ART AND SPIRITUALITY

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0. Introduction

The mind-set of our age tends to focus on what we feel towards reality than to pay attention to what is. It is reality that first has a claim on us and not we on reality. We are only a part of reality. When we come to Art and Spirituality we see that here too people are preoccupied with what they feel about art and spirituality.¹ This is not a fruitful approach, simply because feeling is an accompanying, and not a central phenomenon of the human predicament.

1. What is Reality?

A brief preliminary reflection on reality will help us to identify its significance to us. We discover our identity in the foundational experience of being part of this world. We are this experience of being part of this world. Our awareness has, at least on the superficial level, two modes: one, the foundational (ontological) mode of belonging to this world and the other pragmatic (epistemological) mode, where we focus on one or another aspect of the world. Whereas the second aspect is episodic, the first is abiding. As long as we are conscious we are part of the world. Within such a consciousness we ct s subjects focusing on an object-aspect of reality. But this is episodic, not permanent because it inevitably merges into the foundational mode.

When we reflect on both the modes of our consciousness we can distinguish therein two important characteristics: there is, first, the object-aspect and second, the objectifying or consciousness-aspect. The object-aspect is so-to-say the "material" or "cosmic" dimension of reality. This dimension is the meeting-point of all reality. We cannot think or talk or communicate in any way without this dimension.

The second characteristic is the consciousness or human dimension. It is the dimension wherein reality is gathered together; it is so-to-say the awareness of the meeting-point of all reality.

Both these dimensions always go together: one without the other is not possible. This is because there is a link connecting them both and that is the depth-dimension. The material or cosmic dimension cannot be exhaustively described. There is always more to be known about it. There is a certain "unfinishedness" or endlessness about it. Similarly our capacity to know is also endless. It can never be exhaustively satisfied. Thus both the material and the human dimensions share in this endlessness, in this depth-dimension.

Reality then is three-dimensional, is cosmotheandric (cosmos=world, theos=divine, aner=human [male]), or theanthropocosmic (theos=divine, anthropos=human, cosmos=world).² What is
important to note is that each of these three dimensions is unique and interdependent but irreducible to the others.

A holistic approach to reality has to do with fidelity to the threefold dynamics of reality. It will be fruitful to reflect on art and spirituality on the background of such wholeness.

2. The Three Levels of Human Consciousness

Human consciousness has three levels: meaning, significance of meaning and meaning in life which correspond to knowledge/information, understanding and believing.

*Meaning* corresponds to the cosmic dimension of reality. It has to do with the “what” of our exchange. “What” are they saying, “what” are we doing and “what” is your address – all these require a straight-forward, univocal, answer so that we know the subject matter. This is the first level of all communication. Without this level no meeting-point is possible. All communication presupposes this basic level of commonality. It is the level of information and is part of the cosmic dimension of reality.

*Significance* is very different meaning. Many of us share in a common meaning like “friend” but this meaning may not be significant to all of us. My friend may not be your friend. Significance is not information; it has to do with understanding and understanding has to do with relationship. The rules of the game are very different in the case of information compared with that of understanding. You cannot validate a significant relationship as you would some piece of information. The level of significance corresponds to the question “who”; it belongs to the human or consciousness dimension of reality.

Finally we have the Universe of Meaning where things make sense. It is this Universe that is responsible for what we call *meaning in life*. It is not concerned with this or that object or subject but with life as such. Depending on the depth of this universe love, selflessness, service, innocence, honesty, joy, peace, collaboration, etc., make sense. What is not part of this Universe does not make sense. For Christians *punar-janma* (re-birth) does not make sense because such an experience is not part of their Universe of Meaning but it does make sense in the Universe of Meaning of the Hindus. This is the realm of *poesis* (= what makes sense) and believing. Here is where the question “why” is answered implicitly. It corresponds to the depth-dimension of reality. You understand only those things which make sense and only those things make sense which you understand, so intimate is the relationship between the two, though the one is definitely not the other.

Without going into details, the Universe of Meaning has two chambers as it were: the parlour (World of Understanding) and the living room (World of Faith). Every time we understand something we are taken to the parlour where the door to the living room is open and there is a sort of *communicatio in sacris* between the two worlds. And every time we enter the World of Faith (through a faith-experience) the World of Understanding is also enlightened.
So when we encounter a work of art, it would be a mistake to ask "What does this mean?" Art does not function on the level of cognitive meaning. Our age of information imagines that the more information we have about the work of art and the artist, the better we shall know the artwork. This is a mistake. The path of information is not the same as the path of understanding and understanding is not the same as reasoning.

To put this in context I shall just cite three important theses of Raimo Panikkar without giving any commentary on them because they are pertinent here.³
  a. Reason is not the whole of consciousness.
  b. Consciousness is not the whole of Man.
  c. Man is not the whole of reality.

3. Art as the Projection of a World

I would like to begin by bringing all forms of art like poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, drama, literature, etc. under the heading of poesis. Poesis has to do with the realm of what makes sense. Religion and spirituality also belong here, but as we shall see, in a different manner. When we are confronted with what makes sense, one does not ask why. What makes sense is the background on which we ask but itself does not need any justification. All reasoning and justification stop at the door of understanding. Reasoning and justification belong to the cognitive level, to the first level of meaning. Poesis has to do with meaning in life, the third level.

There has been for quite some time a movement focusing on the "aesthetic" dimension, and art theories have stressed the "aesthetic object", that is, the work of art, or the "aesthetic subject", that is, the one undergoing an aesthetic experience or the "aesthetic experience" itself.⁵ Art, in such a view, is that which produces an aesthetic experience and the art-object is that which is capable of producing such an experience. Whatever the focus, clearly, it all boils down to the "feeling" that the subject experiences or the work of art produces. Evidently such approaches are very subjective.⁶ I shall suggest another approach, one that is more holistic, on the one hand, and which stresses the ontological aspect, on the other.

Let us look at Poesis a little more in detail. As I said earlier, I am thinking of Poesis as including all the forms of art. Art understood in this way is that form of human expression which makes presents, projects, a world. What is a world?⁷

Recall any play or a film that grips you! Reflect on what is happening? How first you begin as an observer, and how if the piece is interesting, you are taken up by it without your knowing it and how you have become part of the world that the play is projecting. You are affected by that world, your emotions are aroused, you become active in such a way that you hope that the play will take this or that turn, and you want the film to take this or the other to happen…

Long after the play is over you are still affected, preoccupied with the different scenes, especially with the way the play concluded. You keep on returning to it again and again. And this, in spite of the fact that it is only a play! Somehow we have entered the world of the play and we remain with it for a long time. Indeed, in some cases, we feel at home in that world every time we recall that play. Or in other cases, we do not feel at home in that world; it disturbs us, we are angry and frustrated at our helplessness…
Now let us look back at the two kinds of plays: one where we feel at home and happy and the other where we become angry, exasperated and frustrated. Remember that it is only a play that we are talking about, not about what is happening in real life. Hence we ask, what is really going on behind all these happenings?

A play projects a world wherein certain relationships are highlighted. These relations create situations in which we find ourselves either challenged or confirmed. Our views and values are either contested or denied or ignored and some other values are given credence and support. That means in effect what is being challenged or confirmed is the world that makes sense to us. We feel happy and at home when such a world is endorsed and enhanced but when it is questioned or blatantly rejected, we are angry and frustrated.

Let us take, for example, the film "Life is Beautiful". You see in the main role an optimistic man who is suddenly caught up in a situation where his Jewishness becomes a problem because the German Nazis want to eliminate all Jews. The Nazis arrest him and his son. When his Christian wife hears about this she too joins them in prison but alas she is separated from her husband and son. The film brings out the deep love the man has for his wife and his young son of around three to four years. Because of this love he tries to interpret the hopeless situation to his son as a game which promises to bring the reward of a real military tank to the winner. Every situation, he explains, brings in points and if the son can succeed in hiding he can surely win the tank. The tragicomedy of the situation is infectious. At the end, the father is marched off to his death as his son watches him but he keeps on smiling as if that were the last and reward-winning conclusion of the game.

What happens as we watch the film? We are taken up by the film. We become part of the world of the film without making any choice. We forget ourselves. We become self-less, so to say, for the time being. We laugh and we cry and as the film ends we are crying with one eye and laughing with the other! Through we hope that the three of them will come out alive as if they were our very close relatives.

One could take another film, "Mission", for example. We are fascinated by the success of the missionaries among the tribes of South America who are being caught and sold as slaves by the Portuguese and the Spaniards. The missionaries build up communities where the native Indians are flourishing in every way. But the film ends tragically because the Portuguese and the Spaniards want the natives as slaves and their lands. The film ends tragically because the Pope orders the missionaries out of the territories. We come out of the film visibly disturbed.

In both cases the film does not leave us even after it is concluded. It preoccupies us, makes us aware of our presuppositions and question our assumptions. Our world of meaning is either enhanced and enriched or challenged and attacked. We are either purified, humbled, made happy or sad or angry and frustrated. In any case we are affected, we are no more the same. Understanding always brings with it self-understanding.

Interestingly when situations like these happen in real life we may not be as much affected as we are in a play or a film. In real life such situations rarely touch us the way they do through art. Probably the explanation for this lies in the fact that we are alienated from reality. In a play or a film however the world that they project comes alive and we are taken up by that world. The
world of art in these instances is such that we [are made to] become part of that world. We can rarely escape it. This is because in art a new creation is brought forth in which willy-nilly we find ourselves. The world that a work of art paints before us makes us encounter reality.

Everyday life does not make us encounter reality. Everyday life is in fact an alienation from reality. Everyday life is concerned with the pragmatics of doing, making, going about routine work, routine meals, routine friends, routine walks, routine everything. In everyday life we take reality, or what we think is reality, for granted. In everyday life we objectify everything both persons and things. We do not show any awareness of the threefold dynamics of reality. We reduce everything to object.

It is in such a routine life that art makes us encounter reality. In every encounter there is freshness, we see reality as it were for the first time. This does not mean that we always have a pleasant experience. An Art work can frustrate us but not because it are not great art but because it shakes us out or our complacency. It questions our universe of meaning; it provokes us into taking positions; it makes us aware of our prejudices and our predilections; it shows us possibilities of different worlds, of how world could be different for better or for worse.

In my way of looking at things, poets and artists are really prophets. They show how the world looks, how it could look; what could make it look this way or another way. Alas, we have not recognized or rarely recognized the worth and value of these prophets. We have left art as a luxury and so art is not part of our lives, part of our religious lives, part of our spirituality. Though history, especially history of religions should have shown what a great role art has played and still plays in religion. But I leave it at that and come to the second part of my theme: Spirituality

4. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is the proclamation of a specific world of meaning; and Spirituality is the path to the appropriation of such a World

From what I have said up to now it should not be difficult to understand religion and spirituality the way I do. In a work of art the world of meaning that is projected there is not necessarily meant to be appropriated, its main intention is to make the audience reflect critically as to where it stands with regard to its own world of meaning. What a work of art does is to challenge, provoke, evoke, raise doubts and pose questions. In some cases a work of art functions like a devil's advocate, in other cases, it supports and encourages and in some other cases raises doubts. Its task is completed when the audience encounters the projected world and makes its own decisions.

This is not so in the case of religion and spirituality. Religion proclaims and evokes a specific world of meaning; and spirituality is the praxis, as it were, of religion. Spirituality shows the way and offers the means to appropriate and participate in the specific world of meaning that religion proclaims. Every religious tradition has its spirituality; this means each tradition offers ways and means of participating in its world of meaning. Religion proclaims a specific world of meaning that it would like the adherents of its tradition to appropriate. Spirituality shows the ways in which one can participate in such a world of meaning.
We are talking about religion and spirituality that are not merely labels but internalized realities. For only when they are internalized realities do they affect and determine the universe of meaning. Notional knowledge of religion and spirituality does not make any difference in life. Only internalized realities determine our universe of meaning which in turn determines our behaviour. So when we bring religion and spirituality into our discussion we do so in the understanding that they are intimately connected with the universe of meaning.

The Hindu traditions have a variety of spiritualities. If we just take the traditional Yogas: Jñana, Bhakti and Karma we at once realize how holistic they are. Jñana focuses on the depth-dimension of reality without neglecting the cosmic and human dimensions. Bhakti puts the accent on love without ignoring the cosmic and the depth-dimensions. And Karma highlights the cosmic without denying the human and the depth-dimensions. Now a world like this presents a balanced set of relationships between God, World and Man. A person who participates in such a universe of meaning will go about life in a way different from that of a person who is at home in another universe of meaning. Not surprisingly Hindu art too is determined by such a universe of meaning.

Or take the tribal traditions which live in close contact with "nature". Their approach to the world around us is very, very different from the approach of, for example, the non-tribal Christian traditions. Tribals have a living and lively relationship to jungles, animals and rivers. Accordingly tribal art shows the closeness of tribals to nature.

Something similar could be said about Western Christian Art. It has its origin in a specific worldview and is evocative in such a world alone.

Secular Art is different from religious art because its themes are secular themes. This does not mean that secular art has nothing to do with religion or that it is anti-religion. It only means that secular art projects a secular world of relationships.

5. Art and Spirituality

Art is an embodiment of a world, of a world-view. The question is always whether the world-view that a specific work of art projects is worth appropriating. It is here that the role of religion and spirituality becomes important. As I said, the work of art projects a world which interacts with our universe of meaning. The role of spirituality comes into its own precisely at this juncture. Our spirituality, in as much as it is active, helps discern the kind of world the work of art projects. The encounter of the two worlds, that of the art-work and of the person concerned, can either be a confrontation or a dialogue. At any rate there is always a back and forth, a to and fro. The art-work proposes a world which interacts with the world of the one engrossed in the art-work. It is in such an interaction that the world of the latter gets affected and changed for better or for worse. This depends on how "strong" or "weak" one's spirituality is. One's spirituality either accepts or rejects or accepts to some extent and rejects to some extent the world of the art-work.

Who can tell us whether our spirituality is taking us in the right direction? Who can tell us the blind spots of our spirituality? The speaker is not aware of his accent; it is others who have to make the speaker aware of this. Similarly we are not aware of the strong and weak points of our
spirituality. It is only when we encounter other spiritualities or, as in the case of art, other universes of meaning that the differences become apparent. Standing within our own spirituality does not reveal to us its strong and weak points. A view from the "outside" as it were is needed for this.

Art is one of these viewpoints. But Art is not just another viewpoint. It has unique characteristics which are not found elsewhere. For instance the world of another spirituality can through comparison and contrast with one's own spirituality could bring many positive and negative aspects to light but psychologically and historically speaking, it will (rightly or wrongly) be suspect and is bound to be looked upon as a competitor, so to say, who has an axe to grind. The other spirituality proclaims and proposes its own world and each tends to consider itself superior to the other. We are normally not open to another spirituality and another religion, especially where the core and not accidentals are concerned.

But in the case of Art there is no axe to grind; the artist has proposed a world and one can freely interact with the world of the art-work without let or hindrance. We can take it or leave it. The artist has brought forth a new creation that can enrich, endorse, enhance and also critique our spirituality or it can challenge and point to chinks in our armour or as a third possibility, it can leave us cold and indifferent.

More importantly spiritualities tend to be other-worldly and here is where the importance of Art is best seen. Art highlights the cosmic dimension of reality which spiritualities are in danger of overlooking, neglecting or even of downgrading and denying. The cosmic or material dimension is not just like a dress that a person puts on and off but is a constituent of the human person. For any spirituality to neglect this dimension is to become one-sided and partial. The medium of Art is always the cosmic dimension. Through it, it evokes the depth-dimension. However the power of its evocation depends on the way it "makes use" of the cosmic dimension.

But most importantly, Art has the unique quality which while making use of the cosmic dimension always points beyond the cosmic to the depth-dimension of reality. In other words Art deals with the symbolic dimension of reality, it reminds us that reality is of the nature of symbol, not of an object, and that the symbolic alone reveals the symbolized reality, that is, the depth-dimension only to those who have eyes to see and ear to hear. It is here that the real contribution of Art to spirituality is to be located.

Whatever a spirituality may be, it makes use of symbols or to put it differently, it functions on the level of symbols. Spirituality can work only when one is attuned to the world of symbols. Spirituality has to travel the path of the symbolic in order to lead its adherents to the symbolized reality, which is in fact the depth-dimension of reality. Art by its very nature points to and retrieves the world of symbols.

6. Concluding Reflections

Unfortunately Art has come to be regarded as a luxury or as a sort of decoration, even in religious circles. Even when Art is encouraged its true role is not emphasized. The prophetic role of Art is not recognized. Sadly it remains a dispensable item in our traditions. One would have thought that religious traditions would have been the first to recognize the danger that today's
technocratic world is exposed to, namely, the thoroughgoing instrumentalization and objectification of reality. In today's world of information technology what counts is what we can grasp with our hands and with our heads, namely, the world of objects. The reason is that such a world is amenable to quantification, control and manipulation.

This is not so with regard to the world of symbols. Symbols cannot be produced; they are given - given, we said earlier, to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. However the universal tendency to objectify everything is a blind alley as far as the world of symbols is concerned. Spirituality and Art are the only real antidotes. Spirituality has not really been flourishing. And still it has not recognized the worth and value of Art. Instead of taking Art as its ally it has simply ignored and side-lined it as if it didn't matter and as if it were only good for decoration or entertainment.

True, Spirituality could make us sensitive to the symbol-dimension of reality but as a matter of fact it rarely does. Its otherworldly tendency needs a corrective which, it seems to be, Art alone can offer. The signs of our times seem to point in the direction of massive objectification of reality. Spirituality with its otherworldly yearning will not succeed in stemming the tide. Here Art has a prophetic function. It alone can sensitize us to the depth-dimension, to the symbol-dimension of the world. By appealing to us through sight and sound, light and life it could give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. It could heal those of us who find ourselves in the darkness of the world of objects.

Spiritualities tend to be otherworldly! Art always projects a world and has its feet on the ground of this world. Art is therefore capable of making a spirituality realistic and relevant. Without Art one Spirituality critiques and confronts another Spirituality. The danger is that the element of earth or world can easily be missing in both. Art can make up for that and make us plant our feet firmly on the ground of reality.

In such a situation Art would complement Spirituality. Spirituality would then become holistic and wholesome. It would shun its other-worldliness and begin to be more relevant. With Art complementing Spirituality our attitude to the world, to nature, would undergo a sea-change. We would see ourselves as part of nature. We would develop a new mentality, a sacra-mentality towards nature. We would learn to listen to the wisdom of the earth, as Jesus did. Ecosophy would be the direction of our spirituality. We would learn:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.11

And more: we would then learn to look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, at the sun and the rain in a new way, perhaps as the poet Jesus did! In other words, birds would not be just birds and lilies would not be just lilies, sun would not be just sun and the rain would not be just rain. They would be all mysteries revealing the Presence and Work of the Divine in the world.

To reach this stage it is necessary that we introduce contact with the different fields of Art in our education and in our formation. For far too long we have turned a blind eye to the salvific
aspects of Art and completely neglected Art-education. Education for Art has to be part of our Spirituality, part of our spiritual training. Through encounter with Art and the world of Art we could also contribute to making Spirituality not only relevant but also holistic. Art will bring into our Spirituality the world of earth, water, air, fire, flowers, birds, deserts and desertification, riches, poverty and exploitation, violence, war and peace, religious conflicts and religious harmony or discord, family life of different kinds, relationships between the sexes, etc., etc., In a word, Art will make our Spirituality "worldly" in the best sense of the word!

For in a secular and secularizing world Art has the prophetic function of reminding us in season and out of season what our world should not be and what it eventually could be.

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4 See "The Origin of the Work of Art", Martin Heidegger Basic Writings, (Ed.) David Farrell Krell, 118: "The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth…Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of beings in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of its essential source in founding leap - this is what the word "origin" [Ursprung, literally, primal leap] means."


6 Raimon Panikkar, "There is no Outer without Inner Space", Concepts of Space Ancient and Modern,(Ed.) Kapila Vatsayan (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre or the Arts, 1991), 17: "I am speaking of something much more primordial than the psychological influence of a building on the tenant or visitor. I am also having mind something much deeper than the aesthetic taste of the architect to choose places, forms and shapes pleasing to the eyes or comfortable to the senses and the aesthetic influence on the beholder or user. The true architect deals with Space and not just with forms. I am referring to something much more primordial than psychology, aesthetics, or even ethics (the influence of goodness). I am referring to this intrinsic link within, the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the material, the cosmic and the human - and also the divine."

7 See Raimon Panikkar, "There is no Outer without Inner Space", Concepts of Space Ancient and Modern,(Ed.) Kapila Vatsayan (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre or the Arts, 1991), 18:
"Artistic here means the poetic activity of shaping a new world out of the very world in which we are already living. We create our own Space as much as Space creates us."

8 Anand Amaladass in his *Introduction to Aesthetics*, 159 tells us that Troy Wilson Organ (*Western Approaches to Easter Philosophy*, 1975) enumerates seven different attitudes in Indian Art

