

Spiritual Capital

Presentation by Dr Michael O’Sullivan, SJ, 9 Nov 2021¹

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3D_xISVs

The notion of spirituality and spiritual capital was not in vogue when Karl Marx (1818-83) wrote *Das Kapital*.² But by arguing that Christianity was a religion that justified the privileges of the ruling class and reconciled the ruled classes to their fate it could be said that Christianity, for him, was a negative form of spiritual capital. However, those of us who use the category spiritual capital today, be they secular, or religious in terms of their worldview, have in mind, not the preservation of the established order, but its transformation.

For example, in an article in *The Tablet* (25 May 2013), Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, was quoted as saying that Europe needs a “spiritual key currency besides the euro”. Koch was recognizing, it seems to me, that there can be a positive form of spiritual capital, a form providing resources to draw from for the sake of transforming the status quo in favour of the common good. The question then is how to conceive a meaning for spiritual capital which can arise from and contribute to a commitment to transform an unjust or oppressive status quo.

As a way of responding to Koch’s call, I will propose three ways of conceiving spiritual capital as a positive grounding and transformative resource and will call them SC1, SC2, and SC3. My response is not only to Koch, but also to the state of our world in the wake, for example, of the global financial collapse in 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ecological disaster that threatens the

¹ The first in a series of presentations about Spiritual Capital by different international speakers, organised by the Spiritual Capital and Moral Leadership Institute, which is based in Madrid and Washington.

² *Capital* in English.

future of planet earth. These realities all show the need to ground our relationships and activities with each other in ways that go well beyond agreement about a common economic currency in the countries of the European Union, and the recapitalising of the banks with financial capital which happened in my country, Ireland, and elsewhere, after the global economic collapse in 2008.

Spiritual Capital 1 (SC1) – An asset of transformative possibility for the sake of spiritual purposes

The notion of spiritual capital is part of a new theory called 4Capital Theory.³ The four capitals are material, intellectual, social and spiritual capitals and they need to be taken into account in measuring a society's wellbeing and in working for social transformation. Material capital refers to funds, properties, and other physical resources like artefacts and symbols; intellectual capital refers to knowledge, skills, and abilities; and social capital refers to relationships, networks, and good reputation. Spiritual capital, however, is a newer concept and I conceive it as follows.

Spiritual capital is not in my view to be regarded as a set of resources that exist in a separate sphere, so to speak, from other resources like material, intellectual, and social resources, which is how it is conceived in 4Capital Theory. I conceive it instead as first of all an asset of transformative possibility for the sake of spiritual purposes to which everything may be amenable (SC1). This transformative possibility is not intrinsic to these diverse resources, but is added to them, so to speak, when they are viewed and utilised in the context of serving spiritual purposes or outcomes. Material resources, for example, on this view,

³ See "The 4Capital Centre," <http://www.researchmethods.org/4capital.htm> (accessed November 9, 2011; November 5, 2014).

become spiritual capital when they can be utilised for spiritual purposes: e.g., the material resource of Church property in Chile during the military dictatorship of General Pinochet (1973-89) was sometimes used to protect people on the grounds that protecting them was understood as a way to serve the spiritual purpose of giving expression to God's universal saving love and its mediation through a preferential option for the economically poor.⁴ While it can be said that the material property of Churches is religious property, as Chris Baker, I believe, would hold, any property, including, therefore, religious material property, becomes spiritual capital when it serves spiritual purposes which can either be religious or secular.

When I worked in Chile, for example, the local people put a sign up over the entrance to the chapel which said 'human dignity now'. The concept of human dignity can be understood in religious or secular terms. Some of those who went to the services and meetings in the chapel were committed Christians and understood what was written above the door in terms of people being made in the image of God, while others who went to the chapel were communists without religious convictions, but who felt valued by the Catholic Church because of its public stance against the violation of human rights by the Pinochet dictatorship.

Intellectual resources like books and philosophical concepts of *any* kind – not just so-called spiritual books and concepts – become spiritual capital when they are read in terms of learning if they can serve human or planetary wellbeing, and are discovered to have effects that lift the human spirit and promote self-transcendence towards beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and

⁴ I worked as a pastor with economically poor people in Chile during the military dictatorship headed by General Pinochet. This reading of the relationship between universal salvation and the preferential option for the economically poor was developed by liberation theology but finds expression already in the documents of the Second General Council of the Latin American Catholic Bishops at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.

love; social resources like relationships and networks become spiritual capital when they lead people to live in terms of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love as ultimate dimensions of reality that have been differentiated in compact human experience over time. For Christians, these dimensions of reality are signifiers of God's beauty, truth, goodness, and love. Everything in other words can become spiritual capital depending on how it is viewed and utilized, and its meaning as spiritual capital can be either secular or religious depending on the worldview of those for whom it becomes spiritual capital.

Spiritual Capital 2 (SC 2) – Lived experiences regarding the mystery of goodness at the heart of life that are foundational and enduring in personal or collective living

By SC2 I mean spiritual capital, not as material, intellectual, and social resources, etc. that have potential, because of how they are viewed and utilised, to serve and spread beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love as ultimate dimensions of reality – which for the Christian means God's beauty, truth, goodness and love (for example, the Bible says *God* is love, and that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life) - but as the kind of lived experiences that can ground the journey of people's lives because they develop the conviction in them that beauty, truth, goodness, and love are at the heart of the mystery of existence and provide them with a treasure of gratitude and self-giving to improve human and planetary wellbeing. I will give a few examples of the kinds of experiences I have in mind here.

My Story

When my brother, sister and I were small children my father on arriving home in the evenings would come and say goodnight to us. On one of those nights, when I was aged 5/6, he asked us, who were very close in age, had we said our

night prayers, and I, the eldest, answered that I had a toothache. Given the culture of the time my father might have responded, 'but Michael we are talking here about praying to God and could you not do that even with a toothache'. Instead, he replied that I did not have to say my prayers then as God would understand how I was feeling. Utterly unexpectedly, his words immediately impacted in me in a way that led to a deep, warm, peaceful experience. I experienced myself in my embodied consciousness being reassured, being cared for; I experienced that my pain mattered, that I mattered – to God. I experienced and understood that God was a kind God, and that this profound realization was being gifted to me at a profound level in myself and from beyond myself.

I experienced what today I would say was a gifted being raised in my humanity to the level of a qualitative self-presence where I was enabled to experience into embodied depth what St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, calls, spiritual consolation. Spiritual consolation, for Ignatius, is the experience of an increase in faith in God, hope and love in our lives. This gifted experience of spiritual consolation was mediated by the interaction between my relationship with my father, his outer words, and my inner sensibility.

Reflecting on what happened that evening in later life has enabled me to identify that this experience of spiritual consolation regarding the reality of God as a God of kindness, compassion, care and understanding was so powerfully transformative in my subjectivity that it became a foundational criterion for me in how to be an authentic human being. Whatever was in line with that experience could be trusted, and whatever contradicted that experience had to be rejected or opposed.

For example, my decision to go to Chile in the early 1980s to tackle the brutal military dictatorship of General Pinochet, who claimed to be a loyal Catholic, was influenced by my desire to mediate the kind God of my childhood into the Chile situation for the sake of its transformation.

Tony De Mello Story

The late and internationally renowned spirituality presenter and writer from India, Fr Tony de Mello, SJ, told a story which I am going to adapt a little.⁵ There was a woman who lived simply and wandered from place to place, who had attained enlightenment, understood that the world was her home, the sky was her roof, and God would look after her.

One day a man meets her on the road. He says to her, 'I cannot believe this, we are meeting on the road. Last night I dreamt that the Lord said to me you will meet this woman on the road in the morning. If she gives you the stone she has you will be the richest person in the world. Will you give me the stone,' he asks her? The woman rummaged in her small bag and took out the stone: it was a beautiful and large diamond. She said to the man, 'of course I will give it to you. I found it in the forest; you are welcome to it'.

The woman went off and sat under a tree. The man with the diamond went away and sat under a different tree overjoyed with what he now had. He sat there until the evening thinking about everything and all that he could do because of the diamond. But then, instead of going home, he went and found the woman sitting in the distance and said to her: 'could you give me the riches that make it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily? The kind of wealth that can do that is worth so much more than this precious diamond. It is

⁵ See Anthony De Mello, *Rediscovering Life: Awaken to Reality* (NY: Image Books, 2012), 106-7; <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=23110>

the real wealth that I need to live my life well'. The diamond, obviously, was material capital, but the capacity to give it away was spiritual capital, and the man's experience of this capacity in the woman transformed him and his desires and became a source of spiritual capital for his life.

Thomas Berry's Story

Thomas Berry was a great prophet of ecological concern who died in 2009. Nine years before he died, he wrote about how an experience in childhood was foundational in dedicating his life to forwarding ecological concern.

At the age of 11 he discovered a new meadow on the outskirts of the town to which his family had just moved. 'The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass,' he said. 'A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.' It was not only the lilies, he said. 'It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in the clear sky...This early experience has remained with me ever since as the basic determinant of my sense of reality and values. Whatever fosters this meadow is good. What does harm to this meadow is not good.' By extension, he said, 'a good economic or political, or educational system is one that would preserve that meadow and a good religion would reveal the deeper experience of that meadow and how it came into being.' Berry reflected, 'It was a wonder world that I have carried in my unconscious and that has evolved all my thinking'.⁶ His experience in the meadow became the criterion for him of how to relate to reality and of the need to develop the ecological imperative. It was an experience of what I am calling spiritual capital.

⁶ See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, NY: Bell Tower, 2000, 1st paperback edition, and <http://www.presentationsistersunion.org/spirituality/default.cfm?loadref=297>

WW2 and EU

It is also the case, of course, that foundational experiences that become spiritual capital can arise from negative experience also, and also that the experience that arises at such times in individuals can be influenced by or arise because of the participation of the individuals in a group experience. For example, the collective experience of WW2 is an example of how a shared experience of terrible suffering, death, and destruction by people across countries gave way to the spiritual capital that emerged from the ashes and gave rise to the European Union.

Spiritual Capital 3 (SC 3) – The self-presence of authenticity: an inherent, foundational, and methodological form of self-presence

By SC3 I mean spiritual capital, not as diverse resources with a potential to serve spiritual purposes either of a religious or secular kind (SC1), or as depth-level experiences that have a spiritual character because of the way they move people to live in the service of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love, (SC2), but as a foundational self-presence that I call authenticity and that underpins SC1 and SC2. In order to appreciate what I mean by authentic self-presence, let us engage in an experiment with our imaginations.

Imagination-Experiment

Imagine that each of us is doing some quiet reading in a public park when suddenly we hear what sounds like a cry for help. If we are reflective about experiencing that cry we realize that experiencing the cry means our interiority is inherently relational in how it is constituted in the sense that it is naturally open to the wider world. This also means that how we receive the cry, and how we respond to it, will reflect our existing quality of self-presence which is

foundational for how we relate to ourselves and the wider world. This quality of self-presence is also open to higher order transformation under the impact of lived experience.

So what do we do in relation to our particular *experiencing* of the cry? Is our way of being present to our reflexive and relational self of a kind that we ignore the cry, or is it of a quality that moves us to attend more acutely to the cry? If the latter, do we find ourselves moved beyond the experience of hearing the cry to a higher form of self-presence that enables us, not only to attend to the data that is the cry, but also to seek an *understanding* of it by asking questions like, what does the sound I have heard mean? Does it mean that someone is in trouble, or does it, for example, mean that there might be a drama group nearby who are practicing their roles? Given that both are possible, do we find ourselves being pushed or pulled to move on to a higher level again in ourselves where we are engaged in not only understanding, but also *judging* between different possible understandings. How do I know which understanding of the situation is correct? This is a question rooted in a self-presence that relates to reality out of a desire for truth. If we find that further question surfacing within us, does it not mean that there is within us a dynamism by which we can move from experience to understanding and beyond understanding to judgment and that the criterion to guide such movement is inherent in it. Staying with our practice of self-attention to our lived experience in the park do we not find that the dynamism at work in us does not leave us content with coming to know what is happening, but continues to prod us until we *decide* to act consistently with that discovered meaning of the cry. For example, if we discover that someone really is in trouble there arises from the interior ground of our subjective experiencing, interpreting, judging, and deciding a desire or an imperative that we do something about that situation by,

for example, calling the police, or seeking the help of others who are also in the park.

Our participation, therefore, in the illustrative imagination-experiment enables us to affirm the reality of structured operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding in common human and, therefore, gender-neutral, knowing and choosing. It discloses that these operations are permeated by a dynamism that orients them toward beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love, which have been differentiated in common human experience over time and which attract the dynamism to function as it can. And it discloses that we connect with reality methodologically, not by bypassing our subjectivity, as though reality was already out there now only waiting to be looked at, but by participating *authentically* in our subjectivity.

Authenticity is a language and an experience to which everyone can relate and affiliate. It refers to a dynamic quality permeating our lived subjectivity and that guides us, foundationally and methodologically, towards contextualised beauty, truth, goodness, and love as concrete realities since these realities do not exist in the abstract but are always contextualized. It does so by enabling and empowering our imagining, attending, questioning, judging, feeling, believing, and deciding to function as they can so that we can desire, discern, and commit to historical expressions of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love as ultimate dimensions of lived experience. As we saw in the imagination experiment, the common human dynamism for authenticity is detected in the activity of experiencing as an exigent desire to attend to all relevant data; it is detected in the activity of questioning as an exigent desire to raise all the relevant questions about what is being experienced; it is detected in the activity of judging as an exigent desire to check interpretations until what

is, or is probably, true is reached; it is detected in the activity of deciding to deliberate until the good and loving emerge in consciousness.⁷

This form of foundational self-presence in the nature of a person as human, this state of lived personhood, makes it possible for him or her to view, and choose to utilise, diverse resources for spiritual purposes (SC1) and to undergo in-depth and life-lasting experiences that provide a treasure of spiritual resources in lived experience for a life of authenticity (SC2). The stories I have narrated of my own experience, of our Indian wanderer, and of Thomas Berry reveal to us a capacity in human persons to be impacted by life experience in ways that can bring them into communion with a foundation in themselves to do with ultimate depth reality. At that spiritual level of receptive, reflective, relational, responsible, and reflexive interiority, reinforced by connatural lived experience, the criterion of what is good and not good is disclosed, and the capacity to live life according to that experienced criterion takes hold of the person so that, for example, the person can be moved to go as a missionary to Chile to be in solidarity with the people there at a time when the country was ruled by a cruel military dictatorship, or is able to give away huge wealth, like the Indian wanderer, or to give one's life to the ecological imperative like Thomas Berry.

Conclusion

This state of authenticity in human subjectivity that opens us dynamically, receptively, relationally, reflectively, responsibly and reflexively, to the normative and mysterious horizon of beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness, and love when forming relationships, developing institutions, establishing traditions,

⁷ See my "Spirituality of Authentic Interiority and Option for the Economically Poor", *Vinayasadhana* (India) 5/1 (January 2014): 62-74.

making discoveries, etc. under historical conditions of existence, and that can be enhanced by life experience like those I have shared, is a foundational spiritual resource we can draw on without reserve for personal, social, ecclesial, and ecological transformation. For the Christian, but not necessarily others, the mystery engaged with through this process is the self-revealing absolute loving mystery of the beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love of the Christian God. For the Christian, fidelity to authenticity comes to be rooted in a foundational aesthetic conversion to the beauty of the lived experience of the extraordinary loving goodness of God. The study of spiritual capital on this view, in educational organisations and institutions, for example, would give a certain priority to developing the authentic subjectivity of faculty and students as an enriching spiritual key currency for Europe and the wider world.

Questions for Breakout Groups

- 1. Do you think material, social, and intellectual capital can be perceived and utilised for spiritual purposes and in that way be regarded as having a spiritual dimension and thus serve as spiritual capital? (SC1)**
 - 2. Can in-depth experiences of the mystery of goodness at the heart of life, which can emerge from positive, or negative, experience, be regarded and serve as spiritual capital for human and planetary well-being? (SC2)**
 - 3. What makes authentic subjectivity in the human mode of being a form of foundational and methodological spiritual capital, which also underpins SC1 and SC2? (SC3).**
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