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MINDFUL HAPPINESS NOWADAYS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE FROM ANCIENT BIBLICAL WISDOM

ABSTRACT

Our current times are characterized by a strange paradox. The secularized world we live in no longer embraces Christianity as such nor its concrete praxis in churches. Simultaneously, however, our times are very remarkably searching for the things that “do really matter”, for “happiness”, “meaning” and “wisdom”. This occurs in a real plethora of different ways and against the background of distinct traditions. Nevertheless, many of the intrinsic beautiful elements in this plethora of contemporary approaches simply are and have for ages been as much Judeo-Christian thinking and living. Indeed, we discern them in the monastic tradition, in medieval mysticism, in the (re-)new(ed) tendencies of Christian meditation, in the Biblical texts, and especially in Biblical Wisdom Literature. All too often, however, they have been forgotten beneath the dust of times. We should rediscover them and situate them in this new and actual context.

1. INTRODUCTION: NEW TIMES, ANCIENT NEEDS

Writing a contribution in honour of Fanie Snyman is a precious and delicate undertaking. How could any scientific article reflect 25 years of friendship. I met Fanie for the very first time in 1993, during his research stay in Leuven, together with his family. Being doctoral students of Marc Vervenne at the time, Hans and I met Fanie as our promoter’s “visiting scholar”: it was the very first time we met

“a real South African”! A few weeks later, Fanie and Estie were guests at our wedding and still some weeks later, we took them to Brussels airport. It was the beginning of what has become 25 years of friendship, with numerous stays either in Leuven, or in Bloemfontein. So, how could any scientific contribution on what I usually write about, in terms of detailed textual or redaction criticism, mirror even a shadow of this friendship. Therefore, I chose a topic closer to life: I aim at relating the actual search for happiness and fulfilment in present-day and global society to the very similar one in Old Testament Sapiential literature¹, with a sincere wish of many blessings for many years to come.

Our current times are characterized by a strange paradox. The secularized world we live in no longer embraces Christianity as such nor its concrete praxis in churches. Illustrative of this situation is the fact that people do not continue to go to church regularly. The age of those who do so is augmenting. The ignorance on even crucial aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition is omnipresent. Simultaneously, however, our times are very remarkably searching for the things that “do really matter”, for “happiness”, “meaning” and “wisdom”. This occurs in a real plethora of different ways and against the background of distinct traditions. There are numerous examples in this respect. I refer to the growing success of “mindfulness”, the existential and scientific reflection on “happiness” in “positive psychology”, the attention for the “here and now”, the hype of yoga, the increasing interest in different forms of meditation, the search for wholeness and harmony, the interest in existential philosophy, and the search for “wisdom”, also in the context of what we start to call “western Buddhism”. There is really no need to deride this. Often, this occurs in a very valuable way, offering people support and guidance, effectively resulting in a better quality of life.

Maybe, in all this, we even touch upon the core of being human. Even more, the core of “religiosity”. Maybe, it is highly time to discover in these phenomena the “signs of our time”, as the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965) named it. It might probably be good to address searching people precisely on this deeper existential level, the deepest layer of their search for harmony with and within reality, for wholeness, as well as in their sense of transcendence. Maybe, we ourselves should even

1 I have written this contribution against the background of a far more extensive presentation of this issue, and a concrete illustration thereof on the basis of a reading of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, in a recent book of mine (Lemmelijn 2017). Since the main stream of thoughts in this article is based on direct observation and immediate personal reflection, as well as on the mentioned book, the apparatus of footnotes and bibliographical references is rather limited.

dare to search, to reflect and to speak in terms of this reality beyond the concrete narratives of different religions, including Christianity. Maybe, this “beyond”, on the deepest level of every religious awareness, could become a renewed starting point, and thereafter, or maybe only thereafter, could we demonstrate how Christianity fits in.

Indeed, many of the intrinsic beautiful elements emphasized in the said contemporary approaches simply are and have been for ages as much Judeo-Christian thinking and living. All too often, however, they have been forgotten beneath the dust of times. We should rediscover, situate and understand them in this new and actual context. Indeed, we discern them in the monastic tradition, in medieval mysticism, in the new tendencies of Christian meditation, but also in the Biblical texts, and especially in Biblical Wisdom Literature. It is worth exploring the questions and longings of searching people nowadays from that perspective, and foremost not to profile ourselves as those who know better. For, as Tolkien already expressed it, “Not all those who wander, are lost ...”.

The present contribution will deal with this issue in three parts. First, the many ways of people’s searching nowadays will be analytically presented from three observable recurring and constant elements. Secondly, the latter characteristics will be analogously recognized throughout the Christian tradition. And finally, they will be mirrored by, and related to three crucial and parallel concepts in Old Testament Wisdom literature.

2. SEARCHING AND LONGING FOR “MORE” IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS

2.1 Rushing and running or breathing again

Few words are needed to make people recognize the feeling that our times are utterly busy: people doing many things simultaneously, losing attention and focus, running, rushing, heading forward to a seemingly inevitable burn-out or depression. And indeed, this growing consciousness makes people realize that this way of living is indeed neither so clever, nor pleasant nor healthy. A way of life without any breaks to breathe and without any meta-critical thinking is not humanly enriching or maybe not even dignified.

Against this background, indeed, many people are desiring a different way of life. We observe a special and renewed attention for the search for happiness and meaning, and this from many traditions and often in very valuable ways. One very remarkable element in this context is the attention

and focus given to our breathing. This is actually not so surprising: whoever thinks about what breathing factually is realizes that it is the fundamental and constant (bodily) condition of our existence. It is a reality, moreover, which we share with all life around us: all breathe the same air, not only human beings, but also animals and plants. Our breath is, in other words, a reality *par excellence* which does not only take us back to the moment of the here and now, but which also connects us intrinsically to a compassing reality while simultaneously guaranteeing our individuality. It is, therefore, not strange at all that breathing is linked to the experience of a deeper reality that gives and enables life. Moreover, and in this respect, we do learn a great deal from language: the word “respiration” or breathing, as in the Latin “*spirare*” and “*respirare*” (with the prefix *re-* pointing repetitively at breathing in and out) is similar to the word “*spiritus*”, which indeed means simultaneously “breath” and “spirit” of life, very parallel to the Greek *dunamis* and the Hebrew *ruach*.² Remarkably, and not coincidentally, it is also recognizable in the word “spirituality”.

Starting from a particular focus on our breathing, an attitude of attentiveness, or literally, “mindfulness” is created. A deeper attentiveness that aims ultimately at the experience of the awareness of a deep connectedness to, and harmony with the whole reality. That consciousness is expected to lead to inner peace, to acceptance, to letting go the forced will to hold and control everything and everyone, as well as the compulsive desire of constant change. It pertains, in other words, and classically expressed, to becoming “one”, in “union” with ourselves, but equally with the compassing reality in us, around us and beyond ourselves.

2.2 A longing for connectedness and wholeness

What is at stake in this attentive looking beyond the immediate reality, is, in my view, actually related to the deepest religious awareness, beyond all concrete forms of religions, namely the connectedness to the whole reality which is greater than we are and deeper than what we immediately observe. The underlying layer of that religious consciousness is the search for what both interconnects and surpasses us, the awareness of the transcendent character of our reality, not somewhere far away or strange to life, but within reality and within the very context of our experiences.

Indeed, the word “religion” is derived from the word “*re-ligare*”, which means to connect strongly. Or, according to others, it is derived from “*re-legere*”, an intensive “reading” of reality. Both elements touch the core: the attentive observation of reality as well as the lived experience of the

2 On the meaning of *ruach* in the Old Testament, see Merrigan & Lemmelijn (2006).

fundamental interconnectedness of all life. In this respect, another linguistic paradox is noteworthy. We do speak of “transcendent” (surpassing, above us) and “fundamental” (grounding, beneath us). In our language, both terms seem to be contradictory, but actually they point to the same. On the basis of a deeper underlying reality which people experience, a certain religious awareness as a longing for wholeness and connectedness arises, which simultaneously surpasses and transcends that very human and seeable reality. In that situation, religious traditions, narratives and religions develop: each and every one trying, within their own context, to touch upon that same underlying reality. From those concrete narratives, we start again searching what connects them: the ultimate transcendent reality itself. In this way, the underlying deeper fundament and the surpassing transcendent reality coincide in a “beyond” of human thinking and experience.

2.3 Three constant and recurring elements

When analytically observing this factual religious longing, we can note that it is linked to three aspects that are very strongly present in the current search for meaning.

- It is very clearly about a mindful awareness of life in its starting point of the here and now.
- That awareness aims at harmony with and connectedness to everything and everyone that surrounds us and transcends us.
- In this context, it aims at the realization of a meaningful life in wholeness, in the context of which the word “happiness” is used.

These three elements – the here and now (the moment, the present), the connectedness and harmony with and within the whole of reality, and the longing for fulfilment and happiness – are omnipresent. Publicity refers to it; films and novels allude to it; journals dedicate contributions to it. Health insurances, schools and companies draw attention to wellbeing and spirituality and offer training in this respect. Even the little message on the label of your tea reminds you “to enjoy the moment”. These ideas and the reflection thereon can be observed in many ways. I refer briefly to some examples.

First, we can point to the enormous success of “mindfulness”, instructed by numerous teachers and schools, following the inspiration of Jon Kabat-Zinn and Thich Nhat Hanh. Many courses and (lucrative) initiatives, as well as scientific research are connected thereto, among others in the field of the so-called “body/mind medicine” (such as MBCT: Mindfulness-Based

Cognitive Therapy, or MBSR: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction).³ There is also a new interest in certain forms of ancient philosophy: both Stoa and Epicurism draw new attention, also in the context of science popularization. Aristotle's distinction between hedonism and *eudaimonia* – the superficial “feeling good” resulting from an agreeable experience, on the one hand, and the fulfilling happiness which comes with engagement and meaning, on the other – are reflectively taken up within the context of the distinction between a “pleasant life”, an “engaged life” and a “meaningful life”. All this is clearly at stake in the growing interest for, and the further development of so-called “positive psychology”, a science domain that is becoming popular worldwide.⁴ In this respect, reference can be made to the reflection on wellbeing and “happiness”, and especially in its relation to “meaning” and “accomplishment” as well as to the importance given to a coherent vision, on the one hand, and a deep motivation oriented to a life goal, on the other.⁵ In the same context, spirituality enters the stage within the context of a broad definition about touching, carefully tasting and being open to deeper and pure qualities such as beauty and wonder, especially in and through inner experience. All this is realized within the awareness of a context of a transcending reality, of which we are part, in which room is created for existential questions, and in which attitudes on the basis of fundamental values can be realized. Moreover, happiness is not only studied and reflected; it is also of major interest to a very wide public. In this respect, we could think of the worldwide bestseller *The world book of happiness* (Bormans 2010), in which 100 internationally selected scientists in positive psychology share their views on what really matters to make people happy.

In the same vein of a growing awareness of a clogging world in which anchors of rest, harmony and wholeness are highly needed, we can observe, also from the point of view of medicine and psychiatry, the development of new terms such as “mental hygiene”. People are getting conscious of the fact that our brains can actually not cope with such a multitude of stimuli to which they are usually exposed nowadays. The negative effect of a constantly divided attention within our so-called multitasking activities – simultaneously on tablet, smartphone and laptop, disturbing our concentration continuously –, is very clear. The divided attention should

3 On the effects of mindfulness in the context of worrying behaviour, depression and burn-out, see the research projects of Prof. Dr. F. Raes (Faculty of Psychology) at KU Leuven.

4 See the astonishing success and the accessibility of the digital MOOC-course by Leijssen and her team (2018).

5 See the work of one of its founders, Seligman (2004; 2011).

be restored and turned again into undivided concentration. Only in this way can our psychic and mental wellbeing be safeguarded.

Further, we observe the growing interest in different forms of meditation and the hype of yoga, in whatever form. If seriously practised, also in this instance, we discern the attention for the here and now in undivided concentration, the unifying of our body, soul and mind, as well as the awareness of an intrinsic relation to the transcending reality. Furthermore, we also observe the mild acceptance of our own limits and the re-awakened engagement to the outer world in good intentions and life attitudes, to name a few aspects already referred to earlier.

To conclude: whoever is attentive to these aspects will also observe the development of what we could almost call a new “religious culture”. All of the above elements also seem to be present in our culture as such. To give an example: we could think of all “religious” language and symbols in the films of Star Wars, or even more explicitly, and against a pluriform religious background, the many reminiscences in the extraordinary book, *The alchemist*, by P. Coelho.

In other words, it seems to become important again to attentively be present in the moment: to let go the greedy grasping and planning of the future and to realize that life happens in the here and now. It seems important that we become aware again of the fact that we are not only connected to each other, but also to the surrounding nature, world and even to the greater, transcending reality: we are no isolated, untouchable, autonomous and individualistically modernistic monads. The result aimed for from this double focus is a deeper fulfilment and the realization of “meaning” in what is called “happiness”: the ever faster, ever more and ever better seems only to result in ever less content people.

3. FROM EAST TO WEST: A PARALLEL SEARCH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Observing religions nowadays from the above described background, we get the impression that people tend to link this new way of searching to mainly oriental religious traditions, and find inspiration therein. There is nothing wrong with that. Travelling far away undoubtedly broadens our horizon. Nobody has ever become wiser by mere navel-gazing. However, it is simultaneously very remarkable that we are not sufficiently aware of the fact that many intrinsically beautiful elements present in this plethora of approaches are also, and have been for ages, truly part of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

3.1 *Nil novi sub sole*

The situation and time in which the Christian church father Gregory of Nazianzus lived, namely the 4th century CE, resembles in several ways the current situation described earlier. Contrary to some of his contemporary theologians, Gregory did not oppose the “pagan” cultures as such. Rather, he was interested and willing to dialogue with an open mind-set. He searched for clues to reflect and integrate the Christian tradition within that context. Indeed, it is important to realize that early Christianity did not develop in a vacuum, but rather that it was embedded in a culture with its own sensitivities. Simultaneously, Gregory’s time was also characterized by internal Christian disputes, particularly the dogmatic discussions on the doctrine of trinity. In this respect, Trinitarians and Arians held different views, which were ultimately settled in the Council of Nicea. Weary of all those excessively rationalist discussions that tried to “grasp” God, Gregory referred, within this very context, to the fact that God cannot be ultimately known. With our human thinking, he stated, we can only know what God is not, and far less what he actually is. That is why he stated that theology should ultimately lead to the mystic meeting with God. Theology and community with God cannot be divided, he opined. God can only be contemplated in “*theosis*”. Too many definitions of God would even result in atheism, he said.

In our time, we see very analogously a Christianity that can neither grow nor flourish somewhere safely in a protected cocoon. Our times are also characterized by their own sensitivities and culture, in the context of which (as I described earlier) the longing for inner depth and spirituality is present in many different ways. It is not good to turn away from it and mockingly laugh at those “tinkerers”, or marginalize their search as woolly. Rather, like Gregory, we should enter into dialogue and read this manifold search of meaning as the “signs of our time”, and, within that context, we could demonstrate what we have to offer as Christians. In addition, we note that our contemporary Christianity might also have been too excessively rational in trying to define God and all of his mystery. Like Gregory, people today, within and outside Christianity, observe that God is indeed not “seizable” in such a way, and that moreover this kind of theological “truth claims” does not appeal to people nowadays. Maybe, Christianity of our times has, very parallel to that of Gregory’s time, been too busy with dogmatic doctrines, with moral and moralizing rules and with a discourse of “knowing” and “explaining”. Maybe God himself has been forgotten a little therein. The feeling, the deep experience of transcendence, the “meeting” of the divine has been pushed to the background, or at least, nowadays it is no longer immediately linked to Christianity.

The famous theologian, Karl Rahner (1971:22), once said:⁶ “The faithful of tomorrow will be a ‘mystic’, someone who has ‘experienced’ something, or there will be no more.” It might sound a little drastic, but maybe it is true. It is probably time to rediscover and accentuate that dimension, also within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to demonstrate that indeed all searching people nowadays, within a time that longs again for “more”, do not have to search exclusively for beacons in strange and foreign cultures, religions or philosophies.

3.2 Coming home

Indeed, many intrinsically beautiful elements present in this plethora of approaches that I described earlier (sub 2), are also truly part of the age-old Judeo-Christian tradition. For the sake of clarity, I summarize them again: (1) a mindful awareness of life in its starting point of the here and now; (2) aiming at harmony with, and connectedness to everything and everyone that surrounds us and transcends us, and (3) pursuing the realization of a meaningful life in wholeness and happiness.

We can observe similar accents, by way of example, already in the spirituality of the so-called “Desert Fathers” from the 3rd century CE, whom we could view as “proto-monks”. Among this group of early Christians was Evagrius of Pontus. He was one of the first to write down his reflected experiences in a more or less systematic way, be it essentially focusing on living practice and not as a theoretical *tractatus*. Remarkably central in this tradition was the “ascent of the soul to God”, and this particularly in what can be called, in classical terms, the three phases of purification, illumination and unification. Moreover, we can already discern the first grains of the principle of “*ora et labora*” (pray and work) in the balanced way of life of these Desert Fathers.

In the 5th-6th century CE, and most probably in the trail of Evagrius, the latter principle has been elaborated in the rule of Benedict of Nursia. In other words, precisely those elements on which we are focusing nowadays are undeniably present in the Benedictine monastic tradition, that has developed from these roots and that stood at the cradle of virtually all monkhood in Europe. This is also very clear in the further development of Benedictine life, namely in the context of the Cistercian reform and especially in the life of Bernard of Clairvaux, reaching the 11th-12th century. His emphasis on the return to the core of the “*ora et labora*”, as much as

6 “Der Fromme von Morgen wird ein “Mystiker” sein, einer, der etwas “erfahren” hat, oder er wird nicht mehr sein.”

his mystical awareness of the inexpressible greatness of God, are very typical in this respect.

The said elements are also remarkably recognizable in the 12th century's spirituality of Francis of Assisi, in which simplicity of life and the intrinsic relation with God are intensely connected. This also pertains to a tradition that is still lived and experienced currently within the broader Franciscan religious order.

Furthermore, we can also observe similar elements in the medieval Rhenish Mysticism in the trail of Meister Eckhart (13th-14th century), which had a crucial influence on the theological, spiritual and mystical thinking of subsequent centuries.

We can also quite as much, but again in another context, observe these accents in the faithful life and reflection of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, which reformed the order of the Carmel in the 16th century. Of central importance, in this respect, was the life in deep connectedness with God, in which prayer and engagement are intrinsically interrelated, and in which the relation to God results in an essential transformation of personal life.

However, also in our time, the said elements are very strikingly present in the renewed emphasis on Christian contemplation and meditation as, among others, in the work of John Main, Laurence Freeman or Thomas Keating (and the "World Community of Christian Meditation" practising this). They do indeed explicitly link up with the age-old Christian contemplative tradition described earlier, and they live themselves inspired by the rule of Benedict (the first two as Benedictine, and the latter – who passed away very recently – as Trappist). In this context, it is said that meditation enables the possibility of a lived meeting with Christ, or in other words, the experience of God's love in Christ. This experienced meeting's aim is inner and outer harmony and peace, leading to an experience of wholeness and unification, which we cannot possess, but rather gratefully receive as a gift of God. It is the gift to become whole and unified, in order to use all possibilities in service of life, happiness and ultimate being. It is said, in this context, that meditation is for the spirit what breathing is for the body. Moreover, and within the same context, we can see that the insights of contemporary psychology are reflected and integrated: that body and mind are essentially interrelated and that our "corporeality" is not something incidental, but rather constitutive for who we are and for the way we think and live life.⁷

7 See, in this respect, the concept of "embodiment".

Finally, and in still another way, the above described elements are equally recognizable in the spirituality and the meditation of Taizé, or very much integrated in, for example, the texts of Anselm Grün – equally a Benedictine –, being read all over the world in many languages, most clearly not without a reason.

3.3 In search of balance

If, by way of illustration, we briefly take a closer look at the life of Benedict of Nursia, we observe the following process. Throughout his own religious growth, he reached harmony with himself as well as connectedness to both the surrounding world and the transcending reality, God. He reached, in other words, union with himself and his own nature, but equally with the nature all around him: he lived in peace with both his inner self and the outer world around him. And precisely that inner attitude enabled him to meet that external world. His spirituality was no woolly, eccentric aura, but very much grounded in the world and daily life. It is about inner depth within reality itself. His deep interiority was not withdrawing to his own cosy and safe self. Rather, it was the basis and motivation for all concrete engagement to what and w/Who surrounded him.

Indeed, the famous *adagium* of Benedict, guaranteeing to the present day a balanced life attitude, reads: “*ora et labora*”, pray and work. From the deep inner reality which is nourished in reflection and prayer, we have to reach out in effort and engagement. And vice versa, the work being done should be done within the same horizon. No mere withdrawal in secure meditation, but no working to death and losing every perspective either. Thus, it is all about creating a good balance between the two mentioned aspects intrinsically enriching one another. And even if it sounds very paradoxical: Benedict’s inner rest and harmony lead him to vivacity and dynamism, resulting in the ultimate realization of dedicated love.

3.4 An echo in the Bible

In addition, we observe the above described similarity not only in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also in the texts at its basis. The Biblical Sapiential Literature, in particular, is down to earth and rooted in daily reality. It is not very difficult to mirror the present-day searching for happiness, meaning and wisdom to the age-old Biblical Wisdom that reflects on life in its daily ups and downs. Biblical Wisdom does so, starting from the emphasis on the here and now, on the one hand, and the connectedness to what transcends us, on the other. Against the background of that double orientation, it aims at the conscious realization and fulfilment of a meaningful life. This is expressed in three specific and respectively parallel concepts.

First, the attention for the here and now, in combination with the sensitivity for the connectedness with the surrounding reality, is recognizable in the horizontal orientation of Biblical Wisdom, in which the wise attitude of “righteousness” is realized. Secondly, the connectedness to reality, which simultaneously creates the awareness of a transcending reality, is discerned in the vertical orientation of the “fear of the Lord”, in deep and fundamental respect. And finally, we observe the third element, the aiming at fulfilment and happiness in the “blessing of the Most High” which leads to full life and peace. In Biblical Wisdom, the blessing of God consists of a deep existential security in which daily life, with and withstanding its fragility, is carried and enriched and thus reaches wholeness.

4. THE “GROUNDED” AND “EARTHED” ESSENCE OF BIBLICAL WISDOM⁸

4.1 Biblical Wisdom as wisdom of life

To talk of Biblical Wisdom is actually to talk of the wisdom of life. After all, the Old Testament Wisdom Literature is oriented, first and foremost, towards the realization of a meaningful life. This wisdom of life is very closely connected to a certain “way of life”, namely living life in the way that a wise person would. The life that draws strength from wisdom grounds itself in an insight into the order of life. Therefore, in Biblical terms, this relates very closely to the observation of the beauty of creation. In other words, it respects the order of creation, an order that God, in overcoming primeval chaos,⁹ purposely inserted into creation. Respecting this order of creation in all its aspects constitutes the core of the way of life advocated by the Old Testament Wisdom Literature. It has its origin in, and is directed towards respect for, and faith in God. The way of life of the wise is, in other words, attuned to God.

In this context, the core of the Wisdom Literature is the quest for the realization of a meaningful life and society, for a blessed, “full” life, supported by a God who is both its origin (fundamental) and its horizon (transcending). It concerns a way of life characterised simultaneously

8 This paragraph was designed against the background of my earlier and much more elaborated study, in which I provide a great deal of exegetical bibliography, which I do not wish to repeat at this juncture: Lemmelijn (2014). On Biblical wisdom, more generally, see Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2007).

9 See the presentation of the first creation narrative in Gen. 1:1-2:4 in Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2010:121-143).

by deep trust and by a clear perception of human vulnerability and contingency. This awareness, however, does not constitute an excuse for discouragement and resignation. On the contrary, it constitutes a stimulus and a call to make the very best of this life, here and now, with and despite all its limitations. Attuning this life to a God who is love and goodness seeks to raise limited human existence above the banality and mediocrity that are all too often, and too soon, part thereof. In other words, Old Testament wisdom strives, to use a contemporary expression, for “quality of life”, which is distinct from pure hedonistic satisfaction of all possible desires, as it essentially seeks to enjoy the blessing of God in this life and, within this context, to bring about a little piece of heaven in the here and now.

4.2 Biblical Wisdom “crossed”

Thus, if the Old Testament Wisdom Literature is particularly concerned with life itself, then it is obvious that it must also have something to say about the various aspects of this life. It concerns, as mentioned earlier, not simply a number of recommendations to live piously, but indeed the concrete realization of a blessed, human life in all its facets. Ultimately, the point is the fulfilment of “full” life under God’s blessing.

When we consider this fact more carefully, we can discern, in the “full life” described, two poles in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature. In a manner analogous to the well-known idea that sees, in the Christian sign of the cross, a horizontal and a vertical axis, we could say that wisdom also has a horizontal and a vertical axis, very clearly distinct and yet inseparably bound.

On the horizontal plane, we could place the immanence of human existence. In the Old Testament wisdom, we indisputably see a clear understanding of human contingency and imperfection. On the other hand, on the vertical plan, this interest is complemented by an attentiveness to transcendence, namely to the divine reality that transcends the human. In the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, two particular and very important theological concepts are attached to both aspects respectively. Finally, they cross each other or re-connect at the intersection point of the “religious” awareness that creates a growing attitude of wisdom, culminating in a third characteristic concept.

4.3 Three sapiential concepts

4.3.1 Righteousness

Connected with the horizontal dimension, which aims at the fulfilment of the contingent, fragile human life, is the key notion of “righteousness”

(*tsedaqah*). The wise person, who tries to live according to God's order, lives in righteousness and is also called "righteous" (*tsadiq*). This is about far more than what we mean today by "justice" as objective and distributive fairness. Righteousness has primarily to do with the differentiation between good and evil. In the Wisdom Literature, the obvious teacher is life experience itself, because the latter is also the source of social mores and laws. After all, they are the result of the collective life experience of a community. This is exactly what is considered to be "wisdom". In this respect, wisdom is thus the practical knowledge of the laws of life and the world that lead us to the correct social comportment.

In this way, righteousness is directly associated with the "order" that God intended for creation. Righteousness and wisdom are, therefore, two very closely connected concepts that nevertheless remain distinct. After all, we could say that wisdom makes it possible to act righteously, on the one hand, and that wisdom itself is an expression of "living righteously", on the other. Thus, righteousness also makes wisdom possible, and vice versa.

The person who lives in the context of this "order" of righteousness is "the righteous one". Such a person lives honestly and correctly, and is also as a result, successful in life. Thus, righteousness is also a goal in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature because, associated with the practice of, and striving for righteousness, virtue and goodness, it entails the achievement of prosperity, a position of respect, and a good name. In this regard, righteousness is even the condition of prosperity and social success.

On this horizontal axis, righteousness is thus directly connected to both life in the here and now, on the one hand and to connectedness to the greater world around us (fellow people, community, the earth and the world), on the other. Biblically speaking, we can thus conclude that the "righteous" person lives according to the "order". Since this order originates in God, the intrinsic "connectedness" with the transcendent axis is already clear on this level. Indeed, in the context of "righteousness" based on the order in creation, the "righteous" person attunes his entire life to God and tries, in his own life as well as with regard to his fellow people, to create opportunities to flourish and in the deepest sense, to "live". He does this in order to bring this "living", here and now, to fulfillment.

4.3.2 "Fear of God" or "Respect for the Lord"

When we consider the aforementioned vertical axis of the divine or the transcendent one, we observe that Wisdom Literature now highlights

another important theological concept. After all, inseparably connected to the orientation towards righteousness in daily life is the motivation for and source of that wisdom, that seeks to attune the human, fragile reality to the divine order. This motivation and source can be traced back to its origin in the “fear of God”. The “fear of God” has nothing to do with trembling in fear of some distant, towering, merciless deity who capriciously rules over and disposes of people. It also has absolutely nothing to do with fear of punishment for sinful behaviour. The Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (New Bible Translation) appropriately renders it in a more contemporary way as “respect for the Lord”.¹⁰ This aspect deals fundamentally with respect, within the awareness that God is greater than our heart and greater than our mind. It emphasises that the reality in which He meets us is far bigger than our own small “I”, and that, on the crossing of the axes of immanence and transcendence, God himself becomes perceptible in the attentive attitude which the wise person progressively acquires.

The so-called “fear of God” or “respect for the Lord” opens up the horizontal dimension to an immediate commitment to God in respect and fidelity, within, for example, the context of the Old Testament covenant theology and especially in compliance with the “order” (natural and social) that God placed in creation. In other words, again within the context of the connectedness of human beings to both the compassing and the transcending reality. If we thus propose that human life must, out of “respect for God”, attune itself to God himself, the question naturally arises as to how this God can be known. In this regard, reference is always made to his Word, which is to be found, for example, in the Torah. If we then consider that the Torah, as well as the prophetic books and other biblical writings, repeatedly aim to attune human existence to God and try to realise this in life itself, then this completes the circle. God meets the human being in life itself, namely in that specific life that turns to the good in everything and that, in attentive connectedness to the transcending reality, helps the life around it to grow beyond itself, through sharing human and almost tangibly “divine” love. Once again, it seems, therefore, that the transcendent aspect is directly connected to the immanent. Biblical Wisdom calls us to live a life that aims at wholeness and fulfilment, or that, biblically expressed, realises itself within the context of the “blessing of the Most High”.

4.3.3 The “blessing of the Most High”

Where these two axes, with their respective concepts, meet each other, we can observe the re-connection which is at the basis of every “religious” awareness and spiritual security. Indeed, the synergic attitude of wisdom

10 The Dutch expression reads: “Ontzag voor de Heer”.

that attentively combines “righteousness” and “respect for the Lord” in being and becoming, results in a life in “wholeness”, or, biblically expressed, a life under the “blessing of the Most High”. In Old Testament Wisdom, the God-fearing and righteous person obtains “the blessing of God on all his ways”.

However, it must be stressed that this “blessing” of God is not some merely spiritual or woolly reality. Parallel to Benedict’s way of life described earlier, the inner harmony is precisely the stimulus to engagement in the outer world, and the inner state of mind and soul can precisely be seen and evaluated in the results in common life. Similarly, the Old Testament “blessing” is expressed in an immanent and tangible way in the daily life of the “righteous” person, who is “blessed” with a long and healthy life and with a loving and caring wife by his side. He enjoys the company of countless children who respect their parents. He experiences (economic) success in his work and prosperity in daily life.

Old Testament wisdom is anything but averse to any comfort, because this is viewed as an outward sign of God’s blessing. What is perhaps a little surprising for Christians, who in a specific interpretation of the tradition have preached poverty as almost an ideal, is the fact that Biblical Wisdom nowhere criticises or repudiates the search for happiness or fulfilment – including its material aspects. Rather, this quest is accepted as a fact. And after all, this is not altogether strange. Surprising though it may be, we note that the “reward” for “righteous” behaviour is tangible. However, the effort for which this material favour is granted is also very “worldly” and tangible, anything but spiritual, and sometimes even prosaically “ordinary”. In this “righteous” life out of “respect for the Lord”, it does not entail first and foremost intense prayer or solitary meditation, far from the world and its reality. Indeed, on the contrary, albeit with an inner connectedness to God (in “respect for the Lord”), it is about a daily effort and willingness to help, about caring for children and one’s fellow human beings, and being attentive to them, and about an attitude to life that, in humility and modesty, dares to be self-effacing before others.

Indeed, we can observe the same elsewhere ... Interiority expresses itself in “the fruits of the Spirit”, if one would translate it in a New Testament way. When Paul, much later in Galatians 5:22-23, states that a life inspired by the Spirit leads to “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”, he, in fact, closely resembles certain tendencies in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature. In a concrete example, we likewise read in Jesus Sirach 1:27: “Fidelity and humility are his delight.” Thus, if the effort is tangible and material, then it should not be so surprising that, in this line of thinking, God’s “reward” may also be

concretely experienced. The longing to live without suffering, conscious of being secure within a divine “order” that is lovingly well-disposed towards human beings, is, within the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, a deep-seated human characteristic that is accepted without further question.

Nevertheless, the Biblical “blessing”, leading human beings to wholeness and happiness, is not at all only material or tangible. Very fundamentally, the “blessing” – that results from a life that connects the horizontal axis of “righteousness” with the vertical one of “respect for the Lord” – realises what is expressed in the Old Testament concept of *shalom*. This relates to both inner and outer harmony: with oneself (in body and mind and their mutual connection), with the neighbour in every human being as well as in everything surrounding us, and finally with the transcending reality that we perceive as present in the relation with God who carries and loves human beings. Consequently, this is the basis for an awareness of existential security and an attitude of deep trust. This perfect harmony leads to “wholeness” and “happiness”, experienced and expressed in an awareness and a life attitude of gratitude, mildness and compassion. It is this *shalom*, this “peace in wholeness”, that Jesus sends to his disciples when he greets them after his resurrection. It is the same peace that Christians mean when they offer each other the “peace of the Lord”. It is remarkably expressed in the meditative refrain of a Taizé song: “The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. Justice (or righteousness), peace and joy are intrinsically part of that “wholeness”.

At the same time, the texts also give voice to the fact that a person does not have everything under control. We recognise that feeling. A person can do everything he can and still end up standing helplessly with his back against the wall, watching as things fail to go the way he wanted them to. Also in this respect, we observe the awareness of a surrounding and transcending reality greater than and beyond ourselves. When the Old Testament Wisdom Literature reveals itself to be aware of this fact, the pertinent awareness of contingency and vulnerability again becomes apparent. Conversely, this is also relevant to situations in which it is indeed going well for people. If it goes well for a person, then this is, in wisdom thinking too, certainly not only attributable to his good behaviour, even if that is indeed a *conditio sine qua non*. The ultimate source of human happiness, however, is God himself, insofar as he spreads his “blessing” on people. The “blessing” of God “fulfils” the life of the “righteous”, of the “good” person, raises it up to a “full” life in wholeness, gives it a perspective, and allows it to touch and share in the divine itself. With this understanding, the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, however, still translates this blessing very concretely, and in a fashion true to life, into

daily things and circumstances that people recognise and that makes them happy. God's "blessing" becomes a secure space within which daily existence, with and despite all its worries and fragility, is sustained and enriched, and reaches "wholeness" and "fulfilment".

5. CONCLUSION

If we carefully observe this presentation of Biblical Wisdom, then it becomes clear that the three main elements perceived in the manifold general existential and spiritual tendencies nowadays as well as in the age-old Christian tradition can also be discerned in Biblical Wisdom. The Biblical Sapiential Literature has stood and still stands with its feet in reality: it is "earthed" or "grounded" wisdom.

The attention for the here and now in combination with the attentiveness for the connectedness with the compassing reality is recognisable in the horizontal axis on which the wise attitude of "righteousness" is realised. The connectedness to reality that simultaneously creates the awareness of a transcending reality is, intrinsically related to "righteousness", discernible on the vertical axis of the "Respect for the Lord". Finally, we observe the third element, the longing for happiness and wholeness, in the "blessing of the Most High", leading to "full life", to fulfilment and *shalom*.

The highly actual facets of the attention for the here and now, the connectedness with the surrounding reality and the longing for wholeness and happiness that appeal to people nowadays in so many forms are therefore not new nor fashionable. We should not deride this honest searching by so many people. Rather, it would be highly recommendable to (re-)connect it, not only to its oriental background even if it is also wise to learn from one another, but also and not less to its Biblical and Judeo-Christian background, which many "faithful" themselves no longer seem to know.

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