

THE COMPLEMENTARY DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCEPTS OF AGNI AND THE SPIRIT IN THE INDIAN AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human language is and will always remain imperfect and vague in expressing the infinite mystery and richness of God. Nevertheless, it is possible to speak of God. From time immemorial human beings have gazed upon the mystery of life, death and birth with wonder and considered them as belonging to the divine realm which is beyond human control and is permeated by an invisible power- a *Pneuma*, Spirit. In religions where there is no clear and definite notion of a personal god, say for instance, in Hinduism, the powers and elements of nature with their massive and irresistible impact have influenced the human mind in raising its religious and divine consciousness. This probably accounts for the pneumatological dimensions of all religions. Belief in a spirit existed and provided for the earliest form of religions like animism and in the ritual of ancestral worship. The immaterial, non-corporeal quality of a being belonged to the sphere of the divine as existence in body/flesh was experienced to be limiting and debilitating to an extent. 'Spiritual' existence was unbinding beyond all control, which is more proper to the gods who hold sway over nature and the human race. Platonic philosophy also contributed to the development of the pneumatological dimensions of religions and considered that true liberation consisted in freeing the spirit from the body and setting it free for the world of ideas.

The Vedic Aryans (for that matter, all primitive religious traditions) lived lives that were in close proximity to nature and nature's manifestations. The overwhelming phenomenon of the sun, moons, stars, thunder, gale and rain evoked in them awe and

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reverence. Consequently they began to ascribe to these powers functions and qualities proper to a spirit. Of all the elements by which the world is constituted, that of fire occupied a central place in representing the divine. This is also probably the reason why fire or its forms like light, oil lamps and lighted candles are used invariably in worship by believers of all religions. In the inter-religious dialogue gatherings that I have witnessed one factor was invariably present - the factor of fire along with invocations to the mighty spirit of God to come and take possession of the occasion and its proceedings. This is because followers of all religions could easily relate to fire without offending anyone as something extraordinary, a symbol that is unifying and elevating at the same time. In short, it stood for the deepest religious aspirations of the human heart. Christian theology in numerous texts, hymns and rituals uses the image of fire to depict the Holy Spirit. For the Israelites as also for other Semitic peoples and, in general, for the peoples of the Mediterranean lands and above all, for the Vedic Indians, the principal element used for divine communication was fire. However, in this study we shall confine ourselves to two great religions - Hinduism and Christianity, which represent two complementary traditions in world religions. In the *Rg Veda* the God *Agni* stood eminently for this benevolent force in his role as mediator and witness. In the Christian tradition the Holy Spirit also plays this significant role.

2. AGNI THE DIVINE FIRE IN THE *RG VEDA*

More than three thousand years ago nomads crossed the mountain ranges that separate Central Asia from Iran and the Sub-continent. These nomads imported the rudiments of their social and religious system along with the Indo-European language, which developed into Vedic and later into Sanskrit. Their scriptures were called the *Vedas*- the most important among them being the *Rg Veda* being so called as it were because of the *rcs* or verse intended for loud recitation. They worshipped a personal deity called *Agni* in the form of fire.

In the *Rg Veda* the gods are called *Devas* meaning 'beings undoubtedly connected with heaven'. 'Div' in Sanskrit means 'to

gleam', 'to vibrate', 'to shine', 'to flash'. The Latin *Deus* for God also has its first beginning in Sanskrit *Deva*³.

Agni means 'to move' coming from Sanskrit *Ag* referring to its chief quality of agility, which is a derivative of *Ag*. The Latin *Ignis* and Lithuanian *Ugnis* are like *Agni* the deification of fire in its threefold manifestations as sun in the universe, lightning in the atmosphere and as fire on earth. *Agni* with its nominal addition of 'ni' means 'mighty', 'supreme', 'splendid' 'forceful' and 'bright'. We find the same root in Greek 'Agathos' meaning 'good', 'noble', 'brave'. It seems that it also means 'love' from the Greek *Agape*⁴.

Of the 1028 hymns of the *Rg Veda* more than 200 are addressed to *Agni* alone and innumerable other hymns invoke this deity first for inspiration and guidance even when the hymn is addressed to other gods. It is significant also to note that the *Rg Veda* opens and closes with hymns to *Agni*. These two hymns are very important as they in a profound manner and in a miniature form include all other hymns in their deepest meaning.

2.1. Identity, Attributes and Functions of *Agni*

Agnim ile purohitam yajnasya devam ritvijam /

hotaram ratna-dhatamam // (RV.I.1.1)

"I magnify *Agni*, the *purohita*, the divine ministrant of the sacrifice, the *Hotri* priest, the greatest bestower of treasures".

The opening lines of the opening hymn summarise the various characteristics of *Agni* among which the most prominent are his priesthood, his indwelling and purifying roles, his task as the giver of wisdom and his intimate relationship with truth. In this study we shall briefly examine each of these functions and roles.

2.1.1. *Agni* as *Purohita* or Priest

In the *Rg Veda* the single most element of *Agni*'s personality is his priesthood. '*Agnim ile purohitam*, 'I worship *Agni* - the priest', so opens the book of the *Rg Veda*. He is priest in a threefold manner. He is chosen priest (*purohita*), he is the invoking priest (*Hotar*) and he is the officiating priest (*ritvij*). As priest he is the mediator who

belongs to both sides (earth and heaven), is at home and involved. In a higher and more elevated sense, *Agni* stands for the aspirations of the human heart to stand in the divine presence and communicate with the otherwise incommunicable, building the fundamental bridge between the physical and the supra-physical world.

2.1.2. *Agni* as Friend and Indweller (*Antrayamin*)

This epithet becomes more intelligible when we recall the standing description of *Agni* as the 'God in human beings' 'the immortal in mortals', 'the divine guest'⁷. He is the *Anima Mundi*- the subtle principle that pervades all nature as the fire or heat within. "Shine, thou of many forms, shine radiantly on us"(RV I.79.5). He is the only lord who is called *Grahaspati*, 'Lord of the house' because he is taken as the perceptual presence in human dwellings and human hearts (VII.15.7-8). When a Vedic Indian kindled the sacrificial fire at dawn he was in fact kindling the inner flame of upward aspiration. Dwelling within, his mission is to purify all that he works upon and to raise the soul struggling in its earthly trivialities.

2.1.3. *Agni* the Purifier (*Sucir agni*)

Numerous *Rg Vedic* hymns give fire the name 'Purifier' because fire plays a central role in transforming a being to its higher destiny through a purification from within. "Most youthful God, whatever sins through folly we may have committed as human beings, do thou expiate. Remit entirely, O *Agni*, our offences (IV.2.4). RV I.97 is a heartfelt prayer where the cosmic, the human and divine elements are all present in asking for forgiveness. Every *Mantra* ends with the refrain "May the Lord burn away our sins"⁹. If such is the elevated nature, qualities and functions of *Agni*, he cannot then be merely fire used for cultic purpose.

2.1.4. *Agni* the giver of *Dhi* or Wisdom (*Jinangni*)

Scholiast Sayana gives to the word '*Dhi*' varied meanings. It is rendered variously as 'thought' 'prayer', 'action' and 'food'¹⁰. With the prefix *BU* (*BU+DHI*) it stands for the rational, imaginative and intellectually mnemonic faculty of observing, retaining, reasoning, comparing, comprehending and creating. In the Vedic

understanding, the giver of this inward vision is none other than *Agni* who as the inner soul within illumines the mind dispelling all darkness and enabling clear perception (I.105.14). *Agni* is well known in the *Rg Veda* as *Vaisvanara*, 'he who belongs to all men'. He belongs to all peoples by virtue of his attribute of light both external and internal¹². Vedic man believed that there is a supreme light, transcendent and immanent which is the source of all lights. *Agni* is one of the colossal manifestations of this original light. Thus we have the famous *Gayatri Mantra*, the most celebrated verse of the entire *Rg Veda* in III.62.10 which formed the daily prayer of the *Brahmins* in the morning and evening¹³.

2.1.5. *Agni* and Its Relationship to Truth

Agni's relationship to truth is closely associated with his purifying role as one who brings out the real essence of things to the front, destroying layers of impurity and ambiguity. In many a hymns to *Agni* he is pictured as the guardian of truth - truth understood here as the *Rta* in man and defends it against the powers of darkness¹⁴.

The final hymn of the *Rg Veda* is a hymn to *Agni* invoking at the same time all other deities. It is a prayer for unity and harmony among all created beings. The hymn invites all believers to live lives where "Your minds are of one accord" (RV 10.191.1-4), because, says the *Rg Veda* "The place is common, common the assembly, common the mind" (V 3). The very last *Mantra* (V 4) gathers up and integrates all that we have been seeing in the hymns at random by sublimating the theology of the *Rg Vedic* hymns to *Agni* in the following lines.

"United your resolve, united your hearts

May your spirits be at one

That you may long together dwell in unity and concord"¹⁵.

From the above discussion on *Agni* we can easily discover the fact that this deity *Agni* played an important role in the religious lives of the Vedic peoples. Interestingly, we can see the very same attributes and qualities in the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit who is symbolised often in the form of fire. The second half of this

study attempts to capture the mysterious personality of the Third person of the Triune God - namely, the Holy Spirit.

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT : THE DIVINE FIRE IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Holy Spirit' is the proper name given to the third person of the Blessed Trinity and is different from the other uses of terms like 'spirit' and 'holy'. Other names for the Holy Spirit are 'Spirit of Promise' (Gal 3:14), 'Spirit of Christ' (Rm 8:9), 'The Spirit of the Lord' (2 Cor 3:17), 'The Spirit of God' (Rm 8:9,15) and the 'Spirit of Glory'¹⁶ (1 Pet 4:14).

Christian experience of the Holy Spirit is without fail and experience of light and warmth, illumination and inspiration - all aspects of fire. An analysis of the concept of the Spirit in the Old and New Testaments, in the Patristic writings, in the experience of the mystics and particularly in the celebration of the liturgy will shed new light and insights on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

In Hebrew religious language God's spirit is that which expresses God's outreach towards his created world, a medium used to link the transcendent God with the realm of time and space. It is a way of God being with them, God directing his thoughts, God proposing, willing, bringing into being, sustaining and guiding. They convey the idea of the creator addressing his rational creatures, inspiring, teaching, commanding, warning, punishing, forgiving, rewarding, intervening, loving and even standing in close personal relationship to his people¹⁷.

The Greek *Pneuma*, Latin *Spiritus* and the German *Geist* for spirit were terms that were always conceived as antithesis to matter and body. They meant something immaterial, disembodied, supersensory and supernatural¹⁸.

In the New Testament, long before the reality of the Spirit was a doctrine to be analysed, he was a fact in the experience of the community. But there are surprisingly few statements about the Spirit in the Gospels and only one or two may be traced back in substance to Jesus himself. It is no doubt a historical fact that Jesus

himself seldom referred to the Spirit. However, the community after Easter experienced the gift of the Holy Spirit as the sign of God and as a sign of the people of the last time. One important aspect of the NT Pneumatology is that it is highly Christological. The Holy Spirit is inseparably related to the Incarnate Word¹⁹.

3.1. The Holy Spirit: Identity, Attributes and Functions

The reasons why the Holy Spirit is little known to most Christians, are many, one of which stems from the very nature and role of the Spirit itself. In our ordinary human language and experience we do not relate readily to a Spirit. By contrast we relate easily to the idea of a 'Father' and a 'Son'. We know what a human father is like, either through experience or through observation. The same is true also of the Son. But we have no observation or experience as to what a Spirit is. The very idea of the Spirit is the notion of a being without a body, something that has no visible appearance or material constitution. This is one of the primary reasons why Christian theology abounds in the use of symbols and images while speaking of the Holy Spirit. It is here too that we find a close affinity in functions and attributes with the *Rg Vedic* God Agni. We owe it to the Fathers of the church who reflected, discussed and debated over this issue and bequeathed to us a Pneumatology that is rich and orthodox²⁰. St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and above all St. Ephraem use frequently the image of fire to speak of the action of the Spirit in the believer. According to them the Holy Spirit is 'The flame of love'²¹. "Did not our hearts burn within us?", asked the disciples on their way to Emmaeus. John the Baptist baptised with water but prophesied that the Christ would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3:16; Mk 3:11). Jesus himself likened his mission in the Spirit to that of "casting fire upon earth" (Lk 12:49). But the most poignant experience of the Spirit as fire occurred on the day of Pentecost in the light of which all previous allusions and subsequent manifestations become meaningful and alive. The theological and spiritual content of Pentecost, which far outweighs the historical sequence and manner of events is contained in this. At the beginning of the church, there was a massive, spectacular, intense and unmistakable experience of the Holy Spirit and that this experience was best translated in terms of an experience of being set on fire²².

However, what is interesting is that the Spirit at Pentecost does not replace Christ altogether, but rather points to a more sublime presence of Jesus. It may be noted that even at Pentecost - the feast of the Holy Spirit - the Spirit does not draw attention to himself, on the contrary he bears witness to Christ. The Spirit makes us hear the Father's Word but we do not hear the Spirit himself. The Spirit's mission is by and large hidden. At Pentecost, what the community proclaimed was Jesus and not the Spirit²³. In everyday life, where a person hopes against hope, where one, for no apparent success or advantage, accepts a responsibility in freedom, where a leap into the darkness of death is accepted as the beginning of promise, where the bitter, deceptive and vanishing everyday world is withstood until the accepted end, which is still unknown, where one endures in prayer when apparently there is no answer to one's prayers, where one rehearses one's own death in everyday life in such a way as one would like to die - peaceful and composed -, there, and similar 'wheres', is the unique and unmistakable experience of the Holy Spirit²⁴.

3.1.1. Experience of the Spirit

One of the synonyms used for the Holy Spirit is 'Advocate' (Gk. 'Paracletos'). In the Old Testament there were many advocates because the idea was that humans can be represented before a deity only by a superior being who comes forward as helper, elevator, defender and advocate. Men of God like Abraham, Moses and Samuel, and prophets like Amos and Jeremiah, interceded with Yahweh for others in guilt or distress. In the New Testament, however, in place of many advocates, primitive Christianity recognised only one advocate with the Father - Jesus Christ, who as the righteous one intercedes for sinners; "Another advocate" who after the departure of Jesus will continue his work and remains forever with the disciples as the Holy Spirit²⁵ (Jn 14:16,26; 16:7,13).

3.1.2. Holy Spirit: The Indwelling-God

Yahweh dwelt among the people of God and had his dwelling in Zion. Yet, he remained far and wholly the Other. The excellent term that bridged this gap between the transcendence and immanence of God was *shekinah* meaning 'to inhabit'. Later the

indwelling took its most colossal form in the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us²⁶ (Jn 1:12). The Fathers of the church, however, emphasised that divine indwelling is the special quality of the Holy Spirit. He is the 'soul's most welcome guest'²⁷. References to the indwelling Spirit abound in the NT (1Cor 6:19; 3:16; Jn 4:12-13; 14:16-17, 23; 15:10). Closely related and forming part of the indwelling is the expression 'The Spirit in us'. The Spirit in us is an inward fire that cannot be easily extinguished and is experienced as 'fire burning within our hearts' and as 'fire shut in one's bones and marrow to hear God's voice and neighbour's cry'²⁸.

3.1.3. The Purifier

The purifying role of the Spirit was developed in the church in the 5th century mainly by John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia²⁹. On the practical experiential level the purifying role boils down to this. One looks to the Holy Spirit to burn what is useless in one's life, to purify oneself as gold is purified in the furnace. The real renewal of a person does not come with a change of outward condition; it comes when God washes away all evil and gives humankind a new heart and a new spirit, in short, God's own Spirit³⁰ (Eze 36:25-27; Jer 31:31-33).

3.1.4. Mediator/Witness

In every encounter there is an anonymous third party, who makes the introduction, acts as a go-between and sets up a current of communication. In the Christian spiritual tradition this current of communication is none other than the Holy Spirit in whom alone one is enabled to call God 'Abba, Father' and to confess that 'Jesus is Lord'³¹.

3.1.5. The Spirit of Truth

The Spirit of Truth implies ideas of firmness, solidity and fidelity besides the role of 'leading us into all truth'. Foremost here is the discernment that will help a disciple of Christ to distinguish the solidity of truth from the fickleness and superficiality of untruth, the genuine product from the fake counterfeit³².

It is in the context of the celebration of the sacraments and other liturgical rituals that these roles of the Spirit come to the

forefront. The Holy Spirit is invariably invoked 'where two or three are gathered' in Christ's name. Through the positive qualities of light, represented in lighted candles, electric bulbs, illumined interiors, the church seeks to remind the faithful of the presence of God the Father who is the Father of all light and in whose light we see light; the Risen Christ who is the light of the world and the Holy Spirit who is the inner flame illumining the believer from within. This is evident in the Charismatic renewal that is sweeping our nation bringing the Holy Spirit back to his rightful place in Christian life. Even as we admit that the 'Divine fire' is producing an awful lot of 'human smoke', the fact remains that the movement has captured enthusiastic youth giving new vitality to their vocation to be a Christian³⁴.

4. COMPLEMENTARY DIMENSIONS

4.1. *Agni-Spirit Synthesis*

The aim of this article is not to make a comparison between *Agni* and the Holy Spirit or to establish that the two are identical although there exist an attractive resemblance and points of affinity. Rather, it invites the reader to discover and to marvel at the fundamental unity of all God-experiences. Those who dare to scratch the surface and delve deeper will arrive at common roots because God is one. *Agni* is first and foremost a deity who stimulates the intellect, clarifies the vision and enlightens the mind of the sincere seekers in their pursuit of spiritual perfection. A strikingly similar force is at work in the Christian understanding of grace which is nothing but the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

All religions speak of a great Spirit who existed from the beginning and who is benevolently involved in the lives of the human beings on earth³⁵. First, human beings distinguished between the eternal and the perishable. Later, they discovered within themselves the germ of the Eternal. This discovery inaugurated a new epoch in the history of the human race, and the East was the first to discover it³⁶. The symbol of fire had a preferential place in this scheme of things. Unlike other elements, fire has no fixed form or definite shape, it exists only by burning and is therefore, a process. That is why the Vedic Aryans looked upon it with awe and reverence. A

similar thinking is the reason behind calling the Holy Spirit 'Divine fire'. We can sense the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit, but as to his substance we are left in the lurch wondering who and what the Spirit is until he himself allows us a glimpse of his nature and action through faith³⁷.

Israel had different levels of understanding fire, progressing with each level. Whereas Judaism and Christianity found in fire properties proper to the being of God, it was Hinduism that deified God as fire itself. This is the marked difference between the two. However, to think that the Vedic Indians worshipped mere physical fire as God is to oversimplify and reduce to syncretic reductionism a well-developed theology of *Agni* bequeathed to us by the seers and saints. *Agni* remained and still remains a personal God for the Hindus however vague that concept of 'person' may be to the analytical Westerner. Has not Christianity encountered innumerable difficulties in explaining the presence of the Holy Spirit in spite of its highly sophisticated notion of person? The Holy Spirit is never depicted in human form inspite of the doctrine that he is the third person of the Trinity. What could be the reasons? Again, what explanation can we give for the lavish use of symbols in the church to portray the Spirit?

Nothing comes closest to the *Agni*-Spirit parallelism than the Christian concept of 'inspiration' and its Sanskrit counterpart 'dhi'. Giving inspiration and insight is the exclusive task of *Agni* in the *Rg Veda*. In Christianity inspiration is the work of the Holy Spirit by which alone one is induced to right perception and action. "Come O *Agni* Come!", so goes the Vedic invocation, much akin to the Christian prayer "Come O Holy Spirit, Come!"

Hindu metaphysics depends entirely upon the concept of a single substance animated by a single rhythm with pre-established harmonies. In this system *Agni* is the mouth of God, and speech (*Vac*) is considered to be fire. *Vac* in the *Rg Veda* is the first offspring of the Absolute and *Agni* is the 'Guardian' of *Vac*. *Agni* as the 'Lord of Speech' performs the noble task of the link between the spoken word and the speaking body and is in this sense called the 'Mouthpiece' of God³⁸. In ancient Israel too the *Dabar* of Yahweh and the *Ruah* of Yahweh were intimately related. Historically the

connection between Word and the Spirit begins with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. The OT links the Word and the Spirit in a number of texts especially in Joel 2:28 and Eze 37. In the NT the Gospel of John makes a clear connection between the Word and the Spirit (Jn 3:34). The living water of Jn 4:10 symbolises both the Word that reveals and the Spirit that testifies. That is why Jesus said: "True worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth", that is, in the truth that issues from him and by the energy that's connected with him. "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life".

5. CONCLUSION

In a country that is desperately looking for ways to reconcile differences of caste and creed one important way of being in mission is to appreciate and uphold the rich heritage of religions other than one's own (NA 2). The Spirit enables us to perceive truth not in mutually exclusive terms as "Either - Or" but in accommodative terms as "Both - And". One truth does not emerge triumphant over other truths by crushing the latter, on the contrary, my own truth-claims must be tested against their capacity to relate amicably with other truths.

Even if the Church insists that its own preaching contains and promulgates divine truths in the least ambiguous and most adequate manner, Christians should never cease to marvel at the spiritual riches that a bountiful God has bestowed upon the human race³⁹. If one God creates all things, an underlying unity must take precedence over diversity. Therefore, while avoiding syncretism and relativism, we may probe together into a situation that provides itself for our probing. "*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*" "Reality is one, the wise call it by different names" says RV I.164.46. For Christians, Jesus Christ and no other is the controlling factor in discerning the Spirit; but then Christians are called upon to discern not to control the Spirit⁴⁰. The enquiry may take us nowhere, arrive at no conclusions, but there is nothing wrong in enquiring. It seems to me also this is one good way things should move in a country like India where evangelisation is increasingly taking the mode of dialogue until the fire that Jesus came to cast burns brightly and spreads to every land.

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