

THE SPIRITUAL GLOBALISATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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THE TERM 'SPIRITUAL GLOBALISATION' has several possible meanings, but there are three that concern us here: the globalisation of *spirituality*, spirituality as *globalising* and spirituality as itself *globalised*—this last being the one presented in this article. However, some explanation of the other two will help to clear the terrain.

When the globalisation of *spirituality* is mentioned, reference is being made to a phenomenon typical of our own days. In place of the doctrine and rites of traditional religions, some would emphasize the experience of the 'spiritual' that is characterized by the search for a feeling of psychosomatic well-being to be found on the margin of any established religious tradition. It is a personal spirituality that justifies one's conduct with a view to one's own well-being. There is a sort of tautological circle thanks to which a mentality is built up with no thought for any transcendent relationship or love for the other. Everything is concentrated on the search for personal satisfaction. Instead of choosing a religion in any traditional sense, a form of behaviour is adhered to which aims to ensure the greatest personal happiness, corporeal and psychological. To justify such a way of life, a line of reasoning is adopted which mirrors, to some extent, the body of doctrine to be found in recognised religions. Thus a 'spirituality' emerges, defined by the practice of what one's own spiritual experience suggests.

As part of this, all spiritualities, whether religious or not, are supposed, very democratically, to be identical in so far as they seek the greatest well-being, no matter what is meant by 'well-being'. Each person decides for him- or herself what best satisfies his or her personal needs. And then it makes no difference which spirituality is chosen because the primary aim is to satisfy what one feels *in oneself* rather than by any reflexive analysis. The criteria used to evaluate the life one leads are

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drawn from personal experience alone. The criteria vary as the experiences vary. Such a mentality can be maintained thanks to a form of secular fundamentalism (*soft* fundamentalism) which has become widespread in the popular imagination. Spirituality is, then, any way of thinking, feeling and acting which is directed towards ensuring the greatest psychosomatic well-being.

The second meaning of the phrase (spirituality as *globalising*) is backed up by religious fundamentalism (now, however, *hard* fundamentalism). This implies the imposition of a religious doctrine as the norm for any spiritual experience. Such an imposition is presented as the only possible social option for the general well-being in all its dimensions. It is the one, necessary and most appropriate means by which the believer who adheres explicitly to it can 'save' his or her soul. Therefore it should be obligatory for all. In this case also, love is not esteemed as the primary criterion; instead, this is considered to be adherence to an external form. Thus there is a gap between social formalism and personal interiority. Clearly, for the common good of 'souls', no alternative to the norm can be admitted.

The third meaning of the phrase 'the spiritual globalisation of Christianity' (spirituality as *globalised*) emerges specifically in the case of Christian spirituality. It refers to the mutual collaboration among scholars investigating the reality of Christian living, trying to find academic

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foundations for it based on the personalised experience of the transcendent divine love revealed historically in Jesus Christ. Thus, I am attempting to do two things here: to unify efforts to improve the study of such an experience; and to adopt a perspective which is both interdisciplinary and interconfessional.

What is proposed is a somewhat different form of ecumenical dialogue, one that is based on an analysis of lived experience, which does not exclude the dogmatic dimension of that dialogue, but which seeks to undertake it from a point of view that emphasizes the experiential.

The aim of this project is to share a common methodology in the study of how Christianity is lived by pinpointing how the actual experiences of qualified witnesses in the various denominations coincide or differ. Will it be possible to establish a method, among the specialists who study how Christianity is lived in different denominations, to analyze exactly the spiritual experience undergone by Ignatius of Loyola, Luther and Calvin? Such a method would enable us to say precisely what the details are of

actual lived experience they do—or do not—have in common. Then from there we might consider how differences developed over time. In this way we might advance beyond the usual doctrinal analysis that evaluates theoretical pronouncements. Instead, some insight might be gained into the lived experience of those who were influential in each of the different denominations.

I shall show how this project works by presenting some of the progress made in the academic study of lived Christian experience connected with this method. My main aim is to make the method known in the hope that it will be used for the study of the three persons mentioned above. To do so fully would require an interconfessional team of experts, each approaching one of the three from their own point of view but sharing the same method. But I hope that I may help to encourage work along these lines here. In what follow an outline of this *theologico-experiential* method is presented in its three phases (phenomenological, theological and pedagogical).¹ The aim is to offer the method as the most suitable for the investigation of the interconfessional Christian lived experience.

The Starting Point: A Phenomenological Analysis

The mystery of God's revelatory presence in history has been shown forth in different ways, but these reached their culmination in the person of Jesus. From the first moment of the incarnation to the end of time, his presence is active in human history. It is a presence that intervenes in history using means that human beings can feel and understand. Otherwise no dialogue would be possible.

The means used in such a dialogue must respect the rules both of divine transcendence and of human immanence. This means that the Mystery reveals itself as mystery, and what is understood is the revelation of the Mystery, not the Mystery revealed. The historical person of Jesus and his message are understood thanks to the action of the Spirit, but the Father remains inaccessible.

This dynamism of divine action in history is not limited to the historical activity of Jesus, but is representative rather of the 'normal'

¹ See Rossano Zas Friz De Col, *La presenza trasformante del Mistero. Prospettiva di teologia spirituale* (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical, 2015), 117–157; Jesús Manuel García Gutiérrez, 'Il metodo "teologico esperienziale" della teologia spirituale', *Mysterion*, 9/1 (2016), 5–17, available at http://www.mysterion.it/Mysterion_1-2016.pdf; Jesús Manuel García Gutiérrez, *Teologia spirituale. Epistemologia e interdisciplinarietà* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2014), 217–265.

activity of God in history. In other words, thanks to the incarnation of the divine Word, the Father is active in history because the Holy Spirit discloses the Mystery of the incarnate Word, who is the Father Himself. Such a disclosure takes place in the personal history of each man and each woman, something unique and unrepeatable because in each case there occurs a personal and individual history of salvation, one which resembles and mirrors the great history of salvation. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some constant features, seen from different points of view.

Thus, for example, and without the need for exact detail, it is a fact that the Presence of the Mystery of God causes an interior motion,² which is always produced, directly or indirectly, by God. It is the divine 'touch' which appears as a personal revelation, stimulating the person to realise the great values—both Christian and shared by all humanity—such as love (to mention the most important). And love here is understood to be the gratuitous giving of self for the good of others, with no other motive but that of disinterested gift (a Christian would say, 'following the example of Jesus'). Now, if God lets Godself be felt by means of motions, how does it happen that a person can advance from these to the decision to offer his or her own life in a disinterested fashion?

To answer as concisely as possible, by means of a phenomenological analysis of a spiritual motion: once it has entered into consciousness, the person can interpret its origin and discern if it comes from the good or the bad spirit. Next, reflection is needed to ascertain its meaning and its relevance for his or her life, so that a decision may be taken that answers to God's wish (as shown in the motion); this response gives a theological slant to the person's existence. These various steps need to be explained.

Conscious Acceptance and Interpretation

On becoming conscious of a spiritual motion, the person simultaneously realises that it has happened and that he or she has not caused it;

² A motion is 'an alteration in the mind, something that occurs in a person's interior world, but which does not imply in itself the notion of "agency of movement" A motion is an alteration, a movement in the spirit of the person but one which does not entail that a person has to move towards one or another option in the real life of the person.' Again: 'Here the word "motion" does imply movement but not to anything in particular but in itself. A motion is simply "something"; it is a something that is happening to me and which alters (moves) me in my way of seeing or knowing or wanting, or simply in the world of my intentions and desires.' José García de Castro, *El Dios emergente. Sobre la 'consolación sin causa' (EE 330)* (Bilbao and Maliaño: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 2001), 118–119.

and, being aware of this, the person tries to find its origin. This is the process of discerning spirits to discover the source of a motion according to the method of St Ignatius of Loyola (Exx 313–336).

The experience of a spiritual motion allows one to affirm that God does communicate in a concrete historical fashion, and that therefore a person can communicate effectively with God by means of the reply given to the felt motion. Obviously the person who has experienced the motion



St Ignatius of Loyola

can interpret it in many ways because it is always granted in a way open to free choice: it waits for a personal reply. But there are clear rules that help in discerning the motion.

Whoever experiences a motion does so while belonging to a specific cultural tradition, and interpretation takes place within that tradition. Any experience requires an interpretation that is formulated in a language. Only thus can it be understood in categories that are shared in a society and only thus can it be communicated in existential terms, while always respecting the context of mystery.

Reflection and Theological Decision

Once the motion has been interpreted and understood as a sign of God's revelation *in a particular place and time* that are historically limited, reflection is needed to discover what it may say and mean with reference to personal life. Clearly the personal cultural context of the individual is still relevant, but what he or she now has to discover is the relevance of what has been understood about the motion to his or her personal and social existence.

In normal circumstances, the outcome of such a reflection is the making of a decision related to what has been felt, to the motion received. A reply is needed which will require a stronger or weaker link with the Mystery revealed. With the decision, a personal reply is made to the motion that has been felt from the Mystery. What is important is that one should be clearly and surely aware, as far as that is possible, that a manifestation of the mystery of the divine will has been granted, and that some reply is needed. This may take the form, quite simply, of being moved towards an act of love for God, or it may orientate someone to make decisions for the future. But it is always by means of a decision that a personal link with God is established, making possible the growth of theological life or its decline.

The Method: Both Synchronic and Diachronic

Clearly every spiritual motion is preceded by a gestation period and is linked to the concrete occasion of its occurrence. Thus it comes within the context of a developing personal history and this in turn is found within a wider social context which inevitably has an influence on it. Moreover, as in any history, there is never a single motion but several; it is important to bear in mind that a reason for such a succession has to be found. That is why the analysis of an experience (such as has been outlined up to now) can never be simply synchronic. Some consideration is also needed of the transformation that occurs as the succession develops diachronically.

Such a sequence of spiritual motions gradually produces a spiritual outline of the person receiving them. It then becomes possible to identify through the known lived experiences a spiritual history of the person. From all this, the method presented here has both a synchronic aspect and one that is diachronic. With the first, an analysis is made of the most important decisions and with the second a meaning may be found for the temporal succession in which they occur.

Theological Analysis

The analysis of those experiences, which enables one to form a personal outline, is what corresponds to the phenomenological stage: its aim is to appreciate as realistically as possible what were the motions experienced, so as to understand them in their context. There follows a second stage of

analysis in which the question, using the criteria proper to each tradition, concerns theological aspects. The data that have been collected in the first stage are now subjected to a theological evaluation. It is important to note that such an evaluation has two phases: one is deductive and the other inductive. In the first, a given experience is evaluated according to a theological tradition. Whereas in the second, it is the tradition that is evaluated in the light of what has become evident in the experience of certain motions. In this way it may be possible to renovate a tradition (the inductive aspect) and also to stress the continuity of that tradition (the deductive aspect).

As a result of the theological analysis, those elements in a tradition that give it continuity can be identified, and at the same time those elements that renovate it. Obviously some clear criteria are needed which will be sufficiently open not to impede recognition of what is new, while not so lax as to admit elements to enter that are harmful. This is where ecumenical dialogue can play its part, but on the supposition that any dialogue concerning continuity or discontinuity must take into account the lived experience that is being studied in the testimony of those figures considered exemplary. It is a question of evaluating not propositions but rather lived experience, examined synchronically and diachronically, using the same method.

Concretely, in light of the phenomenological and theological analysis of the lived Christian experience of the three key persons mentioned, one may pose the question as to which decisions led to the break with the Catholic tradition that had been dominant until the beginning of the sixteenth century, and which decisions led to its renewal. How were such decisions made, what was the context and what were



John Calvin

the presuppositions? However, a further question is worth raising: given today's socio-religious context and presuppositions, are what were then seen as a break and a renovation still to be seen as such? This question brings into focus a further consideration based on the two preceding analyses: this is the final step in the theologico-experiential method.

The Pedagogical Dimension of the Method

The distinguishing feature of the third, pedagogical phase is the articulation of concrete guidelines—based on the previous analysis of lived experiences—that can help the faithful along their road. In this case, the proposed project would give believers in the three denominations shared pointers that will be valid guidelines, five hundred years after the experiences studied. They would be intended to improve and perfect the personal relation with the Lord whom believers want to serve in disinterested love, from within their own denominations.

For such a method to employ its full force in the final phase, so that nothing is lost of what has been gained in the two previous phases, it



Martin Luther

is absolutely necessary not only to keep in mind the phenomenological approach, with a full appreciation of the religious originality of the experiences of the three individuals mentioned, but also to eliminate ideological perversions from the gaze brought to bear on the situation. Then it becomes possible to make the most use of those aspects of the lived experiences that best fit the starting point of the enquiry. The sole perspective has to be one of sincere and disinterested desire on the part of all for the openness and dialogue that can lead to unity.

Experiential Ecumenical Dialogue

When we consider the three persons mentioned above, Ignatius of Loyola, Luther and Calvin, what can be affirmed about their lived experience of God? It is their experiences that interest us now, not the formulae that over the centuries have been linked to their names as the expression of their respective identities. If anything can be said about those experiences, it will be in the light of the method used to study them. Here what is proposed is to collect data (the first, phenomenological phase), which can be evaluated (the second, theological phase), so that in a third phase pedagogical guidelines can be proposed to assist believers to follow the example of those judged to be their guides. Are there elements in the experience of these men—considered exemplary—which today will be of profit for both Catholic and Reformed together?

If we were to imagine for a moment that the method (in its three phases) has been used with regard to all three persons (who represent three of the best-known Christian denominations),³ and we suppose that conclusions have been reached which indicate a number of coincidences and differences in their Christian lived experience, surely those conclusions should be the prime matter in any dialogue concerning the actual spiritual and ecclesial experience to be found in the three denominations. It is by the analysis of the lived experience of the persons who stand at the origin of the divisions in Western Christianity that the three denominations involved can reflect on them to recognise what continues to separate them and what might serve to motivate union. After all, the three beliefs are based on the experience of Jesus Christ. That is the experience relived in the three exemplary representatives. It is from an acknowledgement of this fact that a dialogue between the denominations becomes possible.

A shared desire to overcome differences, inspired by the love for Jesus Christ, should lead to a rejection of the motives which even today foment separation. The criteria for such a rejection will emerge in the light of the conclusions reached by applying this method to the three characters. For it will become clear how each of them responded to the inspirations they received. On that base, one can reconstruct both the divisions that split Western Christianity and possible points of contact. Such a reconstruction requires on the part of the three denominations an ability to separate the

³ As was said earlier, the present article is intended simply to present the method as a possible instrument of analysis; the participation of an interconfessional team would be needed to apply it in practice.



Pope Francis commemorating the Reformation with Lutheran church leaders at the Together in Hope meeting in Lund, Sweden, October 2016

wheat from the straw—in such a way that the new wine of reconciliation can be poured into jars made anew by a common understanding that wishes to overcome differences. It has to be recognised that this desire comes from the Spirit, which blows towards unity. That is why it is most important that the method be put into practice collegially. The spiritual theologians of all three confessions have to work together, accepting mutual correction. Before that can be done, there has to be a basic agreement on a real will for union and on the acceptance of professional competence.

Spiritual Globalisation

Christianity, seen as globalised spirituality, does not stand for a ‘globalisation of spirituality’, as if all that mattered were the dimension of interior experience, leaving to one side the doctrinal or ritual dimension. Neither is it to be understood in a fundamentalist sense as if Christian spirituality was called to be the ‘globalising spirituality’ that englobes all spiritualities. Instead it indicates the search for the lost unity of Christianity starting from the experience of Jesus Christ. That means the academic study of a lived experience, one that unites the different denominations. By uniting them it globalises them in the experience of the Lord. Hence the term, the *spiritual globalisation* of Christianity.

To reach the goal that is desired a shared effort will be needed by the different Churches so that the common experience of Jesus Christ—to be found in the religious experience of Ignatius of Loyola, Luther

and Calvin—can be discovered thanks to the phenomenological analysis described above and the subsequent theological evaluation. The next step would be the formulation of a pedagogical spiritual proposal acceptable to all three denominations. That could serve as a reference base for the construction of a unity which is really alive in the shared experience of Jesus Christ. The desire for unity would then take concrete shape in a shared method of study that points the way, in a new and original fashion, to a common identity capable of overcoming differences.

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