

# LIBERATING COMPASSION: SPIRITUALITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

By FRANCINE CARDMAN

A YOUNG KOREAN WOMAN stood before the crowd, barefoot and clad in the simple white clothing of a peasant. She called upon the tortured spirits of the ancestors and of the planet, the victims of human greed, hatred and religious intolerance, invoking their presence and voice. For only when we hear their cries and see the signs of their liberation, she claimed, 'are we able to recognize the Holy Spirit's activity in the midst of suffering creation'.

The keynote address of Dr Chung Hyun Kyung to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra, Australia, in February 1991 unleashed what the press quickly labelled a 'firestorm' of criticism, a reaction that has followed her home to Seoul.<sup>1</sup> She was charged with syncretism, labelled unorthodox, taken to task for not being sufficiently Christian or Trinitarian in her theology of the Spirit. Yet many people, especially those from the so-called 'third world' and especially women, found the reality of their lives validated in Dr Chung's moving presentation. In the commotion following her speech, a woman remarked to her that she really ought to be in the women's room at that moment rather than on the assembly floor. When she asked why, she was told that she should see how many women were there crying—in gratitude, relief and joy.<sup>2</sup>

Why were the women weeping? Why were others, men and women, raging? What does the Holy Spirit have to do with the spirits of history's martyred and victimized? What do Seoul and Canberra, the *minjung* of Korea and the aboriginal peoples of Australia have to do with Jerusalem? Is there a Christian spirituality wide enough to encompass all these realities? Is the spirit of compassion deep enough and strong enough to carry us not only into a new century but also into a new age for all earth's creatures?

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Chung Hyun Kyung's address and the reactions to it are a dramatic enactment of the crucial questions facing Christian spirituality in the last years of the second millennium of the time we have so characteristically claimed as *Anno Domini*. Issues of inculturation, empowerment, liberation, solidarity and western decentring are signs of profound changes already under way in the Church. In their most fundamental form, these questions challenge Christian faith and life to a radical reorientation to the world. The change in perspective and proportion that is called for is akin to the visual reorientation worked by maps of the world drawn on the Peters projection. In these maps, geographical landmass rather than cultural weight determines the scale of the continents.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Christianity looks different when it is accurately contextualized. Globally, Christianity is a minority religion; its centre of gravity is rapidly shifting from the 'first world' to the 'third world'; its voices are increasingly multilingual and pluralistic.

The tears and joy, anger and fears at Canberra were, at least in part, a response to the reality of reorientation taking place in the midst of the assembly. Change of this sort is not only political or cultural in its implications, though it is that. It is also profoundly spiritual, reaching to the roots of the hope and meaning we have for ourselves and for our world. To understand why this process of change is the matter of spirituality, I want to look first at the root meaning of spirituality and then consider some basic issues in that light.

### *Spirit and spirituality*

The most basic meaning of 'spirit' is breath or life force, the body's animating principle. It is intrinsic to body and world, not separate from them; it moves in and through history, not outside it. When informed by consciousness, this spirit moves with direction and intent toward what it seeks to know and love. In human beings, this conscious, willing, moving spirit might best be known as *heart*; as embodied *eros*, as the place and means of connected knowing that leads to action, to loving and doing. Thus spirituality is about the ways in which this spirit relates to body, world and history.<sup>4</sup> It is the attentiveness which persons give to the reality of self, others, the natural world and whatever we name as holy, as source, depth and mystery (some would say, as the divine) in our lives. Spirituality is the direction, meaning and value we give to the totality of experiences.<sup>5</sup>

There are, then, many spiritualities, many ways of being human in the world. They are embodied in particular forms, shaped by particular cultural matrices and religious traditions. Within a tradition such as Christianity, there are distinctive spiritualities, ways of being Christian, each with its characteristic expressions and emphases, but all relating in some fashion to the God who is made known through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. I would like to argue that, at its heart, this encounter of God and humankind is the revelation of love and freedom in history. Whatever form Christian spirituality takes, it seeks to embody and empower that loving and freeing action and carry it forward in the world.

One way of envisioning the revelatory activity of Christian spirituality and its relationship to the world is in terms articulated by Paul in his Letter to the Romans. In chapter 8, Paul describes what it means to live by the Spirit:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. . . (14-16)

We still live in a time of suffering, yet we anticipate a glory about to be revealed. All creation suffers and waits with us, longing for the freedom that will be the revelation of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (22-23)<sup>6</sup>

We are heirs, yet we wait for adoption; we are no longer slaves yet we wait for freedom. Creation itself remains captive to futility in the space between 'already' and 'not yet'. But as the call and response of spirit and Spirit grows stronger and more mutual, captivity is undone and freedom is made known now.

Seen in the light of the late twentieth century, this ancient text is startlingly relevant. It touches the deep feelings raised by the debate at Canberra and reaches beneath them to the fundamental human and religious questions: what is it that we hope for? why is it so long coming? how do we live so as to redeem the time? Whatever his sources of insight, Paul knew something that we have mostly

forgotten: that the fate of the earth and the fate of humankind are intricately related. The making known (revealing, *apokalypsin*) of the children of God is the means by which creation itself shall be set free from the bondage of decay. The adoption that we wait for is the redemption of our bodies; not only our individual body, but the body politic and the world body. Another way to put this is to say that the redemption that we hope for is personal, political and global in its dimensions. That hope is anticipatory in a double sense; even as we long for its fulfilment, we act to make it present in history.

A spirituality that embodies such hope must encompass the realities of change and struggle at this time in the world's life. Most especially, it must take account of the major reorientation that is occurring as the result of the intersection of feminist, liberationist and ecological movements. Each of these perspectives is personal, political and global in its outlook. Together they constitute a new way of being in the world that I (with many others) would argue is crucial for our well-being and even survival as we approach the next millennium.

### *Decentring*

Inherent in the feminist, liberationist and ecological movements is a strong critique of domination in all its forms—cultural, religious and ideological, as well as political. From their distinct but related vantage points, each of these movements rejects the notion that difference must be equated with otherness and otherness embodied in varying degrees of powerlessness. Rather, difference and particularity are understood as essential elements of reality and the basis of any authentic, i.e., non-dominating, relationship. Real difference and real connection demand a multiplicity of viewpoints, of subjects, of experiences. In a pluralistic world, there is no clear demarcation between centre and periphery, but rather a shifting constellation of relationships that informs knowledge and action. Reorienting oneself to pluralism is a spiritual as well as an epistemological and practical process. It requires a radical decentring on the part of the privileged whose reality has occupied the centre, whatever its defining terms (e.g., economic, geopolitical, sexual, even christological). At the same time, it moves the dispossessed to claim a centre of subjectivity for themselves. In the process, the world is reconfigured.

The gradual decline of white, western, male hegemony in world politics and some areas of culture is only the most obvious instance of this ongoing reorientation. Another is the growing sense among very

different peoples of humankind's relative place among the 'earth-creatures', as an interdependent part of the biosphere, not its master.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly there is the recognition that human deadliness to nature is in direct proportion to our alienation from it. The emergence of creation spirituality is one needed corrective to the domination of nature. As long as it remains grounded in the concrete realities of historical struggle and human suffering, creation spirituality offers hope for integral liberation—the end of a politics of domination and the healing of the nature/culture split so characteristic of western history.<sup>8</sup>

The beginnings of other, equally significant shifts in perspective can be observed in contemporary Christian theology and spirituality as well. Feminist challenges to androcentric theology demand a rethinking of the attribution of maleness and its cultural characteristics (domination chief among them) to divinity, whether to God as Father or Jesus Christ as his only Son. For many, the exclusivity of Christian claims about Jesus Christ is deeply problematic, given the importance feminism attaches to particularity, difference and pluralism. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues are making similar demands, particularly in respect to the uniqueness and finality of Christology.<sup>9</sup> A reorientation of Christian claims about Jesus, locating them in the context of a more expansive understanding of God's revelation in the world through the work of the Spirit, would be an important first step toward meeting these challenges. Christocentric liberation praxis need not be undercut by this shift; at the same time, solidarity with other liberation struggles is strengthened by it. If there is to be a future to this planet, it is imperative that the quest for Christian unity be part of a larger quest for human community and for a way to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

Attending to the web of relationship that is continuously being woven from the multiplicity of human experience leads to new understandings of power and its exercise.

### *Empowering*

Implicit in the critique of domination and the practice of decentring is a revisioning of the nature and use of power. Feminist, liberation and ecological views commonly put this in terms of the distinction between 'power over' and 'power from within' (or, 'power with'). Power does not exist absolutely, but is created in and for relationship. Exercised in mutuality, power is not diminished but enhanced; it increases rather than overwhelms freedom. Nurtured

and used with care, it is a renewable human as well as natural resource, not a zero-sum commodity.

Understanding power in this way leads to a new sensitivity to the kinds and degrees of violence endemic to much of contemporary society. Advertising and entertainment media that objectify and commodify women's bodies; national security states worldwide; destruction of the rainforest and the ozone layer; battering and child abuse; the alienating and invasive medical technology that postpones death in stunningly life- and body-denying ways: these are only a few of the forms of everyday, institutionalized violence in our world. They all derive from the dominating exercise of power. Coming to know the violence around us compels us to attend to the realities of power and powerlessness in our own hearts.

Countering violence and creating new ways of exercising power from within, both personally and societally, is a challenge for the powerless as well as for the powerful. For the dominant, giving up exclusive and oppressive forms of power is experienced as a loss; at the same time, the mutuality engendered by the shared creation of power offers new possibilities for meaningful relationship and growth of self. For the dominated, too, change means a kind of loss as well as gain: claiming self and agency, remembering resistance, and honouring victims while also letting go of victimization and the defences of powerlessness. For both groups, establishing a new relationship to power involves spiritual and political transformation.

One area in which the reassessment of power is already having significant ramifications for Christian spirituality and theology is the feminist critique of sexual and domestic violence.<sup>10</sup> The revelation of violence at the heart of family life and heterosexual relationships is a searing indictment of patriarchal privilege in marriage and of punitive child-rearing practices that have long found legitimation in the theology and life of Christian Churches. Survivors of many kinds of family violence are finding the power within their individual and collective voices and using the authority of their experience to challenge theology and spirituality that perpetuate such abuse. Rejection of values that have been taken as fundamental to Christian spirituality—such as self-sacrifice, obedience, submission, and suffering—and the dismantling or displacement of theological constructs that support them—such as the predominant understandings of sin and redemption, atonement and Jesus's relation to the Father—are a call for a thorough-going transformation of Christian expression. Violent and disempowering models of God and human-

ity need to be replaced by images and experiences of mutuality that empower persons to live in ways that promote freedom and love, wholeness and connection.<sup>11</sup>

Both decentring and empowering are spiritual practices that have the potential of reorienting humankind to the world, to each other, and to whatever we regard as holy in the concrete circumstances of our lives. They do this by opening us to compassion.

### *Compassion*

The ability to embrace otherness while honouring difference is the beginning of compassion. Acceptance of the reality and the otherness of our own pain allows us to be touched by the pain of others. Compassion does not confuse the reality of the other with our own, or seek to overcome the pain of separation by the imposition of sameness. It acknowledges distance and limitation, yet reaches beyond them in love.

Wherever love reaches out to suffering, there spirit is at work in history for the redemption of our bodies. Because love is made known in acts of justice, healing and liberation are integrally connected. Compassionate love moves us to action, impelling us to struggle against suffering and injustice. There are times, though, when the causes of suffering are so impenetrable that love can only stand and suffer with the other. Yet in refusing to allow evil to break the bonds of relationship, a spirituality of compassion extends the possibilities of life for all of us. Opening our hearts to the anguish of the world gives rise not to resignation, but to solidarity and resistance.<sup>12</sup> Compassion is both the mother and the daughter of hope.

Compassion engenders hope by reminding us that victims do not have to stand alone. To stand together in suffering is already to resist. To make even this small act of resistance is to assert that suffering is not the last word, that victimization can be transformed into agency and power. In its turn, such hope generates the energy that allows us to extend the reach of our compassion.

By invoking the names of victims and martyrs at the Canberra assembly, Chung Hyun Kyung reached back compassionately into history to extend the hope of freedom to the present and future. When she had finished reading from the scroll that bore the names, she set it aflame and held it aloft. Rising like incense, like prayer, the smoke from the scroll touched the hidden places of the heart, loosening the bonds of suffering, freeing memory and desire, passion and action, marking a way toward the next millennium.

In like fashion, the cries of the spirit throughout the world continue to call us to love and freedom.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A slightly abridged version of her address and a variety of reactions to it can be found in *Christianity and crisis* vol 51, nos 10-11 (July 15, 1991), pp 220-232. See also *The ecumenical review*, vol 43, no 2 (1991). For further development of some of the themes presented in her address, see Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women's theology* (Maryknoll, NY, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> She reported this to me in conversation in July 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The English version of this map is published by Oxford Cartographers Ltd, Oxford, UK, and available through Friendship Press, New York. For a helpful introduction to the map and its significance, see *A new view of the world: a handbook to the world map: Peters Projection*, by Ward L. Kaiser (New York, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> I am quite persuaded by Jon Sobrino's insistence that spirituality demands '(1) honesty about the real, (2) fidelity to the real, and (3) a certain "correspondence" by which we permit ourselves to be carried along by the "more" of the real', *Spirituality of liberation: toward political holiness* (Maryknoll, NY, 1988), p 14.

<sup>5</sup> There is considerable discussion among contemporary writers about the meaning of 'spirituality', with a growing consensus about its relationship to this world and the body as well as to some element of transcendence. Sandra Schneiders surveys aspects of the current discussion in 'Spirituality in the academy', *Theological studies* vol 50, no 4 (1989), pp 676-697.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> 'Earthcreatures' is Carter Heyward's phrase, in *Touching our strength: the erotic as power and the love of God* (San Francisco, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Fox is probably the leading proponent of creation spirituality, popularized in his many books. For a recent presentation, see his *Creation spirituality: liberating gifts for the peoples of the earth* (San Francisco, 1991). The Spring 1989 issue of *Listening* (vol 24, no 2) was devoted to an evaluation of Fox's work; Roberto S. Goizueta is particularly critical of what he sees as a recent tendency of Fox to absorb the political in the mystical, history in cosmology, 'Liberating creation spirituality', *ibid.*, pp 85-115.

<sup>9</sup> For concise statements of the questions with somewhat different conclusions, see Paul Knitter, 'Key questions for a theology of religions', *Horizons* vol 17, no 1 (1990), pp 92-102 and Roger Haight, S.J., 'Towards an understanding of Christ in the context of other World religions', *East Asian pastoral review* vol 26, no 4 (1989), pp 248-265. For a more extended discussion, see Knitter, *No other name?* (Maryknoll, NY, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Groundbreaking pastoral and theological work in this area was done by Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual violence: the unmentionable sin* (New York, 1983). See also the essays in *Christianity, patriarchy, and abuse: a feminist critique*, ed Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York, 1989) and Mary Potter Engel, 'Evil, sin, and violation of the vulnerable', in *Lift every voice: constructing Christian theologies from the underside*, ed Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco, 1990), pp 152-164.

<sup>11</sup> Sallie McFague explores the need for new images and proposes the models of God as mother, lover and friend in *Models of God: theology for an ecological nuclear age* (Philadelphia, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> See Joanna Macy, 'The theoretical foundations of despair and empowerment work', in *A new creation: America's contemporary spiritual voices*, ed Roger Gottlieb (New York, 1990), pp 335-353, for a clear statement of how the experience of pain and despair empowers change and connection.