

## Spirituality: East and West

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I apologise for not being able to speak here in Italian, German, Indian, Chinese or Dutch, but that I have to speak this common language, the *lingua franca* of today – English. You do get a translation of the *lingua franca* in the earlier period at Eranos. It was probably more German, but the world has developed towards English as the *lingua franca*. I will say a few words about translation later, because translation is such a difficult job and I fully sympathise with our translators. I would actually be very interested in hearing how they translate me into Italian, because I will give a rather complex story, really very much in the tradition of Eranos. The Eranos people were Germanic scholars, they were not into the present-day idea of entertainment. So I am not going to make jokes, but will talk seriously, and that was of course very much what people did in the 1950s, too. It is a complex story and difficult to translate, I am aware of that.

So, I thank the East West Foundation and the Eranos Foundation and in particular its Chairman, John van Praag, for inviting me here, it is a real privilege. I think I owe this privilege not to my work, but very much to *Guanxi*, as they say in China, to relations. As you know, there was a good

Dutch connection with Eranos. Frau Fröbe-Kapteyn was a Dutch woman, and I saw some exchanges in Dutch between her and Gerardus van der Leeuw, who was a famous scholar of religion in Holland, so she also still had a good command of Dutch. And John van Praag is Dutch, despite his first name John, and he is actually an alumnus of my university, Utrecht University. And indeed one of his predecessors here, Rudolf Ritsema, was Dutch. So there are French connections and there are Dutch connections, and this is a Dutch connection. That is perhaps one reason for inviting me. The other reason is that I do belong to the tribe of scholars of religion, which was strongly present at Eranos, it was perhaps the dominant tribe at Eranos. Eranos was a meeting place for scholars of religion. When I saw the film of the 1950s yesterday, I recognised many of my ancestors, to mention but a few: Mircea Eliade, who studied Sanscrit in Calcutta while I studied Sanscrit in Lucknow in North India. He ran off with the daughter of his guru, I didn't do that, but for the rest our Sanscrit scholarship is connected. Henry Corbin, one of the great scholars of Sufism and Shiite forms of Islam, had an enormous influence in Iran, even to this day, and I studied Sufism and Sufi cults in Western India. And Gilles Quispel was a professor of early Christianity and Gnosticism at Utrecht University, the same university I am connected to. So I recognise my ancestors in this film of the 1950s. They were great textual scholars, with a deep interest in the spiritual sense of world religions and especially in mysticism. However, we are here not at the Eranos location, we are here at Monte Verità, where in the 1920s artists and dancers were experimenting with the freedom of artistic and bodily expression, to put it in as polite a way as possible. They were bohemians or, as one would say in the 1960s, hippies; they were anarchists and they were doing things that were being

studied at Eranos. So there was an interesting connection at that time between doing and studying. In my view, the spirituality in the art of Monte Verità and in the scholarship of Eranos belong together.

As I said, I recognise my ancestors, but as an intellectual, one should not indulge in ancestor worship *per se*. In fact, I think that traditions, and I recognise this tradition, can only flourish when they are alive through active thought and internal debate and *critique*. So let me highlight a few critical differences with the generation of Mircea Eliade. Today, we are much more self-critical and reflective in our scholarship. We look much closer at the social-political context in which our ideas arise and in which they are operative. Many of the scholars involved in Eranos before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War were rightwing and sometimes had fascist and Nazi leanings. There are a number of those that I mentioned who had that, even Mircea Eliade was known to have had connections with Romanian fascism. There is an overlap between the interest in mythology and mysticism and in Arian roots of say mythology and the Indo-European or Indo-Iranian roots of thinking, and Nazi mythology and fascist ideas. These roots were simply there; we have to acknowledge this. They are part of a very complex and wide-ranging set of intellectual issues, which dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century romanticism. So I really do not want to pass judgment lightly on my ancestors, I respect them highly for their scholarship. But I would highlight that despite their scholarship, their intellectual contributions to the problems of the times were vague and irrelevant, and when they were relevant, they were sometimes negative. Therefore, a reflection on where ideas come from and how they operate in a certain context is really crucial today. We cannot allow ourselves to be faced with the same kind of problems as those in the 1930s and 1940s.

If Eranos wants to be a positive force in the present, it has to be reflective and aware of its past. Today, we are facing similar and as important problems as the people were facing in the 1930s. We are in an era of Islamophobia, of real fear of the Muslims, of aggressive secularism, and we need to reflect on that. Some people speak of a clash of civilisations and clearly Eranos is involved in the study of civilisations, and if it wants to make a positive contribution, it has to reflect on clash and dialogue. Another difference with the earlier scholars of Eranos is that they studied other civilisations from a firmly Western perspective. They obviously thought that it was a universal perspective. This has come to be challenged more and more by scholars from other civilisations. Therefore, Eranos today has to increasingly involve Eastern perspectives. The East West Foundation without the presence of Easterners is not really possible, if it wants to still be recognised and accepted in the world of scholarship. It has nothing to do with so-called tokenism or political correctness to bring a few Chinese, African and Indian faces around the table, that is not what I intend. I argue that there are different perspectives coming from different traditions, and that there has to be a dialogue between these traditions. We are more and more aware of the fact that the centrality of the West in the world economy and in world politics is changing. In fact, we can argue that the Western centrality is only two centuries old. There has always been an Asian centrality to the world economy before 1800, and it is now returning to that normal pattern of world history. So, we are accustomed to the centrality of the West, but that will change, and it already does in the world economy, it will also change in our intellectual world. We have to be very much aware that universalism, the universal assumptions of Western scholarship, will be challenged more and more by China and India.

Finally, and that is a point related to this, there is a more general, theoretical point, namely that universalism and cosmopolitanism in the idea of universal religion or perennial philosophy are more and more shown to be not universal, but perspectives from somewhere else, that people are located somewhere and argue from there. They are embedded in deep, unreflected and unchallenged assumptions. The way to go, I would argue, is to create dialogues between perspectives, rather than enforce a particular perspective, and call it universal. This really is a great challenge and it requires constant translation and willingness to listen to different world views, which may not even be compatible. So we cannot bring anything to a universal kind of mix. I am reminded of an anecdote told about a Dao teacher, Chuang-Tze. Chuang-Tze had this dream that he was a butterfly and he woke up – maybe he was not aware that he had woken up –, and thought, 'At this point, am I a butterfly who thinks that he is Chuang-Tze, or am I Chaung-Tze who thinks that he is a butterfly?' This very simple point shows perspective and relativism in perspectives, and that one can still learn from the old masters about this intellectual point that I tried to make.

Now what is spirituality? That will be the topic that I shall address here today. In December 1911, Wassily Kandinsky – and Kandinsky, as you know, was one of the great artists of our times and, for some, the creator or originator of abstract art – published his *Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst*, spirituality in art. The book's main purpose was to arouse a capacity to experience the spiritual in the material and abstract phase. For in his view, it was this capacity that enabled experiences, which he thought were absolutely necessary in modern life. Kandinsky emphasised that he was not creating a rational theory, but that as an artist he was interested in experiences

that were partly unconscious. One of the formative experiences he described in his book *Rückblicke* is his encounter at a French exhibition with Monet's haystack. I quote from Kandinsky's text: 'And suddenly, for the first time, I saw an image. That it was a haystack, I learned from the catalogue; that I had not recognised it, was painful to me'. So he had looked at this painting, Monet's painting of the haystack, and had not recognised it. 'I also thought that a painter really had no right to paint so unclearly. I experienced dimly that there was no object in this image and noticed, astonished and upset, that the image not only catches, but imprints itself indelibly in memory and floats in always totally unexpected final detail before one's eyes'. He describes the enormous impression of the Monet haystack, which he doesn't recognise; so in terms of representation, he does not recognise it, but the spirit of it really gets into his mind in a very different way. And this is of course a very well-known text in art history for the origins of abstract painting. Abstract art is now of course seen as one of the most distinctive signs of European modernity. One can study its development from the impressionism of Monet and others, but it is hard to escape the sense of drastic rupture with representational art. You also see the great difficulties in China and India with this rupture. When you are, say, painting miniatures in India and you then have to move on to the modern world and start painting abstracts, it is almost an impossible thing to do. It is a century of engagement in India and China, which is really very interesting to study. However, for us this also was an important break. Kandinsky connects abstraction with the spiritual. This may be somewhat unexpected for those who understand the modern transformation of European life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of demystification. We often see modernity as demystification, like Max Weber

saw it. But in fact, the heart of modernity is spirituality – it is the magic. In one of his most poignant impressions of modernity, namely in modern art, the spiritual has a kind of comeback, in Freudian terms the return of the repressed. You try to get rid of magic, but it comes back in modern art. It is also very expensive modern art, so don't take it lightly here.

But what is the spiritual? Scholars like me don't like it, the term is too vague and marginal, something at the fringes of intellectual life. In our present day and age, it is often referred to in relation to the New Age movement. However, I want to suggest that, in fact, spirituality is a term central to our understanding of modernity. It is not a fringe element; it is really at the heart of things. And I am, as John referred to, writing a monograph on the construction of this idea of spirituality in modern India and modern China, from a comparative perspective, because I find it such an important concept. At the same time, it is of course necessary to reflect on the nature of this concept. Certainly it has the same kind of conceptual difficulties as the term 'religion', or the term 'belief', or the term 'secular'. It is very difficult to use the term 'belief'. Missionaries had much difficulty in translating the credo into African languages, for example, because there is no term for 'I believe' in those languages. So 'I believe in God' is not really possible. It shows the difficulties in translating, which is why we have to respect our translators so much. Obviously, its conceptual unclearness and undefinability make it so interesting for those who use it. It suggests more than it defines. And like the term religion, it can be used as a cross-cultural global concept that captures a great variety of traditions and practices. This universal use of the concept of religion has its roots in the notions of natural religion and rational religion that came up in the

aftermath of the religious wars in Europe and in conjunction with European expansion into other civilisations. But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this term religion already became part of a narrative of decline. Darwin is what everyone then refers to, for he basically shows that the story of the Bible is not correct. And then you find all kinds of scientific work, which makes the position of religion really difficult, and we call that secularisation. So the position of religion as a centre of European life becomes threatened. I think that, at this point, we also get the rise of a new use of the term 'spirituality'. Spirituality is something, which is outside of established religion, outside of Christianity, and therefore does not have to be part of that narrative of the decline of secularisation. It is actually part of that move out of the centre of religion. It can, therefore, also be more easily applied to other civilisations and other so-called religions. And then we find this notion of a common and universal spirituality, which connects the essences of different civilisations – just highlighting the kind of newness of this move. Like religion, the term 'spirituality' has a kind of global bridging function, connecting several conceptual universes that are increasingly in contact from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Connecting is different from translating, in the sense that translation always tries for correctness, but there is no term equivalent to spirituality in Sanskrit or in Mandarin Chinese. The term does not exist. So if we talk about Hindu spirituality and Dao spirituality and Confucian spirituality, we are actually in a new world. It is not only the new world of scholars who study it, but also of people who practise it, because they also start translating their own experiences in this global term, 'spirituality'. One of the best examples of that is the World Parliament of Religions, where, in 1893 in Chicago, we have representatives of different traditions speaking about their spirituality. So

we now also have a series in which Tu Wei Ming is involved in spiritualities of the world. These are new notions. The difficulties in translation are simply insurmountable. First of all, what do terms like belief, religion and history mean in the European tradition? That is already difficult to describe. And then one has to find out what these terms mean, or could mean, in other traditions, and whether history and historicity is used in the same way in these other traditions as in our tradition. This problem can easily be demonstrated by looking at the term *yuga* in Sanskrit. *Yuga*, the four world periods we translated as classical concepts of time, as cyclical. This conception clashes with the modern sense of progress, linear progress in time, with its focus on individual people, individual events and cause and explanations. Now when you study Indian history, Indian religious history, it is almost impossible to find out who says what. They all have the name Ananda, Yugananda, Damadanda, Shivananda, and it doesn't really matter what Ananda or in which century, it is almost impossible to locate them in the sense that we do history. I can locate Spinoza, I can locate Descartes, but I cannot easily locate Shankara and his disciples. We just don't know. And why don't we know? Because the Indians were devaluating that sense of history, they did not want to have that kind of history. It was irrelevant to their sense of historicity. So, like the people in the 1950s at Eranos, we are sometimes doing jobs that are impossible. And this also has to be reflected upon.

Now, the problem of non-translatability was recognised by a really famous scholar in the 1920s, who did not come to Eranos, but was a very important literary critic, I.A. Richards. He went to China in the 1920s and later in the 1940s, and he was determined to solve the problem of translation. He encountered the Chinese text and the Chinese language; he

thought it was really based on very different concepts and that the problems of translation were very serious. He was determined to solve it because, in his opinion, the 1<sup>st</sup> World War was caused by misunderstandings, by mistranslations. So there was a kind of political edge to this. He really wanted to have a better understanding between different civilisations, he didn't want to have a great war again. This had wiped out most of his generation. It was also the driving impetus behind his book *The Meaning of Meaning*, co-authored with C.K. Ogden, and behind his attempt to bring Ogden's basic English project to China. Basic English was a simplified English that could be used as a second language by all those that did not already speak English. It was not an artificial language, therefore, like Esperanto, which has the same kind of motivation. But based on natural English, it consisted of no more than 850 words and 18 verbs and was as such easy to learn. We should perhaps be speaking it now. In his *Mencius on the Mind*, Richards argued that it is crucial to understand the way Mencius used language to communicate meaning, a way totally alien to the Western mind, and that it was important to understand that it was for the sake of world communication and to ensure the survival of Chinese civilisation.

Both projects – that of promoting basic English in China with the help from the Rockefeller Foundation and that of translating Mencius – failed. However, Richards shared with Bertrand Russell and T.S. Elliot, his friends and contemporaries, a crucial awareness that, although the gap between conceptual universes was almost unbridgeable, miscommunication could be a cause of war and therefore had to be avoided at all cost. This is what I wish to emphasise, and what I wanted to stress when referring to the dialogue between civilisations.

Given its global and random application, it is hardly possible to give a convincing genealogy of spirituality, except to say that in Europe it has platonic and Christian overtones and comes to be intricately related to Romanticism, the counterpart of the alignment. My main point, however, is that unlike many European-concepts that acquire new meaning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is produced and reproduced in a wide variety of cultural interactions. So the development of the term 'spirituality' in the West is very much related to the interactions with the East. That is the important point I want to make. So like other representations, it serves a function in our self-understanding. For example, there is this common view – common in the time of early Erasmian and even today – that in the East, there is still spirituality, whereas the West has succumbed to materialism, and that there is a kind of opposition between the East and the West in terms of spirituality and materialism. Of course, when you go for a while to live in India or China, you see that people are even more materialist than you are yourself. So in practice this does not work. But there is this common view, and it has to do with the kind of representations of the other and the self, which is conveyed in the term 'spirituality'. There is no possibility to gain a fuller understanding of European or Western spirituality without a direct engagement with Eastern spirituality because these terms are interactive. They are working in interaction.

For Kandinsky, spirituality suggested an experience that goes beyond representation, from representation as it were to abstraction. In that move you can find spirituality. For religious thinkers it suggests something of higher value in contrast to the base aspects of social life, including religion. For romantic nationalists, it suggests the essence of the people, their collective spirits, the '*Geist*' of a society, of a nation.

It also suggests a transcending of the body or alternatively the use of the body to gain spiritual experiences. I am myself doing TaiChi and QiGong, and of course I studied Yoga, and according to Eliade, this is all for immortality and freedom. I am not so sure, but there are experiences gained by bodily exercises, and that probably has to do with all kinds of neurological elements, in which some of us are more expert than others.

Finally, spirituality is used as an oppositional term in contrast to materialism – the spirituality of the East against materialism of the West, for example. Spirituality forms a wide spectrum of movements, also political movements, ranging from socialism to romantic movements, like nationalism and fascism, but also including the many reform movements in many world religions. It is not a backward looking, rear-guard struggle that will disappear as progress continues. It is not just a fringe joke, people who are engaged in this are not crazy, they are actually – and I want to stress that again and again – at the heart of things in many ways. Sometimes, it is really ahead of its time. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, for example, interest in spirituality was very anti-colonial. One of the leaders of the theosophy movements, Annie Besant, was the first woman who got a degree in science at the Imperial College in London, and went down to become a leader of the labour movement, leading the first strike of women in a factory, and then became the first president of the Indian National Congress in India. Now this is a kind of career you would not usually associate with some fringe person. This is a person, who is actually very much involved in the politics of her time, a radical person and a very spiritual person. But spirituality is, as I said, not religious, at least not as an established religion. It is actually a concept very much used to criticise religion and does that strongly. Annie Besant was

married to a reverend at the beginning of her life, so you can understand her antipathy to religion. What is very interesting in this period is that arguments about spirituality are decidedly scientific. They are not against science, they think that science itself is spiritual. And a good illustration of this happy marriage of science and spirituality in our own day is the invitation extended to the Dalai Lama to address the 2005 American Convention of Neuroscientists. There was of course some trouble, especially from the Chinese participants, but you see how people in the sciences still do see these actions and find them important.

Spirituality is a major element in Indian anti-colonialism and it is very much part of Vivekananda's construction of yoga in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vivekananda was an Indian thinker, who was deeply influenced by a tantric guru called Ramakrishna in Calcutta, a man who could not easily be translated in Victorian ways, a man who got into trances, who had erotic experiences that could basically not be put on paper, and who was in many ways a transgressive wild character, left-handed, following the left-hand path, and Vivekananda did a wonderful job in synthesising all of this and making it available for the Western audience. He of course went to America where he was a great success, especially among American women in Boston. He was a handsome man. He went to the World Parliament of Religions and became a very important spokesman for universal spirituality from the Hindu perspective. Vivekananda argued that India was the heartland of spirituality, that it could be the basis of its rejection of British colonialism, which was based on just materialism and economic gain, and that one had to get rid of these British with their materialism and go back to the sources of Indian spirituality. So it is a direct link between anti-colonialism and spirituality.



Naturally, India's greatest leader, Mahatma Gandhi, inherited this, and I want to speak a little bit about Mahatma Gandhi here. Gandhi, who grew up in India and went to London to study for the bar and was one of the founders of vegetarianism in Britain, was deeply aware of the connection of spirituality and anti-imperialism. When he started writing for India's struggle for independence in his book *Hind Swaraj*, basically meaning 'Indian Independence', in 1910, he himself saw that struggle as primarily a spiritual one. The sources of that spiritual perspective were multiple: Hindu tradition, Tolstoy's understanding of Christian spirituality, Ruskin's thoughts about industry, and Nordau's views on civilisation. I would argue that Gandhi's experiments with truth, *satyagraha*, were a product of that encounter between Britain and India. Really his stay in London, under the influence of Ruskin and Tolstoy, was very important in developing his thoughts and ideas. The man whom Churchill dismissed as a 'half-naked faqir' was as much a product of that encounter as Churchill himself. Gandhi was really British. I stayed at Baliol College in Oxford at the Master's lodge, and when you see his signature and that of Andrew, you think, well yes, he belonged here. He could speak the same *lingua*. Gandhi formulated his ideas in universalistic terms, but the idiom of universalism always comes from a particular place in history, in his case the Hindu tradition, in which he had been socialised. His vegetarianism derived from well-established traditions of the Hindu and Jain trading castes, but could be universalised as a general moral practice that linked up with theories of the interconnection between body and spirit that had become popular in Britain during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His non-violence was again a particular interaction between Hindu and Jain traditions, alongside European repertoires of radical protest, some of it coming

from Ireland, like the boycott. The main thing in all of this is not so much the connection between Eastern and Western traditions, but their transformation through a history of interaction. And this history continued in a new direction when African-Americans adopted Gandhi's non-violent action, like Martin Luther King, for example, in their own struggle for civil rights. Gandhi's experiments with truth were attempts to strive for more truth through disciplines of the body, such as fasting and celibacy. Just imagine this man in his linen cloth going to the conference in Britain in the 1930s, walking to Buckingham Palace indeed as a half-naked faqir, representing the Indian people. Incredibly powerful, extremely simple! He initiated the salt march, because the British thought they had a monopoly on salt and therefore that the Indians had to pay tax on salt. But you could make salt in the sea. So what Gandhi did, he walked through the length of India, saying that he would be making salt in the sea. During his march, from beginning to end, he emphasised that he was going to make salt. Of course, that was an illegal act. So the propaganda in India of such an action was enormous. The mobilisation of people was just incredible – for a very simple act, for a very truthful act. Why should the British have a monopoly on salt? Everyone needs salt – it is one of those basics that we really need. And people were poor. I just want to highlight this idea that he had – a kind of understanding of political life in a new way. Some of his disciplines, like fasting and celibacy, could be used as political instruments – he was going to fast unto death when he did not like something. His spirituality was not conceived as a traditional quest for religious insight or redemption, but as the opposite of Western imperialism that he saw as the basis of imperial action. Gandhi wanted economic progress for India and saw the materialism of imperial power as one



of the causes of India's decline. But let people discover the unifying and moral aspect in their own and other traditions. This has all kinds of implications for the multi-cultural situation in India, of course, and the opposition in India between Hinduism and Islam. In Gandhi's view, one attained truth through one's experiments, but this truth was a moral truth that had to be experienced, and indeed shown to others through one's example. One should not criticise those who have not realised such truths, considering criticism already a kind of violence – very interesting for the debates today –, and one should, in general, avoid violently imposing truth upon others who are not convinced by one's example. Truth, then, is moral and should be communicated in a moral way, and it is striking that for Gandhi the morality of communication is as important as for I.A. Richards, whom I mentioned earlier.

Gandhi and Kandinsky are worlds apart, but what I have tried to suggest here is that the term 'spirituality' is crucial to both of them in their response to the transformations that they were witnessing. This indicates the wide span of worlds that are connected by the word spirituality – from American transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, to European abstract painters like Kandinsky and Mondriaan, to Neo-Confucian thinkers like Tu Wei Ming, to political leaders like Gandhi. Walt Whitman's funeral, with its readings of sayings by Confucius, Jesus Christ, and Gautama Buddha, was held in a spirit very different from contemporary exclusivist Christianity or Islam. It does not further our understanding of this global spirituality to, pedantically, conclude that it was based on wrong translations from various traditions. One may interpret Gandhi's spirituality and his 'experiments with truth' as flawed translations of Hindu discourse, but I would rather see them as attempts to create

bridges between radically different conceptual universes. Gandhi and I.A. Richards were focused on creating possibilities for non-violence, but one should realise that spirituality can also be harnessed to a narrow vision of the spirit of the nation. Perhaps even more than in the colonial period and in the nationalist period of the 1920s and 1930s, the multiplicity of uses of the notion of spirituality today deserves scholarly attention instead of outright disdain. Thank you very much.