

Suman Fernando on spirituality across cultures



Connecting inside and outside

In many traditions, especially those outside the western world, spirituality is woven into everyday life and is an integral part of culture. In such situations, extracting and defining something called spirituality as an entity is a sure way of losing its meaning to people in their daily lives. So the best approach to looking at spirituality across cultures is to try to understand how ordinary people work spirituality into their lives.

In the worldview of many first nations of North America everything has a spirit or energy. One's own spirit connects with the unseen world inhabited by spirits (or energies). So breaking of taboos, such as telling lies about spirits, results in being out of balance with the spirits, which is the same as being unbalanced oneself.¹ Restitution of balance comes from appeasing the spirits through medicines, magic, rituals and so on. The 'I and I' principle of the Rastafarians expresses a similar theme: the oneness between two persons, the personal and the 'other' being (as it were) the same, connected spiritually. This could be seen as the expression of community spirit; a sense of belonging to one another as part of a faith community. But to Rastafarians this connectedness does not stop there. It extends through the spirit of Ras Tafari across to Africa, from where their ancestors had been torn away. This may relate to what Du Bois called 'spiritual striving'² as a cultural ideal of black (African) Americans – not an impediment but often a strength.

In the Vedantic (Hindu) tradition of the Indian subcontinent there is 'no dualism of the natural and the supernatural ... the spiritual is an emergent of the natural and is rooted in it'.³ A theme that crops up in Theravada Buddhism is liberation of the mind from being tied to eternal birth and rebirth as one comes to understand impermanence, suffering and the realisation of self as illusion. In practice, Buddhism is associated with a rich cosmology that includes a world of non-material beings (spirits). Gods and demons, like humans, inhabit the cosmos, granting favours, punishing, acquiring merit and interacting with each other and with humans through intermediaries.

In South America there is an 'illness' called *susto*, translated as 'soul-loss'. This may well be a sense of emptiness similar to, if not identical with, depression of western psychiatry. Remedies involve detailed retelling of events leading to the condition, together with the use of medicinal herbs (medication) and rituals for returning the soul. In Eastern Sri Lanka, Hindu goddess cults represented by oracles empowered through possession by spirits are known to provide spiritual healing for people traumatised by war.

Spirituality is not a solitary, self-centred feeling but one harboured in religion and community

Certain themes crop up in many traditions. First, the importance of a sense of connectedness to one another (community spirit), to a land or environment (an ecological spirit), to the cosmos or God or a pantheon of gods. Second, spirituality is not a solitary, self-centred feeling but one harboured in religion and community. Third, although spirituality is not necessarily the same as adherence to an organised religion with a specific dogma interpreted by a hierarchy, 'being religious' and 'being spiritual' are similar and may well be identical sometimes. Fourth, in some cultural traditions contact with the spirit world or spirits as non-physical beings with human characteristics is important, resembling aspects of western psychological theories of forces exerted by unseen entities such as the ego or id. Clearly, when particular entities are identified as spirits they have a profound meaning to both individuals and communities, and communication with these spirits (for example, during séances or possession states) is bound up with the sense of connectedness that characterises spirituality in a wider sense.

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1. Freke, T and Wa'Nee'Che (Dennis Renault) (1996) *Native American spirituality*, London: Thorsons (HarperCollins).
2. Du Bois, W. E. B. (1970) *The souls of black folk*, New York: Washington Square Press.
3. Radhakrishnan (1980) *The Hindu view of life*, London: Unwin.