

Spirituality and Christology

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Who do you say I am? – Jesus asked his disciples. This is a foundational question of Christian faith. In fact the entire Christology is based on this question. Peter’s response was: You are the Son of the Living God. (Mt. 16, 15-16) Christian spirituality has its foundation on this experience. In Jesus Christ the first disciples discovered the compassionate face of God turned towards humanity, the self-giving of God, the outpouring of grace from within the hidden divine springs. This encounter transformed their life in the Spirit of Christ. From this *spiritual* experience evolved the Church as the community of the disciples of Jesus.

How do we understand this transformation process? This question binds Christology with spirituality. In spite of all Christological models and ways of spirituality Christ remains an unfathomable mystery. “Knowing the length and breadth, the height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses all understanding” is an ongoing process in the Spirit (Eph. 3, 18-19). There is no finished model of Christology, no fulfilled way of spirituality. In the last two thousand years the Western patterns of thought with the Greek categories and the Roman symbols dominated and determined this theological process. Today however we live in a new epoch of the Church, in which the experiences of the local Churches worldwide offer new perspectives for grasping the mystery of Christ. A mutually enriching dialogue between the East and the West could be a help to look at the Christ-event from the perspective of mysticism.¹⁷⁷

East and *West* are not just descriptions of geographical areas, which lie far apart, nor do they represent contrary cultures which remain a stranger to each other. East and West in fact point to the complementary perceptions in the total evolution of human con-

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Le Saux, H., *Indische Weisheit – Christliche Mystik*, Luzern 1965, 109-141.

sciousness.¹⁷⁸ One could speak of two levels of perception: the mental and the intuitive.

Mind and Intuition

The mind objectifies everything. We can understand something through the mind only in as much as it is made into an object. Even when one tries to understand oneself, one makes oneself into an object. When one attempts to understand the Divine, it is made into an object: God is invoked as a personal thou. The conscious relation with humans – also with God – unfolds in an I-thou structure. This process is however shaped by several unconscious factors emerging from the personal and the cultural psyche.

There is in us an organ of intuitive perception deeper than the mind. The Church Fathers with their Greek background named it *nous*. "The nous purified and elevated above the mind contemplates the divine process within us."¹⁷⁹ Athanasius finds the nous as the medium, through which we are „conjoined to God (*synaphe*)."¹⁸⁰ Augustine describes it as the "eye of faith" (*occulus fidei*). In the Eastern Religions the intuitive faculty is described as *buddhi*: "Deeper than the mind is the buddhi."¹⁸¹ This intuitive eye is illumined by the divine light, so that human beings can experience the all-embracing presence of the Divine within oneself and in the cosmos.¹⁸² For the mystics in the East and in the West this intuitive faculty is like the *door to the heart*, the divine space within the human being.¹⁸³

Perception at the mental level and in the intuitive depth takes place in different ways. The mind analyses the logic of reality, while the intuition explores the mystique of reality. The mind notices the duality between the subject and the object, while the intuition experiences them in oneness. Through the mind one encounters God as personal thou; in the nous one experiences the Divine as the transpersonal Ground of being, as the ultimate Self. Through the reflection process

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Radhakrishnan, S., *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Oxford 2000, 252-305.

¹⁷⁹ Origen, PG, 14,817a.

¹⁸⁰ PG, 26,296b.

¹⁸¹ *Katha Upanishad*, 3,10.

¹⁸² Cf. *Bhagavad Gita*, 11,8.

¹⁸³ Cf. Painadath, S. SJ, "The Trans-mental Intuitive Perception, Insights from the Christian Mystical Heritage", in: Painadath S. / Nair S. M. (eds.), *Perception*, Delhi 2013, 165-182.

at the mind level concepts, definitions and norms evolve. But in contemplation at the level of the heart emerge new insights on oneness with the Divine.

Eastern Mysticism

In the dominant Christology of the Church the emphasis is put on dogmas and definitions; in the traditional spirituality one stresses encounter with the person of Jesus in liturgy and in devotions. The mystical dimension of Christ experience is a deficit in popular Christian life. Today however most believers in the local Churches of the West seem to have lost enthusiasm in cultivating a personal relationship with Christ presented as the object of faith. A rediscovery of the mystical dimension in Christology and spirituality is an epochal need. This would mean a theological understanding of Christ as the true divine *subject* in us, and the spiritual experience of oneness with Christ within us and in the cosmic reality. An encounter with the mystical heritage of the East could unfold the deeper dimensions of Christian faith. In this regard I would like to emphasize the significance of the Upanishads (800-400 BCE), which offer the well-springs of the Hindu and Buddhist mystical experience.¹⁸⁴

The Upanishadic sages enter upon an inner contemplative path with the recurrent question: Who am I? "How can one know the knower?"¹⁸⁵ „Willed and directed by whom does the mind focus on the objects? Ordered by whom does one breathe? Who is the one who speaks within our speech?"¹⁸⁶ „Who is the seer that is never seen, the hearer that is never heard, the thinker that is never thought of, the perceiver that is never perceived...?"¹⁸⁷ In certain moments of grace one comes to the mystical insight: "I am divine!"¹⁸⁸ The true self in us is divine.¹⁸⁹ The Divine is like a hidden spring „from which everything unfolds, through which everything subsists and unto which everything returns."¹⁹⁰ With the logic of the mental level one shall not label this

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Bäumer, B., Upanishaden, München 1997.

¹⁸⁵ Brihadaranyaka Up. 4.5.15.

¹⁸⁶ Kena Up. 1.1.

¹⁸⁷ Brihadaranyaka Up. 3.7.23.

¹⁸⁸ Brihadaranyaka Up. 1.4.10.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Chandogya Up. 6.14.3.

¹⁹⁰ Taitireeya Up. 3.1.

contemplative introspection as monism. The mystical insight evolves at the level of the nous/buddhi, deeper than that of the mind. Let us now look at the experience of Jesus from this mystical perspective.

Towards a Mystical Christology

Jesus said: "I come out of the Father." (Jn. 16, 28) "The Father has sent me forth." (Jn. 7, 28-29) "The one who sent me is with me." (Jn. 8, 29) "I live through the Father." (Jn. 6. 57) "The Father who has life in himself has granted the Son also to have life in himself." (Jn. 5, 26) "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me." (Jn. 10, 38) "The Father and I are one." (Jn. 10, 30). These words of Jesus' divine self-consciousness show that he experienced God as the Father, not as a person outside of him, but within him. The God whom Jesus in deep intimacy addressed as *Abba* (Father) is not a patriarchal male person, but the mother-base, out of which he came forth and in which he lived.

Using the allegorical method often used by the early Church Fathers to interpret the Bible we could explore the depth of the divine consciousness of Jesus. Just as a tree experiences its generating and nourishing root, Jesus experienced God as the motherly Father. (Jn. 15, 5, 10) Just as a well senses the hidden dynamism of the springs, Jesus sensed God the Father as the source of his being. (Jn. 4, 13-14; 16, 28) "God brought forth the Word as the root brings forth the shoot, as the spring brings forth the stream."¹⁹¹ "The Son is born from the fountainhead that the Father is." (Origen, John, 3, 5) "The Father is the fountain and root of the Son's being."¹⁹² "The Son comes out of the Father as water from a fountain."¹⁹³ All these symbols point out that the Father is that from which the Son is born, the true *subject* of the Son's being. Ambrose has a powerful symbol for this: "The Son is begotten from the womb of the Father (*de utero patris*) (ML. 16, 642) The Father is the generating mother-base from which the Son is born. The Spirit is, as the vital sap of the tree, as the inherent current in the well, the power of this divine life-process; the Spirit is the dynamism within the divine perichoresis (*dynamis tou theou* Act. 10, 38).¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Tertullian, Adv. Praxeam, 4.

¹⁹² Ambrose, Patrologia Latina, 16, 642.

¹⁹³ Hippolytus, PG. 10, 817.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Painadath, S. SJ, Der Geist reißt Mauern nieder. Die Erneuerung unseres Glaubens durch interreligiösen Dialog, München 2002, 49-66.

Jesus lived and spoke from within this divine subject-consciousness: "The word that you hear is not my own; it is the word of the Father who sent me." (Jn. 14, 24) "What I say to you, I do not speak of my own accord; it is the Father, living in me, doing his work." (Jn. 14, 10) As the trunk is the self-unfolding of the root, as the well is the self-outpouring of the hidden springs, so did Jesus experience himself as the self-giving of the Divine, whom he called the (motherly) Father. Hence he could say: "The one who sees me, sees the Father." (Jn. 14, 9) "The one who hears me, hears the Father." (Jn. 7, 16) "The one who knows me, knows the Father." (Jn. 14, 7) "The one who welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." (Jn. 13, 20) Jesus knew the Father as the *subject* of his being: as the one who speaks and works through him.

Towards a Mystical Spirituality

This is the experience that Jesus wanted to communicate to his disciples, to all who believe in him. He would say, just as I experienced God, you too should experience God! "Just as the Father sent me into the world, so do I send you into the world." (Jn. 17, 18) "Just as I live through the Father, you will live through me." (Jn. 6, 57) "Just as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." (15:9) "Just as I abide in his love, you will abide in my love." (Jn. 15, 10) "Just as I am in the Father, and the Father is in me, so am I in you and you are in me." (17:21, 26) "Just as the Father and I are one, so may you all be one in us." (17, 21-23). The preposition 'just as' (*kathos*) makes it clear that we are in fact called to partake in the consciousness of Jesus. If Jesus experienced God as the subject, we too are to experience God as subject of our being. Let us look at the two symbols again. We realize that we are like branches on the divine tree growing out of the divine root (Father) that unfolds itself in the trunk (Son) through the flow of the vital sap (Spirit). For the branches the trunk is the supportive and nourishing subject, just as the root is the generating subject for the trunk. Or, we are like streams which emerge out of the divine spring (Father) that pours itself out in the well/ river (Son) through the current (Spirit). For the streams the well / river is the nourishing subject, just as the spring forms the mother base of the well/ river. In a sense this is a *vertical* way of experiencing the dynamic divine presence.

Integration of Christology with Spirituality

When we look at Christ at the mental level he comes across as a divine person with whom we can have an *inter*-personal devotional relationship. When we experience the presence of Christ at the level of the nous / buddhi we realize in graced moments that Christ is the *trans*-personal divine subject of our life. In as much as we recognize in Jesus Christ the incarnation of the divine presence, we experience him as the Immanuel, as the God-with-us, the God-within-us. (Other religions have their symbols through which the believers experience the salvific divine presence; this we should sincerely respect.) Christ is God's presence in us, around us. Christ is the divine well-spring within us, within the cosmos. Our life evolves not before Christ, but in Christ, as Paul upholds over 144 times in his Letters. "Our life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3, 3) "Christ is in us." (Rom. 8, 10; II. Cor. 13, 5) "We are in Christ." (I. Cor. 1, 30) "Christ is being formed in us." (Gal. 4, 19) "We are being transformed into the image of Christ through the Spirit." (II. Cor. 3, 18) "May Christ live in your hearts through faith...so that you may be filled with the utter fullness of God." (Eph. 3, 16-19) Christ is the *subject* of our being. "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2, 20)

A mystical shift from an objectified image of Christ dominating dogma and liturgy (without denying its importance) to an experience of the indwelling presence of Christ in spirituality and Christology is an urgent task in the Church today. This becomes clear in the encounter of Christian faith with the Eastern mystical religions and in the context of the contemporary crisis in faith.

The experience of union with the indwelling Christ (John) and of growth into the life of Christ (Paul) is a life-long process. This is not something that we can achieve through our efforts; rather we can only develop the consciousness of the transformation process that takes place within us and in the world as well. The Church Fathers called this process the divinization of the human (*theosis*). With the grace of the Holy Spirit we are being transformed into divine life. In Jesus Christ God became a human person to awaken the hidden divine dimension of the human. "God became man, so that humans become God."¹⁹⁵ "The Word became man, so that we humans may become divine."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Augustine, PL. 38, 1997.

¹⁹⁶ Athanasius, PG. 25, 192.

“Christ takes shape in us through the Holy Spirit who reinstates the divinity in us.”¹⁹⁷ “Theosis is participation through grace in that which surrounds the nature of God.”¹⁹⁸ This is a mystical perception of what is happening deep within us. In a graced moment we should be able to say: *I am divine!* This is the grace and fruit of Christian faith. Jesus came to the consciousness of the divinity within him; should we not participate in this perception of the divine dimension of our being? Then we realize that our life evolves not before God, but within the Divine: within the inner-trinitarian *perichoresis*. This is the heart-beat of Christian faith. This is where Christology and spirituality come to integration.

Here it is not a question of withdrawing to a neurotic interiority. The one who perceives the divinity in oneself recognizes the divinity in others and respects them. The one who is conscious of the divinization process sees God in all things and all things in God. Since “everything has been created in Christ, through Christ and unto Christ”, one would perceive the spiritual evolution of humanity and of the cosmos within the universal process of the creation of the *new being*, that was manifested in the risen Christ. In the perception of Christophany one would understand oneself as an instrument in the restoration of all things through the Holy Spirit. In this theonomous perspective one meets every human being with compassion. Compassion is the fruit of contemplation. The prophetic commitment to peace, justice and protection of the environment is an integral element of the compassionate outlook. It is all the work of the divine Spirit. Awakening the mystic and alerting the prophet – this is the concern of an integrated spirituality that evolves through a mystical Christology.

¹⁹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, PG. 75, 1088.

¹⁹⁸ John of Damascus, *Expositio Fidei*, 88, 18.

Spirituality of the Universal Church

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