The Role of Spirituality Today and the Meanings of Tradition

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EDITOR’S FOREWORD: THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY TODAY AND THE MEANINGS OF TRADITION

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Abstract

Traditions (spiritual or not) are seen as vital for preserving cultural identity in a particular area, as much as personal and communitarian one. Yet the meaning of Tradition is changing because of human society’s continuous evolution. This fact constitutes a paradox and a provocation: preserving traditions is a creative act, this being in fact the very meaning of spiritual life.

Keywords: spirituality, tradition, experiment, tryout.

The term spirituality has rather a vague use today, and the ‘spiritual’ practices are so diverse that it is improper to use the same term in every case. That is because nowadays this word is more and more used for designating practices not related to the traditional religious practices. But the spiritual pursuit is often risky, because of inadequate means and inadequate goals. It is risky because it can affect not only the reasoning, but also the health of the practitioner. By tradition, we understand that corpus of rules and requirements that were established through the practices gained in many generations, a corpus often used for the name of a religion. There it is not just the specificity of a religious goal, but at the same time the deployment of an anthropological profile. It is a description of human capabilities and

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possibilities in conducting spiritual experiences: a horizon of possibilities and limitations. But these limitations had been a way of channeling experiences, of empowering human capacities in attaining spiritual goals and preventing failures or harm. So we can speak about a type of rigor implying verifiability (spiritual guidance) and precision requirements (aiming mind and body). There are several descriptions and uses of this kind of rigor in practice of traditional spirituality. So, it is useful to clarify the influence of certain cultural horizons in shaping of a particular spiritual practice and vice versa.

When discussing on the specificity of a spiritual practice in the horizon of a tradition, we should have in attention the specificity of a certain cultural area. A cultural model that directly or indirectly influences the shape taken by the human experience in a particular religious horizon, as also as the way the science is made. Modernity, as the novel cultural pattern, has had as its main mark the privilege given to a human capacity, the reason. This decision is visible in the foundation of the modern concept of science. The type of science initiated by Galilei, the one which will dominate the scientific theory and practice had as its founding act the reduction of the sensitive and living qualities of the discredited bodies as appearance and illusion and their replacement with the mathematical knowledge of their abstract forms and relations. These forms and their relations can only be known through mathematics, meaning that the most authentic meaning of reason must be bound to this way of knowledge. The Galilean paradigm was considered for a very long time the only foundation for the valid scientific research, as well as for the valid explanation in science. The modern philosophical approach received also the influence of this vision about reality, so that the Galilean paradigm proves to be one of the key sources of modernity. But, at the end of the 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey asserted on the distinction between two ways of investigation, the ‘natural’ sciences and the ‘spiritual’ ones. If the explanation is characteristic to the natural sciences, the understanding is specific to the spiritual sciences. The object of the spiritual sciences is the ‘living’ and the only way to understand this is the ‘re-living’. Later, Martin Heidegger writes a study on the modern view on technique, in which he describes the incorrectness of the technical attitude towards nature, as
far as it regards an insistent delivery request which man addresses to nature (Heidegger 2008, 315). The Enlightenment’s rationalism considered that it cannot exist but only one perspective of truth and therefore, according to its own definition of what is veridical and real, it judged and classified the entire cultural production of mankind.

Yet, the recent evolutions in science brought as a consequence a serious crisis in explanation, in quantum physics, but also in cosmology or life sciences, as well as the recognition of the nonscientific approaches’ value, like religion or philosophy, so opening a much broader discussion about the validity in scientific explanation. One aspect of this major change was a broader understanding of what is ‘exactness’ and ‘precision’, important classical model criteria in science experiment validation. So, it is required of a broader meaning of precision and its signification for the different description of experiment as a form of *tryout* (as a fundamental experiential human act). The reality described by the classical physics is an independent one, that is: the measurements do not interfere with the phenomena (the meaning given to objectivity). This thesis became the central thesis of any kind of modern sciences. But, certain levels of reality, specifically the quantum levels, cannot be subjected to the classical explanation given by the science founded by logical formalism, so that arose the need to resort to alternative explanatory models. But nowadays the theory of the quantum field refutes the perspective of the classical physics, mainly because the new discoveries revealed that the particles no longer play the role of constitutive material of the universe. Our senses do not reveal the real constituency of the universe. There are dramatic differences from the classical vision over the world, but it is now required a different vision, as well as the necessity to renounce to the objectivist language.

The reaction to the danger came from the interference of some cultural constructions, which often took the shape of ideology and misled the spiritual exercise and also the scientific investigation from their true purpose, brought out a conscience which modernity did not possess until recently. It is a horizon with an unprecedented possibility which does not necessarily represent the guarantee for a productive dialog between the Eastern way of understanding the spiritual experience and the scientific investigation. We may easily have the
impression of a forced proximity between two dimensions of the human experience that aim different reality levels. The recent mutations in understanding the nature of reality made possible accepting the validity of spiritual experience and the value of the discourse of spiritual tradition as specific way of investigating the inner levels of reality. The crucial question is if these alternative ways to evaluate can somehow meet the current need for rigor, and preciseness. Therefore, we can argue that it is important to prove that the spirituality discourse provides rigor in the description of reality, that in this case there is also a certain understanding of precision and exactness, which is totally functional at a practical level as well. But, science and spirituality are, on their specific paths, somehow similar ways for approaching what we call reality? The mystic’s experience and the scientist’s experiment are both ways of tryout? Is the mystic’s experience, somehow, closer to what is proper to the scientific experiment?

The spiritual experience is the manifestation and the sign of a possibility, of a fundamental aspect for human condition. The human being is a being of experience. As André Scrima indicates, the term ‘experience’ comes from Greek, peira, meaning tryout (Scrima 2008, 198-99). Experience would be then what comes out of tryout, knowledge by tryout. Scrima states that the spiritual experience must also represent a study object because any experience of this kind is creative, founding values, bearing a vision of the world, therefore a way of founding a cultural tradition. Eventually, to approach the spiritual experience means to approach a different actuality than the current one. The spiritual experience comprises a prophetic dimension as it actualizes what is our nearest into our furthest – it allows us to understand the actuality of humanity. It turns out that experience, understood as a tryout, represents the central aspect of any spirituality. At the same time experience, in its valence of experiment, is the essential component of science. One cannot speak about science as long as there is not an experimental frame, without unfolding some experiments. But precisely in this double reference to a form of tryout, I consider that there is an area of a real rapprochement between the one who performs a spiritual experience and the scientist. They both put the reality to tryout, on one way or another. In fact, this rapprochement is more difficult and represents a
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commonplace, due to the reasons mentioned above and these reasons may be, from a point of view, subsumed to language difficulties. This is why, those who reached the intuition of the common ground that this tryout of reality takes place on (in a full acceptation of what we call reality, including the one that is called ultimate reality) were those who could understand the limitations that human language introduces inevitably in a certain historical period. They were exceptional people because they did not fall in the traps of a more or less specialized language that a period or historical moment may impose: being able to understand the authentic ways in which such a complex reality may be experienced and passing over the imaginary and the ideology of their time. An excellent example can be found, regarding the experience’s role as tryout in the writings of Symeon the New Theologian, a Byzantine author from the turn of the first millennium. Symeon was indeed exceptional because he put this experiential self-tryout in a poetical expressing. The way Symeon spoke about God and man’s experience of God can be fully called a-typical if we relate his writings to the discursive canons at the beginning of the second millennium. That is because Symeon sought to transmit to his contemporaries that they might also reach in their historical time something what they considered possible only in the time of the Fathers: a sudden transforming experience that does not come as a result of one’s expectancy, and whose result is a deep inner change (Bouyer 1968, 568). What characterizes Symeon’s experience is an exceptional ‘exposure’ to an unanticipated experience, a sudden discover of a deep and very powerful reality. If we are to follow Scrima, telling that experience means knowledge by tryout, the type of tryout was a double one for Symeon, because the tryout from the extraordinary presence of a totally different Reality from what means daily experience was doubled by a tryout of himself, by the need of leaving aside everything that could represent an inner obstacle in exposing oneself to this experience.

The difficulties in expressing this kind of experimental tryout were very explicit in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, the time when the striving was so acute that the building of a novel language was necessary, in order to provide a suitable expression of the mystical experience as tryout. This happened in Constantinople, in a famous debate, opposing Balaam, a sustainer of
an intellectualist description of the role of philosophizing, and Gregory Palamas, the defender of philosophy as an existential inquiry and as a form of tryout. Gregory Palamas affirmed that the ultimate knowledge (and the knowledge of any kind) involves the whole man and not just his intellect, the act of knowledge has the shape of a relationship, expressing an anti-essentialism corresponding to anti-realist position of actual physics. Palamas developed a realistic doctrine of supernatural knowledge, one given to the whole man, not only to his mind; on this way offering a justification for the method of prayer. Balaam’s criticism was that Gregory identified supernatural with the immateriality. This kind of criticism is even now assumed by many interprets. But the ‘returning to self’ of the hesychast method was understood not just in the spiritual sense, but also bodily. Palamas rehabilitated the matter, which spiritualist tendencies of Hellenism had always inclined to despise. Saint Gregory opposes a supra-rational knowledge to the Balaam’s rationalism (Mayendorff 1998, 204). Knowing God does not require certain exteriorization between the subject of knowledge and the object known, but a union.

All these affirmations constitute the ground of the Palamite understanding of tryout as the privileged form of experiential knowledge. A decisive term in explaining the non-essentialism of the hesychast doctrine was ένέργεια, which Gregory Palamas takes over from Aristotle. The doctrine of the immanent energies implies an intensely dynamic vision of the relationship between God and the world. Palamas’ description of Light is not the one which makes use of rational concepts to express abstract realities, but is, on the contrary, the apophatic expression of an experience culminating in the beholding of God. If ένέργεια or the divine light has this meaning, then what we call a natural (or physical) reality has a much enlarged signification. The physical reality is not a static, inert one, but matter plus energy: it is something that can be described as an active alive process where we find the presence and the intentionality of a person and that as a natural dimension. On the other hand, we can state that in this description the reality is constituted by the experience in the most radical way: the ultimate reality is the human experience of the uncreated energies. In the hesychast controversy was disputed the hypothesis that the access to the
ultimate reality is an act mediated by the hierarchy of the beings or not. That is why there appears the syntagm ‘uncreated energies’. The experimentalism is crucial, the truth criterion being provided by the ‘appeal to experience’. This is for sure, the palamite expression for tryout, and this appeal was several times invoked as the decisive criterion in answering to the Balaam’s understanding of the knowledge of nature. The hesychasm is different from other spiritual practices, at least from the Christian area, by the fact that it emphasizes the experience in the shape of the experiment: it is supposed to be the existence of a method, of a verifiability criterion, and validation – henceforth the interest for the ultimate reality or, in the hesychast language, for the uncreated energies. We can find an evident analogy between science and hesychasm regarding some discussions about the nature of ultimate reality.

The experiential or mystical tryout – as being exposure to an unexpectedly revealed reality, as well as a self-tryout – the result of this tremendous experience, one of the most difficult tasks was the finding of an appropriate linguistic description of this radical experience. The modern science had recently a similar query: how to find a proper language in expressing reality at the quantum level, or at the Universe’s enormous scale? So, the physics of the last century was rather under an explanation crisis. This descriptive crisis meant a conflict of the explanatory models that intended to be complete and truthful. In imposing an epistemological model there prevailed a rather pragmatically need that proves that researchers’ experience in investigating the microphysical reality is complex and bewildering, and only some rather contextual needs imposed the use of a certain language. It is a gain when it comes about communicating among researchers, but at the same time a loss, because the investigated reality is more complex than a formalization or an epistemological model. The risk is that an explanatory model will limit the way research can understand and investigate reality. The fact is that the period invoked above meant a new opening to an unanticipated reality, towards a reality evidence that proved a challenge to formalism and the epistemological model at stake.

Today, more than ever, there is a need of overpassing the fragmentarily knowledge caused by the disciplinary approach, and to integrate the information came from different research perspectives.
Without including the spiritual experience as a radical form of tryout between these perspectives, undoubtedly we will not be able to have a proper understanding of reality. But the achievement of such goal implies a difficult task: to find a language common to the scientific experiment and to the spiritual experience. Past history proves how serious is this provocation, but the study of this history can give us the clues in finding the right approach. The spiritual experience has its specificity in bringing new kinds of solutions to the problems and crises of today, this being a reason for an increased interest for it. The spiritual traditions offer a very rich and complex inheritance that can definitely be used in developing a more complex understanding of reality. The practice of spirituality, as much as it is done with rules and criteria provided by a spiritual tradition, can offer a genuine novelty and new perspectives on the global challenges of today. This happens because the spiritual practice is a way of discovering something non-revealed before, and this fact can be explained if we take into account that every human being has his own particularities, and his proper way of following a spiritual path. It is very important to stress that the history of spiritual practices is not a repetitive one, every historical epoch brought something different and new. If nowadays philosophy is understood as being not only a theoretical and speculative enterprise, but rather connected with a way of practical experientiality, with a way of life, then the spiritual practice is for certain a part of it. It becomes obvious that now an integrated and integral perspective in research is necessary, not only regarding the scientific one, but as well as one concerned with human understanding and one which concerns with values and the role of culture in a globalized world.

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