

Spirituality and Contemporary Culture^{1/}

by Joan Chittister, OSB

I'm going to talk about the relationship between culture and spirituality. Two pieces of religious literature indicate to me with special clarity the essential connectedness of spiritual maturity and cultural development.

The first one is from Exodus 3:18. On Horeb the angel of Yahweh appeared to Moses in the shape of a flame of fire coming from the middle of the bush. There was the bush blazing, but it was not being burnt up. "I must go and look at this strange site," Moses said, "and see why the bush is not burnt." Now Yahweh saw Moses go forward to look, and Yahweh called to him from the middle of the bush. "Moses," he said, "come no nearer. Take off your shoes. For the place where you stand is holy ground." Then Yahweh said, "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free. I am well aware of their sufferings. And I mean to deliver them. So I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people up." Now that's the only place in scripture where I'm sure God has an Irish sense of humor. I have a rotten problem, he's saying. You go solve it. The message is a most dramatic one. Just at what would seem to be the moment of Moses' total immersion in the mystical presence of God, God stops Moses where Moses is, to teach him that his holiness depends on finding holiness where he stands; and then by taking that energy to other people for their liberation. Moses learns that holiness is made of virtues, not visions. Moses learns that holiness depends on being for the other. Moses learns that holiness depends on being something greater than the self. Moses learns that holiness is being present to the presence, everywhere it is, and even where it seems it isn't.

The second story of culture and spirituality comes from the tales of the Hasidim. This story tells us that there was an old rabbi of great wisdom, whose fame had spread far and wide beyond his own congregation to the villages and congregations on the other side of the mountain. One day, suddenly he died. So the young rabbis were bereft. Now they said, "What are we going to do when our people look to us for guidance? Without the old master where are we going to get answers to the great questions of life?" They decided among themselves to pray and fast until the old man's holiness and wisdom would be infused into one of them. And sure enough, one night in a dream, the old man appeared to one of the younger rabbis. "Master," the young teacher said, "it is good that you've returned to us. You see, with you gone, the people are now looking to us for answers to the great questions of life, and we're still unsure. For instance, Master, they're demanding to know: on the other side, of what account are the sins of youth?" And the old man said, "On the other side, the sins of youth are of no account whatsoever." Then the young rabbi said, "Then what has it all been about? On the other side, what sin is punished if not the sins of youth?" And the old man answered very slowly but very clearly, "On the other side, the sin which is punished with constant and unending severity is the sin of false piety."

The point is clear: piety is cultural. Holiness depends on our choosing the pieties proper to the times. It isn't that past pieties were wrong; it's that past pieties are past, that there is a present that calls for a piety applicable to the present. Culture and spirituality, in other words, are of a piece. They are the same thing. If you want to know your spirituality, ask yourself about your culture. As Moses and the old master both knew, the function of spirituality is not to protect us from our times. The function of spirituality is to enable us to leaven our times, to stretch our times, to bless our times, to break open our own times to present the will of God. And what does that mean to us today, to spirituality, to ministering, to being a progressive Christian today?

If culture is the way people think and feel and behave as a people, and if spirituality is the way we live out the life and teachings of Jesus in this particular culture at this particular time, then the questions for thinkers, writers and religious professionals must become: What cultural realities are challenging the Gospel now? And how can the Gospel best challenge the culture, if we, here and now, are really to be a holy people, a progressive people, Christians at all?

The history of spirituality identifies three basic responses to culture: the intellectual, the relational, and the performative.

Intellectual spirituality is creed centered. People who are creed centered are committed to a checklist of beliefs, and they're committed to union with God somewhere else. They're waiting to get to God. God is the brass ring, if you stay on the horse long enough. An intellectual spirituality, in other words, is very good at drawing denominational lines and maintaining orthodoxy. These are people who can tell you at any minute of a 24-hour day who is in and who is out. They're the heretic hunters of every denomination. And they're committed to having personal, mystic experiences. The intellectual wants to stay and contemplate the "burning bush." They want to draw it to size, and define its properties, and dogmatize its meaning, and describe the distance at which presence to or from it becomes a venial sin or a mortal sin.

Relational spirituality is the second stream of spirituality in the Christian tradition. Relational spirituality is committed to the development of human bonded-ness, of community as the preeminent model of Christian life. So the relationist talks a lot about love, and is willing to stay in Egypt, bush or no bush, to keep the slaves company in their pain. The relationist comforts the oppressed, but does very little to change the oppression.

Performative spirituality is the third stream. It's very action-centered. Performers in the spiritual life pray every day, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," and they do something to bring it. Performers are people who know that the Word is incomplete until it has become transforming action. Performers would prefer to reform Egypt by carrying the lousy bush back there, to create a bright new world in the shell of the old.

And these spiritualities are real; all of them were historically prominent in one period or another. The question for us is: what's our cultural situation now? And which type of spirituality is then most needed? And how do we build it? And what does it have to do with the Christian life today, when for the first time in polling history the military supercedes the Church as "the most trusted institution"?

Like Moses, let's look briefly at the cultural situation in the U.S. from 1960-1998, the era that formed, institutionally, the spiritual life of most of us prior to the new millennium theologies. Like Moses, in this period we have experienced major shifts in our own national belief value system. Family patterns have changed. Governments have become less and less credible. The most dramatic transformation of world view that ever took place occurred in this period: John Glenn, our first American astronaut, took from outer space the only picture of the planet that had ever been taken. We've never forgotten the image of that bright globe lost in black space. For the first time in history, we could really see ourselves in all our grandeur; and all our smallness too.

This generation saw scientific progress that was often more threat than help. In those few years, science changed life and changed death, changed family and changed sex, changed birth and changed creation from critically unique to cloned, and changed war from struggle to human annihilation – until finally science has managed to change the very meaning of meaning. In this era, military security became our highest priority, our greatest expenditure, and our scarcest commodity. Thanks to our military security, in deed, we created the end of the world, and we stored it in the cornfields of Kansas, using it indirectly to kill millions who were refused, because of the skewing of a military budget, to direct their development needs. In this age too, we have seen new interest in the wisdom of the East, as the wealth of the West lost its power to save. American dominance and isolation and perfect security ended with the launching of Sputnik and the rise of the third world with its commitment to neutrality rather than to either communist or capitalist ideologies, and it challenged your notion and mine of this country's destiny to the city on the hill, the new Eden, the covenant people – as never before in U.S. history.

In this time frame, integration (Black, Hispanic, Indian, Inuit) challenged white supremacy, and feminism challenged the white male system and even the white male God. And so did great poverty in the midst of great affluence. The working poor, that 20% of Americans out on the streets in the richest country of the world, cannot get full-time work. And six million of them will work two full-time jobs and still not get full-time pay. This moment challenges all the American myths ever made about fair play, and blessing, and the American dream, and freedom and justice for all.

All this has happened in a society where 10 percent of the world – the Western Europeans and North Americans – consume or control two-thirds of the resources of the world. Indeed, social consensus on values and beliefs has broken down. In an annual survey, college freshmen in this last decade were far less concerned than their predecessors about pollution, more approving of abortion on demand, less opposed to the death penalty, more intent on cohabitation before marriage, less committed to the elimination of racism, less obliged to help other in difficulty, considerable less concerned about developing “a philosophy of life”, and much more interested in being “very well off financially.” And all this while the government spent, on the average, only 20 cents of every disposable dollar on human resources – education, employment, job training, social services, health and fiscal assistance – but spent 55 to 64 cents of every tax dollar, minus entitlements, on the military.

How can we say that we do not badly need spiritual-cultural revitalization? The consensus on old values has broken down. The spirit is dying in the most churchgoing nation in the world. Individualism runs rampant to the point of the pathological in this society. At a time when global community is urgent if both this planet and its peoples are to be safe, our current dilemma, then, must be, “How do we link the personal with the public dimensions of life?” How do we take this great churchgoing nation and make private spirituality the stuff of public leaven in a world fiercely private and dangerously public at the same time?

Simple spiritualities of creed, community and cooperation are not enough. They’re not working. We need now a spirituality of contemplative co-creation is the culture is to be Christianized – no my friends, if Christians are to be Christianized. Genesis insists that the function of humanity is to nurture and cultivate and care and procreate and take responsibility for. Carrying on God’s work in the world is, in other words, the spiritual life.

What does religion and religious professionalism have to do with all of that? When culture is in chaos, it may be important for us to step outside our religious categories and look at the process of social revitalization. The anthropologist, Anthony F.C. Wallace, in a little known classic on social change and culture, teaches that major transformation of thought and behavior happen in a society when it discovers that a once common set of religious understanding has become impossible to sustain. To keep gluing them together simply obstructs social revitalization. At that point, Wallace says, a society begins to undergo a revitalization movement of four major stages.

Individual Stress

Stage one, he says, is a period of serious individual stress. People begin privately to question their own past values. They don’t think any more as they were brought up to think about them. What the generation before them took for granted about divorce, or mixed marriages, or birth control, or segregation, or homosexuality, they begin to debate and discard. Now how do you know if you are there? It’s when your mother says to you, “Honey, by all means come to Thanksgiving dinner, but do not talk about X, Y or Z in front of your father.” When you hear yourself saying, “My sister and I just can’t talk anymore. We’re okay as long as we’re on shoes and cars, but by God, we cannot get on kids, marriages and churches.”

Social Stress

In stage two of the revitalization process, there’s a wide sense of social stress. It becomes apparent when I’m not in this alone. I’m not the only crazy one. What we once called “our culture” is now barely recognizable in any of our cultural institutions. And people begin to decide that their problems aren’t personal. They’re not just nuts. They don’t have to pay anymore for something to calm their nerves. Without nerves, they’ll never know they’re alive. Their problems, they decide, are a result of failure in the anchor institutions that they depended on for stability and direction. The institutions have let them down. We begin to hear things like the churches are simply out of tune with the people; the schools are so remote from the real life questions; the government is corrupt and corrupting. Suddenly, the pot begins to boil over, and there’s political rebellion in the streets, schism in the churches.

Suddenly, Traditionalists

In stage three of the revitalization process, the people as a whole all agree now: we do have a problem. But they cannot agree on how to cope with this new social situation. Some of them want to change the whole system, to wipe it out, to start over – new church, new government, new schools, just forget it. Others want to send in the troops – stop this nonsense, excommunicate those heretics, crush these people if necessary, but hold the line. The two groups quarrel and divide, and they both blame authority. These people won't do anything. Then, Wallace says, *inevitably*, a nativist or traditionalist movement suddenly arises out of nowhere. The traditionalists argue that the danger has come from a failure of the people to adhere more strictly to old values and behaviors. They want the "old time religion", and they find scapegoats aplenty. They economy would be all right if it weren't for unions. Marriages and families and children would be all right if it weren't for feminism. They never seem to notice that it's precisely those past perfect families that brought us to this messy imperfect point. And the country would be fine if it weren't for communism or liberalism, or Blacks or Arabs or Mexicans or Japanese, or Khadaffi or Hussein or Milosevic.

A New World View

And in the fourth and final stage of a revitalization movement, Wallace says, comes the building of a new world view, and the restructuring of those old institutions to enable it. But how? In simpler societies, the leadership comes from a single charismatic person. Moses intervened, and you, O God, turned aside your destruction. But in more complex cultures like our own, many leaders, a chorus of high voices, are needed to lead people to new understandings about old values. The role of these spiritual leaders is not to repudiate the old world view entirely, but to shed some new light on it so that it can be remembered that God's spirit manifests always in new ways to meet new needs. Then more flexible people begin to understand, and they start to experiment with the new consensus so that cultural transformation, the movement from death to life of an entire people, begins to happen.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Wallace points out that it is not the older generation – not the people who brought the old ideas from one desert to another – that will change this culture. It is not you and me. It's the new generation that grew up with emerging insights, the generation that spent their entire lives wandering in the desert with no experience, no memory of before the chaos because they knew no other. This generation comes to maturity and old institutions find themselves with new leadership. Then the institutions are restructured.

But this will only happen in the next generation provided that someone from the older generation – you and I: the theologians, the preachers, the progressive Christians – insist that this generation is brought up with the new questions and the new insights. On the days we are the most tired, the most rejected, how do you know it will happen? Because in this country alone, we have seen one generation withdraw from their allegiance to a king, and the next abolish slavery, and the one after that regulate businesses, and the last one empower laborers; and this one, here and now, beginning to struggle for liberation, for equality, for survival.

Moses intervened, Psalm 99 teaches, and God turned aside his destruction. What God saves, in other words, God saves through us. Just as God did with Sodom and Gomorrah, and Mordecai and Esther, and Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph and the Pharaoh, and every requester of miracles in the New Testament, we need to intervene for one another. We need a new world view that puts the old one in new light, and we need the character and courage to say it where it is least welcome – in every office, at every cocktail party, at every conference – no matter who gets bored or tired or mad.

But how? And where will this spirituality of contemplative co-creation come from in an individualistic culture? And how can the religious leaders of our time help build this bridge from privatized piety to public moral responsibility? I suggest that as religious persons we need to look again at the basis of social broken-ness that is found in every major religious stream in the world throughout time, that we ourselves begin to see the spiritual link between the personal and the political. As religious teachers, counselors, directors, Christians, we take another look at what we use to call the seven capital sins, the seven deadly sins, but this time on two levels rather than simply one: the personal and the global. Look

again at envy, pride, lust, gluttony, covetousness, anger and sloth, and the way we teach them to our children.

Global Envy

Envy – wanting what someone else has. In Bangladesh, each person each year consumes an average of six and a half pounds of meat and consider themselves “blessed.” In America, each person consumes an average of 260 pounds of meat a year, and think they are entitled to it. So we level other people’s forests for grazing ground because our own isn’t enough for us. We laugh at the vegetarians in our midst who have changed the family menus as well as their own. And we never see it as the beginning of global sin.

We uphold criminal governments politically for our own good – as we did in El Salvador and Chile, and the Philippines, and Nicaragua – rather than recognize the needs of the people of those countries. When we impose our values and structures in return for trade and profit and power, *isn’t that a form of envy?* Don’t we need to think and write and talk spiritually about that?

Global Pride

Pride is the need to dominate and coerce others on a personal level. But on the global level, isn’t it also the mania for national superiority? For racial superiority? For being number one? For having strawberries in January, whatever the cost to the pickers? Americans spend \$8 billion a year on cosmetics. That’s \$2 billion more than the amount we need to provide a basic education for everyone in the world. If we want to be progressive, don’t we need to think and write and teach and talk spiritually about that?

Global Lust

Lust is clearly the exploitation of another for the sake of my physical gratification. We are beginning to recognize it when it’s date rape, or pornography, or selfish sensuality. But is there yet enough spiritual conscience in us *to see lust as the national passion for instantaneous gratification that justifies the exploitation of whole peoples?* So that we can have the cheap cash crops and conveniences we demand, we are raping their lands and their futures – without ever having to follow the legislation that is enabling it, without ever having to pay the decent wages, pensions, or benefits to those people to get them. *Isn’t it the exploitation that comes from lust that leads to the feminization of poverty,* and the loss of feminine resources and feminine values in a world that is reeling toward its own death from the institutionalization of purely masculine values? Two-thirds of the minimum wage workers, who are earning an average across this country of %5.50 per hour, are single mothers with three children. To support those children and be self-sufficient, that mother needs to earn \$16 an hour. But we have politicians who tell people on Monday, “We’re not picking up your health bill, your dental bill, your milk bill, your kids’ bill.” And on Tuesday those same politicians go to those same cameras and say, “Every one of you people on welfare have to get a full-time job.” You can’t have it two ways. You can’t have mothers in the home, and working mothers on starvation legislation. Get it together spiritually, before you vote on anything.

Isn’t it the institutionalization of lust that makes it possible to condemn the use of condoms and sex education in our schools to say a word from the pulpit about the rape hotels in Bosnia? Isn’t it lust that drains the life out of a man for a company, and then when he is middle-aged, throws him away, so the company doesn’t have to pay him the pension he spent all those years to earn? Are you sucking up someone else’s life and calling it good business, and the American dream, and the 21st century culture?

Global Gluttony

Gluttony, the over-consumption of food, leads to waste and bloatedness and misuse of resources and misuse of resources on a personal level. But it is also surely at the base of the lack of distribution of surplus in this country that we refuse to the dying in Ethiopia and North Korea and the destitute in Haiti and the farmers in the former Soviet Union. All the while Americans and Europeans are spending \$17 billion a year on pet food, which is \$4 billion more than would be needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world. Unless we are preaching, teaching, talking and organizing for these things – how can we say that we are developing spiritually for this culture? Someone wrote of this

culture: "We do not have war on poverty; we have a war on poor people." And what are Christians, as churches, doing about it – as we say in our prayers and publish our creeds and catechisms? The last act of a dying institution, John Garner says, is to get out a new edition of the rule book.

Global Covetousness

We speak of covetousness as a lack of a sense of enough, and we know that on a personal level covetousness leads us to the sinful brink of hoarding. But what's the difference between that and the national demon that is fueling a military budget in quest for world dominance? If we forgave the bilateral debts of the entire Third World to us, that would equal \$6.8 billion. Do you know what that would cost us? It would cost the U.S. Treasury the price of three B-2 Stealth Bombers for a fleet in which we already have 24 such things in peacetime.

Global Anger

Anger we recognize as the cultivation of an eschatological sense of righteousness and judgment, putting ourselves in the place of the patient justice of God. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay you," we remind one another. But what has happened to the national moral fiber when whatever evil we and our newspapers say of the others – the Japanese, the Chinese, the Arabs, the Serbs – is counted as national virtue? What about the sin of demonizing our enemies to justify the military-industrial complex and of our determining our immigration quotas accordingly?

Global Sloth

We abhor sloth and the assumption that if anyone has the right to live off the efforts of others, it is sheer laziness. It is a lack of responsibility. But where is Christian leadership in the building of a new world view about the sinfulness of multinational structures that are living off the backs of the poor by giving unjust wages and benefits but will spend \$165 billion of bail-out welfare for the rich in the Savings and Loans. How do we take for granted the unequal treatment of women and the blasphemy of absorbing a woman's life at lesser pay for the convenience of others, moralizing about that kind of institutionalized servitude in the name of God's will? By the year 2050, in your grandchildren's lives, eight billion of the projected nine billion in the world will be living in developing countries. Over half of them will be women with no influence whatsoever on the systems that control their lives, and we take for granted our own feminine gains, small as they are financially, and say nothing on behalf of women who cannot say a thing.

Conclusion

So, we go on blindly as a culture in our search for goodness, oblivious of new moral imperatives. Our institutions counsel and educate for individuality and autonomy and control and independence in a world that needs community and mutuality and cooperation and interdependence and human responsibility and a new spirituality for contemplative co-creation. Our sermons float high above the fray because, Sister Joan, if I said what you are saying, do you have any idea what would happen in my church?

I think I know. I heard of one pastor who met another downtown. He said, "How's it going at the church?" The first guy says, "It's terrific. We just had this fantastic revival meeting this weekend. We never had anything like it." The second guy said, "Is that right? How many signed up?" He answered, "Signed up? Five hundred of them left."

When Jacob saw Joseph in Egypt, he said, "Now that I know you live, I can die." And God said to Moses, "Stay where you are. Where you are is holy ground." An ancient people tell the story of a seeker who asked, "Before I follow you, tell me, does your God work miracles?" And the Holy One said, "Well it all depends on what you call a miracle. Some people say a miracle is when God does the will of the people. We say that a miracle is when the people do the will of God."

The role of progressive Christians is, like Jacob, not to die until we have assured the rise of these questions in a dynamic spirituality as the next generation comes to grips with them. It is, like Moses, to recognize where we are – with all the depression that it brings us day after day – as the gate of God's grace. It is certainly like the Sufi master to see the link between culture and spirituality differently, not to

simply abandon the fray, not to say, "I can't take them on one more time." Why? So that God's miracles can happen in our time; so that we can find meaning in life by being about something greater than ourselves. For the sake of the people, the poor, the planet, I am begging you to see your contribution to Christianity as the spiritual globalization of the seven capital sins, to have in you the holy anger that makes the Christian life of the new millennium even holier than the last. Though nothing we do changes the past, everything we do changes the future. So do it! Now!

1/ Adapted from an address by Joan Chittister at the 2000 National Forum, the Center for progressive Christianity.