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**The Quest for Human and Cosmic Fullness:
A Multidisciplinary Enquire**

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Speaking to, speaking of, speaking about the Ultimate in our Theological Quest for Human and Cosmic Fullness

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There is a variety of ways in dealing with or in approaching to what we can call God or the Ultimate. Speaking to, speaking of and speaking about the Ultimate are three possible ways of doing that, still there might be more than those three. In this paper the question of the interrelatedness between these different ways of approaching the Ultimate is taken up. This leads to questions about the role of spiritual experience within the process of gaining academic theological knowledge, about the role of intellectual reflection within the process of spiritual growing, about the relation between intentional practice and unintentional openness in our spiritual as well as academic activity, about the possibility of an ongoing revelation process and about (im)possible ways of realizing these thoughts in our theological quest for human and cosmic fullness. This topic will be taken up by focussing on the Ignatian tradition and the Vipassana tradition.

I would like to take up the theme of human and cosmic fullness by focussing on our theological quest itself. What are we actually doing when we are doing theology? What is our main concern in doing theology and how are we trying to realize it? Is our theological work a quest for human and cosmic fullness? The particular focus I started to be interested in during the last years is the question of an interrelatedness of spirituality and theology or between an intellectual and a spiritual approach to theology or one might also say between „scholarly understanding“ and „meditative insight“¹. The background of my personal interest in this question is that I felt unsatisfied by a theology which stops where prayer or meditation begins, which remains strictly inside what one might call intellectual boundaries. At the same time I felt uneasy with people who jumped into different forms of spiritual practice and almost at the same time jumped away from a critical intellectual interaction.

For the beginning I would like to have a closer look to the different ways of relating to the Ultimate or – as we can name it in the Christian understanding – to God. Then in a second step I want to show briefly the difficulties which arise from the over-stressing of one par-

¹ I came across the expressions „meditative insight“ as well as „scholarly understanding“ during my research stay at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBC). This „center’s purpose is to provide a bridge between study and practice, between scholarly understanding and meditative insight“. See *Insight Journal*, vol. 32 (Summer 2009).

ticular way of relating to God resp. from the separation of these different ways. The third step will be to present some selected models which try to define the relationship between the theological and the spiritual quest and in the fourth step I want to look at two spiritual traditions and practices themselves in order to see in what way a bridge to the scholarly approach might be possible.

1 Three ways of relating to the Ultimate – or even more?

As already used in the heading to this article I would like to distinguish between these three ways of relating to God resp. to the Ultimate.

- Speaking to God: unmediated God-experience, experience of reality as it really is in prayer, meditation, liturgy, etc.
- Speaking of God: testimony, teaching, dharma talks, etc.
- Speaking about God: scholarly understanding, intellectual approach, academic approach

Dorothee Soelle also uses a three-fold distinction within the theological discipline. She speaks of three levels on which religion finds an expression. These levels are:

- the mythic-narrative in the mode of narrations and poems
- the religious-confessional in the mode of testimonies and praying
- the argumentative-reflective in the mode of thinking and reflecting²

According to her, theology has to be in touch with all three levels. These three levels do not express exactly the same as the three ways of God-speech do, but what is common to both is, that besides the argumentative or intellectual approach other ways of expression are taken into consideration.

As soon as I use this distinction of the three ways of God-speech I do also see its inadequateness out of mainly two reasons: In the first place the term speaking has to be widened as far as not speaking, listening, etc. especially when we look at the first two ways of referring to God. And in the second place the term God has to be widened when I try to connect my reflections to other than the Christian world what I try to do with one particular Buddhist tradition.

² See Soelle (1996) 76-78.

2 on the one side bones without flesh ... on the other side flesh without bones

Regarding the relation between these different ways of God-speech let me recall some historical data regarding their inter-relationship. When we look back in the history of theology as academic enterprise we will find lots of theologians of the first centuries and of the early Middle Age who have practiced a quite close relation between their faith and their prayer experiences on the one side and their activity as theologians on the other side.³ Alois Maria Haas speaks of a union between mystics and theology up to the 13th century. After that however Haas speaks of a diastase between mystics and theology due to the acceptance of an Aristotelian paradigm of rationality.⁴

Hans Urs von Balthasar was one of those theologians of the previous century, who strongly reminds us of the problematic development that knowledge and life, theology and holiness, „sitting and kneeling theology“ have separated. Balthasar shows that later mystics like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila do describe mystical states, but do not anymore find their way into the process of gaining theological and dogmatic knowledge. He also states that it has become more difficult to bridge the gap between Christian mystics and Christian (dogmatic) theologians than between mystics from different religious traditions.⁵ Balthasar writes: „They [those who have nowadays to proclaim the Gospel to the modern pagans] are looking for the living organism of the Church teaching and not for that strange anatomy: on the one side bones without flesh: the handed down dogmatic, on the other hand flesh without bones: all that pious literature, which – made out of ascetics, spirituality, mystic and rhetoric – passes down on the long-term due to its substancelessness an indigestible food. Only both together can build (according to the original image of the revelation in the scripture) that unique ‚figure‘, which can be perceived in the light of grace through the faithful eye, which remains highly visible in the world, in its uniqueness and evidence and – offence.“⁶

Today we can also find theologians who know about the necessary link between spirituality and theology. So does Marios Begzos, an orthodox theologian, write: „When one stands in front of God, one does not speak of God anymore. Being in front of God shapes/determines the speaking of God.“⁷ And Jürgen Werbick, a German theologian stresses that pray-

³ See Klemens of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origenes, Augustinus, Dionysius Aeropagita, Ambrosius, Anselm of Canterbury, Bonaventura, Meister Eckhart, Nikolaus of Cues.

⁴ See Haas (1996) 38-61.

⁵ See Balthasar (1960) 195-225.

⁶ See Balthasar (1960) 208. This quotation has been translated from the German original to English by the author of this article.

⁷ Marios P. Begzos in his article „Ostkirchliche Mystik oder orthodoxe Theologie? Selbstkritische Überlegungen zur Mystischen Theologie der Ostkirche“. Unfortunately I could not find out in which journal this article was published. This quotation has been translated from German to English by the author of this article.

er is the fundament of all speaking about God and that speaking about God like speaking about a third person is inadequate.⁸ These are just two examples, one could find many more. And still the question remains, in what way a stronger link between the God-speech of the mystics and the one of dogmatic theologians could be realized. Just to state the necessity is not enough.

The trials to do that are obvious. At least in Europe and in the United States theologians have started to speak a lot about a Spiritual theology or a theology of spirituality/spiritualities even when they might think of quite different things by using these terms. Still I think it becomes more and more visible, that there is something missing without „it“. The disadvantages are seen. But what could that „it“ be, which seems to be missing in an academic theology which does not include something like a spiritual theology.⁹

3 Academic theological quest and spiritual quest – can they meet?

In order to explore this question further, I would like to introduce very shortly some ideas of three American theologians, who reflect upon the nature of a spiritual theology, about its advantages and its dangers. These three theologians are Bernard McGinn, Sandra Schneiders and Philip Sheldrake.

3.1 The position of Bernard McGinn

Bernard McGinn, professor emeritus for historic theology starts with the question if spirituality can be taught and learnt altogether and answers this quite simply and convincingly with the fact that it has always been taught and that teaching spirituality might even belong to the oldest cultural things which were taught and handed over from generation to generation.

McGinn distinguishes within the field of spirituality between so called „first order-approaches“ and „second order-approaches“. A first order approach to spirituality does enter into the spiritual phenomena itself, whereas a second order approach deals with the study of spiritualities. He remains sceptical concerning the question if a first-order-approach can be taught at an academic institution. Still he sees the necessity to incorporate spirituality (as second-order-approach) into the academic curricula. At the same time he also regrets the split of theology in the late Middle Ages into a more rational theology of scholastics and a more af-

⁸ See Werbick (2007) 19-23.

⁹ Josef Weismayer distinguishes between a theology of spiritualities, a spiritual theology and a spiritual dimension of theology. See Weismayer (1983) 16-18; Schneiders (1989) 676-697; McGinn (1993), 1-9.

fective theology of mystics.¹⁰ Bernard McGinn belongs – according to Philip Sheldrake, about whom I will say a few sentences later – to those theologians who answer the question of a relationship between theology and spirituality by „treat[ing] spirituality as a distinctive but not autonomous element of theology“¹¹ in difference to those who „defend spirituality as a separate field while related to theology“¹².

3.2 The position of Sandra Schneiders

Sandra Schneiders is one of those theologians who do describe the relationship of spirituality in this second sense. She is professor for New Testament and Spirituality and holds the opinion that „we are witnessing the prolonged and difficult birth, within the halls of the academy, of a new scholarly discipline called spirituality“¹³. She compares the study of spirituality to the study of music and writes, that there are different purposes for studies of music and it cannot be easily decided which one has to be considered as the primary purpose. In the field of music such purposes could either be to learn how to play a music instrument or to develop theoretical knowledge about music. Still what seems to be out of question is that one can study music. Similarly she looks upon the study of spirituality.

Now we still face the question in what way the academic study of spirituality can be connected with lived out spirituality. What is the primary purpose of studies of spirituality and can a lived out spirituality be considered as pre-condition for the studies of spirituality? Sandra Schneiders does also distinguish between two different ways in which studies in spirituality can be done. She speaks of „formation oriented study“ und „research oriented study“, which are connected and still have to be distinguished. That this is quite difficult becomes evident when we have a look at the research methodology which Schneiders suggests. She distinguishes between three different research methods being herself in the favour of the third. The first method is – according to Schneiders – a deductive theological method, according to which dogmatic knowledge is looked upon as it is used in its spiritual application. The second method is a historical method, which is based on historical data. The third one eventually is called anthropological method. This method will always be interdisciplinary and interreligious. Actual spiritual testimonies can be part in this research method. Schneiders says: „Essentially, the anthropological approach takes as its starting point neither the theological tradition that informs or governs Christian spiritual experiences nor the

¹⁰ See McGinn (1993) 1-9.

¹¹ Sheldrake (1999) 166.

¹² Sheldrake (1999) 166.

¹³ Schneiders (1986) 253-274, here 256.

historical record of spiritual experiences but the spirituality intrinsic to the human subject as such."¹⁴

Regarding the involvement of the person who does this kind of research, Schneiders shares, that all the students she has come upon, have used their own spiritual experiences „as a source of question, as analogical data, as comparative resource, as an indicator for validation and falsification“¹⁵. Furthermore she encourages research students to visit people, who do practice a different kind of spirituality than they themselves do or they themselves are familiar with. This enables students to use in their research processes lived spiritual experiences – their own as well as those of others – as „resource for the study of spirituality“¹⁶. Finally she says that she does not see how people who themselves do not practice a spiritual life, can do excellent research in this field and that nobody who does serious research in this field can avoid undergoing a transformation himself and herself. Nevertheless she claims that research activity cannot have as its primary purpose the personal change or growth and that the personal practice should not be an explicit part of most of the research projects.

I think that in the position of Schneiders the dilemma how difficult it is to integrate spiritual experiences into academic theology becomes quite evident. There is always the suspicion and the danger one could lose the distance which is necessary for someone doing research. So she stresses as we have seen that the starting point of research on spirituality according to the anthropological method is the lived spirituality, that all who are doing research in this field and who are known to her personally do use their own experiences and that the involvement of the researcher is necessary in order to reach enough insight and sensibility. And still she says that personal practice should not be an explicit factor in the whole enterprise, whereas it seems as implicit factor it is at work anyhow.

3.3 The position of Philip Sheldrake

Philip Sheldrake is professor for Applied Theology and he criticises the unquestioned connection of experience with spirituality on the one hand and of intellect and theory with academic theology on the other hand. This ends up according to him firstly in the wrong perception that spirituality and intellect are alien to each other and that spirituality has nothing to do with the development of new theologies and secondly it holds the academic theology in the captivity of a mainly theoretical concept. On this background Sheldrake formulates his understanding of the meaning of doing theology as follows: „„Doing Theology’ theologially is ul-

¹⁴ Schneiders (1993) 9-15, here 9.

¹⁵ Schneiders (1993) 14.

¹⁶ Schneiders (1993) 14.

timately a form of spiritual practice [...]. This is why I suggest that theology in its fullest sense involves a way of life – becoming a theological person. [...] To put matters simply, to think about God is to think of God and therefore to become involved with God.¹⁷

Sheldrake speaks of the mystic as of a person who „lives in a movement of perpetual departure“; this brings him into opposition to a purely intellectual approach, because „the problem with a purely intellectual quest is that it can regard its objective as attainable.“ And Sheldrake continues to say: „The reality of ‚God‘ is not like this. If we can speak of the human search of God, it will be a search that continually fails to ‚find‘ God in a definitive sense.“¹⁸ In order to visualize the relationship of theology and spirituality he suggests „a wheel surrounding an axle. The ‚wheel‘ of theology rotates around an axis that is spirituality. Yet the image is three-dimensional and therefore suggests that spirituality reaches outwards into another dimension.“¹⁹

4 Looking at two spiritual traditions regarding the meeting of intellectual and spiritual quest

In order to explore the possible meeting of intellectual and spiritual quest further, I want to draw our attention to two different spiritual traditions belonging to two different world-views. These are the Ignatian and the Vipassana tradition.

4.1 A contribution of the Ignatian Spirituality and the Ignatian quest

The fact that experiences of spiritual exercises as they are practiced by following the Ignatian tradition play an important role in the field of discernment and decision finding as well as in the field of deepening one's faith seems to be out of question. This rests upon the conviction that God is at work in such processes and that people are trying to open up for this divine dimension. Now however what I am interested in is in what way such experiences can have an impact on what is happening in the field of academic theology, of scholarly understanding.

So let me refer to a great theologian who has started to think about this question. It is Karl Rahner in his article on the logic of existential knowledge²⁰. He distinguishes there between two types of pious literature. On the one hand he speaks of pious literature in the sense

¹⁷ Sheldrake (2007) 93-98, here 97-98.

¹⁸ Sheldrake (1999) 162-172, here 165.

¹⁹ Sheldrake (1999) 167.

²⁰ Cf. Rahner (2003) 368-420.

of application literature, in which theological content is presented in a simplified manner and which aims at an internalisation of this content. There is however according to Rahner also a second type of pious literature, and the Exercises of Ignatius is one of the books he considers of being of this second type. This second type of pious literature is capable of teaching something new on the content-level to theology. In his understanding academic theology has to listen to this sort of literature and to be ready to learn from it in order to develop further theological models which are capable of taking up these spiritual experiences on which this second form of pious literature is based. It is here that Rahner uses the expression „produktive Vorbildlichkeit“²¹ („productive model“) to speak about the new in the old. He writes: „To take the exercises as object of theology in this way, that means to question them as theologian, in order to explain them in such a way, that one is learning from them, and not in a way which is explaining them through things, which one knows independently from them, is highly difficult for theologians because the exercises use a language, which tempts the arrogance of the theologian not to find anything behind the exercises than what one knows already since long and to mean at the most that one can lighten awkwardly expressed and dark passages with the light of one’s own theological wisdom.“²² Rahner also says that the academic theologians are not exclusively called to comment on and to judge the (written down) spiritual experiences, but the theologian „is asked if he possesses already the means in his theology to bring that which is lived out there really to a reflective awareness, to make it more precisely understandable and to justify it, or if it is like this, that through these works and their sayings his theology still has to grow, has to allow itself to be corrected by it, before his theology can do justice to those works and before it can do the service to them, which the unreflective action of the Christian existence can expect from theology.“²³

Arno Zahlauer, who has worked on the idea of a „productive model“ as it is used by Rahner puts it that way: The question is, „how can the transfer of a spiritual experience into systematic thinking happen“²⁴, how can „the interference between personal spiritual physiognomy and the possibility of general theological knowledge which is owed to that first one be possible“²⁵. Of course these challenging ideas ask for criteria according to which these spiritual experiences, of which theology has to learn can be identified. How can the two different

²¹ Rahner (2003), 370.

²² Rahner (2003) 371. This quotation has been translated from the German original to English by the author of this article.

²³ Rahner (2003) 383-384. This quotation has been translated from the German original to English by the author of this article.

²⁴ Zahlauer (1996) 16. This quotation has been translated from the German original to English by the author of this article.

²⁵ Zahlauer (2006) 92. This quotation has been translated from the German original to English by the author of this article.

types of pious literature be distinguished? Following Ignatius Rahner considers the criteria of the fruits, which originate from a spiritual experience, as insufficient. Then this would stay within the logics of not really expecting something new but of remaining within the thinking of an application paradigm according to which we know in advance what is adequate and what is inadequate. Rahner however speaks of the „consolation without previous cause“ as criteria for this discernment process.²⁶

4.2 The contribution of the Vipassana spirituality and Vipassana quest

Facing a particular question I would always be interested to see if and in what way a similar question might appear in other than the Christian tradition. It is because of this reason that I have started to look at one particular Buddhist tradition, the Vipassana tradition²⁷, which originates in the Theravada Buddhism. This Vipassana tradition which again has different subdivisions²⁸, is mainly found in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka, and has also spread since the 60s of the previous century to other parts of Asia and to the West (particularly to the United States of America). Vipassana stands for deeper seeing, intuitive knowledge or clear understanding, clear vision or insight. What is for me the most interesting and challenging aspect of the Vipassana tradition regarding the question of a relation between an intellectual and a spiritual quest is that it seems that this tradition is suspicious just of the opposite than of what an intellectualistic theology is suspicious of. So the Vipassana tradition is warning the people of too much thinking instead of entering into one's own experiences. The different Vipassana schools share in common the basic understanding that „the cause of the dissatisfaction, anxiety and suffering which seem to be inseparable from our lives lies in a basic misinterpretation of the true nature of existence, a misinterpretation which clouds our perception of the actual facts, in consequence of which we persist in futile attempts to pursue and secure things (such as health, riches, happiness and so on) which are, by their very nature, ephemeral or unattainable. We seem to be swimming constantly against the current.“²⁹ In order to overcome this unsatisfactory condition and reach real insight, neither intellect nor (blind) faith is sufficient, but the person himself and herself has to start exploring reality. „Meditative traditions also agree that, to overcome this state of affairs, neither intellectual understanding nor religious faith are, in themselves, enough. Something must be done. Not only outwardly, by perform-

²⁶ See Rahner (2003) 407.

²⁷ See Gruber (1999) 43-60; 86-114.

²⁸ See Hart (⁶1997); U Ba Khin (2003).

²⁹ Solé-Leris (1986) 9.

ing acts of charity or of devotion (however beneficial these may be in helping others and in improving the mental attitude of the doers), but inwardly."³⁰

The Vipassana tradition states, that within each human person a deep experiential knowledge can be found, which does appear, when mindfulness is practiced.³¹ Satya Narayan Goenka, an Indian teacher of one of the Vipassana schools says: „Buddha found that one may play any number of intellectual or devotional games, but unless he experiences the truth himself and develops wisdom from his personal experience, he will not be liberated. Vipassana is personally experienced wisdom."³² So according to this school there is no sense in exclusively studying a particular teaching, if it does not go along at the same time with personal practice. It is not the abstraction which leads people to insight, „but rather the unbroken and mindful awareness – within the area selected for attention – of all such inputs as they arise, in order to discern – through a direct experiencing, free from distortions of delusions – their true nature."³³ For this the body and the breath are the most appreciated meditation objects, as they are always available and do combine at the same time being object and subject of the meditation process.³⁴

Here meditation is understood as „bhāvanā“, which means „cultivation“ or „development“ of the mind. This cultivation is the means to correct the inadequate perception and consists mainly of two parts: a) The first step is called samatha, which means tranquillity, calmness and stillness. In this step concentration is developed and practiced. b) The second step is itself called vipassanā. „Here [...] the meditator proceeds to examine with steady, careful attention [...] all those sensory and mental processes which are discarded in abstractive meditation, including those that normally occur at subconscious or unconscious levels. [...] It is the realization, not just accepted as an intellectual postulate but actually lived out in the practice of meditation, which constitutes the insight of vipassanā."³⁵

³⁰ Solé-Leris (1986) 9.

³¹ See Gruber (1999) 9-43.

³² Goenka (2003) 55.

³³ Solé-Leris (1986) 74.

³⁴ See Solé-Leris (1986) 75.

³⁵ Solé-Leris (1986) 23.

5 Summerizing thoughts and questions

5.1 Spiritual experience within the intellectual quest

In order to do a theology which is more than intellectual knowledge, a theology which may be holding surprises even for the one who does it, in order to do theology ‚theologically‘ as Philip Sheldrake would put it, theology can not renounce on the spiritual experiences of those people, who try to do it. If it is right so say, that the fundamental intuition for a living theology does also and essentially originate in existential spiritual experiences, then these experiences will have to be consciously practiced, cultivated and integrated into the theological work. If it is right to state – as Sandra Schneiders does – that spiritual practice is an essential pre-condition for excellent research in the field of spiritual theology, then how comes that we do not give more attention to this pre-condition. It seems to me that implicitly things might simply happen there, which we are not courageous enough to formulate explicitly.

And precisely because the effects of a spiritual practise on the way of doing theology and on its outcome might be quite strong and because in this spiritual field not just the Holy Spirit is at work but also smaller spiritual ghosts which point at themselves instead of pointing at the Ultimate Mystery, we should not avoid to observe carefully what is happening and we should cultivate to a certain extent what we might hope does inspire our theological work. Of course in actively doing this one may never forget that spiritual practice means working on something which one cannot make happen, which one cannot achieve by one’s effort alone. The term „spiritual theology“ links already what we still have to achieve in doing theology or maybe what many among the theologians are doing already without doing it consciously or without mentioning it.

5.2 Intellectual reflection within the spiritual quest

As much as intellectual theological effort is in need of spiritual experiences as much the spiritual quest is in need of intellectual reflection. In this article I did not say anything about this point as I wanted to focus on the first one. Still I want at least to mention it now at the end, because I think without this the picture would be incomplete.

5.3 Buddhist contribution to our Christian quest

What Karl Rahner has been working out concerning the Ignatian retreat and regarding the Ignatian spirituality may not be true just for this particular form of spiritual practice. And what

Ignatius might have been for Rahner – a productive model – might be another saintly person for another thinker and practitioner of another tradition.

As concluding and summerizing question I want to ask: Are we theologians mainly speaking about human and cosmic fullness or do we also – as Philip Sheldrake writes – live „in a movement of perpetual departure“ towards human and cosmic fullness encouraging others to depart?

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