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# THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY TODAY: BETWEEN TRADITION AND NOVELTY

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual experience today is in some ways, close to the way we consider scientific experiments: both can be understood as a form of *trial*. The follower of a spiritual path needs to meet requirements of verification of their experience comparable with those of scientific experiments. Yet unlike science the results of such spiritual trials is the experience of a reality beyond our common sense perception. To express the contents of this experience is extremely difficult. When we look at history, any description of such experience is always seen as a novelty. This is due to different cultural and social backgrounds, and different “fields of experience”. Today, we are in a time when we can better appreciate the requirement for rigour in following a spiritual path as well in connection with the concreteness as we find in the science. Contemporary spiritual experiences, conducted as trials within actual contexts, can offer new answers to actual social and cultural challenges. And it can lead to forms of spirituality which are resonant with contemporary scientific understanding.

## **Globalized Culture and the Need for Spirituality**

Today's "globalized culture" is made possible by the new ways of communication. There are not only obvious positive effects of this new evolution, but negative effects, especially the challenges threatening traditional cultures. This challenge is the standardization of communication, of rules of communication, but mostly of content of worldwide communication. We can ask if there are consequences on human experience at the anthropological level, as we are faced with changes in the way we experience ourselves, others, and changes in how we experience the world. A recent phenomenon that can be discovered especially on social media, is the increased 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, this interest in spirituality takes the form of a subjective quest, with little interest in spiritual traditions and practices. I connect this need for personal experience which exceeds the usual, with a quest for radical and authentic novelty, for attaining a something different and personal. Today these spiritual quests take on a different shape and content from those made in the past because of the impact of recent science and new technologies. But there is also a kind of danger. If we agree that spirituality is growing today compared with the recent past, this pursuit is different compared to the past, and may not lead to the desired goal since it lacks familiar landmarks, the landmarks that the religious tradition offers.

This is confirmed by today's unclear meaning of spirituality: the use of term become now quite rather vague and, on the other hand, the spiritual practices are so diverse that it is difficult to apply the term in every case. That because today this term it 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 follow any traditional religious practice, it is a quest for a private spiritual activity that does not follow the rules and discipline

of traditional religious practices. This tendency is occurring worldwide. This spiritual search is often risky because of inadequate means and goals. It is risky because can affect not only the reasoning but also the health of the practitioner. To support this last statement, I propose in what follows to discuss the value of tradition when speaking about spiritual practices. By “tradition” I understand here that corpus of rules and requirements that where established through the experiences gained through many generations, a corpus understood by the name of a religion. It is not here 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 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 misdirection. So we can speak about a type of rigor implying verifiability (guidance) and precision (prescriptions aiming mind and body). It is very interesting to see how this rigor has been conducted in different cultural areas. We can find many examples of rigor in practice of traditional spirituality, a fact that proves that this kind of precision is not unique to science. So, it is useful to clarify the influence of a certain cultural horizon in shaping a particular spiritual practice and vice versa.

### **Cultural Horizons and Spiritual Traditions**

When discussing the specificity of a spiritual practice in the horizon of tradition, we have to avoid any approach unaware of a certain cultural area`s specificity. A cultural model directly or indirectly influences the shapes taken by the human experience in a certain religious horizon and the way science is conducted. For the Western world, what we call “Modernity” has as its main mark the privilege given to the *rational capacity*. This option is visible in the founding of the modern concept of science. The type of science initiated by Galileo Galilei, dominates scientific perception, replacing the former emphasis on sensitive and living qualities of objects of experience, with a mathematic knowledge

of their abstract forms and relations. These forms and their relations could be known only through mathematics, meaning that the most authentic sense of reason must be bound to this way of knowledge. Galilei's paradigm was considered for a very long time the only valid ground for the scientific research, as well as for the valid explanation in science. The modern philosophical approach was also influenced by this vision of reality, so that Galilei's doctrine proved to be one of the key sources of modernity. But at the end of the 19th century, Wilhelm Dilthey insisted on the distinction between two ways of investigation, one proper to the "natural" sciences and one proper to the "spiritual" ones. If *explanation* is characteristic of the natural sciences, *understanding* is specific to the spiritual sciences. The object of the spiritual sciences is the "living" and the only way to understand this is through "reliving". 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 distorts the manner which man addresses nature<sup>1</sup>. The Enlightenment's rationalism dominated and classified the entire cultural production of mankind. But recent understanding in science has shown that this enlightenment and technological approach suffers from a serious crisis in explanation (especially in quantum physics, also in cosmology or life sciences), as well as the disregard of the significance of nonscientific approaches to value, like religion or philosophy, thus opening a much broader discussion about validity in scientific explanation. One aspect of this major change was a broader understanding of the meaning of "exactness," and "precision," which were important classical models and criteria in the validation of scientific research.

### **The Need for Rigour**

So, we require a broader meaning of precision and its significance beyond the domain of science. We can see experiment as a form of *trial* (understood as a fundamental human experiential act). The development of mathematics and physics has modified our understanding of the world, eliminated the sensible, the concrete, in favour of the abstract

characteristics considered essential of an object, describable from a mathematical point of view. The reality described by classical physics is an independent one, that is: our measurements do not interfere with the phenomena (the meaning given to objectivity). This became the central thesis of modern science. But certain research into quantum levels, cannot be subjected to the classical explanation given by the science founded by logical formalism, so there arose the need to resort to alternative explanatory models. In the 1930's of the last century there was a change in paradigm concerning the physical realism. And nowadays the theory of the quantum field challenges the perspective of the classical physics. This led to a different vision, as well as the necessity to renounce objectivist language. This also led to a new spirituality with elements borrowed from the eastern religions.

The movement beyond modernity appropriates certain older cultural constructions. While this horizon offers an unprecedented possibility, it does not necessarily guarantee a productive dialogue between the Eastern way of understanding spiritual experience and scientific investigation. It is easy to force a proximity between two dimensions of the human experience. These recent scientific perspectives on the nature of reality made it possible to reconsider the validity of spiritual experience, and of the texts of spiritual tradition as a guide to investigating these inner levels of reality. If these alternative ways of evaluation can somehow meet the current scientific standards of rigour, and precision, we can argue that spiritual discourse can also meet standards of rigour in the description of reality. But, are science and spirituality in their separate paths, similar ways for approaching what we call *reality*? Are the mystic's experience and the scientist's experiment are both a kind of trial? Can the mystic's experience, be seen as akin to scientific experiment?

### **Spiritual Experience as Experiment?**

To argue for this possibility we can turn to the work of André Scrima. He provided a number of reasons for that considering spiritual experience is similar to research. First, 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 Scrima indicates, the term “experience” comes from Greek, *peira*, meaning *trial* (its root seemingly identical to the one of the term *pyr, fire*), and the Latin added prefix *ex (starting from)*<sup>2</sup>. Experience would be then what comes out of a trial, *knowledge by trial*. Scrima states that the spiritual experience must also represent an object of study because any experience of this kind is creative, founding values, a vision of the world, and a way of founding a cultural tradition. To pursue spiritual experience means to pursue a different actuality than the current one (“actuality” derives from act, from transposing into act, from what is being done: spiritual experience comprises a prophetic dimension as it actualizes what is our nearest into the furthest - it allows us to understand the actuality of humanity). In the study on spiritual experience, we must emphasize the term *experience*. Experience, understood as trial, represents the central aspect of any spirituality. But at the same time experience, in the form of experiment, is the essential component of science. One cannot speak about science as long as there is no experimental method. In this double reference to a form of trial, I consider that there exists an area of a real connection between the one who performs a spiritual experience and the scientist. They both put the reality to trial, on one way or another. But *in fact*, this recognition of this connection is difficult because we encounter difficulties of language. This is why, those thinkers of the who recognized such a common ground, were those who could understand the limitations of language each in their own historical period. They were exceptional people who 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 ideologies of their time.

I will provide an example of the overcoming of this language context by an appeal to the spiritual experience of Symeon the New Theologian, a Byzantine author from the turn of the first millennium. Here we can find an example of a trial of experience within mystical

writings. Symeon was exceptional because he expressed this experiential self-trial poetically. The way Symeon spoke about God, and man's experience of God, is atypical if we relate his writings to the discursive canons from the beginning of the second millennium. That because Symeon wanted to transmit to his contemporaries that they could also reach in their times something that they considered possible only in the time of the Church Fathers: a sudden transformation of experience that does not come through one's expectation, and whose result is a deep inner change<sup>3</sup>. What characterizes Symeon's experience is an exceptional "exposure" to an unexpected experience, a sudden discover of a deep and very powerful reality. It was a double trial for Symeon, because it involved the movement beyond daily experience to a different Reality, and the movement beyond every inner obstacle in order to expose himself to this experience.

As a matter of fact, this understanding of trial was not really new for the Eastern Tradition, what Symeon really succeeds to do in his writings was to warn about the difference between an authentic life and one which was misled. There are a number of texts describing this path, the most famous for the illustration of true experiential knowledge was Isaac of Nineveh, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He described the *state of rapture* as the decisive moment in experiencing a different reality level, beyond space and time. It is hard to understand his affirmations about the state of rapture if we are not aware about his use of words like mind, intelligence, and soul. He often used the expressions like "the movements of mind" or "the movements of intelligence": these expressions cannot be understood as descriptions of the mind's functions. They are not descriptions of psychological processes, but of a dynamic access to different levels of reality, and to different levels of being<sup>4</sup>. The state of rapture cannot be understood as a kind of autosuggestion, but as an effective moment of radical discontinuity with time and space (the discoveries of quantum physics seem to provide scientific support for this possibility). So, all Isaac's affirmations about what precedes and what characterizes the state of rapture are based on an ontological perspective. In this way we can

explain distinctions between the different states of mind or more precisely, between the movements of mind. Here is the ultimate trial, the experience of what is beyond the normal limits of the human capacity of knowledge. Isaac's description of attaining this ultimate experience clearly indicates the stages of an experiment: there are precise requirements in every stage, warnings about the risks of failure and there are criteria provided for verifying the correctness of an experience. The trial is the way of preparing yourself for the state of rapture, when you receive by grace the state of supra-knowledge. This is the fulfillment of the experiential road, and the attaining of this experience changes everything in the subject's understanding. This is not just an exceptional discovery or an ultimate knowledge, it is more. Patristic literature after Isaac repeatedly indicates, the consequences are changes in the ontological status of man and world.

In Isaac's text we encounter again the difficulties associated with this kind of experimental trial, we can see this also in Symeon's mystical poems, but the Byzantine 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was a time when this difficulty was so acute that it was necessary to try to construct a language to provide a proper expression of mystical experience. This happened in Constantinople, in a famous debate, opposing Balaam, a supporter of intellectualist descriptions of the role of philosophical exercise, and Gregory Palamas, defender of philosophy as an existential inquiry and as a form of trial. Gregory Palamas affirmed that the ultimate knowledge (or 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 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 to the method of prayer. Balaam's criticism was that Palamas identified *supernatural* with the *immateriality*. This kind of criticism is still assumed by many interpreters. But the "return to self" of the Hesychast method was understood not just in the spiritual sense, but also bodily. Palamas rehabilitated the status of matter, which the spiritualist tendencies influenced by Hellenism tended to despise. He does this not

simply to connect the spiritual to material but to connect the supernatural to created world. Palamas opposes a supra-rational knowledge to Balaam's rationalism<sup>5</sup>. Knowing God does not require certain exteriorization between subject of knowledge and the object known, but a *union*.

All these affirmations constitute the ground of the Palamite understanding of trial as the privileged form of experiential knowledge. A decisive term in explaining the non-essentialism of the Hesychast doctrine was *energeia*, 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 make 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 *energeia* or the divine light has this meaning, then what we call a natural (or physical) reality has a much-enlarged spiritual significance. Physical reality is not a static, inert one, but matter plus energy: it is something that can be described as an active, living process where we find the presence and the intentionality of a person within this natural dimension. On the other hand, we can state that in this description the reality is constituted by experience in the most radical way: the ultimate reality is the human experience of the uncreated energies. In the Hesychast controversy the hypothesis was disputed whether access to the ultimate reality is mediated by the hierarchy of beings or not. That is why there appears the syntagm "uncreated energies." The experimentalism is important, and truth criteria was provided by the "appeal to experience". This is for sure, the Palamite expression for trial, and this appeal was several times invoked as the decisive criterion in answering to the Balaam's understanding of knowledge's nature. The Hesychasm is different from other spiritual practices, at least from the Christian area, by the fact that it emphasizes experience in the shape of the experiment: it relies on a method, of a verifiable criteria, and validation - for the pursuit of ultimate reality or, in the Hesychast language, for the uncreated energies. We can find here an analogy between science and hesychasm regarding their pursuit

for the nature of ultimate reality.

In these examples of mystical trial (a trial in the face of an unexpectedly revealed reality, as well as a self-trial in the face of a tremendous experience), one of the most difficult tasks was the finding of a proper expression for this radical experience. But the same difficulties appeared once again with the discoveries made in quantum physics at the beginning of the last century<sup>6</sup>. Modern science began to pursue similar questions: how to find a proper language to express reality at the quantum level, or at the Universe's enormous scale? This explanatory crisis meant a conflict of the explanatory models that intended to be complete and truthful. The imposing of an epistemological model led to a pragmatic need to account for the researchers' experience in investigating the microphysical reality. It imposed the use of a certain language. This became beneficial in communicating among researchers, but at the same time, an obstacle in investigating a reality more complex than a formalist model 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 formalist and the epistemological model.

## **Conclusion**

Today, more than ever, there is a need to move beyond the fragmentary knowledge caused by the disciplinary approach, and to integrate information coming from different research perspectives. Without including spiritual experience as a radical form of trial between these perspectives, we will not be able to have a full and proper understanding of reality. But achieving such a goal involves a difficult task: to find a language common to the scientific experiment and to the spiritual experience. Past history proved how difficult this is, but the study of this history can give us the clues for finding the right approach. Spiritual experience can provide new kinds of solutions to the problems and crises of today, which is the reason for an increased interest in it.

The Eastern spiritual traditions, Chinese, Indian or Eastern Christian offers a very rich and complex inheritance that can be used in developing a more complex understanding of reality. The practice of spirituality, conducted by the rules and criteria provided by a spiritual tradition, can offer a genuine novelty and new perspectives on today's global challenges. This happens because the spiritual practice is a way of discovering something non-revealed, and this fact can be explained if we take in account that every human being has its own spiritual path. It is very important to stress that the history of spiritual practices is not a repetitive one, every historical epoch introduced something different and new. If philosophy is today understood as being not only a theoretical and speculative enterprise, but rather connected with practical experience, with a way of life, then spiritual practice is an important part of it. It is now obvious that we need an integrated and integral perspective on research, not only in science, but also concerning the spiritual strivings of the human being.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings from "Being and Time" (1927) to "The Task of Thinking" (1964)*, Ed. David Farrell Krell (Harper: San Francisco, 2008), 315.

<sup>2</sup> André Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei (The Spiritual Experience and its Languages)* (București: Humanitas, 2008), 198-199.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Bouyer, "Byzantine Spirituality", *A History of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. II, Ed. Louis Bouyer (NY: The Seabury Press, 1968), 568.

<sup>4</sup> Isacco di Niniveh, *Discorsi Spirituali*, Trans. P. Bettiolo (Bose: Qiqajon, 1985), 55.

<sup>5</sup> John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*. Trans. George Lawrence (NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 204.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard D'Espagnat, *On Physics and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2006, 14.

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