

Spirituality and community development: Exploring the link between the individual and the collective

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Abstract The underpinning philosophy of community development and *spirituality* is the connection of the individual to the collective, acknowledging that the well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of the community. The central tenets of this philosophy are the promotion of fairness, *social justice* and access to community resources to create responsible well-being. This paper explores the links between spirituality and community development. We argue that the six dimensions of community development, namely economic, social, political, spiritual, cultural and environmental (Ife, 2002; 1995) are strongly informed by spiritual values of holism, sustainability, diversity, equilibrium and social justice. Case studies of community development practised by different faith-based groups are presented and critiqued.

Introduction

Spirituality dwells within every culture and every geographical community because as people search for meaning, spirituality becomes embedded in their ways of life (Fabry, 1980), as it informs their ethics and their desires. While some people may reject notions of spirituality with reasonable arguments, secular society represents a relatively small global population (Saul, 1992). Even within postmodern society, spirituality finds expression in various forms including an assortment of religious affiliations. In an increasingly globalized and diverse world, community development workers are likely to be informed by a range of spiritual beliefs. Regardless of particular spiritual perspectives, development relies on the respectful and sustainable regard for communities and the environment.

This paper explores the recurring ideas that flow through spiritual and faith-based approaches to community development. The understanding that spiritual ideals closely align with the values and principles that

underpin community development inform this exploration. Ife laments that:

Modern society is essentially secular, and has left little room for notions of the sacred or for spiritual values. This can be seen to have denied one of the most important aspects of human existence. Hence there is a strong need for community development to incorporate notions of spiritual development. (Ife, 1995, p. 172)

We argue that the underpinning link between community development and spirituality is the connection of the individual to the collective, acknowledging that the well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of the community. The paper explores these links as a means to understanding and addressing some of the contemporary development issues such as globalization, diversity, oppression, social isolation, pattern and distribution of power, the tension between individualism and the collective, competition and collaboration.

Links between different spiritual approaches

Identifying the connections within the broad range of spiritual approaches is central to discovering the links between spirituality and community development. To effectively explore spiritual approaches it is essential to distinguish their potential for liberation from their potential for oppression. The theologies of some contemporary religions and their intolerance of other beliefs have tended to limit the application of spiritual principles in community development.

Religion and spirituality are not synonymous. Religion is only one of the ways through which spirituality finds expression. It is a faith-based institution through which belief systems and practices become recognizable in particular practice traditions. Spirituality, on the other hand, is the inner self that defines who we are. It is developed and expressed in many ways outside of religion. Spirituality pre-dates organized religion. Jesus Christ, Krishna, Mahavira, Buddha and Mohammed were not religious leaders, but spiritual masters of their time (Wulff, 1991). Religions that developed around them were a response to their spiritual wisdom and a means of connecting their followers to a common faith based on their ideas and practices.

Spirituality is based on the actual experiences of the divine dimensions of reality and does not necessarily rely on a special location or an officially appointed person to facilitate these experiences (Pruyser, 1968). It involves the relationship between the individual, the collective and the universe. The contexts in which we experience these sacred dimensions are our bodies and nature. Spirituality has been described as 'the oneness of God, of people, of

universe a personal experience at the level of spirit or soul. By being connected with spirit, we are connected with its origin' (CIDA, 1992). As Paterson (2000) asserts,

Religion invariably presents an over-simplistic and narrow view of reality, is intolerant of contrary views and demeaning to the basic tenets underlying spirituality in that it attempts to present a finite and limited interpretation of the infinite. Spirituality on the other hand is usually a far deeper personal experience associated with an individual's personal quest to re-discover his or her essence and who he or she really is. (Paterson, 2000, http://www.vision.net.au/~apaterson/esoteric/religion_spirituality.htm)

Spirituality relates to those values and beliefs that inform the meanings we make of our existence and our purpose. It places us in a context of time that is larger than that for which we live and provides the connections that exist between individuals within the collective.

The authoritarian construction of the concept of divinity by organized religion may also have stifled the relevance of spirituality in community development. Divinity is shrouded in mysticism in many religions where the distinction between the realm of the divine and human experience is polarized as that between the supernatural and natural worlds. This is at variance with the fundamental conceptualization of divinity relevant to community development, as the natural order and common purpose of the universe, the conscious interconnectedness where everything is encompassed within the divine. All of life is an expression of a network of spiritual unity, and the growth and realization of the full potential of the individual is intrinsically linked to the full and conscious realization of collective outcomes.

Though spiritual experience may be subjective, geared towards a common objective, spirituality in development provides a foundation for understanding that in practice community development is about respectful and sustainable approaches to the environment and each other (Daly and Cobb, 1989).

Most spiritualities acknowledge that an 'inner peace' that is separate from the world cannot exist. Well-being comes from deep awareness, which requires a deep sensitivity to the well-being of others. Spiritual approaches emphasize interconnectedness that require a holistic framework which incorporates related issues, such as social justice, economic fairness, human rights, and ecological sustainability. This requires harmonizing individual and collective needs, as well as integrating socioeconomic needs with environmental sustainability.

The following concepts from Keenan (1996) and Lerner (1992) in our view provide the basis for the holistic framework that links spirituality and community development.

- Everything in the universe originates from one eternal source. The universe itself is an organic *whole*, alive, intelligent and conscious.
- The laws of balance and equilibrium hold throughout the universe and at all levels. This ensures justice and harmony.
- Evolution applies on a grand scale to all of life and all that exists.
- The soul experiences and learns and achieves self-awareness. This occurs on all planes, the physical, the mental and the spiritual.
- Every thought and action has consequences on people and the environment, it has a *kharmic* effects.
- We use our consciences and our intuition as we move toward our higher selves. This occurs through meditation or prayer, through aligning ourselves with each other and nature and through acting for the greater good.
- Humanity is not separate from the earth, we should therefore promote unity, justice, empathy, altruism and compassion in our daily lives and act for and as part of the *whole*.

Links between spiritual approaches and community development theory

We define community development as the process in which members of a community attempt collaboratively to promote what they consider to be their collective well-being through unity of action. As a process, community development focuses on the dynamics inherent in the interaction among community members who seek to deal with social change in a deliberate and sustained attempt to strengthen the horizontal patterns of a society. As a vehicle for change the development process enables the community to change from a condition where a few individual elite within or outside the local community make decisions for the rest of society, to a condition where people themselves make decisions about matters that concern them. This is undertaken through popular participation that enables the local people to make the most of their own social, cultural, economic and environmental resources rather than depending on external input, thus maintaining a balance between social welfare and local community resources.

Community development has at its foundation an ideology that motivates people to link with each other. This ideology provides the context for questions that inform community development work. For example, why would we want to develop communities? What is wrong with competition? What is wrong with inequity? Why should we really care about the person next door, let alone someone on the other side of the world? It is important to reflect on these basic questions so we may also find meaning in the more personal questions, namely 'why do I want to do this work, and what do I

hope to achieve?' It is our experience that answers to such questions are often informed by our spiritual constructs.

Spirituality shapes our relationship with others and our environment. The links between spiritual approaches and community development underpin respect for diversity. This means distributing power and resources equitably so that the diversity of interests, beliefs and approaches within the community are allowed expression, thus honouring plural spirituality.

Different spiritual approaches provide varying answers to these questions. For example, from the Christian perspective Simpson argues that: 'it is the Christian personal experience and knowledge of God's love and justice which is the motivating factor' for community development (Simpson, 1998, p. 122). Wallace summarizes this Christian personal experience in the following hymn:

Deep in the human heart the fire of justice burns: a vision of a world renewed through radical concerns. As Christians we are called to set the captives free, to overthrow the evil powers and end hypocrisy. This is our task today to build a world of peace; a world of justice, freedom, truth, where kindness will increase; a world from hunger freed, where every person is of worth and no one lives in fear. (Wallace, 1990a)

This burning desire for a world built on the principles of social justice contrasts with rational scientific thought, which has often provided justification for global inequality using theories of evolution and survival of the fittest (Saul, 1992). Herbert Spencer and other Social Darwinists misapply the biological principles of natural selection to the social, political and economic realms. Social Darwinism, which originated in the class stratification of Edwardian England, was extrapolated as a general evolutionary argument about the biological basis of human differences (Cartwright, 2000), competition, and biological rationalizations of inequality. Social Darwinism effectively created what Rodney (1982) terms the development of underdevelopment, whereby human progress invariably meant the development of some and the underdevelopment of others. Winners and losers become constructed as a natural part of life therefore society is absolved of any responsibility for the poor and the 'inevitably' less privileged. These ideas were also used to justify 'modernization' as superior, inevitable and more valid and valuable than any other form of social development.

Contemporary social theory has less regard for biological explanations for social issues. Biological rationalism does not account for the complex web of behaviours and relationships, which is the basis of mutual interdependence. This interdependence is captured in the Buddhist concept of karma and Hindu concept of moksha (life of spirituality and renunciation), symbolizing the interconnectedness of human lives and all reality.

The divide between the poor and rich, the developed and the under-developed is what Wallace (1990b) articulates as the paradox of global inequality epitomized in the following hymn:

We call the wealthy 'rich' but God says 'they are poor, the wealth which they possess I give for all to share. Their spirits shall indeed be poor till worldwide justice is their care'. We call oppressors 'strong' but God says 'they are weak, they take the people's power and never share their own. We call the simple 'fools' but God says 'they are wise they listen in their hearts and know who pulls them down'. (Wallace, 1990b)

It is from this spiritual context that community development operates, both as a process and as an outcome. The hymn admonishes the rich for usurping the wealth that should naturally belong to all, where wealth should be created and controlled by people acting collectively for the benefit of all. Setting the captives free relates to the desire and commitment of community development to 'work with the oppressed, to hunt out the sources of oppression and to find ways in which to counteract' sources of oppression.

This apparent preference for the 'poor and weak' has been treated with suspicion and contempt in the past. Nietzsche regarded Christian humility as fabricated by a religion of slaves who were jealous of power and therefore cast a virtuous light on their powerlessness and envy (Zeitlin, 1994). Marx considered patience and long-suffering as a control ideology created by the rich rather than the wisdom of God (Lefebvre, 1968). The poor and weak are not a fixed group of people. Its quantities and characteristics are dynamic. Promoting the well-being of, and meaningful contribution by, both the privileged and the under-privileged reaffirms the inalienable worthiness of the person, which is central to personal identity, the most critical basis upon which 'good society' is built.

The role of spirituality in community development discourse provides a framework for critical analysis and understanding of the causes of oppression as a means for creating positive and sustainable transforming community development. The connection between spirituality and community development is the fire of social justice that brings about radical transformation of structures of society, through radical community development work. Both are passionately concerned with reforming society. Both characterize contemporary social and economic arrangements as oppressive and in need of radical change. Because of power imbalance, it is not effective to attempt to bring about social change by working within the status quo arrangement of power, privilege and state apparatus and playing 'by the rules of the game'. To 'set the captives free' demands the use of radical instruments. These include:

- Conscientization about the nature of oppression and injustice;
- Organizing 'to end hypocrisy' of disempowering ideas, structures, power relations and discourse;
- Telling the 'truth' about issues of globalization and exploitation through propaganda, militant campaigns, building links with organizations and between communities of interest, and seeking alternative solutions to issues of public interest.
- Creating theories within the radical framework and mobilization of community resources through the organization of new social formations.

Community development based on spirituality includes at least the reduction of inequality, enhancement of personal security, respect for individual human rights, recognition of personal values, social justice and empowerment. These are the bases for transforming development, which enables communities to regain control over what they consider to be important to their well-being. Within this framework, freedom of choice is not realized through conformity and outright self-interest, but through a healthy mix of individualism and collective concerns. Spirituality in community development therefore seeks to remove those things that suppress the expression of individual and collective empowerment.

Spirituality, community development and contemporary philosophy

Economic systems and structures often define communities and shape the ways that we interact with each other and the environment. These systems seem so natural, so intrinsic, and so inevitable that we often make the mistake of assuming that they define what it is to be human. Systems and structures may survive generations but they are not central to what makes us human. Modernization and the market are not synonymous with progress. Our certainties change over time. Our dynamic notions of human nature and social progress influence the absolute truths that become popular and then fade away (Lerner, 1992). Five hundred years ago animism and mysticism provided people with as much certainty about the world as reason and science do now, what will be our absolute truths five hundred years from now? Liberation theology suggests that spiritual belief systems should be dynamic in much the same way (Sigmund, 1990) appropriate and transferable to contemporary circumstances and insights regarding knowledge and humanity. The complex and globalized world of today is obviously different from the localized social and economic environment in which many belief systems were first taught many centuries ago. Spiritual principles need to be translated into contemporary contexts.

While there are differences across time and across communities, commonalities amongst spiritual approaches provide ideas for re-imagining diversity from a strength perspective. From this perspective, diversity is promoted through shared knowledge that incorporates both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and the inner knowledge of spiritual experience, recognizing sensory experience, empiricism, mental experience and rationalism. Shared knowledge must not be confused with the idea of one-singular knowledge. For instance globalization should be about the meeting of cultures and ideas, not the indoctrination of one culture and one idea. The spiritual dimension of human experience is a critical resource for personal growth work and social change for it provides meaning and purpose to existence.

Discourses of postmodernism and social constructivism reflect diversity (Featherstone, 1995; Poster, 1990), as art, music, science and literature move away from modernism to embrace emerging new paradigms. Postmodernism thus allows spirituality to be valid without the need to meet scientific standards of truth and rationality (Griffin, 1988). At the same time, spirituality has been cleared of its supernatural mystique and oppressive hierarchies enabling the incorporation of spirituality in postmodern discourses of contemporary philosophy and social theory.

The postmodern concept of respecting multiple truths does not equate to society based on competing certainties. The greatest mistake is to assume that difference must necessarily lead to competition rather than collective consensus. Pure competitive self-interest cannot serve the innate tendency to connect with others. Liberty is about the individual's freedom to attain his or her full potential and should not be mistaken for self-interest. Our ability to assert ourselves should not be measured by our ability to operate from cold-hearted contracts of tolerance. Spirituality in community development requires a radical revision of very fundamental knowledges and values, even a revision of consciousness. It requires us to go beyond structural approaches and onto matters of the very meaning of life, and re-examine how the secular society masks the creation of what is essentially a new religion of competition and consumerism. We define this as a religion because both processes seem to provide a set of new meanings and ethics for people's lives.

Saul (2001) attempts to define that which unites us through six inherent qualities, which are found in both spirituality and community development.

- **Common sense:** An expression of shared knowledge, which links us and acts as the foundation for all societies, not as a singular ideology but a collaboration of experience, empathy and understanding.
- **Ethics:** Responsible individualism and collectivism, a practical

approach to personal choice supported by public concern and structures, where every action is carefully considered because it affects the environment and the collective.

- **Imagination:** Our primary source of progress or movement, the ability to empathize and identify with each other including listening to intuition. We are on all a path of learning so there are things we don't know and cannot dismiss.
- **Intuition:** An un- or anti-intellectual function that acknowledges the non-linear nature of 'progress' and increases our effective consciousness by non-rational means. It is also a connection and communication with the *whole*.
- **Memory:** Wisdom. Memory is not just recollections of the past but also consists of experience and acquired knowledge, it is perception, history, context, contemplation and self-awareness.
- **Reason:** The thoughts, ideas and processes that organize the chaos, it allows us to reflect and consider, and provides an ordered framework to our existence to link with the other qualities.

These six qualities provide the platform on which contemporary philosophy resonate with spirituality and community development. The underpinning principle for community development within this framework is the need to find equilibrium, to ensure that the development process and development outcomes are in harmony, socially just and sustainable, and achieved with respect for diversity, shared knowledge, and a re-imagining of the future.

Links in action

Exploration of spiritual constructs unveils the rich manifesto of the link between spirituality, community development and social change for both indigenous knowledge and organized religion. Various groups have committed to creating dialogue across communities, cultures and ethnicities that actively promote social justice. These international conversations and organizations represent how both organized religion and indigenous peoples understand the links between spirituality and community development.

Indigenous knowledge uses the living environment to provide ways of attaining harmony through balance, collaboration and collective nurturing. In New Zealand, Maori spirituality evolved from the belief in an essential connection between humanity, the natural world and the universe. This is an indivisible relationship derived from *Mauri*, the universal soul, life force and energy. There is a strong vision of ultimate and interdependent well-being, or *Ora*, that informs Maori approaches to social and environmental

issues in a potentially holistic way. Recognition of these connections is represented in Maori cultural practices. Douglas (1997) suggests that:

Maori development, whether economic, political or social is group-orientated and contains a very large measure of *mana motuhake* (autonomy and authority), together with *whanaungatanga* (kinship), *manaakitanga* (sharing and caring) and *kotahitanga* (unity). (Douglas, 1997, p. 5)

These spiritual principles are consistent with the conditions for sustainable transforming community development.

Similarly, spirituality provides the bases for holistic development of the indigenous peoples of North America where the interconnection between the cultural, economic and spiritual realities are actively linked to attain sustainable community development in harmony with the physical environment (Deloria, 1999). In the same way, the indigenous Korean *minjung* and Indian *dalit* belief systems articulate liberation theology in their explorations of contradictions, injustice and religious history from the perspective of the oppressed (Pieris, 1998). The holistic understanding of existence and living energy characterizes the history and traditions of African peoples (Somé, 1998), while African anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements draw on both traditional and Christian beliefs as epitomized in the leadership of people such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

Liberation theology provides a society-transforming vision that goes beyond personal salvation into a political dimension for social critique linking personal suffering to oppressive power structures. Christ the social activist invited people to participate in the struggle for justice, liberation and the integrity of creation through the removal of the oppressive circumstances and structures. Buddha realized that human rights and freedoms were integral to growth and self-realization and that social justice and full participation were essential to the organic interdependency of all beings (Jones, 1993). The deprivation of individuals leads to the impoverishment of the collective. In Judaism the Talmud states that:

God formed Adam out of dust from all over the world: yellow clay, white sand, black loam and red soil. Therefore, no one can declare to any race or colour of people that they do not belong here since this soil is not their home. (in Idel, 1990, p. 151)

Hinduism recommends a variety of paths to liberation and the improvement of the human condition (Srinivas, 1972). Islamic beliefs emphasize the doctrine of unity and oneness among people (Cleary, 1998). The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka promotes liberation through conscientization and interdependence (Jones, 1993).

Conversations across organized religion include the 1968 Medellín Conference of Latin American Bishops that denounced the unjust use of power and the great inequality among social classes; the 1975 World Council of Churches Assembly in Nairobi that called for a just, participatory and sustainable society; and the 1993 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago which produced *The Declaration towards a Global Ethic*, recognized universal human rights and dignity, acknowledged the important role of all religions in creating global social justice and urged religious and cultural groups to 'strive for a just social and economic order, in which everyone has an equal chance to reach full potential as a human being' (in Beversluis, 1995, p. 132). In 1997, the Jubilee 2000 Coalition was established, uniting international organizations from all major faiths to force international debt into the global political and media agenda.

These conversations provide the framework for linking spirituality and community development in ways that transcend narrow religious focus, to facilitate education and action on social concerns to promote economic justice, civil rights and international peace. For example, the North American Conference on Religion and Ecology was formed in 1989 to work in partnership with the United Nations and other international organizations to mobilize spiritual communities towards environmental justice and action. One of the outcomes of this partnership is the collaboration between Buddhist, Christian and indigenous peoples on the west coast of North America on issues of social and environmental justice for indigenous peoples. The theo-ecological literature pioneered by Freire was the result of numerous local community-based grass-roots groups in Brazil, organized with the church as their base, critically discussing their social, spiritual and political futures.

In South East Asia, due to the dynamic, complex and diversity of cultures, societies and histories across the region, the role of spirituality has become central in political legitimization and national integration. The challenges of contemporary society have transformed the monk's role as a community leader, from personal, social and ethical counsellor to social and environmental activist.

These conversations create what Ife (1997) refers to as a dialogical relationship where knowledge and wisdom from above (professional and academic, in this case spirituality derived from organized religion) converge with knowledge and wisdom from below (in this case indigenous peoples' spirituality). They reflect a broadening of responses to working with structural issues of poverty, oppression and the environment to promote holistic, integrated and multi-faceted approach to sustainable transforming community development.

Conclusion

The worldview of the vast majority of poor people in the world is essentially spiritual. Development workers who have no ear for the spirituality of the poor are in danger of becoming irrelevant in the big picture. Significant similarities between spirituality and community development include links between the individual to the collective and responsible well-being. The significance of this for community development workers is that it links us to our communities and those we work with, and also provides a basis for understanding, connection and consensus. This means that our practice must be non-discriminatory, inclusive, working towards achieving balance and sustainability, empowerment and the expression of power by all communities. We think that the following Franciscan blessing provides an operational framework for practice:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Community development and spirituality while operating from differing paradigms, both focus on the things that unite and hold society together. Spiritual principles of interdependence and impermanence combine with community development principles of small, flexible local-based structures while retaining global relationships to create sustainable well-being.

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