

HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY: Wholeness, Not Flawlessness

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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 weekend we reflected on the impact of dualism on spirituality. This weekend we shall reflect on a Spirituality based on the newly emerged Holistic paradigm.

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Several developments in science and philosophy in the last hundred years have undermined the mechanistic-dualistic paradigm and paved the way for the emergence of a new one – the *Holistic* paradigm.

This new paradigm is having a profound and revolutionary impact on the understanding and practice of everyday spirituality.

Among the developments that led to the new paradigm, fundamental was Quantum Theory which ushered in the concept of a dynamic, fluid universe. The universe is not a collection of static objects which can be further decomposed into still smaller units as the mechanistic-dualistic paradigm had suggested. Rather, the universe is an inseparable and interconnected web of vibrating and dancing energy patterns in constant motion. In such a universe no one component has reality independent of the entirety. All of reality is one, and it is in constant flux.

It is not just quantum theory that undermined the dualistic-mechanistic model of the world. *Darwinian evolution* showed that nothing in the universe is static, but constantly evolving into more and more complex structures from simpler forms.

For *process philosophy*, change is the very essence of reality. In process thinking, fluidity and change are more fundamental than stability and permanence.

Systems theory does away with the notions of separate, discreet, and independent reality. Reality is whole and can only be understood as a whole. The essential properties of an organism are properties of the whole and cannot be found in its parts.

The result of these new ways of understanding reality was the undermining of the Dualistic-Mechanistic paradigm and the emergence of a new paradigm – the *Holistic*. The term “holistic” comes from the Greek *holos* (‘whole’) and refers to an understanding of reality in terms of integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller units. In other words, all of reality is one. And this reality is in flux, constantly changing and evolving.

In this new paradigm matter and spirit are not separate or opposing realities, but rather two poles of one ultimate reality – matter being the gross (concrete) pole, and spirit, the subtle (fluid) pole. The great spiritual master, Teilhard de Chardin, expressed beautifully the oneness of matter and spirit: “Matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.”

This concept of wholeness, of the unity and oneness of all reality, interweaving of matter and spirit, has implications for our understanding of spirituality and its practice.

A SPIRITUALITY OF WHOLENESS

Growth in spiritual maturity is not about being perfect or flawless, but about being loving and growing in relationship to the divine and to all of reality. While trying to become a loving human being, struggling to grow close to the divine and the human we can fail, we can make mistakes, sin. Our failure and sinfulness too can be means to grow in holiness. Grace and sin form one entity, part of the whole, just as matter and energy do. They are inseparable elements of spirituality. Both grace and sin are at work in us. We struggle, we fail, we succeed. In all that God is present. Spiritual growth happens when we recognize that presence and feel loved, and grow in love.

In his *Stories of God*, Jack Shea refers to the possibilities for finding God in our limitations, our disillusionment and our sinfulness. He writes: “When we reach our limits, when our ordered worlds collapse, when we cannot enact our moral ideals, when we are disenchanted, we often enter into the awareness of Mystery” (p. 39).

Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and retreat director, wrote a book with a rather paradoxical title, *Falling Upwards*. In it he describes potential inherent in our weaknesses, failures and limitations to enhance our spiritual journey as follows: “We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right. That might just be the central message of how spiritual growth happens; yet nothing in us wants to believe it” (p. xxii). Yes, those of us who have grown with a spirituality of perfection, with a clear division of sin and grace, and the need to be perfect and flawless believing God d love us only when we are good, would find it very difficult to believe this. We might consider Rohr’s statement heresy.

The late Indian Jesuit spiritual master Tony D’Mello said something similar with his story of the metaphoric rope that binds us to God. When we commit a serious sin, the rope is broken, severing our relationship to God. But when we repent and return to God, then the severed rope is tied back together, making it both shorter and stronger. In other words, our sin and our reconciliation strengthens our relationship and brings us closer to God more than before our sinning!

The motto of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is applicable to spirituality as well: “Progress, not Perfection!” We seek *progress* on the spiritual path, *not perfection*. Progress can be made even through our failure. What we need to do is to keep on struggling day after day to grow a little more in the love of God and our neighbor, using our failures as stepping stones.

This idea of spirituality might appear heresy to many. But, not if we know who our God really is: a God of mercy and compassion who does not hold our sins against us, but lifts us up into his

warm embrace after we fall. The story of the sinful woman in Luke's Gospel is illustrative here. Jesus says it is her sin that taught her to love more deeply. "Therefore, I tell you her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; *hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.* (7, 47)

Introspection

What is your reaction to this presentation of holistic spirituality? Does it disturb you or challenge you? Why? In what way?

Prayer

There are many incidents in the Gospel where we see the compassion and understanding Jesus shows to sinners and those who go astray, such as to the woman mentioned above. He never condemns them. He condemns, instead, the self-righteous Scribes, Pharisees and Rabbis who prided in their goodness and looked down upon those who fail or are not righteous in their sight.

You could now take a few minutes to talk to this compassionate and merciful Jesus about all that this podcast is triggering in you, as well as about your own struggles on the spiritual path. If you feel so inclined, you could read some of the passages in the gospel where Jesus shows mercy and compassion to sinners and those who struggle with life's problems.

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Have a blessed weekend. Be well. Be safe.
Thank you for listening/reading.

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