



## Engaged Spirituality

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### Introduction

Spirituality is a way of life and it has two aspects: World-view and values. Our values are formed by our world-view. In this recollection on the theme of Engaged Spirituality we shall look at the biblical roots to remind ourselves of the Christian World-view which forms our values that calls for our commitment.

According to Janet Parachin, “engaged spirituality is demonstrated by all those persons who find within their faith tradition the resources that nurture their being and enable them to engage in activities that move the world toward peace, justice, greater compassion, and wholeness”<sup>1</sup>

Spirituality within our faith tradition is essentially discipleship to Jesus. If we need to follow Jesus we need to ask two questions: (1) What did Jesus do? (2) What would Jesus do in Our Society? To answer the first question we need to look at the gospels and in order to understand the gospels effectively we need to look at the biblical background. “Bible is a history of

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<sup>1</sup> Janet W. Parachin, *Engaged spirituality: Ten Lives of Contemplation and Action* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 1.

what God has done in the lives of men, for humanity as a whole, in order to fulfill in them the design of grace.”<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Biblical Background

The Biblical background can be summed up in three central points: (1) The Biblical vision of life, (2) The Biblical Experience of God and (3) The Basic Biblical Attitude

### 1.1 *The Biblical Vision of Life*

The Bible has laws, psalms, prayers, but it is primarily a narrative, a narrative that begins with the creation (Gen 1-2) and ends with the “new heavens and new earth” (Rev. 21:1-4). Creation is seen in the

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Bible as a movement from chaos or disorder to order, that is a paradise situation. But this situation is disrupted by sin (Gen 3-11) and goes back to disorder. God forms the people of Israel as a contrast community through patriarchs and prophets and enters into a covenant. But Israel fails to keep up the covenant and to live as a contrast community, because of which they are exiled, back to a disorderly situation. They turn away from God as a result of which start oppressing others. God wants to restore the original paradise situation through Jesus who inaugurates God’s Kingdom through the revelation of love. So the Church is called to be a contrast community, a community structured not by power but by love. Thus the Biblical narrative is a story of journey of humankind and cosmos to the fullness of life animated by love.

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<sup>2</sup> Yves Congar, “Christ in the Economy of Salvation and in our Dogmatic Tracts,” in E. Schillebeeckx and B. Willems (ed.), *Who is Jesus of Nazareth?* (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1965), 6.

## ***1.2 Biblical Experience of God***

The God experience is articulated in the Bible in two ways: creed and hymns. There are three such creeds in the Bible: Deut 6:20-25, Deut 26:5-9 and Josh 24:6-13

Deut 26:5-9 is the most important creed and the Jewish Passover liturgy begins with this creed. In Ex 5.21 we have a very ancient hymn called the Song of Miriam. In all these texts, the faith of the people is not articulated in formulas but in a narrative form. It is a narrative about the wandering Aramean, a wanderer and how God freed him and his descendents from slavery and oppression. The creed in the Bible is rooted in the historical experience of God liberating the people. This is the foundational experience of the people of Israel: God liberates us from slavery.

This God experience is well articulated in two call narratives of Moses: Ex 3.14 and Ex 6.2-7. Biblical scholars say that they are from two different traditions, Yahwist (J) and Priestly (P) and has two different theologies. Be that as it may, in both the texts the central question is “Who is God?” In Ex 3:14, to the question of Moses about his name, God replies ‘*ehyeh* ‘*asher* ‘*ehyeh* ( *אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה* ) and the word ‘*ehyeh* can be both used for present tense and future tense in Hebrew. This can be translated into 4 ways: (1) I will be who I am (promise), (2) I am who I will be (faithfulness), (3) I am who I am, and (4) I will be who I will be. Scholars think in the biblical context the third or the fourth translation is more apt than the first two. In other episodes in the Bible, when God is asked of his name by Jacob (Gen 32:29) and by Manoah, the father of Samson (Judges 13:17-18), his reply is “Why do you ask my name?” By this counter question God seems to say that we are not supposed to know his name. This must be also the meaning of his reply to Moses. Traditionally knowing someone’s name means having control over that person. Other pagan gods had name like Baal. But the essence of the true God cannot be captured in a name.

The God of the Bible is a free God totally away from the control of human persons.

The Free God is also the Freeing God. This is the theology of Ex 6:2-7. He tells Moses that he is *el shaddai* which is translated as God Almighty. It literally means the Hill God denoting the power of God. He is so powerful that he can liberate his people. The text speaks of liberation from and liberation for – liberation from bondage and liberation for becoming

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God's people. To be God's people is not only a privilege but also a task; the task is to form a contrast community

### ***1.3 The Basic Biblical Attitude***

The God Experience of the people of Israel leads them to a tension between their religious experience and life experience. The religious experience is the promise of the land (Ex 6). Land for them is the symbol of prosperity, freedom and peace. But the reality was very different. They did not inhabit the land; they were dominated by the Egyptians, then Babylonians and then Romans. So life was full of conflict and tension. So they raised the question, "why are we oppressed?" This question comes frequently in psalms. The biblical answer is that the Israel failed to be a contrast community and hence they did not possess the land. But God of the Bible is a faithful God. Hence they resolved the tension by projecting the promise to the future: "we do not have the land, but one day we will."

This hope of Israel takes two forms: messianic hope and apocalyptic hope. The classical text for the messianic hope is Isa 11:1-9. The content of the messianic hope is that God will raise a son of David who will establish an empire of justice and peace. He will give Israel the land to lead a free life. The messianic hope is this-worldly; it's a political hope. This

messianic hope slowly receded after exile because two significant things happened during exile. Firstly, the family of David was no longer significant. Secondly the people of Israel came in contact with the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, and were influenced by its theology of conflict between good and evil and the final victory of good over evil in the end-time. This takes on the form of apocalyptic hope. Apocalyptic hope is therefore expressed in symbolic visions of end-time. The vision of the end-time implies the destruction of the oppressors and the liberation of the oppressed (final victory of good over evil).

## **2. The Core Experience of Jesus**

Whatever be the forms of hope, the only biblical symbol that expresses this hope is the Kingdom of God. This was the core experience of Jesus.

### ***2.1 Kingdom of God: Fulfillment of Hope***

In Mk 1:14-15 we read, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come; Repent and believe in the good news.” This is the hermeneutical key with which Mark has to be read. This text has two parts: statements and commands. The two statements are synonymous, so also the two commands. Kingdom of God refers to the final definitive liberation not through an outpouring force but through the revelation of love. Jesus sees love as the only force through which human persons can be liberated. The word “repent” should not be understood in the Greek sense of *metanoia*, saying sorry for our sins, but in the Hebrew sense of *shuwb* [pronounced as ‘shoove’] (שׁוּב) returning to God. Returning to God is a positive personal action involving the whole person; it means “God loves you, just accept it.” This is the central proclamation of Jesus the basis of which is his God experience.

### ***2.2 Jesus’ Experience of God as Unconditional Love***

In all his prayers, Jesus addressed God as Abba, which is an endearing way of calling father like ‘daddy’ in modern times. In the Hebrew Bible, God is described as father but never

addressed as daddy. Jesus radicalized the experience of God as liberator into God as love. The *abba* experience of Jesus is well presented in the parable of the prodigal son. However Jesus has clearly understood during his prayer at Gethsemane that God's love does not mean receiving what is pleasant but what is good. In this sense God's refusal to grant us what we ask is also expression of his love. God's love is both caring and challenging that empowers us to reach the fulfillment of our life. It is analogous to the nurturing parent in the transactional analysis as opposed to the critical parent whose love is conditional and the indulgent parent who gives unconditional approval.

### **3. Dimensions of Engaged Spirituality**

It becomes clear for us that an engaged spirituality based on biblical tradition rests on two pillars: Freedom and Love

#### **3.1 Freedom**

The foundation of the engaged spirituality for a Christian is the *abba* experience, that is, the experience of God's love. The experience of God's love leads us to freedom. This freedom is both from compulsions from within and inhibitions caused by external factors. St. Paul in his letter to Romans (Rom 7:15) speaks of his compulsions from within: "I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." His words "I do the very thing I hate" refer to compulsions from within. There can be many compulsions for us – to possess more than what we need, a typical expression of the consumerist society, to achieve, to enjoy various kinds of pleasures. When these compulsions bind us we are no longer free. Paul also says "I do not do what I want." This refers to inhibitions, which is just the opposite of compulsions. This is often because of fear of rejection: "what will others say?" We want the approval of others because of our insecurity resulting in fear. Jesus was powerless – no wealth, no political support, no theological training, no priestly approval – but was totally

fearless. He confronted without fear every established institution of his time. He confronted theological establishments (Mk 2:1-36 healing the paralytic man through forgiveness, Mk 12-13-37 paying tax to Caesar), religious establishments (Mk 11:15 cleansing of the Temple) and political establishments (Lk 13:31-33 refusing to move out of Jerusalem as was ordered by Herod). Nor did he have any compulsion to possess or to achieve, instead he had come to serve and lay down his life for others (Mk 10: 45).

Jesus was also free from the external pressures of his time: Law and cult. Law and cult are meaningful and necessary but if we place them above God and his love, then we end up being legalistic and ritualistic. Jesus' attitude to Law is illustrated in the issue of Sabbath. Originally Sabbath was meant to be a day of rest for slaves. What was liberative gradually became oppressive. Jesus wants to restore the original liberative dimension of Sabbath and hence heals the man with withered hand, a blind man, a paralytic on the day of Sabbath. Jesus violates the institutionalized law responsible to give us a principle: "Sabbath is for human person and human person is not for Sabbath." Every human institution, however sacred it may be, has to be subordinated to God's people. Jesus' attitude to ritual is well brought out in the context of Pharisees accusing Jesus of eating food without washing hands. The background to this is the principle of purity and pollution or the dichotomy between sacred and profane. The most sacred place is the holy of holies, in the Holy Temple in the holy city of Jerusalem in the holy land of the Jews. What lies outside of this holy land is profane, and the Samaritans and gentile living outside of the holy land are impure. A Jew would have come in contact with the impure people, who make him polluted and to make himself clean he needs to do a ritual cleansing of his hands before his meal. Jesus challenges this through his symbolic gesture and instead suggests holiness comes from within and is determined by heart. It means what sanctifies is love and what unsanctifies is unlove.

Freedom finds its fulfillment in commitment. This is illustrated for us in Mk 5:1-20, in the episode of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus encounters the possessed power. From verses 1 to 5, Mark gives a long description of the demoniac which is both symbolic and theological. The image of the possessed man is one of unrestrained force. Was the man free because he could do anything without restraint? In a way he was free but his freedom was one of animals, not of humans for human freedom involves commitment. After getting healed, the man is back to social convention and ties himself to Jesus. He is physically unrestrained to follow Jesus, socially unrestrained to get back to the society and linguistically unrestrained to proclaim God. Now he enjoys human freedom. He commits himself to Jesus in freedom. Saint Paul says “Though I am free, I have made myself slave for all.” A free person becomes slave through love and commitment. Christian life is to be a “*free slave*.”

### 3.2 Love

The great love commandment of Jesus is “Love God and love your neighbor.” Luke makes this explicit in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For a Rabbi, the great commandment is “Love God” (Deut 6:4-9). This is called Sh'ma Yisrael (שְׁמָא יִשְׂרָאֵל) and the Jews recite it three times a day. For Jesus the great commandment is “Love God” (Deut 6:4-9) and “love your neighbor” (Lev 19: 13). The biblical scholars tell us that the ‘and’ is not additive but explanatory; the first is explained in terms of the second. It means that we can love God only by loving our neighbor. We respond to God’s love by loving our neighbor. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that, “to receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren” (no. 1397). In his encyclical “*Deus Caritas est*,” Pope Benedict states as follows: “Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does



for me and how much he loves me.” For a Jew, neighbor is basically a fellow-Jew. In the book of Leviticus it gets extended to a stranger and a refugee who becomes part of Jews. A gentile for them is never a neighbor. For Jews, neighbor is anyone in need (Lk 10:29-39) including an enemy (Lk 6:35). [In parenthesis as good Christians we need to love Modi]. This is not really utopian. This is what love really means. Love is not a reaction but an action. In other words I love you not because you are loveable but because I am capable of loving.

In Greek there are four words for love: *eros* (sexual love), *philia* (friendship), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *agape* (the love of God for human person and of human person for God). In Greek literature, the word *agape* is hardly used but in the New Testament this word appears in abundance. *Agape* is a divine attitude. It originates from God’s love. *Agape* is not possible if we do not experience God’s love; it is only because we experience God’s love, we can experience others as brothers and sisters.

Experiencing others as brothers and sisters has two dimensions: acceptance and concern. Acceptance in the New Testament is given in the exhortation to forgive. Forgiveness means accepting the offenders, loving people who have hurt us. The text that follows immediately the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospel according to Mathew reads thus: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:14-15). It does not mean God’s love depends on our forgiveness and thus it is conditional. It means that if I do not forgive others, then I do not accept God’s forgiveness. Again we are told not to judge (Lk 6:37-39). It does not mean we should not judge situations.

In fact we need to condemn inhuman situations of slavery, human trafficking, sexual abuse on women, child labor, and such evils, but we should not judge people. The two-fold reason for not judging people is again found in the New Testament: (1)

because no one sees the heart (I Sam 16:7), and (2) we are all sinners (Jn 8:1-11 the woman caught in adultery).

The second dimension of *agape* is concern. Concern is not a matter of feeling but a matter of doing. It is always doing good. Jesus says, “love your enemies and *do good to them*” (Lk 6:35). This is the best definition of love in the New Testament. *Love is effectively responding to the needs of the people* as did the Good Samaritan. Needs of people are very diverse like material needs, psychological needs and spiritual needs. This would call for a deep commitment to people.

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## Conclusion

We realize that the roots of engaged spirituality are found in seminal form already in the Hebrew Bible that announced God’s special love for the poor and called God’s people to a covenant of love and justice. This is radicalized in the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came “to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . liberty to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself with “the least of these,” the hungry and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:45).

We believe in the triune God whose very nature is communal and social. God reveals himself to us as one who is not alone, but rather as one who is relational, one who is Trinity. Therefore, we who are made in God’s image share this communal, social nature. We are called to reach out and to build relationships of love and justice.

Catholic social teaching is based on and inseparable from our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. Every person, from the moment

of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity. Human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment and therefore as true Christians we are called to be committed to the nurturing of human life

This commitment does not spring forth from mere social analysis or desire to do social work. This commitment to effectuate a social transformation and to contribute towards a creation of a just society is impelled by our spirituality of discipleship, that is, to appropriate the life of Jesus to make it our own. In our own creative ways we need to reply the second question which I raised in the very beginning: “What would Jesus do in our society?” It is left to each one of us to address this question to continue our commitment. 🌹

In the Bible, God presents himself as a teacher. “I myself taught Ephraim to walk, I myself took them by the arm,” it says. A believer is obliged to raise his children. Every man and every woman has a right to educate their children in their religious values. When a government deprives children of this formation, it can lead to cases like Nazism, when children were indoctrinated with values which were alien to the ones held by their parents. Totalitarianism tends to take over education to feather its own nest... ~ Pope Francis