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The Relationship between Spirituality, Religion, and Culture

Abstract: The author establishes that religion, spirituality, and culture are intertwined and have a strong influence on each other. After a short introduction to basic concepts, the author first shows how spirituality is a fruit of religion and/or culture. Then the influence of spirituality on religion and culture is explored. Finally, the author also tries to show the possibility of a Christian spirituality transformation that is capable of responding to the needs of our time for a new humanity able to live in solidarity while building relationships among all human beings and all of creation.

Keywords: Religion, (Christian) spirituality, culture, solidarity.

Introduction

Listening to the daily reports of various media, news about cultural events cannot be ignored. The news about culture is often limited to a variety of specific cultural events while neglecting the culture that marks the everyday life of every person, community, and nation. At first glance, it seems that culture is only created by a variety of artists. However, it is often overlooked that culture is shaped by every human being, including the religion to which a person belongs, and the spirituality that a man lives.

From this viewpoint, we wish to advance the thesis that culture, religion, and spirituality are interconnected, intertwined, and interact with one another. After a brief clarification of the basic concepts, we will first show how spirituality is a fruit of religion and/or culture. Then, the influence of spirituality on religion and culture will be explored. At the end, we would also want to show the possibility of a Christian spirituality transformation that is able to respond to the needs of our time for a new humanity to be able to live in dialogue and solidarity while building relationships among all human beings and all of creation.

1. A Brief Clarification of the Basic Concepts

On the objective level, religion usually means a religious institution or institution

that connects man with the supernatural or sacred through a certain system of worship, conducts, practices, worldview, sacred texts and places, theology and ethics. At the subjective level, religion denotes believing, i.e. an attitude to the sacred expressed in a personal relationship through various ways of worshiping the holy and living one's life according to it. At this level, we can see the connection of religion with spirituality, when it simply refers to personally lived belief. These two levels are supposed to be complementary to each other, but, occasionally, they are opposing or exclusive¹.

From the perspective of social sciences, religion as a system of belief and practice is a fruit of culture. But from its point of view, religion itself is based on a revelation that was later dressed and concealed with historical forms and cultural characteristics².

The word spirituality was first used within Christianity. Based on the Bible, especially the teachings of Paul (e.g. 1 Cor. 2: 14-15), spirituality means living in and through the Spirit of God. However, the use of the word "spirituality" is often very vague today. Many people understand "spirituality" or references to "spiritual" in a dualistic sense, where something contrary to the substance or material, physical or the world is considered something "immaterial". Today many prefer to use the term "spirituality" rather than 'religion', as the former is broader, less concrete, and less linked to an institution. Others feel that spiritual and spirituality is the heart of religion, the real center, which is characterized, in particular, by religious and mystical experience³.

Despite the fact that it is difficult to define the word spirituality accurately, because it is becoming increasingly separated from religious traditions, it can be observed in the work of various spiritual authors and teachers that the word refers to the deeper values and views of life that people want to live. It means searching for something that can help a person achieve the fullness of his life, to find answers to his fundamental questions and the meaning of his life, and to realize it in the fullness of his ability⁴.

The word culture also has multiple meanings. In general, it signifies everything that people use to perfect and develop their diverse abilities of the spirit and the body⁵. In the broadest sense, it is the way of human life. In the description of culture, the following aspects are fundamental: 1) Culture is a human creation and horizon, and it is the embodiment of its freedom and transcendence (spirituality). 2) Culture

¹ Cf. *Splošni religijski leksikon [General Religious Lexicon]*, Ljubljana 2007, p. 1031-1032.

² Cf. U. King, *Spirituality, society and culture*, in: *Way Supplement 73* (1992), p. 15.

³ Cf. U. King, *id.*, p. 16.

⁴ Cf. Ph. Sheldrake, *Spirituality: a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2012, 4-8; B. Čović, M. Marinčić, *Društvena odgovornost za zdravo društvo u kontekstu promišljanja Küngova projekta svjetski etos [Social Responsibility for Healthy Society in the Context of Küng's Weltethos Project]*, in: *Filozofska istraživanja* 36 (2016), 3, p. 480.

⁵ Cf. M.P. Gallagher, *Spopad simbolov: Uvod v vero in kulturo [Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture]*, Ljubljana 2003, p. 61.

is inherited. At the same time, it changes and adapts to different moments in history and different environments. 3) Culture includes and affects the entire way of life of people; it is the source of their identity. Therefore, it also has a great influence on the quality and tone of religion and spirituality. 4) Culture transfers and expresses the meanings, beliefs, visions of life, values, rules of behavior, habits and traditions. 5) Culture is often embodied in institutions and systems in a manner that helps preserve them or their symbols. 6) Culture strives to be preserved in future generations. The problem arises when the society changes rapidly. 7) Historically, cultures have largely been based on different religions; therefore, the central core of today's cultural crisis is the split between culture and religion, which has lasted for almost two centuries⁶.

Therefore, culture permeates all the dimensions of man and the community in which he lives and works. It also permeates religion and spirituality. At the same time, man and the community form a culture with the religion to which they belong, and with the spirituality they live and practice. Thus, we cannot understand culture without religion and spirituality, and vice-versa. All three of them are intertwined, and complement, or obstruct each other. None of these realities can be completely neutral in relation to the other one.

2. Spirituality: a Fruit of Religion and/or Culture

Almost every spirituality in the history of humankind has been associated with a particular religion and has expressed its subjective level, that is the living faith, within a particular religion. Particularly in Europe, spirituality, under the influence of modernism, secularization, and postmodernism, increasingly separated itself from its religious roots, especially from theology and the religious practices of the Christian tradition. Thus, spirituality has become a kind of universal keyword for finding the direction and meaning of life, in particular in times of personal and community crisis. In a modern secular society, spirituality was 'discovered' as a lost or at least hidden dimension in the vast materialistic and consumer world⁷.

The modern emphasis on spirituality has its roots in Western culture, in which the subject is increasingly at the forefront of individuality. Great attention is given to personal development, the importance of human dignity, and various psychological schools and therapies. Thus, different spiritualities that are unrelated to any religion and do not connect man with the transcendent have developed. Rather, they are often based on philosophy, psychology, gender theory, aesthetics, and so on⁸.

In many alternative spiritualities of the postmodern culture, it is primarily the awakening of people into the eternal dimension of their lives. Many, who have been

⁶ Cf. M.P. Gallagher, id., p. 40-42; T. Stegu, *Simbolna teologija in povezovalna moč umetnosti [Theology of Symbol and the connecting Power of Art]*, in: *Edinost in dialog* 69 (2014), 1-2, p. 140-143.

⁷ Cf. U. King, id., p. 18.

⁸ Cf. Ph. Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney 2014, p. 7-12.

chronically disappointed and are far from the practice of religion, begin to re-discover the mysteries of the inner life and the richness and challenges of the invisible world by stepping on the path of spirituality. By losing the ancient close connection with nature and by tackling the connection with religions, man becomes a homeless person. This is one of the main reasons of desperate spiritual lightness⁹. On the one hand, this is some kind of a sign of disappointment over the present religions and cultures. On the other hand, this is precisely the incentive they need to listen more to the needs of the present man and allow them to come to their forefront dimension.

Every spirituality is conditioned or dependent on a particular culture as a reflection of an anthropological, sociological, or general social period, and especially the prevailing religion of a certain period. Therefore, the expression of the individual mode of spirituality is completely subordinate and adapted to the needs of a certain time and consequently with the cultural manifestation of a certain population. Culture is accompanied by the entire way of life of a community. Spirituality is no exception in this process. Thus, it can be understood that spirituality adapts to the needs of an environment in a certain historical period. At the same time, it expresses its 'demands' that are, at some point, most suitable for a person who wants to live a life more fully, indefinitely, spiritually, happy. One could say that culture is a kind of platform or basis for the spiritual expression of a person at some point in his life¹⁰.

Postmodern culture encouraged the development of philosophical spirituality, which encourages man to live in radical questioning and the constant search for answers to basic human questions. Nothing is self-evident in the world. Religion and her spirituality are also encouraged to be open to fundamental questioning and not to abandon the simplicity of stability and evident nature that it offers to the believers. It is precisely at this point that the difference between religious affiliation (confessionality) and spirituality can be observed, as Klun points out: "We can deal with religiousness – in terms of belonging and religion – without perceiving genuine spirituality. The latter is at work when a faithful man is capable of radical questioning and sincere readiness for constant conversion (of himself)."¹¹

3. The Influence of Spirituality on Culture and Religion

Culture represents „the fundamental dimension of the spirit which puts people in a relationship with one another and brings them together by using their most common trait, that is their humanity"¹². Therefore, culture is a reflection of the human's inner feelings and actions at the moment. On the one hand, culture denotes the traditions of the past, but at the same time, culture is changing and adapting, so that it

⁹ Cf. J. O'Donohue, *Spirituality as the art of real presence*, in: *Way Supplement 92* (1998), p. 91.

¹⁰ Cf. M.P. Gallagher, id., p. 19-40.

¹¹ B. Klun, *Fenomenologija duhovnega življenja [Phenomenology of Spiritual Life]*, in: *Udejanjanje duhovnosti v sodobnem svetu [Actualization of Spirituality in the Contemporary World]*, ed. P. Repar – S. Repar – A. Božič, Ljubljana 2012, p. 81-82.

¹² Ph. Gallagher, id., p. 79.

can be realized at certain moments or periods of time in history. Culture is the language of spiritual experience. For each culture, great spiritual movements marking the course of its history are important indicators showing various manifestations of spiritual experiences.

Speaking about spirituality and its influence on religion and culture, it has to be emphasized the three dimensions are always intertwined in spirituality¹³. We believe that this fact can also be used to better understand both the influence of spirituality on religion and culture as well as their interrelationship. In the same way as these three dimensions of spirituality are interdependent and each of them is irreplaceable, spirituality, religion, and culture are also similarly interdependent and irreplaceable. 1) The personal-experiential dimension of spirituality. Without it, spirituality cannot be personal and living faith when talking about religious spirituality (it lives in a certain religion and culture, and also affects them). 2) The community dimension of spirituality. Every person can become what he truly is only in a personal relationship with other people and in a particular community (this can only enable participation in a particular religion) and its culture. At this level, the fruits of spirituality can also be recognized as quickly as possible in people's lives as well as affecting religion and culture. 3) The reflective or academic dimension of spirituality, which in the broadest sense can mean any personal and community reflection of the lived spirituality and its wording, and, in a narrower sense, a systematic, comparative, and critical study of the spiritual experiences and the doctrines (teachings) that have evolved from them. Religion and culture are influenced directly or indirectly by this level, spirituality influences them whereas at the same time.

If any one of these dimensions of spirituality fails, then spirituality can rapidly shrink to one or another dimension, and can no longer fulfil its mission. The same applies for the dimension of spirituality, religion, and culture in the lives of each person and the community. If any one of these three fails or the life and work of a person shrinks to only one of them, a person or community can no longer fully live their life and mission¹⁴. All three are necessary to allow each other the rhythm that gives the true pulse to each person and community, so that the latter can become more humane and live its life and mission in the integrity that everyone desires¹⁵.

¹³ Cf. W.H. Principe, s.v. »*Spiritualità cristiana*«, in: *Nuovo dizionario di Spiritualità*, ed. M. Downey – L. Borriello, Città del Vaticano 2003, p. 793-795.

¹⁴ Cf. I. Bahovec, *Identity of Ecclesiastical lay movements: spirituality, community and communitarian civil involvement*, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik* 69 (2009), 4, p. 450-455; I. Bahovec, *Postmoderna kultura in duhovnost: religioznost med new agem in krščanstvom* [*Postmodern culture and spirituality: religiosity between new age and Christianity*], Ljubljana 2009, p. 47-96.

¹⁵ Cf. W. Zyzak, *Co mam czynić, aby osiągnąć życie wieczne? Duchowość chrześcijańska na świeckiej drodze życia* [*What should I do to inherit eternal life? Christian Spirituality in the Life of the Laity*], Kraków 2008, p. 270-272.

4. Conclusion

Based on previous research, it can be confirmed that there is not only a relationship between spirituality, religion, and culture, but also a close connection between them, and that they have a significant influence upon each other. Spirituality is created within religions and always bears a reflection of the culture in which it is located. Surely, the spirituality that arises within a certain period also influences the characteristic way back to the religion and culture of that time.

The great spiritual hunger in today's postmodern Western culture is a 'sign of the times' for all religions to begin to search for and develop a deeper spirituality that will be able to respond to the needs of today's man, different communities, and varying cultures. The Catholic Church is also called upon to recall the treasures of the spirituality that she carries within herself that can respond to the needs of today's postmodern times, if only the Church is willing to observe these signs of the times and respond to the present needs of humanity and the world¹⁶. Gallagher, in his short presentation of the basic feelings of postmodern man, uses a simple way to show how these feelings encourage Christians to become more aware of the more or less forgotten dimensions of their faith and allow them to come to the fore. A renewed Christian spirituality can respond to postmodern mistrust in rationalism with its narrative and negative theology. Postmodern attention to women and ecology can be answered by putting the connection of everything in God's Trinity, that is, Christian holism in the forefront. The search for the post-materialistic quality of life can be answered with an alternative way of integral life following the gospel. The desire to return to spirituality can be met with the neglected contemplative dimensions of prayer and the path to depth, which must be combined with biblical complexity and concreteness. The postmodern sense of dispersion can be answered by offering a concrete community of fraternity/sisterhood in Christ. A response to postmodern frustration over utopias can be concrete compassion to every human being, especially to the poorest, with social solidarity¹⁷.

Christian spirituality is called to become an even more essential link between religion, which is always in danger of becoming only an external religious affiliation, and culture in the lives of most people. This will only be possible if the three main dimensions are repeatedly highlighted therein: 1) The personal and community experience of living a religion; this means placing more faith in the foreground as the answer to Trinitarian God than to doctrine, the importance of personal and common reflection, and the mutual sharing of experiences. 2) Growth in contemplative and active-responsible love in relation to one's self, every person, every community/society/nation and all creation. 3) Practical spiritual skills that help cultivate a personal and conscious relationship with Trinitarian God through various forms and modes of

¹⁶ Cf. F. Podgorelec, *Ekleziološka utemeljitev koncilske duhovnost [Ecclesiological Reasons of Conciliar Spirituality]*, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik* 73 (2013), 2, 196-203.

¹⁷ Cf. M.P. Gallagher, id., p. 196-198.

personal and community prayer and the celebration of sacraments.

Such a spirituality can build bridges between the constant presence of God and his self-giving love and possibilities of the life situation of every human being and the actual environment. This spirituality becomes an area in which people decide to pay attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, listen to his inspiration and follow it in the spirit of discernment, where they shape the quality of their lives and activities, where they safeguard the freedom of their hearts, given to them in Jesus Christ, and where they learn to wisely judge, decide, and act under the pressures of the various cultures surrounding them. Surely, each person has the opportunity to choose between a messy shade in the culture/s that surround/s him, or adhere to the guidance of spirituality, which helps him harmonize life and work with the gospel. Every person, a Christian as well, should always be aware that spirituality should primarily encourage and enable him in an active effort to humanize everything that is in danger of slipping into inhumanity¹⁸.

The present pope Francis invites all Christians to the transformation of Christian spirituality. In *Laudato si'* (2015), he emphasizes the great wealth of Christian spirituality acquired in twenty centuries of personal and communal experience can be a magnificent contribution to the reconstruction of humanity¹⁹. Absolutely, it is necessary to be aware of the dangers in which Christian spirituality can be trapped or in which it has already been caught. The Pope acknowledges that Christians did not always accept and develop the riches God gave to the Church, the riches in which spirituality is not separated from the body nor from the nature or reality of this world, but lives with and in it, in communion with all²⁰. Therefore, he invites all Christians to continually strive to be able – by the help of Christ's Spirit – to overcome the danger of being trapped in different forms of spiritual consumerism, individualism, individualism, and pleasure, and of the spirituality of seeking only oneself, without a community and a responsible attitude towards each person and the environment, without any commitment to the common good and common home²¹.

According to the pope Francis, Christian spirituality is truly Christian when it is lived in the spirit of the entire gospel. At its center is faith in God, a Trinitarian community of mutual relations, and in the fact that everything is created after the Trinitarian God and therefore all carries a Trinitarian footprint, a network of lasting relationships that is mysteriously intertwined. Therefore, he encourages Christians and every human being to discover and admire the many bonds between everything that exists. This is also the key to our own realization. "The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into re-

¹⁸ Cf. M.P. Gallager. id., p. 190-199.

¹⁹ Cf. Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, Vatican 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html [20. 12. 2017], n. 216.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

²¹ Cf. Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican 2013, in: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_ evangelii-gaudium.html [20. 12. 2017], n. 89-90; Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, n. 203-237.

relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created.²² This connection of everything invites all humankind to be aware of it and embark on a path of maturation in a holistic spirituality of solidarity, the spirituality of dialogue and service, the free self-giving love flowing from the mystery of Trinitarian God. Christian spirituality is open to every person, all his needs, as well as all communities (different nations and religions) and all mankind, together with all creation, to all cultures and religions, otherwise it is not Christian²³.

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²² Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, n. 240.

²³ Cf. Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, n. 202-242.

Relacja między duchowością, religią i kulturą

Streszczenie: Autor stwierdza, że religia, duchowość i kultura są ze sobą powiązane i wywierają na siebie silny wpływ. Po krótkim wprowadzeniu do podstawowych pojęć autor najpierw pokazuje, że duchowość jest owocem religii i / lub kultury. Następnie badany jest wpływ duchowości na religię i kulturę. Na koniec autor chce także pokazać możliwość transformacji chrześcijańskiej duchowości, która jest w stanie odpowiedzieć na potrzeby naszych czasów, aby nowa ludzkość mogła żyć solidarnie, budując relacje między wszystkimi ludźmi i całym stworzeniem.

Słowa kluczowe: religia, (chrześcijańska) duchowość, kultura, solidarność