

## *Christian Spiritual Experience as a Model of a Culture of Dialogue*

### ABSTRACT

A space for dialogue between people and the cultures is a focus of this article. To start with, the biblical basis for analysing spiritual experience is presented, followed by the components of Christian spiritual-religious experience. It is also explored whether it is possible to cross-reference the said components with the culture of dialogue. A particular focus is made on the spirituality of encounter and mysticism that leads to a conclusion that a reliable and continuously deepening reflection on Christian spirituality shows its value not only on a “vertical” (upright) plane, i.e. a dialogue with God, but also on a horizontal, flat plane. It shapes the overall attitude of a person, both towards other people and towards themselves, as well as towards the world around them. Certain elements may play a major role in shaping the culture of dialogue between people and the communities of people. These elements are: relational character, desire of getting to know “the other you”, emphasizing the dignity of “the other you”, mutual respect, shared search for and acceptance of the truth and a communal dimension (communion). The ethical aspects of spiritual experience – including a mystical experience – such as conscience, virtue or value, have also been regarded because the ethical elements play a very important role in the dialogue of people and communities.

*KEYWORDS: dialogue, Christianity, mysticism, spirituality*

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The question of religious experience has been evoking great interest of both philosophers and theologians. It is, among other things, thanks to studies in the field of philosophical cognition by such authors as e.g. James (1902) and Guardini (1961), as well as in the field of theological cognition, e.g. Truhlar (1951), that the concept of religious experience has evolved from empiricism, psychologism, sentimentalism and subjectivism to objectivism and respect for spiritual and metaphysical norms of human nature. Christian spiritual experience is a matter for reflection of spiritual theology that focuses on its main area of interest. It is also the very nature of Christian spiritual experience and various aspects of this experience: spiritual, psychological, social, etc.

A few features of Christian spiritual experience are considered as a perfect model of social dialogue. The nature of Christian experience includes, *inter alia*, relational character (as outside of Christianity there is also non-relational spiritual religious experience), openness to getting to know the other "you", emphasising the dignity of the other "you", mutual respect, a shared search for and acceptance of the truth, being invited to participate in the life of "the other", and a communion (communal) dimension. It is these and other features that will be presented as a model of any dialogue between people.

#### 1. BIBLICAL BASIS FOR ANALYSING SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

In order to understand what spiritual experience is by its nature, it is necessary to reach for the most important point of reference, i.e. the Bible. For Christians, it is the Word of God contained in the Bible that is the foundation of faith, but it is worth emphasising at this point that the Bible does describe not some abstract ideas but a very specific, existential, often painful spiritual experience of its sacred authors, their personal experiences

in a dialogue with God. Therefore, the Bible is the oldest, most universal description of spiritual experience.

In the Old Testament a man experiences God being present and active in history. That experience, in turn, results in gratitude. And the other way round: failing to notice God in history, forgetting about Him, about His beneficial or redeeming interference with the history of a nation or specific people was considered to be the greatest sin. It is already at this point that we can provide the first reference to the basic dialogue between people: to notice that somebody exists, to notice that they bring some tangible good to the lives of individuals and societies is the first step towards a dialogue. And, in contrary, any form of exclusion, paying no attention and ignoring another human being closes the possibility of a dialogue. That is important for the culture of dialogue all over the world. Emphasizing the memory, which is perpetuated in signs, becomes another very important feature in the spirituality of the Old Testament. It is important to remember about God, and liturgical symbols and signs are to assist in reaching that goal. One can say that it is also a process of learning a man's dialogical attitude: one should remember about the other persons even if they are not seen or heard. The memory should be cherished and kept because an obliteration of a memory is the obliteration of a dialogue. The third feature of the spirituality of the Old Testament is community. It is very clear that God gets in touch with people not only individually but also through the community. He builds, guides and brings up the community and turns it into the environment in which man is to develop spiritually. In the commandment of love of a neighbour, God gives an order to develop interpersonal relationships not based on likes or dislikes, not based on superficial preferences, but on the basis of the power of love, which everyone has for themselves, and that is why we are asked to love your neighbour "as you love yourself". Community is a very important feature of spiritual experience not only of the Old Testament: what is important, therefore, is not that "I"

should be saved but that “we” should be saved. When looking for a model of the people-to-people dialogue, it is difficult to find a better example. Any natural good possessed or worked out by a man is not intended to only meet his personal needs, but to make some “we” come into existence, that can enjoy this benefit.

In the New Testament, knowing God focuses on the person of Christ who is the manifestation of the Father. An ancient hymn of the first Christian community (Col 1:15-20; cf. Jn 1:18) describes Christ as “the image of the invisible God”. He is the One who, in person and history, became visible while being close to the invisible God. Consequently, the human figure of Christ, His life and teaching are placed in the centre of spiritual experience. If we were to ask what Christ taught his disciples, what attitude He wanted to shape in them, then the answer would be simple: He taught the dialogue which is dominated by love reaching the point of giving one’s own life for the life of another person. The Gospel is against any isolation, assessing and judging another person and against indifference.

## 2. COMPONENTS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CROSS-REFERRING THEM TO THE CULTURE OF DIALOGUE.

The capturing of a relationship with God comprises the following elements:

- *Intellectual and cognitive* – as there must be an idea of God, which orients a person’s attitude and specifies their relationship. This element is indispensable for a dialogue between people because it implies a few questions. Who is my interlocutor? Where do they come from? What are they interested in? What constitutes a destructive element in a dialogue is the lack of information, which is often replaced by prejudices and stereotypes.

- *Volitional* – a spiritual experience is necessarily an act of freedom, and to be more precise – an act of generosity (performed on a voluntary basis). The relationship with God must not be, even to a very minor extent, imposed or a result of manipulation. It is also a guideline for the culture of dialogue in which encouragement and suggestion should never be replaced by coercion or violence.
- *Affective* – Christian spiritual experience engages the whole person, and thus their affective side: hence, it creates joy, worship, adoration, thanksgiving, prayer, etc. In today's culture one may observe a sort of over-accentuation of emotions: the dialogue is often broken under the influence of emotions. Therefore, it would be advisable to look for wise restraint in this area (i.e. the participation of emotions in building the culture of dialogue). In the history of Church, there is a search for the most appropriate role of emotionality in building the foundations of faith.
- *Active* – Christian spiritual experience provides inspiration for life and specific activity, and it turns into specifically determined activities; it aims to ensure that all acts are inspired and sanctified by the service to God. It is also a valuable suggestion for everyone who reflects on the culture of dialogue as it must be more than just creating ideas, hence it must be related to taking specific actions.
- *Community* – not only is it about the aspect mentioned above, but it is also about the fact that transmission of faith in Church takes place "through other people" and not directly from God. It is also impossible for a man, without help of other people, to be able to understand the nature of his relationship with God. This might be, in turn, a contribution to reflection on the dialogue in the context of individual relationship, but also the dialogue among groups and societies. The gathering of a community corresponds to a person's deepest needs. A reflection about a dynamism and spirituality of communities within the

Catholic Church might constitute invaluable help for everyone who, when implementing the culture of dialogue, would like to create and moderate any communities of people.

### 3. "THE SPIRITUALITY OF ENCOUNTER" AND MYSTICISM

Personalistic understanding of the relationship with God constitutes a foundation upon which Christian spirituality rests. For Martin Buber "all real life is a meeting", which he characterizes "in the double meaning of the word: as reaching out to someone else, but also as reaching out to someone's clemency and gift" (Sudbrack, 1996, p.114). We are reminded about this truth by Popes, in their writings. Benedict XVI (2005, number 1) says at the beginning of his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* that „(...) being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life to a new horizon and a decisive direction". Pope Francis (2013, number 4) made similar remarks; in his first Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*; he makes more than twenty references to the relationship with God, referring to it as a meeting "Faith is born from an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, the love that precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives". Therefore, it can be said that Christian spirituality is the "spirituality of encounter" and the term is gaining a more and more important place in Catholic Spiritual Theology.

As Ogorzałek (2015) points out, an issue of the encounter has been the subject of a theological discussion, which is limited to an interpersonal encounter (e.g., in philosophy this term is used also with a reference to relations with non-personal beings). The spirituality of the encounter not only is a relationship with God, but also with a human being, including oneself. For every culture of a dialogue "encounter" is a key term, whereas "the spirituality of encounter" might be its spiritual foundation.

A mystical experience included in the category of encounter is a specific form of spiritual experience. According to Sudbrack (1996) mysticism, as an encounter, is an internal moment of any living faith in God. If we look at mysticism as encounter, then in it we will find help for any other encounter: with oneself, with the other "you", but also in a broader sense, with other community, with other culture, etc. If a mystic discovers that "encounter" is his spiritual nature, then this experience stimulates (or it should stimulate) them to open up more and reach out to another person and another culture.

The name itself comes from the Greek concept *mysticos* (mysterious, secret things), which, as an adjective, refers to the nature of religious, esoteric rituals, which were called *mystêrion*. Furthermore, the word *mystês* means the one who is looking for the secret knowledge. All the terms derive from the same etymological origin, the Greek word *myô*, which means "to close one's eyes so as not to see something that is a secret", or "to shut one's mouth so as not to reveal a secret" (Ancilli, 1984, p.17). Thus, the term itself derives from the Hellenic tradition and it points to the reality, which is unknown, hidden, inaccessible to direct cognition and expression. Each of the great religions has its mysticism, but in the Christian tradition the adjective „mystical“ has a threefold meaning: (a) biblical – referring to the way the Scriptures are read; (b) sacramental – concerning sacramental signs, and (c) spiritual – referring to the experience of God's presence in a mystic's soul. That is the meaning that is most relevant to the subject matter the present article reflects upon: in this meaning mysticism is the union of God with a man, experienced in the very heart of his personal being (at "the bottom of his soul"), it is a passive experience (i.e., out of God's initiative) (Chmielewski, 2002).

The science, which deals with mystic phenomena is called mystology. In contemporary reflection on mysticism, there are a few elements that can be very useful in the discussion of the culture of dialogue. Below, there will be mentioned only ethical

issues, which, apparently, can make the greatest contribution to the development of the culture of dialogue. There is no Christian mysticism without ethics.

Value is the main path to Christian mysticism and as a term, it was disseminated by Max Scheler, in the context of ethics. The philosopher placed *sacrum*, i.e. a religious value, in the highest place. *Sacrum*, like all the other values, is a universal value; it is accessible to all traditions though each religion discovers its own way leading to it. It is followed by "spiritual values": truth, good and beauty. A person refines their best inclinations and develops their spiritual potential when they go beyond the flatness of everyday life, striving for what exceeds their capabilities – the knowledge of truth. A man is free and thus ready for a dialogue when in his spiritual aspirations he is actually guided by the search for truth, wants to be good or to admire beauty – not because of something else but for the very reason that these values exist. Practising values gives a person a sense of fulfilment since they let him fulfil himself as a whole person (Kłoczowski, 2001). The basis of spiritual experience, thus understood, might be a platform of intercultural encounter.

The second crucial term in ethics is virtue. Ancient ethical reflection, by Aristotle himself among others, paved the way for building humanity through "ethical bravery", i.e. virtue gained through long and patient efforts. In the culture of dialogue it is impossible to build anything without raising the question of virtue as that would reduce the dialogue to a very superficial relationship. The third ethical term close to mysticism is *conscience*. As Kłoczowski (2001) points out, *conscience* is defined as an inner voice, which judges what is right and wrong; it is an act of a "thinking person". Mysticism asks a question about conscience and about obedience to this inner voice, which tells us what is good and commands us to reject what is evil. Mysticism, as it clearly emerges from Christian spirituality, is also a source of strength to keep following the voice of conscience persistently and



in spite of suffering. Conscience is so important for the culture of dialogue because a dialogue is based on trust. And it is not possible to build trust towards a person "without conscience", who thinks and acts in a calculated manner.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a reliable and continuously deepening reflection on Christian spirituality shows its value not only on a "vertical" (upright) plane, i.e. a dialogue with God, but also on a horizontal, flat plane. It shapes the overall attitude of a man, both towards other people and themselves, as well as towards the whole world around them. The elements contained in it, such as: relational character, desire for the knowledge of "the other you", emphasizing the dignity of "the other you", mutual respect, shared search for and acceptance of the truth and a communion (communal dimension) may play a major role in shaping the culture of dialogue between people and the communities of persons. Moreover, the ethical aspects of spiritual experience, including a mystic experience, such as conscience, virtue or value, must not be disregarded because ethical elements play a very important role in the dialogue of persons or communities.

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