

Life lessons from Johan Witteveen

# A Sufi Lulls the devil to sleep rather than awaken him.

25 April 2019 Former Finance Minister Johan Witteveen passed away last Tuesday at the age of 97. In 2017 he spoke with Marcel ten Hooven: life lessons from a Sufi in politics.

Sufism taught VVD member Johan Witteveen to view everything from two perspectives, both yours and the other's. "A very simple idea, but of great value today."

Despite his age, Johan Witteveen was determined to travel to India at the beginning of February for a conference on universal Sufism. He felt a great urge to go, certainly now with *'America First'* and the Brexit putting a policy of self-interest under high pressure. He longed to discuss this with his kindred spirits in New Delhi: their Sufism is an idea of a harmonious existence. That is indeed a mystical idea, but according to Witteveen it is therefore no less practically applicable as a source of resistance, both spiritual and intellectual in nature, against extreme politics that people set against each other.

As a Sufi leader in the Netherlands, he has been closely involved in the preparation of the conference in recent months. He had his hands full. But at the eleventh hour he had to abandon his journey. Although in good health, he is physically fragile at the age of 95. "I just had to acknowledge my limitations. I have been there via Skype and have been able to address the conference that way. More than forty spiritual leaders from all different religions, from all over the world, were gathered there. "

The Sufis met in New Delhi at the mausoleum of the musician and mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927), the founder of the Sufi movement. Witteveen: "It was a kind of pilgrimage to this holy place, to delve into the lessons, directions, and values that we can derive from Sufism today. I was very interested in this conference. That Brexit threatens Europe, Donald Trump is elected president, wrong ideas amass power. The world has quickly become more dangerous. We must therefore develop the spiritual forces that put the loving relationship with others, the light, the beauty of the world first, and have nothing to do with the black worldview behind Brexit and Trump. A core idea of Sufism is that you have to look at everything from two points of view, both yours and the other's. A really simple idea, but of great value today. "

Sufism is the spiritual source from which Witteveen draws since Kafia Blaauw, the then leader of the Suficenter in Rotterdam, initiated him at the age of eighteen in 1939. It is not a religion for which it is often used, but an attitude to life, a way of life based on the philosophy of Inayat Khan. He detached Sufism from its original, Islamic context and thereby protected it against dogmatism. Every monotheism, a belief in one god, tends to do so because, in the eyes of his believers, He soon appears as an authority whose word is law. According to Inayat Khan, god has many names and every individual experiences him in his own way, as soon as the question about the meaning of life has to be answered. You must therefore look for him as a counselor within yourself, not as an authority outside yourself.

"The belief in one particular religious variant, usually Christianity in the West, is too limited for me," says Witteveen. "Khan has taught me that there is a unity between the major world religions. Their essence is more in their mutual similarities than in their differences. That essential is that we must all seek peace within ourselves. Because, Inayat Khan writes in *Gayan*, that inner peace, the harmony in yourself, must first be found before you try to make peace in the world. Unfortunately, the religions have covered that underlying idea with all kinds of dogmas and beliefs, making it less visible. That creates tensions and conflicts in a world in which borders are blurred and religions come into more contact with each other. '

Sufism is anything but world-wide, for the Sufi's philosophy of life includes seeing earthly existence as positive, an opportunity to gain experiences, to learn from others. Such life lessons are indispensable for widening consciousness.

'You sometimes see people who long for a deeper life withdraw from the outside world, into the desert, into the mountains. They become a yogi or a recluse. That is not the ideal of the Sufi: on the contrary, you must strive to merge that inner life that you seek with the outer, for the latter you are here on earth. You did not come here as an angel, but as a human being, with a task to act, to realize ideals. Inayat Khan himself stressed the need to be sober in that, although he was so honest to acknowledge that a mystic like him was quite sensitive to spiritual euphoria or ecstasy. "

**Johan Witteveen**, already at the age of 27, a professor at the Dutch Economic College in Rotterdam, the forerunner of Erasmus University, sought out public life. He soon became active in the VVD , to become a member of the Senate in 1958. "My father advised against that. "You have such a wonderful life as a professor. Why would you go into politics? "" He said. I did not follow that advice. " In the Marijnen (1963-65) and De Jong (1967-71) cabinets, he was Minister of Finance. In the intervening years, he was part of the VVD group in the Lower House. From 1973 to 1978 he was CEO of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in Washington.



In all those positions he was aware of the relativity of the decisions he made, knowing that no one is infallible. This requires self-relativity. "Edzo Toxopeus, my colleague at the Interior in the Marijnen cabinet, once said to me:" Well, one day you have to make a large number of decisions and you can be happy if more than half are good. " judge with a certain detachment, free and independent, because then the chances are that you make a good decision. This requires self-confidence, or an inner confidence. My Sufi meditations help me in this. "

Although neither Sufis recognizes Witteveen in the American intellectuals Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) and Walter Lippmann (1889-1974) kindred spirits, because of the distinction they make between the world of the mind and the world of matter. Witteveen still regularly consults *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944) by Huxley and Lippmann's *The Public Philosophy* (1955).

Lippmann was a journalist and commentator, two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and one of the founders of the liberal magazine *The New Republic*. In the material world, "in which we struggle and die," you should not overdo your goals, he wrote in *The Public Philosophy*, because that world will always be full of contradiction, confusion and complications. Therefore, never strive on earth for the perfection: "The harder people try to turn the earth into a heaven, the more they make it a hell." Witteveen recognizes the same wisdom in the admonition of Inayat Khan to strive above all for the good and not to fight too badly the bad. "A Sufi," he wrote in *Gayan*, "Lull the devil to sleep rather than awaken him."

Lippmann's aversion to 'total revolutions' was also the result of his experiences with the violence of nihilistic regimes such as Nazism and Stalinism, which he had witnessed just like Witteveen. It is therefore not surprising that Witteveen formulates his commitment in politically modest: 'You simply have to do the things that can be done. For people it is best if society is ruled by wise leaders who look after their well-being and make reasonable laws for it. Then space is created for the free development of human energy. In that spirit you can best work in an imperfect world. "

To the objection that it could be a little more ambitious, he replies: 'We should not want to pursue much more. It is a lot if the country can be ruled like this. And look around you: that does not happen that often. "

In addition to his philosophical belief, Witteveen's experiences with the economic crisis in the 1930s and the political extremism that triggered that crisis were decisive for the choices he made in his life. "I was impressed by the great depression. In Rotterdam, where we lived, I saw the effects of the crisis in the 1930s. The printed atmosphere in the city. The unemployed in long lines, to stamp for benefits. It was poor asset. Unemployment is a terrible fate, not only because of the loss of income but also because of the shame. That passivity of the government in its approach to the crisis was not good. I thought that could be arranged better. "

This has motivated him to opt for the study of economic science. 'I wanted to contribute to a better functioning of the economy. You don't get much out of high ideals. You first have to study how something works, where things are not going well and where you can improve it. John Maynard Keynes and Jan Tinbergen, my teacher at the Hogeschool, have shown me the way with their idea: freedom as long as things are going well, but the government must intervene if necessary. That was a view in the 1930s that was a taboo for a large majority of Dutch politicians. Keynes and Tinbergen have demonstrated their mistake. "

Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen (1903-1994), after the war, the first director of the CPB (CPB) was a socialist, like the grandfather of Witteveen, SDAP ' there Floor Wibauthuis (1859-1936), the Amsterdam housing corporation and a nation of the icons of alderman socialism. Witteveen nevertheless made another political choice: the VVD.

He says: 'I admired my grandfather, Wibaut. He was also an alderman for finance and, despite his socialist attitude, was able to talk wisely to bankers. He has done a fantastic job of replacing those horrible slums with good homes. " According to Wibaut, it was part of the government's task to properly accommodate people. So he awarded the building contracts to architects such as Michel de Klerk, foreman of the Amsterdam School, and to housing corporations who wanted to build 'palaces for the workers'. "I liked coming home to him. One of the famous stories in the family was how during the First World War, during his aldermanhood, he heard company directors complaining in the tram about an unknown rich man who supported the strikes financially. He was that man himself. "

He also has pleasant memories of Tinbergen: 'He was a special person. Truly a teacher, both in his capacity as an economist and personally. He gave a wonderful lecture in econometrics and wrote great books about economic politics. He also had a great love for people. He was really an example in this. In my own life I want to do as much as possible well, also on a personal level. Our different political choices were not much more than a nuance difference. He was a liberal socialist, I a social liberal. Because of the idea of freedom I was drawn to liberalism, but without the laissez faire that had caused such economic misery before the war. I found socialism artificial, unfree.

After 1945 the government opted for economic growth, employment and a fair distribution of income as the main goals of economic policy. The economy had to become more at the service of the people. This pursuit came from the experiences with the pre-war economic crisis in which political extremism thrived so well. Witteveen: 'In the 1930s, the depression was simply let go, despite all the social misery it caused. The business cycle policy that the government pursued after the war was at odds with this. That policy has brought us great prosperity, along with the economic stimulus that came from the Marshall Aid. "

Witteveen finds it all the more regrettable that the Rutte cabinet seems to have forgotten the economic lessons from the crisis. Coalition parties VVD and PVDA declare victory over the prospect that the Treasury deficit in 2017 for the first time is in years to zero. They claim this as a success for the government's budget policy. Witteveen, on the other hand, sees an overriding desire for frugality. The government invests less than is possible, making unemployment higher than necessary. "It seems that everything we learned in economics school after the war is no longer of value," he says.

Due to its dominant position in the economy, the government has a special responsibility to maintain spending and economic growth. The debt that the government must take for this if necessary is of a different nature than a private debt. For an individual it is wise to have paid off his debt at the end of his life. The state has eternal life and can always continue with this cycle of borrowing and repaying, provided that the growth is maintained. The government is partly responsible for the latter.

"It is pure deception to make one idea predominant and to say that it is the will of the people"

"You often hear politicians say that you can only spend a guilder once," says Witteveen. "The mistake is that this does not apply to the government in a growing economy. The national income is growing and therefore the debt can also grow, without causing problems. The cabinet therefore leaves unused space for investing. That is a capital error. "

According to Witteveen, under-spending is the biggest imbalance in the Dutch economy, rather than the national debt. That problem becomes visible in the steadily growing trade balance. This figure shows that Dutch companies rely more on foreign countries than on the Netherlands itself, due to a lagging domestic demand. The other side of this coin is that companies in other countries are relatively disadvantaged, due to a lack of sales opportunities in the Netherlands.

Germany, the leading economy in the EU, makes the same mistake, according to Witteveen. An economy such as the Greek could, with an economic stimulus policy of the richer member states, grow faster than now, creating new prospects for the Greeks. The choices made by Germany and the Netherlands in their fiscal policy therefore cause unnecessary tensions in the European Union, with the result that there is a greater risk of politically extreme reactions.

'Keynes does not only seem to be forgotten, but has gradually been maligned. Germany and the Netherlands live below their economic position, at the expense of other European countries. Such a high current account surplus is not always the best that our country can strive for. From the outset, I have opposed the government's budgetary policy. Some government spending had to be remediated, certainly, but when economically influential countries like Germany and the Netherlands go for a government deficit of zero percent, they make the problems for the rest of the European Union unnecessarily great. They think they promote growth, but that is not true at all, it is actually being curbed. "

With his argument, Witteveen gets zero in the petition in his party. 'I have never been able to make this clear to my friends at the VVD . Mark Rutte also simply does not understand, or does not want to understand. He says what VVD voters like to hear. That the government is too big, that the deficit is too high. Perhaps that appeals to voters, that story about a government that spends too much, but that is not yet correct. It is normal in all respects that if the government makes investments, it borrows. It must also appeal to liberals that economic growth would have been greater. "

Johan Witteveen regrets that politics can be distracted from this main issue by its fixation on an elusive theme like the 'identity' of the Netherlands. A good or bad economic policy can make the difference for people between a relaxed life or struggling to make ends meet. The political debate on that subject therefore has a concrete meaning in daily reality, as opposed to what is 'Dutch' and what is not. Witteveen counts the latter among the 'illusory identifications', comparable to a church that merely identifies itself with its own form of faith. And just as oppressive.

"It is better for politicians to stay away from this," says Witteveen. 'I prefer that they indicate which measures they believe can be used to properly govern the country than that they lose themselves in these kinds of subjects. What is that, being the Netherlands? That is nothing, an illusion.'

He fears that the political forces that want the Netherlands to withdraw from itself in this identity debate. Close borders and from the EU are gaining popularity. 'Parties create a kind of ideal image of a future Netherlands outside the EU, based on a fantasy. We do not know what that will be like in the Netherlands, except then probably poorer, less stimulating, less dynamic, less free, less inspiring.'

This political position can also be traced back to deeper beliefs that have their source in his philosophy of life. 'In essence, if you look at it from the point of view of mysticism, you must not assume your identity, because if you do, then you limit yourself to a few qualities that you pick out to identify with. That is an illusory construction, so a false identity.'

In itself, Witteveen finds it understandable that people look for something to hold on to with such an 'unreal ego'. Over the years you form a certain representation about yourself, based on experiences, experiences, impressions, what you can and cannot do. At a given moment you say that it is you of that image. 'Yet that is too limited, too systematic a way to look at yourself, because then you stay on the surface of your psyche. Your true being cannot be named with this or that quality, but lies in the deeper feelings of the heart, in love, friendship, forgiveness, consideration. Those are the feelings with which we can overcome all those differences between people and experience the unity of creation. "

Also at the conference in New Delhi, the Sufis spoke about the undesirability of assigning unambiguous meanings to a nation or a belief, says Witteveen. "A religion becomes an evil once it considers its own ideal as the only right one. That inevitably leads to conflict with others. I don't need to tell you the examples of this in today's world. A religion is not a systematic, comprehensive law of moral principles from which specific answers to specific questions can be distilled. We put a lot of emphasis on that during our conference in India. "

The portrayal of that deliberation, says Witteveen, was that you should judge all beliefs, rituals, and customs of beliefs on their contribution to loving relationships and compassion in the world. "That's what it's all about, not whether a belief is true or not, because truth is important, but it goes beyond our concepts. Something will soon go wrong if we try to grasp the truth. " In politics too, an absolute concept of truth soon derails, he agrees, formerly in Nazism and Stalinism, nowadays in populism. "It is pure deception to make one idea dominant and to say that it is the will of the people."

At the New Delhi conference, Witteveen addressed his kindred spirits through Skype about the need to look at everything from two perspectives, your own and that of another, in order to avoid systematic thinking in opposites. "That own point of view is of limited significance. That is what it is about in the spiritual life that you get rid of it. The material world is made up of opposites, between light and dark, between good and evil. Everything moves between those

poles. If you want to deepen your innerlife, then you must try to rise above that absolute distinction and to see that there is something evil to be found in all good and vice versa, something good in all evil. That gives a more nuanced view of what is happening. You will not easily condemn other people because they think differently.

Sufism helps Witteveen to endure the great setbacks in his life. He survived two of his four children. In his study time, in 1979, son Paul died at the age of 21, due to the complications of Hodgkin. Wittvenens oldest son, Willem, professor of law in Tilburg and senator for the PVDA, died on July 17, 2014 with his wife Lidwien and his daughter Marit in the attack on flight MH17 over Ukraine. Regarding the loss of Willem, his daughter-in-law and his grandchild, Witteveen says: 'I thought: I have to accept it and I did. I have a certain peace with it, also because I have the feeling that I am now closer to Willem than when he was alive. The feeling for his being, for who he was, is intensively present in me. As a result, I may not have such a great sorrow. I am also convinced that he is still alive in the spiritual world. All three are there. Willem, Lidwien, Marit. That offers comfort. They are not here, but there, and I believe I will meet them again. "

There is still lightness, he says. As he gets older, he increasingly sees the beauty of life, in people, in nature, in music. 'I actually end every evening with fifteen minutes to half an hour of classical music. I love that. " He prefers Bach, especially Das wohltemperierte Klavier in the performance of András Schiff. "Then you dance through life