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IN SPEECHLESS ECSTASY

Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience
in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature

by
Serafim Seppälä



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FOREWORD

The greater part of the rich literary heritage of Syriac-speaking Christianity is monastic in origin and ascetically orientated in content. Most of the Syriac spiritual discourses are actually correspondence between monks and hermits. One of the most striking features of these treatises is their frequent reference to mystical experiences, more or less ecstatic in nature, scattered throughout the discourse both as indirect allusions and as open descriptions. These descriptions have, however, received scant attention in academic discussion.

Another subject of interest to me, Sufism, is more famous for its ecstatic accounts, but surprisingly, no systematic presentations concerning the expression of ecstatic experiences have been published, to my knowledge. When I was studying Semitic languages and philosophy in the mid-1990s, the idea of preparing a systematic presentation of the “howness” – to use a Semitic idiom – of the expression and interpretation of the ecstatic experiences in both traditions occurred to me quite naturally – and I was unable to shake it off, despite making several attempts to do so.

The obvious difficulty and extensiveness of the subject means that there is hardly any standard method for its treatment that could not be questioned. Any approach must be made from at least three directions: the Syriac language and culture of Oriental Christianity, the Sufi tradition and the Arabic language, with their Greek and Persian parallels and subtexts, and the problem of the mystical experience itself, that can be examined from a psychological, sociological or philosophical perspective. I have chosen to exclude the Greek and Persian traditions as far as possible, and approach the mystical experience with “philosophical” means, as we shall see.

Due to a certain religious sensitivity associated with the subject, combined with my present position as a professional would-be-mystic (sic.), I can hardly avoid making a few more preliminary remarks on the choice of subject and on the non-theological method. One of the original motives underlying the study was my unattainable dream of studying and comparing the religions themselves – not only some of their accidental properties, but the actual real substances of such religions as Oriental Christianity and Islam. Such substance, of course, remains unattainable, and was banned from academic discussion long ago (i.e. the logical need for the concept of “substance” in the scholastic sense has been set aside as unnecessa-

ry). Scientific thinking deals with language and forms, “external attributes”, the function of which it aims to define. Consequently, the aim here is not to make statements about God or “spiritual realities”, existent or imaginary, but about the language referring to them; nothing more, nothing less. Nevertheless, this also means that since scientific discourse does not pretend to touch on substance, it cannot *harm* it either – one of the most profound advantages of objectivity!

In other words, when one wishes to approach the “substance” of religion in academic discussion, one must make choices between the attributes or characteristics of tradition. Therefore, the question is: which of the empirical features of a religion is closest to its substance, the one that would reveal its “God”? The closest we can approach is, as I see it, the collective witness of the psychological experience of individuals who have completely devoted their lives to their religion (and preferably, if possible, are considered to have done so by their traditions). In other words, if one endeavours to find God, what does one have but experiences of Him? And when one pursues these experiences, what does one find but descriptions of experiences? And finally, the descriptions are covered and entangled with interpretations in accordance with the particular theology of the authors.

Accordingly, if we aim to go through Syriac and Arabic texts in order to discover mystical experiences in their purest and most apparent forms, we shall merely encounter descriptions and interpretations. This is the material that I aim to “deconstruct and reconstruct” in the following, according to the logical deep-structure of the discourse. My conclusions set forth in the last chapter will be most cautious, but the material is open to other interpretations as well.

The study was prepared in stages, since the project was interrupted several times by a variety of circumstances. The project was commenced in Jerusalem in 1996, continued in Helsinki in 1998, and completed in the new millennium at the monastery of the Transfiguration, New Valaam, far removed from academic discussion and libraries. The result is a one-man pursuit – the author is unfortunately unable to share responsibility for his failures with anyone else!

I have the pleasure to express my gratitude to those who have graciously supported the completion of this study: the Emil Aaltonen foundation and the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth foundation. Special thanks are also due to my professor, Tapani Harviainen, whose encouragement has been very important to me, especially in the early stages of the study (particularly the first and third times I started!). The English wording has been revised by Michael Cox, Lic. Theol., in his guaranteed manner.

I wish to dedicate this work to the memory of the late Mr. George Kaplanian, whose friendship I had the privilege to enjoy at the time I began to prepare this study in Jerusalem. After an “existential break” the work was completed under

quite different circumstances in monastic surroundings. "Methods are adopted according to circumstances", George used to say. And I still disagree.

S. S.

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