

# Elements of a Universal Spirituality

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A global or universal spirituality does not mean a super-spirituality. The aim of describing a global spiritual life is not the reduction of the rich variety of humanity's inner life to one common form or generic type. That would be neither possible nor desirable. There are literally thousands of forms of spirituality; indeed it can be said that each person has his or her own kind of spirituality.

Yet we can describe common elements; just as there is a consensus on ethics among religions, there can also be a consensus on the essential elements of a global spirituality. Likewise, just as the goal of a global ethic is to identify common standards for the transformation of consciousness, so all authentic spirituality is itself transformative. True spirituality, in its social dimension, is a deep and personal appropriation of the moral life, and makes each of us better than we were before.

There is a spiritual interdependence among the various religions in the same way as there is a metaphysical interconnectedness to all reality. Each religious tradition and each form of spirituality develops in relation to actual life. Spirituality is a personal response and commitment to reality in its deepest sense. It is the source of self-knowledge that sees our human condition with all its woundedness, but which also offers us the possibility of real growth toward becoming an integrated person, one who is alive, holy, and wise. It gives us a sensitivity to life in all its variety.

Spirituality is an inner stand in relation to the Divine or Ultimate Reality that calls us to higher realization. Spirituality embodies our profoundest and purest desire, our passionate yearning for the Divine itself. It is a longing for union and communion with God, with Ultimate Reality. Characterized by this passionate commitment to the Ultimate, all spirituality takes the form of embracing the spiritual journey, the road to inner transformation and growth. Each kind of spirituality awakens us to reality as it is and to our own condition. Spirituality itself, as the deepest dimension of life and being, is common to all religions.

In identifying the essential elements of a global spirituality -- those elements that will be part of any viable tradition -- seven are clearly discernable:

- 1) a capacity to live morally;
- 2) deep nonviolence;
- 3) a sense of spiritual solidarity with others, including other species and the Earth;
- 4) a spiritual practice and comprehensive self-knowledge;
- 5) simplicity of lifestyle;

6) selfless service; and

7) prophetic action.

### *Moral Capacity and Commitment*

The capacity to live morally or ethically is the indispensable foundation of the spiritual life in any tradition. One who is on the spiritual journey is always a morally committed individual. A universal spirituality would easily adopt the code of the "Global Ethic," and spirituality would provide the inner motivation for implementing its norms in one's life, or in the life of a community.

### *Deep Nonviolence*

A deeply-rooted attitude of nonviolence is also an important aspect of spirituality. As one becomes more awake within, one also becomes gentle and sensitive without -- that is, in relations with others. Not just nonviolence, but "deep nonviolence" must be emphasized because of the growing problem of violence all over the world. Deep nonviolence means a non-harming that is the fruit of wisdom and compassion; it is really a form of love, and it is also a way to spread peace: by living nonviolently! If we truly wish to teach peace, we must live nonviolently!

### *Spiritual Solidarity*

Every person who follows the call of the inner life knows there is a deep bond of human and spiritual solidarity that unites us all. It emanates from the unity of reality itself, and because of this oneness, there is also a spiritual oneness, the basis of our interdependence. That means actually that reality has degrees of subtlety and unity -- subtlety-in-unity. Spirituality has a high degree of unity that can be seen as solidarity on the human level. Practically speaking it implies a responsibility to assist and guide any seeker on the spiritual journey who asks for our aid. Thus, a spiritual solidarity exists in life, and we receive what we need, while the journey provides what is required for us.

At the same time, we have a spiritual solidarity with the other species and with the Earth in a special way. It manifests in the possibility of harmony and communion with them both. This harmony and communion is not as rare as we might imagine; it is common to many very advanced in holiness who also have a highly evolved sensitivity towards the created order. Examples include St. Francis of Assisi, the nature mystics and poets and certain monastics, as well as some unusual lay persons.

### *Spiritual Practice and Self-knowledge*

All genuine spirituality has a spiritual practice, the heart of spirituality which brings about the process of inner change. Without it, spirituality is neither authentic nor viable. Spiritual practice may consist of some form of mature prayer, meditation, or interiority, a discipline of contemplation, spiritual reading, reflection, study, work, or a simple resting in the Divine. Spiritual practice often involves all or most of these activities. It also may involve liturgy or

some kind of ritual. The only rule is that spiritual practice must be transformative. It must initiate, follow through and sustain fundamental, indeed radical change in the aspirant. Spiritual practice, with the aid of grace, initiates a four-fold transformation: of consciousness, of will, of character, and of action. This four-fold transformation has self-knowledge as its basis, and, again, all genuine spirituality requires a comprehensive self-knowledge.

One's consciousness grows by addition of greater knowledge and awareness. Perception of reality becomes more profound and all-embracing. This includes an awareness of the three primary worlds: the material, the psychological, and the spiritual dimensions of all reality, life, and being. The person becomes proficient in spiritual wisdom as his or her consciousness becomes more and more subtle. The individual acquires a progressively deeper understanding of hidden motives and unconscious emotional programs originating from infancy. Eventually these give way to spiritual maturity. The person's will, like the mind, is transformed; it no longer seeks selfish ends, and becomes more other-centered. It seeks the permanent in the midst of what is passing away, and pursues harmony with the divine will and with the totality of life. Similarly, the human character knows a far-reaching transformation whereby the person becomes more and more grounded in virtue, grace, and holiness. Saintliness of character emerges as the person submits to love and is shaped by this into a loving, wise, compassionate being. One's behavior is altered as selfish patterns give way to altruistic actions governed by love, kindness, compassion, mercy, and wisdom.

### *Simplicity*

The fifth element of a universal spirituality is simplicity of life or lifestyle. Its power and truth are eloquently expressed in the admonition: "Live simply so that others may simply live!" Simplicity in style of life, in the use of the Earth's goods, has for millennia in every tradition been a requirement and a sign of the genuine nature of one's spiritual witness. In monasticism and other forms of religious life the vow of poverty is meant basically to emphasize the need for simplicity in living. Simplicity also has a direct bearing on the cultivation of detachment, and detachment facilitates growth in our spiritual lives, especially in holiness and our attachment to the Eternal -- that is, to God.

"Live simply so others may simply live," refers, of course, to the poor in its original social context, but it also has a direct bearing on the Earth. Our self-indulgent consumer society has caused and continues to cause a serious deficit to the planet itself. Simplification of life means above all using only what we need of resources and nothing beyond. This principle of spirituality thus translates into a benefit for the Earth and all its inhabitants, and indicates the eminently practical nature of spirituality itself. As Gandhi recognized, we don't need much to live and be happy; he often remarked that the Earth has sufficient resources for humankind's needs, but not for its "greeds."

### *Selfless Service*

The sixth principle or guideline in a universal spirituality is selfless service. The transformation of the person living an intense inner life, especially the radical change in character and will, leads spontaneously to the development of a sensitivity to the needs of others. One's relationship with

others is grounded on compassion, kindness, love, and the possibility of service or compassionate action. One becomes capable of thinking and acting beyond self-interest, able to discern among the needs of others what is required, based upon justice and charity. This pattern of behavior is found in every valid expression of the spiritual life and is one of the infallible signs of its genuineness. These enduring fruits of enlightened awareness unfold in the spiritual journey.

### *Prophetic Action*

A seventh and final element of a universal spirituality is the freedom to exercise prophetic action calling for change; it may mean taking a courageous stand for others in matters relating to justice, peacemaking, economic policy, refugees, hunger, poverty, women, the elderly, children, the unemployed, the homeless, AIDS and other diseases, and the whole critical issue of the environment. Prophetic action requires spiritual leadership and the courage to take a stand that may have political implications and consequences.

The issue of Tibet, for instance, is one that cries out for an effective voice. For nearly five decades now the Tibetan people have endured immense suffering, oppressed by the Chinese who have carried out physical and cultural genocide against them, inflicting on them unspeakable forms of torture and numerous other indignities. The world has stood by in utter silence. The United Nations has ignored the whole question, and the religious leaders of the world, with the notable exception of Buddhists, have been equally reticent. Can they not sense the extreme anguish and pain of the Tibetan people? Genuine spirituality demands prophetic speech and action in such cases.

Another example is the plight of indigenous peoples. We have not dealt adequately with their complaints nor have we been sensitive to their intense pain over the centuries, a suffering for which we bear a certain historical responsibility. Healing must take place between native peoples and the Europeans who have oppressed and nearly destroyed indigenous tribes in the Western Hemisphere and Australia. The indigenous population in Guatemala is nearly 75% of the total, yet they are still treated as a minority in their own country; their rights are systematically denied them by the 25% of European descent who rule Guatemala. Authentic spirituality demands a prophetic response.

In this age of spiritual interdependence, when we have finally discovered the profoundly rich bonds of sacred community that unite us, our global spiritual tradition must possess the ability to speak out when the occasion requires it. Such moral leadership is yet another fruit of a genuine spiritual life, and in our age it is much more. It is an essential demand and function of a global culture.