

The Spirit in the three monotheistic religions and in the philosophical research.

El espíritu en las tres religiones y en la investigación filosófica

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Recibido: 06-08-2013

Aceptado: 17-11-2013

RESUMEN: La referencia al tema del espíritu se encuentra en toda la historia de la cultura occidental. Está presente desde el principio en la religión judía y la cultura griega; estas dos raíces se toman y se integran en la experiencia y la reflexión de la cristiandad. La reflexión sobre el espíritu, sin embargo, no es un privilegio exclusivo de Occidente: se encuentra en el Islam y en otras culturas y religiones.

La reflexión sobre el espíritu afecta tanto a la dimensión de la teoría que de la práctica y de la experiencia de la vida: por un lado, el espíritu ha sido objeto de importantes investigaciones en la filosofía y la teología occidental e islámica, por otra parte, se reconoció como una noción que designa el espacio más profundo y decisivo de la experiencia humana, y también como una dimensión en la que se realiza, o puede ser realizado, el encuentro de lo humano con lo divino.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Espíritu – letra – fuerza – regalo – razón – vida – libertad.

ABSTRACT: The reference to the theme of the Spirit passes throughout the whole history of the Western culture. It is present from the beginnings, in the Jewish religion and the Greek culture; these two main roots are picked up and integrated in the experience and reflection that Christianity brought forth. The reflection on the Spirit, however, is not an exclusive privilege of the West: we find it in Islam and also in other cultures and religions.

The reflection on the Spirit regards both aspects of theory and practice as experience of life: on the one hand, the Spirit has been the subject of important investigations in the Western and the Islamic philosophy and theology; on the other hand, it has been recognized as the notion that designates the most profound and decisive sphere of human experience, as well as the very dimension in which is realized, or could be realized, the meeting of the human with the divine.

KEY WORDS: Spirit – letter – force – gift – reason – life – freedom.

The reference to the theme of the Spirit undergoes throughout the whole history of Western culture and involves both dimensions of theory and practice, as much as the experience of life. It is present, indeed, from the beginning in the two traditions, the Hebrew and the Greek, which are the basis of Western culture. In both cases the original meaning of the

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word is related to a material dimension: both the Hebrew word *ruach*, and the Greek *pneuma*, originally indicate the wind, the air blow, which is also the air of breathing, and hence the breath of life. On that ground, the word “spirit” comes to designate a reality which has a broader, and indeed universal, meaning: a force or principle that is the source of life, which ensures the meaningful connection of Creation, or which protects the harmony of Cosmos.

These two traditions develop, however, their original intuition according to different lines. Within the Hebrew context *ruach*, when it is referred to God, has first of all the basic meaning of a force, unpredictable and mysterious, which is the source of life: it is a power that works in and is manifested by the creatures, but it is not at their disposal, and it rather belongs to God. Secondly, this force not only gives life, but renews and elevates life itself: thus the Old Testament emphasizes its character as a gift, underlining its *charismatic* function and its connection with the prophetic inspiration and the historical action of inspired figures working for the salvation of Israel. The New Testament re-elaborates this legacy from a point of view marked by a clear *eschatological concentration*: for St. Paul and St. John the spirit is a gift related to the resurrection of Christ, the source of the new resurrected life; thus it “dwells” in the believers (Rom 8, 9 ff.; 1 Cor 3, 16). It is in this context that the specifically Pauline theme of the opposition between spirit and letter (*pneuma* and *gramma*: 2 Cor 3, 6; Rom 2, 29; 7, 6), which will be of great influence to both the later theological and philosophical reflection, and particularly to the Hermeneutics, finds a place. The Pauline antithesis between ancient and new covenant is not properly a text about hermeneutics; however, it is not limited to the opposition between Law and Gospel conceived as two different contents of revelation, but it indicates the different effects obtained by the Law as dead letter and by the Spirit as vivifying principle; it is through this indirect path, that it is related to the hermeneutic problem of comprehension.²

Within the Greek context, the notion of *pneuma* first appears in a fragment of doubtful authenticity, attributed to Anaximenes; then we find it in the researches of the medical schools and finally it is widely developed in the doctrine of the Stoics. The spirit, for them, is the breath of life that animates and sustains life in the organism, and particularly the human one. Similarly, the universe is conceived as a living organism and the *pneuma*, understood as a divine breath that pervades everything, ensures the unity of the whole, the cohesion of any single part, and their harmonic connection. Here, as in the Bible, the Spirit is a divine reality, which at the same time is present in the human being: in both cases, therefore, the spirit is a force that is at the origin of life, that rules and sustains it. In Stoic thought, however, the spirit is not a gift that comes to us from the outer, but a principle of our natural constitution: the Stoic spirit is not an unpredictable and transcendent force, but an eternal principle that human mind can grasp because of its rational nature. It also maintains a material and immanent character, while the biblical conception, which has had

2 Cf. G. Ebeling, art. *Geist und Buchstabe*, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, third edition, edited by K. Galling, vol. II, Mohr, Tübingen 1958, coll. 1290-1296.

its origin in the material reality of the blow or breathing, in the course of its evolution has increased the emphasis on the transcendent dimension of the spirit and its power over matter.³ The Greek thought, however, offers another important contribution to the reflection on our theme: it is the Platonic, Aristotelian and middle-Platonic notion of the *nous*, which in many cases is far more suitable than the stoic *pneuma* to be attributed to the divine and, at last, also to the human reality; in fact, *nous* is a principle of ethical and rational connotation, clearly different - if not opposed - to matter, which can be referred in the first place to God and his providential government of the world, and secondly to the higher dimension, rational and ethical - and in this sense "spiritual" - of human experience.

Early Christian thought is faced with the difficult task of developing the biblical message in an environment permeated by the Hellenistic culture and therefore dominated by the Stoic conception of the Spirit. After some hesitations, it made a clear choice, which allowed him to solve the question of his relation with Stoicism. In the first chapter of *De Principiis*, the Greek Father Origen states that if "God is spirit," as the Gospel says (John 4, 24), this means that He does not have a corporeal nature, but must be understood as a simple and immaterial reality, "which is all in all nothing else but Intelligence" (*nous*); thus, also the human spiritual element is, in a similar way, the immaterial dimension of intelligence. With such a turning point, Christian thought abandons the Stoic legacy in favor of the Platonic one, but in this way it also deviates from the biblical conception of the Spirit as a life-giving *force*: the spirit is now understood as *Reason*, as immaterial thinking, clearly opposed to the corporeal reality. Through the contribution of Augustine and the Scholastics, this dualistic view will widely prevail in the Christian Western world, up to modern philosophy. Despite the opposition of important thinkers, such as Bruno, Böhme, and Oettinger, dualism will be the dominant perspective until the 18th century, and it will find its most radical expression in the Cartesian metaphysics of the subject, presenting precisely the Spirit as "a thinking *thing*" ("*une chose qui pense*").⁴

A new turn, decisive for the entire further thought, is realized by Kant: he is harshly critical of the metaphysical conception of the Spirit, seen as a simple and immaterial substance, and he rethinks this notion from a completely different perspective. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Spirit is the faculty that gives rise to the free play between Imagination and Understanding, giving to such faculties a harmonic impetus and a unitary orientation; in brief, it is the life-giving principle of the soul (*Gemüt*). At this point, Spirit is no longer a "thing", but a *dimension of experience*, which, among others, is connected back to life and to that feature of inspiration that ancient thought had highlighted. Fichte and Schiller are moving along the same line of thought: the time is now ready for the grand synthesis of Hegel, which reclaims and develops furthermore the critique of dualism, underscores the

3 Cf. G. Verbeke, *L'évolution de la doctrine du pneuma du stoïcisme à S. Augustin*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris - Louvain 1945, rist. Garland, New York & London, 1987.

4 R. Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques*, in *Oeuvres*, edited by. Ch. Adam e P. Tannery, vol. IX-1, p. 21.

complexity of the spirit, and recognizes freedom as its fundamental determination. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a positivistic view, the interest for the spirit abruptly decays; it is with the crisis of Positivism that philosophies seeking new ways of understanding the meaning of experience return to reflect on Spirit: Dilthey and Troeltsch, Croce and Gentile, Jaspers, Scheler, Hartmann and Bergson are the thinkers who offer, in this context, the most important contributions. In contemporary thought, we become witnesses of a renewed impulse to reflect on Spirit: this circumstance concerns, in philosophy, especially hermeneutic thinkers, from Gadamer to Ricoeur and Vattimo, but it also intensely involves many theologians, both Catholics and Orthodox, as much as Protestants.

This renewed interest takes into account, among others, a series of phenomena manifesting in society: the recent success of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements and, in a more vague and controversial sense, of the movements that claim to be inspired by New Age, explain the widespread need for a rediscovery of the spiritual dimension. Going back to the theoretical point, we must say that the reflection that has been developed, from the crisis of Positivism onwards, seems largely confirm the righteousness of the turning point introduced by Kant: Spirit is conceived mostly as a *dimension of experience*, whereas rigid dualism of material and immaterial sphere appears abandoned. Therefore, whereas the dualistic line becomes obsolete, the question of the relationship between immanence and transcendence remains instead entirely open, and on this new ground it can be dealt in a more ductile and flexible way.

One point on which many authors have insisted is the complexity of the experience of Spirit. It is marked by a tension between opposing principles that could not be reduced to one, but it is their very coexistence that qualifies this dimension. Thus, Spirit is on the one hand a cosmological-anthropological principle, and on the other hand, it is typically theological; it characterizes the singular and intimate nature of the individual and at the same time brings forth a common and intersubjective dimension; it manifests itself in the rational and universal sphere of experience and is simultaneously connected to the domain of intuition, feeling and creativity; it is both *esprit de géométrie* and *esprit de finesse*.

On religious level, Spirit indicates a close connection, and even a net, between human and divine realm. Thus, in the Bible, Spirit comes from God and works in human beings; it marks for the creature the essential element of its being and nevertheless the creature does not have in itself the source of this power. Something similar is also encountered in Islam. Here the presence of divine spirit (*ruh*) in Adam is what confers to him his very high dignity, what makes him superior even to the angels, and makes him the recapitulation of creation and the vicar of God on earth. The Islamic religion firmly maintains the difference between Creator and creature, but its esoteric tradition emphasizes the omnipresence of spirit and goes so far as to speak of a certain consubstantiality between the divine spirit and the created world.

In the biblical religion, Spirit, which comes from God, indicates the essential element in human beings; however, this element - so essential for them - is not available to them; the creature cannot exercise on it any control, even if it likes to do so: as Jesus said to Nicodemus, “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*” (John 3, 8). It seems to me that at this point the experience of the spirit marks a really deep conception of human experience, which is also valid outside of the religious perspective: what we really care about is not out of our reach; we participate in it and indeed it demands our action. Nonetheless, it is not under our command; what is essential to us is something we actively do, and at the same time, something that we receive. In this sense, the reflection on spirit says something essential also on the experience of freedom; freedom seems to mean mastery of ourselves, independence from external powers, and hence faculty of choice; but freedom, in the perspective suggested here, also refers to something we receive, something that we do not completely master, and therefore freedom implies a twist between the active and the receptive side of our being.⁵

⁵ For a broader exposition of the notion of spirit in the different traditions and in philosophy, see: *Lo spirito. Percorsi nella filosofia e nelle culture*, edited by M. Pagano, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2011.

