



The Understanding and Function of Spirituality in an Older Woman's Life*

Nelson Mafla Terán^a

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5747-4464>

José Ricardo Acero Montañez

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2139-2723>

RECIBIDO: 09-05-21. APROBADO: 10-10-21

ABSTRACT: This article deals with the understanding that older women in Cafam Day Center (Centro Día Cafam) of Bogotá have of their spirituality and its function in their lives. It is the result of a field investigation in which theology and nursing teachers took part. The study's purpose was to offer academic elements to improve the spiritual accompaniment of older women in the medical environment and in geriatric pastoral work. Studies of this nature underline the description of the spiritual experience of the older individual, but ignore the analysis of the *spiritual quality* that rules the lives of these persons.

Our study analyzes the types of divine representation that support the spiritual universe of older women who attend the Cafam Day Center, the types of spirituality derived from such representations and the spiritual risks inherent to a situation in which gods and spirituality merge into a retributive dynamic of fear and obedience.

The study bases itself on the theoretical dynamics of the transcendental anthropological method whose premise states that the human being is able to have a deep inner experience of God's reality, a transcendental experience that takes place with no other mediation than ourselves, while God's reality takes place in an act of self-communication.

This paper is divided in three parts: first, it presents the research method, which is followed by the explanation of its procedure (participants and procedure implemented in the construction of data); and it concludes with the presentation of the results and some conclusions drawn from the investigative process.

KEY WORDS: Transcendental anthropological method; Older woman; Spirituality, God; Dimensions of care; Spiritual experience.

* Research article. This text is a result of the investigation project "La espiritualidad como elemento integrador de las dimensiones del cuidado en el adulto mayor", executed in Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, code 000000000007027; it started on March, 2018 and concluded on October, 2021.

^a Correspondence autor. E-mail: nelson.mafla@javeriana.edu.co

Comprensión y función de la espiritualidad en la vida de la mujer adulta mayor

RESUMEN: Este artículo expone la comprensión que tienen las adultas mayores del Centro Día Cafam de la ciudad de Bogotá sobre su espiritualidad y el papel que ella cumple en sus vidas. Este deriva de una investigación de campo en la cual participaron docentes de teología y docentes de enfermería. El fin del estudio fue ofrecer elementos académicos que permitan cualificar el acompañamiento espiritual de las adultas mayores en el ámbito médico y de la pastoral geriátrica. Los estudios de esta naturaleza ponen el énfasis en la descripción de la experiencia espiritual del adulto mayor, pero dejan a un lado el análisis de la *calidad espiritual* que rige la vida de estas personas.

Nuestro estudio analiza los tipos de representación divina en la que sustentan su universo espiritual las adultas mayores del Centro Día Cafam, los tipos de espiritualidad que se derivan de dicha representación y los riesgos espirituales inherentes a situaciones en las que los dioses y la espiritualidad se funden en una dinámica retributiva de miedo y obediencia.

El estudio se apoya en los fundamentos teóricos del *método antropológico trascendental*, que plantea la premisa de que el ser humano es capaz de vivir una experiencia profunda de la realidad de Dios en su propia interioridad, experiencia trascendental que sucede sin más mediación que nosotros mismos, mientras que la realidad de Dios acontece en un acto de autocomunicación en nuestro propio ser.

El escrito consta de tres partes: en primer lugar se expone el método que sustenta la investigación; a renglón seguido se indica el procedimiento de la misma (participantes y procedimiento implementado en la construcción de los datos); se finaliza con la exposición de los resultados y algunas conclusiones derivadas del proceso investigativo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Método antropológico trascendental; mujer adulta mayor; espiritualidad; Dios; dimensiones del cuidado; experiencia espiritual.

HOW TO CITE:

Mafla Terán, Nelson y José Ricardo Acero Montañez. "The Understanding and Function of Spirituality in an Older Woman's Life ." *Theologica Xaveriana* vol. 72 (2022): 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.11144/javeriana.tx72.ufsowl>

The good God and the evil god met at the peak of the mountain. "Good morning, brother", said the Good God. The Evil God did not answer the greeting. And The Good God went on to say, "you are in a bad Mood today". "Yes, said the Evil God", "because lately they take me for you. They call me by your name and they treat me as if I were you and I really dislike that." "Well, you should know that they have also called me by your name", said the Good God. Once he heard that, the Evil God went on his way damning the stupidity of mankind.¹

Introduction

To answer the questions: What understanding do the older women in Cafam Day Center have of their spirituality and what is its function in their lives? The transcendental anthropological method, which comes from fundamental theology was determined. Because it deals with the investigation of the spiritual intimacy of an older woman, the transcendental anthropological method (TAM) constitutes a legitimate academic procedure which allows the inquiry of an individual's intimacy. It is to be noted that the transcendental anthropological method is not merely a work technique; it concerns a way of responsible feeling, understanding, thinking, judging and proceeding. Therefore, the point of departure is the concrete and historic human individual. It involves the person's unity in their historical, transcendental, and social dimension. It implies that "a concrete human being must be essentially situated within the world and must not be conceived other than connected to this world in which they live and from which they draw their experience,"² earthly and transcendental.

As a procedure, part of a dynamic understanding of human knowledge begins with experience passing through intellectualization and judgement, and concludes in responsible action. This procedure and knowledge "does not solely depend on the characteristics of the object, but also on the essential structure of the cognoscente subject. Reciprocal conditioning and dependent relation between the subject that knows and the known object, at the same time, as known and cognoscible, constitute

¹ Gibrán, *El profeta, el loco*, 153.

² Baena, *Fenomenología de la revelación. Teología de la Biblia y hermenéutica*, 66.

the subject matter of a transcendental approach.”³ Here, the “transcendental approach” makes reference to the feasibility of human knowledge concerning reality of sense as in the divine or some other type of reality into which the individuals may pour forth their deepest desires.

Theologically speaking, human knowledge is only possible when given God’s self-knowledge in his selfhood *ad intra* of human structure. Human reality in its basic structure is being dwelt in by God. According to Baena, we are dwelt inside by one “God, a spirit proceeding in this manner. God’s being spirit is His proceeding manner.” Here the basic and fundamental sense of theological understanding of spirituality is at play. For that God is spirit and proceeds as such means that “he has the capacity to come out of himself and be within another. Therefore, God’s spirituality is the art of abandoning oneself, the art of denying oneself to be within another.”⁴

Analogously, “we are spirit for the same reason God is spirit, that is, we operate as spirit by the capacity to come out of ourselves out of consideration for others.

That is what a spiritual foundation consists of. That is, mankind as a spiritual structure is made to deny himself in regard for others. Thus, spirituality would be in a way an art, a way of being, seemingly the spontaneity of our own existence. What does this mean? If we possess this inner structure, whose foundation is God Himself, a spirit, the spontaneity of our existential reality is then to always be abandoning ourselves in regard for others.⁵

In that order, is there some type of anthropological structure in the human being able to perceive this kind of self-communication with the divine? It definitely seems to be the most viable explanation of why human beings cling to a meaning of reality outside of themselves. The individual (human being) is the event of the absolute and indulging communication of God himself.”⁶ Subsequently, if our spirituality is the expression of our being within reality, if it is our being abandoning itself in regard for others,⁷ then our actions are the fruit of the spirit that dwells within. Our hands’ actions are the objectivity of the spirit that dwells in the most basic structures of our

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Baena, “¿Qué es la espiritualidad? Conferencia Taller de Regionalización, Colegio San Ignacio, Medellín, 2 de abril de 2011”.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rahner, *Curso fundamental sobre la fe. Introducción al concepto de cristianismo*, 149.

⁷ “Abandoning” oneself is understood as the capacity to put oneself in another’s suffering or vulnerable situation, even to the point of detriment of whom executes the action, and is performed without expecting retribution as a reward. See Riechmann, *La habitación de Pascal. Ensayos para fundamentar éticas de suficiencia y políticas de autocontención*.

anthropological nature. Of course, it does not deal with an adversarial event: "...people are able to consciously open up to profundity and to the spiritual. [...] Spirituality, deriving from that, is a way of being, a basic attitude, lived in daily existence."⁸

Given this human-divine relational peculiarity, the human being has a capacity for God. Said differently, the human individual is subject to transcendental knowledge thanks to this participation in God's being. Therefore, the transcendental "is a structure *a priori* not acquired by the human being, but given beforehand, which is a condition of the possibility of his knowledge and free action, and therefore, also the being of man [and woman]."⁹ Put another way, "God does not create the human being as one who sets something at a distance, but places himself inside the creature. And for that same reason, that is God's concrete position in the world, as a creating action."¹⁰

The divine is in the ontological setting of the being. "There is no other mediation than that of ourselves. We do not need mediation, because the last part of what we are, our being, is precisely mediation."¹¹ It is this spiritual experience on Jesus of Nazareth's lips that He (Jesus) and the Father are part of a unity. "The Father who dwells in me is performing the works. Believe me: I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14: 10-11). The medieval mystic Master Eckhart would say that "not one rational soul is devoid of God: the seed of God is within."¹²

Such verification is embraced by modern fundamental theology. In this framework, Rahner points out that "the most intimate part of mankind in the only concrete and real order of human existence is God's self-communication, at least previously offered and given to the persons' freedom as the condition for their supreme and obligatory fulfillment."¹³ Upon this epistemological foundation, the individual's spiritual experience is assured. Spiritual experience will consist of an immediate coincidence of divine reality with the human spirit. This is the core of experience and spiritual knowledge. In Remolina's words, spiritual experience "is when the human being feels 'touched' by God's reality, in an immediacy that excludes any type of reasoning at the experiential moment."¹⁴

⁸ Boff, "La base biológica de la espiritualidad".

⁹ Baena, *Fenomenología de la revelación. Teología de la biblia y hermenéutica*, 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹ Panikkar, *La experiencia de Dios*, 10.

¹² Maestro Eckhart, "Del hombre noble", 135.

¹³ Rahner, *Curso fundamental sobre la fe. Introducción al concepto de cristianismo*, 156.

¹⁴ Remolina, *Los fundamentos de una "ilusión". ¿Dios y la religión, ilusión o realidad?*, 63.

In this sense, Rahner made clear, in his long investigation, examples of what might be “the Holy Spirit’s concrete experience within a normal life.”¹⁵ According to him, the experience of the spirit takes place in human actions such as these: persons who discover

...that they are able to pardon without reward and admit the evidence of a silent pardon on behalf of the other [...]. Others that keeps their silence when treated unjustly; without the pleasure that comes from remaining silent as the sovereignty of their untouchability.¹⁶

Therefore, spirituality would be the way to assume and live life as it comes, with the Spirit.

Within this epistemological framework, examples of experience and manifestation of the spirit are possibly multiple and varied, *verbi gratia*, men and women who committed themselves to Jesus of Nazareth, pursuing their dream of freedom despite the danger that it meant putting their lives at risk. Those who reach out to help others without expecting recognition.¹⁷ Those who decide to do the right thing each and every day of their lives. And those who perform their jobs as the opportunity to serve the community. The grandparents who lovingly and trustingly places their lives in divinity’s hands. The student who boldly and decisively faces life’s challenges. “We may further extend the list, without ever being able to evoke the totality of that life experience of the spirit, of freedom, and grace for each human individual.”¹⁸

We are definitely before the basic spiritual nature of the individual. However, the spiritual realm of the individual has power over that; it is not a static reality. It is the source from which individuals derive their sense of being, encourage and nourishes an intimate connection with themselves, with others, with nature and what binds them to the totality of reality.

Thanks to the objectivizing of these dynamics, the spiritual experience of a person is an observable fact, feasible in being analyzed and interpreted. The human spirit braided into divine reality, that internally molds it to be observable in discourses, specific actions of pardon, solidarity, self-care, etc. In the same way, it is revealed in beliefs, representations of God, values, meaning of life, habits and customs. This fact makes possible the real inquiry of the Cafam Day Center’s older women’s understanding

¹⁵ Rahner, *Experiencia del Espíritu*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹⁷ This way of proceeding the spirit can be deepened in the work from Coupeau, “Una ciudad en lo alto: espiritualidad y ciudad en los escritos teológicos de Ignacio Ellacuría”, 6-12.

¹⁸ Baena, *Fenomenología de la revelación. Teología de la Biblia y hermenéutica*, 69.

of their spirituality (and its function in their lives) by applying the transcendental anthropological method.

Obviously, under this epistemological structure, deductive logical reasoning becomes second place; it is not the reasoning other than that leading to a spiritual experience. The transcendental anthropological method focuses on the lived experience on a level of symbolic rationality. It places the symbol as the mediation of the spiritual experience in the daily living. In this epistemological structure, symbols have the particularity of making divine reality and human reality coincide in life's immediacy. Metaphorically, we would say those symbols are the kiss that fuses divinity with humanity. Which are those symbols? From an open understanding towards symbolism, we would say they are multiple: "the perfect stillness of the night", the solemn silence of solitude, "the deep darkness" of the senses, the "nocturnal aroma of the flowers", the sense of unity with cosmic foundation", and the perception of nature's "laws."¹⁹

This might have been the case of Albert Einstein, for whom the spiritual world was constituted by a "cosmic religious sentiment". For our genius of physics, "the individual experience seems to him a kind of prison, and he desires to experience the world as a single significant oneness,"²⁰ open to a possible mystery, "recognizing the existence of a "superior force" that orientates and offers a supra-personal content to experience, conducive to "living the experience of mystery" that Einstein likes to call "cosmic religiosity."²¹

On the other hand, this may be the case of Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, when feeling "touched" "in the most intimate fibers of his being, [driven to] affirm God's existence and committing himself to Him in a religious relationship."²² Fascinating: a priest and an atheist physicist involved in the same dynamics inclined to the presumption that human life is shaded by a spiritual dimension subsisting and operating in the life of individuals regardless of their belief or disbelief. Spirituality does not fit in with a religiosity in particular. The person's spiritual realm will depend on their *religious dominance*.²³ For example, from the atheist's standpoint, "religiosity is substituted [...]

¹⁹ Remolina, *Los fundamentos de una "ilusión". ¿Dios y la religión, ilusión o realidad?*, 63.

²⁰ Einstein, *Mis ideas y opiniones*, 33.

²¹ Viviente, "Albert Einstein. La religión del misterio".

²² Remolina, *Los fundamentos de una "ilusión". ¿Dios y la religión, ilusión o realidad?*, 49.

²³ What this concept indicates is the religious affiliation of believers, theists, agnostics, atheists or nones. Here, a believer is a person that believes in God and as a result of that belief is a member of a determined religious creed. For instance, Christian-Catholics believe in the Biblical God, and at the same time are a part of a religion, Catholicism, where their way of being, presence, and actions derive from that religion.

by rules of love, responsibility, comradery, solidarity, living together, integrating²⁴, as with the priest whose whole life and actions are driven by his faith in God.

With these methodological background budgets, we set out to inquire the understanding that older adults have of their spirituality and its function in their lives.

The Participants

Teachers from the Theological Formation Center ascribed in the Shool of Theology, and teachers from the Nursing School of the Pontifical Javeriana University participated as investigators. Older adults from the Cafam Day Center were the subjects of study. It is to be noted that for this Center, the topic on spirituality as a substantial element in the life of an older adult is not a light matter. In fact, it has the prioritized purpose to support the older adults in their pursuit of an active, healthy, autonomous and responsible life in link with spirituality. To this end, the Cafam Day Center offers its affiliates programs on formation, recreation, and spiritual cultivation as such. Thereon, researchers' interest in gaining access to the understanding that this population has regarding *their spirituality and what this contributes to their lives*.

Given the difficulty that a qualitative study implies accessing the entire population, it was necessary to constitute a focal workgroup, by summoning—under the authorization of Cafam Day Center—the geriatric population wishing to participate in the research. Nine older women between the ages of 65 and 85 signed in. There was no reply from the older men. The researchers, following the standard set that the investigation would be carried out with subjects who voluntarily signed up, proceeded with the respondent voluntary women. The group was called to a meeting whose end was to convey the intention of the research. Once the project and its goals were exposed, the attendants' intentions on the side of the group were verified. All expressed their wish to take part in the study. An informed written agreement was signed, and the procedures that would be used to gather the information were made known.

Access to Information Procedures

Intending to go beyond the simple gathering of information, the participants were asked to come to two workshops on spiritual introspection. The goal was to gain their confidence and at the same time for the older adults to become aware of their spiritual realm. Therefore, with the help of an expert and involving art therapy, a workshop on self-awareness of personal spirituality was led.

²⁴ Rivera y Montero, "Ajuste psicológico y vida religiosa en adultos mayores", 896.

Making use of the inner artist contained within, the work consisted of creating their silhouettes out of paper and writing their personal values on them, their relation to God, to others, to themselves, and to nature. Thus, with the assistance of the work team and the contribution of each of the attendees, it was concluded that their spirituality relays the specific values and manner in which each relates to the transcendent, to others, to themselves, and to nature.

Considering that the first workshop allowed the participants to become mindful of the kind of relationship they have with themselves and that this relation is not always the best, the attendees proposed that a following workshop be guided towards the relationship they keep with their bodies. In response to the group's suggestion, a second workshop consisted of procuring a dialogue with the body through an exercise called "a letter to my body". With this aim, and with the assistance of our art therapy expert, the participants were asked to take the time to perceive their bodies using a mandala and transcribe all their feelings regarding it on a letter to the body itself.

Besides providing information on how older adults perceive their spirituality, the two workshops allowed a trusting environment between the therapists and participants. They fertilized the soil that led to the gathering of information utilizing a semi-structured magazine. As known, this tool allows a certain degree of flexibility when approaching the participants, intending to acquire relevant information to the goal of the study. Therefore, the interview was based on questions such as: "Do you believe in God?" "Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?" "What is spirituality to you?" "What are the living standards that guide your life each day?" "What do you do to nourish your spirituality day by day?" "What does your spirituality offer to your life?"

Once the information was collected, it was analyzed and entirely digitized proceeding to place it under two pre-established categories for the study: the understanding of spirituality and its contribution to an older adult life.

The Results

With the background of a transcendental anthropological method theoretical budget, it is relevant to consider the academic community and the understanding that these people possess concerning spirituality and its functionality in their lives. The results of this work constitute a source of information important to those guiding this sort of population sometimes relegated and forgotten in their spiritual needs.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the results exposed in the following texts emerge from a vivid spiritual construct and are exposed directly by the older women

in their own words. Hence, it is in no way mere empirical data. It all aims to give the information a meaning and link it to available knowledge of the field of spirituality particular to the final stage of life.

Spirituality in the Life of the Older Woman at Cafam Day Center

The spirituality of these women is anchored in the experience and understanding of God. It should be noted that here the concept of understanding refers to the individual's capacity to construct a meaning drawn from surrounding reality or from inner self experience. In this sense, the act of interpreting is associated with both their thought process and "an understanding of existence in the world, mutual understanding between themselves and others, understanding one's concrete existence from factual life."²⁵

Who is God for the Older Woman at Cafam Day Center?

The study demonstrates that for all of the participants in the focal group, God constitutes the vital experience from which their spirituality is derived, that is, their particular way of being spiritual women. God constitutes the center of their spiritual experience. The general pattern is that God appears as the basic reality that articulates these people's lives. God is the center around whom orbits the fact of their understanding of selves as spiritual individuals, their social world (friends, relationship with their families), biological (self-care, and care of others in their same conditions), cultural (values, customs), and ethical-moral behavior. Of the eleven participants, ten evidenced an experience of God based on trust, protection and aid understood as an inner inspiration enabling them to face the difficulties of life as older adult women. The linguistic tone of this trust, protection and aid coming from God may be varied, but always pointing towards God as the center. For instance, God is "the heavenly spouse":

He is my heavenly spouse; ever since my husband passed away, He has been at my side in everything, He sends me to the mother, he sends me to the angels, I go anywhere and he's always there somehow.

Participant 6

Another participant experiences Him as the fundamental base of her life:

²⁵ Sosa Montes, "Entender, comprender, interpretar", 194.

To me God is the fundamental base. That is why we must be grateful when opening our little eyes until going to bed at night. God is there at all times cloaking you with his most holy mantle. I fall and 25 angels come to lift me up.

Participant 7

Still another woman perceives Him as a guide, an inspiration, an aid:

I have realized that if you are with God, God will guide you and open doors for you. I used to live in sadness and bitterness, but now my life has changed, though I do have my moments; but then I change again and God is helping me a lot.

Participant 2

So, one by one, these women expose their thoughts in grammatical tones distilled from their experience of God. However, it is precise to point out here a relevant pattern: God's representation is not the same in all cases. God may gain varied attributes from each participant as can be seen from the information.

The group's prevailing representation of God is an anthropomorphic god who becomes angry when his will is not complied with, who requires praise like prayers, rituals, sacrifices to favor the believer. For the sake of this kind of divine representation, Participant 1 expresses that

...spirituality is like a communication with God, in which wherever you go you keep in mind he is always watching. You don't act a certain way because it's offensive to Him; so, I take care of my body because it is a temple of God, I pray for his protection [...] Anything that happens to me is my God's will.

Alongside this kind of divine representation, a kind of "ATM god" is disclosed. People think merits (indulgences) must be had to gain the divinity's favor. As in the case of a bank account, where there are requisites to have access to it, so it is with the "ATM god". To be able to have access to this kind of divinity, certain requisites need to be abided by the believer. To go to Sunday's preaching, go to Mass, and keep up with the *novenas* to saints, ask for pardon for each of their sins and a long list thereof. The belief is that the more assiduous the believer is with these kinds of practices, the more favor the divinity will bestow on their prayers.

Not that there is anything wrong with a divine representation of this sort, but it may be harmful to the believer when things do not work out, or end up the way the person has foreseen. Put another way, it may be counterproductive for the believer when the *reward* does not come at hand. For instance, if in face of illness

the person prays for health and that is not fulfilled, the tendency is to put the blame on the divinity, the fights and claims against God and many cases may end in rupture of the human-divine relationship. Participant 7 hints this spiritual dynamics in which such people move:

I fall because I am always down on the ground, but now I got into the habit before leaving home or when I get up in the morning to ask my guardian angel to protect me... A few days ago I scolded him because he let me fall down.

How long can a divinity of such nature work? If the falls continue, only frustration ensues, which for an older adult may become very painful if taking into account that these individuals truly take refuge in God. Abram Amsel's investigations shows that the "I give you, you give me" dynamics can truly negatively affect the person's conduct. This spiritual loop of retribution and reward may lead people into deep frustration in the immediate achievement of their goals.

For these older women in particular, when confirming that the divinity has abandoned them, may cause an emotional conflict possibly leading them into fear, aggressiveness, depression, loss of appetite, lack of self-care, neglect in taking their medications, amongst other counter-productive attitudes affecting their personal welfare. In Amsel's research, he could perceive that "on the onset of a sudden situation of no reward, the subject intensifies abandonment of (his goals) and ceases to put forth expected efforts."²⁶

This is not a small piece of information, for when older women express that God is important, that He is part of their lives, it is because to them it is a real thing, it is a genuine feeling. It is a fact that can be perceived in the powerful discourse when referring to Him.

To me He is an only being and He is inside of me. Each person has God within, I consider him/her an only being; if that weren't the case we would be totally empty, He is the strength, the energy that moves and allows us to live, so I believe in God, but it's been a long time since my last confession. Now I make my confessions to myself, I have my Jesus portrait inside my room and I speak to Him as I would to anyone, I tell Him my problems and I give him thanks for all He has given me, because he has given me everything I have. So to me, he is an only being, life and the reason for living.

²⁶ Baquero and Gutierrez, "Abram Amsel: teoría de la frustración y aprendizaje disposicional", 665.

This religious feeling is a most important matter if taking into account that these are people beginning to feel lonely and at the final stage of their lives, so a support to hold onto and not succumb is vital. More so if taking into account that no human being can totally live away from some sort of reality of meaning. All human beings in normal psychological conditions need to be connected, linked to some sort of reality of meaning for their orientation and support within existence. According to Honoré de Balzac, in “Lost Illusions”:

...man dreads loneliness. And of all loneliness, moral loneliness the most feared. The first anchorites lived with God, in the most inhabited world, a spiritual world. The greedy live in their world of phantasy and pleasure. The greedy have it all, including sex, in their brain. The first idea that man has, his first thought, leprous or forced, infamous or ill, is to have an accessory for his future. To satisfy this feeling, which is life itself, he uses all his strengths, power, the verve of his life. Without this sovereign wish, would Satan have been able to find his companions?²⁷

Unfortunately, for these older adult women, a religious attitude based on interest and fear, may easily end up in solitude and frustration. It does not deal with a moral assessment of this type of attitude, nor whether it is right or wrong; that is not the point. The point is that any day an attitude of that nature may succumb and the individual may find themselves involved in a confrontational situation with the divinity in the midst of their solitude which for these people is just a concept. Solitude is a state of life led and is expressed openly with no secrets, as Participant 5 puts it: “I live with God and the Virgin, and I live alone in a lovely house.” Therefore, how to make the transition towards an attitude based on liberty and gratuity?

How do the Older Women at Cafam Day Center See Themselves in Regards to Their Spirituality?

They all see themselves as spiritual persons. Access to this information was made possible by inquiring: “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?”

Not taking into account the participant’s religious affiliation, they regard themselves as spiritual women. Take Participant 1, who points out:

²⁷ De Balzac, “Las ilusiones perdidas III”, 101.

I am a spiritual person because I keep in mind what God wants of me. at all times. He lets me know what he wants me to do. So that for me is His command, His will [...] Therefore, I am a spiritual person because I do His divine will.

We are before a person whose experience orbits around the divine.

As was indicated in the methodological basics of this investigation, the encounter with God, the spiritual experience is articulated in the person's symbolic universe. In this case, the death of a daughter, a mother's illness, the care given by a daughter, and the ability to carry out a mission constitute it.

According to the transcendental anthropological method, spiritual experience takes place as in all strictly human experience, on a symbolic plane; metaphorically, symbol constitutes the kiss of human and divine encounter. Illness, care, death, fulfillment of a mission would not make up spiritual experiences *per se* if not raised onto a symbolic plane, that is, rising above the particulars of a concrete action in which they are perceived. Symbol is the needed condition to fall back upon the daily living and give a concrete event a character of generality.

Another Participant states:

I am a spiritual person because I have clung so much to God ever since my husband and I parted ways. He hurt me because of my religious belief. When I would go to mass he would say I would lick the bricks and get very upset. So I ended up away from everything. We got a separation and then I came to Bogota. I suffered a lot in my loneliness but I clung to God and was able to move on.

Participant 8

God is seen as the impulse to go out into the world, share, give aid, avoid hurting anybody, be devoted to a cause, get up cheerfully, dress up, and be a help to a child. This Participant defines herself as a spiritual person in the following terms:

I am a spiritual person because I do nothing but give. I was born to give. Nothing bothers me. When I am a little bit lazy, I say to myself: 'Hey, change your attitude.' I give thanks to God and get up, sweep the floor, do the cleaning, tidy up. When I pray at night, I say to the Lord: 'I ask nothing for myself. Just give me love and encouragement; just that. I place the world in your hands, all the families, all my friends, all those who are ill.

Like other participants, she finds the impulse of her life in God—a god who becomes present when giving, even in laziness (one of the capital sins); a god that becomes present in the prayers for others' illnesses: families, the sick, her friends. God becomes present in the plea for love, encouragement, and a generous availability towards others. That's why spiritual life

...must be valued, taken care of, given a new meaning, and served. The maximum dimension of spirituality comes from the coordinates of love, one who always hopes and believes (1 Cor. 13:7). The true beginning of a spirituality as a means of development is love's genuine, deeply felt payback.²⁸

This basic pattern is present among the eleven participants, in the settings of their spiritual experience. The wording will change, the facts, the symbolic mediation, but, in essence, the structure will be the same. If we refer to the experience of Participant 3, who moves within the margin of constant religious practice, the same dynamics can be attested. When asked, “do you consider yourself a spiritual person?”, she states the following:

At this moment, honestly speaking, I would be lying if I stated that I totally consider myself a spiritual person. I have even become conscious of this lately. I would tell little white lies, but then, without anybody educating me and finding out for myself, when I tell one I am fooling myself inside. My conscience is telling me what is not fact, then I am spiritual at that moment. But I think I have a way to go, to grow, to evolve because to me spirituality is to keep maturing, climbing higher, evolving, knowing how to live the everyday life; and not individually, but with all those around me and all beings.

Participant 3

Nonetheless, this case covers a particular interest, for going beyond exposing her inner self constructed a bit within the margin of an assiduous religious practice, she reveals that evil makes up part of the symbolic platform of her spiritual experience. Aside from the awareness of inner transformation, the dialogue with herself, the impulse of growth, evolution and knowing how to live life with others, the lie comes up.

I used to tell little white lies, but then, with others pointing that out to me, and thinking about it on my own, when I tell a lie I am fooling myself inside. My conscience is telling me, what is not true, so it is then that I am spiritual.

²⁸ Palacio Vargas, “La espiritualidad como medio de desarrollo humano”, 480.

Let us remember that lying is typified by the Catholic Church as one of the capital sins. Hence, that human beings are inclined to evil is not new. The fact is broadly documented by theological anthropology. What does incarnate interest for this research is the fact that the person involved has placed it as part of her spiritual experience. Let us remember that in the West, evil is associated to the figure of the Devil, an outside reality to the human being enticing and alluring them to evil. In contrast, the person places him as part of their inner self, where their conscience emerges at the same time declaring that it is not a censurable act: “My conscience is telling me that it is not, so that is when I am spiritual.”

Despite it being the only case, this way of situating evil as part of their own spiritual conscience, covers a relevant importance for this research. In this perspective, evil is not the Devil’s responsibility. The human individual is accountable. Metaphorically, our participant sees herself as a kind of Albert Necker’s cube; the cube where “each interpretation of the cube is symmetrical to the other is demonstrated, but both dwell within the same shape,”²⁹ neither is more correct than the other.

In the same way, the dynamics of good and evil are equal to symmetric components of the same spiritual reality of the individual. Up to what point are human beings conscious of what drives us inside? If we were, would there be a way to educate our inner selves more consciously?

What is Spirituality for the Cafam Day Center’s older Women?

From the experience of God where these women come from and their self-perception as spiritual individuals derived from their understanding of spirituality, is a specific way of being spiritual. To proceed spiritually, or proceed in a spiritual pattern means that the individual is integrated into a manner of procedure according to their basic dimensions: social, biological, cultural, ethical-moral and transcendent. As it is known, the human individual “is not an aggregate of juxtaposed elements; they are an integrated whole that constitutes a dynamic supra system”³⁰ set with vital experiences of the living person in contact with the dynamics of everyday life.

To understand implies a mode of spirituality and constitutes the deepest and most genuine part of a human individual. It is what imprints character, identity, self-dominion. It is the place where the individual draws the necessary dynamism to

²⁹ Uribe, “Ilusionario”.

³⁰ Martínez Miguélez, “Dimensiones básicas de un desarrollo humano integral”, 119-138.

confront hardships with determination, moves them to live with passion and hope. It drives individuals towards change and creativity shedding anything that limits their freedom.

Despite it all, the understanding of one's own spirituality varies from one person to another, in such a way, that in a group like the one these women participated, different types of spirituality may bloom, almost always connected to the representation they have of the divinity. The study shows different understandings of spirituality such as the ones in the following paragraphs.

An Open Spirituality

The study shows an understanding of a spirituality linked to Christian spirituality. A specific mode of the participants is shown in their relation with God, others, and things. In their relation with God, they make transparent a spirit of faith made visible in specific practices of prayer, their participation in specific rites of their religious creed, representations of God as mentioned before. In their relations with others they reveal actions of mercy, compassion and forgiveness. They introduce themselves as women with the capacity to put themselves in the shoes of others with feelings of empathy before differences and plurality. In relation to things, they make known an attitude of detachment in regards to material goods and respect and care for nature. In their own concepts, this is how their spirituality emerges:

Spirituality is a continuous growth, climb, evolution, knowing how to live day by day and with others.

To me spirituality is a lifestyle, a way to live with others.

Spirituality is an understanding of others; one must place oneself in the other's shoes.

Participant 2

Spirituality to me is to live well, walk, have good but positive friends, because I don't keep the company of those who are not positive, no [...] for I have a lot of faith in my Lord and my little Virgin. The Lord helps me think. That is how I see spirituality.

Participant 3

To me spirituality is to be united to God, but not in continuous prayer. It is offering the day to Him, and asking Him to be my company in everything I do during the day; and offer everything to Him, and the best; and be united to Him. One does not have to be praying all day, but to carry Him in the heart. I talk to Him even when taking a taxi.

I also talk to the little Virgin (referring to the Virgin Mary). I say: 'You know I am in a hurry and it's getting dark. I sure am scared of the dark. I don't like being out in the dark after five. If I am out on my own I tell the Virgin that I need a cab. Blood of Christ assist me or Lord... This, and things work out the best for me.

Participant 4

It is not for us to judge whether this is right or wrong. We only set it forth to indicate that the relationship with divinity happens in the daily living of people in all kinds of imaginable ways. What is important is that it works out for these people's lives. It must be frightening to be elderly and feel unprotected, out in the street in the middle of the night. However, God shows up as the friend that comes out to meet them and helps them fetch the taxi. That must be a fascinating experience!

Considering the living conditions of life assisting mankind today, spirituality must allow the individual to take total control of their life, prepare their soul, mind, and heart in decision-making. Also to bring forth change of actions and inner transformation. It is believing that everything is possible when one's gaze is on the essence of the Creator, in few words, goodness materialized in acts of love.³¹

As mentioned before, spirituality in the lives of these people is not a contraption, it really affects their lives.

A Spirituality Rooted in the Meaning of Life

"Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give" (Matt 10:8) seems to be the motto of these people. Data shows a spirituality adhered to service. In fact, it is an attitude that hooks the life of persons onto a meaning for themselves and an appropriation of another through service. This attitude is a behavioral pattern in the eleven older women partaking in the study. One of them puts it in the following terms:

I know none other than to serve; I was born to give [...] I want to give it all, I need nothing. Every night I pray to God saying 'give nothing to me', just give me encouragement and love, give me nothing else, I pray for the world, for my whole family, friends, the sick, no, nothing for me; the only thing I ask of God is that I give it all each day. I give up everything.

³¹ Palacio Vargas, "La espiritualidad como medio de desarrollo humano", 466.

Participant 4 expresses the same attitude in this way:

I was also a smile operation volunteer for about ten years. The administration staff changed so I told myself I was going to work not because I didn't have anything else to do at home, but because I had the sacred duty and great liking of going to work on Wednesdays.

The conclusion drawn from this is that “spirituality centered on life is given, emptied, offered to others for their growth and development thus completing the cycle of transforming oneself as I help transform, heal as I aid in healing others.”³²

The Spirituality of Duty

Duty and fear regarding God marks a starting point in people that nourish themselves with this type of spirituality, evidenced in distilled religious memory such as this:

Spirituality is to obey the will of God.

To me spirituality is contact with God, wherever I am I keep in mind he is watching me. I should not do this thing or the other because it is offensive to Him: so I look after my body to avoid abusing it because it is a temple of God.

Participant 1

On one hand, *duty* is the foundation of this type of spirituality; duty for God's sake that demands a certain behavior and in addition is watchful and recriminating if the behavior is not aligned with His will. It is clear that the individual is under a control by the representation of the divinity that operates in the back of their minds (themselves). “I care for my body to avoid abusing it because it is God's temple.”

On the other hand, the fear factor comes up as a controlling factor in the life of the individual. “I must not do this or the other because it is offensive to God.” How sad it is to find people reduced to duty and fear! But without a doubt they are there, people of blood and bones going up the mountain burdened with duty and fear. But as Alejandra Pizarnik would say: duty and fear installed unto death's echo and even in its name:

*In the echo of my deaths
Lingers fear.*

³² Ibid., 479.

*Do you know fear?
I know of it when I call out my name.
It is fear,
Fear's black hat,
Hiding rats in my veins,
Or death's dead lips
Drinking up my desires.
Yes. In the echo of my deaths
Lingers fear.*³³

Nothing makes up for living in subjection. Up to what point do duty and fear constitute an insult to human dignity?

To Conclude

The study demonstrates that the spiritual experience of these women is sustained in the experience of a divine reality. God is at the foundation of their spiritual experience. Clearly this phenomenon is not a novelty. The different religious schemes have proven it and have

exposed it in a diversity of sacred writings. Buddhism, for instance, indicates that “the innate ontological condition of all living creatures is of Buddhist nature; that is, all living creatures possess the innate potentiality to attain illumination.”³⁴ The Hebrew realm on its side speaks of *ruah* (vital breath). As in Buddhism, the spirit is not an outer ontological reality of the human individual. “Yahweh God modeled human beings from the dust of the earth, insufflated breath into his nostrils, and man came to be.” (Gen. 2:7).

In our study group, similar dynamics can be seen, so “where does the novelty of the spiritual experience take hold in older woman in the Cafam Day Center? In their attitude before divinity. It is in this element that all is gambled. From this comes the representations of God mentioned before. They go from an anthropomorphic representation to an ATM representation of God, a mere utilitarian understanding of the divine.

How might the divine representation of this nature impact the life of a person? It is well to remember that “each individual molds himself psychically amidst their biology, culture and society that cradles them. Then and only then does the human

³³ Pizarnik, “El miedo”.

³⁴ Aceves, “Naturaleza y origen de los demonios en la épica tibetana de Gesar de Ling”, 193.

animal come to a condition of survival on their own.”³⁵ Therefore, a spirituality secured by a utilitarian attitude may give place to actions and attitudes fed by frustration and fear.

As said before, a representation of the divine of this sort may be hazardous for the believer for when it erodes, it may plunge them into frustration, confusion, and desolation. Thus the results of the investigation alert us before the presence of a religious experience entrenched in the “logic of a retributive structure of human action,” and that a person is hardly aware of “the constitutive elements that underlie that same structure of human action with adjusting factors in its foundation. Should we determine them, would we know what gives light to our actions?”³⁶

This study points out a spiritual experience needing to be qualified starting from formative processes. In all certainty, a decision of this sort will considerably impact the quality of life of these older adults.

A *second conclusion* that we wish to bring up deals with evil. We observed Participant 3 going beyond exposing her inner life, constructing a bit marginally upon an assiduous religious practice, revealing how evil plays a part in the symbolic platform of her spiritual experience. It is true, in dealing with this single case, but the content of her experience in all surety represents the people that have a little more holistic vision of their spiritual experience and is talking about a condition of our anthropological settings. For it is not possible to talk about spirituality if we leave out the equation to evil. Drawn on this, we dare to consider the following:

Both the altruistic solidarity with others, the willingness to help our kin, and the selfish indifference towards others, both the social instincts and the egotistical, are evidently a part of our normal spiritual endowment, and are probably both biologically determined. They limit each other since both instincts, of solidarity and greed, push us in opposite directions, expecting and depending on sound common sense that conflicts and animosity constitute a constant component of human destiny.³⁷

Along the same lines, Dawkins was able to prove that the human being as a biological organism is subject to the whims of evolution and the dictates of nature. “We, like the rest of the animals, are machines created by our genes.”³⁸ According to Dawkins, “a predominant quality we expect to find in a prosperous gene would be

³⁵ Gonzalez Montoya, “El fenómeno religioso: causas pedagógicas y consecuencias antropológicas en nuestro contexto sociocultural”.

³⁶ Maffa Terán, “La estructura retributiva de la acción humana: una lectura cristiano-budista”.

³⁷ Kolakowski, “Utopía y futuro”.

³⁸ Dawkins, *El gen egoísta. Las bases biológicas de nuestra conducta*, 12.

merciless egoism. This selfish quality of the gene would normally yield the origin of selfishness in human behavior.”³⁹ We are not elaborating apologetics to genetic moral, “for a society simply based on genetic law,”⁴⁰ of a cruel universal egocentrism, would be a very unpleasant society to live in.” His statement is in the interest of acknowledging our earthliness.

To understand that human spirit is sprinkled with selfishness compels us to enclose ourselves upon our existential axis. From times back, human beings have been aware of this burden tied to an anthropological nature. Paul of Tarsus himself is prey to this obfuscated force that nestles in his entrails and predisposes him to proceed against benevolence, freedom, and the gratuity he seeks. He was able to see that alongside God’s spirit also dwelling in him, his evolving nature seized him.

Certainly, in my proceedings I do not comprehend: for I do not what I want, but I do what I hate [...] for I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is at hand, but doing the good is not. for I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.” (Rom. 7:15-23).

A *third conclusion* is that a person’s spirituality can be observed, analyzed, and systematized. Here lies the singularity of this study and its academic value presuming the Cafam Day Center’s older women have an identifiable spiritual construct with a specific function for their lives. Of course, it is not for us to judge whether this spirit and/or spirits from which their ways of being, doing and acting in history proceed are right or wrong. What matters is that there is a spiritual construct feasibly being observed and analyzed for its effects on the lives of these people. There is a spiritual realm that is objectivized in spiritual convictions which bear beliefs and specific practices. Definitely, there is an objectivized spiritual realm in the phenomenology of their lives.

References

- Aceves, Bertha. “Naturaleza y origen de los demonios en la épica tibetana de Gesar de Ling”. *Revista acta poética* 33 (2012): 181-208.
- Baena, Gustavo. *Fenomenología de la revelación. Teología de la Biblia y hermenéutica*. Estella (Navarra): Editorial Verbo Divino, 2011.
- . “¿Qué es la espiritualidad? Conferencia Taller de Regionalización, Colegio San Ignacio, Medellín, 2 de abril de 2011”. *You Tube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8mdFFZaBdk&t=141s> (accessed August 23, 2020).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid,13.

- Baquero, Alejandro, y Germán Gutiérrez. “Abram Amsel: teoría de la frustración y aprendizaje disposicional”. *Revista latinoamericana de psicología* 39/3 (2007): 663-667.
- Boff, Leonardo. “La base biológica de la espiritualidad”. <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/boff/articulo.php?num=505> (accessed March 5, 2021).
- Coupeau, José Carlos. “Una ciudad en lo alto: espiritualidad y ciudad en los escritos teológicos de Ignacio Ellacuría”, *Theologica Xaveriana* vol. 72 (2022): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.11144/javeriana.tx72.caecet>
- Dawkins, Richard. *El gen egoísta. Las bases biológicas de nuestra conducta*. Barcelona: Salvat Editores, 1993.
- De Balzac, Honoré. “Las ilusiones perdidas III”. https://web.seducoahuila.gob.mx/biblioweb/upload/las_ilusiones_perdidas_iii.pdf (accessed March 5, 2021).
- Einstein, Albert. *Mis ideas y opiniones*. Zaragoza: INO Reproducciones, 2002.
- Gonzalez Montoya, William. “El fenómeno religioso: causas pedagógicas y consecuencias antropológicas en nuestro contexto sociocultural”. *Educación y ciudad* 21 (2011). Disponible en: *Instituto para la Investigación Educativa y el Desarrollo Pedagógico*, <https://revistas.idep.edu.co/index.php/educacion-y-ciudad/article/view/112/101> (accessed November 20, 2020).
- Gibran, Khalil. *El profeta, el loco*. Bogotá: Quad Graphics, 2011.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. “Utopía y futuro”. *El País*, 18 de abril de 1993, https://elpais.com/diario/1993/04/19/opinion/735170418_850215.html (accessed August 22, 2020).
- Maestro Eckhart. “Del hombre noble”. En *Obras alemanas. Tratados y sermones. Mercaba*, https://mercaba.org/Enciclopedia/E/eckhart_tratados_y_sermones.htm (accessed on January 10, 2021).
- Maffa Terán, Nelson. “La estructura retributiva de la acción humana: una lectura cristiano-budista”. En *Budismo y cristianismo en diálogo*, compilado por José Luis Meza Rueda, 68-87. Bogotá: Ediciones San Pablo, 2018.
- Martínez Miguélez, Miguel. “Dimensiones básicas de un desarrollo humano integral”. *Polis, Revista de la Universidad Bolivariana* 8/23 (2009): 119-138. [*Scielo*, <https://scielo.conicyt.cl/pdf/polis/v8n23/art06.pdf> (accessed August 25, 2020)].
- Palacio Vargas, Carlos Julián. “La espiritualidad como medio de desarrollo humano”. *Cuestiones teológicas* 42/98 (2015): 459-481.

- Panikkar, Raimon. *La experiencia de Dios*. Madrid: PPC, 1994.
- Pizarnik, Alejandra. “El miedo”. *Poemas del alma*, <https://www.poemas-del-alma.com/alejandra-pizarnik-el-miedo.htm> (accessed May 14, 2020).
- Rahner, Karl. *Curso fundamental sobre la fe. Introducción al concepto de cristianismo*. Barcelona: Herder, 1998.
- _____. *Experiencia del Espíritu*. Madrid: Narcea, 1977.
- Remolina, Gerardo. *Los fundamentos de una “ilusión”. ¿Dios y la religión, ilusión o realidad?* Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2017.
- Riechmann, Jorge. *La habitación de Pascal. Ensayos para fundamentar éticas de suficiencia y políticas de autocontención*. Madrid: La Catarata, 2009.
- Rivera, Armando, y María Montero. “Ajuste psicológico y vida religiosa en adultos mayores”. *Universitas Psicológica* 13/135 (2014): 895-906.
- Sosa Montes, Gabriel. “Entender, comprender, interpretar”. *Enseñanza e investigación en psicología* 18 (2013): 191-201.
- Uribe, Diego. “Ilusionario”. <http://www.ilusionario.es/PERCEPCION/necker.htm> (accessed on January 26, 2020).
- Viviente, José Luis. “Albert Einstein. La religión del misterio”. *Revista Real Academia de Ciencias*, <http://www.raczar.es/webracz/ImageServlet?mod=publicaciones&subMod=revistas&car=revista58&archivo=053.pdf> (accessed August 10, 2020).