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*Research (B.Q.) [20 mars]*

ANY COMMITMENT TO A REAL DEBATE BETWEEN CONVICTIONS,  
WHETHER RELIGIOUS OR NON BELIEVING, BEARS WITNESS TO A 'SPIRITUALITY'

## **SPIRITUALITY IS NO LONGER A RELIGIOUS PREROGATIVE**

### **INTERCONVICTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ARE TO BE APPLIED**

Like all living reality, languages change over the years. Slowly but surely. By taking account of the gradual evolution of certain words we can often develop useful observations on society and its deepest development. So it is with the word "spirituality." The attempt to follow the sense in which this word has been used in the French speaking world over a number of decades can most certainly help us to gather new resources in the field of inter convictional dialogue, both for practical aspects and for the institutions.

#### *Considerable vagueness ?*

Like all ideas that relate to developments at the heart of our culture, the word "spirituality" is on the tip of everyone's tongue. It is used to signify just about anything in a miasma of indecisive vagueness or of imprecise expressions which are sometimes contradictory. We speak more and more of spiritualities, without being able to give the least precision to what we mean by this word. If it is neither exactly religion, nor wisdom, nor the sacred, nor the transcendent, nor an awareness of what is beyond us, nor of anxiety about the unknown, nor of love, nor of mysticism, what is the real meaning?

Is it even possible, in the current use of this concept, to propose, if not an accepted definition, at least a kind of outline around certain *chief implications*, on condition that there is enough consistency to be able to avoid vagueness in undertaking interconvictional dialogue?

#### *A little bit of history...*

The idea of spiritualité (derived from *spiritualitas* in ecclesiastical Latin) has its history in religion: for a long time it has been understood as an expression of the relationship of human beings with a higher being, an ultimate reality (God) : it referred to all the processes involved in attaining salvation: initiation, ritual, meditation, retreats, prayer, ascetic practice, mystical experience and so on.

Aimé Solignac offers an analysis of the word "spirituality" in an excellent article in Volume X of the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*. It provides a quick overview of the term in European history. Over the centuries it has successively acquired three chief meanings: 1°) a *religious meaning*, which we pick up when we speak about the spiritual life; 2°) a *philosophical meaning* to describe a way of being or a way of knowing in respect of the difference between spirit and matter (spiritual awareness as opposed to materialism), which is often converted into the difference that exists between what is internal and what is external; 3°) a *legal meaning* seen in the antithesis between spiritual and temporal. Solignac's research leads us to conclude<sup>1</sup> that "the philosophical meaning is hardly used nowadays except when there is a specific meaning like 'the spirituality of the soul;' the legal meaning disappeared to all intents and purposes at the end of the XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. On the other hand, the religious sense has come to predominate."

Since Aimé Solignac's contribution, the meaning of the word has continued to develop: the more extended use of the term 'spirituality' is also evidence of profound change in the way in which our contemporaries arrange their convictions. Alongside *religious* spiritualities that have, themselves become more nume-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. note (3) in the article 'spiritualité' in the *Wikipédia encyclopaedia*.

rous and more diversified, we can no longer ignore the arrival of authentic *non-religious*<sup>2</sup> spiritualities of different forms and emanating from different traditions. It is useful to set them out with their similarities and differences in respect of spiritualities of religious origin.

### *Why this enlargement of meaning ?*

A number of factors come together to give spirituality a more global meaning, in harmony with a humanist aim. First the secularisation of whole areas of our culture, the distinction between philosophical research, jealous of its freedom in respect of that divine revelation to which historical religions lay claim, and indeed, the decline in membership of the great traditional religious systems. There is also a move from sociologically dominant religion (social membership of those who practice a religion buoyed up by public ritual practice) and more interior convictions, more personal ones, — in sum the movement from a society that some people call 'post modern' or better a society of 'second modernity' (Jean-Marc Ferry, 2013).

Furthermore since the mid twentieth century different social movements based in oriental practice, often became disconnected from religious currents that had supported them, or by teaching of psycho-somatic therapies geared towards a broader understanding of the whole of human health. Finally let us consider the impression of the fragility of our civilisation, of the threat to the environment, of distress when faced with suffering, the appalling evils that human beings have inflicted on themselves (totalitarianism, world wars, the Shoah, genocide, etc.). These perceptions lead us bring back into play resources that were traditionally the consequence of the "humanist" traditions of our cultures.

In the parlance of those who claim a spiritualité that they term "post-Christian," we nearly always discover a double meaning in one form or another: it is about being careful to find or to find again the deeper self (to reconnect with the self) and about being careful to develop deeper links with otherness, with nature, with one's family, with all human beings, with the Whole (to reconnect with the other). This movement, which Teilhard de Chardin recognised when he encouraged "openness to oneself, openness to the other, openness to what is greater than oneself" is realised, in the best instances, in what we are pleased to term AN ACTIVE SPIRITUALITY.

### *The chief components of a contemporary spirituality*

In the context of what we have just described it hardly seems possible to provide a precise, generally accepted définition for spirituality that can take account of the great diversity of meanings that we have seen to be involved. Above all it is good to note that spirituality is subject to test before thinking about itself, and that it has difficulty in finding expression in the pre-reflexive forms<sup>3</sup> of images and what they evoke; metaphor, myth, parable, symbolic narrative, the "story of a soul." It is enough to have an awareness of the literary form, most often poetic, always taken by great mystic writing, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or agnostic. We should not expect that spirituality's reflected approach should lead to clarity or an idea or conceptual rigour.

Meanwhile, it seems to me that it is possible to extract certain characteristic themes<sup>4</sup> which we find in more or less all spiritualities in different forms and in different proportions. The need to set this out compels us to develop these characteristics (?) one after another; but we should not forget that they exist along side one another and that they can be mutually contradictory.

#### **1° *Openness to oneself***

Believer or not, religious or not, we are at the edge of spirituality from the moment when, breaking from the daly round, we marvel at our existence and wonder about ourselves. We engage in a certain interior experiment, which may be calm and serene just as it can turn out to be fierce and profoundly disturbing. A

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<sup>2</sup> See below a short selective bibliography.- translator's note : the French word is *laïque*, but this does not engage the law of 1905 in this case.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the fine, but difficult book by Jean-Marc FERRY, *Les grammaires de l'intelligence*, Paris, Cerf, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Note that I am inspired at this point by the methodological idea of the *idéel-type*, set out by Max Weber and used in his sociological work and in religious histories.

new work on ourselves comes into being; the Buddhists talk of it as an "awakening." It is not surprising that spiritual life is marked by an awakening of the spirit, a development of spiritual capacity which have so far been latent. Then we become aware of our lack of interior unity, we get an awareness of the indiscipline of our emotions, of suffering from a lack of harmony among the different constituents of our being: the body, the psyche, emotions, desires, the intellect, the memory the will, .... But above all if we engage in a little meditation, to our astonishment we come into contact with an unexpressed part of ourselves. In looking in on ourselves, we discover that our intelligence includes other resources, far beyond simple listening; intuition, imagination, emotional spontaneity, aesthetic ambition, the ability to perceive the depth of being and things. We learn emptiness, silence, darkness. An unutterable part of ourselves would remain dumb if we had not given it the favour of a little silence (Pascale Senk). The process of giving depth to our spirituality is seen in a journey that leads to profound personal liberation through the development of freedom of thought and freedom of conscience, as well as by the peace of simplicity if, however, it is realised with the determination to seek to do what is true. On that condition, all spirituality reveals itself as being in some ways unifying liberating.

## 2° *Openness to the other*

Concern for oneself, an elementary aspect of all spirituality, realised in the preparedness to do what is true, is never present without concern for the other, for others. It is quite wrong to believe that aspects that come together in the perspective of openness to oneself enclose the "spiritual" being in the loneliness of individualism. Spirituality enhances the person, it never isolates. The short journey from oneself to oneself can never avoid passage by another person. The same concern for truth, for sincerity to oneself and with others, which brings our awakening to ourselves, shows us the way that leads to the other. Spiritual growth reveals the illusory nature of narcissism and breaks the barriers of egoism. We are called to look beyond ourselves. Our dynamic aspects, the existence of which so far do not even suspect; awaken. We can find ourselves moulded by empathy, indwelt by compassion (Buddhism again...) with a capacity for generosity. We hear a call to struggle for justice, for solidarity, difficult to identify and with a bias to the poor, the afflicted, suffering human beings, and finally an invitation to love (let us not be afraid of the word).<sup>5</sup> This impetus does not at all spring from the fact that one is a believer or that one is not a believer, that one is religious or agnostic or atheist. It arises from this source of our humanity, which is common to us all, which is rooted directly in intuition - with its 'spiritual' nature - which brings together all humanity beyond legitimate community identity (*appartenances*).<sup>6</sup>

Then we recognised, painfully, injuries by everything in us and around us that obstructs the realisation of a truly human world. That is the dark side of spirituality. And we surprise ourselves by bringing together in ourselves and around ourselves all the energy of indignation, of fervour, or the thirst for justice, of love, so as to liberate these forces, to open fields of activity for them. Our spirituality becomes active. We must work towards bringing about a society in which injustice, hate, violence can no longer have any justification. To the full extent to which it is lived with steadfast concern for truth, active spirituality makes us supporters and creators of non violence, passionate for justice, builders of institutions for freedom, cosmo-political citizens.

## *Openness to what is beyond oneself*

We must now go still further. Our amazement that we exist, which has brought us to the wonder of spirituality, never ceases to work on us, beyond our openness to the other and our commitment to justice and solidarity. If we are no longer tied to everyday things, then questions that we are tempted to avoid become more important because we do not find answers. We come up against what is unexplainable. Even worse, we

<sup>5</sup> It is enough to note how naturally the advocates of "*laïque* spirituality," like Luc Ferry or André Comte-Sponville speak freely about love, see it as the summit of virtue and the apogee of human accomplishment.

<sup>6</sup> The ineffaçable connection between the humanité of a single person to the whole of humanite is affirmer in sevrât sourates of the Quran. "The one who kills a single man who has not, himself, killed [...] is regarded as one who had killed all men" (5,32). Such an outlook illuminated the legal notion of '*crime against humanity*'.

come up against incomprehensibility. Chance events of our existence cause us to pass beyond "limited situations"<sup>7</sup> which upset us, which cause us to lose our footing and which confront us with the absurd.

In one way or another, these are questions of MEANING. Let us look briefly at some of the most common of them. My birth is a fact, I can analyse the conditions, explain it; but does that have meaning for me? The fact that I was born in France and not elsewhere, in the twentieth century and not in another one, in a certain social context, etc., does it mean to tell me something? And what is that? My death, that as well, will be a fact; it will always be possible to *explain* the causes; but to *understand* the meaning of my mortality, to discover the significance that the inevitable perspective of my death can have for me, today, that is quite another thing. Yet more: my death is not and never will be the object of an 'experiment' but the death of the being that I loved is one, with its trail of darkness and scandal: can I find meaning in that?

Modern science, with the development of knowledge, has introduced many questions to which there is no solution, in the field of thought (neuroscience) in respect of the universe (for example if the universe is fifteen thousand million years old, what was there before?) In respect of evolution (does it provide meaning?), in respect of human life (when does an embryo become a person?) is killing an embryo allowed? etc.), in respect of the unfathomable extent of time, of space, of the infinitely small. And so much else ....

The choice of an active spirituality made the darkness still darker. For it is no longer just a matter of accepting our finite nature, of enduring hardship: we come up against evil, against evil that is committed. The colossal extent of the evils committed through human wickedness, multiplied in the twentieth century, makes dumb the conscience that spiritual progress has made more delicate, more demanding. How can we continue to live after Oradour-sur-Glane, after the Gulag, after the Shoah? The most serious thing, without doubt is not so much the evil to which I am subjected (suffering, illness, loneliness, offense, humiliation), but rather the evil that I commit - above all that which I can never redeem. There is an aspect of the irredeemable, - that which brings us together to undertake actions that will limit what follows or repair the damage. There is the unpardonable: who will grant us forgiveness? There is the unjustifiable: who will find justification for us?

Whether we are believers or non believers, faithful or free thinking, religious or agnostic, these questions are ours. Being confronted by the absurd, the shock of discovering our limitations, the search after meaning, the scandal of evil committed, we live them all, in one way or another. There is no way to avoid them; perhaps they should not be put to one side. They are at the heart of all spirituality.

It is here, here alone - that we can separate ourselves. For the ways in which we choose to live with these questions are varied. They engage the question of the MEANING that we endeavour to give to our existence, and what one can therefore call existential. The attitude that we choose to adopt will give its own hue to our spirituality, its particular melody. Faced with what we can risk calling the mystery of human life, it is incumbent on one or another of us to *choose* the position from which we will face the challenge. Flight from the world (in the desert, in suicide, in drugs) may perhaps dispense us from making a choice. But the decision to act, well that always requires us to choose. No longer to wish to answer unanswerable questions, to silence the process of asking itself, entails for those who have an active spirituality, a kind of answer.

In any event, what we must emphasise is this: the essential lies not in the consequence of this radical choice which we call a spirituality. It is not the conclusions brought to ultimate questions that decides what is or is not "spiritual". It is quite precisely the conscious acceptance of our condition, the continuing desire to live that out in seeking after truth, the refusal to cease from the effort that is the call to the ultimate, - that is the tension that requires us to live a spirituality.

In coming to a conclusion, let us underline the close links that unite a spirituality, as we have endeavoured to define it, and interconvictional practice: aspects that affect one another. Loyal engagement in real dialogue between convictions is never bland, it will not occur without deep resonance to the way in which we live our own spirituality, without calling it into question, while ensuring that it engages with spiritual de-

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<sup>7</sup> I have borrowed this expression from the philosopher Karl Jaspers whose research sheds light on a rich philosophy of existence.

cisions that belong to us, and therefore without testing the steadfastness of our own ultimate choices. Now that is a real challenge ... ! On the other hand, to fear confrontation, at the depth of our fundamental convictions, is not a good indicator: spirituality that would protect itself from meeting the other, from the criticism brought by different convictions, indeed contrary ones, would be in danger of death. For spirituality, inter-convictional practice is certainly a trial, an area for testing truth we might say: its safeguard.

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