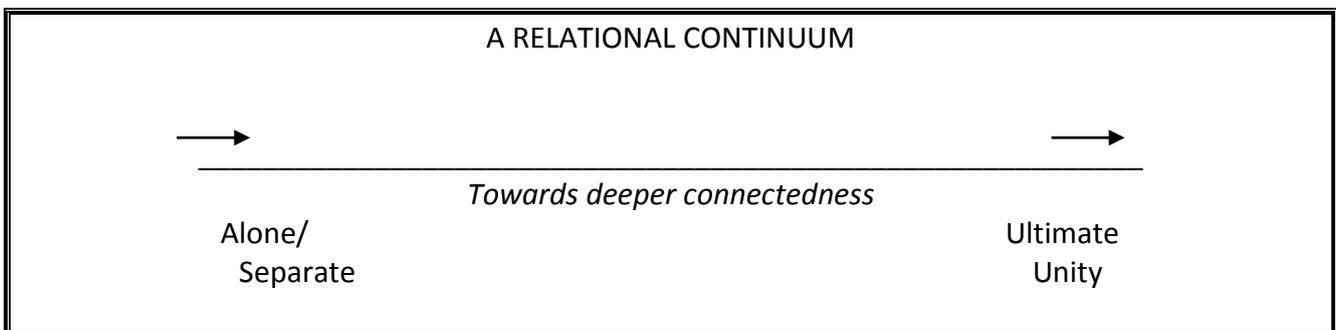# A concept of human spirituality
## Marian de Souza

As spirituality has, more and more, become the subject of many discussions, debates, conference themes, workshops, and research studies, there continues to be a certain insistence on treating the concept as one of ambiguity accompanied by a reluctance to pin it down to a manageable construct. I would argue that it is not helpful to talk about the word in theoretical terms with many allusions to 'spirit' and 'breath' and so on, all designed to further mystify its essence. What we need, at this point in our evolutionary process, is something that makes sense in our everyday lives. A useful question is what does spirituality look like, feel like and sound like in your life? This is an attempt to move one's minds onward from theoretical discussions to more practical applications which, hopefully, makes the word more meaningful in the context of our lived experience. I would, therefore, like to share my understanding about spirituality, a place I have reached after many years of grappling with the subject.

I began my research into young people's perceptions of spirituality in the 1990s to try and understand what young people meant when they said they were spiritual but not religious. My early research, influenced by Rebecca Nye's theory of relational consciousness, led me to the concept that human relationality is the essence of human spirituality (de Souza 2003; de Souza, Cartwright & McGilp 2004). I also concluded that spirituality was an essential human characteristic which was at the core of and reflected in all aspects of human existence. In other words it was not confined to religion or restricted to a relationship with God within a religious framework (de Souza 2009). Indeed, Armstrong (2009) who has written extensively on the human search for a transcendent reality, argues that the ultimate reality was not a personalized god. Rather, it was a transcendent mystery, the depths of which could never be comprehended. It is Armstrong's contention that, while different faith traditions have their own

> 'unique genius and distinctive vision: each its peculiar flaws' there are some fundamental principles common to most faith traditions: 'when one loses all sense of duality and is "oblivious to everything within or without"' (31).

I would suggest that the loss of all sense of duality as described by Armstrong may be linked to the notion of Ultimate Unity that I discussed when I articulated the concept of a relational continuum which reflects the spiritual journey. As individuals pass along this continuum, the movement may be aligned to the growth of human spirituality in terms of having a raised awareness of oneself as a relational Being. Expressions of this relationality, then, become expressions of spirituality.



**A relational continuum reflecting human spirituality** (de Souza, 2011, 46)

In a recent article I have explained this further:

Thus, living with an awareness of one's relationality is the essence of human spirituality. For many, this includes the connectedness that leads to a search for something 'other' beyond one's physicality but even without this aspect, the individual still remains a spiritual Being. Important to note is the understanding that the higher the levels of awareness, the higher the consciousness levels that are reached by the individual. Movement through these levels of consciousness correspond to the movement from a focus on the outer self to a focus on the inner self which, in turn, may lead to the experience of 'letting go' and living in the present moment. These are elements that may release in individuals a sense of freedom, helping them to experience transcendence and, I would argue, spiritual growth (de Souza, 2012).

Returning to the relational continuum, at one end the individual Self is separate from everything that is Other, that is, one is clearly recognized as an individual Being. Logically then, as the individual moves along the continuum and the boundaries between Self and Other become blurred, it may be expected that at the other end of the continuum, the individual becomes one with Other, Self becomes part of the Whole which comprises Other, and the individual has entered the realm of Ultimate Unity.

It is important to note here that this understanding of spirituality extends beyond Nye's (1998) concept of relational consciousness. Rather, the relational continuum discussed here points to a movement along this continuum towards a place/space where the boundaries that create separateness or individual identities become less distinct until the individual arrives at a point where the boundaries cease to exist and all becomes one. This also implies that a consciousness level is reached where the individual is able to experience transcendence, where body, heart and mind become one and unity becomes the essence of lived experience. Arguably, it is this realm of Ultimate Unity that has been described by some religious traditions as Absolute Reality, the Kingdom of God, Nirvana, Dao, Brahman, the Godhead and so on. Thus, the common theme underlying the message in many religious and spiritual belief systems is that the human person needs to escape this life, this physical existence, in order to return to an Absolute Reality: the spiritual journey.

As such, the message at the core of most religious traditions is one that offers a pathway to nurture and enhance the individual's spiritual life and there is a wealth of learning and practices that has been developed over the lifetime of these Traditions. Consequently, believers within a Tradition may develop some security because they have an identity within a community, they are able to express a world view that is shared by the community and their way of being also aligns with the lifestyle of other members of the community. These factors produce in the individual a sense of belonging, and this helps individuals make meaning of their experiences within the framework of their own and their community's belief system. In general, therefore, religion has an important role in nurturing the spirituality of its adherents and contributing to their sense of wellbeing.

It is rather unfortunate, then, that in the contemporary world, too many religions have emphasized their rules and regulations to the detriment of the spiritual dimension of their traditions, and it is, possibly, why so many people have begun to search along spiritual pathways that are not aligned with mainstream religious traditions. This can, sometimes, lead the unwary and vulnerable, often young people, into difficult and challenging situations where they may be

seduced by promises of finding a happy, meaning-filled life only to find let-down and disillusionment. This is one reason why, in the contemporary world, parents, educators and other professionals who work with young people need to introduce children and young people to spiritual practices that have been inspired by the wisdom, teachings and philosophies from different belief systems across both the Eastern and Western worlds so as to give them the knowledge and skills to access their inner lives to gain self-knowledge. As well, they need to learn how to balance their thinking, reflection and action between their inner and outer selves in their quest to live meaningful and purposeful lives.

In the end, all of us are somewhere on a relational continuum. The further along we are, the more chance we have of becoming empathetic, compassionate creatures, unafraid of the otherness of Other. It is important to recognize that engagement with Other is essential if we are to move on from mere tolerance to acceptance and inclusion; these elements are absolutely necessary in  a contemporary world that is, at once, pluralistic and globalized so that religious and cultural diversity are particular characteristics. We also live in a world besieged by technology and social networks today which encourage a kind of 'distant connectedness' which, I suggest, actually tends to erode human spirituality in terms of the connectedness that is promoted through close relationships where the individual is able to respond to another through physical and visual contact.

Given these aspects of contemporary living, it is not surprising that the role of spirituality in education, counselling and health needs to be identified and addressed. More importantly, this needs to happen at all levels in society from policy writers, government funding bodies to practitioners who are dealing with issues related to disconnection such as alienation, health problems and undesirable social behaviour. Some of these factors are generated by disenfranchisement and disillusion that some young people experience and may result in further experiences of fragmentation, unhappiness, discontent, prejudice and racism, envy, feelings of loss and being lost, anxiety, fear, guilt, boredom and apathy. Professionals who work with children and young people need to find ways to address these negative tendencies.

Children need to develop practices that help them focus on their inner lives and to balance the desires and needs of their outer lives  which will help to promote acceptance of self and other and of developing a sense of identity and a place within their communities. These practices will nurture their spirituality and assist them to find meaning and purpose in their everyday which, in time will enhance and promote social cohesiveness and wellbeing in their communities.

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