

# PRIMORDIAL SPIRITUALITY

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the primordial spirituality of the Bible, as expressed in names, narratives and prayers. It looks at the nomadic families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Lea and Rachel, moving around from Mesopotamia via Canaan into Egypt and vice versa (see Gn 11:31–32; 12:4–5; 27:43; 28:10; 29:4; Gn 24 and 29–31). It analyses their experiences, covering the span between birth and death and listens to their parental concerns about education as survival. It also follows their journeys along the margins of the deserts. It shares their community life as it takes shape in mutual solidarity, mercy and compassion.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aspects of the magnificent reference work *World Spirituality* (1985) is the attention editors have paid to the indigenous spiritualities. Five volumes of this 25 volume reference work are dedicated to this important spiritual phenomenon, examples of which can be found all over the world – in Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania and the three Americas (South, Central and North America). This attention is new. Normally people, even scholars, approach the phenomenon of spirituality from the perspective of dominant schools like the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. They do not pay attention to the indigenous spiritualities which are mostly oppressed and at the same time absorbed, by the dominant spiritual schools.

In this article I would like to explore the indigenous spirituality present in the Bible. In his study on *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion*, Albertz (1978) unpacks this field of indigenous spirituality in the Middle East by analyzing proper names, narratives and prayers. This spirituality, not created by or oriented towards the official spirituality of kings, priests and prophets, is present in books like Genesis, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Psalms. I will explore this type of indigenous spirituality in the Bible. Perhaps it can help us to understand indigenous spirituality in Africa. It may offer an adequate partner in the inter-spiritual dialogue between biblical and African spirituality.

'Indigenous' means: native born, originating or produced naturally in a country, not imported.<sup>1</sup> 'Not imported' spirituality! This hits the bull's eye. Not imported, but originating naturally in a country, like the spirituality of the Aborigines in Australia, the Native Spirituality of the Indians in North America, the Celtic Spirituality in Europe, the traditional spiritualities in Africa and so on.

Rather than the term 'indigenous', I prefer to use the word 'primordial.' Etymologically this word comes from the Latin *primus*, which means 'first' and *ordiri*, which means the original set up of a weaving pattern and therefore 'to begin.' 'Primordial' originally does not refer to things which exist from the very beginning, like the primordial soup or the primordial fireball. Originally it refers to the earliest stages of growth, the primeval stages of creation and development. In this sense one can speak, for instance, about a 'primordial awareness,' which means the unfolding of innate knowledge which arises in us by entering the inner core of existence (*liangzhi*), the spiritual exercise that brings us to the root of *Dao*, the Way (Tu Wei-ming 1988:622–625).

Another example is the following: in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* Pope Benedict XVI speaks about 'the primordial human phenomenon which is love'. At a conference just before the release of his encyclical, Benedict called love a 'primordial word, an expression of the primordial reality'. The primordially of this phenomenon is precisely the ordinary human's 'search for love' as an integral part of 'the complex fabric of human life'. The Christian school of spirituality should not destroy this primordial love; rather, it simply 'intervenes in the search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it' (Hampson 2006:4).

I understand primordial spirituality as a way to lead us to deeper understanding of such processes as birth, education, love, relationships, dwelling place and death. Primordial spirituality is a way towards the inner core of our creation and growth.

In this article we will enter the primordial spirituality of the Bible, as expressed in names, narratives and prayers. We will visit the nomadic families of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Lea and Rachel, moving around from Mesopotamia via Canaan into Egypt and vice versa (see Gn 11:31–32; 12:4–5; 27:43; 28:10; 29:4; Gn 24 and 29–31). We will share their experiences, covering the span between birth and death and listen to their parental concerns about education as survival. We will join their journeys along the margins of the deserts and share their community life as it takes shape in mutual solidarity, mercy and compassion.

## BIRTH

Proper names give us insight into the primordial spirituality of indigenous communities. This is particularly the case with biblical spirituality.

1. Etymologically deduced from *indo-* = in and *gignere* = to produce.

In the oldest biblical traditions it was the mother who cried out the name over her child (see Gn 4:1, 25; 16:11; 21:6–7; 29:30; 35:16–20; 38:1–5). She placed the child's coming-into-being under the influence of the Mighty One: He gathered the child (*Cain*), the Mighty One helped the birth process (*Eliezer*), He opened the womb (*Jephtah*), He caused the mother to give birth (*Molid*) and He gave life (*Nathan*). The mother seals the birth process with the imposition of the name which this child will read right down to its source: built by Him (*Bunah*), He forms (*Yetser*) and God is the maker (*Elpaal*). By marking her children with these names, the mother brings them into contact, from their earliest beginning, with the Mighty One who sustains their life. The Mighty One surrounds them as an aura (Maag 1980:111–144). That is precisely the reason why they call him 'mighty'.<sup>2</sup> God is the sustaining Life force, the blessing which bestows fertility: 'The Mighty One has granted me offspring' (Gn 4:1). When the childless Rachel wants a child from Jacob, he answers: 'Am I perhaps in God's place?' (Gn 30:2). The mighty One opens the womb (Gn 29:31; 30:22), but can also close it (Gn 36:2).

The father too initiates his child into this primordial relationship with God. Repeatedly we encounter the phrase 'the Mighty One of my father'. This phrase does not mean 'the Mighty One who is the strength of my father', but above all 'the Mighty One in whom I have been initiated by my father'. In the ancient song of Moses we read:

*My strength, my song, O God! He was my salvation. This is my Mighty One, him will I praise, the Mighty One of my father, him will I extol.*

(Ex 15:2)

'My Mighty One' occurs in this verse as parallel to 'the Mighty One of my father'. This means that my father has initiated me into the primordial relationship with his Creator who later becomes my Mighty One.

'My Mighty One' is intimately interwoven with the process of birth. Accordingly, in many proper names the personal relation to the Mighty One is built in: *my* Mighty One delivers from the womb (*Elishuah*); *my* Father knows (*Abuda*); *my* Father is good (*Abitob*); and *my* Brother supports (*Achishamech*). The Mighty One is intimately associated with my coming-into-being; he is *my* Mighty One:

*Yes, You drew me out of the womb, you entrusted me to my mother's breasts. On your lap I was stretched out from birth, from my mother's womb you have been my Mighty One.*

(Ps 22:10–11)

My Mighty One, like a midwife, brings me out of the womb. She puts me safely by my mother's breasts. On her knee I was born:

*You have been my security from the time of my birth; on You I have relied from the womb, from the time I was in my mother's womb You have been my helper.*

(Ps 71:5–6)

My mighty One has brought me from my mother's womb into an unprotected world. From now on She herself is like a mother's womb around me. My Mighty One is the Strength of my life, my vitality, as near to me as my heartbeat, my breathing.

It is important to see the primordial relationship with the Creator, into which the mother and the father initiate their child, as a primordial process, to be developed by the child. This we can see in a primordial prayer like Psalm 139. In a very ancient fragment of this Psalm we notice the process (cf. Westermann 1984:26, 36, 125, 204):

*Yes, you acquired my kidneys, wove me together in my mother's belly. I want to thank you, because I am awesomely exceptional – peculiar are your makings and my soul feels it extremely! My strength was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret,*

<sup>2</sup>:*El* (variants: *Elohim*, *Eloha*, *Elah*) goes back to the root *wl* or *il*, having as its basic meaning: power, might, strength. The same root *wl* or *il* also underlies the words for 'tribe' and 'tribal leader'.

*embroidered in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw me – still a ball of yarn; in your story were written all the days, formed before even one of them was there.*

(Ps 139:13–16)

This prayer follows the lines of the primordial growth by going back to an ever deeper past. First the kidneys are mentioned, brought together in my mother's belly. Then going back, my hidden strength has been made in secret, but not hidden from him, for he embroidered me in the depths of the earth. There I was seen – still a ball of yarn – by my creator, written in his story and formed in his hands, before even one day was there.

And in the midst of this going back we notice a breakthrough of awareness: 'My soul feels it extremely' – primordial awareness *par excellence*.

## DEATH

To understand the primordial spirituality of death we will read the story of Sarah's death and burial. The story of the end of Sarah's life is told as follows: 'Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years, this was the length of Sarah's life. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is Hebron) in the land of Canaan' (Gn 23:1–2). Dying is viewed as the completion of years ('sated with life', Gn 35:29). Life is 'the fulfilment of days' (2 Sm 7:12; Ex 23:26).

Dying is letting go of one's life (Gn 25:8; 35:29), 'laying down to sleep with the ancestors' (Gn 47:30; 49:29, 33), being 'gathered to his or her relatives' (Gn 25:8; 17; 35:29). The gathering place of the dead is the underworld. As a result, people spoke of the gates of death (Ps 9:14; 107:18; Pr 7:27). They went down into the depths of the earth (see Ps 49). But even more primordial than descending to the underworld is the union with the dust of the earth: 'You are dust and to dust you shall return' (Gn 3:19). This return to the dust is the lot of all humans (Nm 16:29). 'You turn humankind back to dust and say: Turn back, you children of the Earthling!' (Ps 90:3; see Ps 49:14). The dead are again dust – that means they are again completely in the hand of God, as they were 'before even one of our days was formed'. Death reveals our unconditional dependence on God.

After the death of Sarah 'Abraham came to lament over Sarah and to weep for her' (Gn 23:2). Abraham entered the tent where Sarah stayed and performed the lament for the dead which had its original setting in the family (Westermann 1983:456) and is described by two verbs: to lament and to weep over. The lament is a ritual in which effusive expression is given to one's grief. The ritual consisted in beating one's breast (Is 32:12) and uttering brief cries: 'Alas! Alas!' (1 Kg 13:30; Jr 34:5). The lament is accompanied by weeping; the mourners shed tears of sorrow. The lament and the weeping were part of a complex of rituals of self-abasement: fasting, rending one's clothes, going about in sackcloth, shaving oneself and throwing dust on one's head. People removed from their bodies all elements of human splendour (clothing, hair), reduced the vitalities of life (weeping, fasting) and approached the dust of death (lying down on the ground; sprinkling dust and ashes on their heads) in order to become one with the lamented dead through these rituals. The lament internalises grief by bodily admitting death into one's own life. But the primordial dynamic of this internalisation goes deeper. Grief is aimed at making space for new life:

*Often mourning is emphasized so much that no hope seems to be in sight (e.g. Jer 4:28; 14:2; Lam 1:4; 2:8; Jl 1:9ff.); but in many passages it is obvious that behind the mourning lies the silent expectation that a change will follow observance of the mourning customs (Num 14:39 – in vain, to be sure; Ezr 10:6; Neh 1:4; Est 4:3; and 1 Sam 15:35; 16:1 are also to be understood on the basis of this concept).*

(Westermann 1984:456)

This change is expressed in the biblical word 'consolation' (*macham*). Consolation or comfort really influences the situation. In the case of an irreversible event like death, 'comfort' liberates

a person from his or her affective preoccupation. It brings one's mind into a new relation with reality. 'To be consoled' is to experience 'the restoration of inward equilibrium' (Simian-Yofre 1998:340–355).

After one's inner life has been unsettled by death, it is restructured by the mourning ritual. That is consolation or comfort. After he had grieved over Sarah, weeping and lamenting, 'Abraham rose up from the face of his dead' (Gn 23:3). Rising up 'from the face of the dead' is a dialogic occurrence: Abraham permits his beloved dead to depart into the land of the dead and he himself returns to the land of the living. The dead person and the surviving person release each other from the intimacy of the *vis-à-vis* relationship which is characteristic for primordial spirituality and specifically for marriage spirituality. We are told three times that Abraham and his dead removed themselves from each other's face: 'Abraham rose from the face of the dead [...], from the face of the dead [...], so that I may bury my dead out of my face' (Gn 23:3, 4, 8). This farewell ritual makes visible the fact that death is an event which touches the depths of intimacy.

After purchasing a burial place in the field of Machpela in Hebron (Gn 23:4–18), he buried his wife Sarah (Gn 23:19). The words 'to bury' and 'burial place' serve as key words in this chapter (12 times). Solemnly with loud lamentation, the dead woman was carried to her grave. Relatives, friends and acquaintances accompanied the dead as they performed the rituals of self-abasement – striking their breasts, sprinkling dust on their heads (Koch 1989:1153). To bury a person is to bring a person to her grave, an event accomplished in the circle of the family. This act is performed at the burial place, also called one's 'eternal home' (Ec 12:5; cf. Ps 49:11). Being buried meant to come home, to be gathered to one's ancestors (Gn 25:8, 17; 35:29), to be gathered to one's place of origin (Koch 1989:1151). A burial was primarily a return to the community of origin. Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob were also to be buried in Sarah's grave (Gn 49:30 ff; 50:13).

## LEARNING: FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Between birth and death life unfolds its course. Genealogically speaking, this is the life span of one generation. But genealogies tell also how, despite the vulnerable transitions, life was passed on from generation to generation. Central here is the parents' concern that their children would survive. The spirituality of upbringing was a spirituality of survival. This remains the case when nomadic life passes over into the settled life of agriculture. As we listen to the proverbs – which were primarily passed down within the family communities (Höver-Johag 1997:486–495; Morgan 1981:30–40; Von Rad 1972:15–23) – we are struck by the deep concern with which parents instil into their children the belief that they should build up their family and not break it down by quarrelling, adultery and laziness. More than 380 proverbs evince the direct impact of the parents' will upon the will of the children. Three examples will illustrate this:

*Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching.*

(Pr 1:8)

*Hear, my child, and absorb my words, that the years of your life may be many.*

(Pr 4:10)

*My child, be attentive to my wisdom, incline your ear to my insight.*

(Pr 5:1)

Winding through the book of Proverbs are hundreds of appeals, questions, invitations, admonitions, warnings, commandments, prohibitions, motivations and exhortations (Crenshaw 1981:38; Liedke & Petersen 1997:1415–1422; Von Rad 1972:15–23, 74–96). The persuasive language is sustained by concern for one's descendants (Crenshaw 1981:38; Von Rad 1972:40–41). The

parents try to make their children strong in preparation for the future, so that they may survive. Those who listen to the hundreds of proverbs with which children in ancient Israel were raised, become familiar with the most important problem areas into which families initiated each new generation.

The proverbs which concern the *economic* sphere score high (about a third of the total number of proverbs). The children have to learn to take care of their family (e.g. Pr 11:29; 12:17), their fields (e.g. Pr 12:11; 13:33), their cattle (Pr 12:10; 14:2; 27:23–27) and the personnel (Pr 29:19–21). The family is ruined by laziness (e.g. Pr 6:6:11; 10:4–5; 26:13–16), addiction to drink (e.g. Pr 20:1; 23:20–21), despondency (e.g. Pr 12:25; 13:12, 19) and dishonesty (e.g. Pr 14:5, 25; 17:8; 15, 23).

The second problem area concerns *relationships* (similarly about a third of them): no slander and backbiting (e.g. Pr 11:13; 18:19), no pride and mockery (Pr 6:17; 14:20–21). Quarrelling especially must be avoided like the plague: 'To start strife is like cutting a dam, so stop before the quarrel bursts out' (e.g. Pr 17:14; see 6:12–15; 10:12–14).

The third area concerns *marriage* (almost 20 per cent). A solid relationship with the wife of your youth is the foundation of the family: 'House and health are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from God' (Pr 19:14). The wife is the foundation of the family (cf. Pr 11:16, 22; 12:4; 18:22; 30:16, 19). Fornication rots the foundation of the house (Pr 2:18; 6:26; 7:24–27). 'He who loves wisdom brings joy to his father, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth' (Pr 29:3).

The final area of upbringing concerns a person's *community duties* (more than 10 per cent of the proverbs). Young people must gain insight into the well-being of the broader community. They must be truthful witnesses (e.g. Pr 14:5, 25; 17:8, 15, 23); put up security for the weak; not bear false witness (Pr 6:19); nor allow themselves to indulge in wrath and blackmail (e.g. Pr 11:15; 14:30; 15:18, 28; 17:18; 20:16). They must keep far away from crime: theft (Pr 29:24) and criminal assault (e.g. Pr 1:10–19; 4:14–19).

What might be the primordial dynamic of education? If I understand the proverbs well, the primordial dynamic of learning is aimed at 'the good' (*tov*). The good is a mixture of virtue, which consists in safety (Pr 1:33; 2:7–9, 21; 3:23–26); prosperity (e.g. Pr 3:13–18; 8:18, 21); and peace (Pr 3:17; cf. Von Rad 1972:62–65). The good is life itself (e.g. Pr 3:2, 16, 22; 4:10, 13, 20), a thriving tree, located by a spring, bearing abundant fruit (Pr 3:18; 11:30; 15:4, 24).

The atmosphere of the good is appropriated by an attitude of awe and fear (Ps 34:9): an obedient and tactful feeling for God's creation; no defamation, no lying, no collaboration with injustice; promoting the good, pursuing peace and mutual respect (Ps 34:12–15). Awe and fear are the principles of wisdom (Pr 1:7; 4:7; 8:22; 9:10; cf. Von Rad 1972:62). Wisdom initiates the new generation into the primordial unfolding of the good: God. God is the soul and sculptor of the good. When a youthful person stands in awe of good, that person stands in awe of God (Ps 34:9–15). Awe teaches a person to read life at the level of 'the good' in the light of God: 'The experiences of the world were for Israel always divine experiences as well and the experiences of God were for her experiences of the world' (Von Rad 1972:62). God is the centre of creation, the origin of good, the father of wisdom, the soul of the house, the source of fertility, the giver of the life-partner, decision in battle, the helper before the court. Awe leads us into the awesome reality of God (Pr 14:27; 15:33; 22:4; Eccl 3:14; cf. Von Rad 1972:190–195).

## MIGRATORY LIFE

Having considered the generational level, it is now necessary to reflect on the migratory life of the nomadic communities in the Middle East. If a person reads through the Genesis stories in a single sitting, she discovers how often people pulled up stakes and left a given area: Abraham moved away from Ur of the

Chaldeans (Gn 11:31), from Haran (Gn 12:4–5), from Shechem (Gn 12:8), from Canaan (Gn 12:10), from Egypt (Gn 13:1) and so forth (Gn 13:3; 20:1). In fact 'he journeyed from one stopping place to the next' (Gn 13:1–3). The same is true of Isaac and Jacob (Gn 26:17–23; 28:10; 29:10; 31:22; 32:1; 32:9; 42:2–3; 46:1). The reason for this nomadic lifestyle is an economic one.

The nomadic life depends on a small stock of sheep and goats. For the maintenance of this small stock, good grazing is indispensable. In the dry season such grazing grounds can be found on the margins of fruitful agricultural land. In the rainy season nomads migrate deep into the steppe. This constant relocation is what defines the life of nomads.

The life of nomads finds its material centre in the tent (*'ohel*; Jenni 1997:232–236; cf. Koch 1973:128–141): several strips composed of sheepskins are held by a wooden pole in the centre and extended on the sides by cords and pins. The entrance was screened off by a curtain (Gn 18:9–10). When the nomads moved to new grazing ground they folded their tent to pitch it elsewhere. The tent is literally their way of life.

A very important moment in the life of the nomads was the moment they left the grazing grounds in the desert to return to cultivated land, at the start of the dry season. This moment of departure was marked by the transition ritual *pesach*: people stood ready to leave, 'loins girded, sandals on their feet and staff in hand' (Ex 12:11; cf. 33, 39), performed the blood rite (Ex 12:7; cf. 22) and ate the meal (Ex 12:8–9). Eating the meat served to give people strength for the journey. The blood rite was performed to protect the inhabitants of the tent from the destroyer (*maschchith*; de Vaux 1978:367). In these departures God took the initiative (Gn 12:1) and promised assistance to his faithful: 'I will be with you (*'ehye*) and keep you wherever you go and bring you back to this land; no, I will not leave you' (Gn 28:15; cf. 20; Gn 15:7; cf. 24:7; 26:3; 31:13–18; 35:1; 46:1–7; 48:15, 21). Here we hear already the Name later revealed to Moses: 'I am with you, yes I am with you' (*'ehye 'asher 'ehye*; Ex 3:14). With this name on their lips the Israelites would leave Egypt, the house of slavery.

When nomads entered new grazing grounds, they performed a ritual of arrival, which can be described as follows: Abraham pitched his tent, set up a stone as altar and called out the name JHWH (Gn 12:8; also see 13:4; 21:33; 26:25). This description contains three moments:

1. The tent is pitched. By this action the community makes itself present: the family now 'dwells' here. Entering the centre of the tent, the members of the community become identifiable: their faces become visible to each other.
2. A stone for sacrifice (*mizbach*) is erected and a sacrificial animal (*zebach*) is slaughtered. By jointly eating the animal in the presence of the Mighty One, the participants strengthen communion with one another as well as communion with the Mighty One.
3. They call on the Mighty One with the name befitting their arrival: 'Be present here! Protect this dwelling place. Drive out the forces which threaten life'. This is the original meaning of the Name YHWH: 'May He be present. May He let his face shine upon us. May He assert his power here.'<sup>3</sup> With this name on their lips the Israelites entered the new grazing grounds in Canaan.

## COMMUNITY

Life in the generational context of an extended family and within the framework of the tent as the permanent centre of a migratory lifestyle, calls for a close-knit community. It is for that reason that in the family stories of Genesis we hear much about mutual relationships between man and woman, parents and children, brothers and sisters.

3. HWH is the 3rd person singular imperfect of the verb *hayah* which means 'being there, making one's present felt'. See Waaïjman (1984:35–47).

It was in order to gain deeper insight into the primordial depth of these mutual relationships that the nomadic families performed their community rituals. For instance, there were rituals of greeting, such as life affirming gestures *vis-à-vis* another person (Gn 27:29; 33:11); or the ritual of eating the meal: an event in which community comes to expression. We note this when guests are received (Gn 18:6–8; 19:3; 24:33, 54) and when agreements are made between families (Gn 31:44–54). Then there is the ritual of telling stories: affording insight into the migratory areas, familiarising people with the genealogy of the family and initiating the young into God-consciousness. The field of tension between conflict and reconciliation constitutes one of the most important narrative structures. The entire story of Jacob and Esau, for example, is organised around that field of tension (Gn 27:33). Within this complex narrative as a whole, the quarrel between Laban and Jacob (Gn 29–31) is played out. And within that story there is the confrontation between Leah and Rachel (Gn 29:29–30:24). All these tensions call for reconciliation: a kiss (Gn 33:4–5) or a process of reconciliation (Gn 31:48–54).

The ritualisation of community both expresses and internalises the primordial spirituality of being born together with other human beings. We will sketch two paradigms of community life in more detail: marriage and compassion.

## MUTUAL SOLIDARITY IN MARRIAGE

In *Genesis* we are told twice about the creation of man (Gn 1:26–28 and 2:4–25). In the first account the climax of all the work is the creation of human beings: 'and the Mighty One created the Earthling as his reflection, as the reflection of the Mighty One created he them, male and female created he them' (Gn 1:27). The husband-wife relationship is the embodiment of the God-human relationship established in creation. Husband and wife, in their *vis-à-vis* relationship, are the adumbration of the *vis-à-vis* which God creatively calls humans. This *vis-à-vis* stands paradigmatically for all those other communal forms: the relationships between parents and children as well as between brothers and sisters. All these forms represent the fundamental form of our humanity before God. Human beings are created in the image of God-and-man as a communal being: 'as humans with humans' (Westermann 1974:229 ff).

In the second creation story (Gn 2:4–25) it takes a long time before the Earthling becomes male-and-female. A garden already existed; animals were already there; all these animals had already received their names (Gn 2:18–20). But Adam is still alone. There was still no 'help which fit him' (Gn 2:18–20).<sup>4</sup> In this translation Adam is interpreted as the fundamental form the woman has to 'fit'. It is however a question whether the Hebrew word *neqed* has been correctly understood in this translation. Buber translates: 'I want to make for him a help, a counterpart'. In Buber's translation Eve becomes Adam's partner. But we have to take still one more step: 'Together with the mutual help, there is mutual correspondence, the understanding in word and answer as well as in silence, which builds up life in common' (Westermann 1974:227). Eve is someone who interprets Adam. In Eve Adam has a hermeneutical counterpart: someone who draws attention to him and reads him. Indeed, this 'one' is the one before him who can help him arrive at the deepest level of self-understanding. At this point the creation of the Earthling as a *vis-à-vis* is completed (Westermann 1974:232). The primordial power of love between husband and wife transforms them into a single personal love-community (Westermann 1974:234). In this community a man and a woman open up to each other unhindered: 'And the Earthling and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed' (Gn 2:25). The nakedness of the face to face interprets the primordial immediacy through which a man and a woman discover each other (Gn 4:1–25; cf. Westermann 1974:234).

4. The majority of the exegetes agree that in reference to 'help' we must not primarily think of help in working or help in begetting offspring but assistance in a general sense. See Westermann (1974:227).

## MERCY AND COMPASSION

Every community is vulnerable: someone becomes ill; someone is marginalized or excluded; a wife loses her husband, a child his parents; someone has been mentally abused, sexually molested; or drought or floods have taken their toll. In all these situations routine falls short; something special is called for: mutual solidarity, mercy and compassion.<sup>5</sup>

Mercy is *spontaneous kindness*, not restricted to certain relations or specific patterns. It functions between husband and wife (Gn 20:13), between friends (1 Sm 20:8), between host and guest (Gn 19:9), between family members (Gn 47:29), between kinsmen (1 Sm 15:6), etcetera. It can well up between people everywhere: in a friendly gesture, a smile, a conciliatory word, a helping hand, a generous welcome, an attentive ear. Mercy means abundance: good measure, pressed down, running over. Mercy is prepared to do favours. Abraham, afraid he will be murdered by lustful men who want to take Sarah as wife, asks her to do him a favour: 'Do me a favour: at every place to which we come, say of me, he is my brother' (Gn 20:13). Jacob asked Joseph his son for the favour of a good burial (Gn 47:29). Favour forgets itself in reaching out to the other. A mother gives her child 'a direction in the spirit of kindness' (Pr 31:26), which is to say: she hopes with all her heart that her child may find happiness. Mercy is giving love, welling up spontaneously in the heart and streaming out abundance.

Compassion is *tenderness, set in motion by the other*. A mother is moved to tenderness by her child (Is 49:15); a father is inwardly moved to tenderness toward his son (Ps 103:13). A person would have to be very hard 'not to be moved to tenderness toward the fruit of the womb, and not pity the children' (Is 13:18). When the sons of Jacob appeared with their youngest brother Benjamin before their brother Joseph, Joseph could no longer control his tears:

*With that, Joseph hurried out, for his tender heart burned for his brother Benjamin and he looked for a place to weep. So he went in another room and wept.*

(Gn 43:30)

This attack of tenderness touched him at the source of his tears; this is where he 'burned' with emotion at seeing Benjamin. The tenderness triggered the inmost, the womb (see Is 63:15). To Hebrew ears, this is self-evident, for in *rechemim* (visceral tenderness) the word womb (*rechem*) is implied.<sup>6</sup>

Once the tenderness has been unleashed it can no longer be stopped. Joseph could no longer control his tears. All the grief that had for so long been held back now flowed outward without restraint. Tenderness is sustained by the basic feeling that the other belongs to the human community. On account of this deep sense of connectedness, it touches a person immediately when a child weeps, an orphan cries out for help, or a widow begs for assistance. Their weakness cuts us to the heart, for they, like us, belong to the same community.

Mercy and compassion go hand in hand (Dn 1:9; Hs 2:21; Is 63:7; Jr 16:5; Lm 3:22; Ps 25:6; 40:12; 51:3; 69:17; 103:4; 106:45-46; Zch 7:9). Mercy springs from the spontaneous will to do good; compassion is triggered by the need of the other. Mercy shows itself in the sovereign will which prompts the person to give from within; tenderness is the divine weakness of our heart: we cannot restrain ourselves. Both mercy and compassion are marked by abundance, the abundance of a blossoming dogwood tree in the spring.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that primordial spirituality should be understood as a programme of internalising indigenous realities.

5.Cf. Stoebe (1997); Zobel (1986:44-64); also Stoebe (1997:1225-1230); Simian-Yofre & Dahmen (1993:460-477).

6.To Stoebe the etymological connection is self-evident; cf. Stoebe (1997:1226). To Kronholm (1993:477-478) this only partly explains its meaning. Aside from the etymology, however, the connotative proximity between the two terms resulting from a high level of assonance is undisputed, certainly in poetic texts.

It is not enough to have indigenous stories, prayers or names. We have to deepen these stories, to enter into these prayers and to understand these proper names. We have to transform indigenous spirituality into primordial spirituality, a process of internalisation which brings us into deeper contact with our createdness. The primordial spirituality in the Bible may help to explore this area.

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