studies how wellness can be pursued in its own right and not as an antidote to psychological illness. In this regard spirituality and positive psychology share a common platform. In fact a new model for research is being worked out that goes beyond the



“psycho-somatic” to “theo-somatic” whereby stress is laid on the interaction between a pluralism of body-mind-spirit.<sup>14</sup>

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Article Received: June 10, 2004

Article Accepted: June 24, 2004

No of Words: 3,598

## **Integration through Spirituality according to the Bhagavad Gita**

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*Abstract:* The Bhagavad Gita is the most well-known book of the Indian spiritual heritage. It offers a way to spiritual integration that includes the four-fold relationship of human persons with themselves, with the Divine, with others and with nature. In this process of integration the diverse aspects of the human person are taken into consideration, the rational and emotional, the personal and the communitarian as well as the social and the ecological. The Gita helps a person to get rooted in the divine centre of being and from there to get engaged in the liberative work of God in the world. Beyond the barriers of religions, serious seekers of spirituality could find in the Bhagavad Gita an integrated vision and way of life.

*Keywords:* Bhagavad Gita, *Gitasadhana*, self-integration, *Samadarsana*, *Lokasamgraha*, *yoga*, *kama*, *yajna*.

Spirituality is the experience of the Spirit: the awareness of the orientation to the Absolute, to the Divine. Spirituality unfolds the divine depth of reality and gives ultimate orientation to life. It is an awakening to the ultimate concern, a sense of being grasped by the sacredness of reality. Spirituality is the vision-and-way of life that gives integration to life. One may not succeed in defining spirituality, for that which spirituality is concerned about, is beyond all definition. Life is shrouded in mystery, and spirituality is the sense of this all-embracing mystery of life. One may be able to describe the dynamics of spirituality without claiming to have any final comprehension of it or be able to give it a definitive expression. The symbolic language of poetry may be better suited to

describe spirituality. Hence the classics of spirituality are often works of poetry.

One such spiritual classic is the Bhagavad Gita. It is a relatively small book with 700 verses. But no other scripture of India has reached farther horizons of humanity as the Gita. With over 2500 translations and editions in world languages the Gita is the best known scripture of India. The reason for this wide acceptance of the Gita is that it offers an integrated spirituality: it touches upon the mental and the emotional, the rational and the intuitive, the personal and the communitarian, the social and the ecological dimensions of the spiritual evolution of human persons. The Gita does not merely point to the depth of God-experience, but it also shows the ways of attaining this depth. The Gita does not just moralize about issues of life, but it opens the mystical perspectives which can effectively meet these issues. The Gita is not just a doctrinal work, but a handbook of *spiritual exercises* too. It has been a spiritual guide for thousands of seekers for the past twenty-three centuries.

During the last 200 years the Gita has been shaping the spiritual life of seekers beyond India. The spiritual leaders of Indian renaissance propagated the message of the Gita worldwide. In the Independence Struggle, the Gita played a significant role. Tilak worked out the Karmayoga of the Gita as an effective spirituality for commitment to the country. For Mahatma Gandhi Gita has been the *mother* and source of inspiration. Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Vinobha Bhave, Chinmayanada and many others presented the Gita as a timely message for awakening and empowering the people of India. Beyond the boundaries of religions and cultures, the Gita is being accepted and studied as an inspiring spiritual classic of humanity. Several insightful commentaries and essays on the Gita have been written by seekers and scholars who do not belong to the Hindu dharma.

I have shared my reflections on the Bhagavad Gita in three articles in the previous issues of Jnanadeepa. In the first article in 1/1998 (19-30), the dynamic elements of the process of spiritual

integration through jnana-bhakti-karma have been described. In the second article in 2/1999 (27-33), the theological and cultural context of the text was presented and on that background the liberative meaning of the spirituality of the Gita explored. The mystical character of the text, was the theme of the third article in 2/2002 (23-30). The basic paradigm of my interpretation of the Gita has been already presented in these articles. Hence I do not want to repeat what has been said there. Against the background of these articles, I would like to explore how an integration could take place through the spirituality of the Gita.

For the last thirty years the Gita has been accompanying my spiritual growth as a source of inspiration and integration. With the Gita, I have been giving retreats (*Gitasadhana*) lasting 6-8 days in India and in Europe. Through eight daily sessions of guided meditations, the participants were initiated to the spiritual process described in the Gita. Retreatants were thus helped to enter into the inner dynamics of the encounter between, the God who embraces humanity in love, and the human disciple who seeks God in surrender. It is a process of inner awakening to the dialogue between God and the human person. Christians, Hindus as well as seekers with no religious affiliation have taken part in these retreats. For Christians, this was a deepening of their experience of life in Christ. For Hindus, it meant an assurance that their life is secure in the hands of the divine Master. For others it made possible an access to spirituality beyond the confines of religiosity. And for me, the Bhagavad Gita confirms my conviction that within the diversity of religions there is a deep unity in spirituality.

Any reflection on spirituality has to deal with four basic themes of relationships: with oneself, with God, with others and with nature. With the paradigm that I have described in the foregoing articles, I would like to share some reflections on these themes here:

## Spirituality as Self-Integration (Samadarsana)

Describing the structure of the human person the Gita says: “Noble are the senses, nobler than the senses is the mind, nobler than the mind is the buddhi, what is beyond the buddhi is the Self.” (3:42. cfr. Kath.Up. 6:7-8). There are, therefore, two faculties of inner perception: mind and buddhi. Mind (*manah*) objectifies everything and analyses reality in its individuality and diversity; buddhi enters into the depth of reality by uniting it with the perceiving subject. Through the mind (*mens*), one is driven to the fascinating diversity of things while the buddhi (*intus ire*, intuition) delves into the mystery of the unity of reality. Mind pursues the logic of reality; buddhi explores the mystique of reality. Mind speculates on the horizontal level and acquires conceptual knowledge of persons and things (*vijnana*), while buddhi contemplates reality in its depth dimension and attains intuitive wisdom (*jnana*).

To the spiritual seeker the Lord of the Gita communicates ‘wisdom combined with knowledge’ (7:2). Self-integration demands that the extrovert search of the mind must be integrated with the introspective movement of the buddhi. (*buddhiyogam*, 2:39; 18:57). For this, the Gita recommends meditation (*dhyana*). Dhyana is journey (*yana*) into the buddhi (*dhi*) (6:20-23; 13:24). The grace of dhyana is the intuitive experience of ‘seeing the self in the Self through the Self’ (6:20; 13:24). It is a holistic vision of reality. One perceives oneself in harmony with the totality of reality. This is *atmabodha*, the core experience of spirituality.

When, however, one is confined to the realm of the senses and driven solely by the extrovert power of the mind, one develops a neurotic sense of the ego (*ahamkara*). (18:58). One tends to think that the ego is the ultimate subject of everything. “Deluded by *ahamkara* one thinks, ‘I am the sole doer’ ” (3:27). This sense of the ego can be so powerful that it wants to conquer and possess everything. “This I have gained today, tomorrow I shall conquer that also. I have this much wealth now, much more will be mine very soon...” (16:13) Ego-centredness engenders greed (*kama*), which is the root cause of all disharmony and suffering. (2:62-

63). Kama is the inbuilt enemy in the mind of every human person. (3:37; 4:4). Kama viciates senses, mind and buddhi, the entire inner realm of the person. (3:40) Hence the basic demand of spirituality is to control kama in the mind. “Stand up and slay this enemy, quench this insatiable fire.” (3:39,43).

For this inner warfare, the Gita recommends three aids: ascetical outlook on life (*tapas*), devotion to the divine Master (*bhakti*) and intense pursuit of meditation (*dhyana*). Through *tapas* (18:5) one develops the inner energy to control the senses, (5:7, 6:8,12), bring the mind to focus (6:12; 6:15, 6:24), streamline the movements of the subconscious mind (*cittah*, 6:18-20) and open the buddhi to the inner Self (5:20; 18:51). Through the self-consciousness (*atmabodha*) that evolves in the *buddhi*, one reaches inner integration. One realises that the ego is not the real subject of liberative activities, (5:9) but the inner self united with the divine Self (5:10). This is not the annihilation of the sense of the ego, but the integration of the ego-sense (*ahamkara*) with self-consciousness (self-consciousness); not the destruction of individuality but the insertion of the individual into the totality of reality. Spirituality gives a holistic outlook on life.

When one is thus enabled to do works from the *atmabodha*, one realises that the divine Master is the ultimate subject of one's activities. “In the body the supreme divine purusha is the Lord that perceives, supports, approves and experiences everything. Through meditation one realises this inner Self in oneself through the (grace of) the Self.” (13: 23,25) Hence the seeker is invited to ‘surrender all the activities to the divine Lord in devotion’ (12:6; 18:57). Devotion to the Lord leads to contemplation of the divine Self and contemplation manifests itself in devotion. Loving self-surrender and ecstatic meditation are complementary; *bhakti* and *jnana* merge into one. This spirituality of inner harmony runs through the entire Gita discourse.

The fruit of this spiritual process is inner freedom, because this process evolves the dialectics between divine grace and human responsibility (18:63-66). Devoted to the divine Lord and

united with the divine Self, one overcomes the forces of *kama* (greed) and grows to *dharma* (harmony). As one is freed from inner bondage through the grace of the divine Master, one looks at life with all its commitments as participation in the dharma of the divine Lord. Fear is overcome and a certain calmness permeates the inner world.(6:14). One develops equanimity in relation to ‘friend and enemy, relative and stranger, saint and sinner’.(6:9). One is not perturbed by the extremes of ‘joy or sadness, victory or failure, gain or loss, praise or calumny’ (2:38;14:24). “Equanimity is spirituality” (2:48)

### **Spirituality as Union with God (Yoga)**

The Gita was composed on the background of the Upanishads. Hence the apophatic aspect of the experience of the Divine is the undercurrent of the spirituality of the Gita. The human mind cannot fully grasp the divine reality; the buddhi cannot fully reach it. The Divine is absolute mystery. Arjuna overwhelmed by the unfathomable immensity of the reality behind the Lord, exclaims: “You are the primal *Brahman*, the primal *purusha*, the ultimate abode of this universe. You are the primal knower and that which is to be ultimately known, and the supreme goal as well. By your infinite forms this entire universe is pervaded.” (11:38). Human persons experience the Divine primarily and ultimately as the ‘un-thinkable’ (12:3; 8:9), the ‘indefinable’ (12:3), the ‘unmanifest’ (9:4;8:21), the ‘immutable’ (8:3; 11:21), the ‘imperishable’ (9:13; 7:13), the ‘ultimate ground’ (10:12), the ‘supreme person’ (15:17; 13:32) and the ‘final goal’ (8:21). The divine reality is ‘being and non-being’ (9:19;13:13;11:37), ‘unmoving and moving, far and near’ (13:16). No name or symbol can fully express the mystery of the Divine. This sense of mystery opens an infinite horizon for growth in spiritual life. Spirituality is a relentless search for the inner experience (*jnana*) of the divine mystery.

The Gita experiences the Divine not merely as the transpersonal mystery, but as the personal God too. Out of the depth of the mystery the Divine, unfolds as the God of love. “The greatest mystery of the Divine, the highest word about God, is

this: you are dear to me...I love you immensely.” (18:64-65). The *tremendum* becomes *fascinosum* here: the mysterious *It* evolves as all-embracing *I*. With this God, human seeker can enter into a relationship. Hence the repeated invitation: “Take refuge in me with all your being; surrender yourself to me totally; may your mind be fixed on me and may your buddhi enter into me.” (18:62,64,65; 9:34; 12:6-8). ). The Lord will ‘not let his devotee perish’. (9:31) The one who surrenders oneself totally to the divine Lord will ‘go to him’ (7:23;9:25), ‘reach him’ (8:7; 18:65), ‘live in him’ (9:29; 12:8) and ‘become one with him’(7:18;14:19). The love of the divine Lord is an unending drive within the devotee. Spirituality is response in-loving-surrender (*bhakti*) to the dynamics of the divine love.

The divine mystery that reveals itself as a personal God, unfolds in the universe as the transforming power at the heart of reality. “I am the Self (atman) at the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all.” (10:20). As the creative source of reality God is the ‘undying seed of all’ (7:10), ‘the generating father’ (14:4) the ‘origin and birth-place’ (10:8) and the very ‘life itself’ (7:9). As the supporting ground and vital energy God pervades the entire reality. (9:4; 8:22; 18:46). The cosmos is the ‘body of the Lord’ (11:13) and the ‘field of activity’ (13:2). As the ultimate abode unto which everything moves, God is the ‘final goal’ (8:21) and ‘ultimate end’ (10:20). Hence the invitation to the God-seeker: “See the Self in all and all in the Self; see the Lord in all and all in the Lord, and be united with the Lord present in all things. And perceive in all things, reflections of the Self.” (6:26-32). With this perception, one is given a new motive to engage oneself in the promotion of the ‘welfare of the world’ (3:25). Such a commitment will then come not from *ahamkara*, but from an experience of oneness with the divine Master present in the world (6:31). Spirituality is participation in the work of God (*karma*) in the world.



## Spirituality as Commitment to the Welfare of Society (Lokasamgraha)

The Gita speaks of two types of activities in the world: those done out of attachment to the ego and those done out of concern for others. (3:25) Works done from the *kama* dominated ego-centre (*ahamkara*), lead to bondage within oneself, (4:14). On the other hand, when one is engaged in the world with a deeper *atmabodha*, works lead to inner freedom (4:41). Out of inner freedom (*nishkama*) one works in tune with the divine Master who is at work (9:9). This is *karma yoga*. The motivation for *karmayoga* is not ego aggrandisement, but the 'passionate concern to bring about the welfare of the world'. (*lokasamgraha*, 3:25). *Loka* refers to the humanity at large as well as the concrete society in which one finds oneself. *Samgraha* means holding together, integration, welfare. The *karmayogi* is not an inactive person, but with a great passion (*chikirshu*), he/she is involved in bringing about peace and justice, harmony and integration, in human society. The one who emerges out of the contemplative introspection (*dhyana*) is not an introvert, but one endowed with a *divine eye* (11:8) to 'see God in all things and all things in God' (6:30) and an inner passion (*rati*, 12:4) to engage oneself for the integral well-being of others.

With this mystical consciousness, the *sadhaka* is invited to look into the deeper self and discover his/her God-given duty in the world. Every person is born with some inherent talents and temperaments shaped by the 'constituent factors' of nature (*gunas*, 18:41). With respect to them, one has to discern one's role in society. External factors like caste and family (18:41-44) and formative elements like education and religion (4:34; 16:24) are only means to make this discernment. The Gita wants to give individuals the inner freedom (18:63) and spiritual maturity to discern for themselves their proper role and duty (*swadharma*, 18:47). Thus one is enabled to fulfil one's duty 'with great joy' (18:45) and 'skilfulness' (2:50) and reach 'ultimate liberation' (18:45) through works of service. Joy comes from the realisation that one is en-

gaged in the work of the divine Master. Skilfulness is the fruit of the conviction that one is an effective instrument in the hands of the divine Master, for God is the ultimate *subject* of the works of service. The Gita thus offers an integrated spirituality for social commitment. Work becomes worship here. “The Lord from whom the works of all beings emanate and through whom all the world is pervaded – by worshipping him through the dedicated performance of one’s duty, one attains fulfilment” (18:46).

A person who thus develops a spirituality of social commitment, will be above all, a compassionate person: ‘friendly and compassionate to all without any touch of hatred’ (12:13). Hatred comes when one finds the other as a threat to oneself. A spiritual outlook, however, enables the person to look at others as ‘reflections of the self’ (6:32) Thus one is motivated to ‘look with equal-mindedness’ (*samadarsana*) at friend and enemy, relative and stranger, saint and sinner, Brahmin and sudra, (6:9; 12:18; 14:24; 5:18). The social barriers of discrimination and psychic forces of prejudice are overcome through this attitude of equanimity. “Equanimity is spirituality” (2:48).

Some other characteristics of the spiritually liberated person are: ‘an abiding joy’ in the service of others (12:14,19; 18:45), ‘firmness of conviction’ in one’s commitment (12:14), ‘non-possessive attitude’ in relation to things (6:10), ‘control of oneself’ in all undertakings (12:14), ‘skillfulness’ (12:16, 2:50), ‘freedom from craving’ for material possessions (12:16), ‘emotional stability’ (2:56), ‘inner serenity’ (6:27; 12:15) and ‘purity of mind’ (12:16). Spirituality is genuine relatedness to the other human beings within the divine orbit. Spirituality is commitment to the liberation of persons and integration of society (*dharma*).

## **Spirituality as Concern for the Harmony of Nature** **(Yajna)**

Written against the background of the Upanishads, the Gita shows a keen eco-sensitivity in spirituality. The entire cosmos is looked upon as the body of the Lord. This is magnificently pre-

sented in the vision of the cosmic form of the Lord in chapter 11 (*viswarupadarsana*). With the God-given ‘divine eye’ (11:8) Arjuna sees the presence of the divine Lord vibrating powerfully in every atom, in the womb of matter, in the galaxies. It was like an experience of ‘a thousand suns blazing forth altogether’ (11:12). The divine Master graced the disciple with this awe-inspiring vision to make him feel that ‘the whole universe is pervaded by the infinite forms of God’ (11:38).

In the other chapters of the text, this experience of the divine immanence is communicated in poetic symbols: ‘In the light of the sun and the moon the divine light shines forth’ (15:12). Through the world of vegetation ‘the divine sap streams down’ (15:13). ‘In the earth, God is the fertilising smell: in water, the flavour; in fire, its brilliance and in all living organisms, their life principle’ (7: 8-10). The divine presence vibrates ‘at the heart of all beings’ (15:15; 18:61). God is the soul (*atman*) of this universe (10:20), and the cosmos is the body (*deha*) of the Lord. (11:15). God is the life-generating seed of the world (7:10), and the world is like the tree that grows out of it. (15:1).

In a contemplative vision one perceives the transforming work of the Divine in the world. This dynamic presence of God in the world is described as *yajna* (self-giving, sacrifice). The cosmic wheel of life rotates through the power of *yajna* that arises from the divine axis. (3:15-16; 9:10). God turns the wheel through *yajna* and the human beings are to take part in this cosmic process of *yajna* through their works. Works done in the sense of *karmayoga* nourish *yajna*, and the divine *yajna* supports human works. “Works done in the sense of *yajna* lead to final integration.” (4:23); ‘works done out of egoism cause bondage’. (3:9). Through the constant churning of this cosmic wheel, heavens fertilise the earth through rain, and food is generated. (3:14). With this vision, the Gita makes it clear that the destiny of the universe depends on the coherent collaboration of humans with the divine Spirit in the world. This gives a sense of tremendous responsibility to the humans for the preservation of environmental harmony.

Yajna is the bonding not only between the human persons and the Divine, but also between humans and the powers of nature. In fact, God created the things of this world with the mandate: ‘through yajna you shall multiply and prosper!’ (3:10). Creatures have to grow and bear fruit through ‘a mutually nourishing process’ (*sahayajnah*). Human persons have to take care of the life-giving powers of nature (*deva*), and they in turn will sustain and nourish humans (3:11-12). “Sustaining one another you shall attain supreme harmony.” (3:11). There is a cosmic web of life in which human beings and the powers of nature constantly interact in the process of the turning of the cosmic wheel activated by the divine Spirit.

But the Gita is aware that there is a tendency in the human mind to isolate itself from this cosmic process. It is human intervention that disturbs the ongoing life-generating process of yajna. Under the impulse of *kama* the human mind tends to keep things in possession with greed and consume them for ego-aggrandisement. The Gita calls this ‘robbery’. Humans have the right to consume things *only* after making sure that the matrix of nature has had its full. We can harvest from the earth only after having given to mother earth all that she needs for her further sustenance. Those who ignore this and exploit the resources of nature are thieves. (3:12) “Those who eat only what is left over after fulfilling the requirement of yajna are freed from all sins. But those who cook food only for themselves, such degraded ones eat sin.” (3:13). An integral worldview therefore calls for a commitment to the protection of the environment. A ‘passionate concern for the well-being of all things’, not only humans, is an integral element of spirituality (*sarvabhutahiteratah*, 12:4; 5:25). Spirituality is the awareness of being deeply in harmony with the things of nature and the resultant commitment to the welfare of all things.

The holistic spirituality that is advocated by the Gita is, therefore, a call to a fourfold integration: with one’s true self at the depth level, with God at the mystical level, with other humans on the social basis and with the things of nature in a mutual bonding.

This fourfold integration is an experience of grace (*siddhi*), for it is a gift of the divine Master. It is also the fruit of human endeavour (*sadhana*), for it is human responsibility(18:66). It is a responsibility towards oneself, to others, to nature, and ultimately to God. In mature freedom one has to exercise this responsibility (18:63). In one key phrase the Gita summarises the heart-beat of spirituality:

*Yogastah kuru karmani!*

Be united with the Divine and get engaged in the works (2:48)

Article Received: May 10, 2004

Article Accepted: June 14, 2004

No of Words: 3,726

# Trans-Religious Spirituality of Gandhi

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*Abstract:* After tracing the life-style and history of Gandhi, the author shows that Gandhi's spirituality is all-comprehensive, resulting not only in personal peace but also societal and even the environmental peace. Often people belittle the significance of Gandhi's use of a non-violent revolution to achieve political liberation. The author believes that the problem of bringing peace to the world on a *super-national basis* will be solved only by employing Gandhi's method on a large scale. His work on behalf of India's Liberation is living testimony to the fact that man's will, sustained by indomitable conviction, is more powerful than material force that seems insurmountable.

*Keywords:* Truth, search, religions, peace, God, Gandhi.

## Introduction

There is in us the bodily component which we are able to see, touch, smell etc. We are also conscious of an invisible, intangible and immaterial principle which we call Spirit or Self. Thus it is obvious that there are two main principles operating in our life.

It is also clear to most of us that our life, in order to be noble and worth-living, we need to discipline the corporeal and material aspects of our self and control the bodily instincts and sensuous pleasures and make the body subservient to the spirit.

It has been customary to extend these two principles of 'body' and 'spirit' to the cosmic level too. Corresponding to the bodily principle in us, Matter has been postulated as a cosmic datum. Similarly, in correspondence to the spiritual dimension in us, the principle of the Spirit has been postulated as the Ultimate. As regards the postulation of the principle called Matter, people have

not found much problem, because it is visible, tangible and it is experimented upon. However, as regards Spirit, there has been a variety of opinions expressed. There are some people who conceive the Ultimate Spirit as a personal being, while there are others who see it only as an impersonal principle. Even among those who speak of a personal God, there is a wide spectrum of opinions. Some see that personal being as a male principle, others as a female principle, still others see both male and female principles in that being. Some would see God as one, others as triune God. Some would visualise God as a Father, others would see God as a strict Judge. Still others would see Him as simply a Governor or Co-ordinator. Maybe as a reaction to the scandalous diversity, there are some who shun themselves from accepting God, although they would not subscribe to a materialist worldview.

### **0.1. The Problem**

Depending upon the diversity of the conceptions of the Ultimate, there have evolved a variety of doctrinal systems to explain and justify their own conceptions. This in turn has created a diversity of life-style involving moral code and ritual practice. Thus there have evolved different religions too, often with conflicting truth-claims. Conflicts in truth-claims have often led to wars, confrontations and conquests, which is scandalous to many young minds, making them thereby disbelieve in religion and the principle of the spirit itself.

In this context of puzzling pluralism there arises a question of great relevance: Is there not a view-point that explains the diversity of religions and upholds the unity of spirituality? Is there not one view that transcends the diverse conceptions of the Spirit and yet is applicable to all of them, while at the same time emphasizing the noble way of life giving all importance to the Spirit, yet giving due importance to the body as well?

## **0.2. The Contention of the paper**

It is my contention that Gandhi's conception of Truth will provide us with a common framework, interweaving the different religious conceptions of the Spirit and validating the variety of their truth-claims. Gandhi's formulation of spirituality is such that it transcends the wide variety of views and yet comprehends them all in their essence. It goes beyond all the diverse systems of religious dogmas and practices and yet goes deeper into each one's religious faith. It is this that I call the Trans-religious spirituality of Gandhi.

To comprehend Gandhi's formulation of Trans-religious spirituality, it is necessary to understand Gandhi's spiritual journey which consists of a search for a persistent striving after Truth. So in Part I, an effort is made to outline briefly Gandhi's life as a search for Truth. Part II proceeds to present in a nut-shell the important conclusions of his life-search so as to project the vital aspects of Gandhi's conception of Truth. Part III draws out the implications of those conclusions so as to explain the trans-religious understanding of spirituality.

### **Part I. Life-Journey of Gandhi: A Search for Truth**

- 1.1. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the most ordinary man in his early period of life. The boy Gandhi was intellectually not bright. Psychologically he was indeed a weakling. He was not able to see in a dark room. Morally he succumbed to all sorts of vices of a teenager (stealing, lying, smoking, meat-eating in violation of the family customs, even happened to visit a brothel).
- 1.2. The one extra-ordinary quality of the man was his commitment to truth-telling. On seeing the street-play of Harishchandra, the boy was prone to ask a question within him: "Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra?" As for himself, he resolved to play the role of Harishchandra always in life. Thus the boy set to himself the one ideal of following the way of truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through.



1.3. The boy's resolute approach to a truthful life taught him the value of Ahimsa too. The first episode after his resolve was the kettle incident. When the Inspector was giving a dictation to the whole class, Mohandas did not spell the simple word 'kettle' correctly. Although his teacher persuaded the boy to copy the correct spelling from his neighbour, the boy did not follow the persuasion of the teacher, because it was against truth. Gandhi's firm resolve to follow truth gave him the courage to make a confession of his vices to his father. He recalled his sins, wrote them on a chit of paper. In it, he pleaded guilty and was ready for an adequate punishment. Besides, he pledged never to steal again. But the sublime response of the father was a surprise to Gandhi: even as he read it through, pearl-drops trickled down his cheek and wetted the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the chit, forgiving the boy completely. This was an object-lesson for Truth and Ahimsa. It was not merely a father's love for the boy but also an act of pure Ahimsa that transforms those it touches.

#### **1.4. Acquaintance with many religions**

Though belonging to Vaishnavite family, the parents of the boy used to visit a Shiva Temple. Jain monks used to visit his house frequently. Muslim and Parsi friends used to discuss religious matters with his father. Nursing his father as he was the boy was often present during those conversations. Thus he was acquainted with other religions already during his boyhood. Thanks to Theosophists' friendship in London, Mohandas was stimulated to read the Gita in original. Thus he came to know his own religion more deeply. He also came into contact with good Christians there and read the Bible fully. Moreover he became acquainted with the basics of Islam too.

#### **1.5. Deeper questions about Religions**

In South Africa, Gandhi's faith was challenged by some of his Christian friends. He was almost at the point of conversion.

Also deeply influenced by good Muslims, he was pondering whether he should be converted to Islam. This led him to study Islam too. However it was with regard to the Christians' claim that the spiritual seeker, Gandhi, was very much perturbed. Some of the deeper questions that he raised were:

“Was Jesus the only Son of God?”

“Do the lives of Christians give anything that the lives of other faiths had failed to give?”

From the point of view of sacrifice, do not Hindus greatly surpass the Christians?

At the same time, Gandhi was humble enough to understand and acknowledge the limitations of his own faith. He openly said: “If Christianity did not seem a perfect or the greatest religion, nor did Hinduism show itself such”. The defects of Hinduism, particularly untouchability, were pressingly visible to him.

Thus, encountered by the truth-claims as well as the shortcomings of the diverse religions, Gandhi began to worry himself with a more fundamental question: “Which religion was true?”

## **1.6. A painstaking effort to solve the fundamental question**

Gandhi's search was not merely a theoretical search. Religious truth is not a theoretical or abstract truth. It is a life-affecting truth. Unless it transforms one's life, it is not really a truth for that person. Hence, he sought help from a 'living witness' of the Hindu religion. Ramabai, a merchant from his native town, led Gandhi to a deeper study of different religions, including his own. In all his efforts to study religions, he concentrated upon putting the precepts into practice, a prayerful search: waiting silently upon God, seeking his guidance in choosing the true religion.

## **1.7. More than personal search**

Gandhi's search was not simply personal. Rather, it involved him into concrete struggles of liberation of suffering people.

Steeped in colour prejudices, the colonizers of South Africa subjected the Indian indentured labourers to many kinds of humiliations and discriminative legislation. Finding that the Indian community there mainly consisted of the poor and the illiterate, and that they had no leader to safeguard their rights, Gandhi plunged himself into politics in order to liberate them from the unjust treatment.

To the whole of his liberation-struggle, Gandhi applied the twin principles of Truth and Non-violence. First, he offered a truthful resistance, what he called *Satyagraha*. By obeying the unjust and immoral laws of the Whites, the Indian people over there could not maintain the 'truth' of their being human. Hence it was a requirement of their being truthful to themselves, to disobey the unjust laws and resist them. At the same time he applied the principle of conquering evil by love, by voluntarily suffering the consequences such as courting imprisonment and other kinds of suffering without retaliation, not even entertaining mental hatred or anger against the evildoer. This was a sort of moral appeal to the oppressor regarding the genuineness of the grievances of the oppressed and righteousness of their cause, thereby enkindling the 'divine spark' or the inner goodness of the oppressors and moving them to rectify the wrongs. The non-violent struggle was indeed a great success. After a prolonged struggle of 21 years, Gandhi was successful in getting the discriminative laws repealed in South Africa.

### **1.8. The secret of success was what he called a "life of truth."**

This implies a life of purity, which in their struggling context of liberation involved firmness in the cause of justice and readiness to sacrifice anything for its sake. Personally, Gandhi had to snip all family ties, observing the vow of brahmacharya. Further he took to a life of simplicity in dress and diet. He practised self-restraint through fasting, and prayer. He spent hours in *Namajapa*, and *bhajan*-singing.

Moreover, he felt that the success of the struggle required the personal transformation of not only the leader but of all his co-workers and even the rank and file followers who had been mobilized into the movement. For this purpose, Gandhi founded an *Ashram*. It was indeed an interreligious family with a common kitchen, common ownership, run by the labour of each one according to his/her capacity. The success of such an experiment at interreligious community-living was made possible greatly due to his trans-religious approach to life, succinctly put into two words: truth and non-violence, and trans-religious worship and practice.

### **1.9. On his return to India Mahatma Gandhi was accompanied by the collaborators of the Satyagraha movement in South Africa.**

He also wanted to test the applicability of the same Truth-based Non-violent method to India's situation of political liberation. Hence he founded the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmathi in 1915, which he shifted to Wardha in 1917. Invited by the peasants of Champaran and the industrial labourers at Ahmedabad, Gandhi applied his trans-religious method of truth and love successfully to the liberation of agriculturists and industrial labourers respectively. The success he got in these local Satyagrahas at Champaran and Ahmedabad emboldened him to employ the same method on the national level too. Even as he was travelling all over the country to study the specificity of the Indian situation, Gandhiji decided to launch the *Constructive Programmes* on a concrete 18-point Programme of action, only as a true and non-violent means of *Purna Swaraj*- complete freedom.

Finally, as he launched a nation-wide agitation against political slavery, or a social problem like untouchability or economic disability etc., he did it all merely as a part of his search for God an attempt to see God face to face, to obtain *Moksha*, and attain his Realization of Self. However, he re-interpreted his search for God in a trans-religious way, as search for Truth. In the process, Gandhi had to also re-interpret the traditional concept of religion. And,

as a result of his search, he reformulated religious conception of God in a transreligious way. It is important to bear in mind the reformulations Gandhi gave (a) about religions, (b) about God and (c) his own formulation of Truth. This we will see in a separate section.

## **Part II. The out-come of Gandhi's Search**

As mentioned above, Gandhiji's spiritual search yielded three specific contributions to our understanding of trans-religious spirituality. They are in the following areas:

### **2.1. Religions**

1. "Religion" means primarily "Truth", "Truth of Living"-involving a life of morality and striving constantly after self-purification. Indeed a religion is born out of a Life of Attainment or Realised person and is meant to evoke attainment in ordinary people.
2. All great religions are true, because the "fact of saints" in all great religions testify to the validity of all religions.
3. All religions are basically one, in this, that all inculcate morality and self-purification. They all serve a fundamental need of society.
4. There is no one religion which is all true nor is there any religion that is all false. In each, are found both the best as well as the worst; 'peaks of morality' 'heights of attainment' as well as utter degenerations and imperfection.
5. There is no question of relative superiority/inferiority between religions.
6. Believers in every religion should attest to the truths of their religion by living them rather than by disputations and apologetics because truths of Religions are primarily truths of life.

7. Though no religions are equal to one another, yet, all religions are equally true, because every religion is valid to its own followers. Every religion is capable of becoming more and more perfect by its followers' life. And every religion has the obligation to go from imperfection to perfection, from less truth to greater truth.

## 2.2. God

1. Of all the predicates attributed to God by religions, Gandhi considered to state that "God is true," is the best. All other attributes can imply ambiguous meaning. Even the most commonly accepted description of God as Love can lead to ambiguous understanding. Whereas the term 'love can mean many things to many people, Truth (*Sat*) meaning, 'To be' can never lead to any ambiguity. Again Truth, as *Sat*, Being, not 'Becoming' means that "Only God is; nothing else is". Further, God does not exist outside us; He is in every one of us; (unitive existence) "If I exist, God exists", God's existence is unitive not only of humanity but also of Nature. All comprehensive; so, "God is Truth".
2. However, later his search widened through his contact with sincere non-believers, Gandhi accepted it as more valid to say, "Truth is God" rather than "God is truth". For, in any statement, subject is the key term that you know about which the predicate states something you do not know. Now, about God, nobody claim to "know" concretely, while all know about truth of life. Even the atheists who reject God cannot reject Truth. For Truth in its primary meaning of 'sat' cannot be rejected by anybody. Again, the term 'God' may imply a religious belief in a particular religion, but really the reality of God may be denied by that belief or by the untruthful life of the believers. But the "Truth of living" affirms the reality of God in a very real sense, even by the so-called atheists.

## 2.3. Truth

Ordinarily by truth we mean ‘truth-telling’ (correspondence between what is uttered and what is really the case). This is “truth in words”. However, for Gandhi truth means more than this. It also means “truth in thought” and “truth in action”. “Truth in thought” according to Gandhi means that our ideas reflect reality as it is and that we do not allow our bias and prejudice to overtake them or even influence them. “Truth in action” means that I always act in conformity with what I think and what I say. Thus truth according to Gandhi means “truth of living” implying not only consistence and/or of my thoughts with reality, but also a consistency of my words with the reality of thoughts, words and actions.

It is perhaps impossible for us in this world to achieve a perfect harmony or consistency of this type. Imperfect as we are by nature, it is not possible for us to realize a perfect consistency here on earth. Moreover, given the wide variety of people and their subjective conditions, individual perception of Truth is bound to be different. Varied as it is thus, it is not possible to establish a common mean to gauge the ‘perfectness’ of the consistency among people. Here, Gandhi introduces a distinction between Relative Truth and Absolute Truth. *Absolute Truth* is the perfect consistency between thought, word and action. This is the Ideal of Perfection, Truth in fullness, cut apart from all imperfect conditions. That is what is identified as “God”. *Relative Truth* is the truth that is concretely found in relation to the subjective conditions, the geographic, historical and cultural factors of human beings.

## Part III. Implications

1. Acceptance of Relative Truth by Gandhi does not mean relativism as a norm of life. It only means acceptance of a variety of perceptions of the Absolute Truth as a fact of life. By Relative Truth, Gandhi never meant that “anything is all right for anybody”. On the contrary, he insisted that we must always be open to guidance by the “Inner Voice” and further

clarifications from the “Light Above,” that is, enlightening people from within. So, we must be ready to correct our position every moment that we go on getting new light. Thus, Gandhi set the Absolute Truth as the ideal, towards which every Relative Truth must approach closer and closer. Absolute Truth serves the function of Euclid’s point in Geometry. We must always try to go nearer to the Ideal.

2. This effort to reach the ideal of Absolute Truth is precisely what Gandhi calls the religious pursuit. “To be religious” does not mean merely holding a belief or professing a doctrine or observing a ritual but really translating the belief/doctrine or ritual into life and thereby transforming the imperfect life into Perfection, transitory life into Transcendence.
3. In this sense, then, ‘Religion’ is conceivable as a non-denominational, and a non-sectarian factor, as a universal principle of uplifting the imperfect human condition of living into Self-Realization and Self-Attainment. While any human condition is necessarily ambivalent, having the characteristics of both an ape and an angel, the animal instincts and a divine spark, a truly religious pursuit consists in uplifting it and transforming it into a state of Perfection and Transcendence. This essence of religions is identified by Gandhi as ‘Religion’ and is equated with the Truth Absolute, understood as God. So, Religion, Truth and God are all one and the same, which is interchangingly used by Gandhi.
4. All religions of the world are particulars of the Universal called ‘Religion’ or ‘Truth’. They are all attempts by a community of people to strive after perfection in their own way and according to their own context, climes, and cultures. All these religions have not only made demands on their followers to become perfect, but also they have actually helped their followers to realize the “divinity within” by prescribing various dos and don’ts (*yamas* and *niyamas*), enabling them to pursue the goals of human life (*purushartas*) in a disciplined



way and thus providing them with concrete ways of realizing the Absolute Truth already here and now.

5. The objective criterion for testing whether these religions have actually been beneficial to humankind for attaining the truth of living, is “the fact of saints”. Therefore, in a religion there are people who have concretely worked out a way of living, such that a perfect consistency is established in their thought, word and action on the one hand and between their thought and word with reality on the other. If a religion has produced these heights of human life through its own means and within its boundary, then it is a valid expression of the Absolute Truth and a real means to approximate our Relative Truth with the Absolute Truth.
6. The fact of saints does not happen in a vacuum. Any saintly life emerges only in a life-context which is invariably varied. It depends upon subjective conditions like taste, temperament and training, mental capacity for sophistication and upon the differences in geographic and climatic conditions as well as historical, cultural and political backgrounds. So, plurality of religions is a necessity of human race and each great religion is a valid expression of the Absolute Truth in its own context.
7. Though every religion contains the Absolute Truth (as it is proved by the fact of saints) yet it is also mixed with imperfections. The imperfections are bound to arise from the very human instrumentality involved in receiving the Truth and also in explaining it to others, and further in interpreting it by the disciples, and still more by the commentaries given by the later intellectuals.
8. Effort must be made, therefore, in every religion to reduce the gap between the Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth by constantly referring to the ‘peaks of holiness’, ‘heights of spirituality’ within its own religious boundary, and re-capturing the original experience of the Founder or Seers or Saints, and re-applying it to the present day context.

This need of removing one's imperfections and moving towards perfection through a constant effort to *effulgate* the Absolute Truth more and more is, according to Gandhi, the essence of religion. This is indeed spirituality. And in fact, this may be taken to be the universal component of all the particular religions.

## Concluding Remarks

1. If we are justified in explicating the implications of Gandhi's concept of Truth, as the truth of living, then it is obvious
  - (i) that any process of spirituality should help the individual to realize the truth about one's self and be involved constantly in striving after it to protect self-respect.
  - (ii) that non-violence is the core of Gandhian spirituality. Practice of non-violence is not a matter of expediency or pragmatism but a corollary of the Gandhian concept of Truth. In other words, acceptance of Relative Truth implies that one cannot forcibly impose one's perception of truth on another.
2. If Gandhi is right in distinguishing between the Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth and in identifying spirituality as a process of approximating the Absolute Truth in our concrete, actual life, then it is obvious that Gandhi's definition of spirituality is so universal that it transcends every religious specification and yet is applicable to any model of spirituality couched by the diverse religions. In this way, then, Gandhi's conception of spirituality is the most suitable to interreligious dialogue and co-operation.
3. Protection of Self-respect (the divine dimension of humanity) implies recognition of the Self not only in oneself but also in others' self, including the oppressed and the exploited. Even in opposing the oppressor and resisting the injustice and exploitation wrought by the other, we must acknowledge the presence of divinity in him and hence our method must be such as to enkindle the dormant 'Divine Self' in the other rather than use brutal force and thereby stimulate bru-

talities in the other. Hence, Gandhi's spirituality emphasises the use of non-violent methods in any liberation struggle. In fact he says that non-violence is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater and superior to brute force, which is the law of the jungle. In this perspective, Gandhian spirituality is the most fruitful technique to achieve **Societal Justice**. Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all – children, young men and women or grown-up people, provided that they have a living faith in the God of love.

4. Acceptance of non-violence as the law of life, implies also that it must pervade the whole being of the practitioner and not be applied to isolated acts. Moreover, it should be applied to life in its infinite forms. Nature as a whole exists as one organic unity. The human species is just a fragile part of it. The part should feel reverence for the whole, atonement (at-one-ment) with the whole. For the divine dimension is found not only in humanity but also in the whole of creation. Hence self-realization can be total only if the **protection of the environment** is also made part of one's pursuit of spirituality.
5. In one word then, Gandhi's spirituality is all-comprehensive, resulting not only in personal peace but also societal and even environmental peace. Often people belittle the significance of Gandhi's use of a non-violent revolution to achieve political liberation. It is even remarked that it is historically important but not universally applicable. However, if it is placed and perceived in the context of the all-comprehensive nature of Gandhian spirituality, then one will see the relevance of it even today. Great minds like Einstein have a correct understanding; "Revolution without the use of violence was the method by which Gandhi brought liberation to India. It is my firm belief that the problem of bringing peace to the world on a **super-national basis** will be solved only by employing Gandhi's method on a large scale. His work on behalf of India's Liberation is living testimony to the fact

that man's will, sustained by indomitable conviction, is more powerful than material force that seems insurmountable". Why should not religions acknowledge the relevance of Gandhi's spirituality today?

Article Received: June 7, 2004

Article Accepted: June 23, 2004

No of Words: 4,337

# 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.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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”)<sup>5</sup>. 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.<sup>6</sup>

**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.<sup>7</sup> 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 Longing<sup>8</sup>**

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 energy<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

**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.

13

**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.<sup>14</sup>

## **5. Renewed Vision of World, God and Humans<sup>15</sup>**

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.<sup>16</sup>

**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.<sup>17</sup>

**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!<sup>18</sup>

**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](http://www.templeton.org), [www.jnanam.org](http://www.jnanam.org) or [www.ctns.org](http://www.ctns.org), [www.metanexus.net](http://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.”

# **The New Age Spirituality**

## **A Quest to Break Boundaries**

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*Abstract:* The author tries to describe what the New Age spirituality is, how it originated and developed and how it is a challenge to organized religions. The popular appeal of New Age Spirituality can be attributed to its serious attempts to respond to the human longing for harmony, belongingness, communion and freedom from religious and socio-cultural prohibitions leading to spiritual, psychological and physical well-being. The New Age spirituality has the grand vision of a global village but its followers are not committed to its birthing on the foundation of universal values like justice and equality. The New Age spirituality remains a challenge to the adherents of all religious traditions, revealing that the restlessness of humans and the longing for their well-being cannot be satisfied by creating new structures but by providing ways to expand the horizons of the human mind to embrace everything including the ultimate Reality.

*Keywords:* New Age, cosmic harmony, well-being, Eastern spirituality, pantheism, secularization, boundary.

The New Age spirituality defies all definition. Some consider it a spirituality or religiosity with the pre-conceived idea that all organized religions are bad and all spiritualities are good. Some consider it a movement like other movements that emerged as a response to a particular need of the time. Surprising all those who condemn it as a tabloid religion or a passing phenomenon, the New Age spirituality has come to stay, attracting new adherents everyday without any aggressive evangelism. In this article an attempt is made to describe what this spirituality is, how it originated and developed and how it is a challenge to organized religions.

Unlike all other movements the New Age spirituality has entered into all aspects of human life, namely, religious, cultural, social, political, economic, ecological and psychological. The recent document from the Vatican, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, prepared by the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue, shows how this religiosity undermines the basic Christian faith-affirmations. From the response of the Church to the New Age spirituality, it is clear that the Church is alarmed by the impact of this new religious phenomenon. The Church cannot wish it away. Nor can it dismiss it as inconsequential as Harvey Cox seems to do. According to Cox, the twain of Western culture with its emphasis on individualism and consumerism cannot meet the mystical Eastern wisdom of 'egolessness' and 'detachment'. So the elements of the Eastern religious traditions cannot be transplanted in the Western world that revels in values contradicting them. In case they meet, the hybrid would be a combination of the worst elements of both cultures manifesting irresponsibility with a spiritual cover.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the prophecy of Cox that the New Age spirituality would eventually fail, Siddika Angle affirms that it is a premature judgement like that of the prophecy about the disappearance of Christianity or Islam by some at the early stages of their emergence.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other movements and spiritualities which seek their identity in opposition to anything that is different from them, the New Age has the capacity to absorb and integrate into it even opposing and contradicting views of life and ways of life. It can give space for all possible world-views and ideologies that claim to promote human well-being and cosmic harmony.

## **I. New Age Spirituality: Its Meaning and Its Claims**

The New age movement takes from various belief systems and ideologies, whatever is appealing to the human spirit. Since this movement is a confluence of many spiritualities, philosophies, ideologies, life-styles and physical and mental healing techniques, some authors try to describe its main features rather than define it. According to Roy Wallis there are two fundamental traits in the New Age, namely, the 'epistemological individualism' which sets the individual as the locus of the determination of truth and 'an ideology of revelational indeterminacy' which affirms the plurality of ways

in which the truth is revealed through a plurality of agents.<sup>3</sup> Robert Ellwood describes the seven basic characteristics of the New Age. They are: emphasis on healing, use of scientific language and desire to be modern; a monistic and impersonal ontology; eclecticism; optimism, evolutionary view; and emphasis on psychic powers<sup>4</sup>. What is new in the New Age is its appealing integration of contradicting spiritualities and opposing ideologies.

The New Age spirituality takes from pantheism the idea that God is present in everything; from humanism the idea of the divine dimension of every human being; from Hinduism the belief in reincarnation; from Christianity the love-command; from Buddhism the idea of non-violence; from Yoga the psycho-somatic training, from Group-dynamics the value of inter-personal communication, from parapsychology the extraordinary endowments or capabilities of humans; from Feminism the need for deconstructing all types of authority especially patriarchy; from Freedom-movements the idea of a life without anxiety; from Eco-socialism the concern for the protection of the environment; from the primitive religious traditions the myth of the Great Mother Goddess, from Alternative-Lifestyle Movements the challenge of living a simple life; from the French Revolution the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity; from astrology the belief that the zodiacal signs determine a particular epoch; from spiritualism the belief in the continuation of human existence after death; and from the theory of evolution the possibility of further upward development of all beings. It integrates into its vision of reality the principles and beliefs of early Christian Gnosticism, anthroposophy, theosophy, Sufism, 'self-remembering' techniques of George I. Gurdjieff, a number of Eastern mystical and esoteric traditions and even quantum theory. Sometimes it employs the language of science in its articulation of the interconnection between matter and spirit like 'bioenergy,' 'subtle energy,' 'biofield,' and 'electro-magnetic field' etc. to give a certain credibility and respectability to its claims. It is indeed a spiritual supermarket, offering ways and means to make sense out of this otherwise absurd world. Its celebration of diversity baffles those who seek comfort in everything that is well-defined and certain. It could be considered the spirituality of the post-modern philosophy and world-views. Commenting on the mind-boggling diversity of beliefs, ideologies and prac-

tices that make up the New Age movement, Paul Heelas says that beneath this diversity there are some unifying themes. According to him, the dominant tropes include 'the celebration of the Self and the sacralization of Modernity' which means that the individual human self is inherently sacred, or even identical with God and the most accepted values of Western modernity, namely, 'freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determinism, equality, and above all the self as a value in and of itself'.<sup>5</sup> The celebration of the self as divine is nothing new. It is as old as the Upanishadic tradition in India. What the New Age movement has attempted to, with relative success, is the blending of this Eastern spiritual insight with the affirmation of the individual self, gained through psychological theories. This glorification of the self is further orchestrated by the market-forces of the capitalistic economic system through all possible techniques of mass-media communications to cater to the wants of a consumerist culture which it has created for its own advantage.

The New Age spirituality is a syncretism of the most appealing kind, unthreatening, non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian.<sup>6</sup> It appeals to anyone who finds all organized religions authoritarian, their doctrines dogmatic, their theology abstract, their structures oppressive and their attitude arrogant. No wonder, then, that the New Age movement is said to be "the equivalent of a religious H-bomb in sustained explosion"<sup>7</sup>

## **II. The Origin and Development of the New Age Spirituality**

The studies on the New Age movement with its all-inclusive spirituality, claim that it originated in the nineteen-sixties with the awakening of counter-cultural movements in the United States. However its roots go back to the orthodox and the heterodox Christian mystical traditions, as well as other religious traditions which recognize the yearning of the human spirit to enter into communion with God and the possibility of an experience of this union in this world itself. Based on their ecstatic experiences the mystics of all religions claim that they have encountered the unity of the totality of reality. If mystical experience is considered to be the privilege of a few ascetics, what prevents the vast majority of humans from expe-

riencing well-being through communion with the Absolute and the entire creation? Is it due to ignorance or *avidya* about the identity of the Absolute and the relative, or is it due to a rupture between the Absolute and the relative, God and humans? The Western spiritual traditions originating from the Semitic religions emphasize that this alienation is due to sin, and the Eastern religious traditions affirm that it is an illusion that there exists an alienation or rupture between the Absolute and the relative. Whether it is sin or ignorance, it is a fact that humans experience this alienation as a miserable situation from which they seek healing and liberation. How to heal humans of this malady was answered by various mind-cure or mental healing techniques which were believed to effect also physical healing.

In the nineteenth century America, transcendentalism, spiritualism, occultism and theosophy claimed that it was possible to heal humans of their spiritual, psychological and physical sicknesses. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the most known among the Transcendentalists who were greatly influenced by the Asian religious traditions. Following the Transcendentalists were the iconoclasts of the theosophical society. They tried to blend Buddhism with American spiritualism. It is said that Madame Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, made terms like karma and reincarnation a household coinage for the metaphysical tradition and emphasized in her writings the emergence of an order that is not static and fixed but evolutionary and progressive.<sup>8</sup> Probably these movements were reactions to the tendency of driving religion to the periphery from the centre it had occupied in civil society till then. Separating state from religion was thought to be championing the cause of pure secularism. But what they lost sight of in the process, was that every citizen is a citizen of many 'worlds' intimately inter-connected. The spirituality that promoted this inter-connectivity, whether it is from Buddhism, Hinduism, occultism or any esoteric tradition was welcome as long as it provided some meaning to this existence which already experiences alienations of all kinds deep within.

The awakening of the New Age Spirituality in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the sixties, is attributed to many causes. The 1960's have been characterized by the emergence of a

counter-culture especially by the youth who rebelled against anything authoritarian, formal, static and oppressive. It was a rebellion against the familial, social, cultural, political and religious organizations and structures which seemed to profess values and yet acted in a way diametrically opposed to such values. The emergent counter-culture questioned the institutionalized hypocrisy of the state and religion. The immediate cause of such an outburst of the countercultural movements is attributed to the break-up of the socio-religious fabric of the American society based on Roman civic law and the Biblical faith due to many factors, especially the Vietnam war, civil rights movements and political assassinations. The old order could not hold the traditional structures and values of society any more. The movements led by the youth, the oppressed minorities or by women, had one thing in common: they all encountered the structures of society as authoritarian and oppressive, frustrating the infinite possibilities of the individuals to be what they want to be and to do what they would like to do. They revolted against all forms of tyranny. All of them believed that it is possible to achieve personal transformation through one's own efforts using whatever means is available, be it by the human potential development techniques or hallucinogenic drugs. Siddika Angle observes that for the youth of the New Age, the counter-culture provided a shift from external to internal authority and the task was to find new values and meanings from personal insight and experience. Further, Siddika Angle adds:

Humanistic psychologies, with their optimistic views of human nature and potential, provided an important context and conceptual framework for this self-discovery and self-realization. Taught by theorists such as Abraham Maslow that world transformation begins with self transformation, members of the counter-culture sought physical and psychological healing through numerous methods offered by the human potential movement, from psychotherapy and encounter groups to massage and Tai Chi.<sup>9</sup>

In the process of liberating themselves from the neurosis imposed by society, what the protagonists of the counter-culture discovered was not a paradise of their inner world but their own naked selves condemned to live with an existential angst in a meaningless and cruel world. No wonder, then, that there were a series of suicides in the late sixties and early seventies at the Esalen Institute of



Human Potential Development in California. The New Agers overcame this crisis by recognizing the need for spiritual discipline. They sought a spirituality other than that of the Judaeo-Christian traditions, 'the more heretical the better'.<sup>10</sup> The Eastern religious traditions especially Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism etc. promised spiritual treasures they were looking for. They were prepared for any discipline provided that it would give them self-awareness, harmony, freedom from imposed religious dogmas, social customs, mores and injunctions which in their judgment emasculated their individuality. However, everything in the Western tradition was not abandoned. The tendency to follow superstitious beliefs and practices long overcome by the Judaeo-Christian religious doctrines found acceptance and respect. "For along with the shift to Eastern sources—and to gurus like Swami Muktananda, Lama Choegyam Trungpa, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi [the Beatle's choice], Da Free John and Shunryu — Suzuki Roshi — came a burst of new interest, as well, in esoteric and occult traditions."<sup>11</sup>

The New Age spirituality was indeed answering the deepest need of a few generations of Americans who experienced the agony of being rootless, as they all had a history of immigration from another country and culture. This situation was further worsened by the industrial and technological development which forced people to move from place to place in search of better jobs and better living conditions. "[T]he same science and technologies that had expanded both life expectancy and life expectations, had their darker sides: atomic weapons, environmental destruction, materialism, consumerism and a loss for many of a sense of the sacred."<sup>12</sup> Organized religions could not respond to the quest for rootedness, identity, inter-connectedness and belongingness. The quest for a new way of life which would offer identity and freedom, spiritual experience and material comfort, positive appreciation of the human body and mental potentialities, integration of the physical and mystical, providing means for physical health and psychological well-being, found an answer in the New Age movement. Its spirituality offered to the adherents infinite possibilities experiencing what they considered to be meaningful.

### 3. New Trends in New Age Spirituality

In recent years the New Age spirituality seems to have evolved much beyond the imagination of its adherents of the 1960s. It seems to have abandoned the aggressive countercultural rejection of materialism. The new trend in the New Age spirituality is the sacralization of material prosperity, and, indeed, capitalism. The New Agers are making various attempts to harmonize spirituality with material prosperity. Capitalism, with its ideology of the inalienable right to own private property and an individual's unbridled freedom to acquire, possess and dispose of wealth without any interference from religious doctrines, social obligations, and ecological concerns, has found in the New Age spirituality an ally not only supporting its ideology but also giving it a religious legitimacy. The innate nature of humans for transcendence is identified with the individual's success in having material prosperity. If in the past the New Age movement had appropriated everything that it had selectively chosen from other traditions, capitalism has appropriated everything of the New Age spirituality and domesticated it to serve its own purposes. Capitalist ideology can easily manipulate the New Age spirituality and postmodern philosophy to expand its hold on the people of the global market, not for the unfolding of human persons or for the enhancement of communion among humans themselves or relation between humans and the cosmos, but to expand the world of Mammon to benefit a few individuals. Drowned in the melodious hymns sung by the New Agers glorifying the beauty and bounty of the Mother Goddess Earth, is the sound of the felling of trees in the forests of the Amazon and Africa and Asia, the thunderous sound of weapons in fratricidal wars destroying human communities and reducing to rubble symbols of human civilization, and the last sighs of the birds of the air and fish of the sea. Any religious tradition can be manipulated to legitimize a system however tyrannical and destructive it is.

Capitalism has cleverly aligned itself with the New Age quest for transcendence and freedom by interpreting and re-orienting it to mean that this quest is for material prosperity which is also a spirituality. It has made religion itself a commodity. The logic of this capitalism is the 'extension of the logic of the market place to all aspects

of culture' which according to Habermas makes everything a commodity which can be bought and sold, from art to politics to religion.<sup>13</sup> "Now forced to compete in the commercial market place alongside other secular business and industries, religion itself tends to become yet another consumer product within the supermarket of values: the religious believer is free to choose from among a wide array of possible beliefs and piece together his or her own personalized spiritual pastiche...."<sup>14</sup> A paradigm shift has taken place from the early capitalistic attitude based on Protestant work ethic, namely, frugality, thriftiness and innerworldly asceticism to a late capitalist attitude based on consumerism, physical pleasure and hedonism.<sup>15</sup> The late capitalism has its own cultural logic which is characterized by its rejection of the belief in any unifying view of the world and human history and a consequent sense of fragmentation and pluralism which mirrors the bewildering diversifications in the consumer society itself. It is the "freewheeling syncretism of wildly diverse elements drawn from disparate historical and cultural eras, patched together solely by the whim of the individual consumer."<sup>16</sup> One may wonder how this cultural logic of late capitalism which rejects any unifying meta-narrative, co-opts the New Age spirituality that seeks harmony with the cosmos and 'at one with the All'. We can see that the late capitalism's celebration of pluralism and the affirmation of 'too many possibilities' are very much similar to the essence of New Age spirituality. Its marriage with the New Age spirituality offers capitalism new possibilities to widen the scope of its markets, creating new wants and financial prosperity. Rajneesh (Osho), the so called Guru of the Rich, who peddled a kind of New Age spirituality with emphasis on Neo-Tantrism, proclaimed that the American type of capitalism was the triumph of the powerful few. He says: "I don't condemn wealth. Wealth is a perfect means which can enhance people in every way and make life rich in all ways. The materially poor can never become spiritual."<sup>17</sup> Many followers of the New Age are not apologetic about the commercialization of spirituality. According to Michael Brown, the market is filling the moral space created by the perceived bankruptcy of institutions like family, church and government. The new religious consumerism is mirroring the society from which it has evolved. Brown says, "Money is viewed simply as energy — 'accumulated human and planetary creative energy' to be

precise — and therefore as a force analogous to gravity, light or sound waves.”<sup>18</sup>

Many observers have noted that the New age as a whole tends to foster a consumer approach to religion. It offers ‘a wide array of religious products, as readily available as the products on the shelves at Wal-Mart, and is championing the freedom of the individual spiritual shopper’<sup>19</sup>. It caters to the consumer mentality of the present day which looks for instant material and spiritual gratification. In America it goes well with the prevalent mood of society with its avowed adherence to the philosophy of pragmatism which would ‘expect to get something out of being religious—some reward now or later’.<sup>20</sup> According to Sidney E. Ahlstrom, the Americans interpreted all ecstatic fusion states through the prism of the ‘harmonial’ tradition whose central axiom is the that ‘spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos’.<sup>21</sup> Along with the commercialization of the New Age spirituality, there is also a market for the professionals in the field of New Age spirituality. There is a new found interest in Management Gurus, Human Resource Development trainers, Alternative Educational Programme experts and Specialists in alternative medicine. What is appealing in the approach of the Management Gurus and other New Age professionals is that they present, in an attractive and challenging way the traditional religious values and virtues to all and sundry without any religious trappings and obligations. This may appear to be catering to the development of a more pluralist and tolerant global community but in fact it caters to the expansion of global capitalism and consumerism and the West’s exploitation of the sacred artifacts of other peoples spreading neocolonialism and cultural imperialism. But the popular celebration of the globalism and pluralism according to Marianna Torgovnik masks the deeper socio-economic disparity that continues to affect the relationship between East and West, between the First and the Third Worlds and ignores the ongoing forces of neocolonialism and cultural exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

History is replete with instances of domesticating and manipulating religious traditions by the powers that be for the exploitation of the weak and the poor and the annihilation of cultures and peoples.

The New Age spirituality too is co-opted by the market forces of the the global capitalism to administer a slow death to the weak and the powerless. However, a quest for inner liberation and transcendence, a thirst for the supernatural, a struggle for the recognition of human rights and dignity, a yearning for authentic inter-personal relationships as well as communion with the entire cosmos that gave birth to the New Age spirituality continue to appeal to millions, especially in the western hemisphere.

#### **4. The New Age Quest to Break the Boundaries**

It is a basic human experience that everything is not right with this world and there is misery and misfortune, brokenness and fragmentation within and without from which humans seek liberation. Humans experience 'restlessness' (St. Augustine) within and there is a constant search for harmony and peace. All religious traditions claim to offer answers to this deepest human quest for liberation or wholeness. In the course of history many mystics and prophets, sages and monks of all religious traditions claimed to have encountered wholeness and liberation through a deep union with the totality of reality, divine, human and cosmic. However, the religious traditions that are meant to offer ways of liberation to humans become oppressive and enslaving when their doctrines and practices are manipulated by a powerful few to legitimize their nefarious and unscrupulous practices at the cost of the majority.

The innate capacity of humans for transcendence cannot be blocked by any force, whether it be state or religion for a long time. The emergence of the New Age spirituality in America can be attributed to the breaking of the oppressive and dehumanizing boundaries set by religion and state repressing the unfolding of the human spirit. When religions are perceived as not enhancing human transcendence but controlling the human spirit with their untenable doctrines and rigid dogmas, at least some of the adherents of such religions would break the boundaries and recognise their irrepressible desire to go beyond themselves and go within themselves in search of the omnipresent Infinite. According to David S. Toolan,

...[T]uning into the omnipresent Infinite—and a kind of natural supernaturalism that defies all Cartesian dualism—has been the stan-

dard idiom when Americans choose to dispose a despotic Calvinist God 'way out there' and affirm their sense of communion with something like Karl Rahner's 'Ur-mystery'. At a certain point, that is, term 'God'—imagined as a CIA spy satellite orbiting earth—becomes problematic. Thus when Americans are 'reborn' by an experience of 'God within' they find themselves apt, like Emerson, to hymn nature, thereby expressing their harmony with the 'one will, the one mind, ...that is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in every wavelet of the pool'<sup>23</sup>

This cosmocentric spirituality of the New Age is not new to the mystical tradition of Christianity which has a strong biblical foundation. Though the biblical God-experience has been interpreted by the Judaeo-Christian tradition emphasizing its historical character, there is no dearth of instances in the Bible about the cosmic revelation of God. But the overemphasis on the historical dimension of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its concrete expression in rigid dogmas and rules and rituals neglected the mystical dimension of religion which is open, flexible, liberating and intensely experiential. The New Age spirituality attempts to recapture the mystical dimension of both the historical religions of the West as well as the mystical religions of the East. It has also re-discovered the mystical tradition originating from the philosophy of neo-Platonism and Plotinus and further developed by Scotus Erigena, Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg. But this mystical tradition was interpreted according to the American world-view. "Always prone to a flight of the 'alone to the Alone' that meant a rejection of history, neo-Platonism in Emerson's hands turned radically individualistic, anti-institutional, and was virtually blind to evil, pain and death."<sup>24</sup> If the mystical approach to reality is not balanced by a historical encounter with the actual realities of everyday life and the challenges they offer, spirituality becomes an escape route to a dream world.

The New Age spirituality offers ways and means to journey into one's interiority, discovering by means of 'positive thinking' one's own capabilities and through the Gnostic traditions of all religions the interconnectedness of everything that exists. It is the spiritual vision of a global citizen transcending the limitations imposed by all systems and structures, whether religious, political,

economical or ethnic. “But too often the energy of this vision, unsupported by any institutional means of realization, is drained away by the individualistic habit of turning everything into a consumer item for the exclusive benefit of the omnivorous self.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, the noble attempt to break all boundaries following the very movement of the human spirit to go beyond itself does not end in self-emptying love for others and the Ultimate Other or any commitment to transform the world where all can bloom. But it hits at the boundary of one’s own self still searching for liberation. However, the challenge of the New Age spirituality is serious. It forces all religious traditions to have a fresh look at their own hallowed dogmas, their religious language, codes and cults to see whether they are liberating or enslaving, promoting communion among peoples or causing divisions, celebrating pluralism or harping on exclusivism, focusing on the experiential love of God or offering an abstract knowledge of God .

## Conclusion

The popular appeal of the New Age Spirituality can be attributed to its serious attempts to respond to the human longing for harmony, belongingness, communion, freedom from religious and socio-cultural prohibitions, leading to spiritual, psychological and physical well-being. It uses a religious language that can evoke the experience of unity of matter and spirit as well as transcend all dichotomies. It celebrates pluralism in all aspects life and in all dimensions of reality: all fragments are gathered so that nothing may be lost. It offers various ways to attain self-discovery, self-realization and a higher consciousness through spiritual practices like meditation techniques following Zen, Buddhist, Hindu traditions or chanting the holy name of God following Sufism and popular Hinduism. However, the New Age spirituality’s strength is also its weakness. Its maddening syncretism makes space for the values of all religious traditions, practices but ends up providing a shallow spirituality without appropriate moral foundations and without enduring commitment to anything except one’s own well-being. The New Age spirituality has a grand vision a global village but its followers are not committed to its birthing on the foundation of universal values like justice and equality. So it is easily co-opted by the

forces of the global market to legitimize as well as to enhance their unjust trade practices and neo-colonialism. The New Age spirituality celebrates the wedding of the Western cult of individualism and Eastern wisdom and techniques to discover the individual self. Its promise of transcendence and infinite communion with everything that exists, remains a dream that is sold in a thousand ways through the outlets opened by the supermarket-chains. However, the New Age spirituality remains a challenge to the adherents of all other religious traditions, revealing that the restlessness of humans and the longing for their well-being in all aspects of life cannot be satisfied by creating new structures and doctrines but by providing ways to expand the horizons of the human minds to embrace everything and everyone including the ultimate Reality.

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Article received: June 20, 2004

Article accepted: June 30, 2004

No or words: 5,071

## A Missionary Spirituality for Our Times

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*Abstract:* Being aware that a Christian life is the only Gospel that people will read, a genuine Christian becomes the city built on a mountain that cannot be hidden. So a life in conformity with God's will is more significant than an empty proclamation of Christ or even performing of miracles in his name. Therefore, mission is not primarily an assignment to do something among others, but it is an imperative to live the Gospel, so that the very Christian life becomes a proclamation. It is a prophetic and contemplative way of life that becomes a consciousness raiser for people around us. It is an unrest, creating and transforming presence from within.

*Keywords:* Other-centred existence, human rights, cultural pluralism, prophetic spirituality, *nishkamakarma*, mission as presence.

I would like to begin this article with a note on the term 'spirituality.' 'Spirituality,' very popular today is not strictly speaking a biblical term. The nearest we have in the bible would be 'life in the Spirit' (Rom 8: 14; Gal 5:14). What we are referring to by spirituality, is the life-style shining through a person committed to the Gospel. It is the radiance of the Spirit (2 Cor 10: 6). In John's Gospel we are told how Jesus manifested God's glory (radiance) through his signs and discourses. In this article we shall point out some of the attitudes and ideals that shine through the life of a Christian today.

The life-style of the missionary depends largely on his/her understanding of mission itself. It could be said that many still cherish the hopes of the colonial missionaries, without realizing how colonial mission evolved out of a particular ideology consistent with the political, economic and social context, one that emerged from a role of power and superiority. Colonial mission was expansionistic,

harbouring hopes of conquering the whole world for Christ and bringing all the newly discovered peoples outside Europe into the one Church of Rome. Later when the Reformation churches got involved in mission, they too copied this aim and ideal in their own ways. In this paper an attempt is made to return to the New Testament understanding of mission, interpreted in the light of contemporary Christian experiences. Here a missionary does not belong to a separate species; rather, the very Christian self-perception is that of a missionary. After Willingen (1952) and the Vatican II (1962-65) the church is described as missionary by its very nature. Hence missionary spirituality is basically Christian spirituality.

## **The Sent-One**

The very first characteristic of the Christian life today is that Christians must participate in Jesus' own consciousness of having been sent. Jesus does not appear on the scene as a volunteer to rescue the world. He has been sent by God his Father, the source of mission (Mk 12:1-12 and par). According to the Lukan Gospel, the inaugural message of Jesus is couched in the language of sending: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives, to set at liberty the oppressed... (Lk 4:18). "I must proclaim the Kingdom of God to other cities too, for it is for that that I am sent" (Lk 4:43). Not only does Jesus acknowledge how he is sent by the Father but also views the Christian discipleship as the extension of his own sending. "He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (Mt 10:40 and par).

In John's Gospel the very identity of Jesus is as the sent one. In fact in the fourth Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the sent-one about 46 times and refers to the Father as the one who sent him. His mission is a faithful discharging of the will of the Father who sent him, in radical dependence on the Father (Jn 6: 57; 5:19). Mission in the Gospels is the whole series of activities resulting from the sending of the Son by the Father.

Christian discipleship is the continuation of the sending of the Son by the Father in the Spirit. "As the Father has sent me so do I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20: 21-22). Sent-ness, thus,

characterizes Christian existence in the world. Christians do not exist for themselves but are sent into the world to be at its service. They have, hence, a pro-existence. The church does not exist for itself and for a purpose of its own-like self-expansion. Its sole aim is to carry out faithfully the plan God has for the world. Hence it spares no energy in searching diligently as to what type of service is demanded of it in each situation. In this sense the church's existence can be compared to that of the double faced Greek mythological God, Janius, one face turning to the past and the other to the future. The church constantly fixes its attention on God who sent it and at the same time busies itself in finding out what service it can render to the world to which it is sent. Evangelist Mark gave expression to this sentiment when he described discipleship as a call "to be with him and to be sent out" (3:14), "whom he was wanting to call (from all eternity)" (Mk 3:13).

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Christians are aware of how they are called from all eternity to be sent into the world (Jer 1: 5). This sense of verticality, i.e., it is God's initiative that makes mission possible and horizontality, i.e., the call is for a service to the world, permeates the letters of St. Paul. He begins most of his letters with this note (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1.1, etc.).

## **Not Primarily Geographical**

Recently a teacher of Missiology in one of the theological centres in Kerala shared with me his struggle to create an interest in Mission studies among the students. The students argue that practically all of them will be working in the traditional parishes of the Syro-Malabar Church, which, according to them, are not typically missionary parishes. Mission, they are convinced, is outside the boundaries of Kerala.

Obviously, this is an anomalous situation since Vatican II has retrieved the basic missionary nature of the church. What causes intellectual confusion among these students? Though Vatican II has unmistakably spelt out that every Christian is a missionary, not infrequently do we come across Church documents presenting mission in geographical terms. Hence the Christians in Kerala are told, even as in many other parts of the world with a "traditional Christian

presence,” that true mission is outside the boundaries of Kerala though in Kerala itself Christians form less than 23% of the total population.

Though inter-cultural (not geographical) aspect is part of the understanding of mission in the New Testament, geography itself is not the defining element of mission. The Matthean mission text, 28: 19, demands the disciples to go into all cultures (*ethne*). Elsewhere they are sent as the Father sent Jesus (Jn 20: 21) or they are sent to be witnesses of the Gospel (Lk 24:48). Cross-cultural mission has significance always. However mission itself is the conviction that one is called by God to be sent as a witness to the Gospel. This witnessing is to be done wherever the Christian is. It is a matter of the quality of the Christian existence, not necessarily geography. A Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ in his mission. It is mission that makes one a Christian. The disintegration of colonialism, the bed-rock of a geographical understanding of mission, along with the onslaught of globalization, must liberate us from the tendency to hold on to certain contextual overtones such as the geographical understanding of mission and enable us to recapture the biblical view of mission.

Globalization with its mass movement and rapid communication has brought Christians in close contact with the followers of other religious traditions everywhere in the world. Hence a Christian should not hang on to the understanding of mission *ad Gentes* but must live the genuine sense of having been sent to witness to the Gospel irrespective of the locality. The geographical understanding of mission thrived when the missionary obligation was reserved to certain local churches, leaving others as members of the mission churches. Colonial mission gave rise to a very asymmetrical relationship, reducing those who received the Good News to dependent Christians without accepting them as equal partners in witnessing to the Good News. Mission was the exclusive duty of the Western home churches, while the churches in the colonies were seen as mere missions to be dependent on their Western counterparts. This situation has changed.

## Other-Centred Existence

A necessary consequence of the realization that a Christian by nature is missionary, is that the Christian has to be oriented to the other, other persons, religions and cultures. When mission was seen as expansion, interest in other persons was only to the extent that these others could be made members of the church. This is no more the case for the church today.

In the Gospels we come across how Jesus was the constant manifestation of God's 'other-centredness.' By relativizing the laws considered to be immutable, such as the Sabbath laws and rules regarding purity-pollution, in terms of human beings, Jesus showed how the God whom he experienced as the intimate *Abba* was not immediately concerned about God's own self as much as about human beings and the rest of creation. For Jesus, human beings were more important than the laws: "the Sabbath is made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath," he declared (Mk 2:27). He mixed freely with all people, irrespective of their status, gender or moral rectitude. He deliberately exercised a preferential option for the excluded and the marginalized of society in his dealings and social intercourse. The other person, for Jesus, took the place of God. The way we treat the other is the externalization of the way we treat God (Mt 25: 31-46).

During his ministry Jesus made those human beings who were discredited in any way, the ill-treated and the excluded ones, the privileged ones. They would enjoy the fruits of the arrival of the Kingdom. The oft-repeated description of his many table fellowships is the anticipation and the projection of the Kingdom that he came to inaugurate.

Paradoxically, the other has become a problem for Christianity. How to account for the religious and culturally other, is an enduring problem for the church. Getting involved with the other is constitutive of the mission of the church in so far as Jesus' mission was the expression of the other-centredness of God. In our times this other-centredness must take into account the less privileged ones of the society. Relationship is another name for other centredness. It is relationship that defines God and it is relationship that characterizes

the church's mission. The missionary today is a relational person, one who builds bridges and not one who burns bridges. In contrast to the Old Testament understanding of holiness as separation, being set apart, for Jesus, holiness is relatedness.

As a bridge builder, a missionary today must be a pro-active person. To be pro-active means venturing into unfamiliar and unknown zones, which in turn may arouse curiosity or even suspicion. However, a missionary cannot afford to walk only the beaten track, but must also be a trailblazer and at home with the unknown. He/she is not a maintainer of the status quo, but ever taking the lead to build relationships, both at the individual levels as well as at the collective levels as with the followers of other religions and with other ecclesial communities. In all situations, like Moses, the missionary says, "I must go and see what this strange sight is" (Ex 3:3). Thus, the missionary today is ready to get involved so that he/she can promote relationships.

It is also a matter of taking responsibility for the neighbour so that the world is made into more Kingdom-like. The missionary realizes that the unjust situations that we come across are unnatural and something is to be done to change such situations after the \*example of the Good Samaritan, who got involved with the person lying half dead on the roadside, to change that situation (Lk 10:29ff).

Such an open attitude will enable the Christian community not only to come to terms with the religious and the cultural other, leading to harmony, but will also rid the community of many fears and aloofness from the many movements. The Church, traditionally, has been afraid of movements like the workers movement, the youth movement, the women's movement, etc. A church that relies on the Spirit of the Lord need not be afraid of anything, but of fear itself. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Lk 12:32), is the promise of the Lord.

For the church the struggle is not with other persons, religions or cultures, but with any force that is an agent of darkness, lie, deceit and death. In other words, any power that is dehumanizing and alienating. In this struggle the church should seek the collaboration of any agency.

## Struggle for the Human Rights

The opening words of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, places the church on the side of all who struggle for Justice and human rights in the world. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts" (GS 1). These words serve as a window to an understanding of the church's identity and mission today. The church identifies itself with the rest of the world in its hopes and agonies, in its joys and sorrows, especially of the poor and of the alienated. The rest of the Document concentrates on the dignity of the human person describing the many ways in which the human person is deprived of his/her dignity in contemporary times. The church resolves to contribute in whatever way it can to rectify the situation as it seeks "to speak to all people in order to shed light on the mystery of the human person and to cooperate with all in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our times" (GS 10).

*Gaudium et Spes* placed social justice at the heart of the church's vision. Underscoring the exalted dignity proper to the human person, the Council said: "Therefore, there must be made available to all humans everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, shelter, the right to chose a state of life freely, and to found a family, the right to education and employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norms of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and the rightful freedom" (GS 26). In fact no other aspect of the church's service has influenced the modern world as much as its social teaching has done. This is the concrete way the Gospel has made itself felt in the contemporary world. In the spirit of the Synod of 1971 that qualified struggle for justice as an integral part of evangelization today, we can add that any genuine missionary spirituality today must share the concern for a just society. Evangelization is a service to the world, it is not steering people away from the world as something bad.



## Prophetic Attitude

Contemporary mission spirituality must enable one to immerse oneself in a prophetic ministry to the world that is constantly changing. Though the roots of the prophetic life style go back to the bible, prophetism was substantially muzzled by years of indoctrination. We cannot anymore be satisfied with a conformism that was the tacitly accepted norm of the past. The amazing speed with which the world undergoes change does not permit us to seek shelter under a restorationistic spirituality, that was a characteristic mode of escapism. Missionary formation must equip Christians to be passionately innovative in the midst of change and chaos, but always transparent to the prophetic vocation flowing from the Gospels. Jesus' own self-perception stands in continuity with that of the Old Testament prophets (Mk 6:4; Lk 13:31). The temptations that Jesus withstood at the beginning of his ministry bring out how he discarded the values of his times such as power, prestige and possession in fulfilment of his prophetic ministry (Lk 4:1ff.).

As a prophet, Jesus lived constantly in touch with God his Father and with the realities of this world which he condemned in unmistakable terms when these were not consonant with God's will. More than any other prophet he was taken hold of by the hope for the fullness of freedom and love. On the banks of the Jordan he received a new mind and a new heart, a new faith and hope. From then on he saw things in a new perspective, in the light of God's reign. From then on his only concern was the full realization of this reign. "Set your heart on God's Kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well" (Mt 6:33). As a prophet he spoke with authority, a fact mentioned 63 times in the Gospels.

A characteristic of the Old Testament prophets is their social consciousness. This social consciousness is constitutive of Jesus' ministry as well. His many table fellowships are prophetic deeds. His respect for the human person even to the extent of relativizing the Sabbath law and rules of ritual purity, his attitude to sinners and those marginalized, all speak of his social consciousness.

Every Christian inherits this prophetic spirit of the Lord in the Christian baptism. The world situation today, with the many forces

of marginalization, dehumanization, dispossession and the disenfranchisement of the poor, calls for a prophetic response. This requires of Christians to identify themselves with Jesus and his prophetic mission to the world, to collaborate with him to usher in God's reign in the world of our times, a world that is under strain and trauma due to the mad self-seeking and profit-oriented outlook. We must share Jesus' concern for the outcasts and those on the outer margins of society, his acceptance of the equality of women, and his disapproval of all sorts of social privileges and the economic stratification of society. His promotion of communion instead of domination, his vision of liberating all persons from oppressive values and systems, must be foundational for contemporary mission spirituality. Mission spirituality must be sensitive to the enormous gap between the Gospel and the world of our times. Intimacy with the Lord of the mission and his concern for the world must make us distance ourselves from the uncritical absorption of the values contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.

A basic ingredient of the prophetic spirituality is transparency. In an earlier age one could get away with what one said even if it did not conform to one's belief or behaviour. In an age revolutionized by information technology, this is hardly the case. Yet far too frequently, we come across statements addressed to the followers of other religions, which do not reflect exactly what is taught to Catholics; we come across statements and exhortations to the followers of other religious traditions stating that we are all fellow pilgrims with a common origin and a common destiny (NA 1). At the same time we tell the Catholics that we alone are the followers of the only true religion willed by God and that our mission is to bring people into the Catholic church enabling them to be saved.

A sort of stick and carrot policy, not infrequently adopted by official circles by marginalizing creative and prophetic persons at every level with the stigma of 'hererodoxy.' This effectively encourages double-faced persons who believe one thing and pay homage to ideas which are not in conformity with their convictions. Roles of power and prestige attract many persons to be conformists who are careful not to come in the way of the powers that silence any unwelcome criticism. This is creating a dangerous and disastrous situa-

tion. People externally admit what they reject internally. In other words there is lip service with internal disagreement. Many, in fact, may be draining away their God-given creative talents in their efforts to be conformists rather than directing these talents and energies to an apostolic service to the world. This sort of conformism has crept into Christian existence as a result of powerful structures. All this means that there is a lack of sincerity and transparency, promoted by the existing system. Can we acknowledge that when a person stands up for his/her convictions, he/she shows integrity, a love of truth, and therefore a commitment that is pleasing to God? Such a spirit will encourage a prophetic life-style in the church. At any cost transparency of life must be encouraged and maintained. It is a necessary condition for prophetic ministry.

## Respect for Religious and Cultural Pluralism

One of the hope-inspiring achievements of Vatican II was the new spirit that it ushered in most aspects of the church's life and mission. Some of the most obvious of these are the reform of the liturgy, approach to the Word of God, Religious life, etc. As far as mission spirituality is concerned, by far the greatest change was the new attitude to the followers of other religions and openness to the cultures of the world.

Though the Council did not yet say explicitly that other religions have a salvific value, as did John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia 2*, the Council did affirm the real possibility of salvation for the followers of other religions (LG 16, GS 22) and upheld the common origin and common destiny of humankind. Though the Mission Decree *Ad Gentes* gave a rather exclusive understanding of mission, respecting the sentiments of the bishops from the so-called mission countries, by and large the Council's approach to humanity was an open one as reflected in many of its documents like *Gaudium et Spes*, promoting communion and collaboration.

Yet, from time to time we encounter tendencies that divide the world into two camps, i.e., the followers of the one true religion and the others, promoting a restorationist tendency, reiterating the Council of Florence's judgments about other religions and approach to mission. This restorationism is contrary to the spirit of genuine evan-

gelization of spreading God's love and uniting humankind. Though I have very little sympathy for the politically motivated Hindutva ideology, yet I believe that the 19<sup>th</sup> century mission and mission methods have contributed to the rise of Hindutva. Hence the same spirit of condemning the Hindutva ideology demands equally the condemnation of some of the mission methods of the past century. Thus mission spirituality today calls for a resistance to this type of restorationistic tendencies.

The identity of the community of the disciples is not primarily a religious identity but that of the followers of Jesus Christ in his life of love and service. Mission also should have this as its primary concern. It is not primarily a call to change one's religion, but a call to change one's attitude to our fellow humans in the spirit of love and service. Due to 2000 years of mutations and permutations, religious identity is also very much part of the Christian identity and thus religious change also may be implied in the mission of the church. In fact it has to occur for the sake of continuing the mission of Jesus Christ to the ends of time. But that should not be absolutized. Mission spirituality in our times demands a spirit of collaboration with the followers of other religious traditions, with the conviction that we are co-pilgrims with them sharing in all their liminalities. Vatican II and the Supreme Pontiffs since the Council have encouraged this spirituality. John Paul II has reminded the Indian bishops that Divine Providence has placed them in a context demanding that they do everything possible to encourage interreligious dialogue according to the teachings of the church (1986: 29).

Christianity in the past had difficulty in coming to terms with the cultural other as well. Rightly understood, no culture is an 'other' to Christianity, in so far as Christianity did not have a culture of its own, except, perhaps, the culture of love. Yet, the post-Constantinian church increasingly identified itself with the Mediterranean culture. Colonial mission was inextricably bound up with the colonial spirit of superiority which despised everything that was not European. However, the development of ethnology and cultural anthropology has enabled the church to come to grips with the cultures of peoples in different parts of the world. Today we are realizing how the Gospel has to enter every culture, make it its own and in the process

transform the culture from within. Evangelization is this process of inculturation (EN 18).

The modern world is a challenge to ethnocentricity and cultural imperialism. In this, Christian mission can serve as a bridge builder, mediating between worlds and cultures. Interculturality stands on the opposite front of cultural domination, colonialism and the unquestioned validity and superiority of any single culture. Advocating a single culture is contrary to the divine plan of pluralism and pluriformity manifested in nature.

Interculturality implies an openness to and a willingness to learn from other cultures, grounded in the admission of the limitedness of one's own tradition. It is not just a multi-culturalism that extols differences, admonishing the followers to be sticking to one's own cultural tradition. Interculturality advocates the creation of a new paradigm of coexistence within an inter-connected civilization. What is advocated is neither monoculturalism, nor tribalism of the many, but an inter-connected harmony of the many.

## **Exercising Christian Responsibility**

One of the profoundest achievements of Vatican II was the retrieving of the original spirit of the church. Gerald Abruckle describes this retrieval in terms of the retrieval of the founding story of the church (1996: 66). A major expression of this is the restoring of responsibility at every level. The most important responsibility is the missionary one. With the assertion that the church is missionary by its very nature (AG 2), every Christian is called upon to exercise his/her mission. Though the church had its origin and purpose of existence in mission, eventually mission became facultative, an optional note, exercised by a select few professional missionaries, mostly religious. The Council rectified this situation and asserted in unmistakable terms how mission is the reason for the very existence of the church and that every member shares in this missionary obligation (AG 1).

Mission was the first of the restoration of the responsibility of every Christian. In other Decrees the Council speaks of different areas such as the laity, priests, religious, etc. All these are but the

emphasis of the responsibility laid on every form of Christian living. This calls for the readiness to shoulder responsibility in the church. The tendency there is to evade this responsibility seeking shelter under hierarchical responsibility, looking to clerical elders to supply detailed instructions. Vatican II reinstated the mature position of the laity who have to get involved creatively in the work of evangelization. Just as the early Christians did not wait for the blue print from the apostles to go ahead and form a Gentile Christian community at Antioch, so too today the ordinary Christians must have this ability to respond to the evangelistic situations creatively without always having to get instructions from the hierarchy. Naturally, this implies a corresponding readiness from the clerical elders to respect the genuine endeavours of the average Christians in so far as they contribute to the cause of the mission in different contexts even if they are different from the vision of the elders.

In this context one may defend even the need to allow responsible dissent as John Paul II upholds: “what would one say of the practice of combating or silencing those who do not share the same views?” (Abruckle: 65). In such instances the guiding principle should be to see if what is done is pastorally enriching and in accord with the Word of God.

A practical expression of this acknowledgement of the responsibility of all Christians would be that in a missionary context, women religious will not always have to seek the permission of the local pastor for all that they do, though they may not keep the Bishop of the place uninformed about the developments of their work.

## **A Mission of Presence**

An essential dimension of missionary spirituality is the insistence on the quality of Christian presence as a form of evangelization. This derives from the very nature of evangelization that is serving humans by manifesting the divine love made present in Jesus Christ (*Redemptoris Missio* 2). Love is presence. The whole salvation history is the story of the divine presence in creation. The first human progenitors “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8). Even after the fall, God is present to them. Moses experiences the intimacy of the presence in

the tent of the meeting (Ex 33:7ff.); The Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25), the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (Ex 40: 38) are all symbols of the divine presence.

In the New Testament this divine presence becomes personalized in Jesus Christ who pitched his tent among humans (Jn 1: 14). He was God with us (Mt 1: 23). Through his ministry God becomes present to humans with a human face. We must not forget that the Christ event was in continuation with the divine presence in creation. We do not come across a radical discontinuity of this divine presence.

At the end of his earthly ministry the Lord sends his disciples to continue this mission of the divine presence (Jn 20: 21), with the promise that he himself will be present to them to the end of times (Mt 28: 20). According to Mark the very institution of discipleship insists on the contemplative quality of presence. Those called are to be with the Lord and thus present to him continuously, so that they can be sent out (Mk 3: 14). Evangelist John describes this presence through the image of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1ff.). The community of the disciples has to be present to the Lord so that it can be present to the world. It is to be the salt, the light and leaven to the world (Mt 5: 13-13), all images of dynamic presence, but minority images as well. It is interesting to note that St. Paul, the greatest evangelizer of the Apostolic church, did not convert the whole Roman empire to Christianity but gave rise to Christian communities in the important cities of the empire into which life flew and from where life flowed out. In his letters he did not instruct these Christian Communities to be evangelizers but to live the Christian life faithfully. All these show the significance of the quality of the Christian life as a form of presence that would have an impact on the society at large.

Twelve centuries later, St. Francis of Assisi would send his first monks to Muslim countries with the instruction not to enter into any dispute with the people but to live their Christian faith and thus become a dynamic presence among the people (FIS, nd: 310). We must bear in mind that this happened at the height of the crusades.

Today, too, the community of the disciples is to be present in the different situations of society with its radical spirit of love and

service. It is a geographical presence in so far as it has to be present to different cultures (Mt 28: 19). It has to be present to different religions, to different socio-economic contexts, to different races, etc. Most of the time the only service that the community can render is through this dynamic presence. The community becomes the presence of God's other-centredness in a particular context. This presence is such that the onlookers would be forced to say that one's life would make no sense if God did not exist! This is what we have in the life of Mother Theresa and many others. The Christian becomes the eruption of God's presence in the world of today.

The Christian community is aware that it is the continuation of the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). But it is the same Word that existed in the world from the beginning as the Pre-existent Word, creating and enlightening all. Such a spirituality is humble on the one hand, because it acknowledges the universality of the Mystery without exhausting it in the Christian tradition. But it is at the same time demanding responsibility in so far as the same Word became human for a specific purpose with which he has sent the disciples today. It is a responsibility of "going about doing good" (Act 10:38). This service to the divine Presence and to the world is the two edged-spirituality that a Christian is called to live. It is not a claim for any exclusiveness, nor even to any special reward (Mt 20:1ff.).

It is a presence of patience and powerlessness as well. It is a patient presence in so far as it is not overcome by anxieties of success and failure, but allows God to be God, to have God's own way of dealing, while we go on doing the good works (1Pt 2:12). Thus, there is a spirit of *nishkamakarma* in the Christian presence.

The missionary presence today is characterized by its powerlessness. The colonial mission operated from the position of power and superiority. It was typically triumphalistic. But the Christian presence today has nothing spectacular about it, nor the support of any sort of power, except the power of transparency to the divine, with a radical trust in the Lord who could not come down from the cross responding to the challenges of his enemies (Mt 27:42), but who was raised from the dead. "And of that we are all witnesses" (Act 2: 32).



The Christian is aware that in most cases today his/her life is the only Gospel that people will read. The Christian life itself is the proclamation of the Gospel. Through a life of transparency the Christian becomes the city built on a mountain that cannot be hidden (Mt 5:14). On the other hand a life in conformity with God's will is more significant than an empty proclamation of Christ or even performing of miracles in his name (Mt 7: 21-23). The life of the Christian is the letter of Christ (2Cor 3:2). Mission is not primarily an assignment to do something among others, but it is an imperative to live the Gospel, so that the very Christian life becomes a proclamation.

## Concluding Remarks

Missionary spirituality today evolves from a renewed understanding of mission that is universal and has to do more with the quality of existence than frantic activity of any sort. It is a prophetic and contemplative way of life that becomes a consciousness raiser for people around us. It is an unrest creating and transforming presence from within. Such a life is more demanding though less romantic.

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Article received: June 01, 2004

Article accepted: June 30, 2004

No or words: 5,839

# 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.

Studies<sup>1</sup> 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'.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

### **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*,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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'.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

## 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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, Mechtilde 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.<sup>12</sup>

## 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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'



qualities<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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?'<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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!”<sup>27</sup>

## 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](http://www.sedos.org)
26. Cf. Schneiders, "The Effects", p.45.
27. Chittister, "Heart", [www.sedos.org](http://www.sedos.org)

Article received: June 02, 2004

Article accepted: June 18, 2004

No or words: 8, 113



# **Body Spirituality**

## **Incarnation as an Invitation to an Embodied Spirituality**

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*Abstract:* Drawing inspiration from the feminist movement, recent studies highlight the importance of the body and body experiences in defining the identity of a person. The interest in body shown in the secular disciplines proved to be a remote preparation for serious theological reflection on the body. Following in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II who, in his theology of the body, initiated the process toward a deeper appreciation of the embodied nature of human existence in the world, the author explores the different dimensions of this embodied existence in the personal, social and ecological spheres from the Christian incarnation faith perspective, i.e. body spirituality.

*Keywords:* body spirituality, body, spirit, feminism, incarnation.

### **Introduction**

Body theology is a new discipline. Hardly anyone talked about it before the 1960s. The second wave of feminism that emerged in the sixties, affirmed the necessity of women reclaiming their bodies from patriarchal control as the first step toward women's liberation in society. The feminist movement gave importance to women's bodily experiences and accentuated the significance of the body as an essential dimension of who we are as well as a source of knowledge of the world, human persons and God.<sup>1</sup> Drawing inspiration from the feminist movement, the studies in masculinity also highlighted the importance of the body and body experiences in defining the identity of a person. The interest shown in the secular disciplines proved to be a remote preparation for serious theological reflection on the body.

The preparation for body theology in the Catholic Church began, perhaps inadvertently, with the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950. The dogma of the Assumption, by highlighting the dignity of the body of Mary, implicitly underscored the dignity of human body persons. Behind the pronouncement of the dogma one could detect the memories of the atrocities committed against the human person in the course of the two World Wars, as well as the death and desecration of the human person in the Nazi concentration camps and in the bombing of the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It can be said that by declaring the Assumption as a dogma, Pope Pius XII unintentionally emphasized the centrality of the body in the Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> However, the prevailing dualistic view of human persons and a corresponding spiritualistic emphasis on the salvation of the soul, prevented the development of body theology in the Catholic Church for many decades until the present Pope John Paul II initiated a process in the late seventies and early eighties.<sup>3</sup> Still, body theology continues to be in its exploratory stages. This essay is a further exploration in this area focusing on body spirituality.

However, before we begin this exploration, it is necessary to differentiate the 'theology of the body' and the 'spirituality of the body' from 'body theology' and 'body spirituality'. Though these set of phrases are sometimes used interchangeably, they do not mean the same thing. The theology of the body examines the body in the light of scriptural data. Insofar as it studies the body as an object of theological interest, it differs from body theology. The focus of body theology is to explore the significance of the body for the process of theologizing and theological knowledge. That is to say, while the theology of the body asks, what does theology say about the body, body theology asks what does the body say about theology.<sup>4</sup> This difference is also true of the 'spirituality of the body' and 'body spirituality'.

This essay is exploratory in nature. The main argument of the essay is that the body is a source of experience and knowledge of God. This being the case, Christian spirituality ought to begin with the foundational truth that the human being is an embodied being and, as an embodied being the human person experiences and knows

God in the body. This exploration begins with a brief discussion on the relationship between the incarnation and the centrality of the body in Christianity. It will be followed by a brief overview of the attitude towards the body in Christian Tradition. The development of a dualistic anthropology and its impact on Christian spirituality will be examined next. The following section will highlight some of the pre-suppositions for developing body spirituality. Next, the focus will be on the significance of human sexuality in body spirituality. Keeping relationality as a central principle, the essay will go on to examine the importance of the multifaceted human relationships for body spirituality. The last section of the paper will focus on some of the characteristics of body spirituality.

## **Incarnation and Body Spirituality**

The reality that God became flesh makes Christianity eminently a religion of incarnation – a religion based on the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> This central confession of the Christian faith finds its expression in diverse spheres of Christian life, beliefs and practices. It is expressed in the understanding of the church as the body of Christ into which the believers are incorporated as members of the body. The members of the body of Christ are sustained and nourished by the life-giving food and drink of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. In the sacraments, God's saving presence is made real through the material realities such as water, wine, bread and oil that are accessible to the bodily senses. Even the final destiny of the human beings does not exclude the body. The Christian eschatological hope is expressed through the faith in the resurrection of the body.

The enfleshment of God in the person of Christ makes the body central to the Christian self-understanding. Rather than being something accidental or peripheral, the body is essential to the Christian life of faith. For, body is the locus of the encounter between God and humans and, thereby, it becomes the locus of the knowledge and experience of God. In other words, God is known in the body insofar as the reality of God has become flesh.<sup>6</sup> In the body of Christ, God has become accessible, as the First Letter of St. John states, through the bodily senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell (1 Jn 1:1ff).

This is the core meaning of the incarnation. This incarnational faith finds its actualization in the social ethical sphere as well as in the ecological ethical sphere of Christian existence. It ought to find its expression also in Christian spirituality since it affirms that God is known in the Word become flesh, in the church that is the body of Christ, in the eucharistic body of Christ, in the body of the Christian, in the bodies of other humans, and in the body of creation. However, this truth has not been adequately understood nor has it guided Christian life and spirituality in any significant way. A brief overview of the understanding of the body in the Christian tradition will illustrate this point.

## Overview of the Body in the Christian Tradition

The attitude toward the body in the Christian tradition is marked by ambiguities, mistrust and even hostility. Without going into a detailed study, an attempt is made to briefly delineate the main trajectory of the Christian attitude toward the body.<sup>7</sup> It is to be noted that Christianity, which began as a reformist sect within Judaism, inherited the Hebrew view of the human person as an integral whole. The two Hebrew words, *nephesh* and *basar*, roughly translated as ‘breath’ and ‘flesh’, respectively, stand for the total person. While the word *nephesh* is used to emphasize the breath, or life or spirit dimension of the person, the word *basar* is employed to underscore the fleshly or bodily or material dimension of the person. In this way, Hebrew thought, especially the early Hebrew thought, maintained a unified view of the human person as a living body without dichotomizing the person into body and soul.<sup>8</sup> Along with this unified view of human persons, Christianity also inherited the sexual dualism prevalent in Hebrew thought.<sup>9</sup>

However, the encounter of Christianity with the Hellenistic and the Roman culture influenced and shaped Christian thought on the body. Though the classical Greek culture emphasized and celebrated the beauty of the human body in sculpture and sport, the platonic philosophy that developed toward the end of the classical age advocated a dualistic understanding of the human person as composed of a perishable body and an immortal soul or spirit. The body was viewed negatively as a prison where the soul is imprisoned until its libera-

tion. As Christianity spread to the Hellenistic world, it necessarily came under the influence of the Greek dualistic thinking. This can be seen in the Fathers of the Church such as Origen, Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine and others. The dualistic thinking tends to split a unified reality into two irreconcilable principles. Thus the biblical understanding of the human person as a unified and integral whole of embodied soul or ensouled body gradually gave way to a dichotomized understanding of body and soul under the influence of the dualistic anthropology of Platonism.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the complex system of Gnosticism with its dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit, male and female and its denial of creation as the work of God, posed a serious threat to the integrity of the Christian faith. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, accepted the challenge of Gnosticism and defended the biblical faith in the goodness of creation as coming from a good God and on that basis he maintained the goodness of the body.<sup>11</sup> Augustine, who was himself a Manichean for nine years, later in his life attacked the Manichean form of Gnosticism as contrary to the Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> Both Gnosticism and Manicheism were found unacceptable by the Fathers of the Church who vehemently denounced them and, thereby, sought to maintain the integrity of the Christian faith.

However, Christian thinkers who struggled with these challenges did not always succeed in warding off the dangers. This is because living in a milieu seeped in body negating tendencies, the Fathers themselves were not immune to those very tendencies they condemned. In their defence of the Christian faith, especially regarding the body, the dualistic thinking enshrined in Platonism, Gnosticism, Stoicism and other philosophies of the ancient world influenced them. It is evident, for example, in St. Augustine's attitude toward the body as expressed in his approach to sex and sexuality.

This legacy continued in the Christian Tradition. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas rejected the Platonic dualism that denigrated the body in favor of the Aristotelian theory of hylomorphism that emphasized the unity of the body and soul. He emphasized the role of the body in human knowledge and affirmed the goodness of the created universe. And yet his stress on mind and intellect as the superior faculty of human persons had the unintended consequence of

reducing the significance of the body.<sup>13</sup> The Aristotelian anthropology of the scholastics did not succeed in replacing the Platonic dualistic anthropology, and it continued to influence the physical sciences and mathematics, which began to objectify the world and the human body beyond the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, there was a renewal of the Platonic tradition and a renewed interest in the human body as an expression of the inner spirit. This, in turn, led to the idealization of the body in art.<sup>14</sup> The Reformation, on the other hand, with its opposition to the Catholic sacramental system, desacramentalized the world and desacralized the body and, thereby, robbed them of their spiritual significance<sup>15</sup>. Descartes' division of the world into that which thinks (*res cogitans*) and that which lacks psychic qualities introduced a new dualism which greatly influenced the Enlightenment thought. It objectified the universe and the human body and reduced them into artifacts for scientific analysis<sup>16</sup>. This objectification based on dualism continues in the modern consumerist society and finds its supreme expression in the technological manipulation of the body and nature, as well as in the fashion and advertisement industry.

## **Dualistic Anthropology and Body Spirituality**

This very brief overview of the factors that shaped the Christian attitude toward the body shows that the original biblical view of the human person as a duality without dualism or a dichotomous division of body and soul encountered serious challenges from different philosophies and worldviews. The Christian Tradition did not succeed in effectively meeting these challenges mainly because of the dominance of the Platonic and the Augustinian tradition over Christianity. As a consequence, a dualistic anthropology developed which saw the soul, the spiritual aspect of the human person, as superior to the body, the material aspect. This type of anthropology gradually paved the way for the glorification of the soul at the expense of the body. In the course of time, Christian spirituality, by and large, came to view the body as an obstacle to the ascent of the soul, and therefore, as something to be controlled, conquered and subjugated. Not only the body but also everything associated with the body came to be degraded as worthless or of inferior value.<sup>17</sup> The feminist thinkers have highlighted the disastrous consequences

of this thinking pattern that linked body, women and nature and assigned them an inferior position as compared to the supposedly superior trio of soul/spirit, men and culture.<sup>18</sup>

In conformity with this development, the growth in spiritual life came to be associated with asceticism and mortification of the senses and sensual desires, and a corresponding enhancement of the interior life or inwardness. The celibate life came to be viewed as superior, because it represented the triumph of the human will over the body and over everything bodily, especially sexual desires. The consequence is the development of a bodiless spirituality of inwardness, of interior life of the spirit of which we are all heirs.

This calls for a rediscovery of body spirituality. However, there are difficulties to be surmounted. Since Christianity inherits, to a large extent, a bodiless spirituality and considers it as the authentic, the best and the genuinely Christian spirituality, the affirmation of the body in spirituality is bound to be looked upon with suspicion. Moreover, in the modern world, where youthful bodies are admired and adored, even if for no other purpose save to promote a consumerist economy, any talk about body and body spirituality may be dubbed as giving in to the secular spirit of the age. In the context of a civilization that is becoming ever more 'physical' that focuses on bodily comfort, bodily pleasure, bodily beauty, and bodily fitness, while experiencing a spiritual vacuum, any attempt to develop a body spirituality may be viewed as an attempt to promote the fixation with the body that characterizes the modern secular world.

Thus, there arises a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the traditional, bodiless spirituality focusing on inwardness tends to negate the body, and, on the other, there is a culture that suffers from a fixation with the human body at the expense of the spiritual. In this situation the rediscovery of body spirituality calls for a clear perception and articulation of its goals. Both the bodiless spirituality and the fixation with the body presuppose a dualistic approach to the human person. Body spirituality, on the other hand, seeks to transcend such dualism. It attempts to retrieve the unified biblical understanding of the human person and, thereby, to reconstruct a spirituality that takes seriously the embodied nature of human existence. Accordingly, it assigns great importance to every single body experi-

ence – from the most prosaic like the experiences of eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, washing, sleeping, walking, talking, laughing, crying, sweating, and having sex, to the most sublime experiences of contemplation and communion. The value of the experiences is not determined extrinsically by reference to whether they belong to the spiritual or physical realms; rather the experiences have value precisely because they are experiences of body-persons. In other words, body spirituality does not seek to ‘use’ body experiences as means to attain some ‘spiritual’ goals, like the traditional spirituality that advocates the ‘use’ of the body for attaining inwardness through breathing techniques, yogic postures, listening to the sounds around and concentrating on a still point.<sup>19</sup> Instead, body spirituality approaches the body experiences themselves as having profound spiritual significance and as sources of the knowledge of and communion with God.

## **Presuppositions of Body Spirituality**

Body spirituality, as already indicated, is based on the specific biblical understanding of the human person as a unity of body and soul. It rejects at the outset the body-soul dualism that has plagued Christian spirituality from the very beginning as well as monism, either of the soul as seen in contemporary spirituality or of the body as reflected in modern culture. Body spirituality abandons the notion that ‘we have a body’, and accepts the fact that ‘we are bodies’.<sup>20</sup> The first proposition that ‘we have a body’ is based on a dualistic understanding of the human person, which sees the spirit or soul as constituting the essential component that is in opposition to the body or material component of the person. The second proposition takes the human person as a body-soul duality without any opposition. Accordingly, the human person constitutes a harmonious blend of spirit and matter, soul and body. They are distinguishable and, yet, they make up an indivisible reality. The body is seen no more as a disposable material object possessed and carried around by the essentially spiritual person.

Thus, basing itself on the original Hebraic view of humans, body spirituality defines human persons as ‘bodies’, as ‘embodied beings’, and as ‘body-selves’. Human persons exist as embodied



beings and it is as body-selves rather than as mere intellects that they relate to God and God's creation as the image and likeness of God on earth. In our bodies we sense the goodness of creation and the graciousness of the Creator. We see the goodness of creation; we hear the goodness of creation; we taste and smell the goodness of creation and we touch and experience the goodness of creation. In other words, our embodiment is a prerequisite for the experience of God and God's creation. This manner of understanding human persons has immense consequences for theology and spirituality.

Theology is concerned with the knowledge of God, as well as the knowledge of ourselves and of the world as created, fallen and redeemed by God. How we see God determines how we understand ourselves and our world. Conversely how we see ourselves and our world determines how we understand God.<sup>21</sup> For too long theology understood itself as a rational endeavor to understand the incomprehensible God. It is spiritual persons trying to obtain rational knowledge of the transcendent God. In this attempt the body has little to contribute, as it is the lower dimension of the human composite that is often considered the enemy of the knowledge of God. As a result, the body was separated from the spirit in the pursuit of theological knowledge. In the process, the body itself became an object of theological investigation and questions were asked as to the fate of the body after death and the nature of the resurrected body. This method of theologizing did not envisage the possibility of the body itself becoming a source of theological knowledge.

Something similar happened to Christian spirituality as well. The combined influence of Platonism, Gnosticism and Stoicism on the Christian religion from the early centuries paved the way for a passionless, bodiless spirituality that aimed at the ascent of the soul to God, the pure Spirit. In accordance with this spiritual endeavour, the body and everything bodily came to be seen as an obstacle for the ascent of the soul and, therefore, as something to be controlled, conquered, subjugated, tortured, mutilated and mastered in order to facilitate the upward movement of the soul. The primary aim of the ascetic practices such as penance and mortifications of the body through deprivation of food, sleep and other basic needs was precisely to attain this objective. Passions, desires, and feelings were

seen as dangerous, as they belonged to the realm of the body and, hence, detrimental to the spiritual progress of the soul.

At the root of the development of this phenomenon is the dichotomous and dualistic understanding of human persons. The spirit-body dualism along with the sexist dualism of male/female and a corresponding theology and spirituality that tend to denigrate the body, have wreaked havoc on human body-selves and creation. And it continues to pose a threat to the survival of life on the planet earth.

There may be serious socio-cultural and historical reasons for this specific turn in the development of Christian theology and spirituality. However, there is no sufficient reason for holding on to a specific historical creation in the changed circumstances. Human beings, as body-selves, are certainly historical beings, but they are not slaves of history. The emancipation from the tyranny of history depends neither on the negation of history nor on a blind adherence to it. Rather, it depends on a radical hermeneutical critique of the historical development itself and its consequences in the light of the core affirmation of the Christian faith. This is precisely what body spirituality proposes to accomplish. It aims at a hermeneutic retrieval, for the contemporary times, of the full implications of the incarnational faith that God has become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the foundation of body spirituality is the truth of the incarnation, the event in which God united God's self with every flesh and, thereby, transformed the bodily existence of the created order into the sacrament of divine presence in the world. In this way, body spirituality also facilitates the development of an eco-spirituality based on a sacramental understanding of the entire creation.

These presuppositions – that human persons are bodies, that embodiment is an essential dimension of being body-selves, that a disembodied theology and spirituality constitute a threat to the continued existence of humanity and the cosmos, that without being a captive to history, Christianity can fruitfully retrieve the full significance of the incarnation faith for contemporary times – provide the rationale as well as the context for a body spirituality. However, the immediate starting point of body spirituality is the awareness that human persons are bodies and they exist as sexual bodies. One of

the most important aspects of body spirituality is its affirmation of human persons as sexual bodies and the other aspects flow from it.

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## **Body Spirituality and Sexuality**

As bodies, human persons are sexual beings and they exist as male and female. Sexuality is integral to our existence as bodies. Sexuality is the specific way of being male and female body-selves in the world. It involves the specific biological structures that make one either male or female, the socially constructed meanings of those specific biological differences, the specific affectional orientations toward either or both groups of sexual body-selves as well as the desire for physical and emotional intimacy, communion and communication.<sup>22</sup>

Theologically the most significant aspect of being sexual body-selves is the desire for intimacy, communion and communication.<sup>23</sup> This dimension manifests itself in the spheres of relationships. The relational spheres encompass the relationship with our own body-selves, with other body-selves, with the creation and with the Creator God. Human existence as bodies is a cryptic statement that our existence is essentially relational and human sexuality eminently symbolizes this reality. Since sexuality as a symbol of the relational dimension of human existence is central to body spirituality, it is necessary, first, to discuss the multidimensional relationships and then to delineate the specific characteristics of body spirituality.

## **Relationship with our own Body**

The relationship with our own sexual body-selves expresses itself at the perceptual level. The body can be perceived dualistically as an object while assigning a superior and subject position to the soul/spirit. This is what is implied in the statement that 'we have bodies'. Accordingly, the body becomes a collection of organs that the soul/spirit requires as long as it is united to the body. From this perceptual stand the body is viewed as an object external to the real self. The modern medical profession and the advertisement industry seem to promote an objectified view of the body. When the body is reduced to the level of a mere object, abuse of the body becomes a distinct possibility.

The body can be perceived holistically as a subject. This perspective maintains the body-soul duality without dichotomizing it. The body is no more seen as a collection of organs. Rather every organ becomes an integral part of the body-selves. It is from this vantage point that human persons are defined as 'being bodies' or 'we are our bodies'. It would be easier then, to own up genuinely as one's own the pleasures and pains, feelings of ecstasy and excitement, despair and disappointment, peace and quiet as well as desires and longings of the body. At this stage, the alienation from the body is overcome and we begin to love our bodies as our selves. This is the threshold at which we begin to experience the body's grace<sup>24</sup> and embark on the journey of knowing and experiencing God in our bodies.

## **Relationship with other Body-Selves**

The experience of the body's grace provides the precondition for a relationship with other body-selves. When the body is objectified, the relationship with other bodies becomes commercialized and, correspondingly, the finality of body-selves is foreclosed. On the other hand, a subjective approach to the body, affirms the central meaning of the sexual body-selves as a relationship with other body-selves. The body is designed for relationship – for holding and hugging other body selves, for seeing, hearing, touching and tasting other body-selves, for caressing, kissing and having sexual intercourse. The corresponding desire to hold, hug, see, hear, touch, taste, caress, kiss and to have intercourse with other body-selves is a supreme expression of the fundamental human longing and desire for fulfilment through intimacy, communication and communion. The genital sexual act and all the expressions of love and respect that go with it, symbolize and actualize the essential human vocation to the fullness of life. Pope John Paul II has powerfully brought out this dimension of sexuality in his interpretation of the nuptial meaning of the body based on the second creation story in the bible. In his theology of the body, the Pope has emphasized the nature of the body as a gift to be shared. He also underscores the finality of the body as communion and communication leading toward the fulfilment of human life by being a body-gift to others.<sup>25</sup>

However, the Pope's theology of the body has been criticized for its lack of rootedness in the lived experience of the common people. The main criticism is that his theology of the body is somewhat disembodied, as it restricts the nuptial meaning of the body and sexual intimacy to the context of a heterosexual, monogamous marriage. By doing this, the pope has diminished the deeper and broader implications of the nuptial meaning of the body as a gift to be shared. It has been argued that in the context of the universal call to the fullness of life, it would be myopic to restrict genital sexual expression to heterosexual marriages and to condemn that significant minority of the body-selves in the church who are oriented toward the same-sex body-selves and who wish to enter into committed same-sex unions as a way to actualize the divine vocation to life in fullness through the deepest intimacy, communication and communion.<sup>26</sup>

## **Sexual Body and Celibacy**

If the deepest human intimacy and communion are available in the context of sexual intimacy, is not the celibate life an aberration, a conscious negation of the possibility of realizing one's fullness as a body-self? It has already been noted that sexuality symbolizes our desire for fulfilling intimacy, communication and communion and sexual intimacy is the furthest and deepest one can go in intimacy with other body-selves. It is also true that such communion is fulfilling. But it would be disastrous to conclude that this is the ultimate fulfilment for sexual body-selves, as the secular spirit tries to convince us. If celibacy were defined exclusively in negative terms as the renunciation of marriage and sex, then the celibate life would be understood as an unfulfilling life and as an aberration.

However, though a negative definition is assigned to celibacy on account of the dualistic thinking pattern that tends to reject or denigrate the body and everything bodily, a celibate life enhances rather than diminishes the symbolic dimension of sexuality. First of all, celibacy does not negate the central fact that we are sexual body-selves. Second, it does not deny our essential need for intimacy and communion with other body-selves. Third, it does not belie our physical and emotional need for all that is pleasant, desirable and beautiful. Without repudiating all these crucial dimensions of our body-

selves, celibacy symbolically proclaims the truth of what Saint Augustine discovered through his tempestuous life: “for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you”.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the celibate life is a declaration, the content of which is that our ultimate fulfilment as body-selves is in intimacy and communion with God. Thus, celibacy affirms the human fulfilment on earth and then points beyond to the ultimately fulfilling relationship with God. In the final analysis, celibacy consists not primarily in the denial of the body; rather it is in opening up the possibility of body-selves to move toward their ultimate self-realization in and with God.

A celibate life chosen freely and deliberately in loving response to God’s self-gift, functions as a powerful symbol of the eschatological fulfilment of the body-selves in the definitive union with the Trinitarian God effected in Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. The question, then, is whether an imposed celibate life can function as a symbol. The various churches and denominations are struggling with this question in the face of severe criticism, that when celibacy is imposed on an unwilling minority that is oriented to the same-sex, it symbolizes more the narrow mindedness and the intolerance of the culture and institution that thus impose it, than the definitive fulfilment of the body-selves in God. A sexual ethics based on a limited understanding of the natural law need not necessarily provide convincing answers to this urgent and troubling issue, especially when the complexity surrounding the concept of nature itself is being astutely perceived.

Thus the relationship with other sexual body-selves actualized in the context of sexual intimacy and mutuality, is a celebration of the body’s grace by transforming our bodies into a channel of the knowledge and experience of God’s love in the world. The reduction of other body-selves to a sexual object, is a radical denial of God in our bodies. Celibacy, by symbolizing the ultimate fulfilment of body-selves in communion with God, enhances the communion aspect of sexuality, especially in relation to other sexual body-selves. In this way, in body spirituality, the relationship among body-selves assumes a sacramental dimension insofar as it represents in an eminent way for our vocation to find fulfilment in communion with others and with God.

## Relationship with God

Spiritualities modelled on the body-soul dualism (all our spiritualities more or less approximate this model) tend to identify certain actions as spiritual exercises or duties such as prayer, meditation, examination of conscience, Eucharist, reconciliation, retreat, and other popular devotions. Through these spiritual exercises, it is expected that the soul/spirit communes with and grows in intimacy with God. These acts are purely interior or inward acts for which the body needs to be quietened, brought to stillness through breathing and other yogic means. In other words, the spiritual exercises are exercises carried out by the spirit/soul and the body plays a secondary role by providing the necessary body-disposition.

Such spiritualities ignore the fact that we are body-selves – that we are spiritual as bodies and bodies as spirit. That is to say, if we are body-selves, then it is in our bodies that we experience and know God as well as enter into intimacy with God. Just as everything we do has a sexual dimension since we are sexual body-selves, so also everything that we do has a spiritual dimension since we are spiritual body-selves. There cannot be any dichotomy between spiritual acts and physical acts. However, this kind of a dichotomy, inherent in the spiritualities modelled on body-soul dualism, is proving to be dangerous not only for body-selves but also for the entire creation.

Body spirituality takes seriously our existence as body-selves and affirms that we experience God in our bodies. In other words, there is no way to experience and know God unless God becomes flesh. This is the incarnational faith – that we now know God because God has become flesh in the person of Christ. This process has not ended with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; rather it has become an ever-present reality. We keep on becoming one with the God who keeps becoming flesh in the church; we continue to become one with the incarnate God in the Eucharist; and we become one with the incarnate God in creation, the body of God, touched and transformed by the mystery of God who became flesh. This communion with God in the flesh happens in our body-selves.

There is no special time and place for this to occur; nor does it depend on certain mental gymnastics. Communion with the incar-

nate God happens constantly in the positive and negative experiences of the body-selves. The experience of the soothing and refreshing cool breeze on our faces on a hot summer day can be as much a spiritual experience as the consolation one experiences in deep contemplative prayer. Similarly, the advent of the Monsoon rain allowing the vegetation to sprout and grow, spreading, in the process, an emerald green carpet over the surface of the earth is a source of communion with the incarnate God who vivifies everything. The consoling touch of a friend, the reassuring smile of a teacher, the hug of the beloved, the appreciative and accepting look of the significant other, are all events of communion with the incarnate God. In the same way, we can commune with God by listening to the chirping of birds, the humming of bees, the fluttering of leaves, and the laughter of children.

Not only the positive experiences, but also the negativities of life are sources of communion with God who became flesh. The cries of the starving children on the streets, the pain and agony of people tortured and killed in the prisons, the victims of war, the rejection experienced by HIV and AIDS patients and those who suffer from incurable diseases, the sense of worthlessness experienced by the elderly, the despair of the debt ridden peasants, the insecurity of the migrant construction workers and their families, the loneliness of those who have lost their loved ones through accidents, crime or sickness and those who are suffering from the ravages of natural calamities like droughts, floods, earthquakes, and cyclones, are sources of communion with the incarnate God. For the God who became flesh is present as much in the positive experiences of the body-selves as in the negative experiences.

Body spirituality, however, does not stop with thanking God for the positive experiences and praying for the victims of negative experiences. Here body spirituality radically differs from the spiritualities modelled on dualism. For the latter, the body and the body experiences are of insignificant value compared to the disembodied and dispassionate contemplation of a disembodied deity. Since the body and the bodily experiences are seen as inferior and, hence, dispensable, a dualistic spirituality does not require its adherents to see any spiritual significance in the ordinary everyday activities and



events. It also prevents them from making any serious commitment to alleviating the sufferings and pains of others, to bringing about a just social order where human rights and dignity are respected, and where basic human needs are met, as well as to protecting the environment from the destruction being brought about by the greed and profit motive of people. Such a disembodied spirituality is escapist at the core, irresponsible and, hence, irrelevant. Here one can locate the disenchantment with spirituality that many in the contemporary world are experiencing. Those who are preparing themselves for priestly and religious life are not immune to it.

For Body spirituality, on the other hand, nothing is devoid of spiritual significance. Everything bodily is an occasion for spiritual growth and communion. Everyday household activities and experiences of the most ordinary kind like washing, cleaning, sweeping, dusting, grocery shopping, cooking and a myriad other things, are seen as opportunities for encountering the incarnate God. Moreover, since the body is the source of the experience of God in our body-selves, body spirituality necessitates involvement in the ordinary tasks of the day as well as it requires us to commit ourselves to the removal of injustice against and oppression of body-selves by other human beings, as well as to safeguard the ecosystem for us and for the future generations. In this way, body spirituality calls for body responses to the body experiences of the embodied God. It offers no loophole for escapism, nor does it encourage irresponsible behaviour. Instead, it demands that we embody the full implications of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, body spirituality seeks to embody God in our body-selves and it can be done only in our daily life: in our homes, in our work place, during our recreations and relaxations, during our meals, in our communion with other body-selves and with the environment. However, the experience and knowledge of God in our body-selves does not deny the need for quiet time for prayer and contemplation. Rather our encounter with the incarnate God in our day-to-day life will inevitably lead us to the deeper appreciation and savouring, the celebration and proclamation of that experience in the quietness of our heart in silence and solitude, as well as in communion with other body-selves in worship, especially in the eucharistic liturgy. From

this it becomes clear that the problem is not with prayer, contemplation, worship, and liturgy. The real problem is the dissociation of the interior life from the life of the body. The issue here is the denigration of the incarnation and the consequent development of a disembodied spirituality and a 'culture of false inwardness'<sup>28</sup> at the expense of other body-selves and creation, which is the body of God. Body spirituality specifically addresses this problem and proposes a way to reconnect our interior life with our body-life in the context of our life in the world.

## **Relation with God's Creation**

As sexual body-selves, our relationship is not limited to other body-selves and to God. It extends to our relationship with the creation. Both the spiritualities modelled on dualism and the body spirituality affirm human ecological connection. While the dualistic spiritualities seek to transcend the mundane, material realm to reach a transcendent God in another world, body spirituality recognizes the life-giving presence of God in the worldly sphere and seeks to encounter and experience God in creation. Creation is not viewed as a mere collection of inert objects for exploitation. Body spirituality considers the world our home, which we share with myriad other life forms. The principles of mutuality and interdependence guide our relationship with creation.

This is because body spirituality locates the body-selves within the larger context of creation as an integral part of the created order. It acknowledges the Creator God as the fountainhead of all that exists, including the body-selves. It recognizes the pleasure that the Creator God takes in the well-being of creation and aims at participating in this divine pleasure. It also participates in the divine agony at the devastation of creation by the hands of human beings.

In this way, ecological mutuality is central to body spirituality. By promoting body-friendliness, body spirituality seeks to extend the same friendliness to the entire creation. A spirituality and culture that negates or denigrates the body will promote the violation of body-selves as happened in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and as it is happening in prisons in other parts of the world. An attitude that denigrates body-selves will apply the same attitude to other crea-

tures in the world. Thus, the violation of body-selves and the destruction of the environment are closely connected. One is the extension of the other. In body spirituality, on the other hand, creation is seen as the locus of divine presence and, as such, it is a source of communion with the Creator God.

## **Characteristics of Body Spirituality**

Having highlighted the essential relationality of the body-selves based on the symbolic dimension of human sexuality and its significance for body spirituality, we shall now proceed to discuss some of the salient characteristics of body spirituality. These characteristics emerge from the context of the multiple human relationships implied in being sexual body-selves.

## **Embodied and Holistic Spirituality**

Body spirituality is embodied spirituality. From this perspective, holiness is not merely a state of the mind or a state of the soul/spirit having little to do with the body and the bodily. From the perspective of body spirituality, holiness is integral to the existence of body-selves. Spiritual growth in holiness has to do with the body and it is manifested in the bodies. No part of the body is beyond the reach of the spiritual, or, in other words, lacking the dimension of the spirit. In this way, body spirituality considers the entire person – the totality of the body self, with all the desires and feelings, intellect and will, orientations and attitudes, capabilities and faculties, along with the body organs and their functions – as called to holiness. This holiness is embodied in one's thinking, feeling, hopes and desires as well as in all that one does and experiences. It considers every thought, feeling and action that denigrates and destroys the body, other body-selves and the creation, to be unholy and sinful. It is in our bodies and through our bodies that we sin against the incarnate God. For example, selfishness and greed are sinful because they deprive other body-selves of what is necessary for life. Thus in various ways individual and collective sins violate body-selves and creation. Accordingly, reparation and reconciliation have to be done in our bodies as body-selves, individually and corporately. Body spirituality is therefore essentially embodied and holistic.

## **Egalitarian and Differential Spirituality**

Body spirituality is egalitarian and differential. It is egalitarian because holiness is not seen as the preserve of elite. It is accessible to all precisely because we are all body-selves created in the image and likeness of God. God's call to holiness is universal and every individual body-self in any state of life has been offered the gift of holiness. However, it is also differential in that as body-selves we are created male and female, with different orientations and attitudes. Accordingly, a male and a female, experience and know God differently in their bodies. A heterosexual person and a homosexual person experience and know God differently in their bodies. A married person and a celibate person experience and know God differently in their bodies. There is difference but there is no hierarchy of superior and inferior experience and knowledge of God. In other words, there is no gradation in holiness on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and one's state of life.

## **Grateful and Celebrative Spirituality**

Body spirituality is grateful and celebrative. Body spirituality acknowledges that everything is a gift manifesting the goodness of a gracious God. We are motivated to experience the gracious goodness of God in our body-selves as well as in the entire creation. The gifted nature of our body selves and creation fills us with gratitude. Hence our existence as body-selves will be characterized by thankfulness. Our whole existence as body-selves will be a thankful celebration of the graciousness of God. We celebrate our bodies, we celebrate other bodies and we celebrate the whole creation. In celebrating these we celebrate the God who became flesh. And in the flesh we glorify God.

## **Gracious and Generous Spirituality**

Body spirituality is gracious and generous and, hence, Eucharistic<sup>29</sup>. It is constantly aware of the gracious generosity of God enfleshed in our bodies and in creation. This awareness not only leads to thankfulness and celebration, but also motivates us to be as generous and gracious as our God is. From the perspective of body spirituality, our body-selves are not something to be possessed and

preserved for ourselves; but they are meant to be given away as a gift just as God gives away God's self to us, especially in the Christ event and in the Eucharist. God became incarnate so that God's body could be broken and God's blood could be given away as gift that become a source of life for others. Body spirituality reminds us that we are body-selves precisely because as body-selves our body is to be broken and our blood is to be shed for the life of others. We break open our body-selves in order to enter into life giving communion with others. In this way, body spirituality is essentially Eucharistic.

## **Trinitarian and Incarnational Spirituality**

Body spirituality is Trinitarian and incarnational. It is Trinitarian because it holds up the Trinitarian intimacy, communication and communion as the model to be followed by the body-selves. It is for this reason that relationality plays a central role in body spirituality. It tries to replicate the Trinitarian relationship in our bodies, in relation to other body-selves and in relation to the creation and the Creator God. The Trinitarian model of intimacy, and communion infuse our attitude to our bodies, to other bodies, to creation as the body of God. Since our body-selves and the entire creation have been drawn up into the Trinitarian communion through the grace event of God becoming flesh, the Trinitarian intimacy and communion that we model on is also incarnational. The model has already been made present in creation through God who became flesh. Body spirituality consciously acknowledges this fact and seeks to actualize this reality in the spheres of our relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This essay, which is essentially an exploration in body spirituality, examined the implications of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ for a body spirituality, the gradual eclipse of the body in Christian spirituality, the need and the presuppositions for its rediscovery, human sexuality and its relation to body spirituality, the essential relational dimensions emerging from the fact of our being sexual body-selves and their significance for body spirituality, and, finally, some of the characteristics of body spirituality. It is clear that body spirituality is a radical reinterpretation and hermeneutic

retrieval of the Christian incarnational spirituality for the contemporary times. The inspiration for this endeavour comes from the ancient Hebrew thought and the incarnational faith of the church. Without negating the traditional Christian spiritual practices, body spirituality seeks to broaden the scope of Christian spirituality in order to promote a spirituality that does justice – justice to one’s own body-self, justice to other body-selves and justice to the world and its environment. Following in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II who, in his theology of the body, initiated the process toward a deeper appreciation of the embodied nature of human existence in the world, body spirituality explores the different dimensions of this embodied existence in the personal, social and ecological spheres from the Christian incarnation faith perspective. In this way, body spirituality attempts to bridge the gap between the spiritual and material realms by bringing them together within the body-selves and transforming the body into the locus of the experience and knowledge of God. Thus, body spirituality aims at making the incarnation a lived reality in the everyday life of people.

## Notes

1. The title of one of the works that initiated the perception of the link between reclaiming women’s bodies and women’s liberation through the knowledge of the body was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The liberative potential of learning about the bodies is clearly brought out in this book. Cfr. The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book By and For Women*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971.
2. For a brief description of the background of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption, see George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996, 198-199.
3. Starting from 1979 and lasting till 1984, Pope John Paul II gave a series of talks during his Wednesday Audiences focusing on the theme of human body which were collected and published under the title *Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body*. For a clear and succinct discussion of the various topics dealt with by the Pope, see Mary G. Durkin, *Feast of Love: Pope John Paul II on Human Intimacy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983). See also Sam Torode, *Body and Gift: Reflections on Creation. Based on a series of talks by Pope John Paul II*, South Wayne: Philokalia Books, 2003.
4. This difference has been aptly pointed out by James B. Nelson in his

*Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 20.

5. Cfr. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV: On The Theology of The Incarnation*. Translated by Kevin Smyth, New York: Crossroad, 1982, 105-120.
6. Cfr. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV: The Theology of the Symbol*. Translated by Kevin Smyth. New York: Crossroad, 1982, 221-252.
7. This overview is based on the following books: Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*, Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985, especially chapters 4, 5, and 6; Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1996, 1-23; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 37-69; Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach About Sex*, London: Mowbray, 1997, 94-109.
8. For a discussion on the positive view of the body in the Hebrew tradition, see James B. Nelson, *Body Theology*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 30-31; Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, *Toward a Theology of the Body*, (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1996, 58-59; James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, 47 ff.
9. Cfr. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*, Ibid.45.
10. Cfr. Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*, Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985, 103-135
11. Ibid. 113
12. Ibid. 125ff.
13. Ibid. 152ff.
14. Ibid. 165ff.
15. Ibid. 172ff.
16. Ibid. 204ff.
17. For a discussion on the alienation from bodies and the view of the body as inferior, see James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 37 ff.
18. Body is central to the feminist discourse in general. The ecofeminists have pointed out the connection between the identification of women with nature and body and its consequent oppression of women and exploitation of nature. For examples of representative writings, see Carol J. Adams, (ed), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993); Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving*

*the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992). See also her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 259-266.

19. Cfr. Wilkie Au, S.J., *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality*, Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1993, 85-113.
20. Body theology and body spirituality define human persons as 'bodies' meaning 'body-persons'. Cfr James B. Nelson, *Body Theology*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, 43.
21. This is the presupposition at the root of theology considered as theological anthropology. Cfr. Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: The Theological Publication of India, 2003, 15-17
22. This description of sexuality is taken from James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, 26.
23. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment*, 18.
24. For a discussion of Body's grace see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, 309-321.
25. Cfr. Footnote number 3.
26. A brief critique of the Pope's theology of the body is found in Liza Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000, 73-77
27. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Translated by Edward B. Pusey, London: Collier Books, 1969, 11.
28. According to Stuart and Thatcher, spirituality like sexuality drives us out of ourselves to the neighbour in love. Quoting Kenneth Leech, the authors say that a culture of false inwardness leads spirituality toward narcissism instead of a self emptying in service. Cfr.. Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, *People of Passion: What the Churches Teach about Sex*, London: Mowbray, 1997, 230
29. One of the strongest points of the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Eucharist is that it links the Eucharist and the life of faith in the larger society. It also presents authentic Christian life as 'Eucharistic'. Cfr. *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, no. 20.

Article received: June 24, 2004

Article accepted: June 30, 2004

No or words: 8, 743



## **Women and Globalisation**

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**Abstract:** It is unfortunate that the result of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation policies has been an intensification of poverty and unemployment, with a general deflation in the economy leading to a lowering of real wages and interest rates. The fact is that existing inequalities within the Indian society have been exacerbated. The fate of women has become worse.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, capitalism, homogenisation, culture, exploitation.

This article examines 'Globalisation' from a gender perspective. It first sets out an understanding of the term 'globalisation', and then tries to describe and analyse its effect on women in the particular context of India.

### **Globalisation °**

The term 'Globalisation' is now widely used to describe the current phase of economic activity on a world scale. However, the term itself is contentious, with diversity in definition and interpretation. There are some who see it as an inevitable stage in the continuum of the process of global economic development, while others argue that it is nothing but another form of imperialism. However, this is not simply a matter of semantic debate, because as with all economic processes, globalisation has very deep consequences for the lives of real people. These consequences depend on where these people are located, in terms of region, class, race, caste and gender. Any analysis of the impact of globalisation will in turn be influenced by the terms of this location. We therefore need to define our perspective about globalisation at the outset, in order to locate its impact on women in a particular framework.

In descriptive terms, globalisation refers to the marked increase in the flow of goods and services, capital, technology and information across nations in the last few decades. In terms of structure, it refers to a set of interrelated processes of global capitalist production. Those who prefer to see these processes as neutral view them as leading to the creation of a 'global village' and the development of a global civil society and polity, the rise of multilateralism, cosmopolitanism and the emergence of a popular global culture, all based on a transnational economy and a new global division of labour. Within this perspective is embedded a sense of historic inevitability, as a result of which the consequences of these processes must be tolerated, or at best, adjusted with, since it is beyond the scope of anyone, individually or collectively to fundamentally change the nature and direction of these processes.

However, there is the other view of globalisation as a prescription of neo-liberal economics, which not just recommends but insists that the road to prosperity and economic development lies in the adoption of a system of free economic flows within and across nations. While both perspectives offer scope for critical evaluation, the latter affords the possibility of change, because if the prescribed model does not lead to the predicted increase in the economic welfare of people, it can and should be replaced by a feasible alternative.

From the point of view of women, historically battling against discrimination in all spheres of life, globalisation is to be examined in terms of whether it leads towards their goal of equality or away from it. Given that women are disadvantaged in terms of resources, skills and social status, and constitute the economic, social and political underclass in any society, globalisation as a process is bound to affect them in ways that are qualitatively different from other sections, particularly men. If these are negative in nature, there is certainly a case for women to rally against globalisation, and offer other alternatives that may have more positive outcomes for them. In the following sections, we examine the nature of globalisation and its specific impact on women.

**A Historical Perspective:** In order to understand the nature of globalisation as it exists today, it is necessary to view it in the historical perspective of world wide developments in the prior decades, particularly the post World war II period. Often known as the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism’, this period was characterised by high rates of economic growth and development in the developed capitalist countries, based on a system of mass production and aided by the welfare state that took on the responsibility to provide social security, health and education. The Great October Revolution and the alternative systems of socialist production provided the framework for a different paradigm, and the impetus to many nation states to reassert their identity. Consequently, this is also a period marked by a major process of decolonisation and the efforts of many developing countries to advance their economic and social development on the basis of self-reliant import substituting industrialisation, protection of the domestic economy and expansion of the domestic market with active state intervention in all spheres. For women across the globe, it was not only a period marked by their increasing participation in economic production, but also a recognition that it had separate and different meanings for them, as seen from the “Women/Gender and/ in Development” debates surrounding the role of women in economic development. However, by the sixties and seventies, these processes had worked themselves out to their limit, both in developed and developing countries. The world capitalist system was once again in a crisis, with over production and over capacity, requiring a search for new markets and ways and means of enhancing declining profitability. On the other hand, socialist economies were themselves in a crisis, due to several reasons, which included the costs and burdens of the Cold War, and their inability to develop structures that could contribute to the deepening of socialist democracy. Seeking ways out of this crisis, aided by the collapse of socialist systems of production, world capitalism has entered a new and qualitatively different phase, with the following major characteristics.

## **The internationalisation of capital**

In particular, the internationalisation of capital assisted by the development of information technology has taken on an increasingly speculative form. Starting with speculative transactions in foreign

currency exchange rates, the last decade has seen a remarkable increase in newer forms of speculative financial instruments, also known as derivatives, which dominate international capital flows. According to one estimate, for every US Dollar that circulates in the real economy, \$25-50 circulate in the world of pure finance, and less than 5% of circulating capital has any productive function. The replacement of traditional 'aid' by 'trade' and the increasing role played by loans in financing development projects in developing countries, has also contributed to the increasing vulnerability of these economies to the whims and fancies of this speculative international capital that can flow from one end of the globe to another in a fraction of time.

### **The internationalisation of the division of labour:**

This period has also seen the rise of transnational corporations based on an extreme division and subdivision of production processes across countries, with technological transformations that have raised productivity but more than disproportionately reduced the number of workers; the world of labour has been progressively on the defensive, its ability to negotiate curtailed and weakened in the past few years.

### **The rise of supra-national institutions of governance:**

Another marked feature has been the increasingly interventionist role of the world financial institutions, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and, after its formation in 1994, the World Trade Organisation, which are taking economic decisions that were so far the domain of domestic policy makers. While some may perceive this as the decline of the nation state, in fact the ruling class in many countries are actually in active collaboration with these supra-national bodies, because it suits their own class interests.

### **A fundamental shift from the paradigm of state agency to that of the market**

Finally, the new philosophy of globalisation marks a shift from the state to the market, from the public to the private, from intervention to the 'free' play of economic forces, which sees the role of the

state as simply a facilitator for the markets that are fundamental providers of all human needs. Even the traditional role of the state as the defender of the nation state is now eroded, as world capitalism increasingly assumes a neo-imperialist role, willing to use brute military power for satisfying its accumulative instincts, as was seen in the war against Iraq last year.

## **The rise of fundamentalism and social fragmentation**

Accompanying these, are other social and cultural phenomena, which are interrelated in a complex manner to the economic process of globalisation. In particular, one must note the rise of fundamentalist ideologies across the world, which not only divert attention from the adverse effects of globalisation, but feed on the fragmentation that is in reality the character of a globalised society, strengthening identities based on region, religion, community, race and caste, rather than the class (and gender) consciousness of a people facing poverty and unemployment.

## **The homogenisation of culture**

Additionally, there is the development of a global media that perpetuates a homogenised culture that stereotypes and packages the goods and services that capital wants to sell in the market, destroying the individuality and diversity of cultures developed over centuries across different parts of the world. This must also be taken into account while analysing the impact of globalisation, which must not be seen as a purely economic phenomenon.

## **From a Gender Perspective**

Markets, as historical experience indicates, are not neutral. The outcomes of market processes depend on the initial distribution of resources, and in unequal societies market forces affect different groups in the social spectrum differently. It is the state that can intervene and redress the unequal balance of economic and social power. However, the neutralisation of the state in the globalisation process means that all disadvantaged sections, be it the poor, women, dalits, tribals, minorities, and those who are discriminated against in modern society. They are thus at the receiving end of the economic proc-

esses that cause unemployment and deflation, but also lose the protective cover of the state. Women, as we have noted earlier, constitute one section which is caught in a myriad of ways in the process of globalisation. In the following sections, we examine the impact of globalisation on women in general and then in the particular context of India.

## **Impact of Globalisation on Women**

Broadly speaking, we can identify certain major aspects of women's lives that are being directly transformed due to the processes of globalisation. These are work, labour and leisure, the social reproduction of labour, food and social security, health, education, etc. As the globalisation process seeps in further, we may be able to identify other areas that will emerge with time. We must also take into account the indirect impact of growing fundamentalism, that is also linked to the globalisation process, which destroys the identity of women as women, and puts in place instead a fragmented identity based on community, which can then be defined in terms of religion, region, caste, race, ethnic origin, etc, depending on what the ruling class requires at a particular moment in time. We must also note the cultural impact of globalisation that stereotypes women as objects for sale in a universal market, and objects that can help to sell other goods and services.

***Work, Labour and Leisure:*** There is now a wealth of literature on the impact of globalisation on women's work and labour. It is too large a body of work to review here, but we can summarise the major conclusions as follows:

Globalisation is increasing the existing gender divide in the world of work and labour. As we all know too well, women's labour has always been ignored, considered supplementary and subsidiary, despite the fact that the volume and intensity of women's work in society is higher. However, since much of it has been within the family or household enterprises, and it is therefore unpaid, it has remained invisible and undervalued. As globalisation entails 'job-less growth', in many countries, women are losing whatever jobs they had in the organised sector, the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Privatisation of public sector enterprises, downsizing, vol-

untary retirement schemes, all contribute to more and more women losing jobs that entailed minimum wages and social security benefits.

However, since most women have to work, either to support themselves or their families, they cannot afford to be unemployed, and most women therefore seek any kind of work that is available, despite the fact that the offer wage may be far below their norm in circumstances. However, the nature of the new jobs created by the new international division of labour is such that most of them are subcontracted through a complex network of labour contractors, piece-meal and piece-rated, with no job security.

In fact much of it is home based, on the specious argument that it enables women to look after their children and simultaneously do housework. Home work actually increases the double burden of women, because tasks that might have been taken on by other family members, especially men, become their sole responsibility. There is no restriction on working hours, and often, older and younger women share in the home work, converting it into 'family' labour. Women also have to contribute in terms of other inputs (for example, electricity, costs of repair and maintenance of tools, etc.) and the net result is a much lower real wage rate than would be available in a factory, that would be bound by at least a minimum of labour legislation.

In fact, the hard won protective legislation is sought to be done away with under globalisation, arguing that it inflates labour costs and therefore makes production uncompetitive. Many national governments attract capital into so called Free Trade Zones and Export Processing Zones by offering them production areas free from labour legislation. Many multinationals screen women employees to ensure that they are not pregnant, because it increases their labour costs, and some even prefer to employ women only in a specific age group of 18-25 years. Night work is now being introduced in many countries and since there is often no other work available, many women are accepting it, causing grave problems to their health.

Another dramatic change in the nature of women's work and employment patterns is the tremendous increase in migration, within

countries and across national borders. This is to be noted because traditionally women were the last to migrate, given the constraints of family responsibilities and social taboo on migration and women living alone. This has rapidly changed in the last few decades. Unfortunately, there is a rather thin dividing line between migration and trafficking, and women migrating for work often face extreme exploitation, since many of them are particularly vulnerable, living in insecure and often illegal circumstances. This has also led to the demand by some for the recognition of 'sex' work as any other form of work, since women opt to be in it as a matter of 'choice'. This argument belies the fact that many are forced into this kind of work because no other type is actually available, and a large number are actually victims of exploitation, as seen from the fact that very large numbers are minors. Sex work also has many dimensions, from 'body shops' to 'mail order brides'. All women must be freed of exploitation of all types, and there is a strong case for legalisation of prostitution in many countries, but to equate it with other types of work is to strip it of its demeaning nature.

The generally increased work burden means that women have very little time for leisure, so necessary for human welfare. Leisure is then confined to the stuff churned out by the corporatised media, through the television soaps, propagating a certain lifestyle and concepts of how leisure time should be spent, which are infact reinforcing global cultural homogeneity (such as theme parks, shopping malls, etc).

***Social Reproduction of Labour:*** One of the most important aspects of equal status for women is the sharing of domestic burdens either within the household, or by the state, but globalisation actually puts the onus on women. The social reproduction of labour increasingly becomes their responsibility, as the state withdraws from crucial sectors such as child care, caring for the aged, when social sector budgets are cut in the name of reduction in fiscal deficit.. This 'privatisation' of social reproduction is also done by charging higher user fees for social services. In times of falling incomes, women and girl children and even senior citizens step in to avoid these higher costs, taking on what should in fact be done by the state.



***Food and Social Security, Health and Education:*** Since women are one of the most vulnerable sections, they are often dependent on the state to provide them with basic economic and social services. Traditional gender discrimination is sought to be countered by positive measures to provide education and health opportunities to women, or food security systems that assist them in their task of providing for the family. However, the withdrawal of the state and the primacy of the market means that women lose out in terms of social security. Since women are not able to afford priced services, they are forced to opt, and end up being denied access to health, education, housing, pensions, etc.

***Growing Fundamentalism:*** As women battle with the economic fundamentalism of the market, they also face growing attacks on their basic liberties from fundamentalist forces. As mentioned earlier, these forces feed on the discontent bred with the adverse impact of globalisation. On the one hand, these forces emphasize fragmented identities based on religion, race, caste, etc, destroying the collectivity of people and their potential to resist these policies. On the other hand, they posit the concept of the 'other' community that is seen as being responsible for the economic hardship of the majority. Usually these ideologies are opposed to women's participation in public life and social production and advocate the primary role of women within the home. This becomes extremely convenient in a period when employment opportunities are declining and social services are being cut; women need no longer work, but should do domestic work and look after the children and engage in social reproduction instead.

***Objectification of Women:*** Globalisation spawns the extreme objectification of women. Aided by modern technology, women become mere repositories of value, so much so that even reproduction loses its human dimension, as women become production centres for made to order babies. The media pushes the image of women as consumers, making 'independent choices' about the purchase of goods and services, but leaving all other life choices such as their education and the nature of their employment to the mercy of the market.

Thus, evaluated from the point of view of the long road to equality, it is quite clear that globalisation is inimical to women. The ex-

perience of women across the globe, in both developed and developing countries is similar, which also explains why so many women are today at the forefront of the struggle against globalisation.

## **Neo-Liberal Market Reforms in India**

1991 marks a turning point in the economic history of India, when the minority Congress government led by Prime Minister Narsimha Rao accepted the conditionalities of the IMF loan taken to tide over a foreign exchange crisis caused by import profligacy in the preceding period. These conditionalities, which some call the 'New Economic Policy' were the garb under which the IMF introduced "Structural Adjustment Policies" in the country. SAP was the guise under which neo-liberal economic 'reforms' were introduced, rolling back almost four and a half decades of Nehruvian economic policies based on self-reliance, import substitution, a strong public sector and a social policy of nationalism, secularism and some kind of positive discrimination for disadvantaged sections, particularly Dalits, Adivasis, and to some extent women. In brief, the major changes in Indian economic policy in the last 10-15 years can be summarised as:

- A reduction in fiscal deficit, based on reduction in expenditure on the social sector
- A policy of deregulation of the industrial sector, with greater freedom for international and domestic capital to enter various arenas
- Trade Liberalisation, particularly lifting of import controls
- Privatisation of the existing public sector and of new infrastructure projects
- Reforms in Agriculture to remove input subsidies and land deregulation
- Financial sector reforms
- Devaluation of the rupee, making imports expensive and exports cheaper

It must also be noted that there was a remarkable political consensus amongst the ruling classes, the big bourgeoisie and the rural landowning elite in India, about the nature of these neo-liberal reforms, because it suited their class interests in terms of helping to find new avenues for profitability by linking up with the global economy. As a result, whatever the composition of the ruling political formation, all national governments in the period since neo-liberal reforms were first introduced have supported the process. If anything, the first ruling coalition led by the BJP has shown a larger propensity to implement these policies with greater zeal, and in deference to western interests led by the United States.

Fifteen years after these processes set in, the overall assessment of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation (LPG) policies has been an intensification of poverty and unemployment, with a general deflation in the economy leading to a lowering of real wages and interest rates. Despite the fact that the government continues to paint a rosy picture of the economy, “India shining” being the latest turn in its phraseology of selling reforms to the people. The fact is that existing inequalities within Indian society have been exacerbated. India is therefore shining for a handful, the urban and rural elite who gained from economic reform, not for those who have lost jobs due to the economic downturn as industries close down and not for those farmers who have to resort to suicides when input costs become prohibitive and debt burdens are too crushing. The question is: Where do women stand in all this? How is globalisation to be seen through women’s eyes?

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Article received: Jan 1, 2004

Article accepted: Jan 18, 2004

No or words: 3,790

## Single Women: Problems and Prospects

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**Abstract:** After analyzing the notion of single women, the author addresses the problems and prospects facing them from an Indian context. Women should not view singlehood as inferior to marriage or having children. It is also a good option in life. But sufficient preparation is needed at different stages of life to be an empowered single woman. A new look at singlehood of women is needed today to enhance the status and role of such women in our society.

**Keywords:** Single women, reasons for not marrying, problems and prospects of single women, gender equality.

1. The status and problems of single women do not get much attention in our society. Occasionally, news items and articles appear on single women in newspapers, weeklies and other books. Their sociological, religious, biological and psychological problems are many and varied. They carry worries, burdens and undergo stress. In this essay, the problems and prospects of single women are highlighted for further research and study. Usually the word 'spinster' is used to refer to single women. It arose in a pre-industrial context. Unmarried women were doing the spinning at home before industrialization took spinning and weaving out of home. This word referred to the industriousness of women. It was a positive term appreciating the contribution of unmarried women. But it lost its positive dimension as many unmarried women lost their job of spinning at home. Unemployment affected their earning and settling down in marriage. As the days passed by, the term spinster was used in the sense of 'an unmarried woman beyond the age for marriage' (Jethani, 1994: 11). However, it is still regarded as a respectable term in the Indian society to denote an unmarried woman involved in the service of society. But it is not a comprehensive term. We prefer to use the term 'single women' or 'singlehood' or 'singleness' because it includes

unmarried women as well as other single women such as widows, unwed and deserted mothers, and divorced women. Many writers on gender issues accept these women into the category of single women. (Taylor 1994: Xv-xxi). Asha Mohan Sethi includes them in the category of single women from a practical point of view and writes, “single women in our country can be categorized as unmarried or once married but at present either divorced, separated, deserted or widowed. But if we go deeper into the problems, these broad categories have numerous subcategories. For example: Single Unmarried Women can be further classified as highly educated, moderately educated or uneducated, or/and gainfully employed, under-employed or unemployed. Women who are married but now are single by virtue of divorce, separation, desertion or widowhood, can be further classified as with or without children and dependents; educated/uneducated, employed/unemployed. This classification can go on and on with respect to their rural-urban or class-caste-religious backgrounds” (Sethi 1994: SWIP 15).

The concept of singlehood is directly related to marriage and a stable relationship with a husband and children in the context of family. When a woman avoids marriage or becomes a widow or breaks the marital relationship, she ends up in the category of singleness. Marriage is at the centre of the issue of singlehood. So the concept of marriage should be given more attention in the study of single women. Marriage is not just for sexual pleasure or having children or avoiding loneliness. It is a partnership and sharing of responsibilities. It is a lasting relationship in joys and sorrows. It is a commitment of a life together. Both men and women should have a right understanding of marriage, whether they are interested in marriage or in remaining as single persons.

## **1. Unmarried Women**

The percentage of unmarried women in India is low in comparison with Western countries. The Indian culture promotes the idea of being married and having children. Girls who are not married in Indian families are regarded as unlucky or unfortunate and having something wrong with them. They have been looked upon as a hindrance and burden to the family. Neighbours speak ill

of such girls who could not get married. Their parents are blamed for not working out the marriage of their daughters. On the other hand, girls who are dedicated to the values of their religions and remain unmarried are respected in the community. Sometimes, they are even regarded as sacred. While these two dimensions persist in our society, the former one of looking at unmarried women as a burden for the family and a stigma in the society dominates even today. Some of the key reasons for not getting married and remaining single are listed below.

## **Sociological Reasons**

Since the Indian society is divided into small fragments of caste, tribe, race and language, parents try to arrange the marriage of the daughters within the same caste or tribe or race or language. Inter-caste or inter-tribe marriages are regarded as breaking the social custom and religious tradition. Families belonging to the upper caste do not want to give their daughter in marriage to a boy belonging to a caste inferior to their own caste. They have to face a lot of criticism from the rest of their family members and community. They are also afraid of alienating themselves from their caste or being ostracized for crossing the caste and mingling with the inferior caste in marriage. It is difficult to find a suitable groom for their daughter within the same caste or tribe because the choice of a suitable groom is limited under the arranged marriage system. Some parents are so firm on caste and language that they are prepared to keep their daughters unmarried. For them the caste system is much more important than the marriage of their daughter.

Opportunities for socialization are less for women since many girls are not encouraged to go and study in co-ed colleges or to work with men or to attend parties and gatherings. Falling in love with a man is regarded as breaking the norms of the society. Most of the girls usually depend on their parents to arrange their marriage, within the same caste or region. Another problem is the failure in love. If a boy fails to marry the girl whom he loves and deserts her, then it is difficult for the girl to get married. Many parents and boys do not favour girls who were involved in an earlier love affair. Some girls carry the guilt of their failure, hate to marry and choose to remain

single. The psychological attachment of their first love with the person who deserted them may continue with the girls. The loyalty to him and the cultural binding could hinder her to accept marriage with another person. This kind of culture or views and psychological feelings should be challenged by our society by educating and counselling the girls, boys and parents if we want to improve the status of women.

### *Economic Reasons:*

The demand for dowry and gold jewellery and asking the parents of the girls to meet all the wedding expenses has made marriage a big financial burden. Only those who offer to pay dowry and jewels and meet the financial expenses of the wedding can arrange a marriage for their daughters. But many parents find it difficult to arrange a marriage. Girls also hesitate to incur such a financial burden in their marriage, leaving their family in a vicious debt.

Girls who are qualified and earn a good salary can get married. Even such girls are restricted by their caste and huge financial demand. Unemployment is also another reason for girls remaining single.

Some parents depend on their daughters for income now or to take care of them in their old age. Such parents hesitate to arrange a marriage for the daughters.

### *Religious Reasons:*

Good looking girls, with fair skin but obedient and holding on to traditional values, can get married. But girls who are dark skinned or who dress in modern fashion and do not cherish traditional values are not regarded as suitable for family and so are not preferred in the arranged marriage system.

Those families who believe in horoscopes, stars and rasi, omens and superstitions, look for a groom whose horoscope, birth star and omens match with their daughter's own horoscope and stars. Unless both of them suit and tally, marriage is not arranged for the girls. Sometimes it does not suit and tally at all. Such girls remain unmarried for life.



## **Geographical Reason**

Some girls are unwilling to marry a person who is employed in a distant place. They prefer to marry a person within the village or region so that they need not distance themselves from their families and the community. In order to continue in social bond with their community and culture and keep the family land or house undivided, they look for employed persons within the local area. This attitude makes it difficult for girls to get married to a suitable person.

### ***Psychological Reasons:***

Feelings of fear and uncertainty hinder some girls from getting married. They are afraid of losing their freedom after marriage or suppression by husband and his parents, death at pregnancy leaving the child motherless, and separation or divorce after some years. This kind of fear complex keep some girls from giving their consent.

### ***Global Reasons:***

Some, in the Western countries are concerned about the population explosion in the world. Others are worried about the suffering and pain their generation would undergo in this world which is full of nuclear weapons, pollution and violence. They choose to remain single in life after understanding the socio-economic, political and environmental problems.

### ***Family Reasons:***

A few girls wish to remain unmarried for life for some good reasons. They take this decision voluntarily after seeing the situation of their family. They choose to remain single so that they can educate their brothers and sisters with their income, arrange their marriages and take care of their aged parents. These women have no regret in remaining single. They draw satisfaction from supporting the family. Some others like to remain single for medical reasons.

### ***Dedicated Service:***

Others like to remain single so that they can give their time and money for the service of their religion and society. Some women who dedicated themselves to the service of Hinduism have contrib-

uted much and become key leaders. Jainism also encourages young women to dedicate themselves to religious service. A large number of young women within the Roman Catholic tradition have dedicated themselves to remain single and involve in social service through their religious institutions. Their decision to remain unmarried is for a noble cause in society. They draw meaning for their life through their dedicated service to humanity, nature and the Creator.

## **Prospects**

Some of the problems confronting single women at different stages of their lives cannot be ignored. At a later stage some feel loneliness and the lack of their own family. The question of who will take care of them in their old age also arises. Some of their family members try to get as much financial help as possible from unmarried sisters. This creates a feeling of being pressurized by the family members. Although these problems still confront single women, more facilities are available for them today. Those single women who earn a good salary, can buy their own flat or build a house, own a vehicle and enjoy life. Old age homes are also coming to their help when they retire or become old. Those who do not have money to support themselves in their old age depend on their own brothers and sisters to take care of them. They can enjoy their freedom and draw satisfaction from serving their family or involving in social service. They can also become foster parents for deserted children in orphanages and homes. The trend is changing recently, in that a few unmarried women get married to men at a late age for the sake of having a companion in life. Contemporary society is willing to accept such changes in the life of unmarried women and is beginning to support this kind of prospect.

2. In addition to these facilities, the concept of marriage itself is changing today. Past generations considered marriage important. Celibacy or singlehood was not acceptable. Some people went to the extreme of performing formal marriage ceremonies over the corpses of girls who died before marriage. They believed that a virgin could not attain salvation and marriage was necessary for spiritual fulfillment. (Jethani 1994: 15).

3. Some of these old values are promoted even today by the movies. But social conduct surveyed in different parts of India show a change in the 'familistic ideology' prefer the 'ideal of individualism' rather than marry a man and have children (Jethani 1994: 12-14). David Taylor observes, 'singleness is now becoming an option to be considered along with others (Taylor 1994: in *SWIP*. Xvii).

4. Urmila Jethani quotes from other studies: 'As more women remain single, the social stigma and isolation associated with spinsterhood declines, reinforcing singlehood as an alternative to marriage' (Jethani, 1994: 13). If this change in the concept of marriage, and facilities and securities for women develop, then singlehood will not be regarded as inferior to married life. Many more women may prefer to remain unmarried and lead a meaningful life.

## 2. Widows

Widows, with or without children, could be regarded as single women. A woman becomes a widow due to the sudden death of her husband either in an accident or heart-attack or often a prolonged sickness. But the socio-economic, medical, psychological consequences of the death of a husband on the wife and the children are enormous.

Some people blame the widow for the death of her husband, stating the horoscope or stars or rasi of the wife as the reason. They go to the extreme of cursing the widow and blaming her for the misdeeds of her previous birth (Rajalakshmi Das 1994: *SWIP* 164). The situation of some of the widows may be better since they may have a family, a job or funds to support themselves. But this may not be the case with other widows. In a traditional family, a widow, whether mother or sister or sister-in-law is looked down upon as an unlucky woman or a burden for the family. Initially the family members and relatives may show sympathy and concern for the widow, but in the long run they may not even care about the widows. Sometimes, it can go to the extreme of neglecting or exploiting her. Some of the family members or relatives on whom she depends may try to put pressure on the widow to sell land or house or cattle apparently for her upkeep.

One of the cruelties connected with widowhood is to compel her to die with her husband in the funeral pyre and be an example of fulfilling the religious ritual of *sati*. Although it is banned legally, some upper caste families want to practise it even today. Other cruelties rendered in the name of fulfilling religious rituals are forcing her to shave off her hair and remove the *mangalasutra* or *thali*. They are asked to wear a white dress as a symbol of widowhood and abstain from participating in the functions of the family. The main aim of the segregation of the widow is 'to prevent any kind of intimacy with man' (Darshan and Punia 1994: SWIP 77). These cruelties could create a psychological opinion in a widow that her life has come to an end with the demise of her husband and there is no point in trying to empower herself. (Vidya, Meena and Neelam 1994: SWIP 151).

Many widows neglect their health due to financial constraints, the burden of rearing and lack of support from the family and relatives. The shock of their husband's death, dependency, lack of planning to face the future and worries can cause various diseases such as loss of weight, rheumatism, asthma, indigestion, swollen feet, falling hair, skin irritation, headaches and nerve problems (Vidya, Meena and Neelam 1994: SWIP 117).

Another problem is not allowing the widow to marry again. If she cannot separate herself from the family of the deceased husband, then she could become a bonded slave to that family and be abused by the members of the family.

Today, some changes are coming up in society. Some state governments have changed the rule and have granted the pension fund received by the husband to be given to his widow. Local government offices such as Corporations and Taluka offices are instituting a fund to give a small amount to deserted widows. NGOs are helping the widows to get back their rights over the land of the husband, transfer the pension to their name and to get counselling and guidance.

### 3. Divorced Women

Divorce is not common in the Indian society as compared to societies in the West or East. But it is more noticeable in the recent

days. Pinki Sharma says, 'The label of being a divorcee, badly stigmatizes the woman and subjects her to indignity, which is repugnant to the concept of women's honour, self-respect, social status, dignity and freedom (Sharma 1994: SWIP 128).

## Culture of Thali and Separation

Since divorce is considered a curse in our Indian culture, many families facing this problem do not want to settle it legally. Women who are facing this problem prefer to work out the 'separation' from their husbands as an unofficial arrangement rather than official divorce. Indian culture makes the *mangalasutra or thali* as sacred and a security for women. The realities and myths of the culture of *thali* need a discussion in gender studies. It has its own merits and demerits. While the culture of *thali* can be a protection, it could very well be an oppression too. E.V. Ramasamy Naickar (respectfully called Periyar), a social reformer of Tamilnadu, criticized the culture of thali (thirumangaliam). He encouraged his followers not to use thali for various reasons. For the culture of thalai belongs to Brahminical tradition and was imposed on the people of dravidian culture. Moreover, the culture of thali is a kind of suppression of women because it binds them to their husbands and deprives them their freedom to question his dominance, and cruelties. In addition, it can control the freedom of women who are facing the process of divorce. Periyar conducted weddings by exchanging garlands between the bride and the groom rather than blessing the thali and giving it to the groom to tie around the neck of the bride. The culture of thali has penetrated every religion in India. Within Christianity, the culture of thali is accepted by mainline churches and the blessing of it is included in the order of the wedding service. But Pentecostal churches have rejected the culture of thali and the exchanging of garlands, and now solemnize weddings by exchanging the Bible between the groom and the bride. However, the thali not only regarded as a blessing for married life but also as an identification mark of a married woman. Under the arrangement of unofficial separation, a woman can continue to have the privilege of wearing the *thali* and pose herself as married. She can pretend that she is still the wife of her husband who is now separated and try to avoid the suspicion of being looked at as a widow or deserted and left to the mercy of others. But

in the official divorce, they have to remove it or settle it with the husband.

## **Reasons for Divorce**

Some of the reasons for the increase in divorce rate in the Indian society could be listed below.

1. Alcoholic and drug abuse by husbands and the cruel treatment toward wives.
2. Lack of a child in spite of medical check up, treatment and waiting for a long time.
3. Husbands' psychological problems or vice versa.
4. Husbands who were advised by the doctors not to marry on medical grounds.
5. Husbands who are oppressive and not willing to give freedom to the wife.
6. Wives are neglected by the husbands and left to the cruel treatment of in-laws.
7. Financial constraints.
8. Husband living with another woman and having children.
9. Forcing wife to be a sex worker or smuggler to bring in money or yield to his own plan or vested interest.
10. Lack of honesty or loyalty to her husband and adjustment to family life on the part of women.
11. Long period s, of separation if the husband is working in a distant country.

Many of these reasons are common in societies world-wide. William Goode, who studied the problem of divorce, categorized these reasons for divorce in the technical terms of Personality, Authority or Cruelty, Complex, Desertion, Triangle, Home life, Consumption, Value, Non support, Drinking and Relatives (Goode 1956: 116- 119). The reasons for divorce should be analyzed objectively without showing favouritism or nepotism to the parties involved. In

our culture, women are blamed more often than men. Indian society looks at a woman as a quarrelsome person who is unwilling to be submissive to her husband. Since women are considered inferior to men in their thinking, they expect the wife to take all the blame and be tolerant to her husband.

## **Process of Divorce**

Divorce does not take place suddenly. It happens after a long period of tolerance and adjustment with the husband. It is a painful process. Each religion blesses the wedding of the couple and has its own approach to granting divorce. Christianity asks the couple to go to the court and obtain the divorce. Islamic religious leaders may ask the husband to say the word '*Thalak*' three times after carefully considering the problem and all the possibilities of living together. Only when this process fails, the '*Thalak*' can be pronounced. People belonging to Hindu traditions may approach the court or panchayat or community or family to grant divorce and settle the problem of the property. Divorce laws in India vary according to the religions. Some may like to go for an official divorce but others may negotiate for a separation and settlement of properties, funds and the care of the children.

What is important is the way the people who are facing the problem of divorce are guided by counselling. Professional counselling centres in the West play a major role in saving the marriages of many families. Such counselling centres are not developed in India, although a few are coming up in cities in the recent years. In Indian culture, the parents and relatives play a major role in counselling the husband and the wife, and try to save the marriage. When the problem becomes serious, many of them do not know how to handle it. We need to develop counselling centres with professionals who can give pre-marital counselling, marital counselling and post –divorce counselling.

## **Consequences:**

Divorce affects both the parties but women more than men. For, women have to face various problems such as social stigmatization, psychological trauma of losing the husband, rearing and edu-

cating children, lack of financial support and the question of re-marriage if they do not have children in the first marriage.

If the divorce is for a valid reason, then the divorced women need not feel bad for what has happened in life. She should accept the reality and proceed to establish her own life. She can continue her job and take care of the children. Families and society should show their concern and support for such single women who carry the burden of life particularly without having any employment or income.

#### **4. Unwed and Deserted Mothers**

Unwed and deserted mothers are found in different parts of the world. 'Unwed' means not married legally but living with a man who might or might not have been married to another woman. Living with a man and having sexual relationship could happen out of genuine love for the man or for the need of financial support and security. The relationship could have led to children. The man could have deserted her after living with her and severed the relationship. Usually such men do not even inform the women their whereabouts. The women who have been deserted by such men have no legal proof of their marriage or claim to financial support from the men. The unwed and deserted mothers may live with their parents or move out to another place for working in an estate or slums or in the construction of buildings. They feel that they are cheated by men. They do not know what to answer to those who ask about their husbands. Sometimes the children born out of this kind of sexual relationship could be abandoned or given to orphanages. At this stage these mothers are not prostitutes since they maintained their relationship with one man and led a family life. But they are in danger of being sexually exploited by others or becoming sex workers to support themselves.

The percentage of such cases may be more among young girls, particularly those who are still in schools and colleges in USA. The percentage may be less in India but this problem is found in some villages, tribal communities and estates of coffee, tea and rubber. Vinu Abraham highlights this problem in a village in North Kerala among the Muslim community (Abraham, *The Week* July 27, 2003:



20-21). The main reason for arranging the marriage of teen age girls hurriedly with unknown men coming to their village, is their fear of the stigma of keeping girls unmarried rather than the stigma of being abandoned wives. Fraudulent marriage brokers taking advantage of their fear of this stigma arrange the marriage with men already married and take a good commission. These men get a good sum as dowry and live with the women for a year and then disappear with the money and jewellery. Some of these girls have children out of this relationship but lack proof of their marriage. They are abandoned to despair. This trend is common in some slums where men and women live together for a period of time and then separate. The separated men or women develop relationship with other persons and live together for a period of time.

Some of the reasons for being deserted as unwed mothers are:

1. Too much socialization and love affair without knowing the motives and intention of men with whom they socialize and fall in love.
2. Some girls run away with the boys and start living with them because they are afraid that their parents would not approve of love and marriage. They may succeed or end up as unwed mothers and deserted.
3. Some girls may not be ready for a committed family life but like to continue as partners in a sexual relationship.
4. Quarrel and lack of adjustment during the relationship before the marriage resulting in abandoning women with the baby.
5. Very few women like to continue in sexual relationship with a known or unknown stranger who has moved into her place for work or business for the sake of financial support and security.
6. Lack of proper understanding about marriage, sex, family and children lead them to make this mistake in life.

These women who become unwed and deserted mothers carry a stigma in society. They are looked down upon by others. NGOs who work among these women know their psychological and sociological trauma and plight. Some of their problems are viz.

1. They carry the guilt feeling of losing their life and future.
2. They are unwanted by family members and society
3. Their future marriage with another man is at stake.
4. Children of unwed mothers have an identity crisis and carry the stigma
5. They lack financial support when deserted.
6. Their health can deteriorate.
7. Due to poverty, they go begging with their children.
8. They could become sex workers on the street or domestic servants or coolies or rag pickers.
9. Many resort to drugs, theft and smuggling.

Some of these women were taken to rehabilitation homes which care for them.

Their rights should be established and the men who deserted them should be brought to accountability. Prior marriage counselling should be given to all girls in schools and colleges. Should our society victimize them by looking down upon and neglecting these unwed mothers? What should be our attitude towards these single women? How can we help them lead a normal life?

## **5. Genetic Defect, Behavioural Problem and Singleness**

Some men and women remain single because of genetic defects or behavioural problems. In the case of some women, it could be psychological attitude of lesbianism. In other cases, women could be trans-sexuals who behave like men due to psychological problems and dress like men. It could be a problem of hormones too. These are very few in number but their problems are getting attention in media as well as in gender studies. Medical science tries to prove their problems from a biological point of view. Psychologists analyze their behaviour from their point of view. These women behave abnormally not because they want to deliberately show their rebellious attitude towards society. They cannot help themselves

because the defect is inherent in their body and mind at birth itself. Women who are normal but try to behave deliberately as abnormal cannot be included in this category of defective personalities. They can be corrected easily because it is not a biological defect. Discussions and debates are going on to understand people affected by genetic and psychological defect and formulate new laws and regulations. Religious institutions are in a dilemma to work out their stand on lesbians, homosexuals and trans-sexuals regarding their membership, employment, marriage and relationship. Should religions apply their views on them or approach them with an open mind and take decisions on the basis of new findings of medical science and psychology? Suppose we have such a defective daughter in our family, what would be our attitude towards them? Should we condemn them as unwanted or as sinners, or show our concern and support to them? Parents who have such a defective girl child should seek medical advice and counselling help. If the doctors advise the parents not to arrange a marriage for such daughters, it is better not to arrange that marriage which would avoid problems such as divorce and court cases.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Some research by students of social sciences on the issue of singlehood is being done in various academic institutions. People who are interested in this aspect of gender studies can refer to such research data (Jeyaraj 2002: 1-88). We have dealt with the problems and prospects of single women briefly in the above pages to conscientize our readers on singlehood. It is not easy for us to give solutions to their problems. Preventive measures such as educating women, enlightening them with the problems of marriage and family, encouraging them to seek employment and earn their own income and prepare them for every possible situation can help women face life in this world. Women should not view singlehood as inferior to marriage or having children. It is also a good option in life. But sufficient preparation is needed at different stages of life to be an empowered single woman. A new look at singlehood of women is needed today to enhance the status and role of such women in our society.

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Article received: Jan 03, 2004

Article accepted: Jan 30, 2004

No or words: 5, 195

# ***jnanadeepa***

**Pune Journal of Religious Studies**

## **Back numbers of *Jnanadeepa***

- 1/1 Our Commitment to a United India
- 1/2 Beyond the Colonial Past
- 2/1 Vision of a New Society
- 2/2 Contemporary Quest for Freedom & Liberation
- 3/1 Conversion: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
- 3/2 Formation of Religious Leaders
- 4/1 Peace: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
- 4/2 Models of Authority
- 5/1 Science, Religion and Postmodernism
- 5/2 Religion and Violence
- 6/1 Reconciliation: Socio-Political Dimension
- 6/2 Fundamentalisms in India Today
- 7/1 The Situation of Women

ISSN 972-33315

