



# Why I Believe our World Needs More Spirituality not More Religion

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*Here Serge reflects on the current tensions between spirituality and religion, offering his own interpretation of spirituality as a celebration of life. Also writing as a psychologist, he argues that the roots of our current predicament are spiritual and that we have to reconnect with our deeper selves and life itself as well as finding a new story and a new sense of meaning.*

*Humanity is now too clever to survive without wisdom*

*E.F. Schumacher*

## The Need for Nobility of Being

The situation on our planet today is a grave one. Gaia's natural resources, offered so generously, have been so deeply burglarised, giving rise to so many crises, that there is no guarantee that we will necessarily survive out this century. Certainly, there is little chance if we continue in our old, cold, scapegoating, patriarchal ways where we respect reason above heart, competition over compassion and co-operation, and continue to spend our limited resources on ever more ingenious ways to destroy ourselves.

It is important that we realise that our many problems have a spiritual root. Or rather a lack of one! The reason why so many of us operate so unconsciously, and at times so viciously, hold so many grievances in our heart, trash our fellow human beings and abuse our planet so mercilessly, is because we have lost our connection with our deeper humanity, most especially with our feminine side and our heart, and thus with our capacity to feel things - to sense the pain of our world, to understand the meaning of justice and balance. Theologian Matthew Fox attributes our current woes to the fact that 'Our civilisation is without a cosmology and therefore is cosmically lonely and depressed.'

And this is very serious. As a psychotherapist, this holds so true for so many of my clients. At a deeper level, their problems are not just about not having enough money or not having a 'good relationship'; they are about an absence of any connection to that inner gold that lies deep inside all of us. As such, I believe that only the urgent birthing of what is best and noblest about us, only a radical change of consciousness and awakening of heart, and thus a re-linking once more with that richness, with our deeper enlightened self, is going to be able to fill this cosmological hole and thus pull us back from the brink. Put simply, the solutions to the problems of the world do not lie in our discovering ever more ingenious ways to use technology, but in our hearts. (It was our ingenuity that created the atomic bomb.) So long as our hearts are small and our soul-life underdeveloped, we will continue to project

our imbalances and deficiencies upon our world and further twist it out of shape. As our hearts grow bigger, we will learn to use our many resources in a wiser manner.

## Reconnecting

So how is this re-birthing to take place? How are we to recover our lost humanity? Ideally, this should be the task of religion, the word coming from the Latin meaning to re-connect. Ideally, the role of religion ought to be to inspire us to re-connect to our heart and soul, to our capacity to experience love, inspiration, awe and compassion, and thus to the realisation of our interconnectedness with all of life and most especially, to our shared human unity. If we can find the part inside us that is courageous and wise and full and juicy and that truly desires justice, we can be moved to engage in activities that are life-enhancing as opposed to life-negating, and we will thus spontaneously wish to take stands on behalf of peace and truth and creating a world that works. Indeed, I believe that the deeper our mystical imprint, the shallower our carbon footprint becomes.

One of the great tragedies of our times, however, is that many of our religious institutions suffer from the same malaise of soullessness that pervades our society as a whole. In my experience, much of religion today is dry and joyless, lacks imagination, creativity and mindfulness and places more emphasis on knowing about God (knowing the scriptures well) than helping people find ways and means directly to experience the divine. Many believe that Christianity has lost its mystical face which Jung saw as the only way that religion might have creativity, and has degenerated into what the Tibetan Master Dwaj Khul called 'churchianity'. As Gregory Bateson once put it: 'The human race today is rotting from a slowly deteriorating religion?'

So if the purpose of religion is to help reconnect us to a deeper, fuller and more 'sacred us', in order that we might have some kind of antidote against civilisation and its discontents, it is all too often hijacked by those discontents



and becomes another instrument of them. Or, put another way, if one of the intentions of religion is to help us move in the direction of embracing a self that is more loving and inclusive than that defined by our ego identity, it often ends up being seduced by that very identity. People who feel moved to kill others because they have different beliefs about God are in no way connected with their deeper ground of being.

And indeed, today, if we look around our planet, we see these same 'religious wars' still being fought out. If not between the Catholics and Protestants, then between the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq or between the Muslims and Christians, or the Christians and the Jews. The Indian Spiritual Master Osho once said that 'If a man does not know how to love and has lost the art of play, he will use a bayonet to kill another man.'

At its most dysfunctional and patriarchal worst, we have the cancer of Fundamentalism: Christofascism in the West and Islamofascism in the East, where, out of very wounded and fearful egos, fanatics aim to reduce the divine mystery to a literal interpretation of sacred scripts, where all who disagree are condemned as wrong, for only we know the 'true way' and thus are the only ones 'chosen by God'! Unable to deal with a complex, ever-changing world and fearful of the future, many Islamists are attempting to return to some imagined ideal of a medieval and patriarchal caliphate in which women are once more enslaved. It has been suggested, for example, that one of the reasons why many Fundamentalists seem to care so little for the well-being of their planet, is because they are eagerly awaiting Judgement Day, when they alone will be 'lifted up, saved and resurrected', while the rest of us poor, ignorant sinners, can be left to burn in hell! This is nasty, scary stuff. And there is a lot of this mighty dangerous pseudo-mysticism about in our world today.

Perhaps it might be for some of the above reasons that, in a recent lecture, the Dalai Lama made the following comments:

Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which brings happiness to both self and others...

There is no reason why the individual should not develop these, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without. What we cannot do without are these basic human qualities.

My experience confirms these words - today there are many extraordinary people in every country on earth, who are very heart-centred and courageous, wise and mystically aware.

Indeed, more and more people today appear to be by-passing spiritless religion and are learning to attune directly to their source. They are increasingly realising that God's grace is available everywhere and to all people, and that what is primarily required is a determination to discover how best to embrace, savour and share it.

When people attend my spiritual retreats, I tell them that the way to God is through listening to their hearts and engaging in activities that are right for

their soul. I tell them that they don't need to be a Buddhist to do good meditation, any more than they need to be a Christian or a Muslim to do good prayer. Put simply, one can, if one works at it, come close to God without being part of any organisation or institution. If we put genuine effort into these two activities that together conspire to quieten the mind and open the heart, our capacity to hear that still small voice that is always wanting to communicate with us, (which we do not normally hear because there is so much noise or static going on inside us) becomes enhanced. And if, on top of this, we engage in activities such as attuning to nature, feeding ourselves with beautiful music or beautiful art or literature, choosing the company of those we love and who love us, doing work we love, practising being kind to others, letting ourselves feel awe as we open to the great mystery of life, and finding our own unique way of serving or making a difference, our spiritual muscles will become ever stronger and more resilient.

### A New Spiritual Renaissance

For all these reasons and because I believe our world is now ripe for a depth (trans egoic) spirituality which many religions do not offer, I make a strong plea for spirituality above religion, for substance not surface. If religion is important to us and if it leads to depth, and if we can manage to extract that deeper spirituality lying at its core, then let us 'go for it'. But if we cannot, then let us let religion go. Today, in response to our soullessness, we are seeing a powerful rebirth of soul the world over, a great renaissance of the sacred, especially of the great sacred feminine. Today, the Goddess energy, which for so long has been pushed underground, is beginning to return from the Shadows. Hence it is becoming easier for us to connect in to the gentler and more loving aspects of our spirituality.

This 'second Copernican Revolution', as Willis Harman saw it is ever growing in strength, a whole new universal zeitgeist is being powerfully birthed. Many spiritual teachers suggest that 'urgent world need' has evoked enormous assistance from the higher dimensions of life, and that what they refer to as the 'spiritual helping forces' have come much closer to us than they have ever done before and as a result, we are able to make inner progress in ways that were simply not possible in the past. The Bulgarian Spiritual Master, Peter Deunov expressed our challenge as follows:

*We find ourselves at the end of one culture and at the dawn of another which is rising, developing and rapidly imposing itself...From now on a radical transformation is progressively occurring in human consciousness, in man's thoughts, feelings and actions as well as in the organisation of human society. In this way the whole of humanity is rapidly rising to a higher level in order to enter a new life...*

*The only thing to do now is to know how to put oneself in harmony with this new wave of life, which is descending on earth. Every conscious and noetic man and woman must raise the vibration of their thought and refine their feelings by a constant union with God'.*

Note that Deunov did not say that we must join a religion to have what he says come about, but rather that we should devote our efforts to discovering how best to align ourselves to God. I emphasise again: if God is in all things and all things dwell in God, then why should we not be able to connect to the divine in our own back room, or in the presence of a friend or out in nature or, for that matter, wherever we are at any time!

My orthodox Christian friends have naturally tended to chide me for such views and for my eclectic and what they sometimes call my 'lax approach'. 'How', they have sometimes said to me, 'can you be so spiritually promiscuous? Do religious traditions mean nothing to you; have you no respect? Actually, I do have respect, but only for that which is authentic and which is relevant to and which serves new life. If certain forms are no longer appropriate, I say 'ditch them!' I recognise that life needs to move on and that this means that we need new teachings and new teachers. Didn't Jesus himself tell us that 'We need new bottles for the new wine'? This means letting go of those aspects of our past which have become anachronistic.

To give two examples: I think we need to move away from our attachment to the notion of ourselves as 'sinful' and 'fallen' (I think Adam's 'sin' was that he didn't enjoy the garden sufficiently) and rather envision ourselves as blessed and resurrecting. I always find Christianity's strong emphasis on Jesus' crucifixion and on the bleeding Christ rather macabre. Perhaps this is because the egoic mind is too terrified of the transcendent! Also, it is time we let go all that sexual guilt which has flowed into Christianity just because St Augustine felt so bad about his 'lower urges!' And let us also move away from this terrible duality between high and low and our damning of the low. Where churches need to be helping the young, is in recognising and celebrating the sacred dimensions of their sexuality. Indeed, one of the reasons why our sexuality has become so perverse today is because we are still attached to our Judeo-Christian guilt about it; and, of course, where there is repression, there is always obsession and perversion.

### **Drawing from Many Wells**

In my own spiritual journey, I have been deeply touched by many different sources, especially by the traditions of the Native peoples, who, over the centuries, have been so horrendously decimated by the white people, yet whose religions are a) far older than the 'great religions' of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam etc, b) are full of integrity, and c) have never lost their reverence for Mother Earth and her fruitfulness, and therefore for me, are so full of spirituality. (I often think that if our planet was in their hands, we'd never be having global warming today!)

I have also learned from the wisdom traditions of the East as well as from many newly emerging sources, as I believe that today, many new awakening methodologies are 'entering the market', reflecting our new soul needs as citizens of the twenty-first century. Indeed, above all, I need my

spiritual life to be fruity and celebratory, not ponderous and intellectual. I have recognised that it is important that I don't take myself too seriously - I laugh a lot and move about lightly, and, most importantly, continually allow my heart, soul, imagination and creativity to be fed with delicious sacred titbits. I don't mind where these titbits come from so long as they are right for me and are genuine. They could include engaging in activities such as attending a festival to celebrate some sacred occasion, listening to music that touches my heart, or going on a Buddhist meditation weekend.

Personally, I find these activities more soul sustaining than sitting in a church where one gets preached at, often made to feel inadequate for not being more like Jesus, yet not being given any tools to help move one more in that direction. In all my many years of regular church all through school, no one ever told me how to pray or what prayer actually meant. And today, if I meditate on the quality of Jesus, I tune into a presence of great joy, to someone who also celebrated life as well as taking on the sins of the world. After all, he told us that we couldn't enter the kingdom of Heaven unless we become again as a little child, that is, learn to honour the child inside ourselves, that so many of us egoic adults have long ago learned to reject in the interest of 'growing up.' (That, I feel, has much to do with why we grow up to be so stiff and mentally identified!)

The point is that little children love to play. And play is so healing; play is also prayer. And so much creativity is unleashed in the process. The wonderful thing about little children is that they have not yet learned to grow away from their core, mystical essence. They have not lost the ability to delight in little things.

### **The Freshness of Life**

In my own spiritual life, then, I've had to work a lot to re-gain my 'lost freshness', and in the process, have sometimes been a bit like a bee hopping from flower to flower to obtain the different qualities of nectar that I have felt I have needed. For example, at one stage in my life, I studied a lot in Zen Temples to learn about emptiness. Once, I travelled half way across Russia to find an extraordinary cave monastery, so I could learn about prayer at the hands of monks who did this all day. (It was in this place, interestingly, that I was also healed of a serious disease.) In my twenties I was with a Sufi group. I have also worked with certain sacred substances and have derived enormous benefits, with whole segments of my psyche being powerfully cleared of old and dark patterns.

If we wish to be more holy, we need to work hard at becoming more whole, part of which requires purifying ourselves so that our channels to the higher sacred worlds can become more open. In this context, it is also a myth to believe that we can discover our deeper humanity without

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paying attention to our psychological blockages. (For example, if we are still angry with our own father, this will be projected onto God the Father.) Yet the church offers very little in-depth psychological assistance. Today I read, for example, that the Pope's 'weapon' against paedophilia in the Catholic Church is to be prayer. While I wholly believe in the power of prayer, I do not believe that, of itself, it is sufficient. Paedophile priests are, for most part, deeply disturbed human beings, who not only need our compassion but also require very in-depth work with trained experts if a deeper healing is to take place.

Another very important dimension to spiritual development (again not stressed in the church) is sitting at the feet of a genuine, awake, Spiritual Master, (they tend on the whole to be singularly uninterested in religion!) My experience is that if we really wish to grow a deeper soul life, we need consciously to seek out their presence, as their higher vibration rate can begin to speed up ours. Indeed, I believe these great men and women need to be our models for what it means to be authentically human. Better, I say, to find a great Master who is still alive and kicking, than read about the great Masters of our past who have long been dead and buried! The Christ, David Spangler reminds us, is a great unitive, educative principle of life, *not* a person.

I believe that Jesus became one with that principle – one could say he was a fully awakened, compassionate, loving human being, a Christed being. But he has not been the only one. There have also been other Christed figures and I believe there are also Christed persons living on our planet today and thus we should seek them out and learn from them. We must never forget that just as we are seeking enlightenment, that Enlightenment is also stalking us!

Towards this end, it is also very important that we address our dark side, or our Shadow. This implies that we need to get off our high horses, off the illusion of how 'nice' and 'decent' we are, and allow ourselves to confront the worst parts of ourselves, the nastiest, darkest aspects, which we all have, as it is in these unlit dimensions of our psyches that we will discover the spiritual juices that will help springboard us up into the realms of our higher nature. In Jung's words: 'We don't become enlightened by sitting in the light but by going into our darkness.'

Conventional religion has no structures that allow for this. Indeed, the egoically religious person hates looking deeply into himself. He prefers believing in a devil outside of himself, continually tempting him, so his life can be about attacking it, thus taking no responsibility for his own evil which therefore becomes projected out onto other people and the world around him. The more mystically inclined spiritual person, on the other hand, understands that the devil is actually the sum total of his own psychological resistance to the light and so is willing to work with his own darkness and try to own it and so not project it outside of himself. Wars happen for many reasons, but one is that they reflect the sum total of our disowned destructive energy, which therefore continually seeps out of us contaminating our planet.

### Celebrating Spiritual Diversity

So if I, and many of my friends and colleagues and many millions of people all over the planet, are, like me, spiritually 'promiscuous', then I celebrate the fact. Please note: this does not imply we are anti-religion. (I am not anti-anything!) We are just pro spiritual. There are of course certain limitations to not abiding by a religious structure. For example, one is not part of a 'group'; we are challenged to create our own

disciplines and our own structures. And at times, we may feel quite alone. We may also have to integrate different systems together and formulate a specific code of ethics to live by. But again, I have found that the more we connect to our source, the less alone and the more abundant we feel, and the more an inner guidance starts to arise up from deep inside us. I also believe that the wherewithal, both for integration and for understanding values, exists inside our heart. If our hearts are closed, we may know the Ten Commandments by heart, be able to recite pages and pages of the Koran and the Upanishads, but something will always be missing.

### Opening the Heart

So what is important to me is how open my heart is, not whether I am a paid-up card-carrier of any particular religion. If my heart is functioning at its deeper level, I am connected to a spiritual energy that I know can sustain me in the hardest of times. To be honest, I think God is much more interested in how much space I allow for this to happen, than whether I am a Jew or a Muslim or anything else. But to come into such a place does not happen overnight. It takes a lot of committed inner work. Shadow work; soul work; heart work; psychological work. Spiritual awakening can be tough. And we need to be very sincere. And conventional ego man is just used to earning his outer living, not his inner one!

So if we are to create a better world for ourselves, which I feel needs to be our main goal in life today, then I think we are also called to be innovative and resourceful and continually explore what works for us and what doesn't. (At different times, we will need different kinds of help and different kinds and levels of spiritual teaching.) Our living needs to be daily informed by the question of what it really means to be more human, for then we can try to bring our answers into all the many different areas of our lives so that our daily living itself may eventually become our sacred practice.

So if you, like me, find yourself more interested in spirituality than religion and if you find being eclectic also seems to be your path, then embrace it wholeheartedly, together with the many exciting challenges that go with it. I think it is a wonderful privilege being alive today at this midpoint between the death of an old regime and the birth of an entirely new one. And we must remember that it is through us that newness is born. You and I, not 'them' (whoever they are) are the midwives of tomorrow so let us celebrate that. In doing so, we also remember that the great Masters, the great teachers of all the great world religions, all transcend religion, and all say basically the same thing. I will leave the last words with the Sufi Master Hazrat Inayat Khan:

When we are face to face with truth, the point of view of Krishna, Buddha, Christ, or any other prophet is the same. When we look at life from the top of the mountain, there is no limitation; there is the same immensity.

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