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Author: Dehn, Ulrich
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Life and Spirit: A New Approach to a Theology of Religions

ULRICH DEHN

Paul F. Knitter in his well-known book *No Other Name?* states: "From the clouded origins of the human species, as the spark of consciousness broadened and gave rise to the burning concern for the meaning of life, there have always been many religions, each with its own 'ultimate' answers. Today our intercommunicating planet has made us aware, more painfully than ever before, of religious pluralism and of the many different ultimate answers."¹ In his preface he implies that confessional models of approach to other religions have not really been able to render an ability "to listen to what the followers of other ways have to say."² Knitter uses the categories of conservative evangelical model, mainline Protestant model, Catholic model, and theocentric model, which nowadays is usually better known as the pluralistic theology of religions. He stresses the dialogical character of the latter one.

Knitter's perception of the world in its religious diversity is shared by many, and the U.S. context may be even more colorful than the one in most European countries. Yet, after waves of migration in a postcolonial age, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, etc., have become multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious societies to such a degree that the interreligious challenge to theology can no longer be denied. Germany, which is probably somewhere in the middle of the European scale, is estimated to have slightly more than 10 percent foreigners, representing more or less every religious tradition which might exist on this earth, not to count Germans who have opted for another than Christian faith. Next to around 3.2 million Muslims there should be close to 160,000 Buddhists of both German and Asian origin, and probably the same number of Hindus of different traditions. The Muslim number includes

1. P. F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1985), p. 1.

2. Knitter, p. xiii.

the one-half million Alevites, who may or may not consider themselves Muslims. Sikhs, Jains, East Asian Taoists, people holding to ethnic religious rites, and many others are living in our immediate or larger neighborhood.

I am not going to discuss the variety of theological models of approaches to other religions but will focus on such proposals which have especially drawn from pneumatological insights. Then I will try to use their capacity to facilitate communication between religions and therefore go into depth considering some Asia-oriented traditions which value notions of life and spirit.

In Germany Reinhold Bernhardt, starting from a trinitarian approach, has opted for an ecumenical community of all religions and especially based his concept on a theology of glimpses of the Holy Spirit in the world of religions. Bernhardt talks of the “creative and inspiring presence of God in the whole created reality” as an aspect of trinitarian theology and interprets “the biblical tradition of the universal activity of the Spirit” as a “hermeneutical tool’ for the interpretation of religious phenomena and experiences of interreligious encounter.” From this basis it becomes possible to take account of the presence of the “creative, healing and enlightening Spirit” in other religions as well.³

Bernhardt does not specify what might be seen as a sign of spirit presence in other faiths and how the term “hermeneutical tool” (*hermeneutischer Schlüssel*) is to be concretized. We will try to modify the “hermeneutical” aspect from a connotation of one-way traffic into a “communicative” and mutual one with however an understanding of the biblical *ruah* and *pneuma* in the center, as it is a Christian theology of religions we are dealing with, not a general theory of religions. The point I will make is that the notions in the various traditions which come close to life and spirit not only function as communicative facilitators within their respective streams but also have the capacity to play that role externally in interreligious interaction.

Life and Spirit as Religious Concepts

Life has been an important concept for religiosity in new movements for the last decades. It indicates the idea to transpose meaning which was traditionally found in the transcendent, transempirical into this world’s life and into the so-far-undiscovered depth dimensions of life. The Japanese neo-Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai (SG) has gone so far as to use “philosophy of life” as an

3. Reinhold Bernhardt, *Trinitätstheologie als Matrix einer Theologie der Religionen*, in *Ökumenischen Rundschau* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), pp. 287-301, 297f.

other name for Buddhist teaching (*buppō*) in its recent publications.⁴ Previous books on the general teaching of SG⁵ have one major chapter on *life* (*seimeiron*) each, discussing some philosophical options.

Ki in Reiki, QiGong, and Taichi

Recently the notion comes close to what is usually indicated by the idea of *ki* in East Asian thinking. *Ki* is a notion which nowadays is part of many phrases in everyday small talk but expresses an important part of East Asian life mentality. *Ki* itself can be rendered with “life”; it at the same time points at the origin of life, as the absence or destruction of the flux of *ki* generates mental or physical illness and a deficit of relationship to other persons, the world around, the cosmos. *Ki* has been named the communicating element of the two components yin and yang in Taoistic philosophy. It is present in the therapeutic movements of *Reiki*, *Chigong*, *Taichi*⁶ *chuan*, and others. Being visualized as energy, as cosmic force and life-generating and creating factor, *ki* has become a key concept in present-day esoteric movements in the West as well. By authors of the therapeutic movement *Reiki*, *ki* or *Reiki* has been paralleled to notions like *pneuma*, spirit, *ruah*, Hindu *prana*, *ka* of ancient Egypt, and other ideas which point to the life-creating and life-supporting element.⁷ The implication of something transempirical, transcendent may be there, but most of them prefer the expression “spirituality.” *Ki* originally had no divine but rather energetic connotations. When it is paralleled to the biblical notions of *pneuma* and *ruah*, which are considered “energetic tools” of God, tools which are subject to prayer need to be differentiated from an idea of *ki* which may as well function on its own dynamics.⁸ *Reiki* teachers close to Christianity used to assert that the working of *Reiki* and the success of any such therapy is in the realm of prayer.

4. Seikyō Shinbun Kyōgaku Kaisetsubu, *Yasashii Seimeitetsugaku*, Study Department of Seikyō Newspaper, Life Philosophy for Beginners (Tokyo, 2002).

5. *Shakubuku Kyōten* (Textbook for mission, 1951-1968), *Sōka Gakkai Nyūmon* (Introduction to SG, 1980-2000), *Kyōgaku no Kiso* (Basics of the teaching, 2002), the latter one especially oriented to the SGI groups.

6. It needs to be noted that the *chi* of *Taichi* is a different Chinese character (meaning “extreme,” “highest”) than *chi* in *Chigong* (which is the *chi* being discussed here).

7. B. Baginski and S. Sharamon, *Reiki — Universale Lebensenergie*, 15th ed. (Essen, 1997), p. 16.

8. U. Dehn, “Reiki,” in *Panorama der neuen Religiosität*, ed. R. Hempelmann et al. (Gütersloh, 2001), pp. 383-88.

The Notion of Life in Soka Gakkai Thought

The presently most authoritative Soka Gakkai introduction⁹ discusses life as a notion being beyond philosophical materialism and idealism. Also theistic ideas are sharply criticized as being one variety of philosophical idealism. *Life* is grasped as the focus of Buddhist thought, as it is identified with interrelatedness and is subject to various circumstances without being enslaved by them. Life originates from the cosmos and exists before living beings come into being. Life cannot be thought of apart from nature and the cosmos. Cosmos and life can be equaled.¹⁰ It originates in itself according to internal rules; there is no creator, no external force, but an affluent lot of more life. Life is its own *maitre du plaisir*. There shall no God and no soul be asserted. They are to be thought of as illusions. At the same time matter and soul shall not be taken as separate entities. Also the authentic and autonomous self and the environment are bound together as integral parts of one unity.¹¹ *Seimei* is being equaled to the Ten Worlds which constitute the ten stages of existence from hell to Buddha's World, one of the major components of Nichiren's teaching. As life (*seimei*) is the integral focus of interrelated existence in unity of matter (body), soul, and the spiritual dimension, it also constitutes the communicative element which can be brought into harmony with the notions of *ki* and spirit. Life is basic to the duality of presence and absence of emotion: these exist on behalf of the "flux of life" (*seimei no nagare*).¹² This again drives the attention to the energetic as well as the communicative aspect.

Life in Soka Gakkai thought is obviously more than the notion of energy and spirit. It is an all-comprehensive idea which serves to integrate the whole existence under the SG Buddhist concepts, as the latest publication on *life* thought shows.¹³

Life Force in Shinto Thought

Modern Japanese Shinto theologians have given some emphasis to the use of the idea of life which is supposed to be behind the veneration of various *kami*, godlike objects of prayer and confidence. The Shinto priest and theologian Sonoda Minoru states:

9. *Sōka Gakkai Nyūmon*, pp. 119-200.

10. *Sōka Gakkai Nyūmon*, p. 146.

11. *Sōka Gakkai Nyūmon*, p. 138.

12. *Sōka Gakkai Nyūmon*, p. 152.

13. *Yasashii Seimeitetsugaku* (Life philosophy for beginners) (1999; 4th ed., 2002).

Traditional Japanese religion has perceived the spiritual life force (*seimei no reiteki na hataraki*) behind all creation in its human and natural forms, invisible and beyond comprehension though it is; it has worshipped that vital life force, sometimes as kami and sometimes as Buddhas. . . . Life is that which is passed on through an unending process of birth and death from generation to generation, not only amongst humans but amongst plants and animals too. . . . The Japanese are in awe of the mystery of life beyond human understanding, and perceive here the workings of an invisible spirit. The concept of kami and Buddhas is none other than a religious expression of awe before life.¹⁴

This is what might be called a “Shinbutsu theology” in Japanese, meaning a combination of Shinto and Buddhist ideas. Sonoda himself talks of “complexity” and a “new symbiosis.” But just by this kind of interreligious combination he comes close to the spirit element and the communicative function of life and “life force.” This is a recent development in Shinto theology which cannot yet be observed in older concepts like, e.g., Ono Sokyo.¹⁵

The *Life* Concept as Religious Paradigm

Besides the traditions we have so far talked about there are new meditation movements like the one of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, which under the headline of “art of living” propagated a way of wholeness and wellness which is focused in the notion of life and living.

Besides its energetic and communicative aspects, life has become a metaphor for a spiritually fulfilled existence “beyond transcendence,” focusing “salvation” and religious/spiritual destination into this empirical world’s beautiful dimensions.

Concluding Remarks on Life and Spirit as Communicative Interreligious Element

As to the empirical aspects, this is not far away from a biblical view of the spirit which from the very beginning in the creation narrative is a synonym for life-

14. Sonoda Minoru, “Shinto and Buddhism: The Japanese Tradition of Religious Complexity and the Possibility of a New Symbiosis” (paper presented at the symposium “Religions and Tolerance,” May 8-9, 2000, Berlin [Japanese-German Centre Berlin]), p. 7.

15. Ono Sokyo, *Shinto — the Kami Way* (Rutland, Vt., and Tokyo, 1962); Ernst Lokowandt, *Shinto — Eine Einführung* (Shinto: An introduction) (Munich, 2001).

giving, creative wind and breath. It can express itself in fire, water, and other forms of energy; it gives freedom, time, and space. New energies are exposed, dynamics are created.¹⁶ Interhuman relationships are facilitated by the spirit. Experience of the Spirit/of God usually is closely interwoven with interhuman experience. The experience of the Pentecostal event is not in the first place the birthday of the church but the great facilitation of human communication at an instance where it was supposed to be impossible. The spirit of God and of life makes people sensitive to each other and to the world, as well as to those places and traditions where it finds corresponding elements. We do not argue that the Christian notion of the spirit of God can be found in different shapes in other religions or is working as well in other religious traditions as it would be formulated by inclusivistic models of a theology of religions in a strict sense; this would usually imply that the spirit of God is being found in Christian thought in its pure form, whereas in other religions there are slightly deficient versions to be identified. We are not looking for “glimpses of pneumatological thinking” in other religions. We rather suggest that the spirit finds communicative elements in the world of different faiths which are perfectly true in their respective context and fit to the same “wavelength,” the same “radio frequencies” as the spirit of God as revealed in the Hebrew Bible (*ruah*) and in the Pentecostal event (*pneuma*). They enable us to hear the message of the other. The facilitation of communication, the common hermeneutical ground being supplied by the notion of “spirit” and “life,” is the major point I want to drive home. I.e., I focus on the functional aspect such as the communicative and the life-creating one and suggest that by this way a larger communicative community of people of different faiths can be created, rather than by an academic discourse on doctrinal elements which may be either uniting or discriminating.

16. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Der Geist des Lebens* (Spirit of life) (Munich, 1991), pp. 287-91.