

Phänomen-Verlag



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The Will to Transcendence

Origin and Purpose of Spirituality

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek:

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

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The Will to Transcendence
EAN 978-84-949856-3-8

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Satz & Gestaltung: Phänomen-Verlag

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PREFACE

What is spirituality? This question, while it might seem easy to answer at first, evokes some difficulties. Do we actually know what we mean when we talk of spirituality? It seems, as a conglomeration of worldviews and practices grouped under the idea of self-transcendence, to escape a certain clarity. What is it exactly, this spiritual life? Is it a mashup of lifeworlds, or is there a hidden architecture or wholeness to be found which elevates spirituality to something notable, even essential to human nature. Is it more than the sum of its – from all over the world cobbled together – parts? Can we even speak of spirituality as a thing in itself, as something which possesses a structure and form? Does spirituality stabilize itself through including specific ways of communication and methods while at the same time excluding others, in the manner of physical science, politics or economics? In each of those latter cases, there are specific ways and codes of communication to be found, specific practices, specific modes of being. Can we claim something similar for spirituality?

In other words, is there a specific sense of purpose inherent to spirituality, and therefore a general tendency, a *telos* – philosophically speaking – a common goal, a general practise? Does being spiritual mean enacting a Heideggerian way of *being in the world*? If these are true, it would mean that spirituality – as the systems of science, economics, and politics do, amongst others – would have

a reciprocal relationship with all other parts of our cultural life. Moreover, our daily life would be interwoven with spirituality. Science, for example, receives its legitimacy by offering to culture and our daily life the practical results of its theories and its search for truth, thereby becoming compatible with society as a whole. Could we dare to strive for an equal claim regarding spirituality? Is spirituality more than a New-Age phenomenon, more than a passing fad, and maybe something which has to be embedded into the “big picture” of our consciousness and culture?

Maybe – and I am a follower of the concepts of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget – we do not know yet what spirituality is, or what it might be. Didn't Piaget demonstrate that we have to live through certain experiences before we can understand them? Doesn't a child play before it can describe the rules of the game? Don't we need to dream, before we can analyse and understand the dream? Don't we need to fight with our partner in order to find out what is bothering us? Doesn't the infant enact his impulses and instincts, before it can develop concepts and schemes of behaviour? Don't we project certain contents of consciousness as mythical stories into the world before we recognize them as being part of our interior psyche? And don't we need to repeat behaviour in order to observe it, to understand it and to change it? What Piaget discovered was that we have to go through these iterations to become able to understand ourselves and the world.

I am proposing a similar process for spirituality as a cultural phenomenon. What is true for the development of the psyche must be true for culture as a whole. Perhaps up to this point in time spirituality has shown itself only frag-

mentary, while at the same striving to be understood as a whole and revealing her telos and evolutionary purpose. Maybe we need to go through the varied manifestations and iterations of spirituality – the thousands of years old history of the shamanic, the religious and the mystical experiences – in order to understand the true purpose of spirituality. This should be our starting point, and I will come back to it frequently: Perhaps we culturally dreamt for millennia about spirituality, all the while only noticing certain aspects and certain characteristics without understanding spirituality fully, as a nightly dream sometimes escapes a clear interpretation. Maybe we were caught up in certain symbolisms and cultural forms, in certain ideas, ideologies and practices. Maybe it is only now – after going through all the archaic, pre-modern, religious, modern and postmodern iterations of spirituality – that we are able to understand the core of spirituality as an enduring drive of and perspective taken by the human consciousness. Even the *philosophia perennis*, postulating a common origin of wisdom, couldn't see clearly through the fog of ideology and directed its attention more to metaphysics than existential conditions.

Let's extend the temporal horizon and observe all the historic forms, beginning with the early funeral rites and prayers and moving through to the animal gods and the archaic forms of shamanism, along further to the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek and the Eastern cults, and then to the great religious traditions of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Now let's include alchemy, spiritualism, esotericism, hermeticism and the *Lebensreform* and New-Age as iterations of one and the same thing.

When we view this entire arc of history, we have to ask: What is it exactly which is expressing itself through the ages and wants to be understood? What is it *exactly* that iterates, what is it's core, it's motivation, and it's purpose? Maybe we can understand something about human nature and consciousness if we take this long view and inquire into the pattern of the phenomenon we are observing.

It must be said that I decline to talk of these historical iterations solely as *religious* phenomena, as is frequently done. I do this not only because the term "*religio*" is relatively new when viewed in the context of the varieties of spiritual experience of three hundred thousand years; and not only because this term to this day eludes a clear definition; and not only because this term fails to properly describe the eastern traditions; not only because a reverence for the gods or bond between gods or "God" and human beings is not always a constitutive element of the spiritual experience, whether it be pre-modern or post-modern; but rather, I decline to speak exclusively of these phenomena as religious because there have survived to this day certain spiritual phenomena, concepts and practises, while the very *religious* aspects have fallen to the wayside, or been explicitly murdered such as by the most famous and most influential German philosopher. What a god is or could be today is a question which offends our *amour-propre*. The tower – the house of god itself – fell, as was predicted by Christianity itself. And not only did Christianity predict its own demise, it worked actively toward that goal, since, as everybody know, scientific thought explicitly developed by the hands of the clerics, while the modern thinker and first famous scientist Isaac

Newton was at the same time the last of the alchemists. Nevertheless, we don't remain with empty hands.

But this is not supposed to be a complete farewell to two thousand years of Western cultural and religious history. On the contrary, we might understand spirituality better if we overcome our aversion to religion as a whole, in order to integrate the morality and ethics of religion while dismissing its' fallacies. It is obvious that we all internalized a great deal of the ethical norms of Christianity, even if we do not identify as Christian. But it may not be so obvious that the narrative structure of the bible still has a lot to offer to understand our daily lives from a psychological viewpoint. For example, if your spouse has left you: Maybe you should read again of the fall of men and the story of Eden! Are you in despair or resentful because success seems to be withheld from you? Read again the story of Cain and Abel! We live by and through stories, and the biblical ones can offer something to understand our predicaments. We need concrete stories to navigate through life, to generate responsive actions and behaviours. In this sense, those biblical stories are equally important as the Greek stories or the fairy tales of the brother Grimm, which we still read our children, and which derive from Greek myths. They are – obviously – still relevant, and many psychologists have shown that you can analyse ones life properly by analysing the superficial and deep stories, which we have chosen and listened to in a very young age to navigate through life.

What we want to do is keep the ethics and psychological insights, while dismissing all unnecessary metaphysical ballast – all esoteric, murky and speculative presuppo-

sitions – and approach the problem of spirituality from the viewpoint of the evolution of consciousness itself. But in doing so we are running into something we could identify as the main problem with which ‘modern’ spirituality is wrestling since its late-modern emergence in the 19th century and especially since the cultural revolution of the 60ties, namely its utter *incoherence* regarding its program or its methods. What is it that this late modern – or better: postmodern – spirituality wants? Is it about taking the path of self-discipline and temperance or is it about being in the here and now? – two completely different approaches which are basically mutually exclusive. Is it about radical honesty or is it about developing compassion and love – honesty may have nothing to do with empathy and compassion. Is it about healing or illumination? And if it is about illumination: illumination according to whom? Is it about strengthening the individual or to give oneself up in some form of collective consciousness? Is it about attaining happiness, or is it about gaining the strength to endure suffering?

It seems that this self-contradicting spirituality does not discourage the postmodern seeker, but on the contrary, contributes to the attractiveness of current forms of spirituality. Spirituality seems to be what people can make of it. But there is no consistent paradigm nor program, which applies to everyone. There is not yet a consensual *spiritual method*, in the way science itself justifies her very being. Shakti-Pooja, reiki and Tantra-soap – everything seems to belong to spirituality. There are a myriad of ways to practice meditation, and although many practise meditation, the ultimate self-transcendence is seldom reached. In

a pyramid-like scheme of things, with the likes of Buddha at the apex, we would find the overall majority spirituals conforming to the base. Especially nowadays, as German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk recently diagnosed, the idea and the attempt to love everybody unconditionally – which means loves independently of his or her personality traits, quirks and characteristics – doesn't excite anyone anymore; one just has to look at a Facebook-feed of spiritual practitioners to understand where Sloterdijk is coming from.

There isn't currently a telos of spirituality, a common goal, something all the other social systems do in fact possess. And as a consequence of this structural incoherence and missing telos, there seems to appear certain fallacies or pathologies which are permeating the spiritual life; and I am not even talking about pre-modern superstitions like reincarnation, the akasha-chronicles and so on. The striving for happiness would be such a pathology – psychologically speaking, that never works. That was the reason the traditions always put their emphasis on dealing with suffering, and had dangerous and painful rites of passages and initiation rites to prove somebody strong and mature enough to deal with suffering and life itself. These age-long conceptions of spirituality seems to have completely vanished in the context of postmodern spirituality. On the other side, and because of its utter hollowness, some form of spiritual virtue-signalling is permeating our spiritual culture, which means, in the definition of the always reliable *Urban Dictionary*, „to take a conspicuous but essentially useless action ostensibly to support a good cause but actually to show off how much more moral you are

than everybody else.” Postmodern spirituality seem to have lost most of its potential for transcendence, rendering it as a useless accumulation of worldviews and techniques. We will deal with this *heap* in the third part of this book, as well as we analyse the breeding ground from which these fallacies arise. We will see that – from an ethical viewpoint – while the postmodern spirituality had initially lots to offer, these postmodern pathologies are hostile to life and the very development of psyche and culture. We will strive to rejuvenate and clarify spirituality, in part through refurbishing the age-old idea of *transcendence*.

The remaining question would then be if such an interpretation of the spiritual life, as we intend to do it, fits with a conception of spirituality as serving the function of providing answers to existential problems that arising as soon as consciousness emerges. The emergence of consciousness seems to have produced – as every new invention does, independently of it being biological, social or even technological – a certain set of new existential problems. I will argue in the pages to follow that spirituality offered some solutions to these emerging problems, and is still offering these solutions today if only we can see through the haze of the pathological forms of postmodern spirituality. This book is therefore an attempt to identify this existential, evolutionary function of spirituality in the most broadest context; at the same time I fear we will have to throw the bulk of our spiritual conceptions overboard to get a clear picture of this specific evolutionary function.

What does spirituality want? Perhaps lurking in swamps of unhealthy postmodern spiritual life there is some gold to be found – *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies*

Occultum Lapidem Veram Medicinam – something true and beautiful striving to be known by those who have the grit to throw themselves into this abyss. Especially in differentiation to postmodern spirituality we have to and must ask: What is the useful element of such a radical or authentic spirituality? What is its psychological and social function? Inasmuch as we can get involved with this endeavour we might discover its telos and its overall goal.

In approaching spirituality this way, we have to first address the issue of language. We should not ask what spirituality or transcendence ‘is’ but what happens in the process of transcendence and spiritual practise. We want to avoid nominalisations, because there are not things, just processes. There is no such thing as spirituality, it is a linguistic objectification of something we do, and something we act out. A lot has been written about the problems of identifying processes as things; there is no waterfall, just streaming water. Consciousness itself is another very good example, which is not a thing but more in the sense of lived experience. There are also no stages or levels of consciousness as tangible entities, only different ways of create experience and experience (and categorize complexity). This is quite a huge difference if we try to understand our mind. That is to say, there is also no spirituality as there is no waterfall, there is only water streaming down a cliff. This shift in perception will help us to understand more precisely the nature of spiritual practice, as well as its results and its consequences. When on the following pages I will speak of ‘the spirituality’, this will therefore be only out of convenience. With this shift we are approaching one central issue, namely the question what we do if we act

spiritually. Now, one could presume that a definition or description of certain techniques would be sufficient to describe the spiritual life. In this sense, spiritual would be someone who practises Yoga. But my counter-argument would be that such an approach wouldn't serve our purpose since methods and techniques are changing over time and there are obviously people who practise yoga who won't identify as being spiritual. That means we have to dig a little deeper than that. If these ,externalized' and ,culturalized' techniques and methods don't define the spiritual life, what then does define spirituality?

That means, we want to take a look at consciousness as the agent of the spiritual experience. Not the externalized methods like yoga or meditation are the focus of our investigation, but what consciousness does while it successfully employs and uses this methods. *Acting spiritually would imply therefore something we do with our consciousness.* What that is, or might be, we will investigate in chapter one and two. Overall, this should be the general scheme of this book: To differentiate and distinguish spirituality as a postmodern phenomenon from a spirituality which emerges from a consciousness that employs the very cognitive methods that make the cultural and traditional practises work in the first place. Chapter one and two will deal with these processes; following chapters will delve into the postmodern situation with all of its virtues and fallacies.