

Christian Spirituality

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Spirituality is understood in various ways. Some would think in terms of the alone with the Alone. This is pure mysticism, which knows and recognizes only God and withdraws from the world. It hates the world and considers it as evil. The desert fathers of the early centuries of Christianity represent this kind of spirituality. The second type is the one who separates himself totally from God and attaches to the world. This is pure humanism. Nicolas Berdyaev says, 'Great spirituality may be possessed even by a man who, so far as the surfaces of his thought are concerned, and in many cases through a misunderstanding, considers himself a materialist'.¹ He cites the example of Chervishevsky. I like to add Jawaharlal Nehru. There are two other types having much in common. These two types have the common element of combining God and the world. The difference is in the approach. The one approaches God through the world and the other approaches the world through God. The first may well be the spirituality of the Salvation Army and the second the spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox Churches in ecclesiology. The first is a humanist mystic and the second is a mystic humanist. Among these four types, the first two need no consideration and can be disposed of easily, because the first type denies the world which is real and the second type denies God who is real.

The other two types deserve consideration and the imbalance in each will have to be removed.

Spirituality is between God and man. The Bible begins with God. 'In the beginning was God'² and then comes the world. The world is God's making, created by the word of God. Man, too, is created by God. And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'³ He is Divine-human. His first link is with God and he is in the Garden of Eden as God's agent to keep it and to use it. He has a response to God and a duty to the world. Between this response and duty he is under the law, a divine command, 'but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the Garden, God hath said, ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.'⁴

¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human Encounter*.

² Gen. 1:1.

³ Gen. 1:26.

⁴ Gen. 2:17.

We find the Divine break-through in the created order, through a created being—man. This Divine break-through is spirituality. This spirituality has as its character unity and harmony.

Christian spirituality is born into and shaped by Hebrew spirituality. What are the marks of Hebrew spirituality? The Divine breaks through into the human in Abraham. There is a call. 'Now the Lord said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee . . . So Abraham went as the Lord had spoken unto him.'⁵ There is a call and a response. Between the call and the response there is a covenant. God is binding Himself to Abraham through a covenant. Man, Abraham, is binding himself to God through faith. The initiative is with God. Abraham is with God. Abraham is to be a people.

The next big event in the history of Israel, the people and God, which has much significance for the future of history, is the deliverance from the bondage in Egypt. Israel crossed the Red Sea and went into freedom. Nicolas Berdyaev says, 'Spirit is freedom and free energy which breaks through the natural world.'⁶ In this deliverance, Israel finds a spirituality which is symbolical of its continued history. This freedom is commemorated by a feast, the Passover. 'And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? that ye shall say, it is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, for he passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses.'⁷ Much devotion to God, based on gratitude, surrounds this Passover feast. Here is a deep spiritual expression of the Divine break-through into the natural and historical order. This is related to the Easter feast and has related significance, the latter having a universal significance.

Another event of spiritual significance is the Divine entry into the natural and historical world through the proclamation of the covenant. 'Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you unto myself. Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine; and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'⁸

This is followed by the giving of the law. A new spirituality is imposed by God. The spirituality is expressed in the words, 'peculiar treasure', 'kingdom of priests' and 'holy nation'. This spirituality knows no individuality. The whole community is the unit for this new spirituality. There is something strange, peculiar, that which distinguishes them from 'the surrounding world'. Each one in Israel becomes a priest not for himself but for the

⁵ Gen. 12:1.

⁶ *Op. cit.*

⁷ Exod. 12:26 f.

⁸ Exod. 19:4.

kingdom. It is a 'kingdom of priests'. It is a nation separated and consecrated. This spirituality has to be expressed in obedience to the law. The law governs relationship within the community between the individual and individual. 'Honour thy father and thy mother.' The governing principles start with the family unit and go on to community. Thou shalt do no murder—Thou shalt not commit adultery—Thou shalt not steal—Thou shalt not bear false witness—Thou shalt not covet. How essential for any community are such laws! The spirituality of the Hebrews has to be expressed in distinction, separation, oblation, consecration and obedience.

Hebrew spirituality is a movement. The people leave bondage, move into freedom. They become a community and enter into Canaan. The spiritual life revolves round the temple and sacrifice, law and obedience. Temple and sacrifice signify God; law and obedience the human. Divine-human encounter develops. The difficulty in spirituality is to maintain this movement—Divine to human and human to Divine. Hebrew spirituality projects at times the one or the other in the ascendant. These two are represented by the priest standing for worship, the Divine element in spirituality, and the prophet facing the people, the human element in spirituality. The human element is not the individual but an individual in community and in God.

The community move into exile. Spirituality undergoes a discipline. The discipline is an alien land. It is in the alien land that Hebrew spirituality assumes a larger dimension, the dimension of mission. Israel is to be the servant, individually and totally. 'And he said unto me, Thou art my servant; Israel, in whom I will be glorified . . . I will also give thee for a light to the gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.'⁹

'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.'¹⁰

The servant is seen in mission. This is a very dynamic spirituality, far from the conventional spirituality of today and yesterday. This is Israel in mission. This is spirituality in movement. This is once again Divine-human encounter. 'Liberty to the captives and opening of the prison to them that are bound' projects the spirituality of the servant. This is not to be understood just

⁹ Isaiah 49:3, 6.

¹⁰ Isaiah 61:1-3.

symbolically but physically. In mission he suffers.¹¹ This is mysticism; asceticism in the world. The servant suffers not for himself but for the captives.

Israel is restored to fulfil this mission. Within the Hebrew spirituality we find now temple and sacrifice, law and obedience, servanthood and suffering. Israel did not understand this dimension of spirituality and never lived it except through the remnant.

It is in Christ we find the fulfilment of this spirituality and the fullness of the dimension restored. In the incarnation there is a break-through of the Divine into the human. This 'break-through' is revolutionary and it is the meaning of Christmas. From the unity in the Godhead, the Son of God comes into the human to establish a new unity. A new unity and a new harmony is established—God in man and God-man in the cosmos. This is cosmic spirituality. Hebrew spirituality becomes Christological and cosmological.

This Christological spirituality consists in emptying, becoming human and giving obedience even unto the death on the Cross. All in mission. A mission of verification, unifying man with Nature, the cosmos.

This unification and establishment of harmony is the mission of the servant and this is achieved through conflict and struggle, culminating on the Cross. Beyond the Cross is the empty tomb—victory—Easter. Easter is making real the Passover and making it universal—death to life—bondage to freedom. Hence Jesus on the Cross and Jesus risen are central facts to Christian spirituality. On the Cross is seen the Divine-human encounter in all its ugliness and then in the empty tomb we see the victory.

This spirituality is focused in the two sacraments of the Church—the sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Baptism is incorporation and participation in the servanthood, the Messiah. It is from bondage to freedom. It is the Divine coming into the human aided by the Holy Spirit. Holy Eucharist is a symbol and a real event of unification through the Holy Spirit. God comes to unify Himself in Christ with man and man finds his unity with his fellow men. Also, there is a cosmic process in transformation and unification. God is bringing a harmony between man and matter. The bread and the wine are used to convey the Body and Blood of Jesus and so matter is not apart from Divinity. Matter is redeemed and the world of Nature is the instrument to unify man and God. This would stand between man and God, transformed. Man is unified with God through Nature. Berdyaev says, 'Divine-human spirituality may begin with the consciousness of the sinfulness and unworthiness of man, submerged as he is in the element of the world, but it must assert the dignity of man as a being in the likeness of God and fore-ordained to eternity—unworthiness must not conceal the high destiny.'

¹¹ Isaiah 53.

Understood thus, there is a peculiarity distinct from the spirituality expressed through and by the other living religions. We find the Christian spirituality moving through separation. The Christian is separated from the world and this is for the mission of unification and establishing harmony. He expresses this harmony through an oblation. (Here is the case for the daily oblation). He fulfils his mission through consecration and obedience, moving towards his high destiny. There is a Divine-human encounter in movement.

Christian spirituality is transferred into a different spirituality in India. The spirituality of India or Hinduism and Buddhism has many strands. There is the virile spirituality of the *Vedas*, where man is related to the cosmos of Nature through the Vedic gods of sun, storm and thunder. There is the monistic spirituality of the *Upanishad*, expressed through *gnana*—realization of God in oneself through the penetration into *maya*, changing *avidya* to *vidya*; through *karma*—given to good works, expressing in pilgrimages, fast and almsgiving, abstaining from being harmful either to man, creature or Nature (vegetarianism is included here); through *bhakti*, expressing in loving devotion to Rama and Krishna the ten *avatar* and Lords of Hindu piety. This gave rise to saints and songs, temples and offerings. The *Bhagavad Gita* is the Book of the Hindu. Saivism and Vaishnavism have within them all these strands. There is, further, the spirituality of the Shakti cult, worshipping the creative principle (Saivism has the *linga* as the symbol of worship) through the instrument of creation, the woman. This gives rise to many goddesses and a strange devotion which can be termed as fear-redemptive. Then there is the Naturalism of Tagore, giving rise to the enjoyment of bliss in the beauty of Nature and finding God as expressed in Nature. There is the Nihilism of the Buddhist and the Jain. This is pure withdrawal—withdrawing into a state of *nirvana*, the scorching of desire and through this the scorching of the seed of *karma*. Islam has not influenced the other society except giving rise to the Sikh Community—militant Hinduism and a militant spirituality.

The one common factor in the spirituality of the Indian is the acceptance of the doctrine of *karma* and re-birth. This is the spring-board of either realization of God and ultimate absorption into the Godhood through *gnana*, or *karma*, or *bhakti*, or annihilation through penance, fast and pilgrimage. Worship and work, sacrifice and song have an interplay or each is expressed in compartments. Christian spirituality is finding its way into this Indian spirituality and also there is an unconscious assimilation of Indian spirituality. In Indian spirituality the basis is man. He is in a keen struggle with his own past and future. He wants to have a victory. Redemption is emancipation from the *karma*. The agent is himself, either through *gnana* (the realization of God) or *bhakti* (loving devotion to God), appropriating his grace, or *karma* (works), finding either complete abandonment or involvement in

the world. Man is involved in a cycle of cosmic process. He has to extricate himself from this cosmic process, to be absorbed into the Godhead as a honey drop into the honey pot.

On the other hand, in Christian spirituality the basis is God. He is in a keen struggle in the cosmos through man. This struggle is projected on the Cross. Man is to be won into Himself and in winning effect a transformation. Man has to become Divine-human and the process does not stop there. Man is God's agent as Divine-human not unto himself but unto the transformation and recreation of humanity. This recreative process has as its ultimate goal unification and harmony. God is to be reconciled to man in and through Jesus Christ and man to be unified with God. Man is to be reconciled to man and unified. Humanity is to be reconciled to Nature and unified and the whole cosmos to be unified to God through the creative agent man-in-Jesus.

Christian spirituality has lagged behind in this cosmic process. Science and humanism have experimented in analysing the relations within the cosmos and relationships within humanity. We are in a world of analysis. The psycho-analysis of our time is a projection of all analyses in human relationships. The splitting of the atom is the analysis of Nature. This age needs, along with analysis, a *synthesis*. This needs a spirituality of synthesis. We need the spirituality of the ages put together—the Hebrew, the Christian spirituality expressed in the Servant crucified and risen. Christian spirituality has to move in a balance between mysticism and humanism and asceticism and materialism. If Christianity is to be universal, the spirituality of the different living religions must be made to yield their contribution in a resultant synthesis. The Christian is Christological. The root is in the Triune God. The Christian plant is planted in many different soils—Asia with its differing soils, Africa with its differing soils. If we take the Indian soil, there is the Hindu culture and Hindu spirituality saturated into the soil. Hinduism has its root in Monism: '*Tatvam Asi—Thou art that.*' Whether there can be a grafting of the main roots, the Hindu with the Christian, has been and is a dilemma, for it is not known whether it can be done without injury to the main plant. But what can be done and what is unconsciously going on is that the Christian plant of spirituality as it grows sends the main root deeper and deeper into the Indian soil, the Hindu soil. There are the side roots—the hair roots. The more these roots spread out and gather food from the soil, the richer the plant grows. The more the Hindu spirituality comes into the Christian spirituality and encounter, the more will the flowers and fruits increase with their perfume and sweetness.

Arnold Rademacher says, 'The saint in this world is the fulfilment of our true human nature, the realization of the eternal idea of man in the mind of God'.¹² He co-operates in the work of God in the world and enjoys a more profound knowledge of

¹² Arnold Rademacher, *Religion in Life*.

the world and men, seeing them as he does from a divine standpoint. 'He is quick to see the revelation of God in all things and in all experiences, sensitive to the gentle whisper of Divine inspiration in his soul and alert for any opportunities to promote God's interests. He possesses a higher freedom, which springs from his participation in the Divine nature and which ensures that God's will is always his will.' Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. The saint can, of course, be pained by his shortcoming and by the knowledge of how far the reality falls short of the idea of the Kingdom of God, and in fact he cannot but suffer in seeing these things; yet they only serve to spur him on to do his utmost to narrow the gap which separates him from the ideal.¹³

¹³ Arnold Rademacher, *Religion in Life*.

Editorial Note

It is with great pleasure that we announce that the next number of the *Indian Journal of Theology* will be a double issue of approximately eighty pages, and will contain the papers read at the meeting of the Society for Biblical Studies, held at Serampore in October 1964. The Editorial Board of the *Indian Journal of Theology* are grateful to the Officers of the Society for Biblical Studies for making possible this joint venture.