

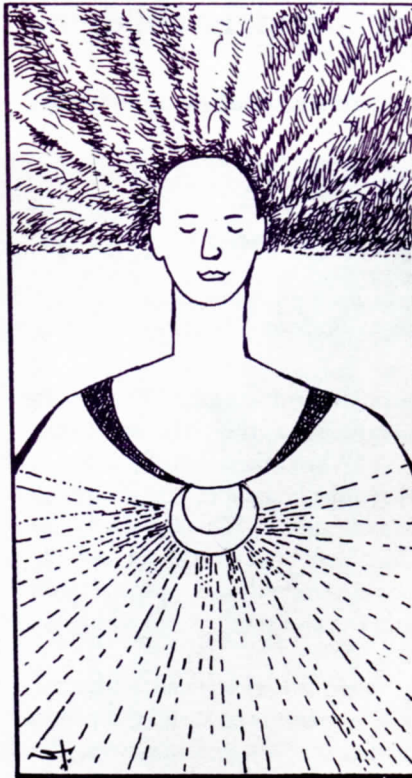
Emerging Asian Spirituality

Culled from the "Emerging Spirituality of Asian Women"
by Sr. Mary John Mananzan (Philippines) and Sun Ai Park (Korea)

There is an emerging understanding of spirituality that takes it to mean the inner core made up of all the experiences and encounters one has had in life and out of which come the motivations, inspirations, and commitment that make her live and decide in a particular way. It could be said that it is the shape in which the Holy Spirit has molded herself into one's life.

Modern-day prophetic theologians, especially Latin American liberation theologians and feminist theologians, come out boldly on the holistic liberation message that the Judeo-Christian religion has in its core, and point out errors and misunderstandings that traditional church theology has woven into the Christian understanding of spirituality. One of the most serious errors is the dualism that separates the spiritual from the bodily and material realm, intellectual from emotional expression, concerns of the other world from those of this world—and subsequently divides men from women. Feminist theologians attribute the last division to patriarchy.

Women's struggle is part and parcel of the historical struggle for the holistic salvation of all humanity. Women can



Sandra Torrijos

make a unique contribution toward this goal based on their spirituality, which is formulated through their concrete pro-life way of living and experiences. All the disastrous dimensions of patriarchal culture are typically exemplified in its demeaning, ignoring, and despising the very spirituality of women that is oriented toward, and sustaining life in, love. The spirituality affirming womanhood, reaching out for liberation of all women and all humanity, is emerging in all parts of the world, and Asia is not exempt.

ASIAN WOMEN'S REALITY

Asian women share the domestic, economic, political, and religious oppression that their sisters all over the world suffer. However, the concretization of the oppression varies. The image of the subservient, servile Asian woman is behind the varied forms of trafficking in Asian women ranging from mail-order brides to prostitution. Because of the economic crisis, women in Asia suffer a double burden at work (low wages and sexual harassment) and in the case of rural women, a triple burden (field work, domestic work, and marketing of goods). Because of political repression, Asian women have also been raped, tortured, imprisoned, and killed for their political beliefs.

Specifically, Malaysian women suffer the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and worsening communal relations; Korean women suffer from the division of their country into North and South and from the oppressive Confucian family law; Indian women suffer from the caste system and the dowry system; and Muslim women in some Asian countries have to submit to female genital mutilation. Sri Lankan women are torn by the ethnic struggle. Although Japanese women belong to a First World society, they also suffer from the male-

oriented emperor system, the tragic experience of the nuclear bomb, and the hazards of a highly technological society.

ASIAN WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

In their powerlessness, women are more severely victimized than their male partners in their particular class, race and caste. This is the result of patriarchal domination. Women's oppression comes in different combinations of political, economic, and religious-cultural oppressions within the

underlying patriarchal domination. Therefore, in Third World

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countries, dealing only with

women's issues cannot uproot all the problems women face in their societies. It is obvious that the emerging Asian women's spirituality longs for freedom from exploitation—a free society for themselves as well as for the men and the children. The liberation framework of Asian women includes, and is included in, the overall people's movement to be free. It brings a qualitatively different vision and interpersonal relationship from the traditional male way of constructing communities.

When two halves don't make a whole:

Spirituality brings women a sense of wholeness

Following are excerpts from an interview with Sr. Mary John Mananzan by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, Communications Program Officer

Sister Mary John is a happy person. Who wouldn't be? Born to an upper-middle class family from Pangasinan, gifted with exceptional intelligence and backed by a formidable education, Sr. Mary John did not have to go through the school of hard knocks. Some cynical friends in the women's circle quip that "with no husband and children to take care of, no financial obligations to worry about and no bosses to order her around," she certainly has no reason to be unhappy. But Sr. Mary John's happiness comes not from a mundane or worldly source but from a constant awareness of her sense of being.

Sr. Mary John, who has been a nun for the last 36 years, is an educator by training and practice but she is as much an NGO person. "I've always been into public advocacy whether it's for justice or for women. For me, there's no dichotomy between being in school and doing social action," says Sr. Mary John who holds important positions in some NGOs, including Isis International-Manila and GABRIELA, the national alliance of Philippine-based

women's organizations. What sustains her through all these is her spirituality.

"When others talk of spirituality, they usually dichotomize the person. It's like saying 'This facet is for her spirit alone', but what about her body? For me, the body and the spirit are one and the end result is the whole person."

Spirituality, she said, is necessary for women to transcend their image as victims and become survivors. More importantly, spirituality is a key ingredient in women's resolve to become active agents of their own liberation. "Where will women get their strength? Where will they get their energy? Where will they get the source of life that will make them transcend? From Spirituality."

She, however, quickly points out that this kind of spirituality cannot be called feminist spirituality but women's spirituality. It is the kind women develop taking into consideration their situation, particularly their struggles for total emancipation and full humanity. "Some of us call it feminist spirituality because it is being developed in the context of the whole



Sr. Mary John: life is a dance

feminist track. But this spirituality should not be exclusive to feminists, in much the same way that Christian values are also universal human values."

Sr. Mary John says she expresses her spirituality in everything she does. "When you eat, you eat. When you drink, you drink. It is living in the present. It's the whole awareness of your being—awareness that you are actually God or a part of God. It's being constantly mindful that there is that

In the Philippines, women are involved in national liberation struggles; they were alongside the men in the anti-Marcos-dictatorial-regime movement. Filipino women are still committed to the struggle of the people in the economic, political, and cultural movements of liberation, which have not ceased even after the February 1986 event. They see this struggle toward societal transformation as a necessary though not sufficient condition for their own liberation. As they

go through the crucible of suffering, they experience

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significant changes in their

understanding and practice of religion and in the manifestation of their religiosity. We see that the spirit of protest against domination, whether in the social, political, economic, ecclesial or domestic order, has correlation to the spirituality of the Asian women's overall struggle for liberation.

Let us turn to Korea. The division of the country was decided by the superpowers at the end of World War II. This decision was imposed on the Korean people by the two

source of life, love and strength in you and in all people. Everything you do is then permeated by that awareness; in the process, you achieve a sense of wholeness. But I do recognize that this is difficult because you tend to be distracted by a lot of things.

"Meditation frees us from distractions. I think everyone needs to meditate. It's not only for religious people. It's for your wholeness as a human being and as an adult to have this moment of reflection. Most of the time we wear masks and there's so much falsehood. When you are in meditation, you are looking in a mirror. All of us should at least have a moment in our lives when we are true despite all the denials we make to other people.

"The whole point of meditation is not to follow your thoughts. The technique is to concentrate on your breathing—this way your mind will not be able to spin. Then you start following your thoughts, making sure you don't agitate them. For example, the image in your mind is you are a duck and rain falls on your back. Just let it roll. Don't agitate it. The fruit of this is that you become calm.

Then, even if we are committed to a cause we are not swallowed up by it.

Reflecting on her decades of involvement in the women's movement,

Sr. Mary John says: "My sense of wholeness has really taught me that we, women, can really be happy. It's just that we often look for happiness in the wrong things. Some women, for example, are conditioned to think that they can only be happy with a man." The conditioning can go so deep as to prompt some women to believe they lead insignificant lives unless they meet a man who would

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say "I love you" to them.

Sr. Mary John believes almost all frustrations of women spring from dissatisfaction in their emotional relationships with people, especially with men—considering women put so much value in their relationships with the opposite sex.

Sr. Mary John philosophizes: "If you are whole in yourself and you meet a man who is whole in himself, then the two wholes will come together and bring about oneness. On the other hand, if you're a half and the man you meet is also a half, when you part ways, you revert to being a half once again. If you invest so much

and the other party doesn't, you'll just feel cheated."

"Spirituality is really a whole attitude. I now look at life as dancing with a playful consciousness. I don't take things so seriously. It's all a play. For me, the essential element of authentic spirituality is being relaxed. If you are so tense, then there is something wrong."

Spirituality, says Sr. Mary John is surrendering yourself to God. But in the same breath, she says that feminism has changed her attitude toward her relationship with God. "When I was in college, what guided me was the belief that God is my almighty father so nothing in this world could really vanquish me. This sustained me for about 40 years. But now I can't relate with God the father anymore because of my feminism. That is when I realized that it's not just the father but also the spirit in me that sustains me."

There is nothing more empowering than believing that within us lies the source of our power and strength.)

Sister Mary John Mananzan is the current president of St. Scholastica's College in Manila and was recently elected president of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. She is the founder and is Executive Director of the Institute of Women's Studies of St. Scholastica's College.

competing ideologies. Did Koreans have time or the opportunity to make their own choice? See what has happened there ever since. These two tiny countries are the buffer zones of two ideological powers and the frontline of their warfare. The Korean War in 1950-53 was an example. At the expense of millions of lives, and grave human and economic casualties, the war gained nothing but deep-rooted enmity and increasing militarism. It is said that the two Koreas now rank as fifth and sixth in military might in the world, with nuclear weapons in stock to be used at any time.

The intellectuals and workers in South Korea see clearly the foreign and local exploitation that accompanies political oppression. The protest demonstrations have continued ever since student power toppled the American-backed dictatorial regime in 1960. Thousands of students have been tortured and imprisoned. What do they want, risking so much? They want to have a truly independent and unified democratic country where the rights of the people to self-determination, and their participation in building a political and economic system for and of the people will be a reality, and not mere lip service.

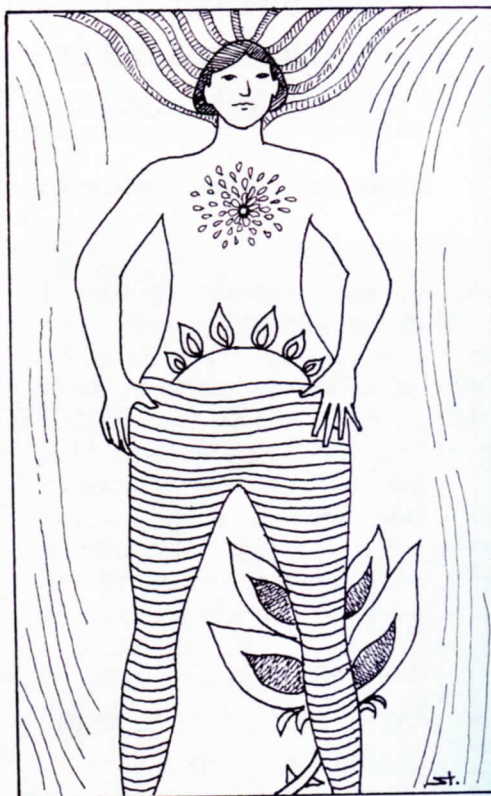
In the Indian subcontinent, the protest is against the colonial policy or the arbitrary bringing together of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups to form a nation. The communal conflict in Sri Lanka and India is an example. Of course, other factors such as the discriminatory economic and educational policies of the two governments are also respon-

sible. The struggle of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Punjabs in India, the ethnic minorities in Japan—all have the same spiritual traits. They all want equal and just treatment and a full share of human dignity. And in all these, the women are the most affected and are the most

understanding, in turn, influences not only their interpersonal relationships with the significant people in their lives, like their husbands, but also their relationships with men in general. It also forms the collective consciousness growing among them as they struggle against exploitation and discrimination, and as they experience the triumphs they achieve in the course. It is therefore not just a vertical relationship with God but an integral spirituality shaped by prayer, by relational experiences and struggle—personal, interpersonal, and societal.

The emerging spirituality of women is characterized by an inner liberation from the internal and external slaveries they seek to break. Militant women have this common sense of liberation arising from their self-knowledge, self-acceptance and the growth in their self-esteem.

Christian women involved in national struggles have begun questioning the traditional teachings of the church, especially those that justify the subordination of women. They are experiencing a process of inner liberation from the abiding guilt induced by religious doctrines and ethical teachings of the church. Women are less and less inclined to pattern their life after the impossible model of virgin-mother imposed by foreign missionaries. They are questioning the interpretation of St. Paul's "wives, obey your husbands" when it comes to the frequency of pregnancy or in submitting to their husbands' claims of their marital rights.



militant in the struggle for the liberation of their people.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE WOMAN QUESTION

There is a growing awareness among Asian women of the ramifications of the women's question. Their personal and social experiences, as well as their common struggle, have shaped the particular form of spirituality emerging among them. This spirituality is nourished by their growing understanding of their self-image, which has been obscured by the roles assigned to them by patriarchal society. This self-

Although the Catholic church has never budged from its insistence on the natural method of birth control, about 90 percent of Catholic Filipino women quietly contravene this position and use other forms of contraceptives. Not a few have had themselves ligated after their third or fourth child.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND ASIAN WOMEN

Interfaith dialogue is an important part of the discussion of the emerging Asian women's spirituality. Ecumenical spirituality seeks unity of humankind in humility and reverence toward all life and all belief systems.

Should Christian women condone all the structural and systemic evils Christian civilization has brought and concentrate only on securing privileged posts in a rotten structure? While it is important to fight for power positions when one is discriminated against for being a woman, it is as important to remain committed to bringing about radically new values that are people-oriented and concerned for life and a truly humane community.

The story of Esther has a profound message. Esther went through a highly competitive screening test, but she hid her identity until it was time to reveal it. She used strategic actions, all carefully planned, in order to save her people from imminent peril. Her action was founded on total commitment. She said: "If I must perish, I must perish!" (Esther 4:17). She was ready to give her own life for the many.

This search for the wholeness of life that is the core of the emerging women's spirituality is further underlined

in the statement of the Urban and Rural Mission of the Christian Conference of Asia on the occasion of the Bhopal tragedy in 1986:

Christian: Biblical faith, spirituality and religion have centered on liberation/salvation. Salvation means wholeness. . . meaning whole, entire, complete or uninjured, unimpaired, unbroken. . . . Wholeness suggests all that the Hebrew word Shalom conveys. Shalom is a comprehensive word for prosperity and well-being, peace, harmony,

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happiness of the people of God in [God's] presence and company.

Buddhist: The key word for the affirmation of the wholeness of life is to walk on. When one is a weakling, one is afraid of death and suffering and cannot walk on. Once we understand the Dharma, then we can adjust our inner condition to have a detached view of the world, less greed, hatred and delusion.

Islam: All creation and humankind is one single whole, living through genesis, leading to the perfection of the person, i.e., the complete expression of one's creativity in terms of reaching towards two essential aims: (a) the relation between person and environment, and (b) the relation between person and

God, i.e., the inner being.

Hindu: That which holds is Dharma, i.e., the order. It is a totality, a holistic point of view towards life. . . . It is a question of an order, a complete, total view of things in which things have to fall in place. . . . When we talk of the so-called Hindu, in fact, we are talking civilization and not of religion or faith.

This statement represents the common views of these four major religions in Asia as they seek the holistic salvation of humanity. However, knowing that deep-rooted misogynous ideologies and practices are the reality in all the region's major religions and cultures, one cannot help raise the question: No matter how beautiful the idea of wholeness might be, can a patriarchal culture be inclusive of women's aspirations?

What Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza says about feminist suspicion in hermeneutics is echoed by Asian women who see the reality of discrimination against women in the name of respect for the traditional culture and religions. Women find themselves very often excluded even by the ideology of wholeness and holistic salvation. It is because patriarchy can never be holistic. Patriarchy is basically androcentric, and it can never include women and children in the center of its world as equals. Even love for women and children is motivated by men's own selfish needs. That is the reason why women and children are put at the periphery although mechanisms of make-believe are woven into their emotional and financial dependency.

In the coming reign of God, Christ will put children in the center (Mt. 19:13-15). In Jesus' life and mission of counter-

culture, he befriended all the downtrodden, including women. If a growing people's movement all over Asia is a sign of our times, the demands made by the various women's movements are the torch lighting the way toward the true wholeness of life.

SPIRITUALITY AS A PROCESS

Asian women realize that the Bible, in spite of all reinterpretations, remains a book written in a particular society and are fully aware of the need for a cultural critique. They must actively participate in the interfaith dialogue to give feminist input, sorting out the liberating from the oppressive. Such an analysis from the feminist perspective, in the search for an alternative culture, is another aspect of the emerging spirituality.

At the same time, however, Asian women are delving into their own traditions, myths, and legends for insights, values and inspiration in their effort toward the full flowering of their womanhood. They are rediscovering their history and resurrecting their women leaders, heroines and saints as sources of cooperation and strength of their struggle. The Filipinos enshrine Princess Urduja and Gabriela Silang; the Indians, Mira Bai, Pandita Rama Bai and so forth.

In Asian women's emerging spirituality, God is one who unites—not one who divides people by creedal dogmas. This spirituality depicts a very liberating portrait of Jesus. The image of the human being transcends the dualistic body-and-soul relationship and has optimism for the possibilities of

personhood. Faith is not a security in being saved because of legalistic obedience but an exciting dimension of radical openness. Salvation has a communal historical and cosmic dimension and is integral and total. The emerging spirituality

Throughout salvation history, this was the experience of the people of God. The emerging spirituality of women shows the characteristics of the original meaning of salvation, namely, its totality and correctness. The release of women's creative

energy and development of new insights have resulted in a refocusing of the different elements of spirituality, which converge and draw its vitality from creation, in contrast with the traditional spirituality that focuses on the fall and redemption.

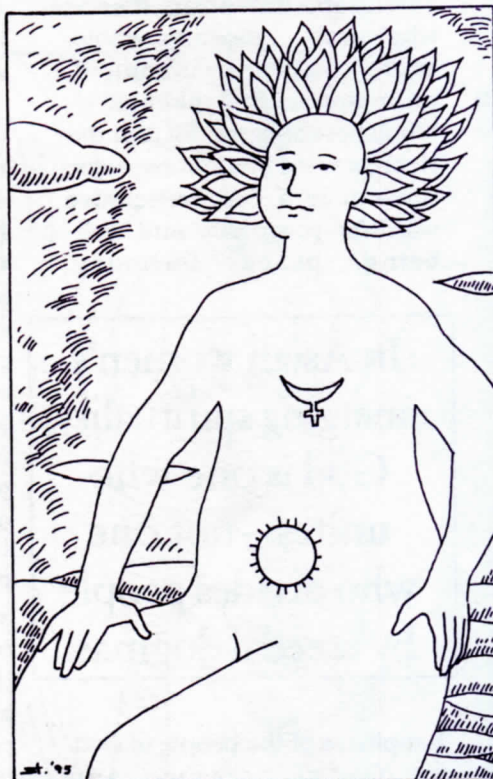
Spirituality is a process. It is not achieved once and for all. It does not become congealed. It is not even a smooth, continuous growth. There can be retrogression or quantum leaps. It has peaks and abysses. It has its agonies and ecstasies. The emerging spirituality of women promises to be vibrant and ushers in possibilities of life and freedom, and consequently, to more and more

opportunities to be truly, intensely, and wholly alive!

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is active rather than passive, expansive rather than limiting. It celebrates rather than fasts, it surrenders rather than controls. It is an Easter rather than a Good Friday spirituality. It is creative rather than conservative.

Our understanding of salvation that emerges is one worked out by a God of history with the people, and results in a liberation that is total and concrete: total in the sense of the whole person being saved, body and soul, in the context of a social milieu; and concrete in the sense that it is a liberation from concrete evils such as slavery and a promise of concrete blessings such as land.