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The Idea of a Spiritual Life

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Our lives are like temples that we are building. The living building we are erecting is a spiritual one within ourselves, an inner life. It is in this context that I want to consider the idea of spirituality and the possibility that there is a spiritual science.

The Idea of Spirituality

My spiritual roots are in the Judeo-Christian theological tradition and the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. My spiritual guide in keeping with these traditions has been the Scriptures: the Torah in the Jewish tradition and the Bible in the Christian tradition.

The idea of spirituality, as far as I have been able to ascertain, is not found in the Bible or in early Jewish rabbinical writing. It is an expression created by medieval translators of the Bible to express philosophical and scientific concepts that were Hellenic in origin.¹ (Numbers refer to references listed at the bottom of the page).

Spirituality in Western literature means the opposite of worldliness. It refers to a special condition of being which is immaterial, hence potentially immortal. It is important to note here that such an idea would have been uncommon in philosophical and theological speculations of the ancient Jewish writers.

The idea of spirituality does occur in later Jewish writers, who began to speculate that the nature of man is essentially spiritual. Man is capable of experiencing the presence of God and capable of fashioning his life in a manner appropriate to this objective. Opinions differed widely, however, as to precisely how life in the presence of God was to be defined and achieved.

'Some taught that spirituality is "the culmination of a long series of moral and religious virtues", beginning with such "outer" virtues as patience, modesty, discipline, and the conquest of anger. Afterwards, one could move toward a more

"esoteric" or inner way of experiencing the divine presence, achieving perhaps mystical union with God.

For others, the Commandments of the Torah could be and were interpreted as directives for living the spiritual life. While for others, such practices as contemplation and meditation, practices which derive from prayer and liturgical prescriptions for communal and group worship, were the path to spiritual experience.

If we conceive the practice of contemplation and meditation as characteristic of spiritual practice, then the concept of spirituality could conceivably be extended to include non-western religious traditions.

From these speculations about how to live the spiritual life, we might generalize about the spiritual man somewhat as follows. Most certainly he would be one who lives conscious of the presence of God. In the Christian sense, he would be one who loves God with his whole mind, his whole heart, and his whole being and his neighbor as well as himself. The proper attitude of the spiritual man would be the joyous resignation to God's will. His life would be one devoted not only to the love of God, but to a love that is inclusive of the whole human family. This love would demand compassion for the oppressed and the poor, and a willingness to serve as peacemaker within the human community. Such a spirituality is obviously not of an otherworldly character, but very much rooted in witnessing God's presence in the world.

In this sense, then, the "ultimate spiritual and parental models are Abraham and Sarah, showing the love of God to others and bringing them 'under the wings of the Shekinah' (meaning Divine Presence) and thereby enriching their own lives with God as well."²

The Study of Spirituality

I propose the thesis that the science proper to the study of spirituality is metaphysics. The questions about spirituality are not simply questions whose answers are to be found in religion. The proper religious study is theology. What is metaphysics? Is there any such science? This, of course is the question central to Aristotle's Analytics.

This takes us to the speculative traditions of Greek philosophy. the very word metaphysics is Greek in origin, derived from the expression *ta meta ta physika* (literally translated means "what comes after physics"), a very ambiguous expression. Does it refer simply to the things that come after the physical things in the hierarchy of being, suggesting the possible existence of supersensible realities? Or does the expression refer simply to several volumes of books on philosophy in which the volume on Metaphysics was placed after the volume on Physics?

The generally accepted interpretation, at least since medieval times, places Metaphysics as speculations about the possibility and nature of supersensible reality.³ Setting aside the lexical question about the origins of metaphysics, I will continue with some speculations about the decline of metaphysical studies in recent times.

The source of metaphysics lies in Plato's question (in the Theatetis) about the origins of philosophy itself. The Arabic philosopher al-Farabi assesses the significance of the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies as giving us an account of philosophy and also an account of the ways to it and the ways to re-establish it when it becomes confused or extinct.⁴

By suggesting that the study of spirituality is properly an object within the scope of metaphysical speculation is to tacitly acknowledge the validity of spirituality and metaphysics as objects of rational analysis. This in effect takes the systematic study of spirituality beyond the confines of theology and religion. Heidegger, on the other hand, argued at length in his Tübingen lecture of 1927, "Phenomenology and Theology" ...

Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth has the answer to the question "Why (is there something) rather than nothing?" even before it is asked: everything that is, except God himself, has been created by Him. One who holds to such faith can in a way participate in the asking of our question, but he cannot really question without ceasing to be a believer and taking all the consequences of such a step. He will only be able to act "as if".⁵

The way to metaphysical knowledge is by way of contemplation, and for spiritual awareness the way is the sustained contemplation of God. This is not to deny the possibility of arriving at metaphysical knowledge, or spiritual awareness, by way of intellectual analysis. As David said: "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers -- what is man that Thou art mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:4-5)

It would seem that the study of metaphysics leads one to contemplate the possibility of the existence, oneness and immateriality of God. The practice of spirituality would instill in the student of metaphysics the cultivation of the love of God. This would include the desire to praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name. The movement is from the intellect to the heart, from contemplation and analysis to love.

As Leo Strauss so well describes in his article on "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" ...

When we attempt to return to the roots of Western civilization, we observe soon that Western civilization has two roots which are in conflict with each other, the Biblical and the Greek philosophic, and this is to begin with a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something reassuring and comforting. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental

tension. There is therefore no reason inherent in Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict, that is. No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.⁶

The existence or possibility of a spiritual life, then, is the question of Athens and Jerusalem itself. There is no shame in not knowing the answer to this question. After all, for the unexamined life that fails or refuses to ask it, there is little else.

Spiritual Powers

The spiritual state may be considered a special state of consciousness which awakens special spiritual powers. This is a viewpoint not uncommon in Western and Eastern forms of mysticism. Whether these powers are supernatural gifts of grace or natural abilities that can be nurtured by certain practices is a moot point. These special powers have been attributed to gurus, saints, the Jewish prophets, and others from time immemorial. They are thought to be the object of the study of Yoga, Zen, Christian Asceticism, and other similar practices.

Central among these spiritual powers is the prophetic spirit, or clairvoyance, which enables one to discern in advance an event or human encounter in the continuum of time and space. This same spirit may enable one to illuminate a text of Scripture, or inspire one to create a work of art, or in some cases to perform supernatural feats.

The spiritual power of prophecy was attributed to forty-eight men and seven women of the Bible and was believed to be abundant in Israel before the disappearance of Elijah.⁷ In this spirit Adam is supplied with the names of the creatures God has created. Jacob is enlightened as to the future of his sons. David and Solomon are inspired to compose the books of Psalms and Ecclesiastes. The Biblical prophet, as representative of one who lives a spiritual life, is not representative of all spirituality. He is pictured in the Scriptural accounts as often caught between the fire of his divine mission and his love for his people. He tries to comfort the people in times of tragedy and despair with messianic visions of better days to come.

Non-biblical descriptions of the spiritual life are less dramatic. There is no radical reordering of one's life, no compelling vocation to speak the word of the Lord. Instead, there is merely an experience of illumination, a feeling of exaltation. It places no obligation on one to perform extraordinary feats or live an extraordinarily exemplary life. It principally enables one to extend goodness and righteousness in the community.

Spiritual reading is one behavior which characterizes the spiritual person. The spiritual person is also characterized as one who performs deeds of loving-kindness, is joyful of heart, works for the greater honor of God, and sacrifices personal advantage for the good of the community.

The Soul

In furthering the idea of spirituality and the idea of special spiritual powers associated with the spiritual state, it is essential to consider the possibility that man is more than his body. If man is more than his body, what is he? One may answer, he is a living soul evolving or advancing in consciousness. This is quite different from the concept of man as a psychophysical unity, with the soul being merely the unifying principle. This would subordinate the soul to time and nature, existing within the confines of physical reality alone. The other idea, developed under the influence of Greek philosophy, regards the soul as a metaphysical entity, ascribing to it metaphysical existence, thus immortal in nature and capable of transcending space and time.

In this view, man is not fundamentally a creation of the natural world, whose essential being is corporeal, but a creature whose source is divine. The temporal and spatial distinctions governing nature do not entirely apply to man. The soul's existence does not depend upon its physical expression. It existed before the body and will remain after it. Putting man's essential being in the supernatural order means that the laws governing the soul are neither physical nor rational, but metaphysical.

The idea of the soul is itself a metaphysical concept which cannot be understood apart from its divine origin, or the concept of spirit, a spirit which is by definition eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. The soul, then, is an individual expression of that spirit.

In Biblical terms, man was created "in the image of God". What is it that was created in the image of God? What is it that was created capable of partaking of the divine, representing an order of existence transcending time and the nature? This could not conceivably be an attribute of the body. It would have to some inner principle such as the soul.

The concept of soul is essentially metaphysical. It portrays man's existence as having meaning only in relation to God. As man develops his metaphysical essence, he distances himself further and further from his physical, material substance.

The guarantee of his capacity to attain the realm of the spirit is to be found in the internal structure of his soul, which ascends level by level from the material to the spiritual. If man is created in the divine image and so has a fundamental relationship to God and an innate ability to serve Him, it is by virtue of the

structure and elements of his soul, which reflect the divine reality and endow him with the capacity to conceive of God.⁸

The idea that man's essence is directed toward the spiritual dimension of existence is bound up with the concept of perfection. Man does not belong simply to the natural order, which is complete in itself. Rather, man is destined for perfection in a realm transcending that order. The notion of perfection not only shapes the purpose of man, but relates him as a supernatural rather than natural being. As we are told: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mat. 5:48). The scriptures teach man the various ways in which his supernatural purpose can be realized. It is the point of contact between man and his metaphysical aspect. It determines his spiritual fate in that far-distant land from which he shall never return.

However, let us not assume that the Bible explicitly conceptualizes the soul as a metaphysical entity. More in keeping with the early interpretations of the Torah is the idea of the soul as part of the psychophysical unity of man, an entity composed of body and a soul. The Torah is dominated by a monistic view that ascribes no metaphysical significance to human existence. Soul is simply that element that imparts feelings and desires, physical as well as spiritual. It is also the site of a spiritual life separate from that of the body. This would be the concept of man as a "living soul", or a psychophysical organism created in the image of God. Yet, it is this very concept of man having been created in the image of God that allowed for the post-biblical thought of the soul as a metaphysical entity. This concept seems to be more influenced by Greek thought than by rabbinical teachings. ⁹

The Greek view of the soul as belonging to the realm of the divine, the infinite, and the eternal, and the body confined to the realm of the material, finite, and mortal no doubt distinguishes both Jewish thought and Christian doctrine. This dualistic conception of man, in which body and soul are in opposition to each other, has religious as well as metaphysical implications. The religious ideal of liberating the soul from the bonds of the physical, thereby enhancing spiritual purity, we are told, was entirely foreign to biblical Judaism, but highly developed in medieval thought.¹⁰

Later Cabalistic teachers describe the spiritual structure of man as making him capable of affecting and being affected by all reality on every level of existence. It is such thinking that leads one eventually to consider the mystical significance of the doctrine of the soul, mysticism being the contemplation and experience of union with the divine.

I will end this article by acknowledging that this is but an introduction to a fascinating and exceedingly no less controversial subject such as any treatise on the nature of man and the purpose of life would be.

The Buddhist tradition has much to teach us about the issues discussed in this article. Thomas Merton towards the end of his life went East in search of some answers to these questions, much to the chagrin of his religious superiors. We have only alluded the Cabalistic and the Jewish mystical traditions, about which I know next to nothing. These might be sources of considerable enlightenment. There is also another tangential subject: the concept of consciousness, especially cosmic consciousness. Other related questions need to be addressed within a treatise on spirituality, like spiritual healing, the reality of psychic phenomena, reincarnation, astral projection, and spiritualism to mention a few.

References

1. Arthur Green, "Spirituality" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought. Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, edited by A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, p. 904.
2. Arthur Green, "Spirituality" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought. Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs*, edited by A.A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, p. 906.
3. Joseph Owens, 1963, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*. Note: an opposing view was argued by Johann Gottlieb Buhle in 1788.
4. Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (1962), as quoted by Alan Udoff's chapter on "Metaphysics" in A. A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr, op.cit., pp. 603-611.
5. Martin Heidegger, 1959, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.
6. Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, op. cit., p. 609.
7. For this information I am indebted to Aaron Singer's chapter, "Holy Spirit," in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, op.cit., p. 410.
8. Rachel Elijor, "Soul," in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, op.cit., p. 888.
9. Reference for this text is Rachel Elijor, "Soul," in Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, op.cit., p. 890.
10. Elijor claims in addition that this thinking became part of Kabalistic thought.