

SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

*From 'Towards a Spirituality of Social Justice by : Tissa Balasuriya. O.M.I.
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Traditional spirituality conceived of a person's growth in sanctity and union with God as one which led to a life of quiet and withdrawn from the world. If it was active it was to be in the direction of works of mercy, of evangelism or administration of religious or ecclesiastical communities. There has been little reflection on the relationship of sanctity to the conflicts that may arise due to a desire to serve one's neighbour in the direction of justice. This has been the main trend of spirituality specially in the last two centuries when Christians were in dominant positions almost everywhere in the world and the centuries as establishments were in favour of the status quo.

As we move towards action for justice there is a necessary element of conflict, for justice cannot be achieved without fundamentals! 'changes, in our society in favour of the oppressed. When such' changes are proposed there is naturally opposition of those who ^x would be the losers economically and socially. The forces of defence of the status quo normally hit back with all the means at*their disposal; for generally human beings do not give Up power till they are compelled to do so by a superior power. Hence conflicts are inevitable in the struggle for justice. it may well be that the issues are also not always one sided. There may be a certain extent of justice in the "claims of both sides. Our choices are bound to be ambiguous for we deal in an area in which there is no absolute certainty as in Mathematics.

It is therefore necessary that the action for justice include conflict, contestation and risk bearing. It is within these that we have to articulate a spirituality in which love is the motivation. It is precisely the love for the oppressed which should make us strong in our action against oppression without being bitter against any person. In this process it is likely that we have to rethink our alliances, friendships and relationships. We may find that groups and persons with whom we have worked for many years are in fact obstacles to social justice. We may even come to the conclusion that persons and institutions that claim to represent God and religion may in fact be strong defenders of the social injustice. Sometimes conflict, may come closer home even the relationships within the family may be strained due to such options; These may cause certain inner tensions .within oneself. We may feel alienated from former friends, from entire institutions and perhaps from a special class. The oppressed themselves sometimes do not support persons who want changes for .they may be more influenced by the thought conditioning to which the\$ have been subjected during long periods.

We may also find that the forces of law and order, be they the police and military or the religious agencies of moral discipline, ma;, be ranged against our efforts. We have to expect to be challenged flour convictions, "attacked in our reputation, and impugned concerning our morality. Our own mental equilibrium may be questioned. We are likely to be isolated, mistrusted, misunderstood calumniated and alienated by many who think they are normal equilibrated, law-abiding and holy.

On the other hand there may be the conviction that unless we take strong steps to contest the present situation in favour of justice the prevailing unjust order will be strengthened and perpetuated. Hence one's own conscience cannot promote, even if one has to conform to the existing situation in which the oppressed and underprivileged of different categories are compelled to suffer. We need therefore to develop a spirituality in which conflict and contestations are seen as part of the process of growth in self-realization in service of neighbour and of the love of God.

It is precisely such a spirituality which Jesus Christ has borne witness to, for his public life was one in which he was constantly Spirituality in Politics involved in tensions and conflicts against all the injustices of the society of the day. The height of his agony was on the night before his death when he prayed in the Garden of Olives that this chalice if possible, be taken away from him. His obedience was not to human wisdom or to a constituted authority which could give a sense of security in conformism. but to his own conscience and the will of the Father made manifest through events of his life in that environment. Within these conflicts and tensions he had a deep sense of peace at the profoundest level of his being because he had the conviction that he was doing what he deemed right in love and justice.

The spirituality of social justice can achieve deep interior peace in the midst of conflict and tension; for this we require much reflection and group evaluation in the midst of action. Such a reflection would be quite different from a meditation that is cut off from the struggles and tensions of the day. It is possible even within monastic life as shown by Thomas Merton. But Merton was an exceptional monk who from the interior of his monastery participated in the struggles of our time and that on the side of the oppressed.

Hence a spirituality of social justice has to evolve radical forms of reflection and meditation, prayer and 'retreats.' These will have to include an awareness of the social environment and the options explicit or implicit of a group or person. Prayerful reflection will also require self-criticism and evaluation by the individual and the group for there is always a temptation for us to make comfortable compromises with the existing power structure rather than to keep moving forward towards the promised land in truth and justice. Evaluation, self-criticism and reflection may themselves be part of the tension and conflict, for we may find differences of opinion even among similarly motivated groups. It's not one's sincerity alone that gives meaningfulness to one's commitment, for this has to be tested within a given social context.

In this connection the methodology of spiritual reflections or retreats' needs to be recast. The traditional 'retreats' with silence and without reference to socio-political analysis cannot meet the demands of the more radically committed or even socially critical persons and groups. These will need the incorporation of social and group analysis within the perspective of spiritual reflection. Such revaluation of one's life is more difficult and more challenging. It' require also a better long term and immediate preparation. Data gathering regarding social issues and trends and honesty concerning our own options, fears and inhibitions will be material for common reflection. The group in 'retreat' will have to emerge from the exercise with a clearer understanding (and hopefully consensus) on goals, short

term objectives, strategies and perhaps even tactics. Presently traditional Christian religious life and spiritual retreats have not yet responded to this need. This is one of the causes for the giving up of the traditional 'retreats' - specially by the younger persons and groups.

The evaluation of one's activities along with a group with which one is connected is an important stage in the spirituality of social justice. This is different from the earlier modes of spiritual direction and 'particular examination' in traditional spiritualism. Then spirituality was regarded more or less as a highly individual and almost secret matter. At most there would be a connection between a person and a spiritual director who would give judgement or who would advise according to the dirigee's dispositions. The spirituality then was more one's relationship directly to God without much consideration for social causes. Group evaluation regarding justice is extremely important for several factors such as the determination of goals, the choice of methods, continuing assessment of results, changing one's priorities, options, methods, formation and alliances. It can be a safeguard against individualism, or compromises due to fear, insularity, personal worries, etc. Group evaluation can contribute also to the rounding of temperaments, the accepting of diversities, the pooling of talents, skills, age groups and strategies as well as to giving practicality to prophecy.

The growth in social justice is not a mere external phenomenon. It is linked to the refinement of a person's spirit. Traditionalists tend to think that social activism cannot be harmonised with spiritual growth. This is one of the myths of social reaction.

Active commitment to justice may take a person away from the regularity of religious life, or wean him from the devotionalism of the 'pious faithful.' But the very process of social commitment with its risks, tensions, conflicts and ruptures is not likely to take place without deep reflection. It requires a more thoughtful decision for a person to commit himself to the defence of civil rights in a time of political repression than to lie low and meditate in a convent chapel or attend a weekly novena. Profound reflection is required for motivation, action and evaluation. This is true for all - be they persons of a religious persuasion or otherwise. Marx, Lenin, Mao Tse Tung and Mahatma Ghandi were all men of deep reflection while being passionately committed to action for justice.

For the Christian the prayer of social justice can find substance in Spirituality in Politics the scriptures, specially in the life and teaching of Christ. The prayer he taught, the 'Our Father', is intimately connected with social justice. 'Give us today our daily bread'... 'Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven' are eminently related to the concerns of justice. To call God 'Father' of all is to take an option against all forms of social discrimination based on race, class, caste and sex.

Such a contemplation places the axe of self purification on our whole social being. It affects our choice of work and employment. Thus those who opt out of an exploiting system to try to change by contesting it are in fact expressing in the reality of their lives the meaning of the call to love God and neighbour. Spirituality has to appreciate what is going on in the mind, heart and will of so many who make such options.

Unfortunately traditional spirituality has hardly any place for it - at least not in the categories of the spiritual and mystical theology of the 19th and the first half of this century. The extent to which Christianity has been conditioned by the prevailing social system is so deep that even mystical theology has been confined within' the limit of the status quo. This is one reason why so many radicals' specially youth find the traditional religious approach unhelpful to them - and even an obstacle to the self understanding of their noblest inspirations and motivations.

Social justice is one of the principal concerns of the more generous youth of our time. When they discover the radical call of Christ, they are happy and motivated to greater generosity. Often times they have to contest the existing values, practices and regulations of the Church to experience an authentic relationship of justice and love in their action and prayer. The contestation concerning the Eucharist is an example of such a search. A work like Daniel Berrigan's 'Dark Night of Resistance' can help us rediscover the radical meaning of the gospel and of the following of Christ in our times.

As one grows in one's commitment to justice one is bound to suffer in different forms - physically, psychologically and socially. This can be mingled with the joy of suffering for a cause. This is one of the processes of self purification that can lead to greater union with God. It has also to be linked to a love of persons that avoids all hatred and bitterness and a service to those in need. The virtue of social justice can help to bring about a harmony between one's subjective motivations and the objective requirements of the kingdom of God. Then personal sanctity will have a more creative impact on the world' outside ourselves. This form of contemplation may be said to be at least as truly God centred as the traditional passive contemplation.

It is a pity that traditional Christian spirituality did not evaluate contemplation and mysticism in relation to its impact on society, Perhaps in past-times this was not in the public consciousness. But today it cannot be avoided with good faith. Contemplation of God to be objectively authentic must relate to the struggle for the building of the kingdom of God on Earth. Otherwise it will be objectively counter productive - even if subjectively well intentioned.

If and when religions understand the radical and revolutionary demands of their basic message - they will cease to be obstacles to ' justice. At that stage the temples and Churches will not be frequented: merely for personal favours within social conservatism. Then there ; will be a conflict between the exploitative social system and institutionalized religion. It will then be seen how close the love of God is j to the dedicated service of man and the struggle for a better world. ' For such an approximation to take place, the spirituality of social justice needs to be evolved in actual life experience by commuted persons, groups and Churches.

Action for justice implies a dying to self in one's possessions, values, and relationships. In Asia today, where repression is on the increase, a person committed to social justice will have to suffer much. It may result in loss of status and employment, even imprisonment, and separation from one's dearest companions in life. Ultimately in the moment of deep suffering one is alone. On the cross¹ Jesus was alone. It was also his

supreme moment of self giving in love. The quest for justice can lead to a self donation in which love can experience existentially the price and joy of love. This love is not! mere sentimentality or paternalism. It is experienced in one's flesh and blood. It may be a profound form of self purifying contemplative union with God in love of others.

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