Religious Experience and Temptations of Nihilism in Spiritual Life of Personality: Philosophical Analysis

Kışlığın Manevi Yaşamında Nihilizmin Dini Deneyimi ve Cazibesi: Felsefi Analiz

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Abstract: Symptoms of a lack of spirituality are negative phenomena such as anxiety, loneliness, an existential vacuum, angst, depression, suicidal ideation, unbridled hedonism. According to the authors of the article, a way out of the existential crisis is a "turn of consciousness", the existential orientation of personality towards the sacred mystery of being as a spiritual instance of the highest order, which is able to suffice human being with a transcendent meaning (meta-sense).

It is emphasized. the reality of the absolute, which is revealed in experience, is comprehended not rationally and discursively, but intuitively and contemplatively, through the ontological co-belonging. In the religious inspiration man discovers the divine unspeakable mystery, reveals the richness of meanings, the qualitative initiative transformation through symbolic death and resurrection happen occurs. The example of Heidegger's philosophy argues that a root of modern disenchantment of the world, nihilism and the oblivion of the sacred mystery of being should be sought in the history of being itself, in the so-called "ontohistory".

Keywords: Sacral experience, spirituality, personality, subject, love, symbol, nihilism, ontohistory.
Introduction

In the postmodern condition, the main characteristic of man is the lack of a spiritual component, nihilism, introversion and isolation in his individual existence, in which the supremacy of material values is asserted, and transcendent things are ignored. Every human being is willing to find a meaning of his own existence, an aspiration towards actualization and the pursuit of blessedness (from Greek μακαριότητα ‘peace of soul’). As Viktor Frankl noted, “the will to meaning” is like a human inherent intention that mysteriously involves the state of blessedness. The feeling of blessedness is somewhat like a sign of how well this intention can be implemented. In the opposite extreme, depression, frustrations, apathy, suicidal mood are evidence of the defeat or the weakness of the will to meaning. G. Hegel wrote that “the secret of happiness consists of the ability to break through the circle of your own self” [Hegel, 1990]. Strangled by his own egoism, a person feels his own spiritual inadequacy and self-insufficiency. Only tearing apart bonds of “Self” in an act of transcendence (getting over personal limitations), overcoming self-centrism, becoming part of the whole, a man reaches fulfillment of being, his soul’s peacefulness and heart’s calmness.

1. Spirituality as a Link between Individual and Super-Individual

What can become an inner spiritual and semantic center for a person, who pursues the will to meaning and happiness if it is not “the ego”? The word “existentia” contains a self-explanation because it involves the word “ecstasy”. Firstly, the ecstatic feature of existence indicates that life draws power not from within itself but from an external source. Secondly, it symbolizes the constant process of self-overcoming (“going beyond oneself”), which obviously has an absolute horizon of meaning. The latter is the one that such a process heads to. If the existence is the transcendence, then there are “Where-to-and-Wherefrom transcendencies” that are both the sacred and ineffable mystery of being. [Karl Rahner].

Ancient sages stated that an individual consciousness (“cogito”) is not a starting point in the world and that the ontological measure for all things is the field of the absolute. Let us remind words, which Heraclitus the Obscure said: “Listening not to me but to the Logos” [The Presocratics]. Per-
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Personality is born in conjunction with both an individual and a super-individual. N. Berdyaev argues it grows in value, having been involved in “the heights of being”. Conversely, the existential negation of the super-individual in the shape of ignorance and “value blindness” is ended up by stagnation of “personality” as a principle. The more secular human is obsessed with the individual sphere, the more often he feels alienated, lonely, an existential vacuum, which he makes up for the excessive hedonism. Prof. Charles Taylor in his work – *A Secular Age* – called individualism by a “moral disease of modernity” [Taylor, 2007]. We characterize this disease as a loss of spirituality, or “depersonalization” (not in a psychiatric sense, but a moral one, though without a doubt these two aspects are correlated).

Nowadays words spirit or spirituality are used in a figurative, allegoric sense. But what is their primary meaning? The word “spiritual” refers to the manifestation of being as a sacred mystery of divine and symbolic form of its expression in the human experience. In other words, spirituality is a human disposition or “tuning” to the sacred, which in turn unravels itself to a certain person in a form of epiphany. Without that epiphany, the transcendent field of the sacred would always be an unrevealed mystery, the undiscoverable thing-in-itself. The denial of epiphany leads Kant to the extremes of agnosticism and then to the anti-metaphysical philosophical tradition.

Standing on metaphysical positions, that are proven by the history of world civilization and undeniable facts of the phenomenology of religion, we are convinced that the sacred mystery of being could be unveiled to a man. Because of the spirit, personalities are not “a monad without windows”, but ontologically an open structure. In traditional terminology, the spiritual experience is a window to the transcendental world through which light of “divine energies” (G. Palama) is shed into the material world, which suffices human life with profound meaning. In modern terminology, it could be called a “peak experience” or a “plateau experience” [Maslow, Abraham H.].

1.1. Religious Experience as Spirituality Parexcellence

A religious experience is not just another kind of expressing spirituality alongside a moral and aesthetic one. From our point of view, it is the spiritual experience par excellence. It raises an individual existence of a
person linking him through a chain of stairs with a mystery of the Holy. Researcher P. Minin points out that such experience, unlike abstract comprehension, makes all the difference in the quality of a man’s life [P. Minin, 2003]. The religious experience or the experience of being (here we regard them as synonyms) is constitutive in a process of human formation, it is the humanization. Without it human being loses their privileged ontological status, dehumanizes and turns into a thing among other things. At the same time this experience reveals the non-autonomy of an individual, the necessity of its “transcendency”, which suggests the constant spiritual movement of self-perfection and self-overcoming. The transcendency, in its turn, means an initiation, that is, symbolic death and resurrection, a mental metamorphosis of personality (“metanoia” in Ancient Greek).

We also need to focus our attention on the fact that transcendency as a heart of the religious experience is never purely a because it is impossible without being to open to “The Other”. It can be compared with a physical impossibility of doing the Baron Munchausen trick, which is to draw yourself from the mire. No matter which kind of the “mire” do we mention – physical, existential, culture-historical – it is not enough to rely on yourself entirely. Ontological self-sufficiency is an illusion, and it should be realized through the true “existentia”. “The truth of being” (M. Heidegger) either personalized in the essence God’s or de-personalized is a source, driving power and the final goal of the transcendency. Without the experience of being, human existence has no force for neither inner metamorphosis nor for symbolic transfiguration.

1.2. Religious Inspiration

Inspiration is an aspect of religious experience. The word “to inspire” is etymologically connected with the word “to breath” and breathing in its turn is associated with spirit (pneuma). Such spiritual inspiration demands determined set, preparation, diving into the state traditionally called ecstasy, holy madness, shamanic delirium and what nowadays psychologists call “altered state of consciousness”, ”trans-personal experience” (K. Wilber). We’ll risk affirming that religious inspiration used to be a source of art for prominent personalities. For example, Diogenes Laertius gave evidence about Heraclitus: “from the childhood, he was a weirdo: when he was young he said that he knows nothing, but when he grew up – that he
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knows everything. He wasn’t someone’s student, but according to him, he asked about everything himself and got to know about everything himself” [Diogenes Laertius]. Knowledge which Heraclitus had gotten was instant like the lightning of divine Fire-Logos. Let’s also remind Parmenides who in the prologue of his philosophic poem “On nature” admits that the goddess has revealed a mystery of true being to him. That’s why many of Parmenides’s philosophical statements are obviously intuitions-insights that were discovered in a trans-personal experience. (Hermann, Arnold (2010).

And here you are some memories of a friend of Raphael’s, Antonio Bramante, which are giving us evidence about the origins of the truly wondrous depiction of the Virgin Mary, which took many years for the master to complete. And we see that these origins were drawn from sacral sources.

Once when I had expressed to him [Raphael] with an open and full heart my wonder at the ravishing images in his work at the Madonna and the Holy Family, I besought him to unravel the mystery of where in the world he had seen such beauty, such touching gazes and inimitable expression as were in his Holy Virgin. <...> Raphael said that from his earliest youth he had had always burning in his soul, a unique sacred feeling for the Mother of God <...> From the first stirrings of his desire to paint, he had nourished within an overwhelming hunger to paint vividly a picture of the Virgin in Her heavenly perfection. But he never dared trust his ability. <...> Yet sometimes it seemed that a divine spark of brightness would flame in his soul and then this inward image of the Virgin would be outlined in light exactly as he would want to paint it. But always it was a fleeting instant, and he could not hold this true image in his soul. <...> Then one night he dreamt he was praying to the Holy Virgin illumined image as he had so often fleetingly beheld and all at once, a sudden surge of anxiety awakened him. In the night darkness, Raphael looked at the wall across from his bed and saw that it was bathed in light, and the light was hanging on the wall, and it was the unfinished image of the Madonna shining in soft radiance, perfect, an image and yet living and divinity was shining everywhere from it. It illuminated divinity so strongly that tears filled Raphael’s eyes. <...> But most wonderful of all, Raphael found in this bright vision precisely that for which he had searched all his life and that which he had for so long experienced only in a dark haziness. <...> Upon arising in the morning, he
felt as though he had been reborn [Florensky, 1996].

A list of famous personalities who experienced a religious inspiration can be continued, but here some important questions arise: to which extent trans-personal experience can be induced artificially; at which point do the human’s possibilities end, whilst superhuman forces come into action, the ontological character of which is undoubted. Acknowledgment of human weakness, conditionality and un-autonomy is the main precondition for religious experience. A well-known Orthodox ascetic of the Valaam Monastery, the Father superior Hariton wrote that preaching to God implies “synergy”, therefore cooperation and collaboration of a human and divine will. “What are they looking for the Jesus’ prayer? – So that a graceful fire would lit in a heart, and an unending prayer would begin, that defines a state of grace...When God’s spark falls into the heart, Jesus’ prayer turns it to flame, but it does not give this spark itself, it only contributes to its acceptance. God’s Spark is a ray of grace. It cannot be produced by itself, it is coming directly from God. It is given freely by divine grace” (The art of prayer, 1966.). In this case, we do agree with William James, who emphasized: “mystical states, which have reached their full extent, are absolutely authoritative for people, who experience them” (W. James). It can be compared to an expression of well-known orthodox ascetic Silouan of Athos who pointed out that: “When the God appears in the great light, then any doubts are impossible that this is God, Creator and Almighty.” (Saint Silouan the Athonite by Archimandrite Sophrony, 1988)

1.3. Language of Religious Experience/Symbolism.

The reality that is being revealed in a religious experience is more than our language can express. It is comprehended not by discursive methods but with the help of intuition and contemplation. Let`s remind ourselves how in Plato’s dialogue “Cratylus” Socrates insists on the inability of language to reach for the essence of being and that we have to research it without any names but from itself [Plato, 1926]. Method of thinking which can comprehend ideas intuitively can get rid of language’s dominance. Therefore, from this point of view, the start and the finish of thought’s movement is quietness, intuitive observation, belonging to being in co-participation, but discourse and argumentation are just a pause in primordial quietness.
That thing which is not to be talked about doesn’t mean that it is nonexistent or it has no meaning and significance. Even more, it is absolutely meaningful, meaning as it is, but it cannot be a subject of scientific research with its reliance on “atomic facts” because they’re not empiric objects. As Gilles Deleuze wrote: “meaning is always suggested as I start to talk... Meaning is deployed with one of its sides to things and with the other to sentences. But it does not merge nor with sentences... either with quality which this sentence mentions. It is a frontier between sentences and things”. Therefore we are unable to “express the meaning of what is being talked about, that is to express something and its meaning at the same time” [Deleuze, 1972]. An absolutely meaningful realm, about what we are silent or symbolically intimate at, is a fact of a special, extraordinary experience.

1.4. Symbol as an Epiphany.

So, the man has a possibility of communion with the truth of being, of the universal meanings of the highest order using the symbolic affiliation, but not logical or discursive one. The orthodox theologian and archpriest Alexander Schmemann interprets the symbol as a sacred link, which assimilates the man into the divine spirituality and at the same time reveals his own essence. In his fundamental work “Eucharist. The Sacrament of the Kingdom”, A. Schmemann states that the Catholic scholastics reduced the meaning of this concept by restricting it to a sign, an allegory, a depiction and everything opposite and different from reality. Therefore, a key question arises whether this reduced catholic concept of the symbol is the depiction (materialistic by nature), that is equal to its primary meaning? “The history of religions shows us that the more ancient, the deeper, the more “organic” a symbol, the less it will be composed of such “illustrative” qualities.”

And this is because the primary function of the symbol is not depiction (which suggests the absence of depicted) but rather display and communion. We can regard a symbol, not as something that looks like reality, which is symbolized, but rather something that belongs to reality, therefore it can actually join (attach) with the one.

Thus, the difference between today’s comprehension and primary meaning is radical. Nowadays symbol is a sign of something else, that does
not really exist in this sign, (similar to the absence of a real Indian in the actor who plays his role, or the absence of water in its chemical symbol). But in the primary understanding symbol is a phenomenon and presence of this Another reality which cannot be manifested in another way than in form of a symbol.” [Shmemann, p. 46].

The word “symbol” itself originates from the Greek verb “to unite”, “to hold together”. Therefore, as Schmemann rightly points out, unlike sign or depiction, it has two realities in it - empiric (visible) and metaphysic (invisible), united not logically (“A” means “B”), not analogically (“A” depicts “B”) and not cause-effectively (“A” is a reason for “B”), but episophically (“A” is “B”). “One reality represents another ... only to that extent to which symbol itself belongs to spiritual reality and is able to embody it. In other words, a symbol wholly consists of spiritual reality, and it (symbol) contains everything needed for reality’s manifestation, however not the whole spiritual reality emerges and embodies in the symbol. Symbol is always partial, because... by its own nature it connects two incomparable realities, one of which in relation to another remains absolutely otherworldly. No matter how the real symbol would be, no matter how strongly it would join us with spiritual reality, it is a function not to “quench” our thirst, but to enhance it” [Shmemann, 1988].

2. From Nihilistic Affirmation of Subjectivity to Its Self-Denial

The mystery of self-consciousness is what metaphysic tradition calls a spirit. The presence of the spirit explains why we radically differ from the animal world and why the conscious existence is a prerogative of human-kind. Without subjectivity, we would turn out to be in tenets of subconscious biological-vegetative processes in which the human dimension is absent and there is only one “biological nature” which is governed by strict determinism. Here, as Karol Wojtyla points out in his work “Acting person”, lies a frontier between “I do act” and “something is being done to me”. A moral act as the free act, which is self-determining, is not possible without subjectivity.

In this sense, Jacques Maritain’s thoughts about the subjectivity problem are very precious. Every one of us is a subject, self-consciousness (cogito). But this subjectivity always slips away from everyone, who attempts to conceptualize it, express in the definition. Subjectivity is a wonderful
flowing “liquid plurality” of our inner world. When we try to learn about it, to reflect it, subjectivity immediately turns into an object. “To objectify is to perform universalization” [Maritain, 1955]. Objectification betrays subjectivity as a subjectivity, a unique and individual personality. “Subjectivity is the most precious treasure in the world, but it is being lost.” According to Maritain, subjectivity can only be saved in the transcendent Absolute. “Everyone knows about me as an object [and even I act for myself as an object – authors remark]. Only God knows about me as a subject. He does not need to objectify me and thus distort my reality. Only God knows the truth about me, he understands me in my subjective depth and therefore treats and evaluates me fairly. Because of His love for me, I become clear to Him and myself, just as others become clear to me in their fullness of existence through love. Thus, in religious experience, subjectivity distorted by objectification appears in its fullness. In the same transpersonal experience, a person discovers what he has always known intuitively and thematically - the immortality of his own self. "Death is an event in time, but 'Self' is above time as an eternal value" (Mariten, 1955).

The secular philosophic tradition breaks with a metaphysical explanation of consciousness, reducing everything to brain operations and neuron nets. But the paradox is that attempts to find a solid scientific ground for self-explanation without God finally leads to losing the ground. The topic of subjectivity and its loss shows us how ambivalent was the age of Modern. On the one side greatness and beauty of the human’s mind were placed by humanists on the pedestal of anthropocentrism, but on the other side, on that very moment when the epoch of Enlightenment rejected Christianity, Europeans had lost this exceptionality (inclusiveness) instantly. And it is not only about the defeat of eurocentrism. The statement of the center itself had been criticized. Now the central seat is empty (Zygmunt Bauman “Searching for a center that holds”). But, in our opinion, anthropocentrism itself was based on a metaphysical framework which is called “onto-theo-teleo-phalo-logocentrism” (J. Derrida’s definition), which European culture deconstructed as time passed. European nihilism relying on human’s exceptionality and autonomy from God leads to denial of such exceptionality in all meaningful ways. In Darwinism and psychoanalysis, in bioethics
and animal’s rights, in concepts of “deconstruction of the subject” and “author’s death”, in neurophysiology and neuromarketing: everywhere we see the rejection of anthropocentrism.

Modern European science was intended to know, predict and rule nature. But, naturally, human nature itself became an object of research. As Z. Bauman points out [Bauman, 1995], the Enlightenment’s idea of controlling nature with an intent to predict and improve it had become a basis for the emergence of eugenics, pseudo-science which used to be popular at the Third Reich’s time. Ever since human is not a titan or a genius, but just object of research - firstly in race genetics (in “closed” totalitarian societies) and then in marketing strategy research, political technologies and manipulative information campaigns (in “open” democratic societies). What really matters is not human’s personality with his rich inner world, but genetically perfect “human nature”, «human material» of which governing elite by methods of social engineering can “build up” needed moods, reactions, set of values, social mythology. Only the forms and methods of research do change (for example, in the 20th-century Nazi concentration camp was a laboratory for research, but in the 21st-century social nets replaced it). But anti-humanistic and anti-personalistic essence of those phenomena stay the same. Z. Bauman and the representatives of the Frankfurt school had been writing that the root of totalitarianism is the philosophy of Enlightenment. In fact, the nihilistic statement “God’s death” is the cause of totalitarianism. And rejection of absolute can only lead to the cult of “quasi-absolutes” (M. Scheler): party, nation, race, state, human rights. The nihilistic conviction which possessed masses, obviously could not have been a mere theoretic construction of a pure cabinet scientist like Friedrich Nietzsche. As far as we concern, the thesis “God is dead” expressed and reflected inner experience, men’s confidence and faith in such a picture of the godless world where there is nothing else but a subject and his will to power. This “negative” experience of god’s absence enabled exclusively European specifics of history which started its way from humanistic ideas of magnifying the subject’s will to self-rejection of this exact idea: “subject’s death” and it’s transformation into the object.
3. The Turn of the Consciousness.

Martin Heidegger in his article “What are poets for?” says that poets are called up to make modern consciousness’s turnaround – from rationalistic-discursive representation and calculation to heart’s depth, where essential is acknowledged through contemplation. Poets are “heralds of sacred”. They are those mortals who search for footprints of sacred, when the forces of the Dark Age reign, religious faith has vanished, and sacred has hidden. “In the world’s night a poet tells about sacred, and world’s night itself is sacred...The Goodness gives a glimpse calling out for sacred. Sacred links with divine. Divine brings together with God. Poets carry to mortals traces of gods, who ran away in the darkness of the night” [Heidegger, 2001]. So, according to Heidegger salvation from dark godless age is to be searched for in poetry. Looking for footprints of the divine, carefully scrutinizing signs and symbols which Being gives to us, we have to prepare a place in our hearts for general historical “Event”(“Ereignis”, meaning co-existence) – the epiphany of sacred being in truthfulness. Now we will shortly explain what Heidegger means by “history” and “Event”. Firstly, it is important to notice that in the philosopher’s opinion world’s history is a history of Europe, or to be more precise, the history of European philosophy. But Heidegger views the history of philosophy from a specific angle. He regards it as an “ontohistory”, i.e. the history of being. Ontohistory is a history of logos’ development and its revelation in the history of philosophy from pre-Socratics till Nietzsche. The trajectory of this ontohistory moves along with such milestones: from the understanding of being as “aletheia”(openness), non-essential nothingness, emptiness, beyond any definitions, limitations and form (synonym of such aletheia is a sacred field), to all possible metaphysical replacements and substitutes of this truth of being such as “being of essential”, “nature”, “idea”, “form”, “essence”, and finally “subject” and “will to power”. Ontohistory in Heidegger’s opinion thanks to this replacement and oblivion of “history of being” is doomed for it finality in nihilism.

Heidegger also talks about the eschatology of ontotohistory, about knowledge which the “truth of being” gives us about itself in recent time. People forget about being and it abandons them. At the same time, abandoning the world and philosophic discourse, by means of its disappearance,
through nihilism, will for power, technologies and alienation Being gives a sign to people – sign that indicates insufficiency, a sign of lack of something fundamental, feeling of absence and nostalgia for something essential that we had lost. Therefore, nowadays world can be saved by this lust for the sacred. Professor Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, former Martin Heidegger’s secretary points out that: “Heidegger himself talked about “escape of the Gods” and their possible return. In his opinion being had abandoned the world for some reason, and that its estrangement was a part of ontohistoric fate, that is a message related to a wrong interpretation of being as an essence of existing)”[Herrmann, 2008].

This message let us know about the possibility of the true interpretation of being as the Event. Along with the abandonment of people by being, there was the abandonment of people by God. It has lost God. “Heidegger had two sources of his thought about the abandonment of being by God. The first is Gelderlin and the second is Nietzsche. Gelderlin mourned the departure of the gods and angels from the lives of men and foresaw their return - the return of the divine and the gods. Following a prominent poet, Heidegger expected a huge shift in history”. The thinker considers “Dasein” to be openness – being of human in its authentic modus which has to be a place for discovery of the truth of being, place of its presence. He defines the Event (Ereignis) as an arrival, visitation of the “last God”, which did not exist before, which would be in the future, and would emerge from within a human’s depth. It would be an inner God, who will be born due to nostalgia for old lost Gods. Not a human waits for the God but God waits for the human: waits till man becomes authentic “Da” (here) – a place where the God can appear, unveil and come true. In other words “the last God” manifests his own divinity not beyond our being, but from the inside of the human’s being, which will be tuned in the right way.

Conclusion

In nowadays human beings can be characterized by a lack of traditional spirituality and the religious experience, the isolation and the alienation in their individual existence, which claims the dominance of material values and things of a transcendent order are ignored. Therefore, the symptoms of the lack of spirituality are negative cases of loneliness, the existential vacuum, depression, suicidal moods, irrestrainable hedonism and so on.
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In the author’s opinion, the solution of the existential crisis lays in “consciousness’s turnaround”, the existential orientation of personality towards the sacred mystery of being as a spiritual instance of the highest order, which is able to suffice human being with the meaning importance and happiness. The authentic being of personality suggests the openness, the orientation towards the sphere of the eternal “values of the highest order”. It is pointed out, in this article that the brightest expression of spirituality is a religious trans-personal experience, which is constitutive in a process of humanization, bringing a man together with his own essence. The religious experience, which human being lives through the presence of the divine reality as unconditional love and source of all virtues, is something that enables the personality to see others in the light of this everlasting love (“sub specie aeternitatis”) as a unique You. At the same time, this light of love is forming human subjectivity. In a state of love, the personality assimilates with God and in its biological nature spiritual personal hypostasis shows through. An ambivalent, active-passive character of features of the religious experience is emphasized, where the transcendence (overgrowth beyond the limitations of the individual consciousness) is never purely self-transcendency. It is underlined that the reality of the absolute, which is unraveled in experience, is comprehended not rational-discursively, but intuitively, meditatively through the ontological co-belonging. In the religious inspiration, man discovers the divine unspeakable mystery, its richness and significance, the qualitative initiative transformation through symbolic death and resurrection happen.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Sakral deneyim, maneviya, kişilik, konu, aşk, sembol, nihilizm, tariholuş.
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