

Homo Spiritualis¹

A True Philosopher

The sea
was angry today,
throwing itself
against the shore
with suicidal intent,
only to pull back
before annihilation,
but the feigned death
was not for me,
rather I was only
a voyeur
not a participant
in act of madness.
October hail fell
with huge tear drops,
forcing me to shelter,
as if mocking
my timid attempts
at introspection,

* Nicholas Cachia lectures in Spiritual Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta. He is also a spiritual director at the Archbishop's Seminary in Malta.

¹ This paper was delivered at a Conference held at a Seminar on Spirituality and Culture in the Mediterranean: The Religious Quest: 20 June 2011.

dwarfing my petty rages,
 knowing full well
 I stand at the abyss,
 not the sea's,
 but my own.
 The voyage
 will be worse
 than if I embarked
 in this October storm,
 for mine has been
 roaring much longer,
 not half an hour,
 but a lifetime,
 lashing my interior beach,
 my risk much greater,
 not just to body,
 but possibly my very soul.

This poem by Benedict Auer is preceded by a saying from James Cowan (*A Mapmaker's Dream*) stating that: "True philosophers are those who embark upon a voyage into the unknown, unsure of their destination or whether they might even return."²

As Dag Hammarskjöld, a Swedish diplomat and the second General Secretary of the United Nations said: "The longest journey is the journey inwards. Of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started upon his quest for the source of his being."

As we grow in wisdom we need to go inside ourselves and work at discovering who we really are. Several questions may confuse us sometimes about ourselves: How do I consider my place in the world? What are my beliefs? How do I fit in the scheme of things? Who am I, really? What moves me, what gives me direction, what gives me energy to keep on moving even when faced with discouragement, opposition, and frustration?

² Benedict Auer, *Soulpoeting. Healing Through Poetry* (London, 2000), 30-31.

Treating the theme of *Homo Spiritualis*, we need to embark on an anthropological journey that would help us clarify the point of departure of any discourse on spirituality. Trying to understand what is meant when we speak of ‘the spirit’ is important. This helps us to consider the human person both in the quest to transcend oneself but also to seek integration and wholeness on the level both of one’s actions and of one’s thoughts and feelings. Finally, the means which help fostering the development of our person will be considered.

I believe that Richard Hauser is correct when he writes about Christian Spirituality (but I believe this is also valid of any correct understanding of any spirituality): “At the heart of an understanding of Christian spirituality is an adequate understanding of the self.. we must grasp who we truly are in order to know what we are to become.” And he states: “Many of us have an inadequate understanding of who we are; so we also have an inadequate understanding of spirituality.”³

In the Preface to the 25-volume series *World Spirituality*, which is described as being *An Encycloedic History of the Religious Quest*, Ewert Cousins states that “no attempt was made to arrive at a common definition of spirituality that would be accepted by all in precisely the same way... Yet...” he continues, “there was a consensus among the editors about what was in general intended by the term.” Here he gives the following description of spirituality:

that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions ‘the spirit’. This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal.⁴

Hans Urs von Balthasar attempts a universal definition of spirituality that could be generally applied: “the way in which [the human person] acts and reacts habitually throughout his life according to his objective and ultimate insights and decisions.”⁵

³ Richard Hauser, *In His Spirit. A Guide to Today’s Spirituality* (New York/Mahwah, N.J., 1982), 5.

⁴ Ewert Cousins, ‘Preface to the Series’ in *Christian Spirituality. Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York, 1985), 16: xii-xiii.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Gospel as Norm and Test of all Spirituality in the Church,” *Concilium* 9/1 (1965), 5.

In order to understand ‘the spirit’ we need to include the meaning of the term *nous* in antiquity – although this term is normally rendered by ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’. It is generally understood by ancient Greek philosophers, most especially Plato and Aristotle, as the highest intellectual faculty. By intellectual faculty they do not mean the ability to reason things out to a conclusion, but an intuitive and immediate grasp of reality. Another way to put it is as a direct contact between mind and truth. We need to include also the Christian usage of the terms *pneuma-spiritus* as well as the modern usage of the term. In this latter instance, we need to refer particularly to Hegel’s understanding with his distinction between objective and absolute spirit. For Max Scheler, then, the spiritual dimension of the human person has its own values and is related to the development of oneself as a person.

Hans Urs von Balthasar says that the wide application of the word ‘spirit’ “is not necessarily formless and vague since the word implies at least one basic and clear precision, namely that man sees and defines himself in the light of his spiritual quality, and not of his material, bodily or instinctive aspects.” He adds, “The spirit opens up in an unequivocal yet mysterious way to the totality of being.”⁶

Elaborating on this position, von Balthasar makes three important points which would help us understand better the dimensions of human spirituality in principle. He says that the human person relates everything else one may be (a part of the world, a material organism) to one’s spirit. Von Balthasar says, “He is a single being, the centre of which lies in his spirit which is in charge of the final harmony within himself and within the extent of his life.” This would entail “the existential search for the truth of existence”, “the basic search for an absolute point of reference.”⁷

The second point von Balthasar makes is that “the spirit wants to express itself in reality ... it wants to become the total content within everything relative. Only in this way does the ‘relation to the absolute’ become principally a ‘decision.’”⁸ Plato, in the *Republic*, works out the application of the spirit to the whole of reality, whether individual or social. Plato does this by means of the ‘cardinal virtues’ as the principles on which this spiritual order is based. This is marked both by factual

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid.

objectivity and selfless service to reality as against arbitrariness and exploitation. According to Hegel, then, in this widening service of the world and in such consistent “objectivisation” can the subjective spirit attain its own absolute value. And Heidegger would have it that in this constant listening to the widening law of being can the spirit “hear” itself.⁹

The third point made by von Balthasar refers the spirit to the absolute truth: the acting person “must allow the absolute to be in command as the norm-giving spirit, and this not merely as a formal maxim within my own spirit (Aristotle, Kant), but as the concrete absolute Mind (*Logos*), which my limited mind still sees as formal and abstract, and only becomes concrete when my mind allows the absolute Truth to choose to be, to ‘happen,’ within myself.”¹⁰

Thus, “the spirit appears essentially as transcendental, in so far as it partakes of absoluteness by moving away from itself towards the Absolute. Next, this transcendence is reflected in its relation to the objective world outside, in unselfish service; and thirdly, it is contained in allowing the absolute Mind to exist freely within me.”¹¹

Continuing our analysis of the word “spirit”, I would like now to turn to Karl Rahner’s notion of spirituality which I believe could shed some important complementary light on what was already said.

For Rahner, the term “spirit”, when applied to the individual, means both self-presence and questioning. As Declan Marmion explains, “self-presence is not an absolute possession of oneself, but a self-possession that goes out of itself and is ordered to the world. One both possesses oneself and is in search of oneself at the same time.”¹² The “restlessness of heart” - a notion traditionally associated with Augustine in his *Confessions* - has as its counterpart, in Rahner’s theology, that questioning which he sees as the root of the human search for meaning and fulfillment. Such questioning provides an important context for Rahner’s explanation of the “transcendent” nature of the human person.

⁹ See *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Declan Marmion, *A Spirituality of Everyday Faith. A Theological Investigation of the Notion of Spirituality in Karl Rahner*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 23 (Louvain, 1998), 56-57.

According to Marmion, “Rahner’s metaphysical anthropology can provide a basis for what has been called a ‘dialectical’ spirituality.”¹³ James J. Bacik organizes Rahner’s statements about the fundamental structures of human existence “into pairs of opposites that are dialectically related.”¹⁴ One example of such a dialectical pair is Rahner’s juxtaposition of the description of the transcendental nature of the human person, and his insistence that such a transcendence also has a history - the categorical dimension. In his analysis of Rahner’s own characterization of human existence as “spirit in the world”, Bacik says that ‘spirit’ summarizes those existentials which involve openness and dynamism - self-transcendence, being individual persons, infinite questioners - and ‘world’ summarizes those existentials which reflect some type of *limitation* - being contingent, material, finite, historical, sexual, temporal, subject to death. According to Rahner, the human person is “the mid-point suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity, and this boundary line is the point of our definition and our destiny.”¹⁵ Both “spirit” and “world” imply each other, and one cannot exist without the other.

Borrowing again Benedict Auer’s words, the question that now arises is: how do I discover and eventually reach “my interior beach”? How do I get to “my very soul”? Here lies the secret of the spiritual being who wants to live an integrated life, living out what one has chosen in freedom to be one’s true values in life.

Ronald Rolheiser defines spirituality as being

about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros. And how we do channel it, the disciplines and habits we choose to live by, will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds, and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others, and the cosmic world.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., 140. He refers to James J. Bacik, “The Basis for a Dialectical Spirituality,” in *Being and Truth: Essays in Honour of John Macquarrie*, eds. Alistair Kee, Eugene T. Long, (London, 1986), 168-182.

¹⁴ Ibid., 175.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (New York, 1968), 407.

¹⁶ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing. The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (London, 1999), 11.

Thus, Rolheiser rightly sees the spirit as having a dual job:

A healthy spirit or a healthy soul must do dual jobs: It has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living... The opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, is to have lost all zest for living ... Its other task, and a very vital one it is, is to keep us glued together, integrated, so that we do not fall apart and die. Under this aspect, the opposite of a spiritual person would be someone who has lost his or her identity.¹⁷

Similarly, Philip Sheldrake has lately understood this in terms of desire. “Desire haunts us” he says. “You could say that desire is God-given and, as such, is the key to all human spirituality. Desire is what powers our spiritualities but, at the same time, spirituality is about how we focus our desire.”¹⁸ Experience shows us that we, as human persons, have many desires. And so the question is: how to discern which to follow. Again Sheldrake tells us:

Authentic desires come from our essential selves rather than from the surface of our personalities, or from our immediate reactions to situations and experiences. Such authentic desires tend to reach into the very heart of our identities. At this level the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What do I want?’ touch intimately upon each other... Our Great Desire is sometimes well hidden beneath a confusing mass of often insistent wants, needs and longings. To move through the various levels of desire clearly demands discernment.¹⁹

Thus, the great importance of knowing ourselves in truth: “The more honestly we try to identify our authentic desires, the more we can identify who we truly are.”²⁰

And desire opens up the human spirit to transcend itself, to go beyond, to stretch forward in order to become more what one is called to be: “Our desires imply a condition of incompleteness because they speak of what we are not, or do not have. Desire is also, therefore, a condition of openness to possibility and to future.”²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁸ Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* (London, 2001), 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 30.

²¹ Ibid., 33-34.

Sheldrake makes a distinction between desires which are “essential”, desires which are at the “the surface of our personalities” and desires which are “immediate reactions to situations and experiences.” George Aschenbrenner speaks of three dimensions of human existence: external behaviour, inner spontaneity, and what he calls “the core of the soul.” He speaks of this core as “a hidden self grown strong ... can radiate inspiration, direction and fidelity.”²²

The first level speaks of that dimension of human life which is behavioural and external. Aschenbrenner describes it thus:

Activity on this level is external... These actions, though very real, perceptible and often consumptive of enormous energy, constitute nothing more than a superficial part of our being. In themselves, cut off from inner intentionality, these actions have very little meaning branded upon them... Though it doesn't make sense in a moment of careful reflection, how easy it is to subscribe to the belief that what you do *is* who you are.²³

The second level of human living, which Aschenbrenner calls “the ‘skin’ of the soul” is related to

the very real area of spontaneity which registers in the human experience of all of us, either rationally or affectively. Though affectivity, sensuality and other aspects of human spontaneity are rooted within the psyche, their result registers and is felt on the skin. These spontaneities of thinking and feeling skitter their way across the skin of our souls, but never strike to the core... These spontaneities, whether fiercely storming or quietly passing, are neither permanent nor profound.

Even here, one needs to face the question: “Are we ever simply and wholly identified by what we spontaneously think or feel? ... Neither ‘What I feel’ nor ‘what I think’ ever fully equals ‘who I am.’”²⁴

The third dimension, which Aschenbrenner calls “the core of the soul”, refers to “the most interior part of every human person.” It is potentially available to everyone,

²² George Aschenbrenner, “A Hidden Self Grown Strong,” in *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, ed. Robert J. Wicks (New York/Mahwah N.J., 1995), 1:228-229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 229-230.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

but it needs to be discovered, allowing it to become truly the centre of one's being and doing. Aschenbrenner says:

If we are to grow to maturity in our humanity and in our spirituality (two realities that can be distinguished but never totally separated), this interior centre must develop into the most profound personal aspect of daily life. Developing this core of the soul requires our careful cooperation.²⁵

Aschenbrenner calls this “deepest centre” of our being God's most precious gift to each of us.²⁶ He stresses on the importance for the human person to discover this ‘true self’ saying that

a profoundly personal inner world is gradually revealed, acknowledged and then laid claim to, though this whole process is much more one of receiving than of making. It is the receiving and welcoming of an enormous valuable gift. With unique beauty this true self, like hidden precious treasure, awaits discovery and development. Deficient appreciation of this inner beauty and truth can mislead a person to ragged self-esteem, and even to a misshapen self-loathing.²⁷

On this deepest level of our being we are able to make a genuine experience of God. “God's love resounds as a presence perduring and endearing... This is the point where we *are* – where we are in God, and continually coming to be in the breath of God's loving Spirit... This is holy ground. In the holiness of this quiet sanctuary, with an attractiveness beyond imagining, God's love is grasping, laying claim to and identifying each of us in Christ. It is the still point in the ever turning world of our person and of the whole cosmos.”²⁸

These dimensions of human existence need to become integrated as much as possible through a process of deepening reflection, assimilation and appropriation. Aschenbrenner affirms that

our very identity, and its continuing development, must be founded in a dimension of ourselves that runs deeper than the superficial levels of

²⁵ Ibid., 230.

²⁶ Ibid., 228.

²⁷ Ibid., 231.

²⁸ Ibid., 234.

spontaneity and activity. Our identity cannot be something chameleon-like with a fresh new face for each day of the week. In fact, it is precisely a profoundly settled identity that makes possible the personal flexibility and adaptability required for the challenges of our life commitments.²⁹

This deepest core of being, duly discovered and developed, becomes the source of energy, what moves one in life, what gives one direction, what keeps one moving even when faced with adversity, discouragement, and frustration. Ronald Rolheiser describes this through a beautiful story:

A friend of mine relates how, after buying a house, he decided to get rid of an old bamboo plant in his driveway. He cut the plant down, took an ax to its roots, and, after destroying as much of it as he could, he poured bluestone, a plant poison, on what remained. Finally, he filled the hole where the plant had been with several feet of gravel that he tamped tightly and paved over with cement.

Two years later, the cement heaved as the bamboo plant began slowly to break through the pavement. Its life principle, that blind pressure to grow, was not thwarted by axes, poison, and cement.³⁰

As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit is present within us, continually active in us and continually extending initiative moving us away from evil toward good. The more we become aware of this presence and are open to the action of the Spirit, the more we become who we truly are. Richard Hauser says in this regard:

The deepest level of our being is spiritual. This is the level of our freedom and love. Here we are free to move out in love toward God and others or to live a self-centred existence. It is at this level that the Spirit of God is united with the human spirit; at this level God's Spirit joins our spirit.³¹

St Paul speaks of the baptised person as the one who ought to "walk in the Spirit", thus becoming *pneumatikos*, the spiritual person.

In Pauline theology *pneuma* or *spiritus* is contrasted with *sarx* or *caro* (flesh), and not with *soma* or *corpus* (body). For Paul, the spirit, *pneuma* suggests the knowing

²⁹ Ibid., 241.

³⁰ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 17.

³¹ Hauser, *In His Spirit*, 9.

and willing self and, as such, the aspect that is particularly apt to receive the Spirit of God. The *sarx*, “flesh”, on the other hand, represents everything in human nature that opposes this influence of the Spirit of God (see Gal 3,3; 5,13.16-25; 1 Cor 3,1-3; Rom 7-8), natural, material, and visible human existence, weak and earthbound. Joseph Fitzmyer states that, for Paul, the Spirit of God, received by the baptised person, is an “energizer”, a Spirit of power (1 Cor 2,4; Rom 15,13), and the source of Christian love, hope and faith, and thus, of an integrated life on the level of being and doing.³²

What means could help foster the development of our person over time beyond the behavioural and the rational and affective level. Ewert Cousins, in the Preface to the *World Spirituality* Series referred to at the beginning of this contribution, speaks of “prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.”³³ Literature on the subject puts great emphasis on creating a space for reflection and personal silence. This “interior” space needs to become an attitude, a way of being wherein one learns to live out from within.³⁴ George Aschenbrenner does put emphasis on regular solitude and prayerful reflection, but he mentions also “affective darkness” in one’s commitment which, if rightly tackled, could become an invitation to go deeper. Although he speaks specifically of ministry, I believe that his reflections - with some necessary adaptations - are valid for any serious commitment in life. It is worth quoting what he says in this regard:

Mature ministry is ... always learning to rely ever more fully on God’s powerful love in Christ as finally much more transforming of our world than is our own activity. This ministerial darkness can purify us as instruments for God’s ministry of accomplishment far beyond what we can see and feel... Without the lesson this ministerial darkness can teach us, our ministry will not be dependable enough because not maturely enough founded in a hidden self grown strong in our soul’s core. And failing this maturity, the

³² See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Pauline Theology,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (New Jersey, 1990), 1396.

³³ Cousins, ‘Preface to the Series’, xiii.

³⁴ See Riccardo Tonelli, “Quale domanda d’interiorità,” *Rogate Ergo. Rivista di Animazione Vocazionale* (March 2009): 15.

quality of our presence in ministry will fluctuate unpredictably in accord with our feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment – and their contraries.³⁵

As a way of concluding this reflection, I believe that Jack Finnegan succeeds in bringing together the various elements that I have dealt with it.

Spirituality is a way of being authentically and lovingly human in the whole web of meaning, creativity, freedom, responsibility, sociality and relationality that mark human life on the planet today. As a process, spirituality engages with the rhythms of an often repressed centre of orientation and creativity that lies beyond the human ego. This centre allows dynamic expression to our inner depths, to the expansive, progressive and probing qualities of the human spirit, capacities that translate as creative and imaginative thought-and-action-in-the-world. Spirit is an axis that is alive, uniquely personal, purposeful, and courageous. Spirit is a centre of depth that makes new modes of experience possible: provided the human spirit is acknowledged and set free as the organising nucleus of a mature spirituality.³⁶

The *Homo Spiritualis*, thus, becomes the human being fully alive, in a continuing dynamic to realize and fulfil oneself, thus becoming who one truly is called to be. I conclude with an invitation-admonition made by a Jewish author, Abraham Joshua Heschel which I found very significant and compelling:

Perhaps this is the most urgent task: to save the inner man from oblivion, to remind ourselves that we are a duality of mysterious grandeur and pompous dust. Our future depends upon our appreciation of the reality of the inner life, of the splendour of thought, of the dignity of wonder and reverence. This is the most important thought: God has a stake in the life of a man, of every man. But this idea cannot be imposed from without; it must be discovered by every man. It cannot be preached, it must be experienced.³⁷

Dept. of Moral Theology
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080 - Malta
nicholas.cachia@um.edu.mt

³⁵ Aschenbrenner, "A Hidden Self Grown Strong," 246.

³⁶ Jack Finnegan, *The Audacity of Spirit. The Meaning and Shaping of Spirituality Today* (Dublin, 2008), 83.

³⁷ *Abraham Joshua Heschel. Essential Writings*, Selected with an Introduction by Susannah Heschel, Modern Spiritual Masters Series (New York, 2011), 115.