

Movements of the Spirit in History

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*“... people’s movements necessarily are the means by which we
serve the Kingdom.”*

(Kairos Central America, 1988, para. 68)

Introduction

From the American and French revolutions at the end of the 18th century to the anti-slavery, labor and socialist movements and first waves of feminism and environmentalism in the 19th century, along with continuing indigenous resistance to colonialism and imperialism, “modern” projects of social order have been marked from within and without by social movements of resistance and hope for another world.¹ This truth became even clearer in the second half of the 20th century. As soon as order was re-established after the international cataclysms of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, and the “end of ideology” (Cormie 1980) being celebrated by Western social scientists and politicians, choruses of “new” voices erupted in 1960s and 1970s around the world in Third World liberation movements, feminist liberation movements, civil rights and black power movements, indigenous movements, anti-war and peace movements, environmental and ecology movements. Subsequently, “newer” voices – of gays and lesbians, transgendered and bisexual people, disabled or differently abled, Asian-American and Asian-Canadian, etc. – have continued erupting to the present. And there is no end in sight.

Here, after (1) contextualizing myself and signaling my hermeneutical priorities, I offer brief probes – hypotheses to be tested in terms of your own experiences and perspectives – on: (2) growing awareness of social movements as primary actors/forces in shaping the social world, and as primary sites of our encounters with the Divine in history; (3) epochal transitions associated with

¹ Broad and Heckscher suggest that “the anti-slave trade movement was the first modern social movement and the innovator of social-change methodologies used by virtually every social movement that followed” (Broad and Heckscher 2003, 716).

developments in science, modes of knowledge production and new technologies, the project of neoliberal globalization, growing resistance to this project in anti-globalization or alternative globalization movements; (4) challenges faced by the “new” voices in theology in terms of recognizing and celebrating the challenges and opportunities associated with these developments; (5) the good news of convergence among popular movements; and (6) contributions of Christian theology to naming the new – and very old – experience of the Spirit in history when faith in the modern doctrine of progress is no longer possible, and the only genuine hope is that “another world is possible.”

1. Hermeneutical Priorities ... and Epistemological Humility

First, a word of personal contextualization is in order. I was born in the U.S. in 1943, near the end of the last stage of the great, prolonged crisis of “modern Western civilization” – World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. And I grew up during the stitching together of the bipolar post-War global order, this time centered on the U.S. as the highest stage of development, defender and promoter of “Western” and “Christian” civilization against poverty, backwardness, and the “world communist threat.”² In Christian, specifically Catholic, terms this meant that I grew up in the pre-Vatican II church, with its strong sense of limited possibilities in this “vale of tears” in what was framed as an essentially unchanging history, full of temptations to sin, demonic threats, longing for salvation beyond history, and need for authority and discipline. By the 1960s though, especially in the North, horizons were shifting radically. Suddenly there was a new (at least for Catholics) sense of wonderful possibilities in this life on earth, and endless experimentation in the cultural revolutions of the 1960s. Along with many others I was swept along by the new spirit of openness to the world, symbolized in Catholic circles by Vatican II and the reforms flowing from it. As a university student in Canada (where I ended up through sheer luck, or

pure grace) I grew increasingly excited by these possibilities, and by contact with priest theologians who were helping to pave these new paths. Caught up in wrestling with how personally to make the transition from pre-Vatican to post-Vatican Catholic, the growing need to think about earning as living as I approached graduation, and the suddenly new career opportunities for lay theologians with the vast expansion of higher education and growing shortage of priests, I embarked on the graduate study of theology in 1965. In those good old days, college and university teaching positions were open everywhere, even to those equipped with only a MA. And in 1967, only vaguely conscious of how little I knew, I embarked on a career as professor of theology and ethics.

This was shocking in many ways, not only for my students but for me too. During the early and mid-1960s, I had been shielded from the cultural and political winds by my Catholic sense of separation between heaven and earth, church and world, religion and politics, by my unquestioning faith in America as a bastion of Western, Christian values,³ and by my sojourn as a university and graduate student in Canada. I was marked neither by the crude overt racism of the U.S. south sparking the civil rights movement nor by the intense anti-communist rhetoric dominating politics and culture in the U.S., commitments to policing world order, and escalation of the war in Vietnam sparking the anti-war movement.⁴ I was shocked, then, upon returning to the U.S. to teach, at the intense debates and conflicts which had already erupted over the civil rights and black power movements and the anti-Vietnam war movement and the agonizing choices being faced by male students confronting the draft, and by faculty members and administrators in colleges, like my own in Buffalo, NY, many of which were located in increasingly black inner city neighborhoods. The expanding sense of wonderful new possibilities was suddenly colored with the deep stains of evil,

² In many circles in the social sciences, after long adherence to the doctrine of secularization as increasingly marking the “modern” world, there is a resurgence of interest in religion. For example, analysts have begun to recognize the religious, specifically Christian, dimensions of Cold War ideology and politics in both its “liberal” and “conservative” expressions, and the roles of Christian thinkers, officials and institutional policies in articulating and mobilizing support for both; see Kirby, D., *Religion and the Cold War*, 2003; Warren 1997.

³ As Kirby notes, “Christianity was appropriated by Western propagandists and policy-makers for their anti-communist arsenal... [A]nti-communist rhetoric emphasised freedom of religion and Christian ideals, which, combined with its emphasis on democracy and freedom, enabled anti-communism to assume a doctrinal status with the claim to moral superiority owing to its spiritual component as opposed to the base materialism of communism” (Kirby, D., 2003, 2).

⁴ Of course, civil rights and anti-war movements erupted in Canada too, but with a bit of a lag, with less of the same highly polarized sense of opposition to the reigning culture and politics, and in other ways wrestling with the peculiarities of Canada, and especially Quebec.

suffering, and conflict, provoking widespread cultural, ethical and political turmoil and anxiety, and seemingly endless new challenges to conversion.

Surprisingly, much of this resonated with experience in my own marginal white working class family of origin marked by a few new opportunities for jobs and housing, but also by turmoil and regular crises in the cycles of boom and bust in the economy, frequent unemployment and constant fear of unemployment, and accompanying stress on bodies, psyches and souls. In view of my family's experiences and many others' – indeed the majority of white working class Americans (Levison 1974) – who did not fit the image of affluent and conservative, it seemed that there were many reasons for resistance to the reigning U.S. culture and politics and hope for alternatives. But, for many complex reasons, critical voices like this were muted in the eruptions of “new” voices. Indeed, scholarly elites and too often spokespeople for the “new left” converged in criticizing white working Americans for all that was wrong when the evidence was (and remains) far more mixed, overlooking completely the concentrations of corporate, media and cultural power, and the roles of elites (or “ruling classes”) in manipulating public discourse and policy-making, often in secret.⁵

In any case, in this turmoil, I too was born again – theologically, ethically, politically and of course personally – in dialogue with growing choruses of “new” voices in the world and in the church, and in the rediscovery of older, long-marginalized voices. My continuing apprenticeship in theology since then has been marked by a priority on attentiveness to these “new” voices, dialogues among and with them, and to supporting networks and organizations supporting them.⁶

Witnessing the births – in political and scholarly terms – of these “new” voices has been exciting. Of course, this pilgrimage has been end-

lessly challenging – not least because being white, male, First World, (more recently for me) middle class, heterosexual, and middle-aged has often been identified as the problem. And the challenges have only become more numerous and complicated, as the Canadian pole of my bi-national identity flourished since returning to Canada as a professor in 1979,⁷ my connections with distant others, especially in Latin America, have grown deeper, and the diversity of standpoints, perspectives, concerns and claims has exploded.

Diversity is growing, central and irreducible, in ways which our theologies and ecclesiologies, spiritualities and ethics are still struggling to acknowledge and accommodate. But, in my experience, equally central in the midst of growing diversity is repeated experiences of convergence across difference, broader solidarities, and new hope for the future. And here I wish to testify to this experience, to probe the contours of this path of this Spirit in history, and to wrestle with the implications of this experience for our theologies and ecclesiologies, spiritualities and politics.

I realize that there is no one right standpoint, perspective, or reading of this history. But I also believe deeply that authentic hope for the future – if there is to be a future for us – must be shared, collaboratively witnessed to in campaigns and movements, and celebrated. And in this Spirit I offer the following reflections.

2. Interruptions of the Historically Silenced and Marginalized

A series of “new” voices have erupted around the world in liberation, feminist, social justice, racial justice, eco-justice and peace movements. Above all, they have given voice to the sufferings and hopes of historically marginalized peoples, their standpoints, perspectives, and concerns. And in the process they irrupted – broke into – reigning cultural and religious, ethical and political discourses in countless ways, disrupting horizons, categories, and frameworks, historically expanding participation, and transforming the character of dialogue and debate in every area.

These “new” voices are different in many important ways. From the beginning, though, they converged in protesting the idealization of post-

⁵ For a contemporary response to caricatures and denunciations of white, working class, ethnic Americans see Krickus 1976; specifically, for an explanation of the “right turn” in US politics associated with the election of Ronald Reagan focusing on the convergence of born-again liberal (“neoliberal”) and born-again conservative (“neoconservative”) politics and orchestration of limited forms of “conservative” populism which did not reflect political shifts among white working class Americans in general, see Ferguson and Rogers 1986.

⁶ For me personally, this has included work in and support for Theology in the Americas (Torres 1976; West, Guidote and Coakley 1982), the American Academy of Religion Liberation Theologies Working Group, the Canadian Theology Reflection Group (Lind and Mihewc 1994), the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologies (EAT-WOT) (Fabella and Torres 1985), and the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative (Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative 1998; Cormie 2004).

⁷ For example, only on my return to Canada did I begin to fully appreciate the diverse streams of the social gospel movement which had become almost completely marginalized and invisible in the U.S. in the 1950s, but which remained vital and influential in Canada through the 1980s (Allen 1975; Wells and Hutchinson 1989).

World War II forms of social order in the Western – “First” – world and the promises of “development” for the “Third” world.⁸ They condemned its contradictions and limitations (named in terms of neocolonialism, dependency and capitalist world system, class divisions, racism, patriarchy, militarism). They dreamed of a different future, which transcends reigning constellations of forces, patterns, and trends. They demanded the right to speak for themselves, and to have a voice in the centers of decision-making power. And they called for changes that go to the roots, “radical” changes, in personal relationships, in established ideologies, institutions, social structures, and decision-making processes.

In the churches this resurgent spirit of hope for marginalized, oppressed and exploited peoples and causes found expression around the world in liberation and contextual theologies: Latin American liberation theology, black and feminist theologies in the U.S., black and liberation and contextual theologies in Africa, indigenous spiritualities, Caribbean liberation theologies, gay and lesbian theologies, theology of struggle in the Philippines, Minjung theology in South Korea, Sri Lankan liberation theologies, Dalit theology in India, and inter-religious dialogues.⁹

In the 1980s these “new” voices were (re)joined by those yearning for peace, protesting the arms race and the deepening shadows of nuclear Armageddon accompanying the Reagan administration’s acceleration of the arms race as a strategy to threaten and to bankrupt the USSR.

They were also joined by a growing chorus of voices seeking to speak on behalf of the earth, pointing to the ecological crises of industrial civilization and to the need for conversion to another path of development.

In different ways, these “new” voices sought to empower marginalized peoples to affirm their own dignity, to speak for themselves concerning their sufferings, joys and visions of society, and to make their voices heard in the centers of power. In doing so, they drew on earlier expressions of the spirit of

liberation in black slave religion, the popular religiosity of peasants and workers, indigenous and women’s spiritualities, the social gospel movement and turn-of-the century feminism, movements like Young Christian Students and Young Christian Workers, the Student Christian Movement and World Student Christian Federation. They rediscovered at the heart of the bible the God who is passionately concerned about poor and oppressed peoples, and the hermeneutics of suspicion and prophecy from the perspective(s) of oppressed groups. They reaffirmed their right to think and speak theologically. They sought to understand Jesus and his mission in his historical context, and to revolutionize theological methodology through dialogue with social scientists. They sought to broaden and deepen theological discourse, to re-connect history and salvation, religion and economy, ethics and culture, spirituality and activism. And they brought a new openness to popular cultures and religions, and the revelations of the Divine in them.

They criticized classical “liberal” celebration of the modern Western world as the epitome of progress in history, with its triumphalism, individualism,¹⁰ and relegation of religion to a separate sphere of culture and personal life unconnected to economics and politics. They criticized classical “conservative” fatalism concerning the (supposed) impossibility of progressive change in history, toleration of inequalities and injustice, projection of hope beyond history, and condemnations of “radicals” who affirm the possibility of good news in history. They challenged church structures and pastoral priorities which marginalize poor and working class people, and especially women and peoples of color, their cultures, experiences and hopes. And they called the church to conversion to solidarity with poor and oppressed peoples everywhere, and with the earth.¹¹

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the 21st century, newer voices, like African American women (“womanist”) and Hispanic American women (“*mujerista*” and “*Latina*”), queer and transgendered people, have

⁸ Most were also critical of the only experiment in developing a concrete “modern” alternative, socialism in the USSR initially, though images of other possible socialisms – Latin American socialism, African socialism, Chinese socialism – continued to stir imaginations in the 1960s and 1970s. Gradually, though, and long before the tearing down of the Berlin wall in 1989 and collapse of the USSR, criticisms grew, and really existing socialism lost its appeal in many progressive movements.

⁹ For a rich sampling of this growing list of “new” voices and their many contributions to global theological dialogues, see Fabella and Surgirharajah 2000.

¹⁰ As Hopkins has pointed out, “due to the post-World War II global reconfigurations, the poor have burst upon the world scene like an earthquake shaking the foundations of North American and European hegemony and supremacy” (Hopkins 1997, 209).

¹¹ As Baum pointed out, “the period beginning with the 1960s was experienced by the churches as a ‘kairos,’ i.e. a special time when major social change toward greater justice was an historical possibility” (Baum 1991, 2).

continued to expand global dialogues.

And the choruses of old, new, and newer voices continues to expand, with no end in sight.

3. Epochal Transformations and Neoliberal Globalization

In many ways these movements have been extraordinarily successful, above all in introducing many choruses of new voices to public debates of important issues around the world. And for the first time in history since our human ancestors left the Garden of Eden in Africa, a new era is dawning for “universal” – or at least planetary – human discourse.

However, rarely, perhaps never, have these movements succeeded in the terms imagined by their initial visionaries and architects, participants and supporters. There are many reasons. Certainly there have been many tensions and conflicts, sometimes bloody, among these movements, so often splits within movements, and rapid, sometimes radical, shifts over time.

Moreover, the sheer multiplication of voices, standpoints, perspectives and concerns has also been overwhelming, swamping the capacities of individuals, groups and communities to understand and respond to all the new voices, standpoints, perspectives, concerns, sufferings, fears, hopes, and challenges to conversion. As widely noted, these movements – along with new communications technologies, the distorting impacts of advertising and public relations industries, and global immigration and refugee flows – have helped to disrupt local cultures, weaken the boundaries of traditional communities, fragment identities, relativize traditions (hastening the “end of tradition” as unselfconsciously transmitted and accepted (Giddens 1994)), provoke crises in established authorities and modes of authority, along with confusion, cynicism and paralysis widely associated with “post-modernity.”

Meanwhile, developments associated with emerging planetary civilization have been transforming the contours of existence: vast and accelerating expansions of knowledge and scientific modes of knowing; vast and rapidly expanding arrays of new technologies, especially communications (Internet and cell phones), transportation, and bio-technologies, both agricultural and human; more dynamic forms of management and governance, and new accounting frameworks; great flows of refugees and immigrations; globalizations (partial and uneven) of multinational corporations and markets, and the

vast expansions of the powers of international financial institutions (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization); popular movements of solidarity and collaboration. Precisely because these developments are so new, fundamental and widespread, they are challenging traditional cultures, religions, and politics worldwide (also contributing to the crises associated with “post-modernity”).

In the mist of these changes, and in direct response to the growing profusion of new voices, perspectives and claims, a new project of neoliberal globalization was established in the centers of power around the world, including in the major mass media (Clarkson 1993; Heilbroner 1998; Kelsey 1995).

This project targeted the old and “new” social movements, and formulated an agenda in explicit opposition to them. And in its triumphs there have been many popular defeats, in which earlier expressions of hope have died, or been executed,¹² (sometimes to rise again) and retreats from previously established standards and policies on many fronts. With the emergence of the clearly imperial Project for the New American Century (Project for the New American Century 2000) and institution of the global “war on terror” by the George W. Bush administration, the obstacles to pursuing liberating insights and forms of action are growing.¹³

And still there are too few resources or institutionalized spaces specifically committed to nurturing dialogues among the growing list of “new” and “newer” voices and all those seeking to be in dialogue with them.

4. Limits and Challenges

Among their historic contributions to knowledge, various liberation theologies have contributed in moving our horizons beyond the purely abstract frame of established forms of fundamental, dogmatic or systematic theology with few or no references to concrete historical circumstances. In particular, they insist on the importance of “experience,” especially the

¹² As Vilas has noted, “civil society [in Latin America] did not awaken from a revolutionary dream [as some critics have claimed]; it was defeated in its attempts to achieve global change. Tens of thousands of Latin Americans went from that ‘revolutionary dream’ to their graves” (Vilas 1993, 40); see also Blum 1995.

¹³ For example, in the U.S., Hunt notes that in the context of the post-September 11 global war on terror, “women’s voices are frequently ‘disappeared,’ especially from the media and politics,” and that “feminist liberation theology is increasingly marginalized rather than increasingly accepted” (Hunt 2002, 108).

suffering and hopes of the victims.¹⁴ More generally, they impel us toward everyday experience – *lo cotidiano*, in the words of Latin American and U.S. Latino/Latina theologians (Aquino 1993, 38–41) – as the context for our encounters with the Divine, pulling theology and spirituality down from the clouds—more accurately, re-connecting Creator and creation, heaven and earth, history and salvation.¹⁵

At the same time, insistence on recognition of the situated and partial character of each expression of human knowing has destabilized established notions of objectivity and universality, authority and truth. Each network and movement of scholars and activists confronts the challenges of other voices, standpoints, perspectives and claims in wrestling with their own understanding of objectivity and authority, relevance and truth. And each confronts the central and irreducible significance of diversity and pluralism, both within traditions, including Christianity, and among them.

The challenges are simultaneously epistemological, theoretical, and methodological. For abstract and ahistorical categories and frameworks always reflect in specific ways the standpoints and perspectives, concerns and interests of their authors. They have been and can always be interpreted in different, even contradictory, ways. Thus, in reacting against this kind of abstraction, with its claims to objectivity and universal relevance, the insistence of new voices on class, ethnicity and race, gender, sexual orientation, dependency and world system serves to substantively qualify traditional references to man, humanity or human nature, world, society and nation, community and church, pulling them down from the heaven of abstraction into dialogue involving particular people and debates addressing particular circumstances.

¹⁴ Since the 19th century, “liberal” theological discourse, in contrast to ahistorical (“conservative”) theologies, has been articulated as “historical” and “critical.” Nevertheless, as Tracy notes, there has been a shocking silence in mainstream “theologies of historical consciousness and historicity alike on the evil rampant in history, the suffering of whole peoples, the destruction of nature itself. The history of modern progressive theologies of history is too often a history without any sense of the radical interruptions of actual history, without a memory of historical suffering, especially the suffering caused by the pervasive systemic unconscious distortions in our history – sexism, racism, classism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, Eurocentrism” (Tracy 1995, 29). “History” has too easily been conflated with notions of evolution and progress, which renders the past as irrelevant and present contradictions and conflicts invisible, perpetuates monolithic notions of reason and rationality, and reduces choices for the future to simplistic highly polarized alternatives, only one of which is rational and good.

¹⁵ See for example Richard 1997.

In turn, though, the contours and dynamics of class, ethnicity and race, gender, sexual orientation, dependency, world system, Eurocentrism, post-modernity, post-coloniality, are also complex and changing, in some respects profoundly. And, for many reasons, within both activist and scholarly liberation, social justice and eco-justice circles too much discourse remains static, unhistorical, apolitical.

In theology and ethics too we regularly hear laments over the lack of “social analysis.” For example, Castillo pointed to the stall in Latin American liberation theology already in the 1980s in addressing the shifting analyses of dependency (Castillo 1989b).¹⁶ More generally, Pilar Aquino has noted that “with rare exceptions U.S. theologians have shown great resistance against seriously incorporating into their work a critical analysis of the political-economic theories that accompany contemporary patriarchal capitalism” (Aquino 1999, 12). Schüssler Fiorenza notes the gulf between much feminist academic scholarship and the concrete experiences of feminist movements (Fiorenza 2002). Eaton has pointed to “the lack of political analysis, interest in social transformation and attention to social movements” in Canadian feminist and eco-feminist theologies. And Cone and others have criticized U.S. African American theology for its lack of concrete analysis (Cone 1984, 88 ff; Paris 1994), and lack of attention to challenges of other movements, for example the challenge of ecology movements to African American movements (Cone 2000).

Too seldom is there attention to the shifting contours of experience – including class, gender, race, nation and world/empire, civilization and nature – and to dialogues and debates over four decades in conceptualizing and theorizing, analyzing, and organizing around these dynamics.¹⁷ Too seldom is there acknowledgement that social movements are sites of human agency in shaping history, involving people in persevering, resisting suffering, and hoping for a different future. Too seldom is there reflection on particular social movements, their contexts and trajectories, their many successes in helping to transform our consciousness, consciences, and world, their failures and defeats. And too seldom is there discussion of their similarities and

¹⁶ For a helpful overview of the debates over dependency, see Grosfoguel 2000.

¹⁷ For example, concerning developments in re-framing analyses of multiple and shifting racisms, and transforming anti-racist politics, in local, national and global contexts, see Marable 1995; Quijano 2000; Rattansi 1995.

differences, points of divergence and convergence in forging shared hopes for a different world, broader solidarities, and collaboration in action.¹⁸

I wish to suggest that these impasses may be articulated in specifically *theological* terms. On the one hand, many theologies and christologies remain insufficiently incarnational (e.g., too unqualifiedly abstract, ahistorical), in the process underestimating the transcendent capacity of specific actions in specific times and places, like those of Jesus, to transform established social patterns, constellations of power, and prevailing trends, in inaugurating a genuinely new (if always historically limited) beginning in history.¹⁹ In our own time, the movements giving voice to historically marginalized peoples and concerns signal the real historical possibility for a different future; and no news is more important than this.

On the other hand, many theologies remain insufficiently Spirit-centered, underestimating ongoing primordial creativity, in nature and natural law (e.g., “creation,” human “nature,” and “existence”) as well as in society (identity and culture, knowledge and technology, economy and politics); expanding human reach and capacities to act; the radical openness of history; the growing weight of human choices in history; irreducible diversity in standpoints, perspectives and concerns, and the central significance of ongoing dialogue and negotiation; the requirement of theological creativity at the heart of tradition.²⁰

So, to summarize, in the spirit of these movements and of the many signs of convergence among them, I propose the following three inter-related

hypotheses concerning the movement(s) of the Spirit in history.

1) Social movements giving voice to marginalized peoples and concerns are central in shaping the debates and struggles over social order and the course of history (in contrast to static views of “culture,” “community,” “society,” “world,” and in critical social theories to emphases on “structures” which smooth out the partial, limited and contested character of every version of social order, the significance of resistance and alternative hopes, and the openness of history).²¹ This is a 20th – and now 21st – century phenomenon; as Hobsbawm has noted of the twentieth century, “the common people entered history as actors in their own collective right” (Hobsbawm 1995, 582).

2) Accordingly, movements are also primary sites for negotiating our identities and relations with the rest of the world. Movements are also primary sites of encounter with the Divine. Indeed, this has been true since the beginning of Christianity. As Castillo has noted, “Christianity, before being an institution, before being church, is a movement; before being structured in institutional forms, it is a messianic movement and that means a social movement” (Castillo 1989a, 63).

3) And this renewed experience of the Spirit in history involves re-centering our spiritualities, theologies, ecclesiologies and ethics.

Just as earlier generations of exegetes and theologians were challenged by conclusions that Jesus’ words and action did not focus on his divine self but on the coming of the reign of God in history, so too are we challenged to re-center our horizons from “faith” and “church” as allegedly separate spheres to “culture,” “politics” and “economics” as the sites of encounter with the Divine in history, to discern true and false spirits and the movements incarnating them, to stitch together links of solidarity with all the suffering,

¹⁸ Welch has noted the almost metaphysical tendency of some liberation theology discourse: “while these [liberation and feminist] theologies criticized the dualistic logic that excludes most of humanity, they often merely reverse the division of humanity into legitimate and illegitimate knowers and actors.” Moreover, she continues, this approach involves dangerous epistemological assumptions: “Much of liberation theology equates epistemic inclusion with epistemic privilege. Women, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the exploited are assumed to be somehow more moral, less culpable, less subject to the abuse of power than those in positions of dominance. But the truth is we are as partial, as petty, as subject to error, betrayal, and cruelty as those currently in power” (Welch 1997, 126). Ironically, then, reversals of dualisms and of familiar elite “scientific” claims for the neutrality, objectivity and universal relevance of their claims versus popular or lay, common sense or intuitive knowledge, re-inscribe central categories, theoretical frameworks, and epistemological assumptions/claims of the paradigms being rejected.

¹⁹ As discovered in the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, in the context of wrestling with the bible and in the context of a global campaign to cancel the debts of poor countries, the biblical notion of jubilee involves the sense of new beginning in history (Cormie 1998).

²⁰ It has become commonplace to note the underdeveloped character of the Trinity in much Christian theology, and specifically of the theology of the Spirit (Bevans 2001, 21).

²¹ Surprisingly perhaps, much the same challenge also exists within the social sciences, where too much attention has been placed on monolithic “culture” and/or “structures.” As anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff point out, “... the epistemic objects of our inquiry are no longer nouns – culture, society, institutions, or whatever – but compound verbs describing the construction and deconstruction of more-or-less stable practices, conventions, forms, commodities, abstractions... Without human agents, without specified locations and moments and actions, realities are not realized, nothing takes place, the present has no presence” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 16). This shift in perspective puts human agency as expressed in social movements at the center of social theory and social analysis.

and to forge ways of effectively collaborating in a shared Spirit without agreement on theory or doctrine. In the words of the Central American Kairos document, “people’s movements necessarily are the means by which we serve the Kingdom” (Kairos Central America, 1988, para. 68).

Meanwhile, I wish to suggest, the great questions at the heart of religious traditions everywhere continue to haunt humanity, and the stakes are greater than ever, concerning the powers of creation (and destruction), the shifting contours and dynamics of humanity, other species, and global ecology on earth, the openness of history and possibilities for fundamental change, the possibilities for hope when faith in progress is no longer possible. “The present-day world,” Sobrino points out, “is the site of a great battle... for the hope of the poor” (Sobrino 1999, 113). In the end, I would also say, this is a great battle for all people, and for many other species too.

5. “Another World Is Possible”

At the same time, there are many signs – even if the eyes of faith are required to see them – of hope for a different future. Here I would like to reflect on one important sign of hope and new opportunities for Christian churches (and other faith communities) in articulating – and witnessing to – hope for the future.

Like many human encounters when the Spirit is present, the World Social Forums (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2001, 2002, 2003) and Mumbai, India (2004) are far larger than the sum of their parts, or the intentions of their organizers – so many participants and groups, representing so many constituencies, from so many different cultures and languages, struggling around so many issues, with so many stories of suffering, and so many hopes, for themselves, for the world, and for the whole Earth!²²

These encounters in the annual WSFs and in the myriad local and regional processes springing up around the world are not traditionally religious, in the sense of being formulated in terms of religious communities or churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, traditional discourses of belief in

god(s) and morality, or familiar liturgical expressions. How could they be, since organizers explicitly encourage participation from every part of the world and every people?

But, amazingly, there is an increasingly wide sense of shared values amidst all the diversity, along with experiences of convergence at many points in the trajectories and agendas of different movements. And the sensibilities and concerns traditionally identified with religion are everywhere. In particular, ethics is affirmed as central and irreducible, in opposition to the suppression of ethics in the supposedly neutral, objective scientific discourses of science, technology, and economy. For example, new discourses of ethically explicit economics (e.g., “economy of solidarity”) are being advocated. “Cognitive justice” – in the production and dissemination of knowledge and expertise – is affirmed. Opposition to the project of neoliberal globalization embodies options for the historically marginalized and for the earth. Opposition to the war on drugs in Columbia and the war on terror in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) is oriented to active peace-making. And the all important ethical – and political – questions concerning which voices participate in analysis and decision-making processes are central.

In World Social Forum circles there is widespread opposition to the notion of a single dogma, ideology, or form of organization. But I also sense a growing sense of convergence and new kind of unity which is dynamic, affirms diversity, is multi-centered, requires participation and ongoing negotiation.

This is not just the much heralded “post-modern” end of overarching metanarratives, fragmentation, relativism and paralysis. For in the midst of this exploding diversity, there are also multiplying points of convergence, broadening solidarity, increasing collaboration in action – there is a strong, if unarticulated, experience of the Spirit. Certainly, there is no adequate single tradition or discourse for all the dimensions of these issues. No single community or movement can address all the key issues, or have all the answers. This is true for Christian churches and other faith communities too.

But these processes of convergence also need fuller discourses of the values and spirit animating them. And here there are many opportunities for faith communities to make important contributions. In particular, I would like to suggest, Christians in particular have many rich, if recently under developed, traditions of speaking and calling on the Spirit. And our churches

²² The most valuable source is the WSF web page: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br> For other collections and commentaries reflecting participation and close attention to WSF processes and documents, see especially Sen, Anand, Escobar, et al. 2004; many of these texts are also online: http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html. For European perspectives, see Transform! Europe 2004; for Indian perspectives, see Sen 2003.

could become creative centers of dialogue drawing on these traditions in discerning and (re)naming this Spirit present across diverse expressions in different contexts but everywhere continuing the ongoing Divine mission of creation and redemption/liberation in history. Our churches could become renewed nodes in an expanding worldwide multi-religious and multicultural networks witnessing to the Spirit animating the hope that “another world is possible.”

6. Pentecost: Great Diversity / One Spirit / Hope for Another World

Broadly speaking, there are three popular, radically different scenarios for the future:

1) New Golden Age: Faith in a wonderful new age of progress for all (at least in the long run) propelled by breakthroughs in science, new technologies and the spread of markets (Schwartz and Leyden 1997; Roco and Bainbridge 2002) flourishes in certain narrow circles of wealth and power deaf to the cries of the victims and blind to the many bad fruits of their perspectives and policies; this faith infuses neoliberal ideology.

2) Armageddon: A final cataclysmic war ending history is affirmed by many American Christian fundamentalists, including those, like presidents Reagan (The Cristic Institute 1984; Lang 1984) and George W. Bush (Wallis 2003), with their hands on the weapons to make it happen.

3) Apocalypse: This image is widely used in an exclusively negative way to evoke threats of devastation, by both conservative (especially in the U.S. where it is a fundamental characteristic of right wing discourse) and of the left. In its more profound biblical sense, it combines the notion of abrupt and cataclysmic transition heralding the demise of the old order and, resonating with the biblical notion of millennium (“one of humanity’s great inventions” (Thrupp 1970, 25), the dawn of a fundamentally different new order. Among popular movements, and in many expressions of popular culture, there are powerful and growing preoccupations with cataclysmic social and ecological disruptions undermining the conditions of life, for countless indigenous communities, their traditions and languages, whole societies wrestling with HIV/AIDS, tens of thousands of species, and whole ecosystems. And in these conditions hope for another future requires profound acts of faith.

The only unavailable option is more of the same; as Hobsbawm has noted, “if humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present.” (Hobsbawm 1995, 585).

In such a tumultuous and threatening context, the first priority is survival. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Africa. In the context of failed development, widespread and growing poverty, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Dube points to Africans’ “shattered dreams and cul de sac/ed roads” (Dube 2004), and their radical challenges to established modes of doing theology and social analysis, ethics and politics. And elsewhere, searching for signals of hope, she weaves a powerful parable of Mama Africa, drawing on the biblical story of the bleeding woman (Mk 5: 35-43) who defies death and, against all odds, actively searches for healing and survival (Dube 1999). In contrast to bright dreams of liberation and development in the past, she is certainly right in pointing to the terrifying shadows which haunt modern progress, evident in massive and growing suffering, and the ominous future which it seems so surely to portend; and she is right to warn against magic hopes for sudden deliverance preached by too many Christians, revolutionaries, and development experts. In such a context, survival requires a miracle, and seeing the signs of hope require the eyes of faith.

Moreover, in the shadows of possible nuclear and/or biological warfare, and/or cascading ecological disruptions and corresponding social turmoil an increasingly dark shadow increasingly looms over all people on earth. And the future, if there is to be a future for us, requires many miracles.

Never more than at the dawn of the 21st century have people more desperately needed clues about authentic signs of hope. In conclusion, drawing on experience of social movements in recent decades and more historically contextual reflection on the book of Acts, I probe the experience of the Spirit in the midst of civilizational crisis in the first century C.E. and today.

Pentecost (Acts 2) lies at the intersection of a complex series of developments in the tumultuous world of the first Christians. Jesus had been executed, and the movement gathered around him had scattered. Then came the encounters of some disciples with the risen Christ. These encounters were powerful, convincing them that persecution and death were not the last words in witnessing to the coming of the reign of God even in the midst of the Roman empire. But they were also mysterious, because in no simple sense were

these encounters with the historical Jesus; he appeared only a few times, in different forms, not immediately recognizable; and others had trouble believing these stories. Moreover, the implications of this experience were not so obvious for the Jews and others still suffering exploitation and oppression at the hands of Roman authorities and the Jewish elites in collusion with them. Then, the appearances ceased, and the risen Christ was no longer present, but, the texts say, ascended into heaven. Meanwhile, the air was heavy with a sense of looming apocalypse threatening annihilation of the world the Jews had known. With the crushing of the liberation struggle and destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., the Jewish state, priesthood, and temple were destroyed, scattering many Jews into diaspora, and threatening the disappearance from the pages of history of the people, their God, and their traditions. And the only imaginable future required nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21: 1).

Only in the broadest terms do we know what happened next: both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were born from this apocalypse. We have very few details, though we can discern some central threads. The Pentecost story weaves together some of them. One thread concerns the absence of Jesus, even of the risen Christ who ascended into heaven. A second concerns diverse efforts to interpret the concrete significance of his life, death, and resurrection in the strong and growing Roman empire. A third concerns the constituency for this “good news,” in the cosmopolitan mix of peoples stitched together by the roads, military campaigns, floods of refugees, expanded trade routes, and shifting opportunities in the far-flung empire.

At the heart of the story lie confusion and doubt, cultural and religious diversity, imperial power on a previously unknown scale, and the experience of the Spirit. To simplify a series of complex cultural, social and political developments, the early Christians finally articulated these experiences theologically in terms of the Spirit who inspires the coming together of diverse peoples of the empire in the *ekklesia*, the assemblies of the people of God; together they continue the incarnate presence of the Divine in history witnessing to the coming new *basileia* (kingdom or reign). With the great cultural and religious diversity, and the shifting horizons of possibility and hope in the evolving, then declining fortunes of the Roman empire over succeeding centuries, there was no single answer to questions concerning the

concrete character of this new reign, or how to witness to it; and along this twisting path inspiration of the Spirit and creativity remained essential. But in specific times and places no experience was more important or moving and joyful – ecstatic – than the experience of unity amidst diversity and shared inspiration in witnessing concretely to hope for a new beginning in history for all.

There are many analogies between the world of the early Christians and our world. We live in a new kind of empire with historically unprecedented power and scope, now to the ends of the earth and high into the heavens. Its high priests promise peace and prosperity for all. But looming apocalypse threatens countless communities and their traditions, whole societies, tens of thousands of species, and whole eco-systems. And too many of our religious leaders are intertwined with the promises of empire, or overwhelmed by the sins of the past, or paralyzed by the magnitude of change and challenges to conversion.

Still, there are many opportunities for a new relationship with the Divine in nurturing the future development of life. The horizons of alternative hope are also expanding with new knowledge, technologies and global linkages. On the margins there are many social movements witnessing concretely to other hopes for the future. And more than ever, mutual respect is essential in forging broader solidarities, shared hope, and effective collaboration.

In the midst of the throes of change, one of the central signs of the times is the irruption of new voices of the historically oppressed and marginalized. They have complicated our thinking and acting in introducing new standpoints and perspectives, which have relativized established frameworks and modes of action in biblical studies,²³ theology and ethics, the social sciences and politics. But they have also evoked new revelatory experiences, recovering long-cherished but more recently forgotten faces of the Divine, and disclosing new ones. And in the wake of many shocks, discoveries, and new perspectives on ourselves, they have also pointed toward broader kinds of solidarity, shared hopes for the future, and new, more participatory, multi-centered, continuously negotiated modes of unity with diversity.

²³ As Jobling notes in relation to the irruptions of so many new voices in biblical studies, “speaking in tongues [from the Pentecost story] readily stands for the recent invasion of biblical studies by many new methods, methods of great and irreducible diversity” (Jobling 2001, 216).

In increasingly multicultural and multi-religious contexts we may all have little Pentecost experiences, when in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces we encounter shared concerns and a similar Spirit in responding to local problems and possibilities – though rarely is there time or space to try to name this Spirit or to reflect together on the implications of faith in it.

Larger gatherings too, like the World Social Forums drawing together representatives of movements from around the world, confirm, on a historically unprecedented scale, the possibility – the growing reality! – of mutual respect among peoples of many religious traditions and no religious tradition at all, new links of global solidarity, and increasing capacities to act together in witnessing to the emergence of another world.

These are experiences of Pentecost in our time, powerful new experiences of the Spirit, poured out across the differences, gaps and barriers which have traditionally divided peoples, in the different tongues, accents and dialects of the peoples of many places, cultures and languages, religions and politics, calling for repentance and conversion, inspiring us to broader solidarities and more inclusive identities, and pointing the way forward together in this time when the whole creation is groaning in the labor pains of new birth (Rom. 8: 22).

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