

A SPLINTERED, DISTORTED SPIRITUALITY

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

Last week end we reflected on Everyday spirituality. This weekend we shall continue our reflections on spirituality, especially the impact of dualism on spirituality.

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Thomas Kuhn, a social scientist at the University of Chicago, wrote a book in 1962 entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that soon became a classic in social sciences. That book introduced the concept of *Paradigms*, paradigm shifts and resistance to paradigm shifts.

Twenty years later the physicist Fritjof Capra wrote a book called *The Turning Point* in which he tried to explain Kuhn's concepts in a lay person's language. Capra focused on two paradigms. One, the Dualistic which influenced thought and behaviour for thousands of years, to which was added the mechanistic understanding in the Modern Era to form the *Dualistic-Mechanistic paradigm*. The paradigm that has emerged recently is the holistic to which is added the ecological to form the *Holistic-Ecological paradigm*.

Paradigms and paradigm changes come handy when discussing everyday spirituality.

THE DUALISTIC-MECHANISTIC PARADIGM

The Dualistic (from Latin *Duo*) paradigm splits reality into two and places one over the other and often against the other. The split between matter and energy, body and spirit, reason and passion are examples. Dualism influenced culture and society, as well as religion and spirituality, for thousands of years and laid the foundations for patriarchal domination.

The mechanistic understanding split reality not only to two, but many bits and pieces. Like the clock, the classic model of a machine, which works perfectly when every part in it works in orderly conjunction with every other part, the whole universe, consisting of bits and pieces of matter, works perfectly when everything in it is moving according to a pre-designed harmonious order. Order and harmony were considered essential to proper order in society.

CHANGE SEEN AS EVIL, PERMANENCE AS GOOD

We know that much chaos and confusion accompany change, as happens, for example, when governments change. Permanence, the opposite of change, maintains order, stability and harmony. Societies for whom order and harmony were cardinal virtues, as also those in power, saw change which undermines these as evil. Change because it is evil had to be resisted. Permanence and its constituents –stability and order—were to be promoted to maintain peace and harmony. Change against stability can be seen as the primordial split that gave rise to hierarchy and patriarchy, as well as the honour given to tradition.

Denigration of the Body

Change can be seen as the basis for the hugely influential split between body and soul/spirit. The body – the material element – decays and disappears and so is evil. The soul or spirit which maintains one's identity even after the body decays and disappears is good. The body was pitted against the spirit as inferior and dangerous. This view of body and spirit had a profound impact on the understanding and practice of spirituality.

Spiritual doctrines and disciplines developed a negative and even antagonistic attitude toward the body. The body came to be considered an enemy of spirit and needed to be subjugated and punished so that the soul could be strengthened. Since sexuality is an important dimension of our embodiment, it was considered as something dangerous to the spirit and even evil. Since marriage involved sexuality, those who embraced virginity or celibacy were considered to be living and practising a superior, holier way of life. Bodily asceticism was seen as essential for triumph of the spirit.

Reason over Emotion

The Greek philosopher Plato and his student Aristotle helped to further entrench dualistic notions and their consequences. They proposed that thinking concerned with pure reasoning is superior or more advanced than thinking permeated by sensory input and emotions. Sensations and emotions bring about turbulence and instability and so are bad and inferior. Reason contributes to order and stability and so is good and superior.

Subjugation and Oppression of Women

The dualistic split between body and spirit, reason and emotions and placing them hierarchically one over the other had a profound impact on the way women and men were viewed.

Emotion and bodily changes (which were considered evil) were considered to be mainly female experiences while reason, associated with the spirit (and considered good), was attributed to the male. Good, thus, became identified with the male and evil with the female. The good had to triumph over evil. Reason had to triumph over passion. Hence man had to dominate woman. (Please note: This is not my thought. I am only presenting the notions and beliefs which were present.)

An extreme consequence of this ideology was identification of women as embodiment of evil, Satan. The witch-burnings of the Middle Ages, and even later, was a direct result of this identification.

Patriarchy

This kind of dualistic and hierarchical notions attributing goodness, reason and superiority to men led to patriarchy – a philosophical, cultural and political system in which men controlled knowledge and

resources, and determined what role women can and cannot play in society. The evolution of patriarchy had disastrous consequences for the treatment of women in society and Church as well.

The patriarchal mindset influenced spirituality and religious practices too. The exclusion of women from sacred space and the privileged position men enjoy both in society and the Church stem from patriarchal thinking.

For introspection

- *What do the ideas presented here about dualism, body, sexuality, patriarchy, evoke in you?*
- *Can you recognize how these are impacting your life- your beliefs, attitude and behavior?*
- *Can you recognize the influence these have influenced our understanding and practice of everyday spirituality?*

Prayer

In the Book of Genesis we read how God created men and women as equal and after creating them he proclaimed his delight in them. "Very good!" he said.

Jesus had a profoundly different attitude toward body, sexuality and women, very different from the prevailing notions and attitudes in his society. Can you recognize how he was different? Which gospel scenes come to mind in this context? You could spend some time talking to him about whatever is evoked in you by this podcast.

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