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*Facing the Dualism of Religion and Culture:**Unveiling the Impact of Dualism on Power Structures*

The symbol of yin and yang, originally a representation of the yearly cycle of the sun, is a circle, half black and half white, with a double-curved line in the middle that at the same time separates and connects the black and the white fields. The curved line depicts the relationship between yin and yang as dynamic: yin flows into yang and yang into yin. A white dot in the black field and a black dot in the white field indicate that all phenomena have within them the seed of their opposite.

According to the Chinese Han philosophy, yin and yang represent all the opposite principles of the universe: yang represents maleness, the sun, creation, heat, light, heaven and dominance. Yin represents femaleness, the moon, completion, cold, darkness, material forms and submission. Although yang represents dominance and yin submission, each of these opposites produces the other cyclically and constantly, so that no principle continually dominates the other or determines the other. The balance of yin and yang is needed to realise harmony in the universe and health in the human body. We could define the relation of yin and yang as complementary, dynamic, non-hierarchical dualism.

I. CLARITY

In Western Europe, the dualistic understanding of the human being appears clearly for the first time in the works of PLATO, who considers the soul as a principle of diverse nature from the body, allied to the world of ideas, pre-existing the body and immortal. PLATO affirms the clear distinction between intelligible world, the world of ideas, and sensible world, the material world, as well as the superiority of the intelligible over the sensible: the sensible has to be overcome through a process that is at the same time knowledge and moral uplifting. Reality is ordained in an above and a below, and the human being reflects in the hierarchical relation of soul over body the hierarchical structure of reality.

The same dualistic anthropology we find in PLATO, mediated by elements of Stoic and Neo-Platonic thinking will be adopted by the majority of the Fathers of the Church, especially by AUGUSTINE who defines the soul substance endowed, equipped with reason, intended to rule the body. The soul is substance independent from the body and outlives it. For AUGUSTINE, as for PLATO, philosophy is the uplifting of the soul to the realm of ideas. Nature, on the contrary, keeps men away from contemplation of truth and therefore needs to be subjugated and dominated.

From the Greek philosophy through the works of the Fathers of the Church, Christian theology and anthropology inherited a dualistic interpretation of reality and of the human being. On the model of the relation of intelligible over sensible, of ideas over matter, of God over nature, of soul over body, several other pairs positioned hierarchically, with the element associated or associating itself with the intelligible and the spiritual placed or placing itself in a position of power "over" those elements associated with matter: human over nature, man over woman, clergy over laity, master over slave.

The hierarchical dualism of reality and anthropology becomes a solid ground for hierarchical relations and power structures in the early Church, legitimising the prominence and dominance of exclusively male clergy over lay people and women. But early Christian theology and ecclesiology do not derive their dualism only from Greek philosophy through the works of the Fathers of the Church.

Elements of dualistic thinking are found in several ancient Middle-Eastern philosophical and religious streams. *Zoroasterism* and *Manichaeism* have in common the belief in two co-eternal divinities constantly fighting with each other: good against evil, or light against darkness. The dualism of good and evil, or light and darkness is found also in philosophical and religious streams such as *Hellenistic Judaism* and *Gnosticism* which, related as they were to monotheistic religions and at the same time influenced by Greek philosophy, felt urged to affirm the supremacy of one principle over the other: the principle of goodness (God) over that of evil, of light over darkness, of spirit over matter, of soul over body.

Hellenistic Judaism and pre-Gnosticism are particularly relevant to our discourse because they influenced the language and thought of early Christianity and of early Christian writings such as the *Gospel of John*. From those philosophical and religious streams, among others, the Gospel of John inherits its dualistic language and understanding of reality as distinct in "from above" and "from below" and its antithetic and hierarchically ordained pairs of light and darkness, spirit and matter, *logos* and *sarx*.

We can therefore identify different sources of dualistic elements in Christian theology and early Christian writings. Hellenistic Judaism, pre-Gnosticism, Iranian religions, mixed with elements of Platonism, neo-Platonism and Stoicism, to mention some, influenced to different extents the writers of Biblical texts, first Christian theologians and early ecclesiologies or models of relations and power within the early Church.

II. CRITIQUE

Hierarchical dualism rooted in Christian theology and in Western culture continues to this very day to determine our hermeneutics, our interpretation of reality, of structures, of relations and of power relations. Most of our thinking continues to be dominated by binary concepts: black and white, good and evil, truth and error, God and nature, spirit and matter, soul and body, female and male, rich and poor, powerful and disempowered, centre and peripheries.

We do not only think in terms of binary concepts, but we also think in terms of couples hierarchically ordained: spirit over matter, God over nature, soul over body, human over nature, man over woman, white over black, rich over poor, powerful over disempowered, centre over peripheries.

Hierarchical dualism inherited from Greek philosophy and Christian theology, deeply rooted in Western culture and in the theory, language, texts, praxis and structures of



the Church legitimises and supports a concept of power exerted “over” and therefore oppressive structures and oppressive power relations.

We need to question the legitimacy of those oppressive structures and power relations, and we need to unmask and question theories, theologies and ideologies that legitimise the superiority of one gender over the other, of one social group over the other, of one race over the other, of human over nature and so forth.

We opened this reflection describing the symbol of yin and yang as a model of dualism that is complementary, dynamic and non-permanently hierarchical. The symbol of yin and yang shows us that not all dualism is necessarily hierarchical. It also shows us, by comparison, that Western and Christian dualism has in fact been permanently hierarchical and static, fixed as it is in vertical relations of above and below, and of power exerted “over”. We said that yin and yang flow into each other, determine each other and contain a seed of the opposite.

Quite differently is described the dualism of genders in Christian texts and theology as well as in Western patriarchal culture: Eve in one of the two narratives of creation is made out of one rib of Adam. Female derives from male, male does not derive from female. Some might rightly argue that this theory compensates the fact that all other men derive from women.

In the anthropology the Fathers of the Church inherit from Greek philosophy, the woman is understood as a deficient being, lacking fully developed soul. This theory of the woman as a not fully developed being, as a being lacking qualities fully present in man is not unfortunately an obsolete one, it continues to this very day to justify the

exclusion of women from ordination and from priesthood in many Christian traditions.

Not all dualism is hierarchical and oppressive. On the other hand, not all structures and ideologies of oppression are simply dualistic. Dominion gets incarnate in very diverse theories, ideologies, structures and practices. Even if in this text we are dealing with the oppressive character of Western dualism, we do not mean in any way to confine oppressive potential to dualistic theories and structures.

Since our hermeneutical key in reading and trying to understand reality and in evaluating cultural and religious processes and phenomena is the respect of the dignity and integrity of every human being and of the whole creation, a dualistic and hierarchical understanding of reality needs to be unmasked and seriously questioned.

In other words, the liberation of oppressed groups and the affirmation of the dignity and integrity of every human being and of the whole of creation need to deal with the radical questioning of models of interpretation of reality hierarchically constructed and oppressive. And if Western dualism is hierarchical and oppressive, then it has to be seriously questioned. And if Western dualism is rooted in dualistic and oppressive cultural, philosophical and religious theories, then we need to unveil the oppressive character of these theories and question them.

The comparison of the yin and yang model and of the dualistic categories Christianity inherits from Greek philosophy also shows how powerful is the tool of interpretation: who has decided that yang represents maleness, the sun, creation, heat, light, heaven and dominance while Yin represents femaleness, the moon, completion, cold,



darkness, material forms and submission?

Who has decided that God, man, spirit, soul and intellect belong together while women, matter, body and nature are to enjoy good company in the same inferior box? Who has detained the power to interpret the Bible? Who has detained the power to choose among a range of available anthropologies, models of communities and power relations and has decided which models deserved to be normative for the entire Church?

Women, blacks, indigenous people, poor and other marginalised groups have been excluded from hermeneutical processes. Theories chosen by white, Western men have been given priority and normative value. We need to go back to the Bible and rediscover alternative anthropologies, models of relations and of power neglected so far, we need to regain from the Bible the courage to challenge oppressive structures and to develop inclusive, participatory models of power and authority.

III. ALTERNATIVES

1. DUALITY AND EQUITY

Questioning hierarchical dualism does not mean that we should refuse to acknowledge the duality of woman and man, or black and white. Diversity is not denied, it should never be dissolved in an omni-comprehensive concept of oneness. Diversity is to be acknowledged and maintained, maintaining at the same time the equal value of the two principles. The difference of "equality" and "equity" can help us in clarifying this point. Equality means that A is the same as A. Equity means that although A is different from B, nevertheless A and B are recognised having an equal value and are treated with "equity". Women and men are different, black and white are different, people of different sexual orientations are different among themselves and remain different. Questioning hierarchical dualism has nothing to do with denying difference or attributing a pejorative meaning to difference.

2. FROM DUALITY TO PLURALITY

As useful as it can be in describing reality, duality is not the whole of reality. Questioning dualism means not only maintaining the two elements of each couple and assigning to each of them equal value. Questioning dualism means also affirming that reality is more than two, is wider than two. Dualism is overcome not in suppressing the "two" but in enlarging the range of available options from two to many, from duality to plurality.

3. WHEN DUALISM IS TO BE DENIED

We also need to say that not all dualisms are to be kept. The difference of woman and man is undeniable, but the dualism of rich and poor has to be questioned and also eliminated. That the poor, for example, have always been there is not a sufficient reason to withdraw from engagement against poverty as if the dualism of rich and poor is a given and unquestionable datum.

4. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF POWER

Questioning hierarchical structures and power hierarchically exerted "over", requires a reinterpretation and redefinition of power. Classical definitions define power as "one actor's ability to make another do what the latter would not otherwise do" (R. DAHL) or "the probability that one actor in a social relationship will carry out one's own will against the resistance of others" (MAX WEBER). Steven LUKES defines power as "the notion that A in some way affects B." This could be an entry in rethinking power from coercitive force to energy and ability to affect "B" positively and constructively. Power could then be understood as liberating power, as power to empower.

5. ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF COMMUNITIES

Reinterpretation of power should go together with the redefinition of power structures and communities. Power could be rethought as socialised, shared, participatory, inclusive authority within democratic, participatory, inclusive communities, where power to decide, to interpret and to choose belong to the whole community. Non-hierarchical models of power challenge us to elaborate non-hierarchical forms of communities where empowerment is mutual.

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