

# *In the Power of the Spirit*

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## Introduction

The lands of Asia, rich in color and resources, conceived most of the great civilizations that survive today. Most of the world's religions also originated in Asia; this includes the so-called Western religions: Christianity and Judaism. While the huge populations of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism in Asia make the missionary work of Christianity exceedingly difficult, they also provide Christianity with a wealth of resources with which it can enrich itself.



Asian culture is replete with religious traditions and many Asian theologians search for a theology that cuts across the boundaries of culture, religion and history, a theology that focuses on compassion at the heart of religion.. To this end they find interfaith dialogue useful. To my knowledge, there are two major lines in the development to this dialogue: one is *theocentric*; the other is *spirit-centred*. In the first, God reveals the divine self to all nations; in the second the stress is on the Holy Spirit who works in the peoples. But in both of these lines, each nation has a different understanding of this revelation within the framework of its cultural context. Both of these positions try to replace the central position of Jesus Christ in Christianity. I do not agree with the present trend in interreligious dialogue wherein scholars attempt to look for the real spirit of Christianity within an Asian expression.

I am aware of the importance of interreligious dialogue, but I am also conscious of its limitations. I wish to emphasize that doing theology is not so much devising a more favorable dogmatic system as to find a more suitable *Way* of living, to find a spirituality in the

power of the Spirit to benefit the future of humanity that is especially suited to Asian Christians. Spirituality, in this sense, is not something derived from a certain religious faith or belief; rather it is *Ways* of living, modes of thinking and patterns of behavior and conduct. An Asian Christian spirituality is basically a *Way* of living suitable for Asian people and Asian Christians.

In this article, based on my personal experiences, I would like to offer some observations regarding the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western spiritual life styles and suggest some guidelines for building an Asian Christian spirituality. I will do this in three parts: Spirit and *qi*, Image of Christ, Hope in God.

### Spirit and Qi

In Christianity the Spirit is God permeating God's own creation. According to the creation study in the Hebrew Scriptures, "a wind [spirit] from God swept over the face of the waters" in the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:2). As Christians we believe the Spirit is God incarnate in Jesus, the personal divinity. "And the Word became flesh, and lived among us....full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14). And it is the same Spirit that inspires human beings, enlivens them and empowers them. "[God] breathed into his [the human being's] nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7).

Hence, the primary mission of the Spirit has to do with life, creating it, sustaining it and directing it towards its future destiny. The Spirit is the source of life, not only of the present life but of eternal life as well. The Spirit is within creation, but is not conditioned by creation. Above all, the Spirit is the power that human beings perceive to be at work in them, relating them with one another in a community of relationships, enabling them to interact with nature in empathy and inspiring in them longings for relationship with the divine. God, nature, and human beings interpenetrate each other through the agency of Spirit for the welfare of human beings and for the wholeness of creation.<sup>1</sup>

Chinese theologians, Chang Chun-shen and C.S. Song suggest that this Spirit is what the Chinese would call *qi* --air, breath and spirit. According to the teachings of Confucianism and Taoism, *qi* is the material origin of all things; it is at the same time the origin of the life-force and energy moving into action. Or rather it is in itself

equipped with life-giving properties and energy for action. The following is a standard expression of *qi*:

Ch'i fills the space between heaven and earth. Heaven and earth themselves, all things between heaven and earth, are all constituted by ch'i [*qi*]. Because of ch'i [*qi*] everything between heaven and earth moves, changes, and functions. It itself moves and moves all things. It is the subject of changes and movements and the origin that causes them. Human beings and animal-plant life also consist of ch'i [*qi*]. The human body is filled with ch'i [*qi*] which comes and goes. The ch'i [*qi*] within the human body and the ch'i [*qi*] outside it are the same ch'i and interpenetrate one another.<sup>2</sup>

This is a common worldview in Asia which has been largely influenced by Chinese culture. Further, *qi* consists of *yin* and *yang*, that is, the female and male principles. The coming into being of all things is due to the interaction between and interpenetration of the *qi* composed of *yin* and *yang* and the five primary elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. This is a "holistic" view of the universe and all things in it, including human beings. Things animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, beings active and inactive are all interrelated through the all-pervasive *qi*. As long as balance and harmony are maintained, all things, all human beings and the universe itself function without interruption in accordance with their respective natures. But when balance is disrupted and harmony disturbed, the result is chaos and affliction.

As suggested by the two theologians mentioned above, the *qi* must have something to do with the *pneuma* mentioned by Jesus. "The *pneuma* [air, wind or spirit] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (Jn. 3:8). This is the mystery of *pneuma* and *qi*. It is wind as well as spirit. It moves and works like wind, blowing where it wills. This actually is similar to the Old Testament concepts of "soul" and "breath", and "soul" and "blood". In Chinese spirituality the "heart" rather than the "head" is considered the center of the whole person. Christian prayer also uses the heart to sing, to thank God and to love. This is one reason that Christianity is called the religion of love.

Traditionally, in the practice of prayer, Christianity has not promoted a favorable attitude towards the body or the flesh. This is

due, at least in part, to the fact that Christianity accepted Greek philosophy in its early history. The philosophies of Plato and Plotinus considered the spirit to be separate from the body and God as a spiritual object, to be separate from the material world. Many modern theologians, especially some feminist theologians, disagree with this concept and are of the opinion that we should pay much more attention to the human body and the world.

In Asian, and especially Chinese spirituality, the focus is first on one's body. The practice of breathing exercises helps us tap into the body's vital energy [*qi*]. Step by step a person can achieve a high degree of spirituality. Since this is basically a form of self-discipline undertaken to overcome human limitations and to be "more than a human being", this could be called a temptation to self-deification. It is always a real temptation for human beings to want "[to] be like God" (Gen. 3:5). Some maintain that we human beings, since we are finite, are condemned to aspiring to be like God, trying to achieve self-transcendence. Some argue that this is the very source and origin of the tragedies in politics that destroy countless human lives; similarly, in religion, when priests and monks play God to humble people and keep them at their mercy.<sup>3</sup>

My personal experiences lead me to examine the monastic position in this regard. I would venture to say that the teachings of "the father of monks", St. Antony of Egypt, has deification (*theopoiesis*) at the very core of his spirituality. According to Antony, without losing our personal identity as human, we can be changed, in some sense, into a christ and be a man-god. This is the very meaning of salvation through Jesus Christ: "He became as we are that we might become as He is."<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, later Christian tradition labeled human deification as the original sin.

Antony's spirituality is meant to liberate us from blindness of spirit, to live a truly spiritual life and to make us divine. To do so, we need a certain monastic sense. The monastic life is marked by hunger, thirst, nakedness; it requires watchfulness and suffering so as to test the self, to see if the person is worthy of God. In this way the self disengages itself from the pressures and obligations of conventional society and is freed from enslavement to the world. This is a liberation theology that frees us from political-social involvement and consequent secularization.

Renouncing social involvement so as to cultivate the spirit or the vital energy (*qi*) is also the basic idea behind Buddhist and Taoist monasticism. In this kind of spiritual life, one can not only discern the Spirit in a Christian sense, but also spirits in a general sense, an area of interest in most of the world religions. Antony and the desert fathers engaged in a kind of spiritual warfare, which is not a war against the human body as it is in the later Christian spirituality, but against demonic powers.

Today's readers would interpret demonic power from a modern psychological perspective, i.e., demons are some evil aspects of human nature, an objective manifestation of internal desires. In some sense, we cannot deny this interpretation, but the assumption behind it is that there are no other beings similar to or higher than human beings in existence. Let's imagine the monks living in the desert long ago. The conditions were hard; they found themselves far away from community, surrounded by silence and darkness. In such a situation human beings become conscious of being a small part of the world. They realize that there are different kinds of beings and mystical powers in the world: e.g., demons, gods or devas. Some of these powers are evil and some of them are good. From the Old Testament we learn that people then did not take demons or Satan as a totally evil power, and that the temptations borne by the saints are sometimes the product of an agreement between God and demons. Those who could bear the temptations from demons were then able to discern what was truly of God.

When applied to illness and natural disasters, *qi* also has a quality of good and evil. But good and evil are not dualistic; they interact with each other and keep a balance. So the art of curing illness consists in restoring the balance between *yin* and *yang* that governs the whole universe and rebuilding the harmony among the five primary elements that constitute the human body and nature. This is similar to the Old Testament's concept of evil spirits.

Antony suggests that his contemporaries were weaker than those who came before them; they could not bear too much temptation. We in the modern world are even weaker, and cannot even vicariously share the experiences of Antony's contemporaries. What we can do is to try to reach beyond ourselves and try to imagine how things were for them. This can help free us from some of our needs, and expand

our souls and minds. Only in this way will we discover how different the world of the Spirit or *qi* is from what we imagine it to be.

### **Image of Christ**

For the Chinese, imaging is very important. This is immediately evident in Chinese characters which represent images rather than words. So an understanding of the Tao, the highest reality in Chinese culture, is not only unspeakable from the Chinese perspective, but also non-speaking in itself. Though we cannot hear it, we can see it imaged everywhere. The Chinese understanding of Ultimate Being is phenomenological rather than transcendental. Within the Chinese spiritual tradition, visions rather than voices are important. This quality of Chinese culture has spread and influenced many Eastern Asian countries and may represent a main stream characteristic of Asian spirituality.

In contrast, voice is a very important part of Christian spiritual life. In the liturgy one sings songs, prays in words. Even when one is silent it is to hear the Word of God. Christian spiritual life seems to me to be too wordy and busy. Diana Eck, who did her spiritual journey among Hindus, has the same feeling.<sup>5</sup> In Western theology the concentration has been one-sided, paying too much attention to the Word rather than the Image of God. In Genesis there is the Word, but also the Image. God creates the heavens and the earth with his Word. God creates the human being using both Word and Image. In the creation of the human being the Image seems to be more important.

Furthermore, I think the central position of the Word in Christian theology has its source in Greek thought. In the Bible the concept of Word takes an increasingly important role as Scripture develops. Many Greek-speaking people who became Christians used the Greek word “logos” which carried a multiplicity of meanings and which eventually acquired a central position in Christianity. A similar thing happened in some early Chinese translations of the Bible, when we used “Tao” which also has many meanings to translate “Word.”

Some post-modern thinkers consider the Western tradition logocentric. As a result there has been a heavy emphasis placed on the rational. Science and technology are seen as applicable to almost

all parts of human life. Christian spirituality itself became more Word-centered and more rational. It seems to me that a spirituality focused on a Spirit-Image has more meaning for Asian people than a Christ-Word focused one.

It seems to me that the whole mystery of Christianity depends on the event of "Word became flesh." This event is the only one in which God reveals himself to us within human history allowing us see God's form and image. This reveals Jesus' absolute poverty, for as the bringer of God's salvific will, he only passes on what he has to others; he himself has nothing. What Jesus requires his disciples to do is to be poor: in material things, leaving everything in the world; poor in spirit, obeying the call of Christ. Jesus is absolutely poor. He prays as a beggar to his Father from start to finish. He manifests full confidence in God. He is the leader and perfecter of faith. His word comes from God's authority, is directed to God in complete poverty. The Spirit is the direction and path by whom God leads the one who is poor and obedient. The Spirit is the definitive bond between the human being and God. When Jesus says: "In truth I tell you, no one can enter the reign of God without being born from water and the spirit" (John 3:5), he is revealing his own experience of the Spirit -- the Spirit he experienced at his baptism and in his life and ministry that followed his baptism.

In the baptism of Jesus, the water makes way for the Spirit. It is not baptism by water but empowerment by the Spirit which is the heart of the event. The Spirit "descended on Jesus like a dove." This symbolism points us back to God's creation where the Spirit is in powerful movement; the descent of the Spirit signifies a new creation. The Spirit that "descended" on Jesus is the Creator Spirit, engaged in creation and the new creation. "Vitality is its essence. Dynamic is its energy. And above all, freedom is the source of its creativity."<sup>6</sup>

After his Baptism Jesus was led away by the Spirit into the wilderness to undergo temptation. During the temptation, Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1). Filled with the Spirit, Jesus could reject all other alternatives to the reign of God. This included himself. He is the Word that is not-word, a word that abandons itself and dissolves itself. So Jesus' existence is one of emptying himself out, or abandoning himself. In the state of abandonment, Jesus gives himself

into the hands of God, so that he may be formed and filled by the Spirit.

Self-abandonment and self-giving require self-denial, and the renunciation of all things. This is what it means to follow the way of Jesus. Confronted by Jesus the disciple's choice is all or nothing. Following Jesus is not an ethical "imitation" of Jesus, but complete "detachment" and "self-abandonment." This way opens us up and allows God and the Spirit to work in us so that we can be glorified and our faith rewarded by God's self-revelation.

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus, full of the Spirit, returned to Galilee to launch his ministry of God's reign. He was a man "armed with the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14). Though there is no direct description in the Gospels of what Jesus "armed with the power of the Spirit" looked like, the image of Jesus with vitality, spontaneity, and authority that commanded the attention of his friends and foes alike emerges from the stories in the Gospels. Jesus can make known the original intention of God for humanity, and see into the human heart. He also manifests a certain "messianic self-consciousness". This is why he says "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:33) We can find the authority and power for this in his miracles of healings, of sicknesses and in the forgiving of sins, when he says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:18). In a word, his deeds and words, his total self-giving are the result of the presence and indwelling of the power of the Spirit within him.

Keeping in mind this image of Christ, we should devise a spirituality by which we can little by little cultivate and receive the Spirit. This could form the major part of an Asian spirituality based on the practice of *qi* present in various Asian religious traditions. I hope this can be accomplished in our generation.

## Hope in God

Now, I would like to consider hope. Actually, human beings are always hoping for something. Recall the Kantian question "What can we hope for?" We can understand this to mean the hopeful, future-oriented human being. In a certain sense, we can say that hope is the essence of human life. As we all know, we are not born into a perfect world. Reality always leaves much for us to restore, to change, even



to destroy. In our attempt to change the reality we are guided by the blueprint in our mind, that is, what we hope for. Our involvement in the world is meaningful only in terms of some future possibility. We are always “ahead of ourselves”, projecting some future possible way of being in the world.

In an existential sense, to hope for something can actually be almost magical in its effect; it can change our attitudes of doubt, despair or apathy. Many people live lives of indifference. They may not often be driven to despair, but they have little hope in the future and only live day by day. These can be the “happy” people who do not know what else to hope for or those whose hope is cut off by present sufferings. Only those can hope whose life is full of spirit and who open themselves up to future possibilities. Life in hope is a real life. Where there is life, there is hope.

Hope opens up a new dimension for us and should be regarded as an essential part of human life. The Early Fathers considered hope to be one of the three main virtues. They saw hope as an act of will reaching out to God. Unfortunately, Christian spirituality did not pay much attention to it for centuries. The Catholic tradition took love as primary for salvation, while the Protestant tradition took faith as primary. For Christians, hope is real. It does not tend towards something that does not exist. The resurrection of Christ is the source of our hope. Christ regained his life, and so we can hope for his second coming. It is in this respect that Christian hope is beyond the empty longing for Utopia.

Hope demands action; it is positive in its anticipation and action. For Christians, the possibility of the future is more than a projection of the present. Hope can come to us unexpectedly, interrupting or redeeming our concepts of what it means to be in this present situation as is taught in the Gospel: “the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44). The future (Zukunft) is something yet to come (Zukommen). In this sense, we have no guarantee that we will be saved. To achieve that goal we must be watchful and struggle in the present up to that time.<sup>7</sup>

In many Asian countries, people used to believe in Marxism and hoped for an earthly paradise--communist society. Communism, despite its negative aspects due to its ideology, is ideal to work for the rights of the poor, struggle for a liberation from the social-economical

forces, and hope for a “tomorrow” wherein human freedom is completely realized. As is suggested by some critics, Karl Marx, an ethnic Jew, got eighty percent of his ideas from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. However communism is very anti-religious; it tries to replace all religious traditions with its own myth, worship and the political leader/god. This is exactly what a Mao Zedong version of Marxism did in China.

Based on her deep involvement in changing the situation of the working class, Simone Weil proclaimed that change does not come about by revolution as suggested by Marxism, but by Christianity, “a religion of slaves”. Her observation is verified by the later practice of communism. The reality in Eastern Europe and Eastern Asia shows that social liberation or revolution cannot resolve all problems. Chaos and killing come with revolution; the on-going suffering and dying that we must endure everyday have their deep roots in human nature. Those who promised to bring everybody a better society bring us more suffering. As it is properly pointed out by Simone Weil, revolution itself has become a myth, the “opium to the people”. Only a “religion of slaves”, not the myth of revolution, can give people love, hope and benefits.<sup>8</sup>

The essential task of the church’s ministry in Asia today is to proclaim the gospel of hope. This good news is to enable those who suffer to have the courage to hope, and thus gain the courage to be. In Asia people are taught by centuries of tradition and culture to believe that it is their fate to suffer. This is suffering that leads to despair. A new life cannot begin until suffering unto despair is transformed into suffering unto hope. In this suffering unto hope, people are aware that God does not condone social and political evil, that God does not accept suffering as the inevitable result of fate. This is liberation from the tyranny of fate into the freedom of the God of hope.

To transform suffering unto despair into suffering unto hope demands a proper understanding of the suffering of God. The doctrine of the suffering God is one of the most significant characteristics of Christian belief. No other religion would let their Almighty be crucified as a slave so shamefully. Jesus Christ is suffering in this world. He is a suffering God standing before us, weeping with us and agonizing with us. He came not to explain the existence of evil, injustice and why we have to suffer, but to give meaning to our daily

misery through his own suffering. This is the God experienced by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he was in prison. He wrote, "God lets God's own self be pushed out of the world on the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which God is with us and helps us. Matthew 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering--only the suffering God can help."<sup>9</sup>

The God in Jesus on the cross is powerless and helpless, just as we ourselves usually are. But this is exactly the one who has the power to save the world. "The Crucified God is the God who identifies with us and dies with us."<sup>10</sup> He does not suffer once for all, but will be suffering as long as we are suffering. Thus, God is always with us. In the situation of despair and emptiness, we are not alone. We even can find joy in our suffering because God is suffering with us. Therefore, if resurrection is the source of hope, the suffering of God with us is the eternal reality.

In my opinion what Asian Christian spirituality should do in the future is to free itself from the control of Euro-centrism and rationalism and develop the aspects of spirit, image and hope. Moreover, it can learn from the rich experiences of the Spirit or *qi* found in many Asian religious traditions. Then spirituality will take on an important role in the life of Asian people, and bring them a new future. This is what we hope for. Actually, hope is the spirit of Christian spirituality, even that of all spirituality.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See C.S. Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 293.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 293. See *Philosophy of Ch'i*, ed. Onozawa Seiichi, Fukunaga Atsuji, and Yamanoi Yu, p. 356. Translation from the Japanese by C.S. Song.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 295.
- <sup>4</sup> Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, tr. by Robert C. Gregg, p. xvi.
- <sup>5</sup> Diana Eck, *Encountering God*, p. 144 ff.
- <sup>6</sup> *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* p. 28.
- <sup>7</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p. 154. ff.
- <sup>8</sup> See George A. Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 127 ff.
- <sup>9</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* p. 360.
- <sup>10</sup> C.S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, p. 184.