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INTERIORIZED WORD AND TRANSFORMING SPIRIT: JOHANNINE MODEL OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality may be described as the manner in which a person views his relation with God, other persons and the world in general, and responds to this relation insofar as it enriches, ennobles and elevates him fulfilling his desire for inner peace, total realization and ultimate happiness. The spirituality of a person is, therefore, determined by his "faith," and as faith varies "spiritualities" also may differ. On the other hand, as there are elements common to the faith of different persons there are also features common to their spiritualities.

In the Johannine writings,¹ as it is to be expected in specifically Christian Scriptures, the central role of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in God-man relationship is stressed. The avowed primary purpose of the Gospel and First Epistle of John is precisely to inculcate and enhance in the reader faith in Christ, the Son of God, and to proclaim that it is by believing in him that one can participate in the salvation that God offers to man through him (Jn 20:30-31; 1 Jn 5:13). This salvation is characterized by purification from sin and participation in divine life resulting in divine filiation of the believers and their union with God, Christ, and one another.

According to John salvation is not a reality superimposed on man or granted him in a more or less exterior manner, or a goal achieved entirely with one's own effort and means, but it is an intervention of God involving a real interior transformation of man effected through divine action which adequately and necessarily reflects in his life and conduct – both in his relation to God and in his attitude and behaviour towards the

1. The following discussion is based on the Gospel of John (Jn) and the Epistles of John (1,2,3 Jn), especially, the First Epistle. We regard these writings as having originated from the circle of Christian believers sharing the same tradition, which we call "Johannine." "John" is used for the author/authors of these writings. The Gospel and the First Epistle of John may have been composed by different persons, in different situations and for different purposes, but theologically they are complementary.

fellow human beings. In Johannine theology the word of God and the divine Spirit are the interior principles through which this transformation takes place in a person and which enable him to respond to the saving intervention of God by co-operating with him and fulfilling his salvific demands.

In the Bible we find a very close relation between the divine word and the Spirit of God.² This seems to have been based on a simple observation of the fact that the spoken word is invariably accompanied by breath, which is the dynamic manifestation of the life-principle of the speaker. It is precisely this life-principle which is meant by the Hebrew word *rûah* and its Greek equivalent *pneuma*, both of which have a range of related meanings, beginning with "wind" and evolving to "breath" and "spirit." Thus, the divine word is accompanied by the divine Spirit and contains the divine vitality and dynamism, and as such the word is often the medium through which the Spirit is communicated. The Spirit, on the other hand, enables a person to receive and interiorize the word. Against this general Biblical background we shall try to understand what John tells about the word and the Spirit and their role in the dynamic relation between God and man.

The Interiorized Word

In the Prologue of the Gospel (Jn 1:1-18) Jesus is presented as the Word incarnate (Jn 1:14). Though this identification is not found elsewhere in the Gospel in such clear terms, it is one which gives theological depth and richness to what John states about the word in the Gospel and Epistles. Since the word is both the medium of communication and the bearer of the vital energy of the speaker, when Jesus is said to be the Word of God what is meant is that he is both the embodiment of God's revelation and the source of divine life for man.

In the Prologue the pre-existent divine Word is introduced as actively involved in creation and as the agent through which everything finite came into existence. The same Word was involved in a special way in the

2. For the conception of the word of God in the Old Testament, see O. Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*, Gießen 1934; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, London 1967, pp. 71-81; J.L. McKenzie, "The Word of God in the Old Testament," *Theological Studies* 21 (1960), 183-206. For "Spirit," see D. Lys, Rûach. *Le souffle dans l'Ancien Testament*, Paris 1962; J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London 1976 (reprint; Bangalore 1983), pp. 840-845.

emergence and communication of life (Jn 1:1-4). Thus, the whole universe is the realization and expression of the divine Word. Moreover, the Word was, and still is, actively present in the world and in human history (Jn 1:10-12) guiding it and transforming it into a history of salvation and challenging man to take a decision for or against God and his offer of salvation by accepting or rejecting it. It is the same Word that took concrete human shape in Jesus and became a real human being one with all other human beings (Jn 1:14). Seen in this perspective, the incarnation is the climax of a process of the divine Word becoming more and more available and present in the human realm—a process that began with creation, continued through history and is still continuing.

The presentation of Jesus as the Word of God is found elsewhere in the Gospel in a metaphorical form. Using the symbol of bread, which in the Old Testament and in Jewish traditions is employed to signify the divine word or wisdom,³ the Johannine Jesus identifies himself as “the bread of life” or “living bread” (Jn 6:35, 48, 51), thereby proclaiming that he is the life-giving word of God.

In the Johannine writings we find not only an identification of Jesus as the divine Word, but also an equation between Jesus and his word. The response to be shown to him and to his word is the same: to believe in Christ means the same as to believe in his word (comp. Jn 5:46 and 47); one can remain in Christ only by remaining in his word (Jn 15:4, 7; 8:31, 51); the remaining of Christ and the remaining of his word in a person practically have the same effect (Jn 15:5, 7). As Jesus, the Word of God, is God’s self-communication and God become accessible to man, the word of Jesus is that through which he, the divine Word, becomes available and present to man. This is in accordance with the Biblical view of the word as the dynamic continuity and projection of the person from whom it proceeds and as having a quasi-independent existence of its own.⁴ Consequently, the word of Jesus is ultimately the word of God (Jn 14:10, 24; 17:14).

The Word and Liberation from Sin

According to John one of the aspects of the saving work of Jesus, the Son of God, is that he has come to liberate the world from the

3. See Dt 8:3; Amos 8:11-12; Prov 9:5; Sir 15:3; Wis 16:20, 26.

4. See Is 55:11; also Ps 147:15, 18; Wis 18:15.

enslaving power of sin (Jn 1:29; 8:34-36) and to cleanse man from sins by expiating them through his redemptive death (1 Jn 1:7; 2:1-2; 3:16; 4:10). In the Gospel when Jesus is proclaimed as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), he is presented both as the new Paschal Lamb (comp. Jn 19:36 and Ex 12:21-27, 46) through whose blood the world, namely, humankind, is liberated from the power of sin, and also as the Servant of the Lord (Is 52:13-53:12, especially 53:7) who by his suffering and death obtains pardon for the sin of the people. The idea of his death as redemptive implied here becomes explicit in the First Epistle of John in the passages cited above.

According to the statement of Jesus in Jn 8:31-32, this liberation from sin becomes available to man through the agency of his word: "If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." In the Johannine writings "truth" is equivalent to the divine revelation, which Jesus himself is (Jn 14:6), and "to know the truth" is virtually the same as to believe in him accepting his word and "remaining" in it.⁵ And the one who remains in the word has the word remaining in him (Jn 15:7).

The Word and Divine Life

The saving work of Jesus Christ has as its main purpose communication of the divine life by which man is elevated to the divine realm (Jn 3:16-17; 10:10; 17:2). Christ is explicitly proclaimed as "the life" in the sense that he is the source of divine life for man (Jn 11:25; 14:6). Christ can communicate the life to man because he himself as the Son has received the life in its fullness from God, his Father (Jn 5:26). As mentioned above, the description of Jesus as "the bread of life" metaphorically conveys the idea that he, the divine Word, is the source and sustenance of the divine life for man.

The life that God offers through Jesus, his Son, also becomes available to man through the medium of his word, as Jesus himself states in the Gospel: "The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). His words are words of eternal life (Jn 6:68).

5. For the Johannine notion of "truth," see I. de la Potterie, *La Vérité dans Saint Jean*, 2 vols, Rome 1977.

Hence, when a person accepts Christ's word and believes in him, he participates in the divine life and becomes alive through eternal life (Jn 5:24).

The Word and Divine Filiation

The process by which a person becomes recipient of divine life, and thus a child of God, is described by John as divine begetting or begetting "from above." Since the divine life is attainable for man through the believing acceptance of the word of God that Christ communicates, we can expect a link between the word and the divine begetting in Johannine theology. Indeed, in the Prologue of the Gospel itself we find this idea. There it is stated that the Word (Christ) enabled all those who received him to become the children of God (Jn 1:12). This theme is further developed in a later section of the Gospel, where the Johannine Jesus speaks about the necessity of being begotten from above, namely, "of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:3, 5). "Water" is a symbol of both the word and the Spirit of God.⁶ Therefore, this divine begetting happens through the agency of the word of God and the divine Spirit. As the expression "begetting" implies, it involves a real transformation in a person whereby he becomes a child of God in reality and not merely by name (cf. 1 Jn 3:1). While in the Gospel the role of the Spirit in the divine begetting is stressed, in the First Epistle of John the emphasis is on the agency of the Word. In 1 Jn 3:9, using a crude but theologically effective and significant metaphor the role of the word in the divine begetting is indicated by describing it as "the seed of God" (comp. 1 Pet 1:23). The word of God transforms a person into a child of God and remains in him exercising its dynamism on him.

The Word and Communion

The interiorized word is also the principle of union with God that is mediated by Christ. In the Johannine writings this union is described in terms of mutual immanence of God, Christ, and the believers, for which the reciprocal as well as the simple forms of "being in" and "remaining in" are employed. What is signified by these expressions is, first of all, an intimate, vital, dynamic and reciprocal relationship

6. For "water" as a symbol of the divine word/wisdom, see Is 55:1-3; Sir 24:21, 23-29; Prov 13:14; 18:4; and for the symbolism of "water" signifying the Spirit of God, see Is 32:15; 44:3; Ez 36:25-26; Joel 2:28-29.

of union between God and his Son in which the Father is/remains in the Son, and the Son is in the Father.⁷ Those who believe in the Son, Jesus Christ, participate in this union by virtue of the reciprocal immanence of Christ and the believers (Jn 14:20, 23; 15:4-7; also 6:56). Moreover, the union between the Father and the Son is the model and source of the unity of the believers (Jn 17:20-26). In Jn 15:7 in the statement of Jesus, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . .," which stands as parallel to 15:4 ("Remain in me and I in you"), we find not only an equation between Christ and his word but also the idea that the immanence of Christ in his disciples is through his word and it is by virtue of the active presence of the word that one can remain in Christ, which is the same as remaining in God. In 1 Jn 2:24 we have more or less the same idea in equivalent terms: "Let what you heard from the beginning (i.e., the word, comp. 2:7) remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and in the Father."

The Word and Conduct

We have seen that according to John the word is instrumental in liberating man from the power of sin. As asserted in 1 Jn 3:9, the interiorized word which transforms the believer and elevates him to the state of child of God imparting him the divine life, moreover, enables him to avoid committing sin. The transformation that takes place in the divine begetting continues to be effective through the word ("seed of God") that remains in those who have been begotten by God rendering them capable of living as the true children of God.⁸ Elsewhere in the Epistle (1 Jn 2:14) we find a theologically less refined explanation of why a person in whom the word remains can avoid sin: it is because the word that abides in him communicates its power to him strengthening him and making him victorious over "the evil one," namely, the devil. In contrast to this, in the Gospel a more positive presentation of the dynamic effects of the word on those who have received and interiorized it is found. In Jn 15:3, in the context of the exposition of the vital union between Christ and his disciples, which is the basis of the fruitfulness of the disciples, illustrated with the imagery of the vine and the branches, the Johannine Jesus

7. See Jn 10:38; 14:10-11; 17:21; also 14:20; 17:23.

8. For a detailed analysis of 1 Jn 3:9, see A. Edanad, *Christian Existence and the New Covenant*. (Bangalore 1987), pp. 134-144.

reassuringly tells the disciples: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." In the light of the metaphor of pruning (literally, "cleaning") the branches in order to make them produce more fruit, which is employed in the previous verse (15:2), the statement of Jesus means that it is through the word that the disciples are rendered fruitful. In the same context this fruitfulness is defined as the observance of the commandments (15:10), and the commandments are reduced to a single commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). The fruitfulness resulting from the union with Christ through the word is a life that is characterized by generous, self-sacrificing and enriching love which has as its source and principle the divine love flowing from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the believers (Jn 17:26).

The Transforming Spirit

In line with the general Biblical view of the close relation between the word and the Spirit of God, in the Johannine writings the Spirit appears as having functions similar and complementary to those of the word. If the word is the source of life, the Spirit is the life-principle contained in the word and communicated through it (Jn 6:63). As Jesus, the Word, is the source of the divine word for man, he is also the source of the Spirit. Using the symbol of water, which can signify both the word and the Spirit, the Johannine Jesus presents himself as the source of living water (Jn 4:10, 13-14; 7:37-38), namely, of the life-giving word and Spirit, the latter being the meaning stressed by the evangelist (Jn 7:39).

As we have already observed, in the Gospel the role of the Spirit in divine begetting is stressed, whereas in the Epistle the agency of the word is emphasized. Taking into account all that is said about the word and the Spirit we can understand the relation between the two and come to the conclusion that the word is that through which the divine begetting takes place and the Spirit is the life-giving and transforming power that is operative in and through the word. Thus the word and the Spirit are principles that are complementary and closely related and that function in tandem in the process called the divine begetting of men. In the Gospel it is further indicated that as a result of the divine begetting, which happens through the divine word that is accepted by a person, and through the action of the Spirit, the one who has become a child of God is capable of

acknowledging his filial relationship with God because of the Spirit inspiring, guiding and animating him, and because of the "truth" that he has received – he will "worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23–24).

In the Johannine theological perspective the communication of the Spirit could take place only after Jesus was glorified through his death and resurrection (Jn 7:39), which constituted his return to the Father (Jn 16:6, 28). In his Farewell Discourse the Johannine Jesus promises the Paraclete–Spirit which will be sent after he has returned to the Father. The qualification "another Paraclete" given to the promised Spirit (Jn 14:16) and the nature of its functions show that the Spirit is expected to continue and complete the revelatory and saving work of Jesus after his departure to the Father and, so to say, to take his place among the disciples. According to these promises the Spirit will remain in the disciples teaching them and giving them a deeper understanding of all that Christ himself revealed (Jn 14:26); it will guide them along the way of all truth (Jn 16:13) and bear witness to Christ (Jn 15:26) who himself is the truth (Jn 14:6). In this sense the Paraclete–Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). In the Epistle, in accordance with its post–Easter perspective, these promises of Jesus are proclaimed as already fulfilled.

The First Epistle of John employs the term "chrism" (*chrisma* in Greek) for the Spirit⁹ which the believers have received (1 Jn 2:20, 27), thereby alluding that the Spirit they have received is a participation in "the anointing" of Jesus with the Spirit (cf. Acts 10:38; also Jn 1:32–33). About this Spirit it is stated that it remains in them and teaches them everything regarding the truth and this teaching is the norm for them to remain in Christ (1 Jn 2:27; comp. Jn 14:17, 26; 16:13). It is further indicated that the Spirit now bears witness to Christ (1 Jn 5:6–8) in fulfilment of the promise that Jesus made to his disciples (Jn 15:26). Consequently, in the Epistle the Spirit is said to be "the truth" (1 Jn 5:7) – a qualification which in the Gospel belongs to Jesus (Jn 14:6).

In the Epistle we find a further development: the Spirit that the believers have received is within them as the principle of their observance of God's commandments. In two passages (1 Jn 3:24 and 4:12–16), in

9. See *Ibid.*, pp. 124–134, 144–155; for the "Chrism" and for the Spirit as interior dynamic principle according to 1 Jn.

parallel statements, the Spirit that God has given to the believers is one of the criteria of their communion with God, and the other criteria are keeping the commandments (3:24), loving one another (4:12, 16) and confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15). Among these the last two are the object of God's commandment (1 Jn 3:23). It is remarkable that among these criteria except the Spirit all the others are external and easily verifiable. From the context and from the parallelisms of these statements it is sufficiently clear that the Spirit is the criterion of communion with God insofar as the Spirit is the inner moving force that enables one to keep the commandments and thus it invariably manifests its presence and dynamism through the observance of the commandments which it effects. This is just another dimension of the transformation that takes place in a person through the life-imparting action of the Spirit making him a child of God. The working of the Spirit continues to be effective rendering him capable of responding and behaving as a true child of God. We have seen that the same is the effect of the word of God that remains in a person as the principle of divine begetting, and this again indicates the close link between the word and the Spirit as agents of interior transformation.

Concluding Remarks

The basic feature of the Johannine model of spirituality can be summed up as interiorization of the word of God and openness to the transforming action of the Spirit. The word of God is accessible to man in various forms and degrees: creation, history, incarnation. The fundamental quality which a "spiritual" person should have is a constant alertness to hear and receive the word that God speaks to him, in whatever form that may be. The ability to hear the ever present, multidimensional multifarious and incessantly resonant word becomes honed by one's readiness to listen to its finest modulations. The one who is indefatigably attentive will be able to hear more and more clearly and distinctly the inexhaustible word of God.

The word of God that a person receives should be allowed to find its place in his heart and to become embedded in it. Since together with the word he receives the Spirit, which is the transforming power of God, the actual transformation that happens in him corresponds to the degree in which the word has been interiorized, whereas the Spirit always enables him to interiorize the word deeper and deeper. If he co-operates and responds adequately by being open through a total self-surrender to the action of the Spirit, this process of interiorization and transformation will

be continuous and ever increasing in momentum and depth - he will become more and more "spiritual."

Due to the transformation that continuously takes place in a person by virtue of the interiorized word and through the action of the Spirit, he becomes more and more "divine," imbued with the divine life and being one with God. Paradoxically, through the same process and on account of the same realities he becomes more and more "human" too. He realizes that God, who entered the human realm through his word which increasingly took human form beginning with creation, can be attained only through the human medium, that the way to God is through man, that he can be one with God only by being one with man, that "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20).