

Spiritual Knowledge in Eastern and Western Cultures and Human Health*

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Abstract—The author of the article analyzes the interrelation of culture and people's ideas about their health. The report shows the peculiarities of Eastern (Chinese and Indian) and Western cultures, and how the understanding of the spiritual element in them defines the concept of health and development of ways to acquire it. The East thinks spirituality as something organically growing from the body (which is also characteristic of the ancient Greek culture) – the principle of kalokagathos. The theistic culture of the transcendent origin (Christianity) stems from the principle of faith (Philokalia), the disengagement of spirituality and body. The author concludes that it is necessary to synthesize the spiritual experience of the East (Taoism, yoga) and the West (faith), following the path of creating an integral culture, to reach the state of being healthy.

Keywords: *faith, spiritual cognition, spiritual culture, East-West cultural dialogue, types of culture, health, kalokagathos, Philokalia, theism, transcendence, world-view*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ways to achieve the state of being healthy are perceived differently in various cultures. Thus, for example, China and India aren't characterized by the purely speculative notion of spirituality because there was no gap between the earthly, material world, and the ideal, heavenly one. Ancient cultures, based on the principle of cosmocentrism, witnessed the development of the natural philosophy, thinking of individual as a unit of cosmic life, in which spirit is not separated fundamentally from matter. Under these conditions, health was conceived as a state of harmony with the surrounding natural and cosmic world (the principle of kalokagathos), disease was regarded as a violation of balance. The ways of recovery from the disorders and restoration of health were the ways of the restoration of the original, once broken, unity with the Tao or logos. The term kalokagathos is of the ancient Greek origin: *καλοκαγαθία*, with *καλός* meaning “beautiful” and *ἀγαθός* – “good” or “virtuous”. In general, it translates as “morally beautiful”. This term was widely used in ancient ethics but to a greater extent, it meant the external beauty rather than the internal, spiritual one [1]. As for the medieval Christian culture, it comes from the

concept of Philokalia (Greek *Φιλοκαλία*), which describes the inner, spiritual beauty, identified with good and love. If Antiquity relied heavily on the principle “healthy spirit in a healthy body”, the Middle Ages leaned toward “the strength of God is made perfect in weakness”. In the first case, the internal, moral aspect can be ignored, in the second case - the external, bodily one is to be overlooked. The holistic culture of humanity and the full-blooded health of a person should be both physical and spiritual, that is, it should synthesize the heritage of the cultures of East and West.

Let's consider it in the details on the example of ancient cultures of China, India, and Greece in their correlation with the European Middle Ages and Modern history.

II. CULTURES OF ANTIQUE AND HEALTH

Taoism may be perceived as a universal matrix of Chinese culture, although various philosophical schools comprehended Tao differently. Thus, for the Legalists or lawmakers, it was the supreme legal law, for the Confucianists – something incomprehensible, and for the Taoists it was the path to obtain truth, meaning, and health. The main content of Taoist philosophy is the doctrine of the universality of the way of Tao as regularity of spontaneous development of the Cosmos, an individual, and society, the idea of the unity of micro- and macrocosmos and similarity of processes taking place in the Cosmos, human body and society. Within Taoism, there are two basic principles of behavior: naturaness, simplicity (*Ziran*) and inaction (*Wu Wei*, meaning refusal of purposeful activity which is not consistent with the natural world order). Inaction means to follow the “innermost path” of Tao instead of one's selfishness. Non-violence, dispassion, silence, spontaneity, permanence, and others are also among the principles of Tao implementation. Based on these principles, the Taoist practice developed: meditative technique, breathing, and psychophysical exercises. A.A. Maslov notes that “due to the absolute blurring and elusiveness of the concept of Tao, the Taoists proposed hundreds of methods of familiarization with this origin. There was meditative practice, worship to spirits, and the most complicated erotological science” [2]. In Taoism, the developed practice of Tao yin combined special psycho-meditative exercises combining breathing and

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gymnastic techniques. This practice aims at purification and cultivation of qi energy, which is transforming into the spirit (Shen). A Taoist doesn't expect salvation from God but seeks it through self-discipline to educate, discover, and develop the required qualities, begetting oneself.

Psychophysical methods of Qigong also rest on philosophical and belief principles of Taoism. The "experience of many generations of Taoism adherents: Qigong masters, alchemists, magicians, and hermits" is reflected in the Qigong practice [3]. This technique is considered within Taoism to be a universal way to health, longevity, and immortality. The purpose of the exercises is to achieve "calmness of mind", the ability to control the flow of qi inside one's body, finding harmony with the universe by comprehending the hidden path of Tao.

As a result, one may note that the Chinese world-view has never separated spirit from matter, has never thought of immortality in a purely spiritual aspect but considered it as the immortality of body and not just soul [4].

The same goes about the worldview prevailing in ancient India. Let us first determine its main features. S. Radhakrishnan notes that "a philosophical attempt to define the nature of reality can begin either by thinking about self or an object of thought. In India, the focus of philosophy is on self. When the mind's eye turns outward, the rapid flow of events absorbs the mind. "Atmanam viddhi" – know thyself – summarizes the laws and teachings of the wise ones in India". The consequence is the extraordinary attention to internal processes, and concentration is seen as a means of comprehending the truth. Radhakrishnan writes: "Indian psychology knows the price of concentration and considers it a means of achieving truth. It believes, there are no spheres of life or mind that a methodical exercise of will and cognition cannot comprehend. The close connection of mind and body is universally recognized" [5]. From these Indian attitudes follows the consequence that the truth can be comprehended through specific psychological methods. Thus, researchers often consider spirit as a result of methodological manipulations with an individual's body and consciousness.

Indian culture is also characterized by the lack of expression of the conception of transcendence. In India, as in China, there is no conception of pure transcendence, which entails an uncomplete differentiation of body and soul. Hence, there is a shift of attention to the physiological and mental processes used for considering spirituality. The close connection between mind and body is described to be an axiom. This is the reason why the concept of faith, underlying Christianity, and the conception of transcendence, which European metaphysics deals with, have not been developed (and that are impossible in China).

Turning to Ancient Greek experience, we note that logos in the works of Heraclitus, as well as Tao in Taoism, is ubiquitous and is the law of the development of the universe. Yet, people don't want to take it to heart, "do not realize what they're doing in reality", "live as if they have a special mind", and hence are all social unrest and body diseases [6]. In Taoism, "those who follow the things essential, follow

naturalness and follow Tao. Those who follow Tao are eternal" [7]. In Ancient Greece, the ideas of natural philosophy were expressed in the methods of treatment chosen, according to the scarce sources, by Heraclitus and Democritus. So, Heraclitus, having fallen ill with hydrops, has decided to cure himself by direct evaporation of moisture from his body. For this purpose, he has let himself be "buried in a cowshed" or be "prone to the sun, ordering the servants to put manure on himself; so, prone on the ground, he died on the second day and was buried in the agora" [8]. According to the legend, passed on by Diogenes Laërtius, Democritus had lived 109 years and had extended his life for a couple of days. Not to die during the festivities, he ordered "to deliver him warm bread every day. Bringing bread up to the nostrils, he was able to support his life during the whole feast. And when the three festive days had passed, Democritus painlessly parted with life" [9].

Both in Ancient China and Ancient Greece, the disease was considered as the prevalence of one element over another. Heraclitus wrote in his letter to Amphidamas: "Disease is the imbalance of the elements contained in us. Excessive heat brings fever, excessive cold – paralysis, excessive air – asphyxiation... But the soul equalizing them in harmony is something divine. Health is primary and nature is the best physician. For primitive artificiality doesn't imitate something unnatural...". Heraclitus believed: "If I know the nature of cosmos, I know the human nature, I know diseases, I know health. This is a therapy for an all cosmos. I shall imitate this in myself likening myself to God who equalizes the excesses of space..." [10].

III. HISTORICAL TYPES OF EUROPEAN CULTURES AND HEALTH

Let us recall that the ancient culture is characterized by the principle of kalokagathos, based on the fusion of the perfection of body and spirituality (morality), with the latter being unthinkable without the former. For the medieval culture, such a universal principle is the concept of spiritual Philokalia, based on the attitude to the transcendent origin through faith. Thus, the medieval Christian world-view stems from a completely different principle. In its center is theocentrism, replacing ancient cosmocentrism. According to the new worldview, the notion of health and ways of achieving it, the relation between soul and body is viewed quite differently. First, the difference lies within the conception of transcendence underlying Christian culture. There appears the notion of faith which is the only way of knowing transcendent reality. The essence transfers itself to the transcendent sphere, where the spirit stays. Transcendent spirit is considered as a source of perfection and health in all aspects, and faith replaces all psychophysical methods of cognition and achievement of health: in theistic outlook, yoga is not only impossible but also reprehensible. The concept of salvation supersedes the doctrine of liberation. People cannot free themselves they can only be saved by God, for whom it doesn't matter whether an individual may sit in lotus pose, or whether his nasopharynx is clean. Even the "third eye" and "kundalini" are not necessary. The only

thing that matters is the purity of thoughts, faith, which, of course, is dead without works.

Yet, the discrepancies in the Eastern and Western methods of spiritual knowledge are not always clearly perceived, leading to an attempt to attribute the psychophysical method of prayer to Hesychasm as the inner spiritual essence of Eastern Christianity. The misconception is so great that even respected Orthodox theologians speak of some Hesychast "technique", comparing it with yoga [11]. The Hesychasts were accused by Barlaam of Seminara (the opponent of the Byzantine Hesychast Gregory Palamas (1296 – 1359) for an allegedly "psychosomatic method of prayer". Gregory of Sinai describes the latter as follows: "Sitting from dawn on a seat about nine inches high, compel your intellect to descend from your head into your heart, and retain it there. Keeping your head forcibly bent downwards, and suffering acute pain in your chest, shoulders and neck, persevere in repeating noetically or in your soul "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy"... Restrain your breathing, so as not to breathe unimpededly; for when you exhale, the air, rising from the heart, beclouds the intellect and ruffles your thinking, keeping the intellect away from the heart". The Hesychasts, however, have never "given this method any sacred, theurgical meaning. It was only an auxiliary, technical method of concentration, overcoming the scattering of thought..." [12].

V. Krivoshein believes that those insignificant psychosomatic ways of concentration, developed by the Hesychasts, are naturally derived from the Christian worldview, determined by the fact that "since our body in its essence is not an evil beginning but the God's creation and the temple of the Spirit dwelling in us, there's nothing wrong with it but on the contrary, it is natural to use it as an aid to prayer". The researcher continues, referring to Nilus of Sinai (5th century): "It would be completely wrong to think that St. Gregory Palamas saw in these methods – useful but still secondary – the essence and the main content of mental doing. Not this or that ascetic action but "ascent of the mind to God and direct conversation with Him" was seen by him, as well as by all Orthodox mystics throughout history, the purpose, and essence of "spiritual and immaterial prayer" [13].

Archimandrite Cyprian considers Hesychast "bodily practices to be of the same origin and order as raising hands, the sign of the cross associated with bows, lying dale on the ground, or, e.g., still observed among the Ethiopians prayer while standing on one foot with outstretched arms, etc. Not only does asceticism not neglect the body and its functions but it also uses them for spiritual work. An ascetic feat must involve not solely the soul..." [14]. Body, of course, participates here but salvation isn't achieved due to manipulations with it or with the psyche.

Faith turned out to be able to virtually instantly cure spiritual (false outlook) and while retaining a particular spiritual state, psychological and mental problems, and diseases. There are limits to human despair when only faith can save us. The idea of faith is an absolute spiritual defense

against all the misfortunes of human life. However, a mere belief is not enough. An idea may only satisfy the distracted mind of an idle armchair pseudo-philosopher. To become spiritual, an idea must grow within a person. The so-called by the saints "inner sanctuary of a person" shall be transformed in accordance with a plan. And for such a transformation to take place, it is necessary to have a deed that represents the life and spiritual path of hermits and Ascetic Church Fathers of Eastern Christianity. The whole spiritual experience of Eastern Christianity is such an embodiment of the idea of faith. The understanding of such an incarnation can be represented as a metaphysics of faith, "a way of epistemological communication with the transcendence" [15].

The healing value of faith is known for a long time, the famous neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot insisted on it. The Russian philosopher B. Vysheslavtsev wrote that "faith in God is necessary because only it, an absolute one, may prove to be a guiding activity. Otherwise, there will be confusion, mental illness – in the disorder of functions" [16]. Pavel Florensky noted: "Spiritual health is in spiritual balance. There must be internal coordination so that the individual elements are not loose so that everything is relevant. If we just think that everything is conditional, we will feel such a grave cold that we will not be able to continue our thoughts" [17]. The Russian psychiatrist Dmitry Melekhov (1899–1979) stressed that "the religious setting of consciousness requires sobriety, awakening, ardor, spiritual fury and the discharge of all subjective "falsehoods" and all the individual fabrications". "Therefore, the true religious life is opposite to any neurosis and psychosis and the saints are the healthiest people" [18].

There is a genus of diseases which is not begotten by organic and mental processes but by ideas, violations of the laws of spiritual life, the division between good and evil. The moral disorder leads to the destruction of personality and various diseases. And in this case, the role of faith is in the healing of, above all, a person's spiritual foundation.

Christianity, however, tore the world apart, creating conditions for the emergence of modern science, possible only while allowing the subject/object opposition (transcendence and immanence, the removal of the Creator outside the cosmos). Christianity's transcendent personalism prepared the subjectivism of Modern history. Contemporary Western medicine is also built on the same principle: a passive object (a patient) and an active subject (a healer, pills, injections, scalpel). Thus, violence turned out to be possible, against which Christianity categorically opposed through its sermon of love. The relations between a subject and an object inevitably incorporated violence, which is especially evident in the attitude of modern civilization to nature, which has led to the ecological crisis.

Passivity in the face of disease, the expectation of a miraculous healing, inherent in the consciousness of the believers, and the hope for medical care, the miracle of modern pharmacology and surgery share still the same worldview – the split of the world. Under these conditions,

the obesity issue, e.g., is solved by means of pills and diets, rather than by active movements that require people to take care of themselves. Quite often such “believers” don’t heal themselves allowing only external influence, relying entirely on the saving external force, miracle or recipe (one of the two, because being identical in the source they differ fundamentally in means). Pure spirit, a subject replaces the laws of the material world. Kantian a priori forms of sensuality and categories of intellect impose themselves on reality and are not derived from it. This substitution, however, is illusory, because the spirit cannot abolish the laws of this world – the change occurs solely in the mind and not in reality.

The East is quite different in this respect, offering yoga, Chinese gymnastics, organic medicine, etc. The East is pantheistic and cosmological, while Christianity inclines to acosmism. The Russian metaphysical thought wanted to save values of the past, overcoming the shortcomings of the traditional world-view. It was inspired not only by the starry sky above and the moral law within (Kant) but also by faith and grace.

On the other hand, the contemporary West witnesses the rejection of the traditional Medieval paradigm of faith and metaphysics, the removal of the opposition between the world and the spirit, transcendent and immanent, accompanied by a shift towards pantheism and naturalism. At the level of everyday behavior, one may observe a passion for personal health, the formation of a “healthy lifestyle”, interest for sports, yoga, and “transcendental meditation”. Instead of the Bible people now read astrological prognoses and turn with their problems to psychoanalysts and magicians rather than to priests. The superstition of contemporary people is thus manifested, who are not saved by the glow of reason, science. It seems that the rejection of faith hasn’t moved humanity forward in the spiritual aspect. We may also doubt the humanism of contemporary civilization since it emanates the threat of thermonuclear warfare, ignites local wars, and an individual is persecuted by the unknown antiquities – the diseases of body and soul.

IV. CONCLUSION

Summing up the results of our research, we may note that this or that spiritual culture forms not only the *Weltanschauung*, psychology, physiology but also the whole system of human life and society. We may say that tradition is a matrix of culture in the most extensive and profound sense of the word, and culture is the foundation of human life. Therefore, the time has come “to carry out the synthesis of humanitarian knowledge and the selected religious ideas and values” [19]. An individual doesn’t choose a tradition; people are born into it and exist thanks to it. At the same time, tradition imposes limits although without the restrictions a person cannot survive as a human being. The change of tradition is a catastrophe for the consciousness, the whole life system, the society. Tradition captures a certain kind of truth, and every nation, every culture, and religion have their absolute truths. We would like to address in this respect

Nietzsche’s statement that the truth is a specific historical lie, ensuring the survival of certain kinds of creatures, i.e. people.

Each tradition elaborates specific ways to achieve health. At the same time, it is constricted by certain notions on the world, people, health, and methods of reaching it. From this standpoint, we may conclude that any tradition, world-view, is somewhat limited and one-sided. Meanwhile, each culture reveals something new and unprecedented, a mystery about a human being and, stemming from it, a particular method of obtaining health. We have witnessed that the East and Antiquity in this regard are characterized by the notion of a close connection between the earthly and heavenly origins, body, and soul, from which various psychophysical methods of gaining health were derived. Theistic religions, primarily Christianity, on the contrary, are based upon the principle of transcendent spirit, creating the world *ex nihilo*. They put the law of faith on the top of both their world-views and attitudes toward reaching spiritual health. Yet, spiritual health doesn’t exhaust the conception of health in general. In this regard, the theistic outlook happens to ignore bodily needs, physiology. Many Western philosophers opposed such nihilism (among them – Martin Heidegger, who criticized the nihilism of European metaphysics), striving to elaborate a particular synthetic world-view and a more universal approach to comprehending human health.

Any historical type of culture is limited, although it may be profound (Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, etc.). In world-view, set by world religions, the truth is revealed but in an individual perspective, inevitably incomplete. It is necessary to rebuild the holistic world-view now even though there are fundamental differences in its forms. We shall seek out the possibilities for consolidation. Attempts to stand united are beset with contradictions but they should not discourage us. Humanity has no other choice but to create a holistic worldview and a synthetic culture, and the footstone of which shall not be pride, but rather humble recognition of the great teachings of Antiquity, acknowledgment of the truth and infinite value. It turns out that such a holistic view is possible only as a synthesis of varying spiritual traditions and it can elaborate a universal way of finding health. Yet the seemingly different types of worldviews use multiple principles, incompatible with each other. However, human consciousness is such that it can get used to different cultures, perceive them in themselves, transform and comprehend using the hermeneutic method.

In conclusion, we would like to stress the need for a new holistic world-view based on the synthesis of cultures to shape the path to good health. This is urgent since our contemporary fellow human being is described by the state, on the one hand, of unnatural alienation from the external (nature) and the “internal” (own body) environment, and, on the other, from the moral principles, the lack of which make the achievement of healthy and normal social life impossible. If the first aspect is deeply developed in the Eastern, Taoist, and yogic, outlook, the second one is inherent to the Christian worldview. The East has formed the path to gaining health through the “putting in order” of one’s organism, through which also opens a way to “putting

Cosmos in order”. The West has delivered a unique way coming out of transcendent spirit, designed to organize all levels of life, and this being faith. The task of the future is to synthesize them. The path to health is not something constant and unchangeable; it varies according to principles. In turn, these principles are set by the fundamental metaphysical and religious attitudes of culture. A holistic world-view is possible only as a result of mankind's development. It should accumulate everything valuable that has been developed throughout history.

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