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The Perennial Philosophy

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By “The Perennial Philosophy” is generally understood a philosophy of experienced spirituality saying that there is something similar or a common core to all experiences of spirituality and mysticism—across cultures and across the ages. In our time, this idea was revived by Aldous Huxley (1945), and has received support from a number of authors (Underhill, 1955; Stace, 1960; Marcus, 1962; Næss, 1967; Happold, 1970; Perry, 1971; Smith, 1987; Vaughan & Walsh, 1989; D’Adamo, 1995). There has also been opposition, however, asserting that because of the important cultural differences there is no perennial philosophy (Katz, 1978, 1983). The views of Katz have been criticized by several authors (Rothberg, 1989; Walsh, 1995; Forman, 1997).

Personally, I tend to agree with the “perennialists,” though I understand that, for example, a Jewish mystic, who sees the “being joined” to God (the *devekuth*) as the essence of his spirituality, may find experiences not including God essentially different from his or her own. On the other hand, the Jewish tradition, like many other traditions, has a general view of humanity (all descending from Adam and Eve) which could be an opening for the perennial philosophy.

Spiritual experiences are often said to be ineffable, transverbal, and this, of course, makes it difficult to discuss the idea of the perennial philosophy in words. So I must admit that my positive attitude to this philosophy depends on intuition more than on reason.

The general conception of the perennial philosophy described above rests on a broad conception of spirituality, but there are various more restricted conceptions, and spirituality within such limits has also been supposed to be perennial. The perennial trait has therefore been associated with several different conceptions of spirituality.

Thus, Toegel (1991) thinks that genuine (“echte”)

spirituality or transcendence does not include experiences obtained by special techniques such as Transcendental Meditation; he regards genuine spirituality as a gift, to which you can be open, and thinks that the search for a technique to obtain it is one of the surest ways to prevent it. Still he thinks that this “genuine spirituality” is perennial and, in support, he refers to many authors from our time including the well-known Chögyam Trungpa, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the “Anonymus d’outre tombe,” and Carl Gustav Jung. Toegel admits that besides the “genuine spirituality” there exists a sphere of extraordinary experiences (“peak experiences,” shamanic travels, and many others) which are also widespread, and which can lead to impressive states of mental clarity and concentration. He distinguishes, however, these phenomena strictly from the “genuine spirituality” and is thus against the broad conception of spirituality.

Another restricted, Christian view of perennial spirituality has been presented to me by my friend Pierre Marchais: “Authentic spirituality (i.e. as in the Judeo-Christian traditions) is destined for all humanity and for those who want to receive it. Christ has come for all men, who are free to receive him or not.” This “authentic spirituality” is denoted with the French word “*supernaturel*,” while other forms of transcendence (Eastern mysticism for instance) are called “*supranaturel*” (i.e., not so much dissociated from the natural as is the *supernaturel*). Marchais thinks that also the *supranaturel* may be perennial, but he distinguishes strictly between the *supernaturel* and the *supranaturel* and is thus, like Toegel but in another way, against the broad conception of spirituality (Marchais, 1997, and personal communications, 1994–1998).

Shamanism is regarded by some authors as a form of spirituality or mysticism covered by the general perennial philosophy (Eliade, 1964; Nicholson, 1987;

Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman, 1989; Peters, 1989) while others have doubts about this (Walsh, 1995). Whether shamanism is regarded as a separate phenomenon or as a form of spirituality conceived broadly, it is particularly interesting in relation to the perennial philosophy, because there is a large literature testifying to its ubiquitous distribution in the world; there are also reports about revival or continuation of shamanism in industrial cultures (Eliade, 1964; Halifax, 1979; Harner, 1982, 1995; Nicholson, 1987; Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman, 1989; Peters, 1989; Gilberg & Gilberg, 1992; Darling, 1997; Shim, 1997).

Since religion and spirituality are important aspects of the life in our "Global Village," I think it is important, also for practical reasons, that we exchange views on these matters. Mutual understanding of both similarities and differences will be helpful for the development of a peace culture, which will be important or even necessary for a sustainable way of life on this planet.

End Note

The content of this paper is influenced by prolonged exchange in the Spirituality SIG, ISSS and in the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, CIRIP, in particular with Pierre Marchais, Søren Brier, and Grethe Sørensen.

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