Spiritual Roots of Protest: Envisioning a Social Spirituality in the Age of Neoliberalism

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Abstract

In recent years, the concept of 'social spirituality' has been widely used in Korean Christian social movements. This is due to the idea that spirituality should not only be experienced and realized on an individual and inner dimension, but also on a communal and social dimension. To be sure, 'liberation spirituality' or 'prophetic spirituality' has been pursued for a long time and such spirituality has social and political implications. However, the reason why social spirituality is explicitly expressed today is, paradoxically, because of the *absence of society* in Korean society. This is related to the individualism, competitiveness, materialism and consumerism of neoliberalism, which destroy society and impose a way of life in which each individual must survive on his or her own. Therefore, in searching for "the spiritual roots of pro-

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test," this essay will first critically analyze the political, economic and spiritual attributes of neoliberalism that lead to a *societyless society* and second, examine the biblical paradigm of social spirituality and third, explore and envision the practice of social spirituality with a focus on *mindfulness*.

Keywords

spirituality, social spirituality, neoliberalism, mindfulness, Christian social movement

I. Introduction: Why Social Spirituality?

In the last decade, there has been an increased interest in 'social spirituality' among Korean Christian social activists. At its core, the idea is that Christian social activism should be based on and guided by some form of spirituality and that Christian spirituality should have a social dimension. To be sure, some may question whether we need a new term for 'social spirituality' because the term 'prophetic spirituality' or 'liberation spirituality' has already been used in Christian social and political movements. So why is the term social spirituality emerging in the Korean context? It is paradoxically because of the *absence of society* in Korean society.

What is *society*? In my view, society is not just a numerical group of individuals but a relational community of people who are responsible for and care for each other. It's worth noting that the English word 'society' is derived from Latin word '*societas*,' which has the root '*socius*,' meaning 'companion,' 'comrade,' 'ally,' or 'friend.' This would be in line with the meaning of *gemeinschaft* as proposed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in contrast to *gesellschaft*. If society is a community of friends or *gemeinschaft*, it would be very difficult to think of today's Korean society as a *society*.

This is not an exaggeration. Every year, the OECD compiles and publishes *The OECD Better Life Index*, which includes an indicator called the "Quality of Support Network." It measures the "percentage of who believe they can rely on their friends in case of need." According to the most recent survey results, South Korea ranks 38th out of 41 countries

surveyed for the Quality of Support Network; Colombia, Greece, and Mexico ranked below South Korea. These are countries where life is difficult. In any case, it shows that many Koreans feel they have no one to turn to in a life crisis.[1] Another indicator of the absence of society is the fact that Korea has the highest suicide rate and the lowest total fertility rate among OECD countries for several years in a row.[2] This is likely related to a loss of basic trust in social connections and community.

As the suffering deepens, so does the desire for liberation. The absence or loss of such a society makes Koreans eager to re-imagine and reclaim society as a community. In recent years, interest in and pursuit of *the social* has become widespread in Korean society. This interest is manifested in the rise of 'social enterprises,' 'social cooperatives,' 'social economy,' 'social housing,' 'social arts' and so on. The adjective 'social' seems to be returning as a symbol of alternative life values. This is a sign of the growing collective awakening and desire among Koreans that society should be social. People who are burned out from being dominated by or complicit in a *societyless society* are beginning to imagine and attempting other possible ways of living, which is communal or relational. They are building alternative societies in a societyless society. In its deeper sense, social spirituality emerges amid this value shift.

On the other hand, unfortunately, society's trust in religion is at rock

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1 See https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/community/

2 In 2022, the number of suicides in South Korea was 12,906, with a suicide rate of 25.2 per 100,000 population, Since the 2000s, the declining fertility rate in South Korea has been accelerating, with the total fertility rate falling to 1.48 in 2000, 1.23 in 2010, and 0.72 in 2023.

bottom. This is because religions in Korea are seen as indifferent and irresponsible to social suffering. It goes without saying that religions that don't love society can't be loved by society. But this is not what religion is originally supposed to be. The first thing the founders of religions like Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad did after realizing or experiencing the Ultimate Truth or Reality was to create communities, which were 'alternative societies' for their times. For instance, the-Kingdom-of- God-community of Jesus was an alternative society of the powerless that restored what the powerful had destroyed. It was a 'society of God' in which God's children were equal, caring, hospitable and loving one another. The pursuit of social spirituality is therefore also an effort to restore the original meaning and purpose of religion.

Starting with a critical awareness of societyless society, this essay will first analyze the reality of today's neoliberal world, second, examine the biblical paradigm for social spirituality and third, envision the possibility of 'Christian mindfulness' as a practice of social spirituality. While the context of this essay exploring social spirituality is Korean, it has universal relevance in today's hyper-connected world. In this age of neoliberal globalization, the suffering of one region is connected to the suffering of all regions.

II. The Belief System of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a concept that has become so familiar that it even sounds clichéd, despite the prefix 'neo' meaning 'new.' Neoliberalism

has also been identified by many as the 'root of all evil,' and the very concept itself has come to have a negative connotation for many people. This is not just the reaction of those who are angry at and opposed to neoliberalism. Even those who de facto support and follow neoliberalism don't call themselves 'neoliberals.' Rather, they call themselves 'libertarians.' On the one hand, many argue that neoliberalism has historically passed its expiration date. In fact, if we look at neoliberalism as an *economic theory*, it seems to be in critical crisis, if not outright failure. Neoliberalism began to gain momentum in the 1970s after the internal crises of capitalism such as the oil shocks and stagflation; and then, by taking advantage of the global economic crisis of the 1980s and 90s, neoliberalism globalized. But the global financial crisis of 2008 has led many, experts and the public alike, to doubt and distrust the legitimacy and sustainability of neoliberalism. Even IMF economists have officially stated that the increased competition and smaller role for the state are the problems of neoliberalism.[3]

However, if we look at neoliberalism as a *belief system* that governs our way of thinking and living, we can see that it has not at all lost its power to dominate our bodies, minds and hearts in all areas of our personal and social lives over the past few decades. This means that even if neoliberal policies are criticized or modified, neoliberal governmentality may continue, more covertly and more lethally. and above all, our lives today are so thoroughly imbued with neoliberal principles and methods of competition and individualism that it is difficult to say neo-

3 Jonathan D. Ostry, Prakash Loungani and Davide Durceri, "Neoliberalism: Oversold?" in *Finance & Development* (June 2016), 38-41.

liberalism has failed and ended. Perhaps what appears to be the failure of neoliberalism is a disguised tactic of the neoliberals to keep us off guard while it transforms into a new form. More blatantly, neoliberals, who advocate 'small government' and 'market freedom,' use *big* government as much as possible to get out of the crises they created. This tenacious life force of neoliberalism has not lost its power, even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The beliefs that neoliberalism imposes on our daily lives are *individualism*, *competitionism*, *materialism* and *consumerism*. Let's succinctly look at them one by one. First, individualism is the belief that everything is the responsibility of the individual. Today's individual is like a 'one-person-enterprise.' In this one-person enterprise, where one is the entrepreneur and the worker at the same time, there are no vacations and no breaks. Instead, one is endlessly self-exploiting and always competing with others. Other people's crises are one's opportunities, so one doesn't take care of others. According to Korean sociologist Ki-ho Uhm, the moral of neoliberalism is, "No one should take care of anyone else."[4] What this means is that neoliberalism forces us to find our own way to survival. In a market society where there is no social care and cooperation, but only competition, everyone is lonely. It is the 'loneliness virus' that threatens our atomized lives in a societyless society. What's worse is that neoliberalism makes us lonely and then uses that loneliness to create new markets and extract profits from us. The lonelier the world gets, the more the "loneliness economy," as Noreena Hertz calls it, flour-

4 See Ki-ho Uhm, *Amudo nam-eul dolboji mara* [No One Should Take Care of Anyone Else] (Seoul: Na-jeun-san, 2009)

ishes, where friendship is bought with money.[5] But because the market is about profit, not genuine comfort or friendship, no amount of consumption can make loneliness go away.

Second, neoliberalism indoctrinates people that "the survivor is the strongest"—not "the strongest survive"—and imposes competition as the principle of life. Of course, competition is not necessarily a negative thing. There is competition in goodwill that pushes one another to be better and stronger and there is fair competition that follows the rules and accepts the outcome. But today's neoliberal competition is a live-or-die matter. It is based entirely on a zero-sum mentality. In the neoliberal world order, the principle of competition is not even meritocracy, which is based on individual ability and effort. It's rather *survivalism*, in which anything is permissible and allowable to survive, or *competitionism*, where everything in life becomes a competition. Everyone is driven by survival anxiety and has to compete.

Third, neoliberalism tempts us to believe that we can become the masters of everything if, paradoxically, we become the slaves to money. That is the *materialism* that dominates people, especially in the modern world. Perhaps, this materialism is most evident and strongest among Koreans. In 2019, the Pew Research Forum conducted a global comparative survey of 17 economically advanced countries on the meaning of life and one of the questions was "What makes life meaningful?" The number one answer among Koreans was 'Material Well-being.' Furthermore,

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5 See Noreena Hertz, *The Lonely Century: How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), Ch. 10 "Loneliness Economy".

South Korea was the only country to rank material well-being as the top source of the meaning of life. In 14 of the 17 countries, the top answer was 'family.' The other two outliers were Spain and Taiwan, which ranked 'health' and 'society'(community) as their top life values, respectively. For reference, in South Korea, the top three values were 'material well-being,' 'health,' and 'family.'[6] This is probably due to the belief that securing material well-being first will ensure health and family life. It's important to note here that this doesn't mean that other countries are free from materialism. Materialism is the most powerful belief and religion of our time.

Fourth, neoliberalism is sustained by enforcing cults of consumption. Living in the *Capitolocene*, humanity is tired and restless as never before in history. This is because we are exhausted from working and living like slaves or machines according to capital's production mechanism, which aims to maximize profits at all costs. So, in order to heal and comfort our exhausted bodies and minds, we consume tangible and intangible goods and in doing so, we again voluntarily provide the capitalistic system with the opportunity to make profits. Human life is devastated by supporting capital not only through production but also through consumption. Indeed, the modern human being is *Homo Consumens*. Consumption is today's universal human condition, regardless of ideology and differences between countries and cultures. *Consumo, ergo sum*! (I consume, therefore I am!)

The problem with today's neoliberal world is that individualism,

6 See https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/11/18/what-makes-life-meaningful- views-from-17-advanced-economies/

competitionism, materialism and consumerism never do guarantee human security and happiness. In the most affluent time in human history, our spirit is the poorest. We are all insecure and unhappy.

III. The Theology and Spirituality of Neoliberalism

Many will question whether it is appropriate, or even possible, to speak of the 'theology and spirituality of neoliberalism,' because neoliberalism can be thought of as utterly secular and materialistic. But imagine that there is a god who knows everything (*omniscience*), can do everything (*omnipotence*) and is everywhere (*omnipresence*). This is an absolute god believed and professed by religious traditions that hold a personalized view of god. The most obvious deity with these attributes is the God of the Abrahamic faith traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. One thing to be clear here is that, according to the traditional discourse about God in Abrahamic faiths, another and the most important and precious divine attribute of God is *omnibenevolence* (all-loving). But what if an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent god doesn't know love? Such a deity can become a god of horrific terror. Neoliberalism is such a god.

The core tenets of neoliberalism are that "the market knows best" (omniscience) and "the market solves all problems" (omnipotence). It is well known that former US President Ronald Reagan said in his inaugural address that "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."[7] What he meant was

that the government shouldn't regulate the market and instead leave the economy in the hands of the market. Neoliberal beliefs such as 'small government,' 'free competition,' and 'deregulation' are the product of a firm belief in the all-knowing and all-powerful market-god. Neoliberalism is also present in every corner of the world through globalization. Even the communist-ruled People's Republic of China is no exception; today's China appears to be on a path of 'state neoliberalism' as some scholars have argued. The scariest thing for us is that this neoliberalism is a god that is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, but it is never omnibenevolent. Neoliberalism is a loveless god of terror.

Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister, was a politician who played a crucial role in establishing neoliberalism. She was famous and infamous for saying, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." This statement is widely recognized as a stark characterization of neoliberalism. It is also important to note that Thatcher also said in a 1981 interview, "Economics are the method: the object is to change the soul."[8] This indicates that neoliberalism is not just an economic theory, but an ideology, belief system and a way of life. How have human hearts and souls changed over the decades of competing in the neoliberal survival game? What kind of place has the world become?

First, the neoliberal god has turned everywhere into a market and ev-

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7 Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Adress," (1981) See https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1981.

8 Ronald Butt, "Mrs. Thatcher: The First Two Years," in Sunday Times (3 May 1981), See https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475.

erything into a commodity. A market is a place where things are bought and sold. It's a place where merchants want to sell goods at a higher price and consumers want to buy them at a lower price. Both sellers and buyers in the marketplace seek commercial value of goods. This is, of course, the basic nature and principle of markets that existed in pre-neoliberal and even pre-capitalist societies. However, in pre-neoliberal societies, there was a certain spatial and social distinction between the market and non-market. That is, there were areas of life where the pursuit of economic profit did not have to be the primary value. For example, some areas of human life such as politics, education, welfare, religion, arts were relatively free from the logic of capital and markets. There remained a social publicness that was not totally dominated by money.

But with the rise of neoliberalism, all areas of society have been transformed into markets. In the case of education, for example, today's schools have morphed into 'vocational schools' that produce competitive industrial workers. Of course, on the surface, the value of character education is still emphasized, but, in reality, teachers and parents are preoccupied with turning students into competitive commodities. Terms such as 'education market,' 'education industry,' 'education investment,' and 'education service business,' which blatantly show market logic, are now commonly used in the area of education. Both high schools and universities are more concerned with shaping and strengthening students' employability skills than cultivating their personalities. Schools are changing the minds and souls of students, who are 'education consumers,' to fit the neoliberal human type.

It is important to note that this marketization doesn't just happen in schools. In a world ruled by the god of neoliberalism, we compete against others everywhere. The survivors of fierce *entrance examination war* and *job-hunt war* are continuously and endlessly engaged in *self-improvement war* to become more expensive and better-selling goods. This is due to the reality of endless competition caused by job insecurity imposed in the name of 'labor market flexibility.' The destructive result of this rat-race for self-improvement is extreme individualism. In a neoliberal society, the success or failure of an individual is strictly a matter of personal responsibility. Suffering due to social and structural problems is seen as the fault of the individual who has failed to become a more competitive commodity. The *Les Misérables* of the world bemoan their misfortune without criticizing the injustices of society.

Second, the neoliberal god has turned everyone into its devoted followers and voluntary co-conspirators. The vitality of a religion lies in the faith and commitment of its adherents. A religion is energized by the number of dedicated believers who live by its truths and it loses vitality when they do not. Great saints like the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad embodied total commitment to truth and demanded the same from their disciples and followers. But commitment to truth is a dangerous and arduous path because it goes against the world's order and value. Therefore, believers compromise with what is not true and even betray the truth. If by 'Christian' we mean someone who faithfully and thoroughly follows the teachings of Jesus Christ, how many Christians are really Christians? In a sense, the history of religion is a history of endless self-betrayal. That's why every time there's a need for reform, there's a

movement of *ad fontes* that is "[back] to the sources." In any case, total commitment to religious truth is a heavy and even frightening burden for a believer to carry.

However, there is one religion that has uniquely succeeded in commanding the total commitment of almost all of its adherents: Capitalism! If capitalism is a religion, then no other religion in human history has achieved the total commitment of its adherents as broadly and powerfully as capitalism. and neoliberalism is the most extreme fundamentalist sect of the capitalist religion. Worse, neoliberalism has not only turned everyone into devoted followers but also it has turned everyone into voluntary co-conspirators. Neoliberalism doesn't force us to follow its rules and principles; it covertly seduces us by exploiting the anxiety and fear that comes from the precariousness of our lives. Humans competing against each other today are not only victims of neoliberal 'survival game' or 'death game,' but they are also collaborators. They voluntarily compete by using, betraying and degrading others in order to become the 'sole survivor.' So, in the globally popular Korean drama *The Squid Game*, the game's designer, Il-nam Yoo, tells Ki-hoon Sung, who sternly protests against him: "I never forced anyone to play this game and you've come back on your own feet."

Religion and spirituality are not immune to neoliberal domination. Religion and spirituality today faithfully reflect the principles and ethics of neoliberal life: individualism, competitionism, materialism, and consumerism. For example, the David Lynch Foundation Transcendental Meditation Center offered meditation programs to more than 2,500 professionals from 2014 to 2016, about 55% of whom were *Wall Streeters*.[9]

According to a more recent study, 16% of members of the CFA(Chartered Financial Analysts) Institute are *meditators*.[10] It's unlikely that the so-called "wolves of Wall Street" or financial analysts practiced meditation for spiritual values like non-possession, sacrifice, and compassion. Perhaps a more sophisticated and sharpened mind through meditation practice would have allowed them to take on risky hedge funds more boldly and effectively. Those at the forefront of neoliberalism use spiritual practices to cultivate the mental capacity for more material possessions and consumptions. and anxious and unhappy people, who are the victims of neoliberal society, consume secular and religious spirituality products such as self-improvement, self-help, inner healing, positive psychology, prosperity gospel and so on. The commercialization of spirituality, mixed with individualism, competitionism, materialism, and consumerism, is the fundamental crisis of spirituality in our time.

The more fundamental crisis in spirituality today is, paradoxically, the *spiritualization of spirituality*. Henri Nouwen, the great 20th-century American writer of Christian spirituality, once spent several months in the early 1980s in Latin America, where he met the poor and engaged in long and deep conversations with liberation theologians. In the preface he wrote for Gustavo Gutierrez's book *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, Nouwen confesses what he learned and realized from that experience.

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9 See https://www.businessinsider.com/wall-street-trend-transcendental-meditation-2016- 10.

10 See https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-new-way-for-stock-traders-to-rebalance-meditation-11581085778.

> Talking with those pastoral workers during that summer course, I became aware of how individualistic and elitist my own spirituality had been. It was hard to confess, but true, that in many respects my thinking about the spiritual life had been deeply influenced by my North American milieu with its emphasis upon the 'interior life' and the methods and techniques for developing that life. Only when I confronted what Gustavo calls the 'irruption of the poor into history' did I become aware of how 'spiritualized' my spirituality had become. It had been, in fact, a spirituality for introspective persons who have the luxury of the time and space needed to develop inner harmony and quietude.[11]

The spiritualization of spirituality that Nouwen criticizes is the pursuit of one's personal inner enlightenment and peace while remaining indifferent to the suffering of the poor and oppressed who are the victims of social injustice. In Buddhist terms, it is *hinayana*(small or lesser vehicle) spirituality, and in Christian terms, it is personal salvation and afterlife spirituality. What Nouwen's poignant reflection on the spiritualization of spirituality reminds us of is that not all spirituality is socially beneficial.

To be sure, in the process of secularization and de-religionization, it might be desirable to move beyond institutional religion to spirituality. But what matters is what kind of spirituality it is and what are the fruits of that spirituality. A spirituality that is indifferent to the suffering of the poor, marginalized and oppressed or a spirituality that secretly pursues

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11 Henri Nouwen, "Foreword," in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), xvi.

the material greed of the world is not the spirituality that Jesus taught and practiced. After resisting the temptations of the devil in the wilderness, Jesus did not remain in the mystical state attended by angels, but left for Galilee, a land where the poor and oppressed suffered and longed for liberation. In Galilee, on the road to Jerusalem and on the cross, the spirituality that Jesus embodied was a *social spirituality*, not a spiritualized spirituality that is asocialized, commercialized, privatized and mystified. Then what is social spirituality?

IV. Biblical Paradigms for Social Spirituality: The Prophetic Movement and the Kingdom of God Movement

Christian spirituality is essentially a social spirituality. This is because spirituality in Judeo-Christian tradition is fundamentally an experience of encountering God and the nature of God that Christians believe in and follow is *social*. The Christian understanding of God is characterized by an ethical monotheism that views God as the liberator who participates in history and favors the poor and oppressed. According to this ethical monotheism, it is the social God's mission for human beings to participate in society and work for justice, peace and life within it.

The primary biblical paradigm to social spirituality is *prophetic spirituality*. The prophetic movement is a unique characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition compared to other religious traditions. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament share the spirit and prac-

tice of the prophetic movement. The emergence of prophets in northern Israel and southern Judah between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE is remarkable both religiously and socially. This is because unlike most religions in ancient societies—even in modern societies—that advocated on behalf of political power, the prophets of the Hebrew religious tradition confronted the powerful on behalf of the powerless.

The integration of the social and the spiritual is also an important nature of the Hebrew prophetic movement. The prophets risked their lives to criticize the powerful not because of any political ideology but because of their spiritual experience of God. A prophet is a person who sees the world through God's eyes and speaks to the world as God's mouth. Many prophets, such as Isaiah, Amos and Jeremiah, received revelations from God and proclaimed God's will in society. For example, Jeremiah was told by God to walk the path of the prophet and when he was afraid and hesitant because he could not speak well and was young, God reached out and said, "Now I have put my words in your mouth." (Jeremiah 1:9) Thus, after a spiritual experience of personally encountering God, the prophets went out into society to denounce injustice and proclaim God's righteousness. For them, spiritual experience and social action were *one and the same*. The Prophet was not only a social critic or spiritual mystic, but both: a socio-spiritual activist-mystic.

The most essential paradigm of Christian social spirituality is the kingdom of God movement of Jesus, which succeeded and radicalized the prophetic movement in the Hebrew tradition. Jesus' kingdom of God was a community of compassion. The Latin root of the word 'compassion' is *cumpati*, which means "to suffer (*pati*) with (cum)."

There is a story in the Gospel of Luke that shows what compassion of Jesus is like. When Jesus encountered a widow at Nain who had just lost her son, he was moved with compassion for her. The Greek word for this compassion here is σπλαγχνίζομαι, meaning to be moved in one's inward parts. It is compassion to feel other's pain and suffering as one's very own, not only psychologically or spiritually but also physically. Compassion for the suffering of others is a basic emotion and virtue in the kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, 'your' suffering is 'my' suffering and one person's suffering is everyone's suffering. It is nondualistic communal love.

There was love in the Roman Empire, too. Rome loved and protected its subjects who were loyal to the empire. But this imperial love had boundaries and hierarchies. It was indifferent to those who were not loyal to the empire and even ruthless to those who opposed it. There was also love for the religious authorities of the temple in Jerusalem and the synagogues of Jewish society. They loved and respected the pious elite who had the political, economic and religious resources to keep the law. However, the poor and the weak, who were unable to keep the law, were excluded by otherizing them as sinners. The love of the political and religious powers was nothing but a 'favoritism' that could only be exercised within institutional boundaries and hatred was expressed toward those outside the boundaries of their biased love.

In contrast, the love of God's kingdom that Jesus embodied knew no boundaries. Unlike the favoritism of Rome and Jewish elites, the love of the kingdom of God was boundless charity, loving all people equally and unconditionally. Jesus loved those who were stigmatized and ex-

cluded as sinners. Not only that, he loved even his enemies. The radical hospitality of Jesus' community exemplified this spirit of boundless and unconditional love. In Jesus' time, the Jews were divided religiously into Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes and politically into Herodians and Zealots. Regionally, there was also discrimination between Jerusalem in the center and Galilee in the margin. Socially, social minorities such as tax collectors, prostitutes, gentiles and the sick or disabled were stigmatized, hated and outcasted as unclean sinners.

Jesus broke down all the religious, political, regional and social boundaries of his day. In Jesus' community of God's kingdom, people who, according to the social conventions of the day, would never have belonged together, lived together in mutual hospitality. Jesus' community welcomed those who were considered unclean, such as the sick, disabled and Gentiles and those who were labeled sinners and socially excluded, such as tax collectors and prostitutes. Furthermore, in Jesus' community, there were also the wealthy and religious elites with a conscience. Even the Zealots who fought against Rome joined Jesus' community. Along with these diverse backgrounds, they were conflicted with each other and some, like Judas Iscariot, betrayed Jesus. But no one was excluded from Jesus' community. It was a community of 'absolute hospitality' that Jacques Derrida proposed.

It is important to note here that the 'kingdom of God' was a familiar symbol to the Jews of Jesus' day. Although the explicit phrase 'kingdom of God' appears only in the apocryphal Book of Wisdom, the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish community were rich in symbols and imageries of the kingdom of God. So, when Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled

and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news," (Mark 1:15) his Jewish audience would have heard him with images of the kingdom of God in mind.

But the kingdom of God that Jesus described in his parables was a huge shock to the Jews, because it was not at all what they had expected and hoped for. The kingdom of David, to which the Jews aspired, may have been relatively more just than the Roman Empire. But even in David's kingdom there was oppression and violence as power was abused. Jesus rejected both Caesar's and David's kingdoms, which were based on the system of violence and offered a vision of God's just, compassionate, egalitarian and peaceful kingdom. The Jews, whose eyes were newly opened to the kingdom of God through Jesus, must have asked a heart-rending question. "What will it be like to be reigned directly by God?"

On the other hand, many Christians think of the kingdom of God as 'inner peace.' They interpret the phrase "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21) in a spiritual sense only. Yet, some Bibles translate this statement from the Gospel of Luke differently. For example, the King James Bible translates it as "The kingdom of God is *within* you," while the NRSV translates it as "The kingdom of God is *among* you." This may seem like a small distinction, but it's important because getting caught up in the phrase "within you" can lead to an individualized, inward-looking focus, while highlighting "among you" can lead to a more communal relationship.

If Jesus had taught, "Don't care what happens to the world, just have inner peace," he might have been revered as a Jewish-Stoic mystic. If

Jesus had taught, "The more painful life is, the more you hope for heaven in the next life," he might have become the leader of an afterlife eschatological sect that turned its back on the world. But the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and realized was unsettling and dangerous to the Roman Empire, to Herod's kingdom and to religious authorities. That is why the powers that be, who often had conflicting interests, conspired to crucify and kill Jesus.

Why was Jesus' kingdom of God considered such a serious threat to all types of power? It was because Jesus rejected thoroughly *every domination*; he rejected Caesar's domination, David's domination and the priests' domination. God's kingdom that Jesus proclaimed is a kingdom reigned by God alone. Perhaps 'reign' is not the right word here, but 'care' is. It is because there is no hierarchy and no discrimination in God's kingdom, or better, 'kindom' that Latin American feminist theologians proposed.

John Dominic Crossan says that the kingdom of God is a "kingdom of nobodies." Jesus' kingdom of God is a kingdom for the nobodies, that is, for those who are nothing, for those whose existence is denied, for the marginalized and the minority. In God's kindom, the nobodies in the world are *somebodies* and *special-bodies*, that is, the dignified equal children of God. Jesus' resistance went deeper than the replacement of a political system; it was the creation of a new community which is an alternative society. The supreme law of Jesus' kindom of God was unconditional compassion and hospitality toward the nobodies. This rejection of all domination and discrimination was a bad and dangerous news for the powerful, but for the poor and oppressed it was a really good news,

the gospel.

V. The Practice of Social Spirituality: Mindfulness

Working for the change of the world and the expansion of the kingdom of God in the world is a lofty ideal and endeavor, but it is also arduous and dangerous. The higher the ideals, the stronger the passion and the more active the work, the greater the risk of anger, violence, burnout and despair. This is why peace activists have no peace in their lives, why political activists fighting injustice are tainted by internal and external violence and why environmental activists are overwhelmed by despair and lethargy. Not taking care of ourselves psychologically and spiritually has a negative impact on our activities and lives. The transformation of the *self* and the transformation of the society are inseparable. Therefore, taking care of ourselves and transforming ourselves is, in a deep sense, not just a personal and spiritual act but a social act. It is also not an egoistic act but a prerequisite for living an egoless life for others. This is why those who live an active life to change the society must also live a contemplative life to change the self.

But it's not that easy to live a contemplative life while living an active life in the world. There is so much suffering in the world, so much needed care for others, so much work to be done. Jesus and his disciples were always busy doing the work of the kingdom of God. They were so busy teaching, caring for and healing people who came to them in desperation that "they could not even eat." (Mark 3:20) People even came

to the remote place where Jesus and his disciples had gone to get some rest. Jesus, of course, did not turn them away.

This is not to say that Jesus didn't have his own times of contemplation. According to the Gospel of Luke, "Jesus often withdrew to deserted place and prayed." (Luke 5:16) Interestingly, the Gospels reveal the uniqueness of Jesus' prayer time and place. Jesus prayed in secluded places usually late at night or early in the morning. There are no detailed stories of Jesus spending time alone in prayer during the day. This is probably because for Jesus the daytime was a time of action, caring for, healing and teaching the suffering and excluded. Therefore, since there were no or relatively few people visiting Jesus at night or early in the morning, he would have been able to pray at those times. If people had come to him at such late hours or early hours, I believe, Jesus would have been willing to give up his time for contemplation in solitude.

The point here is that action and contemplation need each other. This is because contemplation without action is irresponsible and action without contemplation is blind. So, the more active we are, the more we need to make time for contemplation in solitude and silence. There is no detailed record of Jesus' contemplative life. However, it seems likely that he moved from a period of intensive contemplation, such as the forty days in the wilderness fighting the temptations of the devil, to a life of action in Galilee and beyond. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus' contemplation and action were phased or sequential. As mentioned above, even during the period of his active public life, Jesus occasionally retreated to his own 'wildernesses' for contemplative time. More importantly, Jesus' active life was not separate from his con-

templative life. All of Jesus' action was contemplative because he was always with and in God. Jesus was an *active contemplative* in and for the world. It is the biblical archetype of what St. Ignatius called "contemplation in action."

Contemplation in action can be compared to *mindfulness* practice. While mindfulness is often thought of as a practice unique to Buddhism, it has become a phenomenon of trans-religious and even secular spirituality today, experienced across religious and secular boundaries. Interest in mindfulness has grown so much that the 23 January 2014 issue of *Time* magazine featured the phrase "The Mindful Revolution" on its cover. It was a sign that mindfulness was changing the world in a way that could be called a revolution.

What is mindfulness? The English word 'mindfulness' is a translation of the Pali word '*sati*.' This word means 'non-forgetfulness.' The four objects of sati are the body, feelings, mind and phenomena. Mindfulness, then, means not forgetting everything we are experiencing in the here and now. John Kabat-Zinn, who developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program as a more modern application of mindfulness, says: "Mindfulness means being awake. It means knowing what you are doing."[12] In other words, it is not-forgetting what we are doing.

Mindfulness is not a mental or spiritual vacuum where we feel no emotions and think no thoughts. That's not mindfulness; that's stupor or quiet mindlessness. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "paying atten-

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12 Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hachette Books, 1994), 17.

tion in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally."[13] That is, mindfulness is about being aware of what is going on in our body, feelings, mind and the phenomena we experience and noticing them as they are without any prejudice and presupposition. Mindfulness is a state of vivid and clear awareness and at the same time it is an active practice to experience the present state.

It's true that mindfulness is primarily rooted in Buddhist practices. But one doesn't have to be a Buddhist to learn mindfulness. In fact, today's mindfulness is post-Buddhist and even post-religious. Kabat-Zinn asserts that "mindfulness will not conflict with any beliefs or traditions—religious or for that matter scientific—nor is it trying to sell you anything, especially not a new belief system or ideology."[14] Ellen Langer, the psychologist who codified the mindfulness program, also advocates for "mindfulness without meditation," claiming that the roots of mindfulness she has been exploring are scientific, not Buddhist.[15] Even the renowned Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that mindfulness is not unique to Buddhism and that it is present in all spiritual traditions, including Christianity.[16] If mindfulness is transreligious, what is *Christian mindfulness?*

Sri Lankan liberation theologian and scholar of Buddhism Fr. Aloysius Pieris, S.J. argues that mindfulness is not only Buddhist but also the biblical spirituality of the Judeo-Christian tradition. He says that

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13 Ibid., 4.

14 Ibid., 6.

15 Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1989), 78.

16 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Be Fee Where You Are* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2002), 64.

the Greek word '*theoria*,' which the Western church tradition translates as 'contemplation,' is not present in the New Testament or in early Christian texts and that the emphasis of the Eastern church tradition's on '*nepsis*,' or wakefulness, is a more appropriate concept for mindfulness as a biblical spirituality.[17] Whether it's sati in the Buddhist sense or nepsis in the Christian sense, the common emphasis of mindfulness is to be awake in every moment and to be aware of everything.

When you look at the Bible through the lens of mindfulness, it will look like a *scripture of mindfulness*. The Psalmists praise God for loving and caring for human beings with mindfulness. "What are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4) Before humans are mindful of God, God is mindful of humans with all His/Her attention and thought. God is Immanuel, who is always and everywhere mindfully present with us. Jesus says, "Stay awake at all times" (Luke 21:36) and "Watch out, stay alert." (Mark 13:33) The Apostle Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) These are the archetypes of Christian mindfulness practice. If we think of being awake and prayerful and constantly praying in terms of physical time and form, few people can live that way. Even monks and nuns in cloistered monasteries cannot live in constant prayer, 24 hours a day, and even if they could, it is doubtful whether or not a life of prayer without action would be desirable. However, if mindfulness is what Jesus and Paul meant, then we can be awake and in prayer all the time. It is physically impossible to pray all the time, but it is not impossible to be mindful all the time.

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17 Aloysius Pieris, "Spirituality as Mindfulness: Biblical and Buddhist Approaches," in *Spiritus*, vol. 10 (2010), 39.

Like other forms of mindfulness, Christian mindfulness is also a spirituality that anyone can practice, but it is the monastics who have codified it into a sophisticated practice. Like Buddhist mindfulness, Christian mindfulness, too, has been centered in monastic traditions. When St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, called the monks to "Pray and work" (*ora et labora*), it appears what he meant was not unlike mindfulness. The 'contemplation in action' that St. Ignatius proposed and practiced seems closer to mindfulness. In short, mindfulness is no stranger to the Bible or church tradition.

As such, mindfulness is a transreligious spirituality, but this should not overlook the uniqueness of each religious tradition. What makes Christian mindfulness unique is its emphasis on *personal relationality* and *socio-political liberation*.

First, the relationship between God and human beings and between human beings and one another, as seen in the Christian spiritual tradition, is deeply personal. This emphasis on the personal dimension of mindfulness in Christianity differs from mindfulness in Buddhism and modern psychology, which emphasizes the cognitive dimension. It is also important to note that the personal mindfulness of God and human beings is relational. The God that Christians believe and confess is, as abovementioned, a God who mindfully loves all human beings as God's children and who passionately desires that human beings care for and love one another. We human beings, too, seek and love God with all our heart and all our soul. (Deuteronomy 4:29) Because of this emphasis in the Judeo-Christian tradition on the personal relationships between God and human beings and between human beings themselves,

Thomas Keating explicates that Christian contemplation is more akin to *heartfulness* than mindfulness.[18]

Second, Christian mindfulness is oriented toward the socio-political liberation of the poor and oppressed. This is *the* uniqueness of Christian spirituality that is inseparably linked to interpersonal social relationships. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, who loves God's children mindfully, loves, as liberation theologians emphasize, preferentially those who suffer and are in need. God mindfully and preferentially listened to the cries of the Hebrew slaves suffering in Egypt (Exodus 3:9) and responded with the event of liberation. Prophets who remembered God's mindfulness saw mindfully the reality of injustice and courageously criticized the unjust powerful. Jesus mindfully loved God as 'Abba Father' and his people and was crucified for his struggle against an evil system. Other religions also emphasize social ethics, but none emphasize social justice as much as Christianity. This is perhaps the uniqueness of Christian mindfulness. Christian mindfulness is social mindfulness.

A reason social mindfulness is necessary is because there can be 'asocial mindfulness' or even 'unjust mindfulness.' If a brutal torturer *mindfully* commits evil acts, if a greedy capitalist *mindfully* manages capital, if an arrogant religious leader *mindfully* gaslights and dominates his congregation, the results can be even more destructive. Indeed, to take an example, during the World War II, Japanese Buddhists ex-

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18 Garrison Institute, "Mindfulness and Heartfulness: An Interview with Father Thomas Keating," (24 October 2008) http://www.bahaistudies.net/asma/mindfulness_heartfulness.pdf.

ploited Buddhist doctrines and meditation practices to support war and killing. Mindfulness practice can be militarized and weaponized at any time if we are not socially and politically mindful. There can be mindful killing, mindful exploitation and mindful domination.

Furthermore, meditating or praying hard does not necessarily produce ethical fruit. Diligent meditation and prayer without compassion and love may increase *greed*, *anger* and *ignorance*. Spiritual and psychological mindfulness without social and critical awareness of reality bring personal and inner peace, but not world peace. The pursuit of one's personal inner peace that is indifferent and irresponsible to the suffering of others can fall into the trap of spiritual egoism or what Nouwen calls spiritualized spirituality. Mindfulness in the neoliberal world today, then, must be social and engaging and Christian social spirituality can contribute to this.

VI. Conclusion: "Spiritual Roots of Protest"

Earlier in this essay, we mentioned that neoliberalism is the *root of all evil*. If that's the case, then the protest against neoliberalism needs different roots. This has long been recognized by socially engaged Christians. In the late fall of 1964, Thomas Merton offered a retreat, titled "The Spiritual Roots of Protest," in his hermitage at Gethsemani Abbey for a group of radical Christian peace activists, including Fr. Daniel Berrigan, Fr. Philip Berrigan, A. J. Muste, Jim Forest and John Howard Griffin, etc. The tree roots in the above image were installed by Merton himself for

that retreat, symbolizing the spiritual roots of social movements. In his invitation to the 1964 Gethsemani retreat, Merton wrote:

> What we are seeking is not the formulation of a program, but a deepening of roots.
> Roots in the 'ground' of all being, in God, through His [sic] word.
> Standing in the presence of His [sic] word knowing that we are judged by it. Bringing our inner motives into line with this judgment.

Protest: Against whom or what?

For What? By what right?

How?

Why?[19]

It was needed because many social activists in Merton's time suffered from burnout, anger, anxiety, frustration and violence—internal and external. There was no fundamental difference between conservatives and progressives in experiencing the voidness and meaninglessness of modernity. Merton himself in his twentieth was a victim of modernity. What is important here is that the problems Merton in the 20th century faced are the same ones we have in the 21st century. Thus, like Merton and his fellow activists, we too need spiritual roots for our protest. It is a social spirituality that feels social suffering as our own suffering and responds to it compassionately and nonviolently. It is a social mindfulness that aligns our inner motivations with our outer actions.

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19 Thomas Merton, "Retreat, November 1964: Spiritual Roots of Protest," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 259.

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