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## OVERCOMING OPPRESSION WITH SPIRITUAL STRENGTH THROUGH CHRIST

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*From history, we find too many examples of leaders attempting, and too often succeeding, in oppressing their people, instead of leading positively and encouraging each of them to optimize their individual potential, which can help build constructive and productive communities, with people living with positive outlooks on life, resulting from wholesome mental attitude. When oppressed, people often lose hope, which can lead to them becoming depressed, even to the point of being suicidal. It takes effort for people to encourage and build others up, rather than impose their own ideas on them, but it is worth the effort. People are the product of their worldview in action. There are two prominent, contrasting worldviews, namely humanistic and theistic. The critical foundation for well-being among people is their spiritual well-being, which has potential to enhance their own mental, psychological and social well-being, as well as enable them to be positive contributors to the quality of life of their community. From a theistic perspective, a personal relationship with God, through Christ, liberates a person from the tyranny that can be imposed by political and/or religious oppressors and provides wisdom, plus mental and emotional strength, through the indwelling power of Holy Spirit-God. God has the power, ability and desire to save all who acknowledge Jesus as their personal savior and make Him Lord of their life. In fact, this is the prime message that is revealed in the life-giving words of the Bible. Living in a right relationship with God provides hope and help for each person to overcome the many trials and tribulations that they face on Earth, whether that be at the end of a long, productive life, or cut short by unforeseen tragedy, such as that resulting from political and/or religious oppression.*

**Key words:** *Spiritual well-being, oppression.*

### **Introduction**

Aggressors attempt to impose their will on people, who can then become disheartened, disillusioned and depressed, even dead. History is replete with dictators and megalomaniacs who believed they had the right to impose their will on supposedly weaker people and/or situations. Obvious examples include the

Romans, but more recently Hitler, Pol Pot, Gaddafi and Idi Amin, with current world conflicts highlighting the devastation that comes from political oppression, especially of power mongers working against people of their own culture.

### **Setting the scene**

It is argued in D. Paul Schafer's book, 'Age of Culture, Revolution or Renaissance' (2008), that humanity is making a transition from an economic age to a cultural age, although not all would agree that life is so simple. Culture is concerned with worldview, values and people. In brief, there are two major worldviews – namely theistic and humanistic. Values derive from these worldviews, with revealed truth being presented in The Bible, which contrasts with relativistic, humanistic values emanating from philosophical and psychological ruminations. People are the product of their worldviews in action. Increasingly, humanity is forsaking its author's foundation, with people turning to their own wiles, with humanistic 'wisdom' forming the basis of educational, political and social endeavors, to the detriment of humankind; self-centeredness as opposed to godliness.

Current political conflicts can be traced to their origin in self-centered feelings of aggrandizement in certain political figures, leading to domination, instead of service, support and benevolence to their people with right-minded judgement from which all should benefit.

### **Purpose of the article**

This is a position paper which presents, and briefly discusses, biblical literature that expounds the firm foundation for spiritual strength in people, as the key source of sustenance for life itself, especially in the face of torment and conflict.

### **Background**

Many *opinions* are expressed in the plethora of books and papers related to 'spirituality'. For example, a recent article 'synthetically describes historical and present-day challenges in defining spirituality' (Jastrzebski, 2020). Many publications offer reviews especially in healthcare and education. A paper by Cook (2004) provides an overview of 265 associated papers and books, with the outcome being a compromised combination of humanistic, with some reflections on genuine, spirituality. A so-called 'Critical literature review' by Victor et al. (2015) would be more correctly labelled 'A comparative review', since it described, but did not clearly differentiate between, religion and spirituality. A clear distinction between genuine and post-religious spirituality was presented by Mackenzie (2015).

In accord with Mackenzie's paper and Boyle's (2018) assertion, 'the human spirit originated in the divine Spirit from which it derives', this paper will present *evidence* that Jesus Christ is THE source of human spirit becoming alive,

not just in the temporal world on Earth, but for eternity (Col 1:15-20). Hopefully, it will help curtail the proliferation of publications erroneously purporting to address 'spirituality' and call them what they really are, expressions of souliness and/or hyper emotionality, based on humanistic understanding and effort, reflecting only existential well-being.

There is little point in trying to review all related publications because it would take a very long time and still not achieve a definitive conclusion, upon which all could agree. That is because there are two competing worldviews - Theistic and atheistic (Humanistic), which form the basis of beliefs about spiritual issues. However, there can only be one truth about the source of spirituality, as there is about the origin of life.

One of these worldviews has proof of an author, God, who has revealed Himself as Jesus Christ, who not only overcame the natural world and the devil, by healing the sick, casting out demons, walking on water, multiplying loaves and fish, and much more, including raising dead people to life, but He was himself resurrected from the tomb, showing His authority over nature and death as well as providing hope for those people who believe His words of (eternal) life (Jn 14:6; Jn 17:2-3) and act in faith on them.

Humanism is a rapidly growing worldview that is based on two fundamental statements, one of which is belief in evolution; the other is lack of belief in a Creator, God. This Humanistic worldview embraces a wide range of beliefs, including many religions, which are man-made. However, evolution is nowhere near as stable a philosophy as it is made out to be. It is not scientifically verifiable, so fits in the realm of beliefs; not fact.

Humanism's other foundation statement is 'lack of belief in God' (extracted from *Humanist Manifesto III*, American Humanist Association, 2003). As difficult as it is to provide incontrovertible evidence for evolution, it is even more difficult to provide any for the lack of existence of God, as only one piece of verifiable evidence is needed to dispel or disprove lack of belief.

The alternative to Humanism, in its various forms, is to acknowledge God as the author of all things, including space, time and life. The three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam report the origin of humans as an act of Creation in which God made mankind in His image (Gen 1:27; Gen 2:7). However, God gave humans free will, which Adam and Eve exercised in the Garden of Eden, falling for the devil's temptation to 'become like God' by eating forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 3:5). That act of rebellion against God's Word led to, not only physical but also spiritual, death, which has been inherited by all humanity since that time. This temptation still exists today as revealed in belief systems which claim, and act, as if humans can save

themselves. Each person has the responsibility of choosing who will control their life.

Ephesians 2: 1-10 is the key Bible reference which clarifies the origin of spiritual life - through Jesus Christ, for all who would believe and trust that God has their best interests at heart. This shows that God's grace, rather than any good deeds or slavish response to religion, is the way to relate with God, reinforced in Ephesians 2:13,18-22.

The wide range of opinions that abound in the flood of publications relating to spirituality and well-being are exactly that: opinions and beliefs, that are founded on philosophies, not facts. From a search of literature, it appears that a definition could be found to suit almost any belief or opinion, related to 'spirituality', a term which has been so broadly used as to de-value its true nature; genuine spirituality. Such diversity of opinion makes it nearly, if not actually, impossible to compose or gain consensus for a complete, correct or unambiguous view, or to meaningfully compare the results of one research study with another. Anyway, consensual views cannot present truth, as they are, of necessity, compromises containing only the majority opinion of the amassed participants currently in any gathering.

Opinions on spirituality that can be found in the myriad of published papers and books range from 'feeling good' to 'finding God'. However, it would be important to know if there is a, single, correct description of 'spirituality', with others being erroneously misguided, or merely wishful, thinking. This situation, with its plethora of views, motivated a search to answer the question, 'What is the origin and nature of the human spirit?'

In answer to this question, a few key references will be reported in summary form.

#### **Definition/description/ nature of spirituality/SWB**

One proponent of "spirituality", Helminiak (1996), has been succoured by psychology into believing that spirit is simply a higher-order function of the mind, the latter being a concept that is not clearly defined by psychologists and psychiatrists. In contrast, Tillich (1967) had argued, 'a new understanding of the term "spirit" as a dimension of life is a theological necessity' (pp. 21-2); 'although the word "mind" cannot become a substitute for "spirit" ... it is related to perception and intention' (*ibid.*, p. 24). Thus, spirit cannot be conflated with mind; and study of spirituality goes beyond the bounds of psychology.

The New Shorter Oxford English dictionary (Brown, Ed., 1993) defines spirituality as '1 The clergy. 2 Ecclesiastical possessions or rights. 3 The quality or condition of being spiritual as opposed to material, *spec.* the study or practice of prayer, esp. as leading to union with God. 4 The fact or condition of being immaterial. 5 *Med. & Alch.* Containing pure spirit or essence'. Dictionaries only

provide a guide to meaning of words and cannot provide full coverage of their meaning.

In the developing SPIRIN Encyclopedia of Spirituality (Waaajman, 2006), Waaajman & Blommestijn (2010) presented 'Spirituality' as a basic word that has a semantic range, embracing the divine and human spirit, overarching asceticism and mysticism, integrating biblical traditions (*ruach*) with Hellenistic intuitions (*nous*), exceeding the boundaries of religion and philosophies of life. 'The core process evoked by the term "spirituality" is the dynamic relation between the divine Spirit and the human spirit'. However, Sheldrake (2013) argued that spirit (from the Greek '*pneuma*') is not opposed to physical and material, but of the flesh (Greek '*sarx*'), so 'the intended contrast is not between body and soul, but between two vastly different attitudes to life. Thus, a spiritual person (see 1 Cor 2, 14-15) was simply someone within whom the Spirit of God dwelt or who lived under the influence of the Spirit of God' (*ibid.*, p. 2). Both sets of authors trace the changing meaning attributed to spirituality over time.

According to Sheldrake (2013), from the 1970s onwards, spirituality 'countered older distinctions between a supernatural, spiritual life and our purely natural, everyday one'; it recovered a sense that "the spiritual life" was collective rather than predominantly individual in nature; integrating all aspects of human experience; re-engaged mainstream theology and crossed boundaries between different Christian traditions allowing ecumenical growth; and extended further into interfaith dialogue (Sheldrake, *ibid.* page 3). In so doing it has strayed from its foundation in the Word of God to embrace humanistic wisdom, as displayed by contemporary literature on "spirituality" which concerns the holistic - fully integrated approach to life; quest for the "sacred" (variously described as God, the numinous, or mysteries of the cosmos); frequently involving a quest for meaning and purpose for life direction; being regularly linked to the concept of "thriving" (which is akin to resilience and positive psychology).

Basically, 'the current enthusiasm for "spirituality" is nothing more than another off-shoot of consumerism' (Carrette & King, 2004).

'Academically, "spirituality" has now begun to appear in disciplines well beyond the confines of theology or religious studies such as philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences' (Waaajman, 2002). 'Overall, the spiritual quest has increasingly moved away from outer-directed authority to inner-directed experience' (Sheldrake, *ibid.* p. 5). 'Christianity is the original source of the word "spirituality", although it has now passed into other faith traditions' (Sheldrake, 1995).

A prolific contributor to discussions on spirituality, Moberg (2011) presented a paper containing 18 specific descriptions, with many other intangibles, having their own operational 'definition' of spirituality. His

presentation concluded, ‘the recent research and its interpretations do seem to reflect and confirm ancient teachings of the Judeo-Christian Bible. They support my conviction that the “something more” than merely a biological organism that is the core of human nature is the human spirit’ (p. 41).

Francis Schaeffer made a bold statement illustrated by the title of his book ‘True spirituality’ (1988), in which he reported ‘You (that is ‘believers’) are a temple, in which the Holy Spirit, God, lives (1 Cor 3:16) - genuine living communication with a personal, infinite God. Indwelling Holy Spirit is the active agent of the Son and Father God’ (*ibid*, p. 77).

***Spiritual life is a journey, not just an event.***

Spirituality is a state or condition possessed by a person when they experience spiritual birth, entering into a relationship with God, via belief, leading to salvation through Jesus Christ (Eph 2: 1-10). Spiritual life is a journey that leads on from the event of spiritual birth. If there is no movement from the point of salvation, this is tantamount to spiritual still-birth. Spiritual life can be stunted unless there is growth, which requires feeding, exercise and discarding rubbish (Php 3: 7-9). God’s Word, Holy Bible, is Holy Spirit food, which contains over 6000 promises for believers. Spiritual exercises include prayer (personal communication with God), nurturing Fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5: 22-23), and putting faith into action (Php 2: 12-13).

When God renews our heart, we need to allow it to renew our thinking, because ‘as a man thinks in his heart (at his very depth of being), so is he’ (Pr 23:7). ‘The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace’ (Rom 8:6-11). Being sensitive to God’s leading, we can stand against the temptations of the evil one (Eph 6:11) and discern good from evil.

Growth in the Spirit is a stepwise progression, as described in 2 Pet 1:3-9, from faith, through goodness and knowledge to self-control, then perseverance, godliness and mutual affection, to love, which is aptly described in 1 Cor 13. Scripture reminds us that perfect love casts out all fear (1Jn 4:18) and God is the source of love (1Jn 4:19). Spiritual life is a process, not just a product. This earthly life is a rehearsal for the heavenly life to come, when believers will be taken to be with God in glory (heaven). Spiritual life is eternal life, with God (through Christ) (1Jn 4:15).

**Living with clear focus, in times of peace or conflict.**

The Bible makes it clear that you ‘Can only serve one master; God or man’ (Lk 16:13-15), with the outcome that ‘you will be devoted to one and despise the other’ (Mt 6:24). Expressed in another way, ‘a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways’ (James 1:8). There is double jeopardy when religious leaders think

they are rulers of the people, entertaining human dominance as well as usurping God's rightful role and authority.

'Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom' (2 Cor 3:17). This freedom is not guaranteed to be free of political opposition, but it does provide peace of mind that God is in charge; 'God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions (sins)...God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.' (Eph 2: 5, 6). Once we are 'in Christ', our eternal future is secure. (Eph 1:12-13).

In contrast to spiritual freedom, religion and politics are often seen to have similar pathways and outcomes – power over the people. *Religio*, among the Romans, was not based on 'faith', but on knowledge, including, and especially, correct practice, which implied 'living by rules'. The misconception by some people that ministers of religion, and priests, are bosses, having power over the people, is cause for concern, just as it is with political dictators, usurping individual's and communities' rights to freely choose their pathways in life. Providing godly guidance is acceptable practice for religious leaders, but not dictatorial domination, which is not acceptable by anyone.

Jesus laid down *his* life and did not decimate those who stood against him, although he certainly would have been able to do so. Through his wisdom, Jesus corrected and instructed religious and political authorities, who amassed against him. He lived his all-to-brief life in exemplary service to humanity, feeding multitudes, healing sick people, raising dead people to life, casting out demons, and teaching his followers to do likewise. Even though he was the Son of God, who could have been a powerful, political adversary, Jesus walked humbly among the people (Mt 11:29).

The Bible provides clear evidence that Jesus is The way by which each person can obtain spiritual life, through a personal relationship with God (Eph 2:4-5). However, each person can also gain support to grow in their life with God, together with like-minded other people, who comprise the household of faith, the living body of Christ, The Church, of which Christ is the head. This Church is worldwide in nature. Therefore, no Christ-follower is alone in any arena of conflict. As part of the body, we have the responsibility of supporting other members of our family through prayer, words of encouragement and, where possible, with tangible political and practical support. Therein lies a predicament for some, because, in the current conflict in the Ukraine, there are Christians on either side of the battle, as there has been in previous battles, such as WWII.

Using military might to murder innocent civilians, as well as military personnel, is diametrically opposed to God's command of loving your neighbor as yourself. In accord with Mat 18:18 ('Whatever you bind on earth will be

bound in heaven’), it is essential for Christians world-wide to pray for binding the dominating spirit operating in the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine.

Unfortunately, as we live in a fallen world, where increasingly people are becoming like their own gods, living for themselves, there will continue to be wars and rumors of wars (Mt. 24: 6ff). What the Lord requires of us is ‘to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with (y)our God’ (Mic. 6:8).

### **Conclusion and prospect for the further investigation.**

There is clear conflict between a God-centred understanding as the basis for human strength through spirituality, contrasted with humanistic endeavours to be resilient, in the face of adversity. For people who are firmly in a relationship with God, through Christ, their spiritual foundation is secure; and they have support and empowerment through Holy Spirit, God, together with encouragement that their destiny (of, and in, heaven) is assured, whether their lives be long or short. In contrast, people, who are living on the basis of human endeavours, trying to be resilient in the face of adversity, are often fighting a losing battle, the consequence of which is eternal disappointment.

Ongoing research would do well to further examine the pathways and procedures to follow, and the problems to overcome, to help humanity wake up and gain a clear view of the source of spiritual life and strength available through God to overcome oppression, in any, and every, situation; to flourish, for eternity.

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## ДУХОВНА СИЛА ХРИСТА У БОРОТЬБІ З ПРИГНОБЛЕННЯМ

Джон В. Фішер

В історії ми знаходимо надто багато прикладів лідерів, які прагнуть пригнічувати свій народ і дуже часто досягають своєї мети замість того, щоб реалізовувати позитивне керівництво та захоплювати кожного громадянина розкривати власний потенціал, що допоможе побудувати конструктивні та продуктивні спільноти, де люди живуть з позитивним поглядом на життя, що є результатом здорового психологічного ставлення. Під час пригнічення люди часто втрачають надію, що може призвести до депресії і навіть до самогубства. Людям потрібні сили, щоб підтримувати та сприяти розвитку інших, не нав'язуючи їм свої власні ідеї, але це нелегко. Люди є продуктом свого світогляду в дії. Існує два яскраво виражених протилежних світогляди, а саме гуманістичний і теїстичний. Вирішальною основою благополуччя людей є їхнє духовне благополуччя, яке здатне підвищити рівень власного розумового, психологічного та соціального добробуту, а також дозволяє зробити позитивний внесок у якість життя своєї спільноти. З теїстичної точки зору особисті стосунки з Богом через Христа звільняють людину від тиранії, яка може бути нав'язана політичними та/або релігійними знобителями, і дають мудрість, а також розумову та емоційну силу через перебуваючу силу Святого Духа-Бога. Бог має силу, здатність і бажання рятувати всіх, хто визнає Ісуса своїм особистим рятівником і робить Його

*Господом свого життя. Фактично, це головна звістка, яка відкривається в животворних словах Біблії. Життя в правильних стосунках з Богом дає надію та допомагає кожній людині подолати численні випробування та страждання, з якими вона стикається на Землі чи то в кінці довгого, продуктивного життя, чи то обірваного непередбаченою трагедією, наприклад, внаслідок політичного та/або релігійного пригноблення.*

**Ключові слова:** *духовне благополуччя, пригноблення.*

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