

# SPIRIT

[This is the second chapter of F J Sheed's *Theology for Beginners*, first published in London in 1958 (Sheed & Ward)]

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## SPIRIT KNOWS, LOVES IS POWERFUL

When I was very new as a street-corner speaker for the Catholic Evidence Guild, a questioner asked me what I meant by *spirit*. I answered, 'A spirit has no shape, has no size, has no colour, has no weight, does not occupy space.' He said, 'That's the best definition of nothing I ever heard.' Which was very reasonable of him. I had given him a list of things spirit is not, without a hint as to what it is.

In theology, spirit is not only a key word, it is *the* key word. Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman: 'God is a spirit.' Unless we know the meaning of the word spirit, we do not know what He said. It is as though He had said 'God is a —.' Which tells us nothing at all. The same is true of every doctrine; they all include spirit. In theology we are studying spirit all the time. And the mind with which we are studying it is a spirit too.

We simply must know what it is. And I don't mean just a definition. We must master the idea, make it our own, learn to handle it comfortably and skilfully. That is why I shall dwell upon it rather lengthily. Slow careful thinking here will pay dividends later. This book is not planned as a hand-gallop over the fields of revelation. It is an effort to teach the beginnings of theology.

We begin with our own spirit, the one we know best. Spirit is the element in us by which we know and love, by which therefore we decide. Our body *knows* nothing; it *loves* nothing (bodily pleasures are not enjoyed by the body; it reacts to them physically, with heightened pulse, for instance, or acid stomach; but it is the knowing mind that enjoys the reactions or dislikes them); the body *decides* nothing (though our will may decide in favour of things that give us bodily pleasure).

Spirit knows and loves. A slightly longer look at ourselves reveals that spirit has power, too. It is the mind of man that splits the atom; the atom cannot split the mind, it cannot even split itself, it does not know about its own electrons.

## SPIRIT PRODUCES WHAT MATTER CANNOT

Mind, we say, splits the atom and calculates the light-years. It is true that in both these operations it uses the body. But observe that there is no question which is the user and which is the used. The mind uses the body, not asking the body's consent. The mind is the principal, the body the instrument. Is the instrument essential? *Must* the mind use it to cope with matter? We have evidence in our own experience of mind affecting matter directly. We will to raise our arm, for example, and we raise

it. The raising of the arm is a very complicated anatomical activity but is set in motion by a decision of the will. And as we shall see, the direct power the human mind has over its own body, mightier spirits have over all matter.

This mingling of spirit and matter in human actions arises from a fact which distinguishes man's spirit from all others. Ours is the only spirit which is also a soul—that is to say the life principle in a body. God is a spirit, but has no body; the angels are spirits, but have no body. Only in man spirit is united with a body, animates the body, makes it to be a living body. Every living body—vegetable, lower animal, human—has a life principle, a soul. And just as ours is the only spirit which is a soul, so ours is the only soul which is a spirit. Later we shall be discussing the union of spirit and matter in man to see what light it sheds upon ourselves. But for the present our interest is in *spirit*.

We have seen that in us spirit does a number of things: it knows and loves, and it animates a body. But what, at the end of all this, is *spirit*?

We can get at it by looking into our own soul, examining in particular one of the things it does. It produces ideas. I remember a dialogue one of our Catholic Evidence Guild speakers had with a materialist, who asserted that his idea of justice was the result of a purely bodily activity, produced by man's material brain.

Speaker: How many inches long is it?

Questioner: Don't be silly, ideas have no length.

Speaker: O.K. How much does it weigh?

Questioner: What are you doing? Trying to make a fool of me?

Speaker: No. I'm taking you at your word. What colour is it? What shape?

The discussion at this point broke down, the materialist saying the Catholic was talking nonsense. It is nonsense, of course, to speak of a thought having length or weight or colour or shape. But the materialist had said that thought is material, and the speaker was simply asking what material attributes it had. In fact, it has none; and the materialist knew this perfectly well. Only he had not drawn the obvious conclusion. If we are continuously producing things which have no attribute of matter, there must be in us some element which is not matter, to produce them. This element we call spirit.

Oddly enough, the materialist thinks of us as superstitious people who believe in a fantasy called spirit, of himself as the plain blunt man who asserts that ideas are produced by a bodily organ, the brain. What he is asserting is that matter produces offspring which have not one single attribute in common with it, and what could be more fantastic than that? We are the plain blunt men and we should insist on it.

Occasionally a materialist will argue that there are changes in the brain when we think, grooves or electrical discharges or what not. But these only accompany the thought, they are not the thought. When we think of justice, for instance, we are not thinking of the grooves in the brain; most of us are not even aware of them. Justice

has a meaning, and it does not mean grooves. When I say that mercy is kinder than justice, I am not comparing mercy's grooves with the stricter grooves of justice.

Our ideas are not material. They have no resemblance to our body. Their resemblance is to our spirit. They have no shape, no size, no colour, no weight, no space. Neither has spirit, whose offspring they are, But no one can call it nothing; for it produces thought, and thought is the most powerful thing in the world—unless love is, which spirit also produces.

### SPIRIT IS NOT IN SPACE

We have now come to the hardest part of our examination of spirit. It will have much sweat and strain in it, for you, for me; but everything will be easier afterwards.

We begin with a statement that sounds negative, but isn't. A spirit differs from a material thing by having no parts. Once we have mastered the meaning of this, we are close to our goal.

A part is any element in a being which is not the whole of it, as my chest is a part of my body, or an electron a part of an atom. A spirit has no parts. There is no element in it which is not the whole of it. There is no division of parts as there is in matter. Our body has parts, each with its own specialized function: it uses its lungs to breathe with, its eyes to see with, its legs to walk with. Our soul has no parts, for it is a spirit. There is no element in our soul which is not the whole soul. It does a remarkable variety of things—knowing, loving, animating a body—but each of them is done by the whole soul; it has no parts among which to divide them up.

This partlessness of spirit is *the* difficulty for the beginner. Concentrate on what follows—a being which has no parts does not occupy space. There is hardly anything one can say to make this truth any clearer: you merely go on looking at it, until suddenly you find yourself seeing it. The most any teacher can do is to offer a few observations. Think of anything one pleases that occupies space, and one sees that it must have parts, there must be elements in it which are not the whole of it—this end is not that, the top is not the bottom, the inside is not the outside. If it occupies space at all, be it ever so microscopic, or so infinitesimally submicroscopic, there must be *some* 'spread'. Space is simply what matter spreads its parts in. But a being with no parts at all has no spread: space and it have nothing whatever in common: it is spaceless: it is superior to the need for space.

The trouble is that we find it hard to think of a thing existing if it is not in space, and we find it very hard to think of a thing acting if it has no parts. As against the first difficulty we must remind ourselves that space is merely emptiness, and emptiness can hardly be essential to existence. As against the second we must remind ourselves that parts are only divisions, and dividedness can hardly be an indispensable aid to action.

As against both we may be helped a little by thinking of one of our own commonest operations, the judgements we are all the time making. When in our

mind we judge that in a given case mercy is more useful than justice, we hardly realize what a surprising thing we have done. We have taken three ideas or concepts, mercy, justice and usefulness. We have found some kind of identity between mercy and usefulness: mercy is useful. This means that we must have got *mercy* and *usefulness* together in our mind. There can be no 'distance' between the two concepts: if there were, they could not be got together for comparison and judgement. If the mind were spread out as the brain is, with the concept mercy in one part of the mind, and the concept usefulness in another, they would have to stay un-compared. The concepts justice and usefulness must similarly be together and some identity affirmed between them, the judgement made that justice is useful. That is not all. All three concepts must be together, so that the superior usefulness of mercy can be affirmed. The power to make judgements is at the very root of man's power to live and to develop in the mastery of himself and his environment. And the power to make judgements is dependent upon the partlessness of the soul: one single, undivided thinking principle to take hold of and hold in one all the concepts we wish to compare.

One further truth remains to be stated about spirit. It is the permanent thing, the abiding thing.

#### **SPIRIT IS ALWAYS ITSELF**

As we have seen, a steady gaze will show us that a being which has no parts, no element in it that is not the whole of it, cannot occupy space. Continue to gaze, and we see that it cannot be changed into anything else, it cannot by any natural process be destroyed. We have at last arrived at the deepest truth about spirit—spirit is the being which has a permanent hold upon what it is, so that it can never become anything else.

Material beings *can* be destroyed in the sense that they can be broken up into the constituent parts: what has parts can be taken apart. But a partless being lies beyond all this. Nothing can be taken from it, because there is nothing in it but its whole self. We can conceive, of course, of its whole self being taken out of existence. This would be annihilation. But just as only God can create from nothing by willing a being to exist, so only God can reduce a being to nothing by willing it no longer to exist: and for the human soul, God has told us that He will not thus will it out of existence.

A spiritual being, therefore, cannot lose its identity. It can experience changes in its relation to other beings—e.g., it can gain new knowledge or lose knowledge that it has; it can transfer its love from this object to that; it can develop its power over matter; its own body can cease to respond to its animating power and death follows for the body—but with all these changes it remains itself, conscious of itself, permanent.

The student to whom all this is new should keep on thinking over these truths, turning back to them at odd moments—on the way to work, in periods of insomnia. He should keep on looking at the relation between having parts and occupying space till he sees, really sees, that a partless being cannot be in space. He should keep on

looking at the relation between having parts and ceasing to exist, till he sees as clearly that a partless being cannot ever be anything but itself.

We should try to bring together, to *see* together, all these separate truths about spirit. One way is to concentrate upon our own soul, the spirit we know best—wholly itself, for ever itself, doing each thing that it does with its whole self. Yet the human soul is the lowest of spirits. The least of the angels is unimaginably superior in power (those baby angels, all cute and cuddly, which disfigure our children's books, have nothing whatever to do with angels).

The philosophers tell us that angels could, so powerful are they, destroy our material universe if the mightier power of God did not prevent them—as that same power will prevent man from destroying it until God wills that it should end.

It is not enough to have learned what spirit is. We must build the knowledge into the very structure of our minds. Seeing spiritual reality must become one of the mind's habits. When it does, we have reached the first stage of maturity. Materialism, however persuasively argued, can no longer take hold on us. We may not always be able to answer the arguments, but it makes no difference. Materialism is repulsive; all our mental habits are set against it. It is as if a scientist were to produce arguments in favour of walking on all fours: we should find the idea repulsive; all our bodily habits would be set against it. That indeed is no bad comparison. The man who knows of the universe of spirit walks upright; the materialist hugs the earth.