Spiritual Practices as a Path to Mediate and Reconcile

Dan Chițoiu

ANNALS of the University of Bucharest Philosophy Series

Vol. LXVI, no. 1, 2017
pp. 155 –164.
SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
AS A PATH TO MEDIATE AND RECONCILE

DAN CHIȚOIU

Abstract

The spiritual experience is, somehow, closer to what is proper to the contemporary scientific experiment: both are ways of tryout. A follower of such path needs to meet the requirements comparable with those of scientific experiment (in spirituality we can name it “experience”): rules and criteria of verification. Yet the result of this spiritual quest is on another level, because it grants access to a reality beyond our common-sense perception. To express the contents of this experience is extremely difficult, and the normal usage of words is inadequate. And, with any generation in history, expressing the specificity of this experience becomes always a question of novelty. This is due to a different cultural and social background, of a different “field of experience”. I consider that nowadays we can better understand the rigor of a spiritual path as well as its concreteness (new scientific researches prove it), tracking the significance of spiritual practice for a more complex understanding of reality. But at the same time, new spiritual experiences, made in the actual contexts, can offer new solutions and new answers to the contemporary social and cultural challenges. Spirituality, understood as a practice following a particular religious tradition and aiming personal and community’s betterment, has the ability to provide empathy for the other, because somebody having a spiritual practice can recognize a similar need of any other human. “To reconcile” can have many meanings, from reconciling individuals to reconciling neighborhoods, communities, entire countries, to which the reconciliation with self gathers (since we often have contradictory elements in our formal instruction or in our thinking).

Keywords: spirituality, globalized culture, mediation, reconciliation.

1. Globalized Culture and Need of Spirituality

Nowadays the outset of the so-called globalized culture becomes gradually expressed and sustained by the new ways of communication.

---

1 Professor at the University “Al. Ioan Cuza”, Iași. Email: dan811@yahoo.com.
Yet, this new evolution brings not just positive effects, but also critical ones, as the pressure felt by traditional cultures. This, because globalization implies the standardization of the ways of communicating. We have to question what are the consequences on human experience at the anthropological level, if today we encounter significant changes in the way we experience ourselves, the other and the world. There are enough reasons for the answer to be yes, for sure.

A recent phenomenon that can be discovered especially on social media, is the increasing occurrence of messages or conversations on spiritual/religious topics. This should be connected with the need of identity felt by today’s younger generation, a need related with the development of a personal experience connected with something more than everyday life. Yet, the reference to spirituality is made following a subjective need, so there is a little interest to understand what is the real specificity of spiritual tradition and practice, there are just used some affirmations fitting with this personal quest. I relate this need of assuming personal experiences which exceed the usual with the quest for radical and authentic novelty, for attaining something really different and personal. For sure, nowadays this kind of quest is different in shape and content from those made, before because of the impact of recent science and new technologies. But there is also a kind of danger. If we agree that the quest for spiritual path is more present today compared with what happened before, and this pursuit is different compared with the past, the practice of it may not lead to the desired goal due to lack of any criteria or landmarks (as any spiritual/religious tradition offers).

This is confirmed by the today’s unclear meanings of spirituality: the use of term now becomes rather vague and, on the other hand, the spiritual practices are so diverse that it is improper to use the term in every case. That’s because today this term is more and more used for designating practices not related with traditional religions. Among the young generation there is an explicit tendency for searching a spiritual path that does not track any religious practice, it is a quest for a private spiritual activity that does not follow the rules and the requirements of traditional religious practices. This tendency is more or less worldwide present. But this spiritual quest is often risky because of inadequate means and inadequate goals. It is hazardous because it can affect not
only the reasoning, but also the health of the practitioner. To give a support for this last statement I propose, in what follows, a discussion on the role of tradition when speaking about spiritual practices. Tradition can be seen as a description of human capabilities and possibilities in conducting spiritual experiences: a horizon of possibilities and limitations. But the limitations where understood as a way to channeling experiences, to empower the human capacities in attaining spiritual goals and to prevent failure or harm. So, this implies verifiability (guidance) and precision requirements (prescriptions aiming mind and body). It is indeed very interesting to clarify how these requirements were set in different cultural areas. So, it is useful to clarify the influence of a certain cultural horizon in shaping of a particular spiritual practice and vice versa.

II. The Foundations of Eastern-Christian Tradition: Ways and Guides of Spiritual Practice

A very good example in supporting the statements I made is the fundamental intention which dominated the Eastern-Christian Tradition: apart from the systematic inventory of the affirmations made on different articles of faith, it was the way in which the practical experience of following a Gospel commandment was guided, as someone’s concrete experience. The way through which what we call Tradition has crystallized was the accumulation of the testimonies about this practical experience. For our cultural exigencies, this type of accumulation does not mean more than the filing of a subjective and random case which could represent at the most a prime matter for further processing that could offer a coherent and systematic picture of this Tradition. This is precisely the thing we must avoid in order to reach the true spirit of this inheritance. It is necessary to accept the fact that not only our cultural model is not the supreme and ideal form of rationality, but also that in the European culture we must admit the existence of at least another major cultural paradigm which established a particular kind of connexion amongst the human capacities of experience and understanding. Privileging a certain description of reason and the affirmation that the reason is the human capacity by excellence have decided the cultural evolutions of the
modernity, but this radical emphasizing ultimately generated the crisis which crosses today cultural model.

Characteristic for the Eastern Christian spirituality is the notion of betterment, understood as a process of enhancing human’s humanity. This progress, or betterment, as it is termed, can be described as attaining of somebody’s ‘measure’. So, somebody’s identity is not a fixed configuration of psychological characteristics, but a kind of virtual tendency that can be more or less actualized. Yet this road to somebody’s betterment requires guidance, and this guidance is an act that cannot be done by following a manual, a book, because of the concreteness and non-repeatability of personal mode of existence. The Byzantines used the ancient Greek word mystagogía for this guidance, intending by this naming to indicate that there is rather an initiation than a teaching, than something related to the classical paideía. I consider this formative dimension as the missing aspect of today education. We need today a formative strategy that should compensate just the building of practical or theoretical abilities, this compensation being the initiation process as a personal guidance dedicated to concrete and unique persons. This mystagogical approach can be described as the discovery of what is non-repeatable, of what is not to be find in any categorical description. On that way, the human potential can be unleashed, a potential that is either never or insufficiently activated by the current educational strategy. Such formative ideal stands under what is called spiritual humanism, a form of humanism that must compensate and correct the problematical features of the Early Modernity’s secular humanism, that one that hypostasized mathematical reason as privileged human capacity.

III. Spiritual Guidance and Role of Philosophy

The reaching of ultimate experience cannot be result of any type of formal instruction but of a different guidance, which could be called

---

2 As it is described, for example, by Tu Weiming in Humanity and Self-Cultivation. Essays in Confucian Thought (Cheng&Tsui: Boston, 1998).
‘practical spiritual guidance’: an exclusively face to face relationship, yet which did not equate to the passing on of information or techniques, because for the first time the absolute and radical uniqueness of personal experience was acknowledged. Of particular significance was the understanding of the human being from this novel perspective. Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great faced the task of describing an existential situation which could not be confined to the classical Greek philosophy of understanding nature (ousía). Freedom, in the proper sense, involves the possibility to overcome predetermined frameworks. The postulation of man’s personal dimension (hypóstasis) marked an essential leap compared to the philosophical understanding of man up to that point. The pinnacle of the Greek meditation on man’s existential situation was Tragedy, which described the individual’s forever unsuccessful attempt to evade the fate that ruled his life (Zizioulas 1996, 33). Tragedy was the limit that Greek meditation could attain in reflecting on the man’s effort to suspend his conditionings, because there were no arguments in favor of man’s capacity to genuinely alter the course of his existence. Christian doctrine did not merely assume the fact that man is able to make decisions freely and to realize his decisions, it also emphasized the possibility that man can radically change his way of living, his own existential condition, to be in other words an open existence. Of course, such a statement involves paradox, being very difficult to make reliable statements about human. The paradox required the use of a different type of language, ἀπόφασις, based mainly on negation and suspension in order to escape the trap of describing what cannot be positively stated in any way. Consequently, the only way to express the personal mode of existence is to exceed conceptual language (which frames the object of its description in definitions and details), and to adopt a new acceptance of terms use, which allude to an apophatic reality rather than categorizing it in some way. The word is given the role of pointer, signaling a reality that eludes conceptual frameworks and even simple description.

The understanding of a fundamental difference between God and World was full of consequences for the way in which the possibility of knowledge was conceived. In the Greek horizon before Christianity it was stated that the possibility of knowing the truth was offered by the co-naturalness of the human mind with God, because the world is not
from an ontic perspective different from God, but it is an emanation of Him. But the Christian doctrine brings the conscience of an unsurpassed abyss between the created mind and uncreated God and therefore it is impossible for the mind to find out on its own about God. For this reason, it was necessary to reconsider the acceptance of philosophy as a truth searching exercise. To philosophize could not any longer mean a rational effort to grasp the mysteries of reality. Yet this didn’t mean a rejection of the value of classic philosophic exercise, as made by Plato or Aristotle. But to this way of searching it was granted a preparatory role, a very important one, in the economy of searching the ultimate purpose of the philosophical exercise (Runciman 1970, 85). It was called \textit{exōterikos}; however, this does not describe an inferior level, but it pointed out that this is the maximum possible that the human effort could reach in knowledge; it is what we call the knowledge from the \textit{outside}. This ‘outside’ means the lack of something which can offer true and complete knowledge, ‘being outside’ the relation what could deliver the truth. For the entire cultural history of the Christian East, practicing this outside philosophy was considered to forming the mind possibilities’ to discern, because any higher spiritual experience has many dangers, as the risk of falling in the imaginary of the mind as long as the rational capacities are not completely formed. It has been considered that the instruction in the classic Greek philosophical texts could accomplish this formative task. But for this spiritual horizon the Truth is not \textit{something} any longer but \textit{Someone}. So, reaching the truth takes the form of a personal relation with the Truth as Someone, as a Person. In this understanding we can no longer talk about an objective knowledge of the truth, so the much-used later difference of modernity between objective and subjective becomes useless.

But there is also an inner philosophy, the \textit{inner one}, \textit{esōterikos} (Cavarnos 1968, 15). This philosophy does not follow the rigor of the Greek classic rationality: its particularity is given by what is

\begin{enumerate}
\item Which today we call \textit{mystical}, but it did not had this name since it had the signification of an experience through which anyone could search the true path to Christ.
\item M. Costa de Beauregard, Dumitru Stănileanu, Mica Dogmatică vorbită (The Little Spoken Dogmatic) (Sibiu: Deisis, 1995), 86.
\end{enumerate}
characteristic to each person in his/her is opening to communion with Logos, with God. This is the reason why, in its intimacy, this part of philosophy is situated higher than the speech, it names the depth of the personal relation between the Creator and the creature, a relation always unique and non-repeatable. Nevertheless, reason is not absent from this experience, but takes superior forms which cannot be simply placed in a discursive expression. But this is also the place where the paradox of this expression lays, an experience which does not go around reason but it cannot be put into words either. This is the most practical dimension of philosophy, one that involves the entire being, all the human capacities and has as consequence a change of man in his depth which received the name *metánoia* in the Patristic texts. It means a change of mind but not as in a modification of its function, a decrease or alteration of its rational capacities, but an opening of it to the understanding of what is above the creation, it is a participation to the uncreated. The consequences of this experience are much ampler, they imply the whole human being even the body. There are also changes in the references to the world, in the way we interact with, so that we could talk about a real influence of man upon the world through his inner changes and not through the external direct actions or things. From this point of view, what becomes more important is the achieving of this *metánoia* rather than the outer interaction with the objectivity of this world. So, as it was understood in the Christian East, the inner philosophy is close, if not identical, to the aims of spiritual practice, even if the ways of preparation, of training can be more or less different: it is not requisite for the spiritual practice to have a previous training in formal philosophy, yet such kind of preparation is very effective in directing your inner experience.

IV. Community and Communion: Hierarchy as a Way to Human Betterment

Philosophy had an important and effective impact in setting the cultural and social life in Byzantium, and as well as much in fine-tuning of relationship between State and Church – at least by providing two central paradigms: the distinction between inner and outer wisdom and
the hierarchal understanding of reality. The distinction between an outer level and an inner level in philosophizing, in the way of making culture or instruction, offered a model in establishing the links and the dynamic dialectic between the secular power and the religious one. Describing the World as a hierarchical chain of levels in transmitting and participating to the Good also offered a vital model for setting the resorts of secular administration, and at the same time conferring it a symbolic and spiritual role, not just a pragmatic one. Every aspect of the Byzantine life was saw as linked in a subtle but real and effective hierarchical participative chain, connecting everything and everybody in a continuous act of spiritualization. So, there was not a firm distinction between earthly and heavenly, because the Heaven came on Earth for to make the Earth Heavenly.

The hierarchy theme, within the Eastern-Christian background, was understood it as a way to perfect oneself through participation (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 67). The superior-inferior diagram is not appropriated to this description: no matter on what level you are, adopting and participating to a hierarchy could lead you to perfection. The ones who find themselves on superior levels of the hierarchy, have to proper mediate the transmission of good. No matter the level a person is on, if the hierarchy he adopted is one that transmits the good, he will maximal fulfil his potentiality, he could reach perfection. This display of the senses of a hierarchy is based on a fundamental supposition of the Byzantine spirituality: the existence of man as a person, which means absolute identity, uniqueness, and non-repeatability. The hierarchy is understood as an existential dynamic which includes in a chain the movement of the persons towards their perfection as good people. At least this was the ideal that animated the organization of the Byzantine social structures, and of course the historic reality reflected more or less its completion.

The essential idea is that no one could directly unite with God and therefore mediation is needed. Secularly speaking, mediation is equally necessary, because for the Byzantine the social good means nothing but the possibility to participate to transcendence through the best way possible. The levels of the administrative hierarchy are especially the degrees of participation on Good and at the same time they are manifestations of it towards the ones who find themselves on an inferior
level. But the difference between levels is not one among something better and something inferior, but it is actually a different capacity of participation. In this way, the hierarchy is not voluntary established, but it is dictated precisely by the possibility and the measure in which a person could receive the Truth and at the same time could communicate it to others.

The type of justice developed by the Byzantine society can be described as *iconic justice*, and has as its central element the *hierarchical responsibility*. It is a different way of understanding and doing justice, a rather existential and dynamic one, something connected with the Byzantine acceptation of Tradition. As I mentioned before, apart from the systematic inventory of different social or religious practices, this way of preserving tradition is the sum of the practical experiences in following a prescription (social or religious), is about concrete experiences of people, communities and generations. Based on this use of tradition, the responsibility was developed as having a double, even triple meaning. You have to be responsible not only for that one under you on the hierarchical scale, but also for the ones situated above you and also you have a responsibility for whole cosmos as a part of it. That’s why in this understanding, the proper description of reality is that of a Chain of Beings, not of a Chain of Being (a very widespread philosophical interpretation about the order of reality), to more accurate, of a *Chain of Persons*. This late formulation is the most proper one since even the Ultimate Reality (God) is described in the Byzantine Tradition as being Personal. The ideal of every man and woman was *betterment*, a continuous process of self-perfection through hierarchical responsibility. Justice is, in this case, a result of the common assuming of hierarchical responsibility. This understanding of doing justice worked as a presupposition also in the Post-Byzantine societies in the Eastern Christianity, even if sometimes was unapparent.

V. Conclusion

Responsibility, as described by the Eastern-Christian social paradigm, plays a key role in the process of mediation among people belonging to
a certain community or society. But as well, this crucial aspect in setting of the Byzantine social mind, and more or less active in the late Eastern-European societies, can offer as much as a valid solution to the question regarding the strategies in mediation and reconciliations between communities and nations in today’s globalized world, when so often your neighbors are people coming from a distant culture and religion. Yet, the responsibility of this description gains its foundation in the quest for betterment as continuous self-perfection, something to be gain by spiritual practice. So, it can be argued that a spiritual practice, no matters from what religious or cultural area it comes, can offer the ground for mediation and reconciliation among people and communities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY