

Spirituality and Development: Challenges and Opportunities

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1. I have been asked, like the other speakers, to begin by stating where I am coming from on this topic of Spirituality and Development.

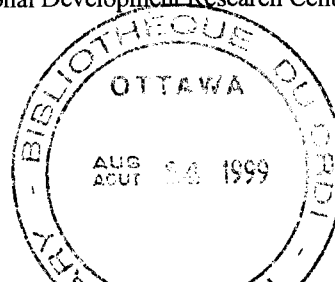
- I am a career development worker; 5 years in CUSO and other NGOs, 16 years in CIDA and 5 years in IDRC. I have lived and worked in Latin America and Africa for close to 10 of those years.
- I am a believing and practicing Catholic, which is to say, rooted in a spiritual and religious tradition that goes back 2000 years and beyond that, through our Judaic roots, almost 2000 more.

I am talking to you, therefore, as one who is a Believer in two world-views. And the reason why I have come to this issue of Spirituality and Development is that, for most of my career, the Development World-View has been one whose discourse made no space for an explicit recognition and articulation of the principles underlying my Religious World-View, and too often my Religious World-View provided too little in the line of insight and example for the practical decisions I had to take as a manager of development programs.

2. I spoke to you the other night of the path that led IDRC to question the limits of the scientific and technological model of development, with its economic parameters of purpose and success, and to seek to understand better the relationship between ethical and spiritual belief systems and the conventional development paradigm that donor agencies and the international community have imposed upon the countries of the South. You have seen the report of the project that Bill Ryan carried out for us. What I would like to do for the next 10-15 minutes is to share with you some of the insights that I have acquired, or re-discovered, in the process of this project as well as over the past four days. It is a personal reflection and I apologize for failing to do justice to what has been said by many of you.

3. Let me preface this by stating what 'Spirituality' means for me. It is not Ethics or Morality, although it underpins and, ultimately, validates or invalidates ethical and moral positions. It is not Religion: Religion is the formalized, socialized and ritualized articulation of a shared spirituality. Spirituality, for me, is first and foremost four things:

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- ★ **a personal relationship to an Ultimate, Transcendent Source of all Being**, which for lack of a better word I would like to go on calling God. This God is not an emanation of my consciousness, nor some blind, natural cosmic energy; it is a spiritual being that Creates, Knows and Loves. Those activities are its nature and, therefore, characterize the relationship that should exist between me and It.
- ★ **a relationship to the rest of that God's creation** - to other humans and to Nature in its fullness. My relationship to Other (human and non-human) must also reflect its source: it must be creative, intelligent and loving. My life takes place within that triadic relationship: God, Creation and Me.
- ★ **a responsibility** that derives from my very existence as a creature of God, to nurture my own growth and that of the world around me towards the completeness and fulfillment intended by God - to be, in a way, a co-Creator with It.
- ★ **a struggle** to overcome within myself and in the world around me the factors and forces that inhibit our progression towards that completeness. Failure to struggle against them diminishes me and diminishes my relationships - my spirituality.

As a Christian, I also believe that this God has projected itself into History through a human being called Jesus Christ, and that I continue to have a personal relationship with God through Christ and through the institution that he founded.

Spirituality, then, is a living thing and like all living things it must be nourished and grow. I have a tremendous respect for those who have discovered this dimension of the human condition from a 'cold start', without having been 'hot-wired' or born and nurtured in a religious tradition that has been reflecting on spirituality for thousands of years. I believe that - in the most literal sense of the word (no pun intended) - they have been hearing the voice of God, a God they may not even recognize or believe in. And I feel ashamed when I think of how I have in the past looked and spoken with condescension of the lack of sophistication in their voyage of discovery.

4. There are a number of challenges facing those of us who, individually or institutionally, would pursue a greater degree of spirituality. These are not new or profound, they are important and have been borne out through history:

- ☞ the first is the temptation to view **Spirituality as a means**, and not to respect it as an end in itself. We see some of that in aid agencies that look at religious organizations only as useful instruments for delivering aid, but do not recognize or respect their identity and integrity, or try to make them what they are not. We see it also in the 'values and spirituality industry' that is springing up among organizational change consultants, who are pushing 'Spirituality in the Workplace' on the grounds that it is something that is good for bottom line productivity and for worker morale.
- ☞ the second challenge is **Spirituality as self-gratification**, as a 'Me-thing' that begins and ends with 'MY inner self'. Spirituality that is self-centred will lead to pietism, passiveness and sentimentality; it will not lead to a commitment to work for the betterment of God's creation

(which means working for the love of Others, against injustice, ignorance, etc). Spirituality cannot withdraw from the World, it must be incarnated in the world - that is the meaning of what St John stated in the opening words of his Gospel...that the Word has become Flesh.

- ☞ a third challenge is **Spirituality as faddishness**, as the flavor of the month. Spirituality that presents itself as an easy and non-threatening explanation for complex, difficult problems is a fraud. Spirituality requires rigour and a built-in crap detector. It is something that must be worked at according to its nature - with intelligence, with love and with creativity - or it will wither or degenerate into self-delusion at best and cult-ism at worst.

5. What kind of problems do I see development agencies and religious organizations facing as they try to integrate spirituality with development? The list could go on for pages, but let me set out eight that have surfaced in one way or another in the last four days:

- the **problem of Evil**. Evil is the negation of God, it is non-being, emptiness, the aberration from Goodness, Love and Truth. It is the result of our failure to deal with the factors and forces that impede the fulfillment of God's Creation. It is injustice, poverty, illness, cruelty, ignorance, indifference, prejudice, war, all the things that we struggle against in development. Development is, therefore, a moral struggle, a struggle for human well-being. And for those who believe that human well-being in its fullest sense must be 'informed' by the Spirit of God, that makes Development, ultimately, a spiritual and religious struggle. Evil is a difficult notion for our western, secular, positivistic world-view to deal with (which is one reason why this world-view has failed to come to grips with the human condition).
- the **problem of Unity and Diversity**. God is One, God is Truth, Truth is One....ah, yes, but whose Truth? Different spiritualities, especially when they are articulated and formalized as religions, produce different notions of right and wrong, good and evil. It is very easy (and very arrogant) to assume that my vision of my relationship with God is the same as God's vision of that relationship, and to exclude the legitimacy of other perceptions that do not coincide with mine. To assume that God thinks like me and mine and speaks only to me and mine is to cast God in my image. One would hope that, at this stage in History, religions are reaching the point where they can accept and respect the differences between them while understanding and embracing the underlying Unity. One would hope...
- linked to the above, the **problem of Freedom**. Freedom to believe, to choose, and to choose to refuse: the God-given power that defines us as moral beings. Freedom to exercise power over ourselves and over those who would take decisions that affect us. Where does one draw the limits to this Freedom? How does the freedom of the individual, which our culture holds paramount, fit with the freedom of the family, of the community, of the culture that nourishes the community, and of future generations?
- the **problem of Acculturation**. How do agencies that work in different cultures reach beyond their own cultural metaphors and those of other societies in understanding spiritualities? We of the West have so often seemed to assume that our science and technology, our economic

theories and even our political models are somehow free of spiritual and ethical values. In transplanting or imposing our theories and models, we have undermined and often destroyed the cultures and religions that have given meaning and guidance to other societies. Certainly cultures change and interchange, but how do development agencies articulate strategies/ programs/measures within the cultural contexts and metaphors of their partners?

- **the problem of Trust.** How do development and religious organizations overcome the suspicion generated by decades or centuries of conflict, ignorance, manipulation, exploitation, and disputation? How can institutions like ours generate the understanding and security that will enable us to accept others as they are and believe and to be accepted by them?
- **the problem of Discernment.** Incorporating values, ethics and spirituality as accepted terminology in development discourse is one thing. Discerning how these terms apply to social and economic policies, practical project activities and inter-institutional dynamics is something else again. It is not enough to toss around fuzzy concepts and sweeping conclusions. An examination of the ethical and spiritual implications of a structural adjustment program in West Africa, for example, calls for objectivity, clarity, discrimination, integrity and practicality -- what the French call “connaissance de cause” and theologians call “prudential judgment”. Most of all, however, it calls for the ability to discern how the principles apply in one’s own life.
- **the problem of Youth.** As belief and value systems have crumbled around the world under the onslaught of the competing values and beliefs implicit in the dominant economic and cultural model of a shrinking world, of the dislocations and alienation produced by natural and human disasters, of the social diseases of family breakdown, addiction, pornography and violence-as-entertainment, the social group that has been most deprived and has most suffered - and that will endure the consequences for the rest of their lives - is the generation of 30 and under. Those of us of older generations have not felt so acutely the brunt of the socio-cultural cataclysm of recent years, or have been able to draw on the resources of a different age. Fewer and fewer young people today are able to do so. When we talk of spirituality and development, what does it mean for them? Yesterday, Fabien Leboeuf called for a preferential option for the poor. I would call also for a preferential option for Youth.

6. What does all this mean in practice? How do you do spiritually sound development? Each of our institutions will have to figure that one out according to who we are and where we have arrived, but let me close by mentioning a couple of examples from my own agency, IDRC, and from my former home, CIDA:

- ✓ **Community-Based Natural Resource Management.** A nice scientific-sounding name for a research issue. It is a new program that we are launching to try to understand how traditional rural communities in Asia have lived off their environment for centuries in symbiotic harmony: exploiting the forestry, soil or marine resources, caring for and renewing them, sustaining and nourishing their biodiversity, and acquiring a knowledge and practice of their natural pharmacological, genetic and physical properties that regularly surpasses what our

finest laboratories have been capable of. IDRC will work with these communities and with research partners in those countries to assist them to systematize that knowledge so that their resource management practices may serve to guide other countries, including our own, and in order to enable them to control and benefit economically from the knowledge and skills that they have acquired over the ages. Doing this means acknowledging, understanding and respecting the reality of the spirituality that bonds these communities to their natural environment, the role that traditional keepers of this knowledge and these skills play in the community, and their aspirations for the use of those resources and the well-being of their community.

- ✓ **FUNDAEC - the Rural Education Foundation of Colombia.** Twenty years ago, an Iranian physics professor on a Rockefeller Foundation grant at the Universidad del Valle, in Cali, Colombia became preoccupied by a primary and secondary school system that prepared rural students for only one thing...to live and work in cities. With a small group of friends, and supported by IDRC and later by CIDA, he spent ten years talking to campesino families about what kind of skills and knowledge their children needed to run their farms and to live fulfilling lives within their rural communities, and then looking with educators at how a curriculum could be designed that would produce the scientific and academic knowledge, and technical skillsets required by the formal school system, in a way that integrated the values, culture, local knowledge and expertise of the farm communities. The Foundation came up with a model that has been applied and replicated throughout the Cauca and Valle del Cauca provinces and in other parts of Colombia. Thousands of young people are living more prosperous and aware lives in their own rural communities, and the Ministry of Education has accepted the Foundation model as an alternative system for public funding. The values and culture of these communities is deeply and profoundly Catholic and that is reflected in the Foundation model. The Iranian professor and the team that worked with him are predominantly Bahai.

7. I have tried to express to you what I have heard on Spirituality and Development in these past days, what I make of what I have heard, and what I myself believe on the subject. It is a profoundly difficult issue, and yet it is a profoundly important one. Most of the people in the world are not guided in the fundamental decisions and choices that shape their lives by economic theories and scientific principles: they are guided by values and beliefs that reflect and express their deepest aspirations. The world today, North and South, is living in a way that cannot be sustained economically, ecologically, or socially. If we are to survive, we must change our ways of relating to each other and to Nature....those kinds of changes can only come about if we give ethical and spiritual value and priority to the choices that must be made.

The keepers of our ethical and spiritual traditions and systems are our religions. Indeed, religion is essentially a socially articulated and practiced spirituality. If the religions of the world, and especially the Great Religions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism cannot lead the way, cannot articulate their religious principles and practices in ways that will guide their believers to make the changes necessary for a sustainable common future, then who else or what else will move our hearts and souls? Do you think our globalized neo-liberal economic model

will move and inspire people to make the personal decisions and sacrifices required for the future of humanity? Or is the all-pervasive globalizing culture of consumerism that we are served up on TV capable of doing it? Or intolerant and vengeful nationalisms?

The challenge is certainly there, therefore, for religion - and especially the Great Religions - to rise above sectarianism and to use the creative, knowing, loving energies that they have received from God to move their followers to work together as co-creators under God for the future of God's Creation. The challenge is also there for development agencies and for those who are searching for a spiritual dimension in development to look carefully at the wisdom and experience of the great religious traditions in dealing with the kinds of questions we are asking ourselves. Wise and good persons in those traditions have thought deeply and grappled mightily with what we have been talking about: let us be open enough and modest enough to learn from what has gone before. It is easy to criticize the terrible errors that religions and religious leaders have perpetrated over the ages; it is even easier to repeat them if we fail to learn from the wonderful wisdom that these same religions have to teach.

Integrating spirituality and development, then, is not a matter of adding a few harmless options to our chosen vehicle for change, like whitewall tires or a sun-roof. It is, ultimately, a matter of our survival as a people and as a planet. It is also, ultimately, a matter of our own fulfillment as human beings. It is, therefore, not an article of Faith, but an article of Hope.

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