

Whose Spiritual Perception? Status quo

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Abstract: The nature of spiritual perception depends on the agent's understanding of spirituality, self-perception, and search for meaning through spiritual perception. Spiritual perception is much more than finding solutions within the framework of therapeutic analysis of the agent's subjective experience. In the Christian perspective, spiritual perception is an expression of the believer's relationship with God, which in its very essence exceeds an adequate intellectual explanation.

Keywords: Spirituality, Age of Therapeutic, Freud, Spiritual Perception

The increasing interest in spirituality in general, and in particular in spiritual perception, runs parallel with the spreading of ideologies of secularization, consumerism, reliance on technology, and weakening of traditional core values, especially those rooted in Christianity. The age of secularization has steadily blurred the religious and cultural boundaries, presenting the reference points for nourishing the individual identity and spiritual growth. However, the secularization process has not removed the desire to explore the spiritual dimensions of human existence.

An open and critical reflection on spiritual perception within a secularized ambient, suspicious but curious regarding Christianity, is a necessary feature of the spiritual journey of the secularized seekers as well as the traditional believer. Spiritual supply has never been so enormous as it is in our time of the Internet, flooded with articles on spirituality, spiritual perception, blog interviews, and lectures on spiritual growth, including courses offering certificates in spiritual areas.

Spiritual perception is a multi-faceted question that cannot be answered with one reply. Any reflection about spiritual perception is intrinsically connected with the question of the nature of spirituality as well as with the self-perception of the agent of spiritual perception. The phenomena of spirituality and spiritual

perception cannot be reduced to the domain of therapeutic, understood in terms of self-perfection. Christian spiritual tradition, accessible in reflections and the exemplary life of numerous spiritual fathers and mothers, does not talk about self-perfection, but personal union with God – an old-new spiritual treasure, calling for rediscovery.

What is Spirituality?

Borrowing Charles Taylor's description of our time, we moved "from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."¹ Unquestionably, secularization, with all its changes imposed on traditional society, again raises the question of what to believe in. A secularized agent, on the one hand, abandons traditional forms of belief, but at the same time cultivates an unprecedented desire for spirituality and spiritual content. Any dissent library or bookstore has a large section on spirituality. With its YouTube channel, the Internet is becoming a steadily growing source of spirituality, where literary everybody can share their own spiritual insights. In this flux of information, one thing is more and more evident: it is not clear what the meaning of spirituality and spiritual perception is.

Traditionally speaking, spirituality was intricately linked to the domain of established religions with their doctrinal teachings and structures. Spiritual perceptions were a part of spiritual life, understood in terms of a personal relationship with a divine or a higher power, demanding a lifestyle based on principles of the same doctrines. Such definitions seem to be too narrow for a secularized mindset, for which spirituality became a concept with broad room for many perspectives. For some people, spirituality became the connection to nature and art. Spirituality can be understood as the opposite of material or a continuation of a reality that escapes bodily sense perception. Analogically, spirituality also designates something non-rational, an area that is not easily grasped by the human mind exclusively. The attempt of the Enlightenment to explain everything with reason by putting aside religion and sacralizing technology relatively soon reached its boundaries. The decline of the Enlightenment can be taken as an implicit preparation of the terrain for a spiritual renaissance, now understood as a transgression of reason. In the contemporary

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

context, spirituality is considered as something irrational, a kind of emotional mysticism rooted in uncommon experiences, creating in believers the feeling of being unique and special. Searching for hidden formulas in ancient spiritual practices, exposure to foreign religious traditions, uncritical absorption of their dogmas, and retailing the old-new discoveries in secular ambient, have literarily become a multi-billion dollar spiritual business. While traditional churches are losing their place in modern cities, spiritual centers are growing everywhere.

The ideology of well-being is another perspective of spirituality, covering a wide span of meaning: from feeling well mentally and physically to looking for meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than ourselves. Practices of spiritual wellness embrace personal growth, professional success, increased productivity, higher performance, better relationships with ourselves and others, being more connected with one's life purpose, and much more. An individual's well-being should lead to spiritual fitness, expressed in optimism, engagement, compassion, respect, and commitment to one's core values. The Internet has literally become a supermarket with articles, blogs, courses, lectures, self-taught techniques, earning certificates and degrees in spirituality. Subjective well-being is often reduced to psychological well-being. Ideals such as perfection, goodness, and immortality, were traditionally attributes used in theological reflections necessary for an adequate description of divine reality. By putting aside any reference to God or the divine, the same attributes find a new place in psychological reflections on human nature in its effort to become divine-like.

If science and spirituality were seen as antagonistic and contradictory in the past, this is not the case anymore; they are rather perceived as complementary as two sides of the coin.² Modern sciences are aware of their own limits. Scientists consider their scientific explanations as tentative models of presentation of reality, which should not be exchanged with reality itself. Science is continuously in search of an interpretation that would be worthy of our trust. None of these scientific interpretations can save us from the fact that there is a tomb waiting for each one of us. By neglecting

² Rafael Espericueta, "Science and Spirituality – Complementary or Contradictory," *LinkedIn*, Sept. 30, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/science-spirituality-complementary-contradictory-rafael-espericueta>.

this fact, both scientific interpretations as well as human philosophy have not the slightest reason to survive.³

If this is the case, scientific theories are surprisingly close to religious and spiritual narratives. Despite their doctrinal disagreements, the mystics of different religious traditions are in agreement that there is a spiritual reality that is as real as material reality. Both science and spirituality seek truth and grasp reality's essential nature. If science seeks to enlighten our minds, spirituality seeks to awaken our hearts.

Science and spirituality can work in tandem. The benefits of the modern lifestyle are requesting its fees: lack of physical exercise and sleep, increased stress, poor nutrition, leading to cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, psychiatric disorder, and cognitive dysfunction.⁴ Extended medical research, in alignment with psychological examinations, proves that excessive stress can epigenetically alter an individual's DNA and affect mental health. If exposure to domestic violence leads to alterations in hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis functioning, a more peaceful and loving environment can change the same individual genetic makeup. Human thoughts and beliefs, connected with behavioral and cognitive practices, affect our DNA and its development. Our thoughts and beliefs can lead to more as well as to a less healthy and fulfilling life. Therefore, an individual's as well as the entire society's spiritual life is essentially conditioned by the quality of their collective imaginary, including the imaginary of their spiritual reality.

If modernity and post-modernity have thrown overboard big collective, traditional, and religious narratives, and replaced them with small personal stories, then the latest scientific discoveries in the field of neurosciences and epigenetics present new narratives in so many ways in alignment with traditional spiritual values, whose importance has been now explained with scientific methodology. These big narratives have the ability to inspire new hope and ideals, enable personal identification, establish the foundations for moral behavior, provide temporarily acceptable explanations for the unknowable, and bring some meaning to our lives, filled with

³ Bernard Russel, *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), 48.

⁴ Corina Dima – Cozma, Cristina Gavriluta, Geta Mitrea, Doina-Clementina Cojocaru, "The Importance of Healthy Lifestyle in Modern Society: A Medical, Social and Spiritual Perspective," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 10, no. 3 (June 2014): 111-12.

longing, courage and optimism.⁵ In this, we can find the real power of scientific narratives, and not in their scientific interpretations of how our brains and nerves function.

We can only hope that modern sciences, on the one hand, and traditional religions with their spiritual treasures, on the other, will be humble enough to learn from each other. Both sides can only evaluate the radius of their knowledge and perception through humility. If so, they will create space for an unprecedented synthesis of our limited understanding.

Individual Values as the Framework of Spiritual Perception

When reflecting about spiritual perception, the key question is not only what we are talking about, i.e., what is the object of discussion, but also who the person or agent of this perception is. Phenomenology teaches us that human perception never takes place in a vacuum or in complete detachment from the environment in which the perception and the agent of that perception are situated. As a result, even spiritual perception cannot be separated from the environment and mental world of the agent of perception.

The perception of reality, i.e., the agent who performs the process of perception, is always conditioned by the value system conditioning and affecting the same process of perception. These values are much more than the agent's personal taste and preferences, as the architects of the new individualistic cultural age like to argue, claiming that values are a matter of personal preferences, which should not be discussed (*de gustibus non est disputandum*).

Values are much more than a matter of taste, which varies from individual to individual. Nor can values be reduced to the opinion of the majority, which then determines what is acceptable and progressive or unacceptable and old-fashioned. The concepts such as objectivity and truth claim must not be results of polls, surveys, or socio-economic studies that measure what we happen to desire but cannot justify moral standards of what we ought to desire.⁶ Proponents of radical historicism take a step further and claim that there is no objective foundation or universal criterium for values. The selection of right and actual values should be left to the elite with certain political, economic, and mass-media power, who continuously shape the meaning of values to the given historical

⁵ Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 109-19.

⁶ Cfr. Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1991), 16.

period. Different cultures have elaborated different notions of what is of value, and nobody should be able to decide what is right.⁷ Following this logic, there should be no place for something absolute and transcendental.

Western cultures' spiritual and intellectual history in the last three centuries struggles to integrate the idea of transcendence as presented in Christianity. Since the period of the Enlightenment, Kant and his scholars tried to establish secular, rational foundations necessary for an adequate understanding of human essence, this time based on human reason. Relatively soon, Nietzsche's critique of rationalism, with his ideas of nihilism and genealogy of morals, revealed the fragile foundations of rationalism. What remains important for Nietzsche is the will to power, enabling the agent to face the horizon of nihilism and meaningless, following the footsteps of heroes in the ancient Greek drama.

When describing the essence and origin of values, Sloterdijk talks about tension or the dynamic between the initial inborn frivolity of not being an animal, on one side, and on the other, man's profound need, as a being with free will, to rely on something objective that transcends and is independent of the current state or needs that afflict the individual.⁸ The vision of life fulfillment should be such that it transcends the current needs and desires of post-modern individuals who like to believe that they are able to determine and decide everything by themselves, including the question of values.

Although the post-modern environment often argues in favor of a reduced nature of values, this should not be the case. Values are traits and qualities that are good and desirable for people in the long term and are not a matter of momentary decisions based on individual feelings. When we talk about values, we talk about ideas, ideals, actions, and conditions of affairs that constitute the value system of a given society, which is, again, much more than an individual position. In his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23), Apostle Paul talks about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Jeff Fountain writes that European values were supposed to be human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and democracy, which are clearly articulated in *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, published in 1789 in the fundamental document of the French Revolution. If all Europeans believe in equality and human dignity, how can we

⁷ Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, 99.

⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 264.

explain the rise of nationalism based on the idea of the superiority of one nation? The value of freedom implicitly demands sacrifice, self-restraint, boundaries, and faithfulness in relationships.⁹ “Europe is dying because it has become morally incompetent. It isn’t that Europe stands for nothing. It’s that it stands for shallow things, shallowly. Europeans believe in human rights, tolerance, openness, peace, progress, the environment, pleasure. These beliefs are all very nice, but they are also secondary. What Europeans no longer believe in are the things from which their beliefs spring: Judaism and Christianity; liberalism and the Enlightenment; martial pride and capability; capitalism and wealth.”¹⁰ Europe is becoming more and more similar to the house of Squatters, i.e., settlers who reside on currently unoccupied real estate without a legal basis. These are not so much immigrants or refugees putting Europe’s values to the test. “Squatters are the members of the dominant secular subculture of political, academic and media elite who claim that freedoms and privileges of the European house without being willing ‘to pay the rent.’”¹¹ Their values are much more attuned to the so-called values of cultural Marxism, based on the assumption that traditional culture is the source of oppression in the modern world. The new values should be political correctness, multiculturalism, opposition to the nuclear family, marriage, patriotism, traditional morality, law, and order.

Introspective View and the Age of Therapeutic

Referring to Sloterdijk, one of the big themes of postmodernity is self-discovery or self-knowledge. Since ancient times, mythological, religious, and metaphysical narratives have had a synchronization function, creating a bridge between humans and the world. Such narratives have lost their power of regulation and persuasion in front of the post-modern belief to discover an inner law. By following this law, the agent should be protected from external instances and provided with strong support and the right orientation. Such an inward journey and search for an order without any reference to the outside support results in irony. The ongoing process of self-discovery contests the hope of finding a binding foundation of regulative truths. Discovering oneself does

⁹ Cf. Jeff Fountain, “The House of Squatters,” in *Weekly Word* 2 (Nov. 2015), <https://weeklyword.eu/en/the-house-of-squatters/>.

¹⁰ Bret Stephens, “In Defense of Christendom,” *The Wall Street Journal* 21 (Oct. 2015), <https://snapshot.factiva.com/Search/SSResults>.

¹¹ Fountain, “The House of Squatters.”

not mean determining one's own grounding and identity but becoming aware of own groundlessness.¹²

In the process of ongoing introspection, based on the hope of finding the final foundation and measurement within, a person remains locked within themselves. Arising from their inner sources is something changing, ambivalent, and relative, far from being stable and solid. Referring to P. Rieff, by over-emphasizing introspection and discovering unpleasant inner instability, the post-modern man looks for new solutions, which he/she hopes to find in therapy. Rieff's book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, published in 1966 in the middle of the so-called sexual revolution, presents an explanation of cultural changes, leading from religious man to economic man, from here to the psychological man. Sigmund Freud, one of the greatest theoretical figures among social scientists of the twentieth century, played a pivotal role in this change.

Following Rieff's interpretation, the advocates of sociological sciences tried to grasp the meaning of cultural changes in the 19th century. Rieff calls them 'spiritualizers of religion,' whose interpretations were based on the assumption that the power of traditional institutions is losing its binding power. By putting aside the importance of historic institutions and all outward forms, "the inner meaning of the good, the beautiful, and the true, the spiritualizers,..., have given way now to their logical and historical successors, the psychologizers."¹³ Following the steps of cultural changes, once the cultural boundaries providing meaning have been removed, the modern culture leaves men disorganized, empty, and experiencing an infinite variety of panic. There is a need for a new culture based on instruments of control of the new *dis-ease*, occupying man's inside. Modern man believes that he knows something that his predecessors did not: "that we can live freely at last, enjoying all our senses – except the sense of the past – as unremembering, honest, and friendly barbarians all, in a technological Eden."¹⁴ The new culture introduced a new definition of human perfection: no longer the Saint, but the instinctual Everyman, uncomfortable with the ideas of evil and immorality. Identification with communal purposes, credible ideas, and ideal figures, through which the self alone should find his own realization and satisfaction, is losing its relevance. If it is true that the essence of modernity is grounded on the end of Christianity and the end of

¹² Sloterdijk, *Eurotaoismus: Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, 264-65.

¹³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row., 1966), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

metaphysics, the individual feels the need to abandon identification with exalted ideals, achievable only through renunciation and sacrifice. Modern man tries to become free of any authority and religious roots. Since external authority's efficacy has deteriorated, human desires seek new forms of expression. This is the framework of Freud's intervention, which only sought to soften the starched collar of culture.¹⁵

"All symbols systems are therapeutic function if they are compelling enough, especially if they serve to introduce a character ideal."¹⁶ Traditional and classical communities were based in theory and practice on certain idealizations, orienting the members of the community to communal goals. A Platonian, or Aristotelian, or Kantian, or Hegelian, or other accepted theories, have an integrative as well as therapeutic function, guiding individuals to find their own place in a communal reality, ensuring them to be cured and secure in an organic community, and not lost in a chaotic universe. The individual's sense of well-being depended on their full, participant membership in a community, which Rieff calls "therapies of commitment." Ritual participation and ascetic activities play a special function, fostering dedication, through which an individual can lose or limit their sense of individuality.¹⁷

Ritual participation is a form of commitment therapy. Once a culture puts aside its cultus, symbols, rituals, ideals, and sacred orders, whose function is organizing a life worth living, it also rids itself of its own system of therapy. Consequently, an individual's integration into a broader society is profoundly challenged. An example of this can be taken from the bourgeoisie intellectual elites of the 19th century, proud of the sharp critique of their own culture. Resisting and rejecting their society's traditional principles and lifestyle, they felt an inner need for something to release their inner disease, which they found in Freud's psychoanalysis. Following Freud's insight, therapies of commitment should be replaced with analytic therapies, which are less transforming but more informing, far from collective salvation, enabling one to survive almost automatically by a self-sustaining technology.¹⁸ This way, one will learn how to deal with their life by following new techniques.

Existential dimensions of human life should be disattached from religious connotations. "How are we to be consoled for the misery of living?"¹⁹ is, in Freud's eyes, not a religious question but

¹⁵ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

a matter calling for an analysis of conscience and inner impulses.²⁰ His therapy did not lead to commitment and engagement in communion, driving the individual out of himself, but to the protection of the inner life from social existence. Being religious or questioning life's meaning and values means equal to being sick. Faith, with its doctrines, once internalized, is functionally anti-instinctual, controlling the conduct of everyday life. Freud believed that with his therapy, one should be able to establish a neutral mechanism of self-control, leading to the transformation of character based on the equality of one's choices.²¹ In short, his psychoanalysis is a response to the need of the Western individual, trying to endure the loneliness produced by culture. Freud's analytic therapy is a functional alternative to the preceding commitment therapies, which, by and large, had become dysfunctional.²²

Freud's successors quickly realized that Freud's analytical approach, lacking engagement with a broader community, including religious components, was the weak point of Freud's approach. Individuals cannot remain completely isolated from their environment. If Freud believed that the end of his therapy is defying authorities, his followers stated that this is only the beginning, not the end. Individuals should not be left in isolation, though equipped with new techniques on how to deal with their loneliness but encouraged for new communal engagements. In the second half of his book, Rieff talks about C. G. Jung, W. Reich and D. H. Lawrence. Each one of them established his own pseudo-religious systems of thought, which can be seen as a simulation of religion. Struggling to embrace a completely anti-religious position, they provided something in place of nothing. Jung proposed a religious psychology based on archetypes existing in collective unconsciousness. Reich talked about radical political activism as the means of self-fulfillment. Lawrence advocated for surrender to the irrational and erotic experience as a therapy against the cold process of over-rationalization.

²⁰ “Freud declared that the religious question, in its inherited form, as a self-abnegation achieved with moral artistry, was no longer worth asking. This total rejection of the religious question gives even Marxism a pious look.” Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32-4.

²² *Ibid.*, 74.

Spiritual Perception and Christianity

How to think about spiritual perception and how to communicate the experience of the spiritual perception of God within the framework of Christianity? To adequately describe such an experience, one must use language that is based on concepts containing communion with God, people, and the entire creation, life, love, death, resurrection, and the mysteries of Jesus' resurrection. Talking about all these by applying abstract language lacks the power of persuasiveness because it lacks the power of life. Similarly, narratives using exclusively philosophical, psychological, or sociological language, result in inadequacy because they are unable to grasp the reality of God's love as a life-giving principle, even though mysterious. Even the language of speculative/rational theology struggles to disclose the mysteries, which are explicable only with the language of a theology of spirituality, wrapped in silence. In addition, it is not enough to explain or analyze human perception of God's presence with a language based on certain scientific principles, without, at the same time, providing the necessary steps for the absorption of these experiences into daily life. Such interpretations remain like moralism, based on clear knowledge of what is good and right, but cannot be translated into daily life. Talking about spiritual perception in a proper way is a risky project, which can easily slip into generalization, theorization, and abstract representation. Metaphorically speaking, the sweetness of the honey can be authentically described only by people who have tasted it.

Spirituality is all that which, in the action of the Holy Spirit, speaks to us of God, communicates God to us, directs us toward God, unites us with God, and makes us Christ-like. Spiritual life, including spiritual perception, becomes life and perception in the Holy Spirit. Following this broad definition, everything can become spiritual and help us be united with God. All existing things can become, for humans, a spiritual reality whose final goal is union with God. Including sinful human nature becomes a special space for union with God. Sinful doing can dwell for long time in the sinner's mind and heart, triggering anger, revenge, fear, and self-justification. The spiritual process of penance and conversion leads to transfiguration and purification of memory. Once memories and sinful acts as such are absorbed by Christ, the same sinful human nature becomes the experience of God's loving presence in the sinner's life. God's loving presence can be discovered in human suffering, pain, and death. Thus, a spiritual person can see everything, including human death, from God's point of view;

nothing in human life should be excluded or impenetrable from God's love. "When a man's senses are perfectly united to God, then what God has said is somehow mysteriously clarified. But where there is no union of this kind, then it is extremely difficult to speak about God."²³

Thus, spiritual perception can be defined as an experience in which God or phenomena related to God are experienced directly and non-inferentially, i.e., non-resembling or deducing from experiences with the bodily senses. This definition reflects the essence of Christianity, which is based on a personal relationship between God and man. The applicability and usefulness of this definition calls for further interpretations to avoid the risk that this definition remains foreign and almost unattainable in the daily life of many believers who wish to have a direct experience with God. It would not be right to conclude that spiritual perception is reserved only for those who are really advanced on their spiritual journey. For this reason, it is more convenient to comprehend the phenomena of spiritual perception as everyday experiences that are similar to the experiences of direct perception of God or phenomena related to God.²⁴

Imbued with principles of skepticism, rationalism, and empiricism, the modern mind struggles with the idea that a spiritual person can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste God not only in an allegorical way or in a purely abstract way. When talking about human encounters with the divine, Christian spiritual thinkers appeal to the concept of the spiritual senses, which relate

²³ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. C. Luibheid and N. Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 288.

²⁴ The same expression *spiritual senses* should be taken as an umbrella term covering a variety of overlapping, yet distinct expressions. The expression appears the first time in the Latin translation of the works of Origen of Alexandria, as a translation of αἰσθησις πνευματικῆ, and refers to the sensory modalities (vision, audition olfaction, touch, taste) qualified by reference to spirit (eyes of the spirit, spiritual touch, ears of the heart, eyes of the soul, mind's eyes, intellectual touch, ears of faith).

The study of the spiritual senses receives a new impetus with Karl Rahner (1904-1984) in his essay on Origene. Rahner defines spiritual senses as partly figurative and partly literal expressions, "found integrated in a complete system of the five instruments of the spiritual perception of suprasensible religious realities." Spiritual senses are analogous to the five physical senses; both of them are two different sets of powers or faculties, directed at different aspects of the same object. Whether a proper understanding of spiritual senses and perception has to amount to a complete system or a body of doctrine as Rahner stated to be the case, remains contested (Paul Gavriyuk, 3-5).

to the physical senses and the body, and analyze their relationship to mind, heart, emotions, will, desire, and judgment.²⁵ The Bible contains numerous passages pointing to certain features of human cognition that make contact with God possible. “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34[33]: 9). Prophets and others “hear the word of the Lord” (Is 1:10). The apostle Paul speaks of receiving the vision of God “face to face” (1 Cor 13, 12). In addition, there are many passages in the Christian tradition about God's communication with humans without specifying the human cognitive equipment enabling such communication.

In his book *Perceiving God*, William Alston distinguishes between two basic kinds of spiritual experiences.²⁶ The first kind is called “sacramental” perceptions, in which God is perceived in or with some object of creation. Celebration of Eucharist is the mode *par excellence* of spiritual perception, when the entire creation, including our daily life of struggle, confusing thoughts, suffering, and sinful actions, once put on the altar, are absorbed in Christ to the point that they become the Body of Christ. Once our life has been offered to Christ, it becomes Christ-like. This absorption should become the guiding principle in every Christian's life, not only in the moments of celebration of the Eucharist but in every moment of daily life. Sacramental perception of God can find its place through the sense perception of corporeal reality. However, perception with the bodily senses cannot be taken as the starting point leading to God's presence. The starting point is God's presence, presented through the mediation of corporeal reality. God's love and presence in the entire creation motivate and accompany the seekers of God on their spiritual journey.

The second kind of spiritual perception is called “intuitive” perception, in which God is perceived without any object of creation. Referring to some examples taken from the Carmelite mystical tradition, in his book *Mystical Phenomena*, Albert Farges describes these moments of perceiving the presence of God, or God's attributes, in an entirely interior manner, apart from any experience of the corporeal senses. One might experience God as illuminating their mind, entering one's life in a tactile manner, or having in God's presence a sweet odor.²⁷

²⁵ Cfr. Paul Gavriljuk, Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁶ William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 20-1.

²⁷ Albert Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, trans. J. P. Jacques (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1926), 279-89.

God can also be experienced through corporeal senses in a way that the same God's experience transcends the normal activity of those senses. In this case, the presentation is not mediated by any creature. Without any doubt, the theological writings of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), the key figure of the Hesychastic movement, provide an abounded source of clarifications related to God's experience transcending our bodily senses. Vladimir Lossky, in his book *The Vision of God*, summarizes Palamas contribution as the crown of a long tradition of struggle to surpass the Platonic dualism of the perceptible and intelligible, sense and intellect, matter and spirit. "Precisely because God transcends created being, because He is in essence absolutely inaccessible, because there is no co-nature between the divine and the intelligible (made up of the angelic and human spirits), God makes Himself known to the whole man; were it not for this we could speak of a purely sensible or purely intellectual vision."²⁸ This communion implies a union of the whole human person with God 'above all knowledge.' Referring to Palamas words, Lossky continues: "Those who are worthy receive grace and spiritual and supernatural power, they perceive by the senses as well as by the intellect that which is about all intellect ... how? That is known only by God and those who have had the experience of his grace."²⁹

Conclusion

There are two ways in which to ponder spiritual reflection. The first way is primarily focused on spiritual perception, which enables the individual to discover new dimensions of their existence in the face of the transience of their life. In this case, spiritual perception is connected with self-awareness and points to techniques that an individual can master in order to better cope with life's challenges. The goal of this kind of spiritual perception is, to a large extent, the desire for self-improvement, which should lead to a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Such thinking about spiritual perception is essentially different from the thinking of Christian thinkers, especially mystics, whose spirituality is not focused on human self-improvement, but on living in a relationship with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christian spiritual life and spiritual perception are not primarily concerned with man's desire for self-sufficiency and self-

²⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Ashleigh Moorhouse (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1973), 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

improvement, which are purported to open the door to a transcendental reality. The biblical way of thinking starts from the opposite side. In the sense of discovering the greatness of God's face, spiritual perception enables man to discover the true nature of human life.

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