

**Spirituality of Resistance**  
**Paper presented at the WCC Internal Encounter of**  
**Churches, Agencies and Other Partners**  
**on the World Bank and IMF**

**Geneva, 12 September 2003**

I. Why introduce spirituality into this context?

The topic of this session stands out somewhat among the other - more technical - subjects. So you may have asked yourselves: Why introduce spirituality into this context? What does spirituality have to do with wealth creation, with economic globalization or the commodification of public goods?

Of course, in one sense one would expect church people, especially theologians, to talk about spirituality and about values. They are the specialists in this area, while economists know best about the dynamics of the economic and financial system and how it actually works. As long as religious and spiritual leaders stay in their field of competence and talk about spirituality, the roles are clear. Spirituality refers to people's personal and most intimate convictions and motivations, whereas the economy follows objective laws that are reflected in mathematical formulas and models. The economy deals with the material side of human life, with the production and distribution of goods and services. Of course, people - at least some people - may also need spirituality and religion for their self-fulfilment, but to provide for this need falls outside the realm of the economy and is therefore usually neglected in the basic assumptions which enter economic analyses and calculations.

Why, then, should business people, bankers, politicians and representatives of the international financial institutions seek dialogue with religious and spiritual leaders? Why should the President of the World Bank, together with the former Archbishop of Canterbury, initiate the World Faith Development Dialogue? Why should Professor Klaus Schwab, the President of the World Economic Forum, seek ways to form an advisory council of religious and spiritual leaders to accompany the efforts of the Forum?

These initiatives do reflect a beginning change in the understanding of religion and spirituality and their influence not only on people's private lives, but even in the public realm, including the economic and financial system. After four development decades, it becomes more and more obvious that the dominant policies were based on a one-sided understanding of how people act in society and therefore did not achieve the expected results. In many cultures, religion and spirituality continue to play a central role in shaping social interactions. The process of secularization which has led to the privatization of religion in many western societies has not spread to other cultures in the same way as was expected. In fact, we are

witnessing a resurgence of religion not only as a spiritual, but also as a political force, not least in the context of responding to the impact of globalization.

What is more: we become increasingly aware that the functioning of the economy and of the financial system presupposes and relies on a social fabric which is maintained through internalized values, attitudes and motivations which in turn have their roots in religion and are being regenerated through spirituality. This "social capital" which is reflected in virtues like trust, faithfulness, mutuality and solidarity, has traditionally been taken for granted in economic analyses and thus not been accounted for. This is all the more surprising since the traditional language regarding economic and financial transactions is full of references to this foundation of social capital. Without "trust", "credit" and the readiness for "sacrifice" and the expectation of "redemption", no economy and no financial system would be able to function.

Today we realize that the prevailing economic and financial policies which have been given global validity through the international financial institutions, have been using up the social capital which had been accumulated through generations and centuries without replenishing. In fact, the values promoted by these policies reflect a reductionist view of the human condition in terms of the *homo oeconomicus* and continue to undercut and erode the social fabric without which the economy itself gets caught in contradictions and dilemmas which it cannot solve with its own means. Thus we see among economic and political leaders, including those responsible in the international financial institutions, an increasing interest in questions of social and religious values. The Global Ethic project of Hans Küng responds to this interest and finds broad support even among leading bankers.

This interest should be taken seriously, and many religious and spiritual leaders have responded readily since they share the concern. However, important as religion and spirituality might be for regenerating lost social capital, they cannot just produce it as the economy produces goods and services. Furthermore, they will fail if they avoid entering with their counterparts into a critical review of the very reductionist view of the human condition which underlies the prevailing economic paradigm. Even less must they allow themselves to be used to lend legitimacy to an economic and financial system which has failed to deliver according to its own criteria.

The Russian social philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev is often quoted as having said: "My daily bread is a material problem. The daily bread of my neighbour is a spiritual problem." In that sense, spirituality indeed belongs into this context. But then it will and it must challenge the prevailing logic of the economy which assumes that following one's own self-interest is the most effective way of contributing to the well-being of all. Spirituality refers to that vital network of relationships within which all life, including human life, moves and is being sustained and which cannot be nurtured by satisfying material needs. Translating this understanding of the human condition into the language of the economy would mean to place the "common good" above the satisfaction of individual self-interest and to acknowledge cooperation and mutuality as decisive factors in interpreting and understanding economic life instead of focusing on competition as the main driving force.

## II. What, then, do we talk about?<sup>1</sup>

In this opening part of my reflections, I have spoken in very general terms about "spirituality" and "religion" and assumed that spirituality refers to that source of energy which generates and regenerates a sense of purpose and recognition of values in social life and thus nurtures the social fabric. With these references I have followed a development in current public discourse where spirituality has begun to attract renewed interest. In our increasingly pluralist societies, there is a growing interest in different forms and practices of spirituality, and we even observe the development of a market catering for the spiritual needs of people. Offering spiritual guidance can even become a new form of business, particularly among people whose material needs are more than satisfied.

On the other hand, we see a renewed quest for spirituality among those who are struggling for justice and human dignity; for them spirituality refers to the energy which sustains people in the struggle. Experiences of defeat and prolonged oppression, but also occasional moments of victory and liberation, have led many of those engaged in people's movements to re-appropriate the values of their spiritual traditions. It should be clear from these brief indications that spirituality has become a notion with relatively loose contours. For any responsible discourse it is necessary, therefore, to indicate what we are talking about.

Traditionally, "spirituality" stands for a life of prayer and contemplation, for liturgy and the attitude of waiting upon God. In many traditions, spirituality has been associated with the disciplined life of monastic communities which have consciously separated themselves from everyday life and its conflicting demands. For centuries, this ascetic tradition of spirituality, sustained by a life under the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, has been upheld vicariously by those with a special vocation for prayer and contemplation. It was recognized that ordinary people could not submit themselves to those demands of a spiritual life except occasionally on retreats, pilgrimages and during the appointed periods of fasting.

However, the ecumenical movement has contributed to the rediscovery and re-affirmation of another dimension of spirituality which has always been alive in the church and not least among the monastic orders. From the early Benedictine motto *ora et labora* to the programmatic linkage between struggle and contemplation by the Taizé Community, from the missionary spirituality of the simple presence to the affirmation of a *liturgy after the liturgy* in Orthodox thought, there have been numerous attempts to live a life of spirituality in the midst of worldly struggles.

At the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975, the Moderator of the Central Committee, Dr. M.M. Thomas, pointed to this newly discovered dimension of spirituality with the phrase "spirituality for combat".<sup>2</sup> He did not propose a spiritual upgrading of political struggles, nor was he interested in instrumentalizing spirituality as a moral preparation for combat. Rather, he wanted to point to the fact that the struggles for justice and human dignity have a spiritual dimension of their own. In fact, the powers that be, whether political, economic or financial, tend

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<sup>1</sup> In the section I have drawn on two previous publications of mine: *Life in the Spirit*, chapter 6 (pp. 56-61) in: *The Political Economy of the Holy Spirit*, by J. de Santa Ana, K. Raiser and U. Duchrow, WCC/Geneva 1990; *Moral and Spiritual Formation*, chapter III.2 (pp. 148-159) in: Konrad Raiser, *For a Culture of Life. Transforming Globalization and Violence*, WCC/Geneva 2002

<sup>2</sup> *Breaking Barriers-Nairobi 1975*, ed. by David Paton, WCC/Geneva 1976, p.240

to cultivate their own spirituality, calling for sacrifices and asking for trust and faithful allegiance. The struggle for justice very often is a struggle about true and false spirituality, about true and false worship, or about serving God or an idol. M.M. Thomas added: "Let us not forget that our struggle is not merely against others but also against ourselves, not against flesh and blood, but against the false spiritualities of the idolatry of race, nation and class and of the self-righteousness of ideals which reinforce collective structures of inhumanity and oppression".<sup>3</sup>

The impulse provided by M.M. Thomas to place the reflection about spirituality into the context of worldly struggles has opened up a discussion which has found its echo in subsequent assemblies. Thus, following this line of thought, the Vancouver Assembly affirmed that "the spiritual struggle of the church must involve it in the struggle of the poor, the oppressed, the alienated and the exiled. The Spirit is among struggling people."<sup>4</sup> And the assembly added the recommendation: "That the churches explore forms through which Christian spirituality is manifested in the struggle for justice and human dignity."<sup>5</sup>

In the period between the Assemblies at Vancouver (1983) and Canberra (1991) the search for "a spirituality for our times" was the focus of intensive ecumenical dialogue and reflection. The report of Section IV of the Canberra Assembly under the title "Holy Spirit - transform and sanctify us!" summarizes the affirmations on ecumenical spirituality arising from these dialogues in the following terms: "Spirituality - in its manifold forms - is about receiving energy for life, being cleansed, inspired and set free, in every way being conformed to Christ. An ecumenical spirituality for our times should be incarnational, here and now, life-giving, rooted in the scriptures and nourished by prayer; it should be communitarian in celebrating, centred around the eucharist, expressed in service and witness, trusting and confident. It will inevitably lead to suffering; it is open to the wider oikoumene, joyful and hopeful. Its source and guide is the action of the Holy Spirit. It is lived and sought in community and for others. It is an ongoing process of formation and discipleship."<sup>6</sup>

The aspects of this description which are of particular significance for our reflection are the understanding of spirituality as energy for life; its incarnational character or rootedness in the here and now, in the world of human life and struggles; its orientation towards community and its openness to the wider oikoumene.

Gwen Cashmore and Joan Puls, animators of this ecumenical dialogue after the Vancouver Assembly, built their introduction to an ecumenical spirituality around the notions of openness, connectedness and earthedness.<sup>7</sup> *Openness* is the ability to transcend oneself, one's horizon; it is the willingness to make room for the other, to open oneself to the action of the Spirit; it is the manifestation of humility, the readiness not to insist on being right but to make oneself vulnerable and to be transformed in the encounter with others. *Connectedness* is the recognition that all life is sustained by bonds of community. All life participates in a delicate web of interconnections, in the flow of energy originating in God the Creator. Connectedness as a mark of spirituality finds its expression in the recognition and

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<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.240

<sup>4</sup> *Gathered for Life*, ed. by David Gill, WCC/Geneva 1983, p. 85

<sup>5</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 89

<sup>6</sup> *Signs of the Spirit*, ed. by Michael Kinnamon, WCC/Geneva 1991, p.112

<sup>7</sup> See Gwen Cashmore and Joan Puls, *Clearing the Way: En Route to an Ecumenical Spirituality*, WCC/Geneva 1990

practice of cooperation, reciprocity and mutuality over a culture based on self-interest and competitiveness. *Earthedness*, finally, binds the ecumenical spirituality to the everyday conditions of life at a given time and place. Recognizing its finiteness and limitations, in constant dialogue with its culture and social environment, an earthed spirituality takes seriously the temptation to worship false gods; it accepts the task of 'discerning the Spirit' and nurtures the capacity for resistance, for endurance and staying power in the struggle to unmask the powers and principalities of this world (cf. Eph. 6:10-13).

From an Asian perspective, Masao Takenaka has pointed to the way in which images and symbols rooted in the local culture can nurture the power of spiritual imagination and shape the human sense of responsibility. In an essay on Asian spirituality entitled *God is Rice*, he interprets a poem by the Korean Christian poet Kim Chi Ha, *Heaven is Rice*, which meditates on the highly symbolic character of rice as the daily food for people in Asia. "The Chinese character for peace (*wa*) literally means harmony. It derives from two words: one is rice, and the other is mouth. It means that unless we share rice together with all people, we will not have peace. When every mouth in the whole inhabited world is filled with daily food, then we can have peace."<sup>8</sup> This leads to two important considerations: "When we say that God is rice, we do not mean that we should worship rice. We take rice as the symbol of God's gift of life. ... Second, if we acknowledge that God is rice, the symbolic source of the whole creation, and if we accept nature as our companion rather than as an object to be conquered or exploited, there will be a decisive change in our attitude towards the ecological issues."<sup>9</sup>

This approach to spirituality as rooted in the culture of people, especially the people of the 'Third World', is reflected also in the report of the 1992 Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in Nairobi. In his introduction, K.C. Abraham quotes the preparatory statement by the Theological Commission of EATWOT which, referring to the same poem by Kim Chi Ha, says: "The cry of the Third World is a cry for life. It is a cry for freedom and dignity that constitute life as human. It is a cry for the rice and bread that sustains life as well as for the community that symbolizes and grows from rice and bread eaten in company. ... Rice and bread for one person alone may not be spiritual because it may be selfish. ... Or in the words of Nikolai Berdiaev, rice for myself alone may be unspiritual, but rice for my hungry sister and brother is spiritual. Thus our cry for life is a cry for the bread and the rice of life and for the spirituality of all the activities, processes and relationships bound up with producing and sharing rice and bread. Ours is a cry for a spirituality of and for life."<sup>10</sup>

The final statement of the assembly, entitled "A Cry for Life", refers especially to the cries of women, of black, indigenous and hispanic peoples as well as to the ecological movement. It states: "We live our spirituality in creative response to the cry for life, the cry for God. We celebrate our spirituality in songs, rituals and symbols which show the energizing spirit, animating the community to move together in response to God. ... There is no room for romanticizing spirituality. It is a cry for life, a power to resist death and the agents of death. Spirituality is the name we give to that which provides us with the strength to go on, for it is the

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<sup>8</sup> Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith*, WCC/Geneva 1986, p.18f

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21f

<sup>10</sup> See *Spirituality of the Third World*, ed. by K.C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, Orbis/Maryknoll NY 1994 p.3f

assurance that God is in the struggle."<sup>11</sup> And the statement describes this spirituality as a spirituality of commitment, rooted in a radical conversion to the God of liberation and life and able to inspire the search for alternatives beyond capitalism and socialism.

### III. Can spirituality and resistance go together?

It was the purpose of the preceding section to clarify the understanding of spirituality which motivates us and provides orientation in the encounter with those who carry responsibility in the present economic and financial system. The ecumenical discussion over these past 30 years of intense involvement in the development debate and in the struggles for justice and human dignity has led us to embrace a politically engaged spirituality which cannot simply be subsumed under the generalized notions of religious spiritual praxis which comprises everything from eastern forms of contemplation to modern programmes of spiritual self-realization. In particular, spirituality in this understanding transcends the individual and the closed horizon of the material conditions of life. It is the praxis of affirming and caring for life as a sacred gift from the Creator which is being sustained only as it is being shared in community. By the same token, spirituality as the energy for life in all its fullness implies the commitment to resist all forces, powers and systems which reduce, deny or destroy life.

The background document under the title "Lead Us Not into Temptation", which was prepared by the WCC to assist churches in their responses to the policies of international financial institutions, is guided by the same understanding of spirituality. "There is ... a long tradition of Christian spirituality which has been critical of the powers that be, even ecclesiastic. This tradition is based on loyalty to God above loyalty to institutions, ideologies and structures. This spirituality has given the powerless the strength and courage to oppose those that abuse power."<sup>12</sup> It emphasizes that spirituality embraces all dimensions of life and is linked to the social, cultural, environmental and historical conditions of societies and their value systems. In this relational understanding of spirituality, God or the transcendent, the individual person, the human community and nature are intimately intertwined. "This means that a spirituality that speaks only about the individual, or which believes the individual is the only basis for spirituality, must be questioned. All dimensions must be equally valued as it is the case in so many social, cultural and religious traditions that value life in community higher than the dominant western culture. Christians in various church traditions embrace a spirituality of life in community and of combating evil in confronting the powers of death. They stand against powers, be they economic, political, cultural or social, which deny to human beings, and the rest of creation, the possibilities of living a spiritual life. By extension, structures which break down the basic nature of fellowship of humankind and nature must also be named and opposed."<sup>13</sup>

A traditional understanding of spirituality would have questioned the very title of this presentation. From that perspective, spirituality and resistance stand for diametrically opposed forms of praxis. However, as the background document in its third section shows, the biblical tradition is full of evidence for a publicly engaged spirituality, including acts of non-violent resistance. In particular, the Hebrew

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197f

<sup>12</sup> *Lead Us Not Into Temptation. Churches' Response to the Policies of International Financial Institutions*, WCC/Geneva 2002, p. 27

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

prophets exemplify a praxis of spirituality which challenges unjust structures and unmasks the misuse of power. The same is true for the gospel accounts of the proclamation and action of Jesus. The story of the temptation of Jesus can be considered as a model of a spirituality of resistance. And the Apostle Paul frequently uses the imagery of struggle to describe the Christian spiritual life, a struggle not against flesh and blood and with weapons that cause harm or even death and destruction, but a struggle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places", fought with the weapons of truth, righteousness and faith to proclaim the gospel of peace (cf. Eph. 6:10-17).

From this perspective, to speak of a "spirituality of resistance" is not only entirely appropriate, but makes us aware that the spiritual confrontation with all forms of exercising power which refuse to acknowledge their accountability before God and the human community is inevitable. Spirituality stands for the active presence of the power of God in human life which aims at enhancing life for all and defends those who are being excluded, the poor, the strangers and those who have been declared outcasts. Therefore, spirituality will have to challenge prophetically any form of power which sets itself absolute and is not legitimized by serving the common good. It will have to unmask false claims of authority and must seek ways of resisting policies and practices which serve to increase the power and wealth of the few while neglecting the basic needs and the right to life of the many.

Resistance can take many forms - from direct political intervention to symbolic actions, like prayer, fasting, public liturgies, boycotts, etc. Resistance as a form of spirituality does not follow the political logic which counts gains and losses and aims at effective change. Resistance is primarily a form of Christian witness, an affirmation of loyalty and obedience to God as the ultimate source of life over against all other claims of power and authority, whether political, economic, ethnic or cultural.

It is a spiritual resistance also against the absolute truth claims which exclude any alternative or dissent as well as against the self-righteous dichotomies of good and evil. One of the hidden ways of exercising power over people's lives and minds has been the claim that after the collapse of the communist system there was no alternative to the prevailing economic paradigm which was considered as reflecting the laws of nature. Any dissent was therefore treated as misguided, irrational or potentially dangerous and had to be suppressed. This tendency to absolutize a particular economic paradigm has had a paralyzing effect on political imagination and has contributed to a sense of fatalism, fear and defensiveness among people. Spirituality transcends the closed horizon of the system in hope and in love and thus becomes a resistance movement against fatalism, resignation and fear.

At the same time, a spirituality of resistance must guard itself against falling into the trap of self-righteousness by claiming absolute moral and spiritual authority and demonizing those who exercise power, ascribing to them evil intentions. The prophets and Jesus have unmasked and condemned sinful structures, but Jesus has welcomed the sinners, offering them the newness of life in the kingdom of God.

To quote once more Dr. M.M. Thomas in his report presented to the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975. He speaks there of the "need to struggle for justice with an awareness of human solidarity in sin and acknowledgement of divine forgiveness". And then he continues: "In moving from the concept of charity to that of justice we have to come to recognize the need for changing existing power

structures. How can the struggles and conflicts to bring human dignity to the poor and the oppressed, even the power politics which oppose institutionalized violence with counter-violence, be kept within the spiritual framework of the ultimate power of the crucified Christ and the ultimate goal of reconciliation of all people in Christ?" And, quoting José Miguez Bonino, he concludes that "this requires recognition that 'our conflicts, even those which are most real and serious, can only be seen as penultimate. None of our battles is the final battle. None of our enemies facing us is the final enemy, the ultimate evil. Our contrasts are never black and white, always grey. Today's enemy must tomorrow be accepted at another level as a brother. Similarly, it prevents us from seeing our achievements in absolute terms'."<sup>14</sup>

#### IV. Signposts of a spirituality of resistance

Spirituality of resistance is an act of witness in the midst of the power struggles of our world. It calls for constant vigilance in the effort of "discerning the spirits". Such spiritual discernment is needed in the dialogue with the representatives of the international financial institutions to be able to distinguish between the officially proclaimed goals and the operational values which come into play in responding to concrete situations. Discernment is equally needed concerning the allegedly irrefutable logic of the prevailing economic paradigm or the claims of rationality put forward by the proponents of "political realism". Václav Havel has characterized this attitude of affirmative vigilance as "living in the truth". It is the courage to say "no" and to say "yes" which the message from the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948 described so powerfully.

The attempt to identify signposts for a spirituality of resistance leads us back to the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation in which the ecumenical community has been engaged between the WCC Assemblies at Vancouver in 1983 and Canberra in 1991. The process culminated in the World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation at Seoul in March 1990. The most important legacy from this convocation are the Ten Affirmations on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. The affirmations are meant as a confession of faith in God who promises life in wholeness and right relationships for all humanity. Each of the affirmations therefore begins with a statement which applies this faith in God's promise to specific situations of conflict around justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Where the traditional affirmations of faith were complemented by a rejection or condemnation of false beliefs and errors, the action-oriented affirmations of Seoul are being reinforced by the declaration "we will resist", leading up to a final act of commitment.

The convocation concluded with a service of mutual commitment and covenanting for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This service was built around the ten affirmations which name explicitly the signposts for a spirituality of resistance.

These include:

- We resist the exercise of authority that monopolizes power and prohibits transformation;
- we resist the forces that create and perpetuate poverty or accept it as inevitable or ineradicable;
- we resist the denial of rights to any racial, ethnic, cast or indigenous groups, and the exploitation of women and children;

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<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, 239f

- we resist the structures of patriarchy that perpetuate violence against women; which exclude their full participation in church and society;
- we resist policies that deny freedom of expression; that concentrate the communication power in the hands of a few;
- we resist doctrines of national security based on the use of weapons of mass destruction, military interventions, and occupations;
- we resist the attitude to creation which treats it only as a resource for human exploitation;
- we resist all human greed that makes land a commodity, which denies the bonds between land and people; which devastates the earth for profit;
- we resist authority that abuses, violates or exploits children and young people;
- we resist all systems and structures that violate human rights; that tolerate torture, disappearances, extra-judicial executions and the death penalty.<sup>15</sup>

These signposts for a spirituality of resistance have not lost their validity in the 14 years that have passed since the Seoul Convocation. On the contrary, they continue to stand as a clear witness to an alternative system of values and offer specific criteria for the process of spiritual discernment. They do not prescribe any particular form of action, but they can serve to provide orientation for those engaging in dialogue about the policies of the international financial institutions.

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<sup>15</sup> *Now is the Time*, Final Document and other Texts, World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation Seoul 1990, WCC/Geneva 1990, p. 48ff