

Challenges of Asian Religious Traditions to Carmelite Spirituality

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I. Introduction

1. The Carmelite spirituality is originally an Asian tradition. It goes back to the Old Testament tradition of the time of St. Elijah.
2. It gives us two great symbols of spiritual life, namely, mountain and cave, symbolizing transcendence and interiority.
3. Modern challenges emerging from the non-Christian Asian tradition basically point to certain spiritual values such as, love for silence, meditation and self-realization and forms of life-style associated with these.
4. The idea is that for an Asian challenge, we may have an answer from the ancient Asian Christian experience itself. Perhaps in course of time we missed certain points due to secularization, Protestant revolution, technological progress, etc.
 - Hence a look into the ancient Christian tradition is welcome, especially into the Carmelite tradition from the very place of its origin.
 - In my search into the Carmelite tradition the excellent work, the first in the series of the *Fiery Arrow*, *The Mystical Space of Carmel* by Kees Waaijman came into my hands and I found it enticingly attractive. Introducing the *Fiery Arrow* series the book says:

In 1230 AD Nicholas of France, for prior general of the Carmelites, wrote a letter bearing the title *Fiery Arrow* to his fellow brothers to urge them to call to mind again the fire of the beginning in which, in silence and solitude, they were consumed by the inescapable claim of the One. Based on the Carmelite tradition, this series seeks to share this spiritual legacy – which presents in a multiplicity of cultures and traditions – with all those who in a great variety of ways are in search of interior life and the fire of life (p. ii).

- This is what we have to do now. But it should not remain in the field of research alone; but should become actual life. In the beginning it was just life, just search and the agony of realization, not re-search or pure intellectual pursuit.
- Answer to the challenges raised by living religious traditions must be given from equally lived spirituality.

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- In 1953 I was an eighteen years old Carmelite novice in the monastery of St. Teresa of Avila in Kerala. This monastery had a huge campus, full of coconut trees and other flowering trees. There was perfect silence and very strict discipline of formation. We had two hours of daily meditation everyday besides the holy mass and breviary prayers.
- Reading *The Mystical Space of Carmel* reminded me that we, the young novices, had to study by-heart the entire Rule of St. Albert in own mother tongue. Hence, it was a surprise and great joy for me to rediscover that the Rule of St. Albert mentioned in *The Mystical Space of Carmel* is the very *Regula* we had studied by-heart when we were too young to understand the depth of it.
- Yet, I am happy about it, because the basic principles of our spirituality is accepted not by reason alone but mainly by faith, which, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, may use the assistance of reason for personal integration and the realization of the same.
- *The Mystical Space of Carmel* is not primarily intended to answer the challenges raised by the non-Christian religious traditions of our time; but takes us to the real spirituality of the Carmel, as it was in the beginning, which, I hope, can very well be used to answer the challenges. But we, including myself who read the paper, should always remember that real spirituality is not research but search, not academics but real life with its agonies and hopes of realization.
- Challenges are to be discerned from the phenomenon of life visible outside. Therefore, we will see what is happening now in the Asian spiritual traditions of great religions

II. The Present Phenomenon of Asian Religious Traditions

1. We see a large number of people moving from the West to the East, to the ashrams, to study yoga, meditation and even music and dance. Asian ashrams of Indian origin, vipasana meditation centers of Buddhist origin, Zen meditation centers from Japan, Thaic centers from China etc. have become great attraction all over the world especially for the people from the West.
2. What do these or similar centers provide? They do not provide so much of material comfort, ways and means to make money or wealth. But they do provide a silent and serene atmosphere, lessons and practice on concentration and meditation, invitation for self-realization.
3. A silent challenge is placed before us that people begin to seek happiness and deeper satisfaction not in affluence which the more advanced countries of the world offer, but in unsophisticated simplicity of life, in more friendly and deeper human relations, in spiritual practices, especially meditation and search into oneself.

4. Eastern religious centers offer this and people do come from all over the world or offshoots of these centers are established in different parts of the world. Many of these movements are not lasting solutions for their problems, but are symptoms of what they are experiencing and thus eye-openers for us.
5. Normally an ashram, whether in India or abroad cultivate an art of simple living, fostering transparency in life, deeper human relationship, loving community members, deeper meditative prayer experience and so on. A few examples can be mentioned.

i) Rajneesh's ashram in Pune

Rajneesh is a very controversial guru and even certain Hindu gurus do not accept him or his method. However, he is a phenomenon to be reckoned with. He is the author of many insightful books, has controversial moral stands and an ultra-affluent lifestyle.

- My visit to Rajneesh ashram to attend a silent meditation programme early morning at 6.00 a.m. Three thousand participants attended the programme. More than half are from the West.
- Rajneesh does not speak at all. After 15 minutes of bhajans (prayerful, meditative singing). Rajneesh comes with an attendant and simply remains there in perfect silence. This is called *mauna dhyana*: silent meditation. The suggestion is that the disciples remain in silence with the master and many of the participants believe that power is transmitted to them through the master. This meditation lasts for one full hour and not a single word is ever uttered by anyone.
- Very powerful, silent instrumental music is actually played (not by tape).
- What do these people seek?

ii) Sri Sri Ravishankar

- His ashram in Bangalore is known as Art of Living. One could see this ashram from our ashram campus, though it is not very close by. I attended a three days retreat there. The afternoon they have a long prayer session called *bhajan mandal* (singing of different bhajans) which last at least for three hours. People find themselves happy, relaxed, free, as any one is free to start any bhajan or song and the whole community join. Of course there are other sessions in which religious ideas are communicated and discussed.
- I had a roommate in my room in that ashram, a young man from Germany, who was so deeply devoted and obedient

to the master Ravishankar. Sense of obedience is too high. Why?

- Why does our Church fail to get obedience from them who are ready to obey these masters? The lack of personal touch in our spirituality may be a point for consideration.

iii) Ramakrishna Mission Ashrams

- The story of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, his disciple.
- Journey of Vivekananda to the parliament of religion in Chicago one century ago. Its centenary was celebrated in New Delhi a few years ago in the hotel Ashoka, a five-star hotel. I attended this, presented a paper, and could see how people from all over the world especially many from United States, where great admirers of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Around 200 people attended the seminar.
- Vivekananda presented a modern version of the traditional Hinduism to the Western world. He became the shining star in the parliament of religions. Ramakrishna ashram slowly spread all over the world. The movement gives you a lot of contemporary insights of traditional religious beliefs, very much applied into actual life than discussing too many theoretical questions.

iv) The *Vipasana* Centres

- The real word is *vi-pasana*, a special way of seeing one's own self, that is, body (breathing rhythm), mind and inner consciousness.
- *Vipasana* meditation or the so-called awareness meditation is basically of Buddhist origin. Master Goenker hails from Burma and he has two famous *vipasana* meditation centres in India, namely, in Nazic near Bombay and in Hyderabad.
- The programme is so simple but very strict: 8 – 10 hours of awareness meditation every day, first three days awareness of the breathing rhythm, next three days sense awareness from top to toes and the last three days awareness of one's own consciousness. Perfect silence and strict separation from men and women, also very simple food. But many people do come for this course from India and abroad and also for the next stages of advanced courses of the same. Why do these people come? What do they gain?
- Bodily and mental serenity; once practiced and acquired, it is enough to keep it by half an hour exercise everyday.

- No God's name is ever mentioned all through the course. Everything is in silence and the mind also is expected to be in perfect silence.
- There are many *Vipasana* centers in Sri Lanka.

vi) Zen Meditation Centres

- With their accent on sudden illumination Zen Meditation puts forward the idea of silencing the mind and reaching enlightenment which is not a product of the mind. For this purpose they propose a kind of riddles, known as *koan*, for the practice of meditation.
- *Koan* suggests that mind's argumentative methods are not the way for enlightened by super human light.
- For example, the search for the sound of the clapping of the one hand alone.
- We could see the way of silencing the senses and the mind also in the *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, and even in the contemplative system developed by St. John of the Cross and Mother Teresa of Avila. William Johnston, the famous author of the book *Silent Music* presents St. Paul's comment on the foolishness of God as a Christian *koan*.
- "For God in His wisdom made it impossible for people to know Him by means of their own wisdom. Instead, by means of the so-called 'foolish' message we preach, God decided to save those who believe. Jews want miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; but for those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, this message is Christ who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor. 1:21-25).

These are few examples of what the religions of Asia are giving to the world today. The implied challenges in these movements are to be answered. Our question at issue is how can our Carmelite Spirituality answer these challenges? Before beginning to answer this question, let us briefly enumerate the implied challenges.

III. The Contemporary Challenges Raised by Asian Religious Traditions

1. The challenge of the love for silence and serenity of nature.
2. The challenge placed before us by love and taste for meditation

3. The challenge raised by contemporary masters of non-Christian religions of Asia and the large following they get.
4. The challenge of moving from reason to faith and profound religious experience.
5. The challenge of knowing by becoming: Call to have deeper self-awareness and divine self-transformation.
Two more challenges came to my mind, which I just mentioned, but do not deal with; because they need different background studies and explanations.
6. The challenge raised by Islam in the contemporary world, largely related to the problem of justice.
7. Protest against the de-sacralization of the world, making it a large global market.

IV. The Carmelite Response to these Challenges

I do not believe that the Carmelite Spirituality has answers for all the problems of the world. However, Carmelite spirituality certainly has something to offer to answer at least some of these challenges

A basic trend we see in these challenges is a dissatisfaction with the affluence and promises the world offers; also to certain extent same challenge is made against a pure, traditional, ritualistic spirituality of our monasteries. This is an internal challenge we experience in our own houses.

1. The challenge of the love for silence and serenity of nature

The Traditional Carmelite Virtues may answer some of the modern challenges we have mentioned above.

- People go to ashrams, Buddhist *Vipasana* centres, loving silence and nature. *Silentium, oratio, mortificatio*: silence, prayer and mortification are well known Carmelite traditional Carmelite virtues.
- Why does the modern world (at least some of them) love silence? May be the clamour and clutter of the industrial world, though efficient and promising immediate prosperity, is in the long run also disgusting and also disheartening. Because external efficiency and affluence do not meet the internal need of peace, serenity of body and mind, and much less the need of divine union and super human bliss. Hence, the more the world go material, secular, industrial, the more the quest for silence, serenity and internal peace.
- The real silence is not the silence of the atmosphere, nor the tightening of the lips. It is a constant factor in our journey to our interiority, the inner mystical space of the Carmel within us. A quote from the Upanishad: "In the city of Brahman there is a dwelling in the form of a lotus flower, and within it there is an inner space. One should search for that which is within the inner space; it is that should be sought, it is that which one should desire to know" (Chand. Up. 8: 1.1). The One

who dwells in the inner space is known as the Atman, the inner Self. Hence, after the atmospheric silence we move to the silence of the senses, then to silence of the mind; then begins the entry into the inner space where God dwells as pure consciousness.

- At an advanced stage, the mind has to abandon its conceptual framework, its argumentative thinking and enter into the mystery of the unbounded consciousness and allow itself to be baffled by the darkness of this night. There is perfect silence and not a word ever is uttered, because any articulate form, whether by mouth or mind, is after all a negation of the unuttered Word. Therefore, the soul opts for the negation of all negations, remains in the silence of the direct encounter of the infinite consciousness by the finite, which is frightening (tremendous) yet fascinating (fascinans), and the soul remains there in wonder and surrender. Thus, silence is a constant factor in our journey to our own interior center and to the Lord abiding there, which liberates, guards and guides us to our final goal.

- The cave on the Mount Horeb represents also the cave of our hearts, we retire to, to meet God in the silent breeze blowing over us.

- *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent* by John Climacus, quoted in the *The Mystical Space of Carmel* (p. 228), speaks on silence as follows:

Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer, freedom from bondage, custodian of zeal, a guard on our thoughts, a watch on our enemies, a prison of mourning, a friend of tears, a sure re-collection of death, a painter of punishment, a concern with judgment, servant of anguish, foe of license, a companion of stillness, the opponent of dogmatism, a growth of knowledge, a hand to shape contemplation, hidden progress, the seeker journey upward...

Lovers of silence draw close to God. They talk to Him in secret and God enlightens them.

2. The Renewed Interest for meditation and the Carmelite Response

The Carmelite rule of St. Albert presents 'silence as a bedding for contemplation' (*The Mystical Space of Carmel*, p. 272).

- Our Carmelite word for meditation is contemplation. The Indian word, largely used in the world religions, is meditation. The actual Sanskrit word is *dhyana* from the root *dhi* which means to think, to reflect, to ponder on. From *dhyana*, through the Chinese chan, the Japanese word Zen was later evolved. All these mean

meditation. Whether it is to the Indian ashram, or to the Buddhist vipasana, or to the Japanese Zen, the underlying power drawing people of the modern world is meditation. We can very well keep our word contemplation. What is important is not the word; but what is happening in us. What should happen in us is consciousness transformation. The Carmelite Rule links silence and contemplation as two sides of the same coin. They always go hand in hand. They are like two maidservants standing on either side of the Lord who is enthroned in the cave of our heart. Summarizing the provisions in the Rule, the book *Mystical Space of the Carmel* says: "Work and silence are institutions. To do work and keep silence is exercises" (p. 272).

- Sadhana, spiritual exercises (lit. means for realization) is a good word to remember. The modern gurus give spiritual exercises than to many doctrines. Remember the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

The 'Cell Culture', so strongly laid down in the rules, recommends the spirit of contemplation:

Just look at the important chapter on remaining in one's cell where in two lines four basic exercises are presented: remaining, meditating, praying, and watching. Hence, the rule does more than introduce a new institution and present exercises. It also seeks to do more than offering a new part of the armour. Faith, hope, and love – the big three! together have only 72 words devoted them, as compared to 299 in the case of work and silence (*Ibid.*, p. 272).

The unique combination of work and silence is worth noting. The modern world has a lot of work, but miserably miss silence. Love for silence is not because of the love for aloofness nor because of the fear to confront the other. But basically to foster the spirit of contemplation. Hence, "remaining in the cell, meditating, praying and watching" is emphasized.

This is what is precisely being done today in the numerous centers of *vipasana* meditation all over the world, but in their own way, with no reference to a God with whatever name. It is not necessary that we do the *vipasana* meditation exactly like they do. It is enough that we do and live what is laid down in the Carmelite rule. **Remain in silence in the cell, pray, meditate and watch.**

The word 'watch' deserves special attention. It is a call to 'awareness', a word very much used by the non-christian spiritual masters. "Be awakened and keep your consciousness steady", this is what we hear quite often in the ashrams and spirituality centers run by non-christian gurus. Awareness

steady on whom? Steady awareness is on one's own self but not on the world or body layer, not even in the mind layer, but far deeper in the layer of inner most consciousness which we call God's presence within us or the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is consciousness by nature. Our meditation through the 'silencing of the faculties' an expression you find in Mother Teresa of Avila, should lead us to the depth, that is, divine consciousness abiding within us. The Lord says: "abide in me and I abide in you" (Jn. 15:4).

The Bhagavad Gita has a very meaningful text about steady consciousness. The book asks: "who is a true devotee of steady consciousness". *Gita* says:

He who hates no creature, and is friendly and compassionate towards all, who is free from the feelings of "I and mine", even-minded in pain and pleasure, forbearing, ever content, steady in meditation, self-controlled, and possessed of firm conviction, with mind and intellect fixed on Me – he who is thus devoted to Me, is dear to Me (*Gita*, XII. 14).

A Carmelite should be a devotee of the Lord, a person of steady consciousness, always praying and watching, his/her awareness fixed on the Lord, unafraid and who is not controlled by the desires of the world, but controls the world and all its desires from within. It is in this sense the word mortification should be understood. It is not a negative running away from the world as it is sometimes interpreted, but controlling the world from within. Hence, the modern rendering of the traditional Carmelite virtues: *silentium*, *oratio* and *mortificatio* will be, serenity (of the atmosphere, body and the mind), self-awareness and self-control (Triple 'S').

3. The Challenge Raised by Contemporary Masters of the Non-Christian Religions of Asia and the Large Following They Get.

- Silence and meditation become powerful with the living presence of an able master.
- The people look for experienced divine persons who can communicate the Divine to them. Gurus and masters are very important in true spirituality. Jesus himself was a great Master who conveyed his own Abba-experience to his disciples. This tradition should be continued.
- The Carmelite tradition had renowned spiritual masters. St. Elijah was a great prophet and spiritual master. The disciple Elisha prays for the power to be handed over to him by the master. Great masters like Albert and Innocent IV provided the basic rules for the Carmelite tradition. Still later, experienced masters like St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila appeared and their teaching still have large following.

- St. Teresa's autobiography was a counter challenge in front of Edith Stein, a modern psychologist and philosopher. Edith's conversion tells us what the modern man/woman seeks is not abstract ideas, but a living, witnessing reality. After reading the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, she wrote on the book: "This is truth." The story of her life was the story of her soul, of her life in faith and total surrender to the Lord. She is a teacher and mistress of Spirituality. The living witness had power to convert a highly educated psychologist philosopher.
- I have a new edition of the complete work of St. John of the Cross. In the introduction of that book it is said: "there was not a time in the history of the world in which the works of St. John of the Cross so much in demand as it is now.
- To meet the challenge of the day the Carmelite tradition should now provide more living masters to the world.

4. The Challenge of Moving from Reason to Faith and Profound Religious Experience

We have already touched upon this question when we dealt with the problem of silencing the senses and the mind.

- This is basically a problem arising from the way of our theological training.
- Theological faculties have moved from the traditional, silent, awe-inspiring monastic campuses to the thoroughly worldly university cultures.
- The teaching method also is different. Pursuing academic degrees the rigor of research and the scientific precision is highly recommended and strictly adhered to.
- These faculties are really wonderful. The amount of money they spent for their students are enormous.
- As a result, these faculties do produce scholars, but not necessarily saints; they offer erudition, but not holiness.
- The amount of study, even in theology, is largely in the area of mind and brain, not in the level of realization and contemplative experience.
- In contrast look at the non-Christian masters emerging from Asian religious traditions. In general, none of them care for academic degrees nor such demands are put on us. But ashrams and spirituality centers do produce a lot books. They are pertaining to life, formation of mind, on practice of meditation and so on. These books are well sold out because the disciples who come there do

need them for practical sessions of realization. We call them Sadhana books, spiritual exercises.

- Hence, what is happening is: more search is taking place than research, more inspiration is given than instruction. Our academic consciousness should become incarnate life. Naturally, simplicity, transparency, unassuming friendly relations, dedication to the welfare of the people around, become values to which simple people respond.
- Such was also the power of Jesus. But I do not mean that all great non-Christian masters from Asia have the aura of simplicity and transparency. But there are others who are less known in public, but appeal to the hearts of many.
- In these movements there is a shift of accent from reason to faith, from theory to practice and from instruction to realization.

5. The Challenge of Knowing by Becoming: Call for Divine Self-transformation

- Another challenge the Asian Religions put before us is a call to move from too rationalistic, objective type of theologizing to a spirituality of knowing by becoming.
- “He who knows Brahman, becomes Brahman” says the Taitareya Upanishad. A Christian version of this would be that he who knows Christ becomes another Christ.
- Self-transformation of the human self into the divine Self is a theme widely discussed in India, unlike in the Buddhist religion, where the word God is kept in silence.
- The first Christians maintained that every Christian is another Christ. Our theological knowledge of God or Christ is real only if we become another Christ. Transformation is the ultimate state of knowing. There is no higher knowledge than this. The Carmelite spirituality has a very strong and rich tradition of handling this issue of divine transformation.
- Once the senses and the mind are silenced, the heart and intellect are purified, the soul is ready for divine transformation.
- This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who abides within the soul as its inner controller and the divinizing agent. In the chapter 14 of the Rule, there is clarion call “put on the armour of God” and get ready to the process of transformation into the likeness of God.
- Special emphasis is given to faith, saying: “here lies victory, your faith,”
- For without faith it is impossible to please God.
- The becoming process takes place through a journey in faith, through the dark nights, which the Carmelite guru, St. John of the Cross expounds.

- The transformation should not be understood as external beautification or grafting of good qualities on the distorted human nature.
- It should be understood as the transformation of consciousness, the deepest awareness of the soul. The soul, with its deepest consciousness, participates in the divine self-awareness, that is God's very consciousness and appropriates it into itself. The soul becomes a perfect reflection or a replica of divine consciousness. It begins to live by the awareness of Christ. Christ becomes the inner agent, the inner controller of all its actions. Hence, it says: "now it is not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2: 20). Jesus confirms this by saying: "I am the vine and you are the branches... For you can do nothing without me" (Jn. 15: 5) Two consciousnesses become, that is, the Divine and human. The human gets transformed into the Divine, without losing itself into the enormity of the Infinity. It becomes the living flame of love; light shines forth from it. Yes, this light is divine, though proceeding from finite consciousness of a transformed person.
- We could understand this becoming process with the help of the Christian oriental mystical term *theosis*:
- **Therefore, *theosis* can be described as the omnipotent and sanctifying, divine and triadic activity which, because of the indwelling of the Trinity and grace and because of the inborn and natural capacity of the creature for transfiguration, introduces a process of assimilation to God the Father, of the whole human person, of mankind and of the visible and invisible universe in its totality, through the mediation of the (in)humanized Logos, Christ the Pantocreator, and in the Holy Spirit (Patro B.T. Bilaniuk, *Theology and the Economy of the Holy Spirit: An Eastern Approach*, 1980: p.184).**

Conclusion

The question remains. Are the Carmelites of today capable of meeting these challenges? Perhaps we need a renewed awareness as well as a renewed option of the Carmelite virtues which should lead us to "the inner space of mysticism" as the Mystical Space of Carmel beautifully exposes. I have a feeling that in the modern world all traditional congregations including the many contemplatives, have lost the sense of silence. Naturally it will affect also the sense of meditation. They go hand in hand. But the salutary sign is that renewal for life; desire for meditation is seen all over the world and also in the members of our congregations.