
Chapter 1

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE ACCORDING TO CATHOLIC TRADITION

Religious Life, Spiritual Life, Interior Life

An introduction to the “spiritual life” must begin by making quite clear the sense in which this expression is to be used. We must start, therefore, by defining the spiritual life. But such a definition will inevitably prove either too vague or too abstract unless at the outset the spiritual life is correlated with two other more or less synonymous terms or expressions: “the religious life” and “the interior life.”

We should note, first of all, that these three expressions are currently used in a loose way which tends to confuse them. Yet, even though the three more or less overlap, they do not exactly coincide. An effort to ascertain, as far as possible, what distinguishes them from one another and what they have in common will, therefore, prove enlightening.

We need to realize that there have existed, and still do exist, some forms of the “religious life” which imply neither any “spiritual life” nor any “interior life” properly so called. The old

Latin religion, that of the pagan peasants of Latium, involved nothing more than the correct carrying out of certain rites, with the exact repetition of certain formulae. Later on, as we learn from Cicero, a pontiff like Cotta could be considered beyond reproach even though he openly cast doubt on the very existence of the gods. Whether he himself was a believer or not was his own personal affair. All that was required of him was that he carry out the rites properly and properly pronounce the formulae.

Obviously, these are extreme examples. But in Christianity itself, among Catholics and among Protestants as well—even though the latter tend to minimize the essential value of external religion—men can be found whose religion, in actual fact, consists mostly, if not exclusively, of “practices” or “good works,” diligence in fulfilling ritual obligations (receiving the sacraments or reading the Bible). Is not this the essence if not the whole of the piety of many Christians, who may be very sincere and even devout after their fashion? For others, religion consists chiefly in a charitable activism in which they spend themselves, without stint, on all kinds of good works and social services. Doubtless, neither the one case nor the other (and they are often found in combination) could be considered by anyone who reflects on it a little to represent an ideal form of Christianity. But this is the sum or at least the principal part of Christianity for many people, who are often excellent persons filled with good will, and by no means “hypocritical Pharisees.”

Again, in that form of Buddhism which seems to be especially pure and primitive, called Hinayana (that is, “the little conveyance”), we find what might be called a “religion without God.” Actually, this last term seems ill-chosen; it is meaningless: there can be no religion unless it has some sort of God as its object, even if, as with the Romans of the decadence, the real existence of that object can be questioned. Let us say instead

that the form of Buddhism we are speaking of is a form of spirituality, a “spiritual life,” detached from all religion. Buddha does not deny the gods: he simply detaches himself from them as he does from all distinct existence. In principle, the “spiritual life” which he preached consisted entirely in this detachment, this absolute disinterestedness in regard to all being—cosmic, human, or divine. Such a “spiritual life” may well seem paradoxical. But it does in fact exist, and it has been and remains, at least for a certain number of persons, an experience the final meaninglessness of which we must deplore without denying either its psychological reality or its grandeur.

It is no less strange, perhaps, to have to recognize that there are many people who have an “interior life” which, though very rich, has nothing religious about it and could not be considered a “spiritual life” however widely that notion were extended. Poets and artists may be complete unbelievers and even avowed materialists and, nevertheless, experience and communicate a richness of imagination, of thought, of emotion, which is all their own. They may know nothing of the “religious life” and even have no “spiritual life”—if by this we understand at least some access to a reality other than that of the sensible world and one which transcends the individual. But it cannot be denied that such people have an “interior life,” nor, often, that this life is of an exceptional richness.

Think, for example, of Proust’s world of a past relived, that extraordinary reconstruction of the memory in an oversensitized consciousness. Or consider the literally fabulous development of consciousness in a novel like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a real interior epic. One of these authors felt nothing but complete indifference to religion, and the other had become passionately hostile to it; nor can it seriously be questioned that each of them deliberately shut himself up in an absolute denial of anything beyond the sensible world. The strange, even monstrous

“interior life” transmitted to us in their work possesses nonetheless a reality which is not only indubitable but even stupefying.

Still more strange, certainly, is the case of certain poets. The experiences which Wordsworth not only describes but evokes in the strongest sense of the term, in his verses on Tintern Abbey and in many passages of his autobiographical poems, recall—occasionally to the point of positively misleading the reader—the very forms of mystical experience. Yet, in spite of the religious considerations with which the poet often accompanies the expression of these experiences, it is very doubtful whether this poetic experience reaches out to any reality other than that of the depths of the soul that feels it.

But it is not necessary, perhaps, to bring in artists and poets in order, as it were, to put one’s finger on the experience of an “interior life” which is certainly not essentially religious and which cannot strictly be called a “spiritual life.” Do not many persons—all men and women, it may be—especially in certain periods of childhood or early youth, create for themselves a dream life wholly and exclusively their own?

And in this waking dream, which they people with beings and things in conformity with their most intimate desires, unrealizable or as yet unrealized in ordinary life, do they not live an “interior life,” which can take over to such a degree as to discolor or even to inhibit all their exterior life?

When we consider all these facts, to which many more could easily be added, our previously fluid notions now appear to have crystallized without any forcing, of their own accord.

The “religious life,” in the widest sense of the term, appears, or is maintained, whenever there is experienced, in any way, a relationship of any kind with a transcendent deity, real or supposed—a relationship which can even, in certain extreme cases, be nothing more than a survival in our behavior of something that our intelligence finds doubtful.

Conversely, there is an “interior life” when the life of a human being takes on a conscious, more or less autonomous, development.

But the “spiritual life” is not attained until this “interior life” develops, not in isolation but in the awareness of a spiritual reality, however this be understood, a reality that goes beyond the consciousness of the individual. Yet this “spiritual reality” is not necessarily apprehended as divine; this character may even be expressly denied it.

If, however, the “spirit” known in the “spiritual life” is recognized not only as “something,” but as “someone,” then the “spiritual life” will be a “religious life” as well. If it is not so recognized, then however lofty (or deep) its reach, the “spiritual life” will not in any way coincide with the “religious life” as such.

The Spiritual Life in Christianity

If we keep the distinctions we have thus arrived at consciously in our minds, whatever their further import may be, we cannot but be struck by one constant fact. In studying the whole of human history or trying to fathom the psychology of a particular individual, the same conclusion is evident: of its own accord, the interior life tends to develop into the spiritual life, which, in turn, orients itself no less spontaneously toward some form of religious life.

Artists and poets may be militant materialists. But their very passion to “make” a work of art a “poetic work” expresses the inherent need of every intense interior life to go beyond the enclosed cell of the individual, to become communication, communion. And nothing is more striking in the interior dream cherished by so many people than the impassioned tendency to

turn toward a world possessing a reality that surpasses us, that subsists and exists independently of us.

Buddhism, on the other hand, which we pointed to as the most amazing effort humans have ever made to provide themselves with a spiritual life while dispensing with the religious life, betrays, as if by surprise, to what a degree such an effort is unnatural. Conceived precisely as a way of satisfying the human need for a spiritual life outside all religion, it has been unable to hold to its primitive "atheism." From the original Hinayana, deliberately areligious, Buddhism has developed toward the Mahayana ("the great conveyance"), that is, toward a new form of popular religion and one still capable—as in Amidism for instance—of the highest refinements. Here, the Buddha himself becomes a god: the perfect savior-god who takes the place of all the gods whom he has caused to fade from the concern of his disciples.

From this point of view, Christianity is seen to be a form of "spiritual life" in which our most personal, most interiorized relationship with God himself in his transcendent reality is fully recognized and formally cultivated.

In this respect, nothing could be more contrary to the tendency which seems inherent in all the ways of Indian spirituality, even in those which, having been dominated for sometime by Buddhism, have rejected it under one or another of its forms. In Hinduism, as in many other Far-Eastern spiritualities more or less closely related to it, like Chinese Taoism, the spiritual person tends toward an absorption of his or her proper personality in a deity which is itself impersonal. The Christian, on the contrary, tends to the full development of a life which is wholly human and at the same time wholly personal, in the discovery of a God who is not only himself a person, but the personal being *par excellence*.

Nobody, it would seem, has set out this difference, this radical opposition, in a clearer light than has the historian and psychologist of religions, Rudolf Otto. His study is all the more revealing in that all the tendencies of the liberal Protestantism with which he is imbued would tend rather to minimize as far as possible the importance of dogmatic conceptions in religion in general and in Christianity in particular. It is all the more remarkable, then, to see how in one of his most important works, he brings out this characteristic which is uniquely proper to the Christian spiritual life.

Furthermore, he intentionally took, as examples for comparison, two great spiritual thinkers the specific differences between whom, one would have thought a priori, he would find reduced to nothing or almost nothing. In Christianity, he chose Meister Eckhart, whose writings contain a profusion of expressions which seem to avow a desire for fusion, for identification, and even for the blessed losing of one's distinct personality in God. And from Hinduism, he selected the figure of Sankara, who retains as perhaps no other Oriental at the very heart of what might be called his "mysticism," the use of personal formulae to speak of the union of God and the soul.

In spite of all these conditions, then, which would seemingly combine to blur as much as possible the differences between the two spiritualities, the purely scientific and phenomenological comparison to which Otto devoted himself led to the most decisive as well as the most unexpected results. While Sankara seemed to approach most closely to the Christian experience of a personal encounter with a God who is himself personal, a fairly close analysis of his formulae show that such is not in the least the import of his statements. As he uses expressions of this kind in relation to the experience he wishes to characterize, they have none of the implications which we should be inclined to give them. In the end, there can be no doubt about the final

lack of distinction in his thought between God and man, who, furthermore, have never been recognized as two beings but only as two forms of being, and of the same being. In contrast, the appearances of Pantheism to be found in Eckhart are only appearances which do not bear up under an attentive analysis. Studied objectively, Eckhart, even when he seems on the verge of a total immersion of his own personality in the abyss of a formless deity, lets it clearly be seen that, for him, however united God and the soul may become, they remain—without the possibility of confusion—two beings who are radically distinct in their very union. . . .

Yet this is still not to say enough. A Christian spiritual life is not one dominated simply by the ineradicable, indestructible *idea* on the part of the Christian that God is a person. This life flows from the *fact* that God has revealed himself to us as a person. No Christian spirituality worthy of the name can exist where the conviction has been weakened that God, in Christ, has made himself known to us by his own words, his own acts as Someone. The whole spiritual life of Christians is aroused and formed by the fact that, as they believe, God has spoken to us and that his living Word has been made flesh amongst us. In other words, in Christianity, the spiritual life does not start from a certain conception of God, not even from the idea that he is a personal God, but from *faith*, the faith which is proper to Christianity; that is, the assent we give to the Word of God, to that Word which is made known to us, which is given to us in Christ Jesus.

A very simple comparison will serve to clarify this absolutely fundamental point. We all know the story of Robinson Crusoe. In an early period of his apparently solitary existence on that island on which the storm had cast him, he believed himself to be entirely alone. Soon, however, there came the moment when he observed the traces of someone other than himself. He came

upon some branches broken in such a way that it did not seem as if the act could have been performed by any being other than a man, and he was sure that he had not done it himself. He found the remains of a fire that he had not kindled. And, finally, he saw in the sand the print of a foot that was not his own.

At this stage of his story, is not Crusoe, as it were, the image of the man who, in reflecting on the world in which he finds himself immersed (or, for that matter, in reflecting on himself), has discovered that God exists and that, like himself, he is not only something but someone? At this moment, man is at the highest point to which merely natural religion can lead him: the impassioned conviction that God exists and that he exists as a reality which is not only spiritual but also personal.

But everything is changed on the day when Crusoe sees Friday coming to meet him on the beach and when he speaks with him, even though at first he does not understand his language. Now he has something quite different from the mere conviction, however firmly this had been established, that the other existed and that he was also someone. Or, rather, this conviction is no longer the logical conclusion of a chain of abstract reasoning. It has become a fact, a fact to which his own most vital experience itself commits him.

The same is true of Christianity, or of Judaism before it, as compared with the highest forms of natural religion. God, his personality, is no longer simply the object of rational conviction. He is known in the supremely personal, the interpersonal, fact of his revelation. He is known, more precisely, in the personal relationship which his own initiative in coming to meet us, and this alone, is in the process of establishing. . . .

This does not, it should be noted, suppress or lessen the value of any of the religious certitudes at which man, without the aid of the Judeo-Christian revelation, has occasionally been able to arrive. It should rather be said that these certitudes

simply find themselves confirmed and also transfigured. But it must be said once and for all that Christianity and Judaism cannot, in spite of these common certitudes, be put on the same level as any other religion, even of some ideal form in which would be concentrated the best elements of all religions. The revealed religion of the Old and the New Testaments is something entirely different. It is a fact and no longer an idea—however immense may be the effects that a mere idea can have on the life of man. It is the fact of the entrance of God, no longer as an idea but as a living person, into the life of man. And it is to this fact that Christian faith adheres, just as, were this one fact eliminated, Christian faith would simply and surely dissolve.

We should realize clearly that this primordial fact is preeminently the fact that God has spoken to us. In understanding the significance of the fact, we can be aided particularly by a contemporary Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, whose thought is nourished by the spiritual tradition of the Hassidim in which Judaism might be said to be still vibrating with an echo of the great experience of the prophets.

Buber has cogently shown that no one really becomes a person to us except in speaking, in a dialogue. Someone to whom you have never spoken and, above all, someone who has never spoken to you is not a person to you in full reality. A “he” whom you speak about but who does not speak to you or you to him is not actually someone to you but only something—even though you force yourself to think otherwise, even though you know abstractly that “he” exists, personally, as you do. It is only the “you” to whom I speak who is someone to me, and, shall we say, it is above all the “you” who has spoken to me who becomes someone to me effectively.

God, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ is precisely this God and the only God who can become to us not only a “he” remaining essentially impersonal

but also a “you” in full reality. And he is this “you” above all because he has manifested himself to us as supremely the “I,” the one who has not waited to meet us until we should take the first step, but who has himself taken the initiative in a dialogue between him and ourselves. Thus, at one and the same time, he asserts himself as *the personality* among all others, and he creates our own selves, not merely as embryonic but as truly conscious personalities endowed with self-mastery. We are not such, indeed we cannot be such, by jealously shutting ourselves up in ourselves. Quite the contrary, we can only be our true selves in this dialogue in which the divine “I” creates us as its interlocutors, as those “you’s” which can only become “I’s” in their turn by taking heed of his call and responding to it.

We can see already, therefore, that it is in no way an accidental circumstance that the eminently personal, interpersonal character of the Christian spiritual life is connected with a revelation, and still more precisely, with a divine Word. In the very nature of things, these two facts are connected by a most intimate bond. They are, indeed, only two correlative aspects of that great fact which Christianity is and which constitutes the very object of our faith. God has spoken to us. He has given himself to us in his Word: this is what we believe, and this belief not only dominates our Christian spiritual life but is its very source, its unique source.

We must emphasize again, as certain contemporary Protestant theologians, beginning with Karl Barth, have done with good reason, that according to this view, it is not enough to say that God, the God who speaks, is the object of the Christian faith. We must go still further and say that this faith recognizes him from the first, in the relationship, in the dialogue between humanity and God (or, much better, between him and humanity), as the subject. For, to the Jew and to the Christian, the reality of the divine Word is not simply that of some response