

NAGY Szilvia

## *Song of the Body.*

### *Liturgical Revolution from the Third World*

*When we look at the theologies and spiritualities which emerged from the Third World, we might first feel they remained particular. They were born in a particular context, they were addressed to people who share the common circumstances of life, and they tried to find answers and solutions for their own problems. Their effort to concentrate on God's immanence and on the immanent realities of the world (such as society, culture, poverty and oppression), at first seems irrelevant to the other parts of the world.*

*Third World theologies, however, confronted not only their own countries and people, but also the First (and Second) World countries and people as well, with their realities (poverty, oppression etc) that they all tried to hide. They also confronted the world and its Western European and North American white male rational ruling principle, which was the political, social and even Christian standard before. They also called Christianity to face its corrupted reality that failed to transfer the good news and became a strange and an oppressive ideology. The new spiritual revolution of body completely transformed the style of Christian spirituality and worship.*

#### I. NEW SONG FROM AFRICA AND NORTH AMERICA

People from the Third World recognized themselves as essentially religious and intuitive beings. They gave voice to their authentic spirituality, unique to the colonial one. The essence of this spirituality is the rejection of every *artificial separation* as material and spiritual world, the body and soul etc. It sees the experienced world in a dynamic and comprehensive manner.

#### NEW SONG OF COLOUR

Third World theologies started their revolution with a *new theological paradigm shift*. They changed the starting point to the understanding of who God is, and it changed the object of theology and worship. They began theology with the first thing humans experience: their own body. In particular, Black Theology was a leading force at this point, experiencing the blacks' bodies as the source of all their discriminations. Black Theology stated that God is black. "There is no place in Black Theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color", said James H. CONE.

It implied that the source of being black is in God, which means a

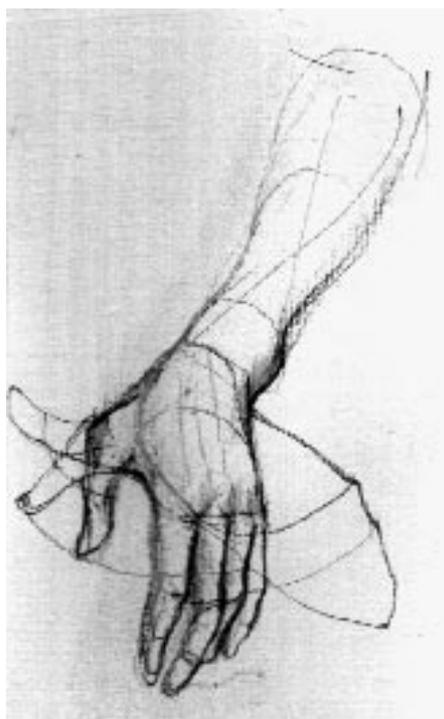
strong assurance of identity. Concerning human beings, Black Theology stated that spiritual needs are as important for the body as bodily needs are for the soul. The body, by remembering its origin and its womb, was seen as a tool that can lead to the primordial consciousness of the presence of God. That is why, through gestures, bodily expressions confirm that human beings are embodied and that the reality of Incarnation is to be taken seriously.

#### NEW SONG OF MOVEMENT

Contrary to the classical Greek and Roman philosophical culture, which shaped Western Christianity, for peoples from the Third World the *body* is neither fallen nor an instrument of sin. Rather, the body is the center of the total manifestation of the person. African theology especially emphasizes this idea. The body bears witness to the past, lives in the present, keeps the memorial of the Lord, and expresses discipleship through an ethical life. While in the Roman liturgy the immobility symbolized perfection, the gestures, the flexing of the body, and the dances in the Third World liturgies express both the individuals and the community as they are assembled before God.

Human voices, drums, rhythm and movement of the dance express the whole worldview, theology and God-relationship of the people. That is why HERSKOVITS argued that what Africa needs is not only black theology but *blackbody theology*: bodily experiences (being in contact with the people, with nature, and with the cosmos) and expressions are essential elements of faith. Faith is shaped (and to be shaped) by the outer forms of religious expression rather than on inner values and beliefs. These outer forms can offer the depth of the inner values and beliefs in an effective and life-transforming way.

The body is natural and ritualized (sanctified). It can be and should be used in worshipping God. The effort to create 'body-theology', however, did not stay only in Africa but helped the other Third World theologies in forming their image of human beings and in rediscovering their own cultural values. On the other hand, it challenged the First World's image of body, of the human being, and of Incarnation. In the beginning, body-theology was a scandal. Later on, however, it started a revolution of body that culminated in involving gestures, movements and dances into the liturgical order.



## II. NEW SONG FROM ASIA

Contrary to the other Third World theologies, where enlightenment was the rediscovery of the communal aspects of humanity, Indian spirituality put the person and the personal encounter with God into the center. As Swami AMALDAS wrote, among the gifts given by God to India, the greatest is that of interiority, the *awareness of the presence of God* dwelling in the heart of each human person, which is fostered by prayer and meditation, by contemplative silence and the practice of yoga and sannyasa.

### NEW SONG OF MEDITATION

Perhaps the main contribution of India to ecumenical spirituality was the introduction of yoga and the rediscovery of the value of meditation. Their wide possibilities opened the way to their use at personal devotion at worship. Both yoga and meditation concentrate on the person, on the human nature, but not from the side of historical context but from the side of the soul, the common human eternal bases, like growing toward self-perfection, realizing the latent resources of the self, living life in its fullness and wholeness.

Although meditations may use movements (e.g. walks), their main benefit offer was to lead Christianity in rediscovering the value of silence and concentration. It happened on two levels, one of them being the *rediscovery* of the great meditative and mystical tradition of Christianity. The other level was the *discovery* of the meditative tradition of the Orient (mainly of India) and the introduction of meditation into Christian spiritual practice.

### NEW SONG OF YOGA

*Yoga* operates with the human body by putting more emphasis on the body than meditation. We can realize, however, that the focus of Yoga practices is the soul that inspires and transforms the body and makes it a tool for deepening one's spiritual life. Yoga ritualizes and internalizes postures which are part of the dance. It deals with the parts of dances as elements with separated identity and it gives time for each of the parts to display its own effects. These techniques with their elaborateness are more useful in individual devotions or for a 'spiritual elite', while dances and common rites fit more for gatherings. Our ecumenical experience shows, however, that because yoga itself and its single elements are able to transcend denominational and cultural labels, owing to their universal character, much of the elements of this religiosity can be widely used in ecumenical gatherings.

For introducing these practices and techniques, especially in public spiritual occasions, deep knowledge, skills and experience are required. In their simple form as gestures,

basic postures and silence they became natural elements of common growth in spiritual ecumenism and they broke the autocracy of sermons with the revolution of the soul.

### III. NEW SONG OF BODY

The discovery of the human body as a tool of worship, the (re)introduction of yoga and meditative practices, helped Western and Westernized Christianity to see the criteria of rational usefulness, objectified spiritual desires (going to church, reading Bible every day, liturgy in a strict order), and determined self, faith, spirituality, and church images (by dogmatic inheritances) as illusions and unfair boundaries. The key is *to change first the inner world of a person*, which can be the source for changes in the outer world.

These spiritualities saw the political, social, and economic changes as obvious consequences of the people's conscious spiritual growth. "The more one recedes inward, the more one encompasses the world at large - without opposition", said Justin O'BRIEN. We could realize, in the ecumenical movement's spiritual and practical fields, the strength and power coming from these practices when these fields met each other and these spiritualities helped to make balance and focus for the ecumenical social efforts.

SERVANT CHRIST,

HELP US TO FOLLOW YOU OUT OF THE DARK TOMB,

TO SHARE DAILY YOUR RESURRECTED LIFE,

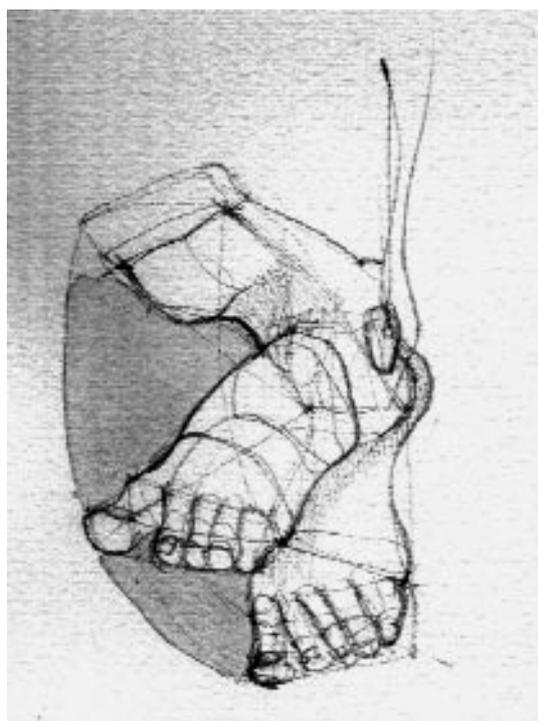
TO BE RENEWED DAILY IN YOUR IMAGE OF LOVE,

TO BE USED DAILY AS YOUR NEW BODY

IN YOUR SERVICE TO THE WORLD,

SERVANT CHRIST, HELP US TO FOLLOW YOU.

*(Indian Litany of the Disciples of Christ the Servant)*



#### Suggested Readings:

CARDEN John, *A Procession of Prayers. Prayers and Meditations from Around the World*. London-Geneva, 1998.

GRAHAM Aelred, *Contemplative Christianity: An Approach to the Realities of Religion*. The Ecumenical Review 1976/28.

*Spirituality and Social Embodiement*. Oxford, 1997.

*Spirituality of Interfaith Dialogue*. Geneva, 1989.

UZURWU Elochukwu E., *Body and Memory in African Liturgy*. Concilium 1995.

NAGY Szilvia is an ecumenical theologian from Hungary, a member of KÖD (Magyar SCM). She is a graduate of the Evangelical-Lutheran Faculty of Theology (Budapest) and the Bossey Ecumenical Institute (Switzerland). Currently she is writing her ThD on ecumenical and interreligious liturgies. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe (EYCE).

