

**Introduction to the theme: “Spiritualities, identities in the dialogue of civilizations”.
(Obstacles against dialogue and the approaches that favour dialogue)**

The 4th World Social Forum is in its full swing, collecting in its bosom all the social actors from various countries of the world. We see with hope the possibility of creating another world. Various rich alternative experiences with people’s participation, at the political, economic, socio-cultural levels are being discussed in the hundreds of workshops that our friends are organizing during these days. New theories of development are being exchanged on the basis of developmental experiences locally carried out.

All of us are hopeful that this coming together in a spirit of solidarity to build a world of love, justice and freedom will certainly be realized. Because, we start with existential and fruit-bearing experiences of decision making at the grass-root level; we do believe that the human spirit filled with love and compassion, in all the civilizations of the world, is much stronger than the dominating, subjugating, alienating, money centered, elitist and imperialist, monolith globalised power that keeps on excluding millions of human beings all over the globe from their sources of livelihood and their basic right to live with freedom and dignity. This global monolith system has imposed on all of us a culture of death that is systematically destroying our civilizations from where we draw meaning and inner strength for our harmonious living.

We are witnessing a world fast getting dehumanized. Right at the outset we wish to condemn the destructive political culture adopted by a few powerful ones of the world to decide the destiny of the billions in the world. We condemn a culture that reduces human beings to the state of objects and commodities. We condemn the money, muscle and manipulative strategies of the powerful that divide and rule the peoples in the name of caste, race, religion and gender. We denounce a culture that reduces the meaning and purpose of life to a blind and avaricious consuming of things to an unsustainable level, unaware of the sisters and brothers in the neighborhood who are deprived of the essentials of life and totally forgetting the future generations. We are ashamed of a world that takes pride in its science and technology but has seriously failed in its task to reach out to the other fellow humans. We are indeed pushed to a situation of asking what is wrong with us, humans. ***Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says: “There is nothing wrong with the human species today except one thing – we have lost the sense of sacred – To recover the sacred would be to recover our humanity. We are sacred and part of the sacred, but we have the capacity to choose and act otherwise”. The Rabbi defines sin as “the refusal of humans to become who we are”.***

“Cogito ergo sum” –“I think therefore I am”. This rational power that was triggered by Carthesius(Descart) brought about unthinkable changes in the past two centuries, at the same time it has effected irreparable damages. The Humans who enjoyed till then a sense of sacred and awe and felt part of the whole cosmic existence and relation in a non-dualistic manner, started taking a distance from it and developed a spirit

of domination, conquer and control, reducing everything and fellow human beings to a state of object to be exploited towards ones own interest. ***Thus dualism became the basic principle of a development that never considered the “well being of the whole”.***

This dualistic way of life in relation to nature and the fellow humans with a spirit of domination, conquer and control, has contributed to the loss of humanity in us. Earlier, the human species enjoyed a genuine, empathetic and altruistic heart, whose aspirations were always justified as ethical and sacred by reason that became the norm of every relationship with the nature and the humans. Thus the power of reason served as a handmaid to the heart’s authentic and sacred appeal. If anyone acted differently he/she was condemned as a “heartless fellow”, in other words, not a human.

Today the whole thing is just topsy tervy ! A person with a tender heart is considered to be a naïve and weak one and is considered as a misfit to live in our society. The sacred and the spiritual that bound humanity are considered to be archaic. A successful person is one who can make his/her heart a hard rock void of human feelings, based on ethical values of love, equality and justice. That person makes his/her intelligence (the power of reasoning) as a double-edged sword and cut everything that are against his/her self-centered interest and becomes a part of a cutthroat competitive culture. It is this culture that has eroded into our societal systems of economy, politics, social relations, education and ecology in the name of development! All are made to be self-centered Robots!!

The religions of the world proclaim themselves to be the defenders and promoters of the sense of sacred and ethical values, the foundation of a real development that would build a human and cosmic solidarity. But the fact remains that they have failed in this task and have been constantly used in various periods of history by a few in a powerful position to dominate, conquer and control. The international tensions that the world suffers today emerge from these fundamentalist attitudes with corresponding actions ending up in killings and wars to retain their hegemony of power.

It is in this context that we propose our workshop on “ spiritualities, identities in the dialogue of civilizations”. We do not wish to present the “spiritual” in opposition to the “material”. Rather, spiritual in our understanding is the inner and dynamic human energy, power of life that on the one hand resists all other energies that tries to suppress it on the other becomes a moving force from within a person or groups of persons to promote life towards a harmonious existence.

Taking this as the general guideline, we wish to affirm that there are several spiritualities in the world according to the climatic, geographic, ethnic conditions of peoples. Because of these spiritualities that give a specific meaning and purpose of living, we are able to recognize peoples with their identities. Each group of people lives these identities through their customs, cultures and other social norms that govern their relations that are sacred to them. Destroying these is equal to destroying their identities as people. Because of these spiritualities and identities, we have several civilizations in the world. In our world history we have been and are witnessing conflicts and wars between the various identities to establish ones own supremacy over the other. If one particular identity is

very strong, its area of invasion also becomes larger to dominate, conquer, impose and control, thus destroying all that existed in other identities with their meaning –giving spiritualities. In our actual globalised world, we are aware how the individual identities and their meaning systems based on their spiritualities are systematically bulldozed. If we have to overcome this draconian invasion of our particular identities, there is no other option than to create and promote a culture of dialogue; not an arm-chair dialogue of the privileged intellectuals, but a dialogue of peoples of various civilizations rooted in our socio, economic and political struggles, for the purpose of knowing, understanding, and mutually getting enriched to face a monolith global giant. In this process of dialogue, our understanding of spiritualities and identities of the peoples will boil down to something that would unite us as one human family, one united spiritual force that would blow out the dominant forces that enslave us. Mathew Fox in his book “Sins of the spirit and the blessings of the flesh” summarizes this in the following way:

- Being one’s own subject, not a doormat
- Being a subject, not an object
- Creating peace, not war
- Experiencing Divinity’s immanence, not distance or transcendence exclusively
- Empowerment and participation in a divine presence in the cosmos, not in a distant being called God
- Being life oriented, not death oriented
- Being whole , not dualistic
- Being creative and birth-oriented, not stagnant
- Being nurturing, not uncaring
- Being Compassionate, not passionless or living power-over
- Valuing healing, not pretending to be “value free”
- Being mystical, not just rational or antimystical
- Having solidarity as a goal, not obedience
- Seeing love as mutual cooperation and sharing, not as coercion
- Being wild and innately spiritual at the center, not powerless.

After having briefly introduced the topic of the work shop, we shall now listen to the panel speakers sharing with us their in-depth experience and reflections of this topic.

R.V.Mathias

Workshop “Spiritualities and identities in the dialogue of civilizations”
19 January 2004, World Social Forum, Mumbai