

SPIRITUALITY, GLOBALISATION AND RESISTANCE

Notes from South Africa

Anthony Egan

HOW DOES SPIRITUALITY EXPRESS ITSELF in the struggle against the effects of economic globalisation? I have found, almost incidentally, in the course of research into new social movements in South Africa, that spirituality often plays a significant role in sustaining such movements. Many participants in the recent World Social Forum in Nairobi readily and openly expressed their spirituality. This conjunction of social activism and spiritual engagement needs our attention—not just from a sociological, but from a pastoral, and finally from an Ignatian, point of view. The Churches need to wake up to a new spiritual challenge, in South Africa and in the rest of the world.

Globalisation and the Spiritual Market-place

To understand the connection between spirituality, globalisation and resistance, we need first to be clear about terms. Globalisation is a complex phenomenon which means and implies different things to different people.¹ One of its key metaphors is the ‘network society’,² which is epitomized by the Internet, connecting people electronically around the globe and providing an apparently endless supply of information from newspapers, discussion groups, online books, policy documents, and religious sites of every kind. The Internet also provides instant access to pornography, hate speech, bizarre cults, crude opinions presented as fact—and endless advertisements. Developed initially as military technology, adopted quickly by multinational corporations, and

¹ For one attempt to unravel it see Malcolm Waters, *Globalisation* (London: Routledge, 1995).

² See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

blessed by many religions as a means of evangelization, it is both a symbol of our 'global village' and what makes it possible. For the minority of men and women on our planet who have access to it, its nature—a web of information without a central source of control—is radically democratic, yet its members form a 'connected' elite. It is a libertarian's dream, but enslaves its devotees to a computer terminal.³ Beyond the Net, the 'network society' also expresses the closeness of citizens in the global village: cheap air transport makes movement between countries easier than ever before in history—for those who



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can afford air tickets, and who have the right visas and the necessary skills and work permits.

The liberal and neo-liberal economic dogma of free trade is closely linked to 'network society', and uses its globalising technologies to great effect. It is zealously propounded by advocates of market fundamentalism within the great multinational corporations, supported by governments who share their views, and acted upon by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).⁴ Neo-liberals have set out to create a single global economy, rejecting any

³ For various views see Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1993); and Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

⁴ The latter are frequently called by secular and religious critics the 'unholy trinity'.

form of state protectionism as economic heresy and opposing state interventionism and organized labour. IMF loans are offered to governments on the condition that they introduce 'good governance' and 'structural adjustment' (meaning tougher policing, particularly of unions; privatisation of public services; and drastic welfare cuts). The more honest supporters of neoliberalism admit that these policies are backed by force against recalcitrant states: whether the economic force of trade sanctions or, at times, military force. The journalist Thomas Friedman gleefully observes:

The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. Markets function and flourish only when property rights are secured and can be enforced, which in turn requires a political framework protected and backed up by military power.⁵

McDonalds, he concludes, needs McDonnell Douglas. In our new unipolar world order, this means that the de facto guarantor of 'stability' is the United States.

Neoliberalism is in many respects a secular religion, a fundamentalism of the market which insists that there is no alternative to its dogmas. Adam Smith's notion of the 'hidden hand' of political economy has become almost god-like. As traditional religion is slowly eroded, particularly, but not exclusively, in the developed North, two new phenomena have emerged: the marked rise of religious fundamentalism (an assertion, in part, of 'resistance identities' by traditional societies undergoing rapid change);⁶ and a renewed interest in a commodity called 'spirituality', often divorced from its roots in communal religious practice.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King⁷ argue convincingly that a consumer capitalist mentality has thoroughly penetrated the world religions. Spirituality, understood as a human sense of the transcendent encountered in culture, habits, practices and thought forms (what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'habitus'),⁸ has become a commodity on the

⁵ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 164.

⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 355; Stephen Hunt, *Religion and Everyday Society* (London: Routledge, 2005), 129.

⁷ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁸ In Tillichian terms, Pedro Casaldaliga and Jose-Maria Vigil argue that 'spirit is the dimension of the deepest quality that we have, without which we would not be human persons'—the personal depth

global market, with a range of often eclectic religious ‘fixes’ available to the spiritual searcher in the global village. A wonderful range of options is offered, in a variety of media, from Zen meditation classes to Wiccan solstice rituals for the ‘solitary witch’. In a more blatant syncretism between business and religion we can study the Tao of big business, and—one of my favourites—how Jesus is a model of today’s CEO.⁹ Beyond the bizarre and through the syncretic, ‘orthodox’ spirituality displays for the most part a kind of quietism; often divorced from a faith community and bereft of any prophetic dimensions, the dominant spirituality is one of ‘me and my Jesus’ or ‘me and my Buddha’—or, if you feel like it, both. Consumers get what they pay for—a faith that makes them feel good, and stops up the emptiness of a life lived as no more than producing and consuming, in a world where, as Margaret Thatcher once said, there is no such thing as society.

There are, however, growing signs of resistance to neoliberal globalisation. From the local level up to anti-WTO protests and to the regular gatherings of the World Social Forum (in Porto Alegre, Mumbai and now Nairobi), a wide range of groups and individuals are insisting that there is an alternative to the neoliberal project; that society does exist; that ‘another world is possible’.¹⁰ This resistance comes from a broad alliance of movements which nevertheless have different political agenda (some reformist, some revolutionary); different economic assumptions (from old-style communists to capitalists with consciences); different goals (self-rule and/or land rights, access to free or cheap public utilities, a tax on all international financial transactions, or protection of domestic production from cheap, often inferior, imports); and represent a diversity of social classes (peasant farmers, factory workers, students, politicians, academics). The religious beliefs of the activists involved range from ultra-orthodoxy to militant atheism, from the traditional religions to Wicca and New Age beliefs.

that most deeply motivates us (*Liberating Spirituality: A Spirituality of Liberation* [Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1996]). This is transcendence in history, what I understand to be spirituality before it receives its religious or social qualifiers.

⁹ See Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Discovering Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995). If Jesus is not one’s thing, one can also find such role models as Attila the Hun, Machiavelli or Jack Welch!

¹⁰ This evocative phrase comes from the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, adopted in São Paulo, Brazil, on 9 April 2001. It has become one of the rallying slogans and underlying visions of the anti-globalisation movement. See José Corrêa Leite, *The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 10.



Protesters at the World Social Forum in Nairobi

All beliefs are welcome in this pluralist 'movement of movements', so long as a common human vision is shared: an alternative 'habitus' that celebrates equality in diversity. How this is expressed in one place—South Africa—I shall examine below.

Spirituality and Resistance in South Africa

The Political Context

Although Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) government was elected in 1994 on what was effectively a welfare socialist programme, it rapidly moved to an economic policy approved by the IMF, WB and WTO. This shift promoted South Africa's entry into the global market; redistributed wealth to a newly empowered black business elite; helped the economy to grow in areas such as commerce and technology creating skilled jobs; and generated some

employment for the new black, and old white, middle classes. Progressive-sounding legislation accompanied this process, though its effect was a decline in employment for the poorest half of the country, widening the poverty gap.¹¹ The ANC extended public services dramatically, but its commitment to WB and IMF 'structural adjustment' principles required the privatisation and deregulation of these services, and a policy of strict cost recovery. This made conditions for the poor—in a country with forty per cent of its workforce unemployed—even worse. South Africa's opening up to world trade and the relaxation in protection of domestic production generated further unemployment.

Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, continued the trend, speaking a very progressive (if at times vague) language of economic empowerment at political rallies ('talking left') while enjoying the favour of the gurus from the Washington Consensus ('walking right'). The South African Communist Party, a junior partner within the ANC, did what other Communist Parties did after 1989: it reconciled its Marxism with capitalism and joined in the process of creating a model neoliberal state.¹² Dissenters were expelled,¹³ and they aligned themselves with a number of small protest organizations struggling for cheaper, renationalised public utilities, free access to HIV anti-retrovirals, land reform and similar grassroots causes that had largely disappeared from the ANC's agenda. Many of these groups joined an umbrella organization—the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF)—led by an expelled Communist, to form the core of South Africa's New Social Movements (NSMs).¹⁴

¹¹ For a history of this gap see Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg: U. of Natal P, 2003).

¹² Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: U. of Natal P, 2000); Patrick Bond, *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa Meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance* (Cape Town: U. of Cape Town P, 2001); Patrick Bond, *Talk Left, Walk Right* (Pietermaritzburg: U. of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2004).

¹³ Trevor Ngwane, 'Sparks in the Township: Interview with Trevor Ngwane', *New Left Review* 22 (July/August 2003), 37–56, describes this city councillor's expulsion from the ANC for dissent over the privatisation of Johannesburg's public utilities and his subsequent work as an anti-globalisation activist. He is one of a number of old 'comrades' who have fallen foul of the ANC.

¹⁴ *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-apartheid South Africa*, edited by Richard Ballard, Adam Habib and Imraan Valodia (Pietermaritzburg: U. of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2006), and see especially on APF, Sakhela Buhlungu, 'Upstarts or Bearers of Tradition? The Anti-Privatisation Forum of Gauteng', 67–88.

The Spirituality of the New Social Movements

Research into the spiritual dimension of South Africa's New Social Movements is still in its infancy. Most scholars have overlooked it; their primary task has been mapping and explaining the political dynamics of these movements, examining their strategies (often with a view to improving their practice and results) and documenting their activities. They have been treated as political manifestations: of urban and rural poverty and unemployment; and of frustration that liberation has not produced more change, despite the election promises of 1994, 1999 and 2004. A sizeable community has resorted to apartheid-era protest politics to struggle for basic human needs such as water, electricity, housing and land. But academics have largely missed the religious undercurrent of this protest—a discourse of liberation that has distant echoes of religious protest during the 'struggle period'.

A colleague and friend, Alex Wafer, attended a number of public meetings of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC)¹⁵ in the course of his research. The SECC is committed to protesting against the disconnection policy of the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council's semi-private electricity supplier. It has its support base among mostly female black pensioners, who are the heads of households and often the only members of their families with a steady (if very meagre) income. Unsurprisingly the 'grannies', as they are called, numerically



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¹⁵ Compare Anthony Egan and Alex Wafer, 'Dynamics of a "Mini-Mass Movement": Origins, Identity and Ideological Pluralism of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee', in *Voices of Protest*, edited by Ballard, Habib and Valodia, 45–66.

predominate at the SECC rallies. Together with a cadre of young men who are skilled at illegal reconnection and a handful of political activists from the APF they comprise the membership of SECC.

Alex noted that at the meetings the ‘reconnectors’ recounted their exploits, and the APF mostly adopted the rhetoric of the international anti-globalisation community, with a typically South African Marxist spin. But the ‘grannies’ spoke the language of religion. Many of them said that SECC was their ‘salvation’, fighting to free them from the crippling cost of electricity, the bureaucratic and corrupt electricity company, and the neglect of the City Council (for which most of them had voted). The meetings often opened or closed with prayers. Familiar ‘struggle songs’ were sung (the SECC and the APF see themselves as bearers of a protest tradition), but also hymns. The latter were sung with greater gusto.

An academic and activist from Durban, Ashwin Desai, has noted similar religious features among grassroots movements in his city. Religion, he recognises, is integral to these communities even when—more often than not—there are no representatives of the institutional Church present at their protests.¹⁶ Other researchers have found that members (occasionally clergy) of the traditionally apolitical Charismatic-Pentecostal Churches draw upon their language of the Spirit and prophecy to mobilise people in depressed communities—though this does, admittedly, cause tensions.¹⁷

Yet the leadership of the NSMs, and particularly of umbrella groups like the APF, are thoroughly secular people. Many come from an academic or an activist background on the Left (Communist, Trotskyist, even Anarchist), and most would describe themselves as agnostic or atheist, certainly not churchgoers, though not particularly anti-religious. While some regard the religious discourses within the NSMs with benign indifference, others see it as significant, even deserving of support. One NSM activist confided to me that, far from being hostile to religion, he was deeply saddened by the apparent indifference of the institutional Churches and religious leaders to the plight of the poor. Another senior activist has written that leaders

¹⁶ Ashwin Desai, *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Sharad Chari, *Political Work: The Holy Spirit and the Labours of Activism in the Shadows of Durban's Refineries*, Research Report 30 (Durban: Centre for Civil Society, U. of KwaZulu-Natal P, 2005).

within the NSMs—many of them from the middle class or educated working class—should take the religion of their members seriously: if they are truly to identify with the poor they should live with them, talk with them in their own languages if possible, and worship with them too.¹⁸

The division between leadership and grassroots in spiritual practice makes the spirituality of the NSMs seem unusual to Western eyes. But in the light of the shifts that have occurred in the religious and political landscape of South Africa the way it has developed is not surprising.

The Religious Context

The religious landscape of South Africa has changed dramatically since 1994.¹⁹ The ‘mainstream’ Churches (Catholic, Calvinist, Anglican, etc.) from the West have declined dramatically in membership; while the African Initiated Churches (AICs), which variously combine Charismatic-Pentecostal worship with an acknowledgement of traditional beliefs in ancestor spirits, are now the dominant bloc, representing almost forty-one per cent of Christians and thirty-three per cent of the nation as a whole. Other Charismatic-Pentecostal Churches, not originating in Africa, constitute over seven per cent of Christians and six per cent of South Africans. The Reformed Churches are in rapid decline. Catholicism, too, is declining, from eleven per cent of Christians in the 1996 census to nine per cent in 2001. The AIC/Charismatic/Pentecostal bloc has become, in effect, the new mainstream. The reasons for this shift are varied and at times unclear, but two factors seem to emerge: a greater post-liberation sense of African identity; and a spirituality rooted in the need for healing and protection, particularly from sickness and the perceived pervasive threat of witchcraft.

At the same time, the public role of the Churches—and of organized religion in general—has changed since 1994. After taking an uneven, but generally positive, role in apartheid’s downfall, the Churches have settled into three distinct tendencies in relation to the

¹⁸ Richard Pithouse, ‘Radical Intellectuals Need to Go Where People Live—the Slums’, *Sunday Independent* [Johannesburg] (27 November 2005).

¹⁹ I am drawing here on a more detailed paper: see Anthony Egan, ‘Kingdom Deferred? The Churches in South Africa, 1994–2006’, in *State of the Nation: South Africa 2007*, edited by Sakhela Buhlungu and others (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006), 448–469.



*Makeshift altar at the Roman Catholic church,
Diepsloot township*

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state. The first has been *withdrawal* into a private religion which eschews politics, with a spirituality focusing on the person, the family and God. The second has been *critical co-operation*: polite dialogue aimed at promoting the common good through pragmatic politics—the use of parliamentary liaison offices, for example, and other attempts to influence policy. The third has been *opposition* to the ANC's desire to build a secular liberal state. This tendency has something in common with that of withdrawal: it opposes 'creeping atheism' (code for secular democracy), liberal abortion laws and gay rights, but lacks a concern with the

issues of poverty and neoliberal economic policies. Only the second option seems to allow for political engagement and represent a positive religious response to secularisation. And many activists have told me that, despite such engagement at a national level, 'the institutional Churches seem to have abandoned us'.

Even in a secular landscape, however, spirituality remains present in the sense suggested above, when people find the transcendent in the 'habitus' of their communities. Ashwin Desai has observed how divisive political ideology has disappeared from the NSMs since the often fratricidal 'struggle era'. Where once ideology violently divided poor communities, the commonality of poverty and commitment to struggle for the basic conditions of a minimally decent life has brought them

together.²⁰ Out of their struggle, the poor communities have built a sense of being neighbours, 'sharing with and defending each other',²¹ striving for immediate goals such as better housing, cheaper or free water and electricity, and land rights, but also becoming increasingly aware that they are part of a global fight for a more equal world.

At times religion itself has been divisive. Desai described an incident to me when Pentecostal preachers within an NSM tried to use their influence to convert Hindus and Muslims to evangelical Christianity. They failed, largely because community organizations, as Desai has observed in another context, 'may disagree about eight out of ten things', but somehow remain focused on their primary goal: defending their 'turf'.

Spiritual Consequences

What might be made of these notes from South Africa? They are certainly not comprehensive and demand further examination, provoking more questions than providing answers. The very existence of the NSMs raises important ethical issues—about poverty, about civil disobedience and about the degree to which a state is obliged to provide for its people—and it is dangerous to draw too many conclusions from a series of impressionistic snapshots. Nevertheless the nature of the relationship between spirituality and the NSMs has implications well beyond its South African context.

In a globalised world spirituality has sometimes been presented as an exotic and therapeutic consumer product. The Churches, and the institutions of other religions, have tended to move out of the public square into a more private, self-interested arena. Yet NSMs in South Africa often have a strong underlying spirituality even when they are wholly secular, and reflect spiritual practices and attitudes in their engagement with the state. So I ask the question: what can Christian spirituality offer them, and how?

The answer is complex. We cannot simply say, 'give the grannies of the SECC an eight-day Ignatian retreat', or 'send the APF to do the Exercises'—though, should some of them be interested, it might be of

²⁰ Ashwin Desai, 'The New Tools of Liberation in South Africa: An Interview', *Z Magazine* (March 2003), at <http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Mar2003/wrenprint0303.html>; and compare Desai's lecture, 'Neo-liberalism and its Discontents'.

²¹ Desai, 'New Tools'.



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benefit to them.²² The religious composition of NSMs is diverse; a preponderance of their Christian members will be African Independent or Pentecostal, and the problem has already been mentioned of activism being used for proselytization. It seems, however, important that some kind of spiritual accompaniment be available for those who might seek it. A place to start might be Jon Sobrino's insistence that 'the unified duality of spirit and practice expresses the totality of the human being',²³ alongside Albert Nolan's recent strong reaffirmation of the need for a truly holistic spirituality, rooted in justice, of the self in relation to others, community, world and God, 'one seamless experience of moving out of our self-centredness and isolation into union with all that is'.²⁴

An approach to the *Spiritual Exercises* proposed most recently by Dean Brackley might prove fruitful.²⁵ While not downplaying its personal dimension, Brackley reads the *Spiritual Exercises* as promoting a 'spirituality for solidarity', focusing on 'transcendence without

²² Quite a few of the NSM activists have commented on how they suffer from emotional burn-out and sometimes chaotic personal lives. ('Our own lives are fucked up', one activist said candidly, 'we need something to renew ourselves.')

²³ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988), 43.

²⁴ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Cape Town and Maryknoll, NY: Double Storey Press/Orbis, 2006), 176.

²⁵ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

mystification, decoding theological language as much as possible', and starting from human experience:

Our lives are too rich for precise scientific explanation, ordinary common-sense discourse, or both to encompass. If the holy Mystery called God pervades our lives, as I believe it does, then we need religious symbols to point to reality as it actually is.²⁶

Drawing us skilfully through each Week, he shows us how—without doing violence to them—the Exercises may be used to inspire and nourish those who struggle for justice. Awareness of our own sinfulness (important even—perhaps especially—for activists) becomes additionally an awareness of our participation in structural sin (including the sins associated with unrestrained global neoliberalism).²⁷ The conversion that we pray for becomes a commitment to the Christ who is present in the poor and a resolve to do what we can for greater justice. The Two Standards entail the solidarity implicit in rejecting worldly social status and advantage. Following Christ in the Second Week and going through the discernment process invite us to critical engagement with the world. The cost of such discipleship is expressed in the Third Week through Christ's passion—which is also an expression of God's solidarity and 'draws us closer to Christ and deeper into the procession of human suffering'.²⁸ The resurrection of Christ, contemplated in the Fourth Week, is not only a historical event that is celebrated as a symbol of hope for all, especially for those who suffer, but also the beginning of a new world, a new creation freed from egoism, greed and death. The new life in the Spirit that 'makes us collaborators and multiplies the fruits of our labours' in God's work for justice is based not so much on 'measurable results as steadfast fidelity, frequently despite apparent results'.²⁹

Here, as elsewhere, Brackley's reading of the Exercises is closely consonant with the underlying secular spirituality of the NSMs in South Africa. The Exercises are an invitation to the 'praxis of discipleship—truth-telling, defending the weak, and challenging

²⁶ Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 9.

²⁷ Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 20–28.

²⁸ Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 185.

²⁹ Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 211.

injustice'.³⁰ The new struggle in South Africa is in some ways more complex, a longer haul, than the fight against apartheid. There have already been some successes, but many more failures.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that a Christian spiritual practice can make is to remind those involved in the struggle that God, however understood, named or unnamed, is with them. Some, probably mostly Christians, may have the opportunity to take up the Exercises, in whatever form, or seek spiritual direction. For them, this represents an invitation to see more clearly how their own lives may be moulded more closely to Christ's. But the primary value of such spiritual practice remains the enrichment and enhancement of the spirituality that they already have. For non-activists, let it be a challenge to compassion.

Anthony Egan SJ is a member of the Jesuit Institute, South Africa, based in Johannesburg. After training in history, politics and theology, he has taught at a number of universities and seminaries in South Africa and works mainly in the field of social ethics.

³⁰ Brackley, *Call to Discernment*, 248.