

The Significance of Spiritual Values in the Peace Process in Colombia

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The Significance of Spiritual Values in the Peace Process in Colombia

An Interview with Peter Stirnimann, Caritas Switzerland

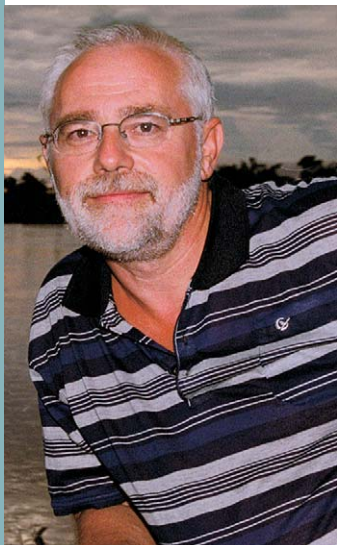


FIGURE 1 Peter Stirnimann in Murindó, Department of Antioquia, Colombia.

Susanne Wymann von Dach (MRD): Armed conflict between guerrilla forces and government troops and their paramilitary allies has been the order of the day in Colombia for 40 years. Thousands of people have been victims of this conflict, while an estimated 3 million people have become refugees in their own country. What are the primary causes of conflict?

Peter Stirnimann: Armed conflict in Colombia has political, social, and cultural causes. Leftist guerrillas took up arms because the country's power elites were not willing to share political power with other forces. Nor were they willing to share the country's wealth with its people and create social justice. In the course of time, these underlying themes were superseded partly by the issue of how this armed conflict should be resolved. In addition to this, the conflict itself became increasingly complex, owing to the participation of paramilitary groups and the involvement of all armed combatants in the illegal drug trade that financed the conflict. Another dimension is the global struggle for strategic resources such as oil, water, valuable agricultural land, minerals of all types, etc—a struggle that is played out violently in Colombia. At the moment, it is necessary to define exactly what we are talking about in Colombia. There is a complex, armed conflict as well as a growing political, social, and cultural conflict (Figure 2). More than 40 years of guerrilla warfare have not altered the country's basic social structures—in fact, the opposite is the case.

MRD: In Colombia, 54% of the population lives in mountain regions that constitute approximately one quarter of the country's surface area. Is there any connection between conflict and the fact that Colombia is a mountainous country?

PS: Armed conflict takes place primarily in marginalized, rural areas, including mountainous regions. The geography of the Andes, with their difficult accessibility, allows rebel forces to move about undiscovered, and to withdraw and entrench. This is possible even in the Amazon region. I cannot identify a specifically "mountain conflict" except perhaps for

the fact that the conflict over sources of water, or territory for growing coca or poppies for drug production, frequently occurs in the mountains.

MRD: Every government in recent decades has promised the country peace, but without lasting success to date. Why has peace been impossible so far?

PS: Concepts of peace, as understood by various governments and guerrilla forces, have always diverged greatly and continue to do so. Governments have made efforts only to get the guerrillas to surrender their arms, while failing to give consideration to real changes in the structures that are at the root of armed conflict. Moreover, Colombian governments have never really pursued sovereign peace policies. The USA, with its hegemonial interests in Latin America, is always at work behind the scenes. Furthermore, the main problem with previous peace accords was that they left important issues open and failed to address the rights of victims to the truth, to legal recourse, and to reparation. This left the losers unreconciled, and they sometimes took up arms again.

The current peace process involving paramilitary groups and the present government also fails to address existing issues. It remains unclear what will happen with 4 million ha of the country's most fertile land, which paramilitary groups appropriated illegally by forcing many people to flee and committing very brutal massacres. Because "peace processes" like this fail to deal with such fundamental issues, I believe that will not create lasting peace. We know from experience that this is not possible without legal action and reparation.

MRD: What about the people of Colombia today? Are they prepared to make a commitment to work for peace?

PS: The great majority of the people are tired of war. When it comes to resolving armed conflict, their preferences alternate between military and political processes, depending on the influence of the government in power at the time. The present Uribe government, which seeks military

and political defeat of the guerrilla forces, has support primarily from the urban, middle-class, and well-off sectors of the population. But the military resolution it has been striving for has not been achieved after 4 years of intensified warfare, and will probably not be achieved even in the next 4 years. It is the unarmed civilian population, in mountain regions as well as elsewhere, that will have to pay a high price for the military polarization that develops between the existing fronts. Despite a great deal of doubt and hopelessness, however, worthwhile initiatives that oppose the insane logic of war are being advanced by civil society.

MRD: What is the source of strength behind initiatives concerned with civil conflict transformation and refusal to give up the hope for peace? Do spiritual and religious values and convictions play a role?

PS: I have come to know Colombia as a country with a strong culture of hope and life in the midst of pain and death. Under-

lying this culture are many different forms of spirituality. When I say “spirituality” I mean fundamental experiences, values and visions—in other words, the spirit that inspires and motivates people or groups of people to take individual or collective action. This spirit may be religious, although it need not be, ie it is not necessarily linked to a concept of God or a Supreme Being. I am aware of 4 significant, fundamental types of spirituality based on my work for peace in Colombia: the spirituality of indigenous and partly Afro-Colombian communities; feminist-pacifist spirituality; liberation theology; and a spirituality rooted in human rights. These do not occur in pure forms but combine and complement one another.

MRD: What in your view are the most important elements of indigenous spirituality? Can you give concrete examples as an illustration?

PS: When I work with indigenous communities and talk with them about their problems and their plans, they usually preface

FIGURE 2 How can Catholic faith coexist with violent conflict? Tidying up after combat in San Luis, Antioquia, 1999. (Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado)



FIGURE 3 In Machuca, Antioquia, people of Afro-Colombian descent find themselves in a mixed society. They have frequently been separated from the spiritual roots that strengthen their identity. A funeral for 74 victims of an ELN guerilla attack in 1998. (Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado)



to continue defending their indigenous culture—a culture that is heavily marked by historical consciousness and a sense of community. This historical and communal element is also present among Afro-Colombians, although in a much less intense form (Figure 3).

MRD: And what is the third foundation of their spirituality?

PS: For indigenous peoples, their relationship to the Earth, *Pachamama* plays a key spiritual role. For them, the Earth is a being—a mother who nourishes, clothes, and offers healing power. For them, peace means being able to live in respectful harmony with the Earth in communal territory. Hence defense of Mother Earth is one of the foundations of their existence. They are continually under pressure from and in conflict with Western economic schemes that degrade the Earth by reducing it to a marketable, exploitable commodity—the equivalent of raping one’s mother! This Western-technocratic “development” is diametrically opposed to their approach to life and to their concept of development.

MRD: What about the 3 other spiritual approaches which you see in Colombia?

PS: I would like to continue by addressing the spiritual approach rooted in human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is acknowledged to be the result of a global reaction to two horrible world wars. Its aim was to create a peaceful world order based on law. Defenders of human rights, who live dangerously and frequently meet with death, draw strength for their difficult engagement from the firm belief that no peace is possible without law and justice.

MRD: Is this spirituality also found in grassroots organizations and among common people?

PS: To some extent. But a great deal of awareness-raising work needs to be done in this area. I recall a movement among black people in Chocó who were fighting for their land. They told me that they

their lengthy explanations with a remark such as, “Indigenous people like us, who have defended and preserved our identity against foreign invaders for more than 514 years...” This brings 2 of the 3 foundations of their spirituality into play: conscious memory of their long, collective history of oppression, and resistance, with its many victims. Their identity arises from this communal and historical consciousness. It gives them the strength to take action in present-day circumstances, and

FIGURE 4 An armed guerrilla with Christian symbols of good luck. Achí, Bolívar, 1994. (Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado)



struggled to achieve passage of Law 70 during the 1980s. This guaranteed them communal ownership of their land. Today palm oil entrepreneurs and paramilitary groups are trying to deprive them of their land. “We are fighting with the knowledge that we have the law on our side, although it makes little or no difference here,” they say. Nevertheless, awareness of having the law on one’s side strengthens people and organizations in the struggle for peace, even against those who are armed.

MRD: Colombia is a Catholic country. What role do the Catholic Church and the Christian faith play?

PS: Christian religious values are evident everywhere. The official Catholic Church has not taken a clear, uniform position on war and peace. Before going to war, guerrillas, paramilitary groups and soldiers usually pray for protection from Mother Mary or for good marksmanship in battle (Figure 4). The part of the Church that is oriented towards liberation theology focuses on peace. Its basic commitment is its engagement on behalf of the poor, since poverty is not a part of God’s law but the result of structural and social sins. In active participation to build the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace for all, both individual and social sins must be overcome.

MRD: How does this type of liberation theology work in practice?

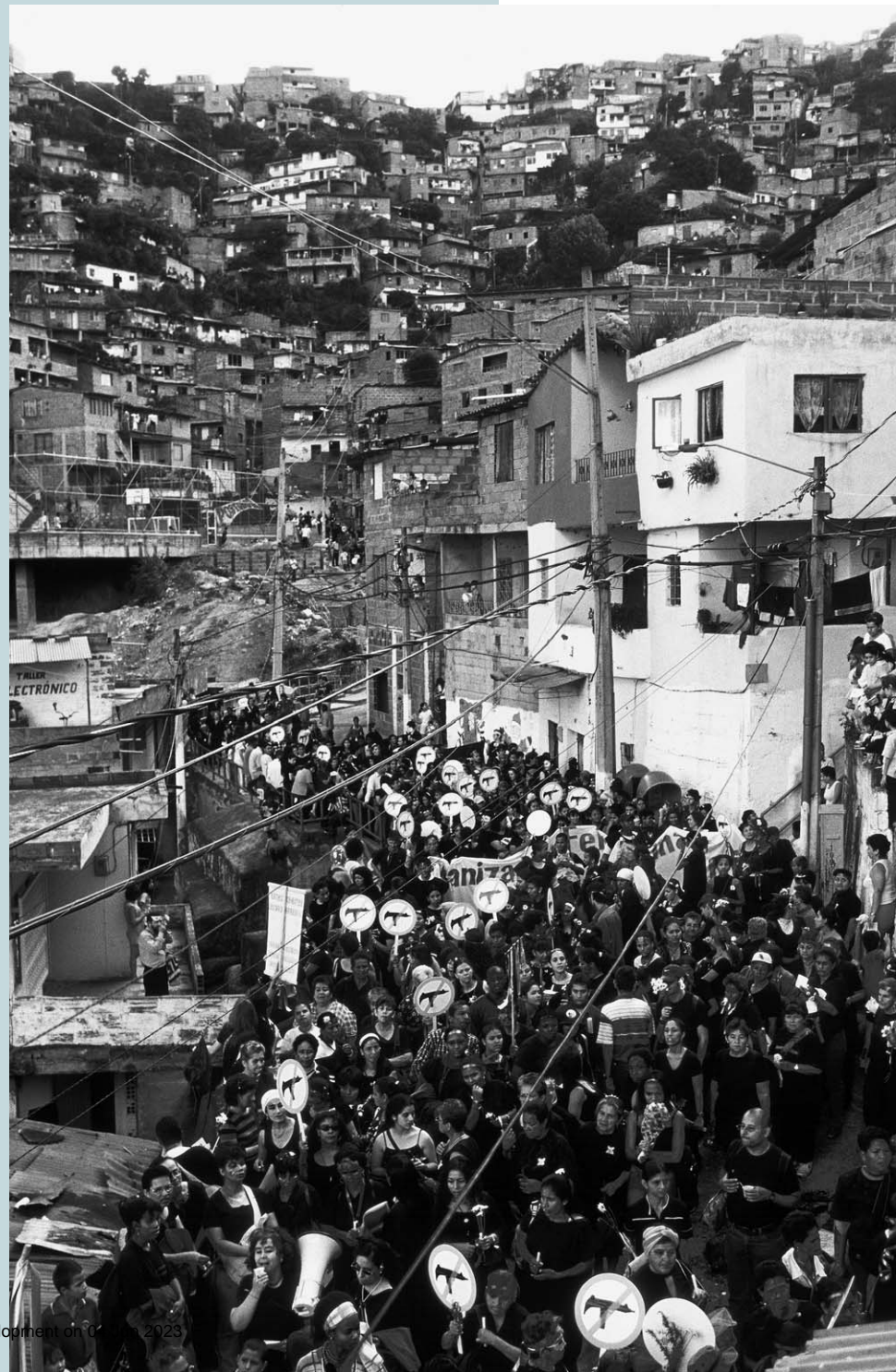
PS: Consider the work of the diocese of Quibdó, which is located in an area between the cordillera and the Pacific coast that is rife with conflict. For years the priests, nuns, and lay members of this diocese have supported different attempts by civil society to organize and resist the logic of war and violence, from whatever quarters it emanates. They have committed themselves to the struggle for human rights in their diocese by engaging legal aid and making public denunciations, while also supporting the visions of different black and indigenous communities. Their worship services are festivals of life featuring music and dance, affirming faith in life with such lyrics as, “You can’t bury

light/Nor can you bury life/Or a people who seek freedom.”

MRD: What role do women play in the context of war and peace?

PS: Women are usually the victims of war. They are the ones who care for the family when their husbands go off to war or are

FIGURE 5 Women mobilize against escalating violence in a poor neighborhood of Medellín, 2002. (Photo by Jesús Abad Colorado)



Jesús Abad Colorado

Jesús Abad Colorado was born in 1967 in Medellín, Colombia, where he studied social communication, followed by training in photography. He worked for 10 years as a photo-journalist for Medellín's leading newspaper, *El Colombiano*, increasingly specializing in reports on the civil war in Colombia and its victims. Since 2000 he has worked as a freelance photographer, having found that the superficial and sensational orientation of photo-journalism clashed more and more with his own deep sense of human ethics.

His photography reveals his commitment to portraying the war in Colombia and its horrors from the perspective of victims, thereby contradicting the reality that the first victim of war is the truth. He is concerned instead with the truth of memory.

No other photographer has influenced photographic portrayal of the conflict in Colombia as Jesús Colorado has. His style is marked by images that are symbolic statements of his own fundamental position, and images that raise questions, as opposed to photographic reality, which he shuns. His freelance photography appears in Colombian newspapers and magazines and in international press reports. He holds exhibits in different cities in Colombia and abroad, and shows and talks about his photographs in many different places in an attempt to build bridges. His work has won numerous awards in Colombia—and most recently, the prestigious *Prix Caritas 2006* awarded by Caritas Switzerland.

There is scarcely a human rights, women's, peace, indigenous or development organization in Colombia that does not use photos by Jesús Abad Colorado. Among these is the UN office in Colombia, which has asked him to design several posters.

Jesús Colorado is not universally appreciated, however. He was once kidnapped by guerrillas while pursuing his work, and subsequently freed as a result of mediation by the Church. He lives precariously: truth and memory are not revered in power centers ruled by the gun.

killed. They must mourn sons lost in battle. Women are also deliberately abused, humiliated, and raped by armed combatants. As a result of these drastic experiences and reflection on them, many different women's networks that seek to put an end to women's roles as victims have arisen in Colombia. Women identify themselves as the guardians of life and take firm positions against the logic of war and the logic of male violence and domination. They engage in public debate about peace and call openly for a peace that takes account of women's rights and needs (Figure 5). They are convinced that a purely "masculine" peace will not be sustainable.

MRD: Are there ways to support these positive initiatives? How can spiritual and religious values be consciously integrated into work for peace?

PS: Since 2001 the Swiss Peace Program for Colombia (SUIPPCOL) has been strengthening forces in civil society in Colombia, so that they can better integrate their concerns more directly into peace-building. SUIPPCOL is an initiative of Swiss development, human rights, and peace organizations, in cooperation with the federal government. It focuses primarily on strengthening local initiatives that stand apart from the military polarization born of armed conflict, and that commit themselves to political negotiations in dealing with armed conflict and social conflict. We support these initiatives launched by campesinos, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians and women, because we realize that their efforts for peace are based on fundamental spiritual values. Our program does not offer these groups any particular type of spirituality; it builds instead on their own values. We seek exchange and linkage between individual initiatives and

we try, for example, to support and promote methods of conflict analysis and transformation, internal organizational development and efficient administration, and political lobbying, so that the concerns of these groups receive greater attention.

MRD: Can the entire peace process be positively influenced by SUIPPCOL's efforts to strengthen grassroots initiatives?

PS: Peace processes proceed slowly. That's why it is necessary for the actors involved to have a great deal of patience. Patience must be based on spirituality: this is one of the fundamental lessons I have learned in international peace and human rights work. In the current difficult phase of conflict transformation in Colombia, we are learning that it is precisely the initiatives we are supporting that are pursuing peace with conviction. They are moving forward with conviction and attempting to motivate others. The Colombian peace movement today is being greatly influenced by these bottom-up peace initiatives. I believe that this has been possible only because they are rooted in spiritual values.

MRD: Can experience from peace work in Colombia be applied to peace processes in other mountainous countries? Or is this experience too culturally specific?

PS: I believe that sustainable efforts to promote peace anywhere in the world can and should draw on spiritual power as the catalyzing factor in peace processes. Peace-building is not a purely technical affair. The techniques of conflict transformation begin to have a sustainable effect only when they are applied by initiatives, organizations or movements rooted in spiritual values.

Peter Stirnimann (askbasel@balcab.ch) studied theology, history, and pedagogy and has specialized in conflict management and peace-building. He has been directly concerned with Colombia—where he lived with his family from 1988 to 1992—for more than 20 years. After his return, he led the Swiss-Colombian Working Group, and since 2001 he has served as coordinator of the Swiss Peace Program for Colombia (SUIPPCOL) at Caritas Switzerland. In 1997 he published a book entitled *Drugs and the Third World: A Plea for a New North-South Drug Policy*. Peter Stirnimann was interviewed by MRD Assistant Editor

Susanne Wymann von Dach. The photographs presented in this article were taken by Jesús Abad Colorado.

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