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*"Spirituality, the Way to Life"*

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# Spirituality, the Way to Life\*

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What kind of spirituality is appropriate to our times? Attempting to define what the spirituality for our times should be is a paradox: the solution cannot be found in the answer, but in the question itself or, rather, in the very formulation of the question, in feeling the need for this spirituality, although giving an answer is not possible. I will however present an outline, and I will begin by saying that this spirituality has to be *integral*, i.e., it must involve Man in his totality. Obviously we should then ask: 'Who is Man?' and turn to anthropology for direction. We must also follow a discipline. We must strive to achieve this spirituality in all its dimensions, without neglecting, as often happens, the corporeal aspect.

The weakness (though mixed with much greatness) of the modern West derives from the second principle of the Cartesian method: 'If you want to solve a problem, start by dissecting it'; after which, however, the same thing happens as with the watchmaker's apprentice: when he puts the watch back together, some pieces are left over.

The fragmentation of reality is the weak point of Western culture. When we say 'Man' we think 'individual'; and to be more precise, we talk about the 'body' and the 'soul'. Or, specifying even further, we talk of psychosomatics and we say that Man is a togetherness of *body, soul and spirit*.

To stay clear of esotericism I will limit myself to a description of Man based on four words taken from the Greek tradition, of which the West and Christianity are heirs. Usually, we stop at the first two words, thus running the risk of fragmenting and alienating Man. Man is the reality expressed by these four Greek words: *sôma-psychê-polis-kosmos*. Man *is* (and not only 'has') *sôma*: body. The body is not merely a support for the soul, as if it were a horse on which the soul rides when it is on earth. Man is body, so essentially that if there is no body

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there is no Man; consequently, all corporeal values belong to the essence of Man. Any spirituality making abstraction of the human body, undervaluing it or relegating it as secondary, would be lame. The body is a constitutive element of Man, and integrates all the others. It would be interesting to talk about the *śarīra* of Indic tradition;<sup>1</sup> the gross body, the subtle and astral bodies, and so forth; and we could add all that Gnostic and Sanskrit erudition has said on the subject. We know that the body is not just a set of proteins; it is more complex, more profound. There are different bodies. . . . To repeat, therefore: Man is *sōma*, body.

Man is also *psychê*: soul. He is thought, imagination, fantasy, will—all that can be included in this amazingly rich Greek word, *psychê*, which basically means ‘soul that is self-conscious’.

Man is also *polis*: a word that can be translated as ‘tribe’. Man is not an individual: he is society. The (mortal) dichotomy between individuality and collectivity has been at the root of all kinds of tensions. It is a mistake to contrast dialectically the individual and society, liberalism and socialism. It seems to me that this clash is the result of a defective anthropology, because Man is not an abstraction. Man is also tribe (*polis*), people, citizen, collectivity, society, Church . . . . Man is family. There is no Man who is not a son or daughter or who is not part of a relationship (citizen, etc.). If we remove all the relationships that constitute Man, Man disappears. An anthropology that considers only the proteins, the nervous system, the conscious or unconscious psyche, the personal attitudes, the right to property, . . . and all that individualistic philosophy affirms, is a one-dimensional anthropology, and therefore incomplete.

The moment we are in a relationship with others, if at the same time we are not this relationship, it means that we have alienated ourselves. Take, for example, the Gospel sentence: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.<sup>2</sup> This sentence is often interpreted almost as the opposite of what it means. We understand it as: ‘Love your neighbour as *another* who has the same rights and duties as you, to whom you cannot deny a due demonstration of love, respect and consideration’. What it actually means is: ‘Love your neighbour *as yourself*, as part of your being’, the *you* who is not ‘an-other’ but ‘your-self’.

1. The adjective ‘Indic’ is used to refer to the culture of the South-East Asiatic Subcontinent, as distinct from ‘Indian’, which refers to India as a modern nation.

2. Matthew 22:39.

Man is not only tribe, society, community. Man is also *kosmos*: universe, world. That means that Man is not only the tribe of humans more or less separated from the rest—from animals, things, the Earth and the planets; Man as the 'lord and master of nature', as Descartes calls him; the king, the one using everything to his own advantage. . . . To consider him only in this respect would, once again, be an incomplete anthropology.

Man *is* the world, he does not merely *have* (own) the world. We are finally realising that the Earth reacts badly to human progress and the exploitation to which 'she' has been subjected for centuries. Meanwhile, we carry on as before but with a few precautions . . . (rather like capitalism with the trade unions). Now the Earth also has 'her' trade union! We have lost the awareness that the Earth is not 'the other', but is also a constitutive part of Man, who in his turn is also cosmos, earth . . . Just as a man does not exist without a body, no man can exist without *kosmos*.

Often the Earth is exploited by Man as though he could claim absolute rights over 'her', as though 'she' belonged to him and he could do whatever he wanted with 'her'. Yet we will pay dearly for the consequences which can spring from such an attitude. Man therefore *is* also earth, world, *kosmos*.

How do we explain the fact that God (*theos*) does not appear in our discussions about Man? This is so because—deplorably—we have often made a caricature of the Divine. The concept of transcendence without the intrinsic compensation of immanence is both unthinkable and contradictory, and therefore false. We should avoid the temptation first to differentiate Man from 'another' (in this case, from divine transcendence) and then to place them in relation to each other. The divine element is, in fact, *immanent as well as transcendent*. Divine immanence means that the Divine is found in the *sôma*, in the *psychê*, in the *polis* and in the *kosmos*. And it is precisely this mysterious element, this breath, this transcendent and immanent presence that confers an identity on things, as it does on Man.

Therefore, it is not necessary to talk about God as a reference point in order to define Man, because for Man the Divine is not 'another'. Generally we say that there are animals, angels, the earth, people, plants, machines . . . and '(one) God'. It is not like that! God is not other, *another*, no matter how great we can imagine Him. God is transcendent as well as immanent. We meet the Divine in the very *quaternitas* of elements that define Man.

Even if we do not talk about God explicitly, that does not mean we have left Him aside. For example, if I say that God is the end of Man, there is a danger that, in defending theocentrism, we might convert God into a 'Supreme Being' and thus transform Him—without needing to cite Pascal—into the most insidious form of idolatry.

Before taking up the argument, we must keep in mind the following points:

1. I do not believe that spirituality should concentrate itself solely on the values of the spirit, thus remaining separate from the rest of Man. Neither do I believe in a spirituality that completely estranges Man from the world, as though this were the indispensable condition to attain human wholeness (the a-cosmic ascetic).

Spirituality is like a 'navigation chart' for the sea of Man's life: the sum total of the principles directing his dynamism towards 'God', as some say, or towards a just society or overcoming suffering, as others say. We can, therefore, talk about Buddhist spirituality, even though Buddhists do not talk about God; or about Marxist spirituality, although Marxists are allergic to religious language. Such a broad concept of spirituality expresses rather a quality of life, of action, of thought, etc., that is not bound to any particular doctrine, confession or religion, no matter how well recognised its foundations may be.

If I use the word 'spirituality' it is because I cannot find another word that can embrace such diverse paths, whether they come from the grace of God, or human effort, the dynamism of history, the destiny of creation, and so forth. I would like to use the word 'spirituality' in a way that makes it valid for all the different paths that lead Man to his destiny. While the word 'religion' has been monopolized by some religions, the word 'spirituality' has been to a certain extent protected from historical subordinations and rigid doctrines, even if it does express itself in different languages and according to different worldviews.

2. We cannot remain in the world of abstraction, although I have always tried to have a concept of Man acceptable to all human traditions; this is why I have never used a language limited to any particular spirituality.

We are, undoubtedly, 'fragmented' and we realise, especially in the West, that we find ourselves in a blind alley and that we must find a way out. Depression is increasingly common, and joy increasingly

rare; we are suffering an identity crisis. I make out two ways of getting out of this predicament.

*First:* to return to our roots and traditions, and listen to the message our mystical tradition has left for us. Without these roots, aimless superficiality will take over. There is a great need for interiority, meditation and stillness. Many Westerners, dissatisfied with their own religion, go to India led by a sincere desire for spirituality, but often their involvement in a different spirituality remains superficial. Changing religion is not the same thing as changing clothes. These people have not yet appreciated their own ancestral traditions, yet they already want to embrace the Eastern ones. We must take up the path marked out by our ancestors. The West will not find its soul by abandoning twenty-five centuries of tradition, as teenagers do.

*Second:* we must remember that in the West other religions have left their mark, and the traditional path is no longer considered as the only one available.

Moreover, we should not forget, considering the present situation of humanity, that no religion, no civilization, no culture *on its own* has sufficient strength or is able to give a satisfactory answer to Man—they all need each other. We cannot expect the solution for the whole of humanity from now on to come from a single source. We must benefit from what comes from the East, but, most of all, we must strive for a *cross-fertilization* of the various human traditions. They are all needed in order to face the present situation. We all are led towards the same destiny.

Then what should the spirituality of our time be?

There are no recipes or directives. I repeat that spirituality should be integral and cannot neglect any aspect of reality. Everything must be 'purified by fire', everything must be transformed; it is the *apokatastasis* that St Peter talks about.<sup>3</sup> We need to achieve a synthesis between interiority and exteriority. Thus the immediate and practical consequences of what was said earlier will be clear, i.e., that transcendence must not be separated from immanence.

Let us go back to the four elements I referred to above.

The four elements belong to my nature, to my reality—nor does any of it more than any other. I am not a body more than a soul, a people, a world. *Everything is a totality.* Recovering awareness of this unity is

3. 2 Peter 3:11.

essential. Such a *recovery*, or *reconquest*, cannot be effected by mere addition, nor can it be an optional choice, but must spring from a new awareness, in which I realize what I am, with all that I am. It is then that the inner dimension will stop being in dialectical opposition with the outer. This is expressed very well in a passage from the *Gospel of St. Thomas*: 'The kingdom will come when the two are made one, when the inner is like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower . . . then will you enter [the kingdom].'

Both things need to be done together. The effort that is required is symbolised by the Incarnation, in which the problems of Earth cannot be separated from the problems of Heaven, since by Incarnation the gap has been bridged.

The very fact of speaking of 'a spirituality for our times' could be an obstacle, because it *cannot* be a *single* spirituality, as we said above, since sensibilities are different. According to many traditions, the 'purification of the heart' is necessary. In this lies the new innocence. The mystery of life is that evil exists, that tensions cannot be suppressed, that we must do all that is possible, without being dominated by our very efforts and without ever believing that we have the absolute truth. We must accept the human condition; be aware that a certain form of doubt is not incompatible with faith; that a sense of contingency is necessary in our lives; discover the meaning of life in its joys, its sorrows and its passions. Instead of complaining about the hardships of life, and postponing the moment of profound enjoyment of life to some future time that will never come, we must find this meaning in every moment.