

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*

**S**ister 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

The emerging spirituality of women is characterized by an inner liberation from the internal and external slaveries they seek to break.

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.*