

The Spirituality Check:

What is really meant by... ...Spirituality?

E. W. Harnack

*In a society in which large ecclesiastical institutions, endowed with the power to dictate a layperson's beliefs, do not control religious practice any more, diversity can become a problem. Who is not an expert, often needs qualified guides in order to distinguish sincere spirituality from misleading ways. An objective appraisal what can be a sincere form of spirituality and what not is difficult to find because most experts advance their own worldview. With this series of articles, called **The Spirituality Check**, we want to illustrate from the perspective of a transcendental science of religions what distinguishes sincere from dubious uses of spiritual terms. Therefore, a concept will be presented with its etymology, its theoretical provenience, its practical application, and its occurrence today, and will be discussed with regard to its serious applicability.*

Where does the concept come from?

The concept of *spirituality* makes sense only within the Christian tradition or – today – within the western culture being influenced by Christianity but having abandoned its religious roots. The term “spirituality” is derived from the Latin *spiritus*. Its etymological development shows a “spiritualisation” itself: Firstly, a breath of air was meant, which was equated then with the human or animal breath and, in addition, the breath of life, the vital force itself. Subsequently it was sublimated into the mind and its highest part, finally, in the Latin Bible also meaning the Holy Spirit, the *spirit sanctus*. Spiritually (as an adjective: *spiritualis*) is in the New Testament (1st Corinthians) what separates the person as a spiritual being from his/her physical part (*carnalis*) and from the animal desires (*animalis*). This use of the concept continues during the Middle Ages: Thomas Aquinas, being the most important medieval theologian, distinguishes *spiritualitas* from *carnalitas* (carnality) and thus puts spirituality in a connection to asceticism, the renunciation of the worldly. In the 12th century, Rimbaud de Liège says: “If we want to see what is of God, it is necessary that we break with animality and accept the spiritual” (quoted in Solignac 1990, 1145; translated by me).

The latter quotation demonstrates: within the tradition from which the concept has originated, spirituality is synonymous with striving for God, with the effort towards the achievement of transcendence, of another world. Hence, spirituality in the western history of religion is partially connected with the mystic and monastic tradition. Therefore, it

is not surprising that the Catholic Jesuit Order is the editor of the monumental encyclopaedia of Christian spirituality, the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*. On the other hand, spirituality, as opposed to the concept of *contemplation*, does not only refer to the introspective form of a search for transcendence, but rather to the reorganisation of the complete life and the whole person. It refers to an orientation of the social, physical, intellectual, and emotional person towards transcendence, a total dedication of ones life to the experience of the divine (cf. Solignac in 1990, 1142f.).

How is the concept used today?

When, however, the concept of spirituality is used today, often other demarcations are accentuated: first discriminating it from materialism and material reality, then within the so selected sacred area discriminating it from religiousness. Religiousness appears as a term for an orientation towards conventional religious forms and cults, spirituality as the attempt to experience transcendence directly and personally and to live it in privacy. A spiritual life, however, always includes personal growth, changing what exists in the individual into something else closer to the divine. The Middle Ages already stressed that spirituality is not possible without transformation of the mundane person into her other, spiritual nature. That applies for the Christian contemplative tradition since the Desert Fathers as well as for all Far Eastern meditative traditions, and it even applies where – like in many Christian theologies – the divine initiative is thought to be prior to the transformational achievement of the person.

A stronger partition results when spirituality is not only separated from religiousness, but from religion¹ in general. Such a double demarcation towards religion on the one hand, towards materialism on the other, is typically possible only here and now, while in India and many parts of the world today as once in the western Middle Ages a differentiation between material and spiritual world, between religion and ones own interior being is not reasonable. However, in western societies, spirituality appears as distinguished from religiousness qua religion primarily as the private, individual form of contact with a transcendent reality, while religiousness would be the same when it happens embedded in an institutional frame. However, there is an objection against such a definition. While it does no harm to spirituality if it is practiced outside religious communities (like the hermits of all cultures do), however, it seems inappropriate to distinguished it from religion per se theoretically and methodically. Because all forms and methods of searching for a transcendental connection come from the religious traditions of humankind or can be traced back to them, since religions are simply the social and historical place for building traditions of spiritual forms and methods (beside their undesirable political and narcissistic functions). Even spiritual geniuses, finding their spiritual path beyond all traditions (as some regard the contemporaries Eckhart Tolle or Eileen Caddy), can be traced back at least ex post facto and partially to the sources of knowledge contained in certain spiritual traditions, partially they can be

¹ We use the concept of religion here neither according to Schleiermacher/Otto/James as primordial human attribute nor in the sense of the often criticised export of monotheistic religious concepts to other cultures, but simply in terms of: *Tradition of transcendental knowledge*.

understood as innovators of these traditions. Besides, there will always be just a few spiritual autodidacts who are able to create their spirituality out of themselves (some even assume, that such autodidacts do not exist at all). However, in almost all cases spiritual seekers need the wisdom of others in which they can confide at least in the beginning of the way. If you do not want to search this wisdom in religion, you have to search it elsewhere where no religion is.

Thereby, the concept *spirituality* runs the risk of not being distinguishable any more from other “surplus offers” for life enrichment. If we want spirituality to maintain a specific profile as a concept of its own it should remain distinguishable from terms like “self-realisation”, “well-being” or “wellness”, “success” and also “happiness”. Thus, the other demarcation comes to the fore in which spirituality is contrasted to materialism (like once the contrast to *caralitas*). Because we realise that spirituality makes only sense as a concept that contains the dimension of personal transcendence, with its ability to reach into another, non-material world. If we do not recognise this other reality, or transcendence, it makes no sense to talk about spirituality (and not simply about “self-realisation”).

It makes no difference whether the separation between mundanely experienceable, material reality and otherworldly, just “differently” discernible world (like in the mystic experience, in the enlightenment etc.) will be nullified again in the second step. Thus, for example, many Buddhist schools or the Indian Advaita Vedanta would not stress the existence of two worlds, but point out to the fact that, in the end, the one world and the other are the same. Nevertheless, they either presuppose the preceding separation into two world areas implicitly, by saying, for example, both worlds (!) are, *finally* one; or they make a clear distinction between the perception of an enlightened being and an unenlightened one (and only for the first both worlds are identical!). Therefore, even after expanding the concept to other traditions than the Christian, we can adhere to the fact that it is just the acceptance of the otherworldly which distinguishes spirituality from any other form of *weltanschauung*.

How can real spirituality be distinguished from unreliable forms of spirituality?

We cannot distinguish serious spirituality from more dubious forms simply by the fact that the first takes place within the main religions – or even within ecclesiastical Christianity – and the latter outside (or vice versa: that real spirituality does not subordinate itself to religion). However, we must be aware that there is a closed, not accidental connection between transcendence and religion because real spirituality strives for transcendence while real religion preserves the tradition necessary for transmitting the human knowledge about it. Religion is indispensable for spiritual practise, without determining any religion or even any degree of institutionalisation. Also a scarcely institutionalised religion like neopaganism contains tradition, while a loose movement like the New Age could become a religion in the sense that it is about to develop its own traditions (even if not a firm institutionalisation) (cf. Hanegraaf 1998). However, for this, time is needed: The longer something has been tested, has been reflected and proved to be good, the more valuable it is; this applies for spiritual forms and methods, too.

However, spirituality is only sincere if it is sincerely lived in the daily routine. Because spirituality is just the real longing for transcendence, we can find answers for our everyday life to exactly that question, what helps us to get in touch with the divine, in a real spiritual systems' frame of reference. "Spiritual products" serving mundane egotism, being detached from religious tradition, most likely do not provide any sincere frames of reference, or just such ones paying attention to our egotistic motives alone, not to our spiritual development.

On the other hand, spirituality may also not disregard that part of universal religious knowledge which provides guidelines for a comprehensive spiritual life in human as well as global community (including animals, plants, technology; even if some of these guidelines still refer to moral systems made for infantile societies without adult ethical reflective capabilities). "Spirituality", being harmful to other beings or promoting narcissism, war, environmental destruction, or self-elevation, can hardly be called sincere, because it contradicts the connection between harmony and love on the one hand and the divine on the other, which is taught by all religious traditions.

Spirituality that does not primarily promote the relation of the individual and an otherworldly power (numinosum), his/her enlightenment or his/her continuous transformation for coming closer to the divine, is not sincere because it does not focus on transcendence. The Buddhist teacher and psychologists, Chögyam Trungpa, coined the expression „spiritual materialism“ – meaning that spiritual products are bought or sold like material consumer goods for the maximisation of mundane happiness. "Products for fulfilling meaning needs", utilising transcendence just as the means for mundane aims and not regarding it as a purpose in itself, in any case, are perversions of the original concept of spirituality. While on the other hand spirituality must also demonstrate being effective in our life here and now, „holy fools“, contradicting all denominational regulations, can possess absolutely real spirituality (like the Tibetan national saint Drugpa Künleg, the Indian Ramakrishna, the legendary Mullah Nasruddin, the early Christian type of saint called "salós", or maybe even "Osho"). Checking spiritual teachings and teachers, therefore, means not to regard them in a superficial but in a thoroughly manner according to their closeness to transcendence.

To sum up, real spirituality seems to be reflected in four criteria:

- 1) Real spirituality is aimed at a transcendental truth and reality in personal experience, not only at immanent advantages. Moreover, it does not merely appeal to the adherence of dogmas or theses of supposed masters.
- 2) Real spirituality does not contradict the common ethical base of all big religions.
- 3) Real spirituality is – even when it is ecstatic, gay, foolish, or down to earth – oriented towards a serious, holistic life practise including personal transformation in direction to the transcendent.
- 4) Real spirituality always has a clear connection with one or several religious traditions, whether it is a part of these traditions or has descended from them or at least consorts with them. This does not exclude the possibility that it can be an innovation or continuation of the known.

Literatur:

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