

# SPIRITUALITY, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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IT IS AN APPROPRIATE MOMENT for a review of Christian spirituality to consider the meaning of spirituality within a wider context. Much has been written on society and culture by sociologists and social anthropologists, and on spirituality by theologians, but little attempt has been made to consider the mutual interdependence of these three and reflect on the importance of historical time and location for spiritual ideas and practices whilst, in turn, such ideas and practices may act as powerful agents of transformation for society and culture.

It is also a particularly appropriate moment to reflect on the transformative potential of spirituality within our current global sociopolitical situation where we can perceive the outlines of what has been called a 'world civilization'. The Club of Rome has just published its new report on *The first global revolution*, describing a global situation of perhaps terrifying, but also hopeful complexity. Perhaps we are in the early stages of forming a new world society as different from today's society as was the post-industrial revolution from life in the preceding millennia. This new global revolution is not shaped by a single ideology, but by social, economic, technological, cultural and ethical factors. The report stresses that we possess a promising opportunity, one unlikely to be provided by history again, to shape a new understanding and new attitudes towards the world as a whole. Whilst contemporary society is confused about morals and ethics, and in social and educational chaos, it is essential for humanity to respond to this unique opportunity for a global revolution and find the wisdom needed to respond to it in a commensurate manner. Such upsurge of wisdom, which must feed the will to action, can probably only come through the inner development of each individual. Religions have attempted to foster this throughout history, but so far with few outward signs of success.<sup>1</sup> The appeal to inherited wisdom, to our global spiritual heritage, and to the inner development of each person in relationship with others can be understood as a momentous call of our own time to explore the powers of spirituality in contemporary society and culture. But

before we do so, it will be helpful to provide some foundational reflections on these terms and explore different cultural expressions of spirituality. We will then return to the theme of global spirituality and set spirituality within the context of our present time and place.

*Some clarifications on spirituality, society and culture*

It is quite difficult to assign a precise content to these three concepts which are so widely used without having clear definitions, though numerous ones have been suggested. Sociologists distinguish between different kinds of society in both past and present, yet the notion of society is also used in an overarching, universal sense as referring to human groups in general. There exist also numerous definitions of culture, but one may still quote the classic definition provided by E. B. Taylor in the late nineteenth century:

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (*Primitive culture*, 1871)

Culture so defined is possessed by human beings alone, created through the unique human ability of mind, imagination and will to assign meanings to things and events which cannot be grasped by the senses alone. Human creativity has brought forth material and non-material culture, i.e. objects, behaviour, institutions, language, ideas, beliefs, customs etc. There is no society without culture nor can there be a culture independent of the individuals sustaining it through their actions. Social anthropologists have tried to identify cultural patterns, interesting themes and ideals in different cultures, but they have also asked whether some patterns are universal in all cultures and others specific to some cultures only. Each culture (of a particular society, at a particular time and place) can be viewed as a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action containing within it a considerable range of diversity.

Culture is a human creation; it is linked to human imagination and creativity. However, from a religious point of view it is also linked to something greater than human, whether described as the sacred, the transcendent, the spirit, or God. From the perspective of the social sciences religions are cultural forms and creations—systems of beliefs and practices—whereas from a religious point of view they are founded on revelation, however much the latter may be clothed in and obscured by historical forms and cultural variations.

From a historical and merely human point of view different spiritualities can be seen as different cultural forms or the expression

of different religious ideals within diverse religious traditions. From the point of view of a person of faith and the life of religious praxis, spirituality must form part of the history of divine-human interaction, a breakthrough of the spirit into history and a piercing through beyond history. Spirituality, not as an idea or concept but as praxis, is resonant with longings for the permanent, eternal, everlasting, for wholeness, peace, joy and bliss which have haunted human beings throughout history and for which many are hungering today.

But this is anticipating our discussion. We first must clarify the concept of spirituality itself. Some authors feel uneasy with the word 'spirituality' or references to 'the spiritual' because they may be understood as dualistic notions in contrast to 'matter' or 'the material', the physical or the world. To some the concept seems a rather abstract and idealized one, too separate from other human concerns. Others prefer the notion of 'the spiritual' to that of 'the religious' because it is wider, less concrete and less institutionally bound than the latter. Others again consider 'the spiritual' and spirituality as the heart of religion, its very centre, encountered particularly through religious and mystical experience.

The word 'spirituality', though widely used, is surrounded by much terminological confusion. The subject matter of spirituality, however described, is a perennial human concern, but the way in which this concern is expressed and described is a particular development of modern culture, though not as recent as some authors seem to think. The word itself has its roots in the Christian tradition, but it has become universalized today and is used in connection with all religions, as well as in interfaith and secular contexts. Yet a succinct definition is hard to come by. Most dictionaries and encyclopaedias still do not list the word whilst they may refer to spiritualism, spiritual experience, spiritual development or spiritual disciplines. It is indicative, though somewhat puzzling, that the large *Encyclopaedia of religion* (ed M. Eliade, New York: Macmillan, 1987), written from a phenomenological perspective, only lists one entry on 'Christian spirituality' written from an insider's point of view, and has no comparative references to spirituality elsewhere. There is also no attempt to provide a critical discussion of the concept of spirituality in *The study of spirituality* (eds Ch. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold, London: SPCK, 1986) although a brief note on the word, written from a Christian perspective, is contained in the preface. There is also some recognition that the word is by no means limited to the Christian world as the book contains six chapters on 'Other

religions'; their content, however, consists largely of historical narratives describing ascetic, monastic and mystical practices.

There has been more discussion on terminological clarification on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest is the series *World spirituality: an encyclopaedic history of the religious quest* (25 volumes; New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985-) edited by Ewert Cousins who considers spirituality as concerned with the inner movements of the human spirit towards the real, the transcendent, the divine. Spirituality is understood as wisdom intended to help one follow a path, guiding one on a journey towards the goal of spiritual realization. Cousins also emphasizes that following such a path today should include dialogue with other spiritual traditions in the world. Spirituality may thus be seen as a faith's wisdom to live that faith. Such a position recognizes the vital relationship between faith and spirituality: spirituality is lived experience. But spirituality also relates to theology, to an intellectual discipline of study and critical reflection, and this discipline has grown into independent study and degree programmes over the last few decades.

We can therefore distinguish three distinct, though interdependent, levels in the understanding of spirituality: first, spirituality as lived experience or praxis; second, spirituality as a teaching that grows out of this praxis and guides it in turn (i.e. the spiritual disciplines and guidelines to holiness and perfection found in different religions); third, the systematic, comparative and critical study of spiritual experiences and teachings which has developed recently in a new way. All three levels, in their occurrence and expression, are closely intertwined with other sociocultural factors which shape the practice and understanding of spirituality during particular historical periods, in different religions, and in different places where the same faith is practised.

#### *Diverse cultural expressions of spirituality*

The modern emphasis on spirituality goes together with an emphasis on the subject, on individual self-development and a more differentiated understanding of human psychology. Traditionally, much of Christian spirituality developed within the cloister; it consisted of ascetic and monastic practices grounded in community and linked to the sacramental practice of the Church. If one considers spiritual experiences as finding different expressions which range from an emphasis on the more objective to the more subjective, one can say that earlier ages on the whole emphasized more the objective

pole, divine reality and transcendence, whilst today the emphasis lies more on the subjective side of experience, on immanence, inwardness, spiritual awareness and the discovery of the true, spiritual self. This is evident from some definitions of spirituality as lived experience. Contemporary writers speak of spirituality as 'an exploration into what is involved in becoming human' or an 'attempt to grow in sensitivity, to self, to others, to non-human creation and to God who is within and beyond this totality'.<sup>3</sup> Walter Principe has described spirituality as:

the way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection being sought.<sup>4</sup>

These definitions are rather abstract, but they emphasize the understanding of spirituality as an integral, holistic and dynamic force in human life, both for individual and community. From being rooted in the Christian tradition, where it has a long history in theology and religious practice, spirituality has now become a kind of universal code word for the search of direction and meaning at a time of crisis. In modern secular society spirituality is being 'rediscovered' as a lost or at least hidden dimension in a largely materialistic world.

Non-European languages do not seem to have an equivalent word for 'spirituality', just as they do not have identical concepts for what is called 'religion' in the West. Even in European languages the word 'spirituality' has occurred with different degrees of frequency and meaning in the past. Germans have adopted the word '*Spiritualität*' quite recently whilst the French have made wide use of '*spiritualité*' for some time. It comes as no surprise that many important surveys of the history of Christian spirituality come from French authors for whom the word itself is linked to a long history of debates surrounding mystical and ascetical devotion. Pioneering work on the study of spirituality was done in France—one only has to think of the great *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité* begun in 1932—but it is entirely focused on the Christian tradition, if not on Roman Catholic developments, and does not take a comparative approach.

Within Christianity alone, there exist many different schools of spirituality which developed in different countries or during different periods of history, whether one thinks of 'Spanish spirituality', 'French spirituality', 'Rhenish spirituality', 'Beguine spirituality', 'Russian Orthodox spirituality', or the spirituality of the desert

fathers, to name some random examples. The very existence of such different schools highlights the historical diversity of human religious self-understanding and activity, the widely varying responses to the discovery and unfolding of the spirit, the ever new, creative responses of faith to different circumstances. This diversity also demonstrates that there is no one universal spirituality, not even within one religious tradition; there are many particular 'spiritualities' linked to specific times and places, to different socio-political-economic conditions, and to different forms of consciousness, even though it may ultimately belong to the very essence of spirituality to transcend the contingencies of all of these.

Several western writers make the mistaken claim, however, that the expanding usage of the term 'spirituality' has only occurred in the last few decades. Sandra Schneiders writes:

Before Vatican II it [spirituality] was an almost exclusively Roman Catholic term. The term is being gradually adopted by Protestantism, Judaism, non-Christian religions, and even such secular movements as feminism and Marxism, to refer to something that, while difficult to define, is experienced as analogous in all of these movements.<sup>5</sup>

This is contradicted by historical evidence; the term was already used in the nineteenth century when it was adopted by Hindu reformers writing in English. The most famous was Swami Vivekananda, but others preceded him in contrasting Indian spirituality with western materialism and in proclaiming that India possessed treasures of spirituality which the West still had to discover. Exploring the theme of the complementarity of East and West these reformers recognized that India needed the material development of the West—social and political organization, science and technology—but that in turn India had a mission to proclaim spiritual truths to the West which would complement and crown the external, material development of western people. This is not the place to analyse this particular cultural contrast between East and West which continues to be made;<sup>6</sup> I only mention it as an example of a more diffuse understanding of spirituality at an earlier period than is generally recognized.

In thinking about spirituality we are thus faced with two kinds of diversity: there are the different schools of spirituality as lived and taught praxis within all religious traditions; there are also the different models of understanding the concept of spirituality and of studying the diverse historical expressions which in turn are influenced by the forms of consciousness developed at particular times.

Looking at Christian spirituality we can see how different developments of western culture have shaped the praxis of Christian spirituality in the past, whether one thinks of the socio-cultural conditions of the late Roman empire, of Byzantium, of the influence of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the Enlightenment or modern science and technology. In the past, much of Christian spirituality was developed by a social, cultural and intellectual élite which alone had the necessary leisure for cultivating mind and spirit, for developing an alternative to the dominant culture of their times. For Catholics the predominant locus of sanctification was the cloister, a separation from mainstream society and an insertion into an alternative parallel community.

Past spiritual advice is often based on strong dualistic notions dividing the ordinary world of work and matter from that of the spirit, body from mind, males from females. With the rise of Protestantism the locus of sanctification shifted from the cloister to the ordinary life in the world with its day-to-day relationships and responsibilities. Spiritual formation was no longer pursued in separate institutions but occurred in the world at large. A new 'spirituality-of-being-in-the-world' developed which was not without precedents, however, in earlier Christian teaching. Yet if one reads the Christian spiritual classics, one is struck by the strong emphasis on renunciation and asceticism, sometimes developed to pathological and morbid extremes. One is similarly struck by the discovery that what appears on the surface as gender-neutral spiritual advice, addressed to apparently asexual beings, in practice often turns out to be the advice of male spiritual mentors to their male disciples so that ascetic writings, not only in Christianity but throughout world religious literature, contain many anti-feminist and sexist passages which are entirely unacceptable from a contemporary point of view.

The history of Christianity knows of the parallel existence of two models of spirituality—the ascetic/monastic model of renunciation spirituality and the model of what, for want of a better word, might be called the 'householder spirituality', a term taken from Indian religions where both these models are also present. In Islam and Judaism only the latter is known, whereas during much of Christian history the former was dominant.

### *Spirituality and contemporary culture*

The question facing us now is: how far are past models of spirituality appropriate or adequate for contemporary culture? In

terms of the diversity of spiritual practice and of the understanding of spirituality today, there is no doubt that there are strong historical links with the past, but also a number of discontinuities. We have to deal with a new order of complexity, not only in our culture but also in the understanding and practice of spirituality. I concur with Ewert Cousins that interfaith dialogue must be considered as a new phase in the human spiritual quest. He writes that:

it may well be that the meeting of spiritual paths—the assimilation not only of one's own spiritual heritage but of that of the human community as a whole—is the distinctive spiritual journey of our time.<sup>7</sup>

The transformations of society, culture and consciousness have deep repercussions on the role of religion in general and on spirituality in particular. In turn a rightly understood and practised spirituality might give direction and meaning to these transformations.

The process of social and cultural change has been greatly accelerated in recent years. The innovations in communications, the experience of social, racial and religious pluralism, the exponential world population growth with ever greater competition for decreasing world resources, and the revolutionary changes in geopolitical forces, have been very unsettling for many individuals and groups. We have not yet developed the necessary spiritual and moral resources to deal with these developments at either a social or individual level. What spiritual resources do the world faiths possess to respond to the great global threats of poverty, war and ecological disaster? Each faith community needs to examine its own spiritual resources, but in order to develop a spirituality commensurate with our global needs, we need to develop a new kind of spirituality which has been called 'global spirituality' by Ewert Cousins and others.<sup>8</sup>

An important writer on and practitioner of such a new kind of spirituality in a global context was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose works are mostly out of print and whose ideas, sadly, find little mention in most contemporary works on spirituality. He perceived with extraordinary clarity the complexity of both society and consciousness, caught up in an accelerated dynamic of transformation. His entire vision is set within a global perspective at a remarkably early date. Within his thought 'the phenomenon of spirituality', to which he devoted a special essay in 1937,<sup>9</sup> took a central place, for spirituality provides the deepest energy resources for human action and community, for building the spirit of one earth. In other works



he spoke of a 'new mysticism' or a 'mysticism of action', understood as a new, holistic spirituality which works in and through all human realities rather than apart from them. He contrasted this new kind of spirituality with the ascetic and world-denying features of many spiritualities of the past. He was searching for a transformational spirituality commensurate with a cosmos in spiritual transformation wherein personal, social and global developments are not seen as apart, but as closely interdependent. Several interpreters of Teilhard's thought have described his spirituality in entirely traditional terms whereas close attention must be paid to the elements of newness in his approach to spirituality which meets the needs of contemporary culture in a way that many other spiritual writers do not. Whilst others tend to stress a personal, individualistic approach to inner development and transformation of self, Teilhard has a masterly grasp of the dynamic interconnections between the spiritual development of the individual person, of small groups and communities, and of global society.<sup>10</sup>

Teilhard's integral understanding of spirituality as *transformative* spirit in action provides a new paradigm for the practice of spirituality in contemporary culture. Spirituality has come out of the cloister, out of religious institutions, into the world at large. The search for new forms of spirituality which integrate action and contemplation, social and personal worlds, outward and inward is a search which one also finds articulated elsewhere, for example in the contemporary women's movement, in new religious movements, in the ecology and peace movement. It also expresses itself in many activist movements and in the search for a new global ethic<sup>11</sup> guided by wisdom and insight. These aims are also shared by the conciliar process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation initiated by the World Council of Churches. As the Club of Rome succinctly states, the pursuit of wisdom is the essential challenge that faces humanity. We need a common vision of what we want the world to be, so that we can shape it and arrive at a greater equity and balance between spiritual and material needs.

Reading the spiritual classics is no longer enough. Seeking spiritual formation and following a spiritual discipline is necessary, but not sufficient for the spirituality of the future. Whilst theology must be rooted in spiritual commitment and oriented towards transformational praxis to remain meaningful, spirituality must permeate the personal and political, it must animate our thought, action and imagination so that we can work for the transformation of the whole world and all life within it.

Spirituality cannot remain the privilege of a few; if it were, it would become sterile and irrelevant. There is an urgent need to work for a broader development of spiritual awareness and sensibility among all people. To be attentive to the call of the spirit in contemporary culture requires a creative, dynamic response—only a transformed action-oriented spirituality can respond to the hopes and agonies of our suffering world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Alexander King and Bertrand Schneider, *The first global revolution* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Clarifying discussions are found in the articles by W. Principe, 'Towards defining spirituality', *Studies in religion/Sciences religieuses* 12/2 (1983), pp 127–141; and Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., 'Spirituality in the academy', the introductory chapter in *Modern Christian spirituality: methodological and historical essays* (ed Bradley C. Hanson), Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990, pp 15–37.

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Churches Council, *Working party report on 'spirituality'*, Dunblane: Scottish Churches House, 1977, p 3. The emphasis on the self is also found in Martin Israel, *Summons to life: the search for identity through the spiritual*, London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> W. Principe, *op. cit.*, p 136.

<sup>5</sup> S. M. Schneiders, *op. cit.*, p 18.

<sup>6</sup> I have analysed the historical development of this contrast in *Indian spirituality and western materialism: an image and its function in the reinterpretation of modern Hinduism*, Ideas for Action Series, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1985. This contrast is continued to be used uncritically not only by contemporary neo-Hindu missionaries, but also by Christian writers, for example by Bede Griffiths, *The marriage of East and West*, London: Collins, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> See Ewert Cousins' preface (p xiv) to the series on *World spirituality in Christian spirituality*, vol I (eds B. McGuin, J. Meyendorff and J. Leclercq), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> See Cousins' preface of the book quoted in note 7, and also R. Muller, *New Genesis: shaping a global spirituality*, New York: Doubleday, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> The essay is found in P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Human energy*, London: Collins, 1969, pp 93–112.

<sup>10</sup> There is no space to discuss this important essay in any more detail here. I have done this in my article 'Spiritual disciplines and Teilhard de Chardin's understanding of spirituality' in J. Duerlinger (ed), *Ultimate reality and spiritual discipline*, New York: Paragon House, 1984, pp 118–137. Teilhard's understanding of a new mysticism is discussed in my book *Towards a new mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and eastern religions*, London: Collins, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> See Hans Küng, *Global responsibility: in search of a new world ethic*, London: SCM Press, 1990.