



Thoughts on a Theology of a Universal Church Spirituality

Klaus Krämer

Thoughts on a Theology of a Universal Church Spirituality

Klaus Krämer

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between theology and spirituality with respect to a spirituality of the universal Church. What is the particular nature of a universal Church spirituality? Is this a collective term for the variety of spiritualities to be found in the different regions of the universal Church or is it a specific kind of spirituality in its own right? An attempt to answer these questions will be preceded by some introductory remarks on the fundamental relationship between theology and spirituality.

Theology and spirituality

As a living reality, spirituality actually and factually precedes any theological reflection.¹²⁸ Spirituality refers to the tangible experience of faith; it describes a certain form of faith in Christian life. Its focus is not primarily on theoretical content but rather on the personal experience of the reality of God and the specific way in which that experience influences and changes a person's life. Spirituality is characterised first and foremost by various devotional practices: prayers, rituals, forms of Church service, meditation practices and spiritual texts. Spirituality acquires a distinctive profile as a result of the special emphasis placed on certain truths of the faith, of their existential permeation and personal appropriation, thus making them a part of one's own life. Beyond the different manifestations of piety in the strict sense of the word, spirituality is distinguished by a lifestyle which is in harmony with the experience and practices of faith. To that extent it is holistic in nature. The constitutive and characteristic features of faith are woven into people's everyday life and work, giving

¹²⁸ Cf. Fraling, B., „Spiritualität – Systematisch-theologisch“, in: Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, 3rd edition, vol. 9, Freiburg im Breisgau 2000, 856.

them an inner coherence, consistency, credibility and authenticity. Spirituality generally goes hand in hand with a certain view of the world and perception of reality. In this reality God's call is heeded and given an existential answer. Spiritualities are moulded by specific life conditions and biographical situations. As a rule they are responses to certain social and cultural challenges (signs of the times).

As faith tangibly experienced and articulated, every spirituality has its inherent theological quality. Max Seckler distinguishes three basic forms in which theology as the "practised correlation between God and language"¹²⁹ can give linguistic expression to the reality of God. In his view, speaking of and bearing witness to God, which takes place in the speech act of religious source language, constitute the beginning, foundation and substance of all other forms of theology. It is in this sense that the word "theologian" is first encountered in Ancient Greek religion, where it is used to refer to a person talking about God in mythical and ritual terms. Hence, in ancient times, Homer, Hesiod and Orpheus could be regarded as theologians, i.e. as heralds of God, in the way that Moses and the Prophets or Jesus and the Apostles were.¹³⁰ A second basic form of theology appears in Greek antiquity in the guise of philosophical criticism of gods and religion, i.e. in the use of reason to exercise critical control of religious talk of God and to gain knowledge of the divine.¹³¹ Consequently, it was possible to expose inner inconsistencies, projections and erroneous forms of religious speech and action. This second basic form of theology can be interpreted as philosophical theology, because here God and religion are the subject of a rationally inspired endeavour to gain knowledge, with philosophical methods being used to examine them. The distinguishing feature of the third basic form of theology, by contrast, is that interest in acquiring knowledge springs entirely from faith itself. The emphasis is on understanding faith from within faith itself (*fides quaerens intellectum*). The *intellectus fidei* thus operates entirely within the reality opened up by faith. Faith is understood by faith itself; it is thus the experiential foundation and basis of validity for theological discourse.¹³² This third basic form

¹²⁹ Seckler, M., „Theologie als Glaubenswissenschaft“, in: Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie, vol. 4, Freiburg im Breisgau 1988, 180-241, 180.

¹³⁰ Cf. Ibid., 182.

¹³¹ Cf. Ibid., 184.

¹³² Cf. Ibid., 186f.

of theology, in particular, harbours a spiritual momentum of its own. Faith, which is directed per se towards recognition and understanding, wishes to penetrate deeper into itself and, in so doing, reveals new insights and internal relationships. Seckler compares this spiritual momentum with a process of enlightenment: "If the believer were not in the dark, he would not need to seek understanding; but if the faith were not enlightening, he would neither wish nor be able to seek it."¹³³ In his existential decision to embrace faith the believer follows a light that initially takes him through the darkness along a path which gradually enables him to recognize a deeper, hitherto unknown truth. This wisdom-based – and thus in the proper sense – spiritual understanding of theology is crucial for the writings of the Church Fathers in particular.¹³⁴

This brief introductory outline gives some idea of the extreme complexity and diversity of the relationship between theology and spirituality. Theology can be seen first of all as an attentive and critical companion of spiritual life. One of the tasks of theology is to record and analyse the reality of life in which a specific spirituality develops and unfolds. While this task precedes theological reflection as such, it is nonetheless of indispensable importance for the purposes of adequate theological classification and evaluation. It is closely tied to an initial descriptive and analytical approach, which enables the different kinds and manifestations of a specific form of spirituality to be described and its inner cohesion explained. This makes the form of spirituality recognisable and comprehensible in conceptual terms. The critical task of theology as such consists in ascertaining whether a certain spirituality constitutes a theologically appropriate and coherent response to the message and claims of Jesus. The legitimacy of a form of spirituality is thus proven by its conformity with the Gospel. Of crucial significance here are the testimony of the Holy Scriptures and a critical comparison with the historically influenced forms of Christian spirituality (tradition). At the same time, however, a spirituality must also constitute an adequate and convincing response from within the faith to the challenges presented by the current period in time. An assessment of all these aspects makes it clear whether the respective form of spirituality can be recognised as a legitimate response to the "signs of the times" that is in conformity with the Gospel. In the broad

¹³³ Ibid., 188.

¹³⁴ Cf. the article by Michael Amaladoss on "Spirituality and Theology" in this volume.

range of spiritual offers it is thus possible to make a critical distinction as to whether and to what extent a certain form of spirituality can refer to an impulse of the Holy Spirit or whether it represents a concession to the spirit of the times that must be subjected to a critical review.¹³⁵

To properly determine the relationship between theology and spirituality it is important that theology should be constantly aware of its critical “service character” and not unduly elevate itself above the spiritual form of faith that is practised. After all, theology is also advanced by the life and reality of faith and repeatedly confronted with new challenges. If serious theological consideration is given to the potential attribution of the practised faith of the Church to impulses of the Holy Spirit, scientific theology – as a science of faith – will pay careful attention to the people of God’s sense of faith and thus be the recipient of further valuable and significant stimulus for ongoing theological reflections. A close look at theological history reveals that the lived-out faith of the Church and its spiritual movements have exerted a decisive impact on the development of dogma.¹³⁶

Spirituality in a global world

Every authentic spirituality springs from a certain experience of reality. Hence the question about the specific character of a universal Church spirituality must begin with the experience of the reality of an increasingly globalised and internationally networked world. People’s daily lives are increasingly played out in this global context. In contrast to earlier generations their perception of current developments is no longer restricted to the limited range of their immediate surroundings. The Internet and the social communication media offer virtually boundless opportunities to acquire information about events and developments in far-flung regions of the globe. The whole world is thus present in the everyday life of the individual and, as a result, in his perception of reality.

Hence for many people spirituality, too, is increasingly set in this global context. The problems, concerns and needs of people in different parts of the world are no longer far-distant realities that

¹³⁵ The teachings of Ignatius of Loyola on the distinction of the spirits are helpful in this respect; see: Lambert, W., *Aus Liebe zur Wirklichkeit. Grundworte ignatianischer Spiritualität*, Mainz 1993, 99-106.

¹³⁶ On the teaching of the sense of faith of believers see Beinert, W., in: *Glaubenszugänge. Lehrbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, edited by W. Beinert, vol. 1, Paderborn 1995, 167-182.

have only a marginal impact on my own experience of reality. They can increasingly become the focus of my attention and thus present an existential challenge to which I must find an appropriate answer. In the introduction to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* the Second Vatican Council says that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”¹³⁷ It goes on to state that “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (*in corde resonet*)¹³⁸, thereby addressing the issue of a comprehensive and, indeed, universal attitude of empathy – a capacity to identify with the experience and feelings of all people.¹³⁹ This special sensitivity to the cares and concerns of all people in this world can thus be considered an initial characteristic of a universal Church spirituality; it deliberately puts spiritual experience in everyday life and work in a global context. A second aspect can be formulated with a view, in particular, to the universal Church as a point of reference of a special basic spiritual attitude. Ignatius of Loyola regarded the ability to adopt a Church mentality and to learn how to feel with the Church as a key element of his approach to spirituality.¹⁴⁰ Taking up these thoughts and with a view to a spirituality of the universal Church, one might speak of a *sentire cum ecclesia universalis*, which enables the empathy due to all people as a matter of principle to be devoted in a special way to those brothers and sisters who are obliged to perform the common mission in the face of very different conditions and challenges in the various regions of the universal Church. This “feeling with the universal Church” could represent a contemporary spiritual appropriation of the Pauline metaphor of the body, according to which all the parts of the body share the pain if one part is hurt.¹⁴¹

In consideration of the above, a spirituality of the universal Church could manifest itself in three consecutive steps. First of all, there is a need to take cognizance of global reality, remain abreast

¹³⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Cf. Romans 12:15: “Rejoice with others when they rejoice, and be sad with those in sorrow.”

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Loyola, I. von, „Geistliche Übungen, Nr. 352-370“, in: Loyola, I. von, *Deutsche Werkausgabe*, vol. 2: *Gründungstexte der Gesellschaft Jesu*, Würzburg 1998, 262-268; Lambert, W., *Aus Liebe zur Wirklichkeit*, 161-165.

¹⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

of important events and developments, ascertain the situation facing people in different parts of the world and explore their current problems and challenges. People interested in the universal Church will take a particularly close look at the situation in the individual local churches, at the possibility to freely practise and bear witness to one's faith, and at important events and developments in the ecclesiastical life of the various local churches in order to share in the wealth of their experiences as well as in their concerns and problems. The different information media are a significant means to this end. However, face-to-face meetings are of crucial importance, too. It is not just a matter of acquiring objective information, but also of sharing experiences and feelings. This awareness, therefore, always involves a process of dialogue, too, in which attempts are made to explore and understand the point of view of the persons directly affected. In this context special importance attaches to universal Church partnerships and dialogue processes at all Church levels (community partnerships, diocesan partnerships, meetings at the level of Episcopal conferences).

The second step requires a spiritual absorption of these perceptions in order to interpret them and see in them the signs that are capable of providing orientation for the path taken by the Church in the present. This occurs first and foremost through the incorporation of these experiences into the realm of prayer and meditation. That applies to both individual prayer and communal liturgy. Intercessory prayer, in particular, is a suitable means of communicating to God the concerns, worries and needs of the people with whom we feel connected worldwide, thus including them in our community of prayer. The universal Church communion finds its sacramental climax in the Eucharistic Prayer which expressly refers in several places to the worldwide community of the Church. But proclamation is also an appropriate means of extending the awareness of the faithful to the concerns of the universal Church and thus to practise *sentire cum ecclesia universalis*.

The third step, finally, involves an existential response to what has been perceived and recognised as spiritually significant; this finds expression in tangible influences on lifestyle and practical activities. On the one hand, the latter might be concrete measures of solidarity wherever a local church depends on the support of the global community to fulfil its mission in a given situation. Alternatively,



they could take the form of practical advocacy for people afflicted by injustice, violence and humanitarian disasters. A fearless commitment to human rights, religious freedom and justice, in particular, can be one of the most valuable fruits of a universal Church spirituality. Concrete effects and consequences also manifest themselves, however, in ordinary, everyday lifestyles – in dealing with creation, non-renewable resources and consumer behaviour that takes seriously the conditions of others and their chances in life.¹⁴²

Spirituality and contextuality

Even if a sensitive universal Church spirituality is aware of its global horizon, it nonetheless remains rooted in its specific context. Crucial factors here are a certain social and cultural environment and specific social challenges. It is in this setting that the individual encounters very concrete “signs of the times”, which require a faith-based answer and attitude and find expression in a spirituality appropriate to this context. Contextual theologies reflect this situation and place the faith-based answers and interpretations in a structure that is understandable in both theoretical and conceptual terms. This specific context is the place in which an inculturation of the faith must take place. It is in the process of inculturation that the message of the faith finds a new and authentic manifestation in the medium of a specific culture. Faith is integrated into the context of a culture which moulds and determines the entire attitude to life and the lifestyle of the social community. At the same time, faith changes this culture from within. The outcome of this process of inculturation, therefore, is a new, contextually determined form of Christian faith with a unique, unmistakeable spirituality of its own. These culturally determined contexts are also the genuine location of a dialogue with other religions. Here again this is not primarily an academic dialogue but rather a dialogue that addresses the common challenges arising from the specific circumstances (dialogue of life) and initiates an exchange on the question of whether a spiritual answer can be found for these challenges on the basis of the respective religious conviction and tradition. Of the four different forms distinguished in dialogue with the followers of other religions¹⁴³ it is the dialogue of religious experience which represents

¹⁴² By opting in favour of fairly traded products, for example.

¹⁴³ This distinction was first made in the document issued by the Secretariat for Non-Christians: *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Vatican



the highest and most qualified level, because it involves religious practice as the subject of the dialogue. Here, people rooted in their respective traditions “exchange their experiences in prayer and contemplation, in belief and action as forms of expression and ways of seeking for the absolute”.¹⁴⁴ The outcome of this exchange through dialogue is absorbed into the respective, contextually determined form of spirituality.

A universal Church spirituality has the important task of establishing how these different, contextually determined spiritualities can engage in a beneficial mutual exchange. Here again it will firstly be a question of communicating and exchanging experiences that are capable of giving the members of the one cultural communication community a general idea and ever better understanding of the contextually determined nature of a spirituality that has arisen in a different cultural communication community. This exchange abides by the rules of an intercultural dialogue.¹⁴⁵ It gives the participants a new perception of things, a deeper understanding and empathy with a spirituality that is rooted in a different context. As a rule the dialogue also leads to a deeper and, above all, more conscious understanding of one's own spiritual tradition and thus also to a deeper penetration of the truth of the faith shared by both partners in the dialogue. Within this dialogue significant help and clarification is provided by the respective contextual theologies as theologically reflected forms of these contextual experiences.

In these dialogues the question usually also arises of the extent to which the different contextual spiritualities can inspire and enrich each other. Ultimately, therefore, the question concerns the reception of spiritual forms and practices that have emerged in different cultural contexts. Here the principle holds that the different culturally influenced and contextually determined forms of spirituality constitute a great wealth of the global community of believers which must be tapped into time and again. However, this may result in unsuitable forms of appropriation being undertaken too rapidly, which can lead to an obstruction rather than a promotion of access to the content

City 1984; cf. Krämer, K., *Den Logos zur Sprache bringen. Untersuchungen zu einem dialogischen Verständnis von Mission*, Ostfildern 2012, 60-63.

¹⁴⁴ *Dialog und Mission*, 35f.; cf. *Den Logos zur Sprache bringen*, 62f.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 222f.

of the faith. Such problematical forms of reception are fostered by a mentality which tends towards an eclecticist receptive process because of the pleasure found in the new and exotic – a process which regards unfamiliar spiritualities as consumer items that can be combined with other items or replaced by them at will. The critical and clarifying function of theology is, therefore, of the utmost significance especially in this field. Of the essence here is a clear and informed understanding of the different nature of the contexts that enter into a dialogue with each other through a reception process of this kind. Only if there is a clear reflection of the correlation between the unfamiliar spirituality and the common ground of faith will it be possible to ensure that, if foreign cultural elements are incorporated into one's own context, this will not result in a shift in importance that can deprive the form of faith of its authenticity. That applies, in particular, wherever a different spirituality has legitimately incorporated elements of other religious traditions into its own spirituality. Wherever the necessary basic understanding of the correct interpretation and classification of these elements is missing, an uncritical syncretism can unwittingly spring from a legitimate inculturated practice.

On the other hand, wherever a fundamental open-mindedness towards the spiritual diversity of a global community of believers is linked with a theological reflection that is critical in the best sense of the word, the outcome can be a new form of spirituality capable of overcoming the boundaries of narrow, contextually determined spaces, thus making it possible to gain a deeper experience of the one shared faith in all its diversity. The unity of the Church thus becomes palpable in an existential depth that may prove to be a viable foundation – especially in situations in which different positions can spark tensions.