1. INTRODUCTION TO ECSTATIC READINGS

1.0. PRELIMINARY REMARKS: THE PURPOSE AND MEANS

According to the hypothesis underlying this study, Syriac and Sufi texts refer repeatedly to and deal with something "mystical" which is absolutely non-linguistic in nature, yet is expressed linguistically under the conditions and restrictions of natural language; this something is an important factor constituting the character of the discourse, but it does not submit to being an object of research. For this reason, we must place it in brackets and content ourselves with the documented process of expression and interpretation.

The purpose of this study is to undertake a systematic survey of the different constituents of ecstatic readings in Syriac ascetic literature, including the process of expression and interpretation (and manifestation, as far as possible), and to present this together with a corresponding analysis of classical Sufism as it is manifested in its authoritative literature, and finally, to make concluding remarks concerning common features and differences between the traditions.

The concept of mystical experience is employed in the broad sense, covering the concepts of "ecstasy" and "trance", further details (and the reasons for the lack of precise definitions for any of these concepts) being discussed below (p. 38 ff.).

The Syriac corpus consists of more than 1,500 pages of literature by about 10 authors, the most important of whom are Isaac of Nineveh, John of Dalyatha, and ʿAbdišoʿ (Joseph) the Seer. All the main sources are basically internal monastic correspondence from one hermit to another, the result being a great variety of relatively frank descriptions of inner experiences.

The Sufi corpus consists of almost the same number of Arabic texts, the most important of these being Niffari, Qušayri and Jilani; alongside these, Hujwiri's *Kašf al-maḥjūb*, originally composed in Persian, proved to be very fruitful. In the case of the Sufi corpus there is more variation in the nature and purpose of the treatises; the works are primarily intended for a general audience, which inevitably indicates a certain caution in the means of expression.

The traditions are close to each other chronologically, geographically and linguistically, representing the same Oriental cultural context. The Syriac sources date back to around the 7th and 8th centuries and the Arabic Sufi texts to around the 10th and 11th centuries, so the comparison is historically relevant and themati-

cally illustrative. However, my approach is not diachronic but synchronic, based on a systematic contextual analysis of the relevant vocabulary, implemented and interpreted in the light of the logical structure of the discourse, which I have aimed to reconstruct in my disposition. Yet I do provide a brief historical introduction to both traditions, since these are seldom presented concurrently, and also because the cultural context cannot be disconnected from the semantics of linguistic expressions. However, I do not aim to prove any "influences" between the traditions – too much discussion concerning "influences", especially in the history of religions, has been based on common features that are merely parallel with no actual causal link – but rather to survey the logical structure of each discourse. This means that I have chosen to treat both traditions as independent entities and to respect the inner vitality and primary originality of the individual writers and their traditions. Consequently, the structure of the chapters on Syriac (2) and Sufi (3) discourse are not completely identical in structure but shaped according to their inner "needs". I have been careful to avoid reading Syriac sources with the ideas of interpretation derived from the Sufi sources, and *vice versa*.

Therefore, fundamentally the two corpora will be dealt with as timeless units. Historical developments are occasionally referred to as secondary items in order to provide some background for facilitating the understanding of a text. In the main chapters of the study (2 and 3) the aim is not so much to give a general presentation of Syriac (and Sufi) spirituality, but rather to concentrate solely on those points of discourse that bear an explicit relation with the mystical experience (as "ecstatic" as possible).

Methodologically my approach is "philosophical", as expounded below (pp. 42–57); in the main chapters, however, I present the material in a descriptive way, generally speaking, without entering into detailed philosophical speculation. This is due to the fact that the present material has not previously been examined in a systematic way, and therefore I prefer to concentrate on giving a detailed view of the constituents of the actual discourse and to leave a more detailed philosophical meta-interpretation of the experience for further studies at a later date.

Especially in the chapters on expression (2.2. and 3.2.) the approach to the textual material is a qualitative one: I do not necessarily look for the most general expressions but the most accurate ones, those with the most insight. My main interest is to discover *how* the mystical experience is expressed, and for that question the quantity of an expression is actually irrelevant. In chapter 4, however, I approach the discourses of both traditions with a more quantitative emphasis, with the aim of representing the most important common features and differences in the emphases, goals and contents of both traditions in their ecstatic readings.

1.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1.1. The Syrian Christian Ascetic Tradition

Syrian asceticism has been the subject of growing interest, partly due to the stimulating works of Arthur Vööbus[1] on Syrian asceticism and a certain counter-reaction provoked by them. The social aspects have been further analysed by Harvey (1990), the theological aspect by AbouZayd (1993), and the perspective has been widened to include the archaeological dimension in the works of Peña (1975, 1980, 1983) and Palmer (1990). Due to the disconnected nature of the early sources and the oddity of later hagiographic material, the scholar *must* have a personal perspective, and that means personal results. I myself have written a general history with the aim of harmonising the views of Vööbus and AbouZayd.[2] The field, however, is still in many respects an open one.

The roots of Christian asceticism and monasticism have traditionally been traced back to the Egyptian desert fathers with little or no attention to the Syrian region. Yet the Syro-Palestinian Orient has always been rich and self-sufficient in ascetic traditions. Many of the early Stoics were Syrians; many of the Church Fathers were to some extent influenced by the ideas of this "least Greek of all philosophic schools".[3] Secondly, Jewish ascetic traditions flourished in the early Christian era: the character of the Qumran community is well known, and the Essene movement had monastic communities spread throughout the cities of the Holy Land.[4]

Syrian asceticism developed at the same time as Egyptian asceticism, but unlike the Egyptian variety, it neither needed nor received stimulation from persecution. The external social, political, cultural and economic factors are insufficient

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[1]   *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient I-III.* CSCO 184 (1958), 197 (1960), 500 (1988).

[2]   Munkki Serafim: *Kerubin silmin.* (Suomen Itämainen Seura, Helsinki 2002).

[3]   Russell, *History of Western Philosophy,* chapter 28. Stoic ideas can be found in such fathers as St. Augustine and Ephrem the Syrian (see Possekel 1999, 230–235). One important point is that the concept of passion ($\pi\acute{\alpha}\theta o\varsigma$) was understood in a very Stoic way by Clement of Alexandria, Evagrius and Gregory of Nyssa.

[4]   The monastic features of the Essenes include (1) a noviciate of three years, (2) lack of private property, (3) common prayers before sun-rise, (4) a ceremonial common meal with blessings, (5) the wearing of a distinctive cloak, (6) the practice of silence, (7) the study of writings and (8) "monastic" vows. The Essene features that are not found in later Christian monasticism include (a) ritual purifications, (b) an esoteric disposition to conceal doctrines or the names of angels from outsiders, (c) observance of the Mosaic law, especially the Sabbath. In some communities it was also permitted to lead conjugal life. For the classic description of the Essenes, see Josephus, *War of the Jews* (II, 8: 2–13).

to explain the explosive growth of the Syrian ascetic movement. The basis of Christian ascetic identity was (and still is) *imitatio Christi*, meaning literal observance of the commandments of Christ and participation in his passion and death. Martyrdom was not experienced in the early Church merely as an unfortunate circumstance but as an essential part of Christian faith, so that after the persecutions ceased asceticism became throughout the whole Christian world an indicator of *imitatio Christi*, and virginity a "bloodless martyrdom".[5]

It has occasionally been suggested – by Protestant authors – that Christian ascetic thought is derived from the dualism of Persian religion. This is, however, quite an unnecessary supposition, and it misses the point in understanding the thought of the early Church. A more likely external source of influence, however, would be the meditative life-style of the philosophers, one characterised by self-denial. The Christian life was, indeed, considered to be the true philosophy.[6]

The actual beginnings of the Syrian ascetic movement is a much debated question. On the one hand, Vööbus asserted that the entire Syrian Church was in fact an ascetic sect in which baptism and the Eucharist were reserved only for the celibate elite, that the independent early hermit movement was heavily influenced by Manichaeism and that the hierarchical Church experienced difficulty in integrating it into the official Church and its norms. On the other hand, we have authors like AbouZayd stating that there is nothing extraordinary or non-Catholic in the early Syrian Church. And both scholars, of course, read the same extant sources thoroughly.[7]

The earliest sources may, indeed, be read in both ways due to their sporadic nature. There is no explicit evidence that the non-celibate were baptised before the mid-fourth century, and likewise, the celibate "elite" seem to have occupied a dominant position in the churches. The dual possibility of interpretation, however, may be explained by the following arguments. Firstly, early Syriac literature, like all hagiography, is idealistic in nature: The *Acts of Thomas* (AT) portrays ideals, not necessarily the exact practices, of the second-century Syrian Church. Moreover, the main point of AT is not celibacy but *total* renunciation in every area of worldly life. Secondly, it may be that both Vööbus and AbouZayd underestimated the plurality and variety in the early Syrian Church. There must have been "normal" churches (with a strong Greek component), Jewish-Christian assem-

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[5]   See below p. 178–180; Markus 1990, 70–72; Drijvers 1984, 27–28; AbouZayd 1993, 301.

[6]   Markus 1990, 73–75; AbouZayd 1993, 262–263, 288. For a Syriac account of the excellence of the pagan philosophers, see Mingana/Dadisho', 111 (28b–29a).

[7]   For Vööbus on celibacy, see Vööbus 1951, 21–34, 45–58. According to AbouZayd (1993, 50), devout celibacy developed in the fourth century. Also, the influence of Manichaeism is not accepted by AbouZayd (ibid., iv), who declares that "Vööbus' theory belongs ultimately to the realm of imagination".

blies, perhaps communities formed around a charismatic hermit, as well as sects based on more or less Essene principles, and all without a strong hierarchy or central organisation.[8]

Jewish sectarian believers in Christ have left no literature of their own, but some traces of their heritage have been found, perhaps surprisingly, in the most important, and almost the oldest, Syriac book: the Bible. In his detailed study M. P. Weitzman showed convincingly that the Syriac Old Testament is the product of a non-rabbinical Jewish sect in the Edessan region c. 150 A.D. With slight textual changes the translators introduced into the text ascetic examples (poverty, celibacy), and spiritual ideals (prayer instead of sacrifice); occasionally there are signs of a hostile attitude towards ritual. Presumably the members of the sect behind the translation converted to Christianity and introduced their Bible to the Aramaic-speaking Church in the late 2nd century.[9]

The case of the Syrian hermits has been much debated. There are several texts[10] portraying hermits living on mountains like wild animals, eating grass and roots, avoiding the use of fire, and sometimes neglecting even to wear clothes. Traditionally the texts have been ascribed to the most famous Syriac author, Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), or to his disciples, which would imply that the hermit movement had perhaps originated in the late third century.[11] Many modern scholars, however, date them to the fifth century, and read them as imaginative portrayals of contemporary ideals.[12] It seems to me, however, that the latter interpretation does not bear the weight of the evidence of Greek literature, which unambiguously bears witness to the existence of Syrian hermits in the third quarter of the fourth century.[13] For the topic of this study, however, it is actually irrele-

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[8]   For more discussion, see my *Kerubin silmin*, p. 18–28, 36–43, 48–49.

[9]   Weitzman 1999, 95–96, 212, 227, 258.

[10]   (1) Letter to Mountaineers (E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones IV*, CSCO 334, Louvain 1973, pp. 28–43), (2) *On the Solitary Life of the Solitaries* (ibid, pp. 1–16), (3) *On Hermits, Solitaries and Mourners* (ibid. pp. 16–28), (4) another text also entitled *On Hermits, Solitaries and Mourners* (E. Mathews: *Isaac of Antioch: A Homily on the Solitaries, Hermits and Mourners*, Master's thesis, The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. 1987).

[11]   Vööbus 1960, 51–53.

[12]   Griffith 1995, 221–222.

[13]   Basil the Great visited such communities in the 350s; John Chrysostom lived in and worked with them in the years 373–398 without regarding the hermit movement as a new phenomenon, and, of course, we have *A History of the Monks of Syria* by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, indicating the existence of hermits throughout the fourth century, and indeed, coenobitic communities after 330 (see *History of the Monks of Syria*, p. 35, note 8). The problem is, of course, the arbitrary differentiation between "coenobitic monasteries of monks" and "hermit communities" because this division actually came into existence only after 370.

vant whether the hermit movement originated in the 3rd or in the 5th century, but the fact that it was in any case a dominant ideal in the 5th century, at the latest, is an important witness to the individual, and therefore potentially charismatic, character of Syrian asceticism.

The well-known Syrian "proto-monastic" phenomenon concerning the hermits and churches called 'covenanters' (*benay qeyāmā*) must also be mentioned. The great Church Fathers Aphrahat (d. 345) and Ephrem are the main witnesses for the existence of this class of men and women who dedicated themselves to the service of the Church, leading lives of celibacy and asceticism among the churches.

The Manichaean religion also had its own monasticism in the Syrian Orient from the third century on. The presence of Manichaean monks offered a psychological stimulus for ascetic zeal, creating a kind of competition (albeit an unconscious one). There were also several semi-Christian groups (Marcionists, Gnostics) that all shared the same ascetic ideals, and largely the same literature (AT and other apocrypha). For those who wished to devote themselves to their religion and take it as seriously as possible, the religious atmosphere did not in fact offer any alternative ideals than asceticism.

The Syrian ascetic movement rapidly expanded during the last quarter of the fourth century. According to Vööbus, the number of inhabitants of towns and villages even declined as a consequence of the thousands who retired to the desert, or rather, the *mountain* communities of hermits or monks.[14] Disciples gathered spontaneously around the most charismatic fathers. The increasing number of hermits demanded co-operation and organisational principles so that the development towards fixed monasticism was inevitable. On the other hand, erecting earthly buildings and creating hierarchies was seen by some to be more or less incompatible with their spiritual ideals. In any case, there soon emerged communities of about 400 members possessing gardens and cultivations. The buildings were often constructed with the support of donations from the wealthy newcomers.[15]

Despite the inevitable evolution of organisations, ascetic ideals and practices continued to prosper inside the monasteries. The exact customs, however, varied significantly from one monastery to another. In order to understand the atmosphere among the ascetics it is essential to take a closer look at certain features of monastic life. (If some of the following examples are difficult to take literally, it is

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[14]   There was no definitive difference between "monk" and "hermit" before the coenobitic rules of St. Basil imposed from the 370s on. Since then 'monk' has meant a community dweller, despite its etymology (μοναχός, 'a single one').

[15]   Vööbus 1960, 19–25.

good to remember that the most incredible practice, that of stylitism, happens to be the one with indubitable archaeological evidence!)

Eating was to be restricted to a minimum, which might mean only one vegetarian meal a day (served after the ninth hour, i.e. 3 p.m.). Despite the possible growth of collective wealth, poverty was real on the personal level. The monks' cells were small and contained hardly anything. Their hair and beards were left unshaven, and dirt was preferable to washing. Meeting and seeing the opposite sex was avoided – sometimes even beardless men were forbidden to enter the monastery. Castration did occur. Both quantity and quality of sleep were reduced to a minimum; some kept themselves awake through the night by means of ropes. The ideal posture was to spend the night sitting, facing east, leaning on a stone wall. Some exchanged their woollen clothing for coarser materials or secretly kept chains under their cloak. Some tied themselves up in a barrel hanging from a tree or otherwise used their imagination in building private torture chambers. The final phase of ascetic life was total seclusion in a cell that might be roofless or completely walled up with bricks, or so small that it did not allow a person to stand or move.[16]

Women had their own communities from the very beginning, first of all in connection with the churches as 'daughters of the covenant' (benāt qeyāmā), then in the mountains, and finally there were convents for at least 250 nuns. Also, the first "transvestite saints" lived in the Syrian Orient, i.e. women who concealed their real sex and spent their lives in monasteries disguised as monks.[17]

The number of communal prayers in the Syrian monasteries varied between three and seven times per day (two in Egypt).[18] The fixed hours, however, were surpassed by many monks in private prayer during the long night vigils in their cells. Due to the legacy of the hermit communities and the lack of influence of St. Basil's coenobite rule, most monasteries were of the laura type, where only novices lived in the coenobite manner, as the monks spent weekdays in their cells but gathered together for vigil and liturgy on Sundays and feast-days. In their cells the monks engaged in reading, prayer, meditation and manual labour.

The imaginative art of developing personal methods of mortification led to the ultimate exercise of stylitism, which in physical terms meant absolute asceticism: standing in prayer throughout the night, eating perhaps once a week, with no moments of relaxation from the eyes of the public. The latter feature also included a most peculiar method of self-mortification, that of exhibitionism. The

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[16] Vööbus 1960, 256–273, 277–278.

[17] Harvey 1990, 114–117.

[18] Syrian asceticism, of course, contains exceptions to every rule: the wild desert community of Alexander Aikometos had 24 prayer times per day. Vööbus 1960, 151–153. AbouZayd 1993, 381–386. The Greek and Latin texts of the life of Alexander in PO VI/5, 658–701.

stylite did not contend for his personal salvation only: his role between heaven and earth was unavoidably that of mediator. The first stylite, *Šim'ōn Esṭōnāyā* (c. 386–459), attracted groups of pilgrims and visitors from as far afield as Gaul, Rome, Georgia, Persia and Ethiopia. Due to his example of spiritual fervour, and his simple preaching, large numbers of people, especially Arabs, were won over to Christianity.[19] During the following centuries Simeon the Stylite had about 150 disciples, most of them in the Syriac-speaking world.

In many ways the fifth and sixth centuries were the Golden Age of Syrian asceticism. The number of stylites and hermits, monks and monasteries was striking, and they attracted pilgrims probably no less than Jerusalem itself. The charismatic power of the holiest monks was experienced as a source of blessing, and this in turn resulted in the cult of relics. In the case of Simeon the Stylite, army protection was needed to escort his funeral. Thus the ascetics continued the function of martyrs both during and after their lifetimes: their relics were preserved in churches, and their memorial days were introduced into the liturgical year. The ascetic's role as an intercessor was understood almost as an insurance policy for the community.[20]

The social function of asceticism was also remarkable, including the establishment of inns, based on the ideal of serving visitors – a custom already known in the hermit era – and work for the benefit of orphans, the sick and the poor. Monks could also attempt to protect the poor from excessive taxation and the despotism of landlords. Due to the lack of social security, during times of distress there might be thousands of people dependent on the monasteries' provision. The teaching of monks on social justice also discouraged slavery, and every now and then slaves were redeemed or released, sometimes because the master himself retired to monastic life.[21]

However, ascetic zeal could sometimes be manifested in an intolerant way. The temples and statues of pagan cults (still vital in the 5th century) were occasionally attacked by zealous monks, sometimes with the desire to court martyrdom. Sacred places of the old religions were sanctified for Christ by turning them into churches and monasteries. Unavoidably, the same zeal was soon directed against other Christians and fellow-monks: the Christological controversy continued in the Syrian Orient throughout the 5th century and a good portion of the 6th century. It seems that the majority of monks were at first passive in the face of the dispute the subject of which was probably considered to be somewhat elitist.

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[19]   Vööbus 1960. 208–223, 319; Harvey 1990, 15. For evidence on the Stylites, see I. Peña: *Les Stylites Syriens* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 16, Milano 1975). For Simeon, see R. Doran: *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Cistercian Studies Series 112, Kalamazoo 1992.)

[20]   Vööbus 1960, 321–326; AbouZayd 1993, 296–298.

[21]   Vööbus 1960, 361–383; AbouZayd 1993, 280–284.

Yet the question of the nature of Christ was the central one in Christianity, and for that reason a soteriological matter, so the bishops did not encounter insurmountable difficulties in mobilising "the ascetic front" to defend their position.[22] The outcome was a bitter, sometimes even violent, conflict that paralysed the relationship between the West and East Syrian monasteries as a kind of "cold peace", and left both opposed to the Byzantine position, but the common line between the Oriental Orthodox (West Syrians, Armenians and Copts) was preserved. Due to the common liturgical and literary tradition, however, there did occur recurrent co-operation between the Western and Eastern Syrian monasteries. Among the best examples are some of the sources of the present study that crossed the dogmatic boundaries.

Intellectual life in the monasteries was strongly promoted by the reading, copying, and interpretation of the Scriptures. Practically all the known Syriac authors – perhaps 150 are known by name – may be considered products of monastic thought. Several West Syrian monasteries became centres of translation and learning, whereas the East Syrian Church continued the tradition of the school of Edessa by establishing academies for diverse study, functioning on a highly ascetic basis, and they served as the model for Islamic academies, which in turn set an example for the European universities.[23]

The relationship between the ascetics and the "official Church" – albeit after somewhat floundering beginnings, if we are to believe Vööbus – soon settled down into one of fruitful co-operation. *Benay qeyāmā* and their heirs, the monks, served as vergers, deacons and finally priests in the churches, and the laity actively participated in worship in the monasteries. Asceticism was therefore the solemn heart of the whole Church. This was sealed by the fact that the leaders of the Church were chosen from the ranks of the monks. The ascetic bishops gave the whole structure of the Church a desert character. On the other hand, the possibility of ecclesiastical leadership introduced new elements and dangers to monastic living. Many were unwilling to accept honorific offices; occasionally the people would literally hunt down the most famous monks to induce them to accept a bishopric.[24]

The spread of Christianity in the Orient took place through the efforts of the ascetics who settled in non-Christian areas and attracted crowds by their life-style and actions as well as by their preaching. New Christian communities gathered around the monk, who would sometimes move on to another district after the parish was established. Outside the Aramaic-speaking world the influence of

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22 Vööbus 1960, 344–347; Vööbus 1988, 197–206.

23 Vööbus 1960, 388–393, 401–410; Vööbus 1988, 71, 432–439. See also Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266, Louvain 1965).

24 Vööbus 1960, 323, 326–330; AbouZayd 1993, 286–287; *Kerubin Silmin* 51–54, 59–67.

Syrian monks was especially strong in 4th-century Armenia and 5th-century Ethiopia. In Central Asia nomadic Turks were converted in their hundreds of thousands during the early Islamic period; China was evangelised by the East Syrians in 636–845 and later still in the 13th century.[25]

The role of Syrian ascetics was also crucial in the christianisation of the Arabs in the fourth and fifth centuries. The West Syrian Church spread among some tribes in Northern Arabia (Jordan) and the East Syrians along the coast to Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen. The converts are reputed to have abandoned their gods and made "churches into their tents". Arab Christianity was largely based on the imitation of ascetic ideals, and conceivably, on the cult of St. George (*Georgios, Sargis, Girgis*), whose icon the tribe of Taghlib used as a banner in their raids! The actual monastic presence was noteworthy: the province of Arabia (Belqa, Batanea, Hauran and Ledja) contained at least 137 monasteries in the year 579, including even a community of stylites in 'Aqraba. The whole region of Tedmor and Yarmuk near Damascus was inhabited by monks. Other monastic centres were to be found at Sinai and in Madyan, near Sinai on the Arabian side, a location close to the trading routes. The local monks were not so rigorous in self-mortification as those in upper Mesopotamia.[26]

The most important monastic centre of the West Syrians, however, was Tur 'Abdin, with approximately 80–100 monasteries on the northern side of Nisibis, and the second in importance was probably Qal'at Sim'on between Aleppo and Antioch. There were also monastic centres around Amid, Apamea and Homs. The paradise of the East Syrians was to be found in the mountains around Mosul-Nineveh, where monasticism continued to flourish in great numbers until the thirteenth century.

The presence of Syriac-speaking Christians was also marked in Palestinian monasticism, which was noted for its international character. Pilgrims gathered to the holy city from Ethiopia, Georgia, Gaul, Persia, and even India. The actual pilgrimage was a form of asceticism in itself due to the severe conditions, not to mention the dangers faced during the long journeys on foot. Many pilgrims could not resist the call of the desert of the Holy Land and decided to remain in the proximity of the holy places. In the Judean desert alone there were at least 60 monasteries in the sixth century.[27]

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[25]   Vööbus 1960, 342–344, 354–360, 48; Vööbus 1988, 275–278; AbouZayd 1993, 292–294; *Kerubin Silmin*, 136–148.

[26]   Vööbus 1960, 349–252; Vööbus 1988, 230–234, 252; Triningham 1979, 251–256; *Kerubin silmin*, 139.

[27]   Hirschfield 1992, 10–11; Hunt 1984, 3–5, 54–74, 108. The term "Syriac" here covers Palestinian Aramaic, as it does in the classical sources.

Syrian asceticism differed from the Egyptian and Byzantine traditions by its more severe mortification, its greater admiration of seclusion, and the greater reverence paid to visions and other charismatic experiences. The ascetic character is nowhere as illustrative as in the ideals and practice of *fasting*, which at an early stage became an essential element of the Oriental Christian life in general.[28] In addition to the emerging scheduled fasts common to all Christians, ascetics were accustomed to observe their own practices and restrictions; the most rigorous monks could even live on grass and water alone.[29] Monasteries served two common meals, or even only one per day. The monks' diet was a vegetarian one; the eating of meat was strictly forbidden.

The unique nature of Syrian asceticism is a result of its historical roots. We may sum up the historical factors leading to the growth of the monastic tradition in the Syrian Orient as follows (especially the connection between the first two is important):

1. The extremist and ascetic outlook of the whole Syrian Church.[30]
2. The Jewish background of the Syrian Church, with a strong sectarian component of the Essene type.
3. Independent hermit movements of the 4th century.
4. The stimulus provided by Manichaean asceticism.
5. The proto-monastic tradition of the covenanters (*benay qeyāmā*) as described by Aphrahat (d. 345).

It is also important to note the following deficiencies:

1. The limited and late influence of Egyptian monasticism.
2. The relative absence of the influence of the rule and principles of Basil the Great imposed in the Greek-speaking world from 370 on.

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28   Fasting is an ideal present already in AT (Wright 1968, 161). The Eastern Churches have from six to thirteen main periods of fasting, the most important one being the forty-day Great Lent (*ṣawma rabbā*). The early Christian practice of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays has remained valid in the Eastern Churches up to this day (see Vellian 1977, 373–374). The East Syrian Church has eight major fasts every year; the Antiochene tradition of the West Syrian Church includes six annual fasts; the Alexandrian tradition has ten, the Armenian thirteen, and the Byzantine nine, but the exact observance varies on a local basis. According to Cyrus of Edessa (*Six Explanations*, 32 [37–38]), the exact procedure of Christian fasts varies in nature: for example, during the Great Lenten fast one may observe abstinence from food for three days, four days, one week at a time or eat once a day (after vespers).

29   See Vööbus 1960, *History of Asceticism II*, 261–265; Vööbus 1960, *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 39, 73, 107, 161.

30   This is shown by the fact that the *Odes of Solomon* is the sole early Syriac work with no ascetic emphasis.

3.   The limited influence of Greek thought in general before the 5th century.

All this hindered the formation of a strict monolithic type of monasticism obligat-
ed to follow a single model of conduct for the standard role of a monk. Syrian
monasticism was indeed flexible enough to allow monks to practise personal
forms of mortification and engage in missionary work. Monks needed no permis-
sion from their bishops to move into another community; the blessing of one's
spiritual father was sufficient.

This kind of basis created a favourable atmosphere for growth in mystical
experiences. Monastic rules usually represent the least charismatic aspect of
monastic literature, but in the case of Syriac literature we can even find a monas-
tic rule for novices that gives instructions to avoid vain talk, a common subject in
monastic regulations, employing a very charismatic argument.

> He shall refrain from much talking since this extinguishes *the fiery impulses, evoked by
> God, from the heart.*[31]

It seems that, unlike in the West, the laura-type of monasticism was never
thoroughly replaced by a coenobite communal rule. This applies especially in the
East Syrian tradition, where a novice spent his first years (often three) in the com-
munity, serving in its common labours, but the actual monastic life from the be-
ginning of monkhood was to be lived alone in a cell, observing perpetual silence
with no communication with others, avoiding going out during the day-time, and
concentrating on the inner life instead.[32]

Due to the heritage of its individual origins, in (especially the East) Syrian
tradition several Fathers became distinguished experts in verbally describing the
movements of the inner world, the psychic and spiritual phenomena which take
place in the mental reality. In the following section we shall make a brief survey
of the most important of them, the sources of the present study.

1.1.2. The Corpus of Syriac Authors

1.1.2.1. Isaac of Nineveh

The best-known Syriac author of the corpus, Isaac of Nineveh, came from
seventh-century *Beth Qaṭraye*, a monastery in Qatar, where he was discovered by
George (661–680/1), the Catholicos of the Church of the East, who consecrated

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[31]   Translation of Vööbus (1988, 191, italics mine). The Syriac original is to be found in
Vööbus, *Syrische Verordnungen für die Novizen* (Oriens Christianus LIV, 1970). The dating
of the text is undetermined; the oldest manuscript is from the 9th century.

[32]   So Joseph the Seer in Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 17 (12*).

Isaac bishop of Nineveh (Mosul). After only five months as a bishop he resigned and retired to lead a solitary life in the mountains of Khuzistan, Iran, near the monastery of Rabban Šapur.[33] His resignation seems to have taken place due to the conflict between monastic ideals based on the Gospel and hierarchical requirements based on common sense. As a charismatic character he probably encountered a great deal of envy as well.

Isaac's solitary career proved to be more successful than his episcopal one, even though he eventually lost his sight due to extensive study of the Scriptures. The fact that he had to dictate his last writings may explain a certain clumsiness in his syntax. Isaac's teachings have, however, enjoyed a great reputation and inspired spiritual life widely. The so-called *First Part* of his writings was translated into Greek in the 8th century, and ever since it has been a source of inspiration in the Orthodox monastic world. Translations include versions in Georgian, Slavonic, Latin, Arabic, Ethiopic and in various modern languages. In the Greek Orthodox tradition he has been traditionally known as Isaac the Syrian, a name which does not hint at his East Syrian and therefore "Nestorian" background. West Syrian copyists introduced changes into the text by replacing the name of Theodore of Mopsuestia with that of Chrysostom, yet without altering his message, and his place of retreat was changed to Scetis in Egypt,[34] and due to the popularity and difficulties of the text numerous variants and mistakes have emerged in the Greek manuscript tradition.

The first part is a mixed collection of 82 discourses.[35] It could be described as a one-man *Philokalia*, an adventure in the inner world with the light of (a blind man's!) inner eye. The basic ideas are love and self-sacrifice, solitude and loneliness. Single experiences of a mystical and ecstatic nature are frequently described or referred to. The "individualistic" aspect of the Syrian monastic tradition is seen, for example, in a reference to the righteous one enjoying the continual providen-

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[33] The few known facts concerning Isaac's life are based on two sources. The first one is to be found in the *Book of Chastity* by Išoʿdenah, from the early 9th century (J. B. Chabot, "Le Livre de la chasteté", in *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 16 [1986], p. 277–278), and the second is included in Rahmani's c. 15th-century manuscript (*Studia Syriaca*, Charfet Seminary, Lebanon, 1904, p. 33).

[34] The latter replacement was taken for granted by early Western scholars such as Wright and Assemani. See Wright 1894, 110; Colless 1968, 4.

[35] The Syriac text is edited by Bedjan (*Perfectione Religiosa*, 1909) and translated somewhat clumsily by Wensinck (*Mystic Treatises*, 1922); the first six chapters have been fluently re-translated by M. Hansbury (St. Isaac of Nineveh: *On Ascetical Life*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1989). There is also a translation of the Greek version (*Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac of Nineveh*) where Bedjan's Syriac has been consulted. The best introductions to Isaac's thought are the exhaustive introductions to Wensinck's and Miller's translations. There is also a new comprehensive general survey by H. Alfeyev: *The World of Isaac of Nineveh*, in the Cistercian studies series.

tial care of Grace "individually, not communally" – words omitted from the Greek version.[36]

The second part was also known and used by Syriac-speaking Chalcedonians, but since it was never translated into Greek, it was forgotten and remained unknown until 1983, when the Syriac original was discovered.[37] The insights and the style resemble those of the first part; both have been among the most important sources of this study. There is also a third work attributed to Isaac, the so-called *Book of Grace*, which, however, is more probably a product of Simeon the Graceful.[38]

1.1.2.2. Sahdona (Martyrios)

Sahdona was born in Halmon, Beth Nuhadra. He was influenced by his mother and by a holy woman called Širin, and became a monk in Beth 'Abe, from where he was appointed a bishop of the East Syrian Church c. 635–640. Curiously, he became a kind of a theological "in-between", for he was accused of embracing Chalcedonian Christology and was deposed, but was soon reinstated and once again deposed. Probably the whole process was aroused by envy of Sahdona's spiritual character, but in any case the outcome was that Sahdona lived his last years as a hermit somewhere in the vicinity of Edessa, and his writings survived only within the Chalcedonian tradition.[39]

Sahdona's literary heritage consists of five letters, a collection of maxims on Wisdom, and his major work *The Book of Perfection*; all of these have been edited and translated.[40] The most important part for our study is the latter half of the first part of the Book of Perfection, which deals with the spiritual life of the "perfect".

The discourse in Sahdona's writings is thoroughly biblical: quotations from or allusions to the Holy Book occur in about every third line. The role of quotations may even cast doubt on the value of the writings as a source of genuine experiences, but especially the chapter on prayer contains sections that seem to describe genuine personal mystical experiences.

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[36]   ܐܬܘܪܐ ܘܠܐ ܐܬܘܪܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 103. (Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 70.)

[37]   Edited and translated by S. Brock: *'The Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI.* (CSCO 554–555, Lovanii 1995).

[38]   Brock 1997, 55.

[39]   Brock 1997, 50–51.

[40]   The Book of Perfection has been edited and translated into French by Halleux, *Oeuvres Spirituelles I* (CSCO 200–201, Louvain 1960), *Oeuvres Spirituelles II* (CSCO 214–215, Louvain 1961), *Oeuvres Spirituelles III* (CSCO 252–253, Louvain 1965). The letters and Maxims are to be found in Halleux, *Oeuvres Spirituelles IV,* CSCO 254–255 (Louvain 1965).

1.1.2.3. Simeon the Graceful

About the only thing we know about the life of Simeon the Graceful (*Šem'ōn de-Ṭaybūtheh*) is that he gained a reputation as a medical doctor during the time of Catholicos Ḥenānīšo' (680–700), and became a monk under the guidance of Rabban Šabur.[41] Simeon seems to be the only Syrian mystical author to have had a Hippocratic background. Consequently, his writings contain various analytical classifications and reveal a kind of psychosomatic understanding of spiritual life.[42]

All the surviving writings of Simeon the Graceful have been translated into Italian, and the most important of them into English by Mingana.[43] The most interesting aspect of Simeon's writings is the way in which he deals with the movements of 'grace' (*ṭaybūtā*), its proceedings and withdrawals, and his analysis of the inner faculties of man and the different aspects of prayer. Points of especial interest are his remarks on the contemplative attitude as well as the epistemological contribution he makes to the discussion by outlining the connection between mystical experience and mystical knowledge. Simeon also finds more profound connections between mystical experiences and the truths of Christianity than do most other authors.[44]

1.1.2.4. Dadišo' of Qatar

Like Isaac of Nineveh, *Dadišo' Qaṭrāyā* originated from Beth Qatraye, and he entered the Monastery of Rabban Šabur in the late seventh century.[45] The works of Dadišo' include a Commentary on the Asceticon of Abba Isaiah,[46] a Commentary on the Paradise of the Egyptian Fathers (unpublished), and miscellaneous short writings on the spiritual life, which are used in this study.[47]

Dadišo''s approach to ecstatic states might be described as encouraging: he aims to guide his reader towards mystical experience rather than to exhaust the topic by describing it. His methods, however, seem somewhat merciless in their

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[41] Brock 1997, 55.

[42] I have given some examples in *Kerubin Silmin*, 230–231.

[43] Italian translation by Bettiolo (1992), English translation by Mingana in Woodbrooke Studies VII. In addition, the *Book of Grace* attributed to Isaac of Nineveh is probably by Simeon; selections translated in *Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac of Nineveh*, 397–426.

[44] For examples, see below p. 171, 178.

[45] Brock 1997, 56.

[46] Dadišo' Qatraya: *Commentaire du Livre d'Abba Isaïe*, CSCO 326–327, Louvain 1972.

[47] Published by Mingana in Woodbrooke Studies VII.

uncompromising preference for withdrawal into silence and seclusion. Dadišoʻ does not in fact envisage the possibility of any real mystical experience outside the cell and complete solitude. Yet for the same reason he is a valuable source for the practical aspect of "exercises in solitude". But Dadišoʻ also makes it clear that ascetic mortification, its "bitterness", is not an end in itself: the aim of eremitism is what we call mystical experience: the joyous "sweetness" described as "the spark of the love of Christ" and the "feeling of forgiveness", as well as the "spiritual impulse" stirring the ardour of the "perfect love of God" and the "sight of the light and the glory of our Lord".[48] Dadišoʻ also has an exceptionally rich discussion on the role of angels in the experience.[49]

1.1.2.5. John of Dalyatha

The identities of the various Syrian Johns were confused at an early date and since then the subject has been much debated, the result being that John of the Grapevines (*Yuḥannan Dalyāthā*) and John the Elder (*Yuḥannan Sābā*) are identified as the same person, distinct from John of Phenek and John of Apamea (who in turn consists of two or three different Johns!). John of Dalyatha seems to have been born in Northern Iraq, become a monk on Mount Qardu, and flourished in the eighth century.[50] The details of his life have been forgotten, but the most important point is that his writings display deep spiritual insight, surely not inferior to the more famous Isaac of Nineveh. In fact the language of John is richer and more resplendent than Isaac's, and therefore John's obviously profound mystical experiences are portrayed in a very colourful way. Images of light and warmth and various ecstatic terms and expressions appear frequently in his discourse, which is deeply penetrated by ecstatic experiences.

This being the case, it is a matter of regret that the corpus of John of Dalyatha has remained almost unknown. Only his Letters have been published,[51] and even they have not been translated into English, although their contents well stand comparison with Theresa of Jesus or perhaps Hildegard von Bingen, to name but two. I am personally inclined to see John of Dalyatha as the most original and most poetically talented author in our Syriac corpus,[52] and it is to be expected that

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[48]   Mingana 1934/Dadišoʻ, 12a–13a, pp. 209–210 (tr. 88–89), *ibid.*, 19a, p. 216 (tr. 98).

[49]   Mingana 1934/Dadišoʻ, 45a–47b, pp. 236–239 (tr. 126–130).

[50]   Brock 1997, 60–61.

[51]   With a French translation in PO 39 by R. Beulay (*La Collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*). The other writings consist of 25 (or 28) *Discourses* and *Headings on Spiritual Knowledge*. Four short chapters have been included in the Greek version of Isaac of Nineveh and circulated under Isaac's name. (Brock 1997, 60–61.) John's thought has been thoroughly analysed by Beulay (*L'enseignement spirituel de Jean de Dalyatha*, 1990).

[52]   For instance, see pp. 96, 156.

John will sooner or later be recognised as being among the greatest Christian mystics of all time, the works of R. Beulay being a good start.

1.1.2.6. 'Abdišo' and Joseph the Seer

Born a Zoroastrian, Joseph (710–792)[53] was taken captive in an Arab raid, brought up as a slave in Sinjar and finally sold to a Christian from the region of Qardu, where Joseph was greatly impressed by the life of local monks and received baptism. Joseph, due to his spiritual zeal, was liberated by his master to enable him to enter a monastery in Beth Nuhadra. After a certain period in solitary life he was chosen to be the head of the monastery of Mar Bassima in Qardu. However, he retired once again to solitary life only to be made head of the monastery of Rabban Bokhtišo'.[54]

Joseph the Seer (*Ḥazzāyā*) is reputed to have produced "1900 writings", but only a few have survived. The identity of Joseph the Seer has also been more or less confused. The Syriac sources already confused Joseph Ḥazzāyā with Joseph Ḥūzāyā, a 6th-century grammarian, and moreover, even his name "the Seer" was interpreted by Wright[55] as Joseph of Ḥazza, even though Joseph was from Nimrod, and not from Hazza (Arbela). Catholicos Timothy I condemned Joseph in the East Syrian synod of 790, evidently because of his teachings on charismatic pneumatology, but the contemporary historian Išo'denah considered the condemnation to be the result of personal envy.[56] The schism probably provides the explanation why Joseph also wrote under the name of his brother 'Abdišo', also a convert.

The treatise under the name of 'Abdišo' happens to be perhaps the most important one for this study. The text is not lengthy but it is thoroughly filled with a rich variety of vivid images concerning the mystical encounter: joy, love, peace, a sweet odour, intoxication, rapture, strong wine, fiery impulses, consuming fire, crystal light, immaterial light, a vision of our Saviour, keys to the inner door of the heart, luminous clouds, visitation, spiritual *theoria* shining in the soul, intercourse with the sublime being, failure in the control of the senses, incidents of falling to the ground.

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[53] These years are suggested by Sherry 1964, 88.

[54] Brock 1997, 61.

[55] Wright 1894, 128.

[56] Sherry 1964, 78–88. For more discussion on the synod and the decisions in question, see Beulay 1990, 423–428.

In addition to the writings published by Mingana, Joseph the Seer is the most probable author behind *A Letter sent to a Friend*,[57] which is attributed by its West Syrian scribe to Philoxenus of Mabbug. The theme of the letter fits perfectly with the East Syrian tradition. For example, prostrations before the cross are greatly emphasised. The letter is an extremely charismatic treatise on the three stages of spiritual life, and it contains descriptions of mystical states very similar to those in the writings of 'Abdišo'; some of these are among the frankest in the whole corpus.

1.1.2.7. The Book of the Holy Hierotheos

The Book of the Holy Hierotheos by Stephen bar Sudhaile is an unique master-piece of Syriac literature, composed c. 500. As a person, Stephen is known only from the letters of his opponents. He was a monk who moved from Edessa to the environs of Jerusalem, and remained a famous but controversial teacher with Origenistic and even pantheistic tendencies. His only known work, *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, is a story of cosmic and spiritual ascent proceeding with a dreamlike logic. The result is a peculiar collage of subjective and cosmological, biblical and neo-Platonic components. The book was condemned as heretical and was almost forgotten when the greatest Syrian scholar, Barhebraeus (d. 1286) realised its beauty and published a new edition, which was still copied and read by the West Syrian Fathers in the 19th century.[58]

1.1.2.8. Other West Syrian Authors

With the exception of Stephen bar Sudhaile, all the authors so far have come from the East Syrian tradition. Nevertheless, the differentiation between the Western and Eastern Syrian traditions is not relevant for the theme of this study. The two traditions may in fact be taken as a single entity, since the same spiritual teachings have been read and copied on both sides of the denominational and ecclesiastical borders. Moreover, the ascetic authors themselves did not pay attention to the

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57 Edited and translated by G. Olinder, *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug sent to a Friend* (Gothenburg 1950). French translation: Graffin, "La lettre de Philoxène à un supérieur de monastère sur la vie monastique" in *L'Orient Syrien* VI (1961) – VII (1962). For a general introduction, see Vööbus 1988, 160–169. The letter has also been translated into Armenian and Arabic. Olinder, oddly enough, did not question the authorship of Philoxenus. There is, of course, the possibility of circular reasoning here: the treatise is attributed to East Syrian tradition on the basis of its contents, but if it actually was of West Syrian origin, as the manuscript tradition claims, it would be no less than an effective proof of the common character of the spiritualities of the two traditions.

58 See Marsh 1927; 222–232. Widengren 1961, 166–169.

dogmatic questions that had led to the division of the churches. There are no substantial reasons why the same literary genre could not have flourished in West Syrian monasteries as well. Due to its Alexandrian doctrinal connections, the "Monophysite" tradition should in fact have been even more adaptable for the patterns of mystical theology than the "Nestorian" tradition, which perhaps remained somewhat closer to the ancient Jewish-Christian heritage and its biblical expression. However, the West Syrian sources of this study remain more or less cursory in character. I have made only slight reference to the works of the two best-known West Syrian authors, Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) and Barhebraeus (d. 1286).

Philoxenus possibly studied first in Tur 'Abdin, then in the Persian school, where he completely rejected dyophysitism and consequently opposed Chalcedon. He was made the metropolitan of Mabbug in 485, but suffered great persecution by the Byzantine Orthodox in the time of Justin I. Philoxenus is also important as one of the earliest Syriac authors to pass on the influence of Euagrios. Among the massive literary heritage of Philoxenus there is a famous collection of ascetic homilies, and an interesting letter to Patricius of Edessa (translated into Greek under the name of Isaac the Syrian) where he discusses charismatic topics, one of his aims being to harmonise the Evagrian scheme with the biblical imagery of St. Paul.[59]

Barhebraeus is in many ways the culmination of Syriac literature. He collected the various fields of Syriac sciences into vast encyclopaedias of which the most relevant for this study is *Ethikon*, a treasury of Syriac spirituality containing material compiled from both West and East Syrian authors as well as from the Greek Fathers from both before and after the schism, yet the disposition is arranged according to Al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, for which Barhebraeus aimed to produce a Christian parallel.

Finally, it is to be noted that numerous interesting points of comparison can be found in Greek Orthodox monastic literature, the *Philokalia* and its kindred. The closest Greek parallel in geographical, chronological and thematic terms is the seventh-century work from Mount Sinai, the *Ladder* of John Climacus, which I occasionally refer to in the footnotes. The Greek material, however, would require a separate study of its own.

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[59] Philoxenus of Mabbug: *The Discourses*. Edited and translated by E. W. Budge. London 1894–95; Philoxène de Mabboug: *La lettre à Patricius*. (PO 30.) Paris 1963. St. Paul and Evagrius are connected by Philoxenus by means of the concept of love. See *La lettre à Patricius*, 79–87 (826–833).

1.1.3. Syrian Asceticism and Early Islam

The religious context in which Islam was born and developed was dominated by Syriac Christianity. The presence of Christians in the Arabian peninsula during the first Islamic century is a remarkable fact in itself, not to mention the monastic presence in the surrounding areas of the earliest centres of Islam. As we have seen before, seventh-century Qatar produced a few important Syriac authors. In Mecca itself, however, there was no actual church, but there seem to have been a few Christians who lived there. Nevertheless, the historicity of the traditional claim of contacts between Muhammad and Syrian Christians seems to be of a legendary nature, the accounts having an apologetic purpose.[60] Theological, literary and ideological influences seem to have been adopted indirectly as implicitly accepted common ideals and expectations as to what one might suppose a religion has to offer.

It is beyond the scope of this study to go into great detail, but a few interesting remarks are worth making. Obviously, the ascetic ideal and practice of the Christians gave birth to both counter-reaction and imitation among the early Muslim faithful. The monks' way of praying – recitation, repetitions, postures, prostrations, lifting of hands – was the devotional model for the Islamic conception and practice of prayer.[61] The endless prostrations of Syrian monks were modified in Islam into a fixed and moderate set of prayer movements. The corresponding mechanism may be seen behind the evolution of the Islamic practice of fasting: the constant denial of the hermits was offered to every believer in the form of Ramadan, the model of which must have been the Great Lent of the Eastern churches. Since the Arabs (mainly those living in the Syrian region) were much influenced by the Stylites, it seems to be a reasonable suggestion that the

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[60] The presence of Christians is interesting because of the Islamic tradition attributed to Muhammad prohibiting non-Muslims from living in the Arabian peninsula. Nevertheless, the East Syrian Synods were still attended by bishops from Qatar, Bahrain and Oman in 676, so the tradition in question cannot be genuine, unless we assume that the prohibition was neglected by the early Islamic leaders. For information on the Christians of Arabia, see Mingana 1926, 58–60. The basic work on the matter is Trimingham 1979, albeit perhaps not the most critical in its perspective. For the Syriac perspective on the story of Muhammad and the Monk Bahira, see Griffith 1995b.

[61] An illustrative description of a Syrian monk performing his prayers is given by John of Ephesus: "And, because intense noonday heat prevailed, he stood and prayed, and next he knelt down, and he stood up and stretched out his hands to heaven, expanding himself in the form of the cross; and he continued for a long time until about the ninth hour, and then he sat down to rest for a short time" (*Lives of the Eastern Saints* [PO 17], 132).

Islamic minarets were inspired by the Stylites' columns.[62] It is typical of the development of Islamic thought that the spiritual elitism of a Stylite was transformed into a pillar of the community.

The Islamic attitude towards the ascetics was from the very beginning positive and tolerant. Monasteries and hermits were in principle protected since they were devoted to the service of God. The first caliphs adopted the same approach but in practice the "protection"[63] (*dhimma*) could be occasionally denied. Especially during war-time monasteries might be looted and destroyed. The monasteries of Arab Christians seem to have quickly disappeared. In the aftermath of the Arab invasion a large number of monks escaped to Byzantium; an East Syrian community was formed in Rome in the 7th century.[64]

Tolerance prevailed during the first half of the era of the Omayyads (661–750), Christians still being a majority in the Middle East. The Omayyad policy of treating all Christian groups equally was seen by many Oriental Christians as an improvement compared with Byzantine rule. The 8th century, however, brought changes. The caliphs Walid (705–715) and Omar II (717–720) were despotic tyrants who treated Christians in particular according to their fancies: a monastery could be destroyed if the sound of the *nāqūšā*[65] happened to irritate them.[66]

Syrian monasticism flourished until the end of the first millennium, but not without losing something of its vitality. Due to the troubled circumstances and the

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[62] The suggestion has been made by Peña 1992, 35. Theodoret of Cyrrhus tells how "the Ishmaelites come in groups of 200 or 300, and at times by thousands; with great cries they renounce the errors of their fathers and, in the presence of the great luminary (= Simeon the Stylite), smash the statues that they had worshipped" (*Historia Religiosa*, XXVI). The Christian Arab poet Al-Akhtal used to swear "by the God of the ascetics, who walks on the column platforms" (Al-Akhtal: *Diwan*, ed. Salhani, Beirut 1891–92, 71:6). Stylites were even found in Yemen (Peña 1992, 41).

[63] The quotation marks indicate the ambivalent nature of the protection: the only protection that a Christian needs in an Islamic state is actually from the Muslim protectors themselves! The intolerant features in early Islamic *thought*, however, have become almost a taboo in academic discussion, which is used to viewing Islam as essentially a tolerant religion, all the acts of intolerance being merely "political" activity with no religious basis, in spite of the fact that political and military activity has been profoundly connected with the religious cause since the beginning of the Islamic era. The very combination and co-existence of religious and political ideas and practices in Muhammad's *sunna* and in early Islam provided an ideological basis for intolerant actions later in history. The facts that support this side of the matter are collected – in perhaps a somewhat propagandist fashion – by Bat Ye'or in *The Dhimmi* (Dickinson University Press, 1985) and in *Les Chrétiens d'Orient entre Jihâd et Dhimmitude* (Cerf, Paris 1991).

[64] Brock 1995, 50–51; Vööbus 1988, 306–310, 316.

[65] *Nāqūšā*, the Greek σήμαντρον, is the wooden instrument used for the summon call by the Eastern churches before bells were introduced from the West, perhaps during the 9th century.

[66] Vööbus 1988, 306–310, 316.

absence of the possibility of evangelising openly it was inevitable that the monasteries should turn inwards. The splitting up of the Islamic empire produced considerable difficulties for monasteries, which were almost systematically destroyed, mainly by Kurds. The fate of monasticism is symbolised by the fate of the monastery of St. Simeon the Stylite, which was captured and its monks killed in 985. Even Tur 'Abdin rapidly emptied. The Golden Age of Sufi literature was a period of decline for Syrian Christian monasticism. A revival took place in the 12th century with John of Mardai, who renewed Syriac literary culture and oversaw the re-opening of twenty monasteries. The Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century dealt a mortal blow to the East Syrians, whose rich monastic tradition is nowadays in fact dead, although it has been continued by a few Chaldeans (Catholic Uniates). The principal monasteries of the West Syrians still function with a few monks in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Jerusalem.[67]

These tragic aspects of history, curiously enough, need to be pointed out because they have their part in determining the structure of our "purely synchronic" study in setting the limits of the Syriac corpus. For instance, perhaps the most important single treatise in our corpus, 'Abdišo' the Seer's *Book of Answers*, has survived only in part: the lost portions are known to have disappeared during the First World War.[68] Due to the numerous burnings and lootings of the libraries of Syrian monasteries, it is too late to estimate which Syriac mystical works belong to the mainstream or are more important than others: we have to contend with the texts that have happened to survive. The 150 Syriac authors known to us today are almost like a handful of fragments compared with the abundance of Islamic (Sufi) literature.

1.1.4. Sufism

"Sufism" has been the topic of an endless number of introductory works from historical and spiritual as well as theosophical perspectives. One of the central questions in both the classical Islamic and the modern Western approach is the relationship between Sufism and Islamic Orthodoxy: does Sufism represent the heart of original Islam or is it a movement attached to it more or less from outside? The answer largely depends on one's personal presuppositions and views. The question is in fact too wide to be resolved empirically. Sufism is chronologically, geographically and by its composition such a far-reaching entity with no

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[67]   For details, see Vööbus 1988, 311–313, 320–324, 361–383, 387–406; *Kerubin silmin*, 152–156, 176–177.

[68]   Mingana 1934, 165.

clear limits that by choosing a suitable sampling it is possible to prove anything at all.[69] Sufism has become a designation for all Muslim spirituality.

The historical truth of the birth of Sufism seems to be too complicated to be elucidated with simple facts, and this situation is not eased by the fact that "Islam" itself developed into its final (Sunnite) form simultaneously with the development of Early Sufism. The main factors, I would suggest, that contributed to the divergence of a specific mystical tradition from the mainline of Islamic everyman's religion are (1) the psychological religious need of some people to devote themselves to God and to the new religion more than was "necessary" according to its regulations, (2) the example of Christian monks in the environment of the Arabian desert, and (3) an inner-Islamic counter-reaction to the outward brilliance of the quickly spreading Islamic empire, which was a striking point of comparison with the modest origins and practices of the first Muslims. All these three tendencies strengthened each other, and Qur'anic support for these ideas was provided by the spirit of Muhammad's early message in the Meccan Suras, which contain numerous images directed against the world.

Islamic ascetics exercised their "proto-Sufism" in a variety of groups of a loose nature, called 'ascetics' (*zuhhād*), 'devotees' (*nussāk*), 'readers' (*qurrā'*), 'preachers' (*quṣṣāṣ*), 'weepers' (*bakkā'ūn*) and *ruhbān* – a term that usually refers to Christian monks.[70] It seems that most of the earliest Muslim ascetics lived as hermits with no doctrinal, social or hierarchical structures. It is to be noted that the early Sufis frequently quoted sayings – mostly imaginary, sometimes perhaps derived from the Christian kerygma and in a few cases from apocryphal sources – of Jesus who was seen by early Muslim ascetics as an ideal Ascetic.[71] The Islamic Jesus says, for example:

> The love of this world corrupts religion; but to me, this world is the same as a stone or a clod.[72]

> The sweetness of this world is the bitterness of the next. Ostentation (*jūda*) in dress is pride of heart, that is to say, vanity and boasting. A full belly means abundance of lust (*jām al-nafs*, literally 'bowl of soul') that is to say, it is their nourishment and stimulus. Verily I say unto you. [...] who loves this world does not discover the sweetness (*halāwa*) of devotion.[73]

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[69] For these views, see for example Shah 1968, *The Way of the Sufi*, and Ernst 1985, 1.

[70] Smith 1931, 155 (e.g. Abu al-Mahasin ibn Taghribardi, *al-Nujum al-Zāhira* [Leyden, 1855–61] i, 396).

[71] Smith 1931, 158–159. For more details, there is an excellent study for Finnish readers: J. Hämeen-Anttila, *Jeesus, Allahin Profeetta*. (Suomen Eksegeettisen Seuran julkaisuja 70, Helsinki 1998.)

[72] Abu Talib al-Makki: *Qūt al-qulūb*, i, 263.

[73] Abu Talib al-Makki: *Qūt al-qulūb*, i, 256.

After a short period of admiration of celibacy, however, the Islamic ascetics and mystics quickly adopted themselves to "follow the straight path" and began to marry, even though they often depicted marriage as an obstacle on the path towards God. Usually they also continued their earthly occupations. The family troubles and restlessness caused by earthly life were to introduce a certain pessimistic character into Sufism.[74]

As one might expect, early Sufism varied on a local basis. According to Al-Shaibi, the earliest Muslim ascetics in the Syrian region were distinguished by perplexity (*hayra*), ignorance and self-mortification, and in the 9th century they were called 'hungerists' (*ju'iyya*) due to their avoidance of eating for fear of gluttony.[75] The most evident Christian influence, however, is the fact that the first convent (*ribāṭ*) was established in Syria.[76] In Kufa and Khurasan there was a movement of *futuwwa*, known for the special non-woollen clothing worn. Basra was more subject to Persian and even Indian influence, and there existed a few ideals not prevalent in "Arabian asceticism": love, lack of cleanliness and long hair. The ascetics of Basra were also known for their practice of weeping for purification.[77]

The doctrinal emphasis slowly moved from God's judgements to his merciful side, from pessimism to optimism. Hasan of Basra (d. 728), the preacher of repentance and fervent reciter of the Qur'an, became a symbol of the former, and Rābi'a (d. 801), the famous female saint, of the latter.[78]

During the ninth century Sufi thought and literature slowly began to develop towards greater variety of thought and richer plurality of expression. An elementary feature is the hierarchical understanding of the different aspects of meaning in the Qur'an, already developed by Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765).[79]

The main line of early Sufism seems to have been an original intra-Islamic development with some ideals unconsciously adopted from Syrian monasticism and Persian religious thought. There is also at least one movement with a strikingly Christian emphasis, i.e. *malāmatiyya*, 'the blameable', who aimed to conceal the practice of religion, perform good acts in secret and even pretend to commit

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[74] Schimmel 1975, 36–37.

[75] See, for example, Iṣfahānī: *Ḥilyat al-awliyya' wa ṭabaqāt al-asfiyya'* 9, 268.

[76] Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 6. (Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 6.) al-Shaibi 1991, 44–45.

[77] al-Shaibi 1991, 39–41. The development of the ideal of Love may be understood from the psychological point of view as an aftermath of emotional practices such as weeping.

[78] See al-Shaibi 1991, 40; Schimmel 1975, 30–31. For more details on the development of early Sufism, see Smith 1931, 125ff ; for Rabi'a, see Smith 1928; for Hasan al-Basri, see H. Ritter: *Hasan al-Baṣrī, Studien zur Geschichte der islamischen Frömmigkeit* (Der Islam 21, 1933).

[79] Schimmel 1975, 41.

sin in public. Especially the first two features are a general ideal in Eastern Christianity, and the latter corresponds to the famous "Fool for Christ" tradition which originated in the Syriac-speaking world.[80]

One aspect of early Sufism, greatly stressed by some scholars and less by others, is that with their unaccustomed behaviour the Sufis were unable to attract popular support and therefore became alienated from society. Many of them were accused of heresy, exiled, imprisoned, tortured, or even put to death. Denunciations were often intra-Sufi affairs, rival Sufis inciting the government to act against their opponents. Ecstatic experiences were one of the main topics of controversy. Intra-Sufi controversies concerned matters like the nature of the vision of God (*ru'ya*) or whether ecstasy was caused by sorrow or joy, but for outsiders the issue was often the legitimacy of the very existence of such experiences. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 859–862), perhaps the most important early teacher of ecstasy (*wajd*), was constantly opposed by the Mu'tazila and the Maliki jurists because of his teaching on mystical experiences, and he was forced to leave Egypt. He was also the first Sufi poet of note.[81]

In order to date the transformation of *dhikr*, the most important Sufi practice, into a technical and institutionalised practice, we may note here that the first work focusing on the correct way of performing *dhikr* is, according to al-Khaṭīb, *Ṣafā' al-dhikr* by Abu Hamza (d. 883).[82] The corresponding Christian practice, the Jesus Prayer, which developed about simultaneously[83] in the Byzantine monastic tradition, is often suggested as having been derived from Islamic or Indian influence, yet this suggestion has evident difficulty in explaining how the East Syrian Church, the most probable channel of such transmission, seems to be uninfluenced by the idea of continuous repetition of *one* short prayer formula.[84]

Abu Yazīd Bisṭamī (Bāyezīd or Bayāzid, d. c. 875) is attributed with the honour of having contributed several distinctive features to Sufism. First and foremost is the concept of "annihilation" (*fanā'*) as the ultimate goal of Sufism. Abu

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[80] On the Syrian holy fools, see John of Ephesus, PO 19, 164–179 [510–525]; Harvey 1990, 91–92; Peña 1992, 17; my *Kerubin silmin*, 69–73. For an example of the delight in being of no value in the eyes of others, see Qušayri, *Risāla*, 150; *Principles of Sufism*, 93.

[81] Böwering 1999, 53–59; Schimmel 1975, 45. The teachings of Dhu-al-Nun, however, are scattered among the works of later Sufis (e.g. Qušayri).

[82] Smith 1935, 30.

[83] There is actually no real dating for the origins of the Greek Orthodox hesychastic practice of the repeated Jesus prayer and its combination with breathing (and the use of the rosary). The earliest evidence is in fact pre-Islamic; especially John Climacus of Sinai (ca. 579–649) is important in this respect. A kind of breakthrough seems to have taken place with Gregory Palamas at Mt. Athos in the 14th century.

[84] Curiously enough, one of the spiritual authors that have contributed the most to hesychasm, Isaac of Nineveh, does not mention any particular prayer that should be recited.

Yazid expressed this idea with paradoxical ecstatic utterances such as no Muslim had dared to mouth before: he apparently claimed to be divine and to have seen God Himself. Zaehner has presented some explicit evidence that the idea of the soul identical with God may be influenced by Hindu thought.[85] Abu Yazid's utterances were, however, considered non-heterodox and defended by later Sufis. Secondly, Abu Yazid's manner of describing mystical experience as *mi'rāj*, a heavenly journey like that of Muhammad, became a legendary one and a model for latter representations. As his third main contribution we may count the theme of "Lover and Beloved", which was to remain a permanent one in Sufi literature. The interpretation of his passionate parlance full of paradoxes, however, caused many problems for Muslim authors during the following centuries.[86]

Ecstatic behaviour became wilder and mystical language bolder. In 865 al-Nuri died, possibly of loss of blood due to wounds received while running bare-foot into a freshly-cut reedbed in a moment of ecstasy.[87] When Sufis proclaimed their teachings in public, they were confronted with persecution by the populace and prosecution by the authorities. There was an evident need to synthesise theories of ecstatic mysticism with the religious law. One of the first synthesisers, al-Kharraz (d. 899) developed the theory of *al-fanā' wa-l-baqā'*, combining mystical knowledge with the vision of God. His view of the substitution of divine attributes for human qualities in the experience of mystical union, however, was later condemned as heretical.[88]

The 10th century was in many ways a decisive period in the development of Sufism. Divergent local emphases spread and diffused into a kind of Sufi synthe-

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[85] Zaehner 1950, 93–102, 116, 126–128. The most important facts are: (1) Abu Yazid's master was a convert who "mastered the ultimate truths" yet did not know how to perform the obligatory duties of Islam; (2) Abu Yazid has sayings that are problematic in their Arabic context, e.g. "you are That (*dhāka*)": *dhāka* is never used in Arabic to denote God, but in the Upanisads "That" is a general way to refer to Brahman as the Absolute; (3) Abu Yazid employs themes of the cosmic tree and the birds in a way familiar from the Upanisads and the Bhagavad-Gita. Yet Schimmel (1975, 47–48) – overlooking the difference between the experience itself and its interpretative expression – assumes that Abu Yazid "reached his goal by means of the Islamic experience of *fanā* ... rather than by experience that, in the Vedantic sense would have led him to an extension of the *atman* ..." Zaehner in fact did not make claims about the experience itself but about the expressions used to describe it. However, Zaehner's interesting thesis is not generally favoured; the main stream of Indian influence obviously belongs to a later phase in history. The influence in Abu Yazid's case seems to be valid, but this did not affect Sufism as a whole. See Baldick 2000, 36–37.

[86] Schimmel 1975, 47–48. One of the earliest accounts of Abu Yazid's *mi'rāj* to the seven heavens is in Pseudo-Junayd's *Al-qaṣd ilā-llāh*, translated in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 244–250.

[87] Böwering 1999, 55–56.

[88] Böwering 1999, 57–58.

sis. Practical Sufism culminated in polarity between *ṣaḥw* and *sukr*, 'sober' and 'drunken' Sufism. A sober Sufi remains a responsible member of society and observant follower of religious regulations, while a drunken one entrusts himself to trust of God (*tawakkul*), intuition and experiences in which awareness of personal identity is lost. The classical Sufi books of doctrine were written by sober Sufis, so it is no wonder that the drunken ones appear in minor roles, often subject to heavy criticism.

A kind of culmination of the sober line has been seen in the Baghdad mystic Junayd (d. 910), to whom the initiation chains of the later Sufi orders usually go back. His final aim was not only "annihilation" (*fanā'*) but "persistence" (*baqā'*). One of the definitions of Sufism given by Junayd was "ecstasy with attentive hearing" (*wajd ma' istimā'*).[89] Junayd, who lived when the Sufis were under suspicion by the government, admitted that it was dangerous to speak openly about the deepest mysteries, and in this he strongly disagreed with Hallaj (d. 922), the pole-star of drunken Sufism, who openly declared the mysteries of unification. Even though Hallaj's claims were not substantially different from those of Abu Yazid, he had to face the death penalty for his preaching, which was too bold for authoritative Islam. Hallaj is remembered as the martyr of Love – "martyr of ecstasy" would also do him justice. Hallaj also has the reputation of representing the culmination of Arabic Sufi poetry in both quantitative and qualitative terms: he possibly composed more poetry than any other early Sufi.[90]

Due to the extremists' activities it was necessary to make the Sufi path safer to travel for those who could not equal heroes like Hallaj. The latter half of the 10th century may be described as a period of consolidation. Development is connected with the growth of the political power of the Shiites. Mystics usually sympathised with the family of the Prophet, and even though not all Shiite doctrines were plainly acknowledged, 'Ali was considered an important link in the chain of Sufi masters leading back to Muhammad. The Sufis and Shiites also share, for example, common doctrine on the eternal light of Muhammad, and the

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[89] Qušayri: *Risāla*, 281 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 304). In this study I have utilised Junayd's short treatise *Kitāb al-fanā'*, which is an extremely interesting analytical approach to the mystical experience. (Arabic original in *Islamic Quarterly I*, 79–83; English version in Zaehner 1960, 218–224).

[90] Schimmel 1975, 57–59, 64–73; Schimmel 1982, 35. "In contrast to didactic and moralizing poems, much of al-Hallâj's verse revolves around ineffable states and abstruse theosophical doctrines" (Homerin 1994, 193). For more on the thought of Junayd, see Zaehner 1960, 135–161. The life and teachings of Hallaj have been treated magnificently by Massignon in *La passion d'Al-Hosayn ibn Mansour Al-Hallaj, martyr mystique de'l Islam exécuté à Bagdad le 26 Mars 922* (2 vols, Paris 1922), an English version edited by H. Mason: *Passion of Al-Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton University, 1981).

Sufi conception of sainthood (*wilāya*) and hierarchies of saints resemble and are largely parallel to the Shiite theory of the imamate.[91]

At the same period Sufism began to absorb philosophical ideas, most of which were derived from neo-Platonic thought, although commonly attributed to Aristotle. Especially the speculation on the grades of illumination and gnosis bears a strong neo-Platonic imprint. Christian veneration of the celestial hierarchy of the saints may also be behind the development of Sufi ideas concerning the role of the saints in the maintenance of Cosmic order. Virtues were formed into systematic abstract systems. Muhammad was described as the perfect man, the reason and purpose of creation, the friend of God and intercessor for his community.

"Sufism" itself can be considered a 10th-century product, at least in the etymological sense: before that not all Muslim mystics were known as "Sufis". The name is often said to be attributed to them because of their woollen (*ṣūf*) clothing that resembles a Christian monk's garment.[92] However, more important than clothing is the fact that during this period the compilations such as Kalabadhi's *Ta'arruf* and Sarraj's *Kitāb al-luma'* began to describe all (non-heterodox) mysticism as an art of *taṣawwuf* and its practitioners as Sufis.[93] Another outcome of the same process was the appearance of Sufi historiography which, in accordance with the Arabic manner, categorised Sufis into various classes. Sulami's *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* became the basis for later biographies.

The doctrine of sober Sufism slowly developed in both its methodology and content. The final harmonisation with Orthodoxy took place in the works of al-Ghazali, whose conversion to Sufism is among the most famous in Islam: after an intellectual approach to Sufi thought he "realised that what is most distinctive of them can be attained only by personal experience, ecstasy, and a change of character".[94]

Al-Ghazali's harmonisation, however, was by no means the end of the evolution of Sufi thought, which developed a theosophical (or "gnostic") branch of its own, one culmination of which is to be found in the works of Ibn 'Arabi (1165–

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91   Schimmel 1975, 82–84. For detailed discussion on Sufism and Shiism, see al-Shaibi 1991, 59–77.

92   E.g. Smith 1931, 155, 158; Schimmel 1975, 35. The etymological connection with Christian monks is often doubted by those who stress the independent character of Sufism. In any case, not all Sufis wore distinctive woollen robes. The appearance of the word *ṣūfī* may be traced to Kufa in the late 8th century or early 9th century; see Al-Shaibi 1991, 37, esp. note 19. The more spiritual explanations refer to the purity (*ṣafā*) of their heart (e.g. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 5), although in the linguistic sense this is impossible.

93   Sviri: *Ḥakīm Tirmidhī and the Malāmatī Movement in Early Islam in Early Sufism*, 593. (In Lewisohn, *The Heritage of Sufism*, pp. 583–613).

94   Quoted from Schimmel 1975, 94.

1240), whose massive literary output has been of enormous significance in later Sufi discussion. His theosophical tendency has been regarded as pantheism, corrupting the pure Islamic vision as well as the final and full interpretation of Islam. (Texts have no meaning – meanings must be read into them! Any development of religious thought can always be seen as either progress or decay, depending on one's dispositional postulates.) The interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's thought largely depends on the signification given to his central concept *waḥdat al-wujūd*, 'unity of existence' – most probably it does not imply pure pantheism.[95]

The Western Islamic world, Andalucia, was perhaps more open to philosophical speculation and more or less pantheistic ideas, while many eastern mystics had a more "enthusiastic, enraptured attitude".[96] Local variations are also seen in the most important Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*) that developed during the thirteenth century around the most famous Sufi masters: *suhrawardiyya, qādiriyya, kubrawiyya, šādhiliyya, naqšbandiyya* and *mawlawiyya*, Rumi's whirling dervishes. Each brotherhood has its own chain (*silsila*) of masters (*šaykh, muršid*) and special kind of methods and practices to upgrade their disciples. Most orders seem to have had a seclusion period of 40 days under severe conditions for the novices.

The fact that the practice of *dhikr* was accompanied by corporeal movement resulted in the development of ecstatic dances, probably the most famous aspect of Sufism. The historical roots of Sufi dance have been seen in the dances of Arab warriors, the techniques of hatha-yoga (*naqšbandiyya*) and the folk dances of the Near East (Rumi and *mawlawiyya*).[97]

The main problem in Islamic mystical thought was always how to express the affinity between God and man, the Creator and the created. Instead of public ecstatic utterances or potentially heretical theological treatises, poetry was found to be an apt vehicle for the expression of mystical experiences in a less dangerous way. In the Arabic tradition prose and rhymed prose was more important than poetry, which arose from the background of Bedouin *qaṣīdas* and the wine and urban love poetry of the Abbasid period. The mystical love poems with images of worldly love were followed (c. 900) by tender love poems with more traditional spiritual vocabulary. Sufi poetry reached its Golden Age in the Persian culture around the 13th and 15th centuries.[98] The most remarkable Persian poet was Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), although Omar Khayyam and his wine poetry have

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[95] Schimmel 1975, 263–265.

[96] Chodkiewicz 1993, 2 ff.; Schimmel 1975, 264; Schimmel 1982, 37–38.

[97] Michon 1989, 281–284; Burckhardt 1976, 104

[98] Schimmel 1982, 13, 19, 26.

Chronological chart of the most eminent characters[99]

CHRISTIANS		SUFIS	
West Syrians	East Syrians[100]	Arabs	Persians
John A. (500?) Philoxenus (523) Stephanos b.S. (550?)	Isaac N. (660?) Sahdona (670?) Simeon G. (680?) Dadišoʿ Q. (700?) John D. (780?) John/ʿAbdišo H. (790?)	Hasan of Basra (728) Rabiʿa (801) Dhu al-Nun (859) Niffari (965) Makki (996)	Marwazi (797) Muhasibi (857) Razi (871) Bayazid (875) Tustari (887) Tirmidhi (908) Junayd (910) Hallaj (922) Sarraj (988) Kalabadhi (990) Sulami (1021) Hujwiri (1071) Qušayri (1072) Ansari (1089) Ghazali (1111)
Barhebraeus (1286)		Ibn ʿArabi (1240)	Suhrawardi (1234)

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[99] This table shows the "eastern" emphasis of the Syriac and Arabic mystical authors; most came from the Persian region. This peculiar fact has no obvious explanation. In the East there may have been some *indirect* influence of the old Iranian religions, especially their dualistic nature, which logically stimulates *extremist* religion, dualism being a cosmological postulate of asceticism. Since the "Persian" Sufis, however, wrote fluent Arabic, it is somewhat unnecessary to stress their non-Arab character as Damghani does in his article *Persian Contributions to Sufi Literature in Arabic* (1993).

[100] All figures are rough estimations.

traditionally been more famous in the West. The most familiar themes are human love, the wanderer seeking his home and the alchemistic images of unification.

We may conclude this brief historical survey by noting that the later Middle Ages, especially the 17th and 18th centuries, have usually been considered a period of decay in the moral, intellectual and aesthetic standards of Sufism, with no creativity or originality. However, this conception is – as in the case of mediaeval Syriac literature – probably an outcome of the fact that the texts of this more recent period have not been of interest to scholars and have therefore remained unknown in the West. It is perhaps to be admitted that for many of us the very same notion would be viewed as the "wisdom of classical antiquity" if it had been produced in the 8th century or as "dull and uninteresting religious talk" if it had been uttered by a 19th-century preacher.

1.1.5. The Corpus of Sufi Authors[101]

We will not be totally mistaken if we estimate that in the case of the Syriac sources listed above we have all the most important (published) sources of mystical experience in classical Syriac literature. In the case of Sufism, however, the case is entirely different. Even though our corpus is approximately of the same size, we must admit that when compared with the number of existent classical Sufi works we have only a few of the most important works and only a microscopic proportion of the total number. Authors like Jilani[102] or Ibn 'Arabi produced more works than an average scholar is able to treat systematically. For that reason I have no illusions about producing a "systematic analysis of ecstatic experience in classical Sufism" in the absolute sense of the phrase. Nevertheless, with the aid of the present corpus *something* at least can certainly be illustrated. It is to be hoped that this might be a beginning for other systematic studies of either of these two rich traditions, and for further comparative studies. But now we must content ourselves with a kind of torso Sufism consisting of the corpus of the following sources.

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[101] The order is chronological. The most important (i.e. the most famous) of all Sufi classics that I have not used as a source is probably Sarraj's *Kitāb al-luma'*, which also displays features of an apology for Sunni Orthodoxy. In English it may be entitled the *Book of Glimmerings* (Ernst 1985, 11) or the *Book of Flashes* (*Early Islamic Mysticism*, 212).

[102] Long extracts from Jilani's works are available in English translation at http://www.al-baz.com/shaikhabdalqadir/index.html.

1.1.5.1. Kalabadhi

Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (d. c. 990) was born and buried in Bukhara, Khurasan, but about his life or his personality there is very little to be told. Of his writings only two have been preserved. The first is an unimportant commentary on 222 selected traditions, but the second, *Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-madhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, is one of the most important classical Sufi works. There is a saying concerning the importance of the work that "If it had not been for *al-Ta'arruf*, none would have known *taṣawwuf*."[103] Although major in importance, however, *al-Ta'arruf* cannot be called original or inspired but rather a "somewhat dry exposition of a Hanafi jurist", as Schimmel puts it.[104] The basic motive behind its compilation was to show the consubstantiality of orthodox Islam and Sufism, which was now offered to Islamic society as a science and tradition with both discursive literary forms (*qāl*) and direct spiritual experience (*ḥāl*).[105]

The book presents Sufi doctrines, states and concepts with an almost scholastic touch. Systematic arrangement includes chapters like "Their doctrine of the Qur'ān", "Their doctrine of vision", "Their doctrine of the legal schools", "Their doctrine of ecstasy" and so forth. Yet the references to ecstatic experiences may be found scattered in different chapters. Kalabadhi is quite unusual in asserting that in many cases a mystical state expressed with opposite concepts, such as "absence" and "presence", may be one in essence.[106] Kalabadhi's discourse is seasoned with quotations from earlier Sufis in both prose and poetry. I have quoted *al-Ta'arruf* according to Arberry's translation unless otherwise mentioned.

1.1.5.2. Niffari

Al-Hasan al-Niffari (d. 965 or 976/977) is a most peculiar case among the Sufi authors – and not only because he is one of the few early non-Persian Sufi authors. In the most important Sufi biographies Niffari is not even mentioned, yet his writings *Mawāqif* and *Mukhāṭabāt*, compiled by his sons or grandsons, offer a fascinating and challenging experience. They contain neither systematisation of states nor theoretical speculation on ecstasy or analysis of it. It might be more correct to state that the books were produced in a state of ecstasy, perhaps even by

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[103]   Damghani 1993, 37.

[104]   Schimmel 1975. 85.

[105]   Damghani 1993, 38.

[106]   Baldick 2000, 56.

automatic writing.[107] And oddly enough, the work is fashioned in the form of revelation so that the subject of the discourse is God. The mysterious presentation implies a slow and meditative way of reading:

> Names are the light of letter, and the thing named is the light of names: stay with it, and you shall see its light, and walk with it in its light, and not be covered by it from its light.[108]

The differentiation between "technical statements involving interpretation" and "utterances expressing genuine beauty and mystical experience", though often useful, does not work at all in the case of Niffari's discourse, which is full of esoteric allusions and subtle, mysterious aphorisms.[109] However, Niffari can be numbered among the drunken Sufis, for his statements concerning 'seeing' (ru'ya) God and "direct influence" (waqfa) are very incautious from the point of view of Islamic Orthodoxy; it also seems that Niffari presents himself as a kind of Mahdi.

The paradoxical thought of Niffari seems, on the one hand, to remove the veil between the human and divine, but, on the other hand, denies its mere possibility. In the use of technical terms, too, Niffari follows his own line. Some of the most prevalent terms he does not employ at all (e.g., dhawq), some he employs in an idiosyncratic way (e.g. wajd, harf), and in addition, he has a few entirely original terms (waqfa).

Niffari, due to his non-sober position, turned out to be the most important Sufi source of this study, even though his thoughts must be read in an exceptionally careful way because of their cryptic character. Yet he does reveal numerous aspects of the mystical experience that other authors do not notice. Especially his views on (mystical) language are profound, and his critical attitude towards the main lines of Sufism leads him to make many pungent observations.

Damghani has good reason to claim that Niffari's writings are "absolutely devoid of practical benefit or instructive value for novices on the Sufi path", but his opinion that they "rather resemble certain apocryphal Jewish or Christian works modelled on the Torah and the New Testament" is somewhat obscure and substantially unsound, albeit interesting.[110]

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[107] Suggestion of Arberry (1993, 13–14).

[108] Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 19:3.

[109] Arberry, in chapter six of *Sufism*, disagrees at this point. My view is that "genuine" mystical truths are frequently to be found under Niffari's apparently "technical" expressions.

[110] Damghani 1993, 39. Damghani here mentions the book of Lamentations and the Revelation of St. John, which are both of a completely different nature from Niffari's writings.

1.1.5.3. Qušayri

Abu al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qušayri (born in Nišapur, Persia, d. 1072 or 1074) was praised by Hujwiri as follows: "In his time he was a wonder. His rank is high and his position great, and his spiritual life and manifold virtues are well known to the people of the present age."[111] According to Damghani, Qušayri's main work, *Risāla*, dated 1046, has been for a thousand years among the most important "key works and classical sources of reference for the study of both practical and speculative Sufism"[112]; according to Schimmel, it is "probably the most widely read summary of early Sufism".[113] Despite these eulogies, however, the reader of a translation[114] may perhaps be disappointed with the contents of *Risāla*, which appears to be more or less a collection of anecdotes with little original thinking or intention to treat topics with profound, many-sided insights. Moreover, von Schlegell's translation lacks 27 chapters that include profound, inspirational expositions of technical terms. Despite the rich theoretical classification there is no single unified system. The highest point in the mystical path may be presented as "direct knowledge of God", "love", or "passing away", depending on what sector of the discourse is activated.[115]

Risāla, just as Kalabadhi's *Ta'arruf*, aimed to present Sufism in perfect agreement with Sunni Orthodoxy. In the case of Qušayri this results, for example, in a polemical attitude towards the Malāmatiyya sect. Numerous commentaries have been written on both of these works. Their compilatory character means that both also functioned as sources for the thought of many earlier Sufis.

1.1.5.4. Hujwiri

'Alī ibn Uthmān al-Ghaznawī al-Hujwirī (d. c. 1075) was a Hanafi Sunnite who is reputed to have been widely travelled, to have experienced both poverty and wealth, and to have had an unhappy marriage. He composed his main work, *Kašf al-mahjūb li-arbāb al-qulūb* (in Persian), as an answer to questions on Sufism. The result is an exhaustive and unique work of great importance. The modern reader finds especially pleasing Hujwiri's custom of treating opposite views in a

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[111]   Hujwiri: *Kashf al-mahjūb*, 167.

[112]   Damghani 1993, 40.

[113]   Schimmel 1975, 88.

[114]   Partial translation: *Principles of Sufism* by B. R. von Schlegell (Mizan Press 1990); most of the omitted chapters are translated by M. A. Sellis in *Early Islamic Mysticism* (The Classics of Western Spirituality), pp. 99–149.

[115]   Baldick 2000, 62–63.

very objective way. On the other hand, this means a certain indecisiveness. *Kašf al-mahjūb* in fact contains the earliest known synopsis of different Sufi groups and their special characteristics. The plenitude of divergent opinions ensures that Sufism is presented in its most colourful and multiform light.[116] Hujwiri is unusual in admiring celibacy and sexual abstinence, even in marriage.[117]

1.1.5.5. Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) is widely considered to have been the most profound and influential Muslim thinker ever, and "the greatest Muslim since Muhammad". His influence may have been somewhat exaggerated, as Chittick argues,[118] but his profundity remains unquestioned. This is connected with the deep personal aspiration in his writings proceeding from the vicissitudes of his life, especially his retirement from philosophical studies and professorship to devote himself to the spiritual quest and the ascetic Sufi life. He was born at Tus in Khurasan, where he returned for the last years of his life and established a *khānqāh*, a Sufi version of the Christian monastery.[119]

Besides making some reference to his main work, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, one of the greatest Islamic classics ever produced, in this study I have made systematical use of two very different kinds of works. The first is his personal presentation *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, and second his brilliant esoteric work *Miškāt al-anwār*, a classic of light mysticism, which he composed during his last year in Tus.

The authenticity of *Miškāt* has been questioned by some modern scholars (e.g. Watt), because of its apparent incoherence with al-Ghazali's most famous works, but as Bakar argues, there is simply not enough evidence to disprove the traditional claim regarding its authorship. Moreover, in traditional Islamic scholarship the difference between exoteric and esoteric presentation is recognised and well established.[120]

The question of al-Ghazali's actual significance for Islamic thought need not be resolved here, but if one had to name one's personal favourite in all Islamic literature, my choice might be *Miškāt al-anwār*, where the author's tone is subtle

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[116] Nicholson's introduction for *Kašf al-mahjūb*, ix–xii; Hosain 1971, 546.

[117] Baldick 2000, 64.

[118] Chittick states that the three 13th-century Sufi texts translated by him "have a much broader relevance and appeal than do the two works translated by Watt (*The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*)". Chittick 1992, 20. See also Baldick 2000, 41–42.

[119] Bakar 1998, 165; Watt 1965, 1038–1041.

[120] Moreover, some of Watt's arguments seem to be misleading if not totally mistaken. See Bakar 1998, 166, 169–171.

and sovereign, high above the polemical attitudes present in his earlier works; the images are beautiful and the discourse transcends semantic speculations concerning terminology, which is not the case in most Sufi literature.

1.1.5.6. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilani

'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1077–1166) originated from the districts around the Caspian Sea. A Hanbalite, he lived in Baghdad and began his distinguished preaching career at the age of 50. He is remembered as the father of the *qādiriyya* order and one of the most famous Islamic saints ever: his tomb at Baghdad is still among the most famous destinations of pilgrimage.

Jilani's doctrinal position lies within official sober Sufism. Of his vast literary production I have consulted *Sirr al-asrār*, a work that presents the essence of Sufism with a perspective concentrating on the inner states. Compared with Kalabadhi, for instance, this treatise is characterised by a certain openness, and the remarks on ecstatic experiences are obviously based on personal experience. Tosun Bayrak's English translation, *The Secret of Secrets*, is, however, an extremely free paraphrase that must be used with caution.[121]

1.1.5.7. Ibn 'Arabi

Muḥyī'l-dīn Ibn (al) 'Arabī (1165–1240) was an Andalucian Arab by birth, but he influenced the whole Arab world, not least because of his extensive travels.[122] His mysticism was not restrained by the fact that he was married with several wives. As the author of at least 251 works he was the most productive of all the Sufis, perhaps even twice or three times as much, depending on what is counted as a separate treatise, but only a small proportion of these have been printed, even less translated.[123] A good proportion of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, moreover, may be reckoned as the most difficult Islamic literature to explicate and interpret. Scholars have read them thoroughly without achieving certainty as to their meaning.[124] The manuscript tradition is unique as well: many of the works have survived as originals or as copies affirmed by the author himself.

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[121] Bayrak translates, for example, *man lā wajda lahu* 'The one who has not experienced ecstasy and thereby received the manifestation of divine wisdom and truth' (*Secret of Secrets,* 89).

[122] Ibn 'Arabi's travels included Seville, Cordoba, Fez, Tunis, Cairo, Jerusalem, Mecca, Baghdad, Mosul, Malatya, Konya and Damascus – we may note here that the latter five surround the Syrian monastic centres.

[123] Ates 1971, 708. Ibn 'Arabi himself gives a list of 251 works; his biographer O. Yahya gives 846 possible titles. *Sufis of Andalusia* / introduction by R. W. J. Austin, 47; Arberry 1950, chapter 6.

[124] Chodkiewicz 1993, 1.

For this study I have selected two of Ibn 'Arabi 's works that represent two ultimate ends of his production. *Rūḥ al-quds fī munāsahat al-nafs* (Mecca 1204) is an easy-to-read collection of contemporary Sufi biographies which, however, stands out from numerous other Sufi hagiographies because of its discerning perspectives on inner states.[125] *Tarjumān al-ašwāq*, on the other hand, is surely among his most complex products. It is a mystical collection of poems inspired by the beauty and wisdom of a Meccan maiden. These poems met with such immense misinterpretations that Ibn 'Arabi was compelled to return to Mecca in 1214 to explain the esoteric spiritual meaning of the poems, and in the end he wrote a full commentary for the collection.

1.1.5.8. Subtextual Sufi Sources

Of other classical Sufi literature, besides the main sources systematically used, a few works need to be mentioned here. As this study is limited to the field of Semitic languages, the whole entity of Persian literature has been available to me only in translation. Yet I have made a modest reference to the translations of a few Persian classics, such as Attar's (1120–1190) "Conference of the Birds" (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*) and Rumi's *Fihi ma fihi*.

Tirmidhi, one of the lesser-known Sufi authors of the 9th century, offers several exceptionally open and expressive descriptions of mystical experience and its waning.[126] The other subtextual material comes from a later period. Chittick's compilation includes three 13th-century Sufi writings, probably by Nasīr al-Dīn Qūnawī – Ibn 'Arabi and Jalaladdin Rumi have also been suggested as possible authors. These writings treat "unity" (*tawḥīd*), "prophecy" (*nubuwwa*) and "eschatology" (*ma'ād*) as basic components of Islam with warm and practical wisdom differing from the scholastic approach. A further reference has been taken from the biography and teachings of Abu al-Ḥasan al-Šādhili (d. 1256), as compiled in 19th-century Tunisia.[127]

The latest work used as a source is 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāšānī's (d. 1330) *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* (A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms), a massive work consisting of explanations of 516 terms. It is not, however, completely commensurate with the glossaries in the Western scholastic-analytical sense: the enigmatic explanations are often more cryptic than the word explained, and the author does not bother to explain many of the simple terms at all – even though the work is

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[125] Because of its discerning quality *Rūḥ al-quds* proved to be a more suitable source than, for example, Attar's classic *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*. The English translation of *Rūḥ al-quds* also includes selections from *Al-durrat al-fākhira*.

[126] Radtke & O'Kane 1996, 21–22, 180–185.

[127] al-Sabbagh: *Durrat al-asrār*. Unfortunately I had no access to the Arabic original.

intended for a wider audience of "scholars of the traditional and intellectual sciences". Most terms define the soul's experience of different aspects of God in a more or less psychological sense. Unlike other Sufi dictionaries, it is arranged alphabetically.[128]

To sum up, the corpus of sources is quite extensive but not necessarily thematically unbalanced. The most important target sources have been analysed systematically, and some other relevant literature from the classical period has been used for reference. The study is based on original works written in Syriac and Arabic,[129] yet in quotations I have usually used the existing English translations, in slightly altered form when necessary. For the old-fashioned and somewhat awkward translations of Wensinck (Isaac of Nineveh) and Mingana (various authors), as well as the ultra-interpretative version of Jilani by Sheikh Bayrak, I have frequently given a new translation of my own.

1.2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The subject is indefinable and the textual material vast and heterogeneous. How is one to handle it? On the other hand, the topic itself seems to be relatively limited if defined as explicitly *ecstatic* experience. Indeed, if we take the Syriac discourse and exclude everything that does not describe an (ecstatic) mystical experience, we will have only a limited amount of text. But are we eventually left with anything at all? How do we know whether a certain expression is really a description of a mystical experience? In fact we do not. And moreover, we must not fail to admit this relativity present in the subject, yet keeping our eyes open for all descriptions that may reflect an extraordinary state of consciousness.

Besides reading the meaning from the text, a certain aspect of the meaning must be read *into* the text as well. In this process we need not only grammatical knowledge and contextual understanding, i.e. as to how the synchronic discourse in the text itself functions, but the use of subtextual reference as well: how the subtexts penetrate and contribute to the semantics of the expression. A basic dilemma of semantics is that every reader has his own subtexts constituting what

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[128] Ernst 1992, 183–187. Qašani's omissions include many of the most general ecstatic terms, such as *ghayba, wajd, sukr* and, *šuhūd*.

[129] In addition to the Arabic classics of Sufism, I have included Hujwiri's *Kašf al-mahjūb* among my main sources, even though I had no access to the Persian original; this was made possible by the fact that Nicholson's translation gives all the significant original terms in brackets. The technical terms of Arabic origin were largely adopted as such into Persian Sufi discussion.

he considers to be a "meaning". This means that the closer the subtexts are to the text in question, the closer the understanding is to the original meaning. For the same reason the concept of "corpus" in a semantic analysis is a flexible one: the existence of different "sub-corpora" causes some variation in the process of understanding.

In an ideal case the main sources – target sources – are those where the frequency of ecstatic expressions is high. Understanding of such readings, however, implies some knowledge of other literature from the cultural context. These subtexts constitute background for our material. The last level of subtexts for modern Western readers' meta-interpretation is to be found in Western literature, modern thinking which is inevitably present in our reading. It functions mainly on the methodological level, as a certain "philosophical" attitude in our approach.

1.2.1. The Objective: Ecstatic Mystical Experience

The present subject is impregnated with terminological problems, yet the whole course of the study is determined by the approach chosen concerning the use of terminology.

Firstly, a straightforward problem: there is no established English term, such as *Sufi*, for the Oriental Christian Mystic-Ascetic. I find the word "mysticism" somewhat inconvenient and insufficient, due to its multiple connotations that may refer to the occult or to any superstitious phenomena, as we are here dealing with a limited corpus of "early Oriental Christian mystical theology". Therefore, I suggest a new term *metatheology* to refer to the thought and doctrine, and correspondingly *metatheologian* to indicate its author. (This must not be confused with the use of 'metatheology' in the philosophy of religion, where it means a theoretical and analytical approach to the postulates of theology.) Since the word *meta* comprises the meaning of continuity with both unity and change (forwards), it is very appropriate for the present purpose. *Metatheology* will therefore be used henceforth in the sense of "mystical theology of the Syriac-speaking Christian tradition". When understood in this sense, the concept is more exact than "mysticism". Functionally, it indicates its continuity with standard orthodox theology.

It is to be stressed that the metatheologians do not dissociate themselves from dogmatic theology but, on the contrary, intend to extend it towards the exposition of more existential, personal and in that sense "practical" discussion concerning the progress of the soul, and possibly towards wider cosmological structures. The position can be illustrated by the following scheme, where all theology, dogmatic and mystical, is a single entity under the scrutiny of the scientific approach:

philosophical metatheology	philosophy of mysticism

⇩ *scientific approach* ⇩

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dogmatic theology	→	(mystical) metatheology

The mystical experience has indeed been a topic of numerous overviews based on psychological[130] or philosophical standpoints or on comparative religious studies.[131] The discourse and dispositions of these works are regularly based on the mysticism of Far Eastern religions, on the one hand, and Western Catholic mysticism on the other, even though quotations from Sufi masters may occasionally appear as complementary material, yet with no serious interest in understanding their context.

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[130] The descriptive studies and psychological analyses of ecstasy in modern religions are methodologically in an entirely different position compared with our pursuit of scattered references in ancient texts; they may provide some indirect help, but there is no sense in making any actual comparisons.

[131] The basic classics of 20th-century study of mysticism include the empirical psychology of James and Underhill. The approach of Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1911) is described by its author as "science of union with the Absolute". Perhaps the most profound philosophical and psychological approach is to be found in Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917; *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923). For a basic comparative analysis, see Otto, *West-Östliche Mystik* (1926; *Mysticism East and West*, 1932). The philosophical questioning is defined by Stace (*Mysticism and Philosophy* 1960), which is a possible starting-point for modern discussion. Stace's theory of the basic unity of all mysticism is problematised in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford University Press, 1983). The main point of most modern discussion culminates in the question whether the mystical experience is totally conditioned by its cultural context ("constructionist approach") or whether it "transcends" its context ("perennialism"). Katz's pluralism is critiqued in Forman, R. K. C, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness, Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press 1990). For more discussion, see also Kvalstad 1980 and Jones 1993. B.-A. Scharfstein's *Mystical Experience* (1973) is also to be recommended, including, for instance, an interesting discussion of mysticism and creativity (of Einstein, Sartre, Jung etc.) carried out with wide perspective and solid criticality. The most fruitful publication for this study, however, has been the collection of inspiring essays on the linguistic connections of mystical experience, edited by S. Katz (*Mysticism and Language*, 1992).

But when we turn to the previous studies on our subject, there is very little to be related. In the field of Syriac studies mystical experience as a primary issue of scientific study has been almost completely ignored so that there are actually no standard points of comparison. More surprisingly, almost the same may be said concerning the studies of classical Sufism where no systematic studies of the ecstatic readings are to be found, despite the plentiful amount of literature touching upon the phenomenon. Consequently, the present work is the first systematic comparison between the two.[132]

More recent monographs on the thought of John of Dalyatha (Beulay 1990) and Isaac of Nineveh (Alfeyev 2001) do provide some support, but it seems that the mystical experience in Syriac literature has been the main topic of only one article, G. Widengren's *Researches in Syrian Mysticism* (1961), where the author aspires to trace a few historical roots (Stoicism, Origen) and methodological parallels (Jesuit meditation of the cross), albeit not always convincingly.[133] Widengren seems to have the traditional tendency of Western scholars to force the original terms to contain more logic and constitute a more coherent picture than they in fact originally did.[134] The best basic introduction to Syriac spirituality is probably S. Brock's little-known work *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kottayam 1989).

Despite the plentiful amount of literature on Sufism, studies concentrating on the ecstatic readings are relatively few in number. The chapter on "Illumination and Ecstasy" in *The Mystics of Islam* by R. A. Nicholson (1914) is still a good basic introduction to the subject. However, we may note as a kind of counter-example that even such a classic as Louis Massignon's *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (1954), a meritorious work on the roots of Sufi vocabulary, does not pay sufficient attention to the ecstatic experience: it even lacks many of the crucial terms.[135] Carl W. Ernst's *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (1985) is an outstanding study on ecstatic utterances, which I have

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[132] The avoidance of the subject can be seen as being caused by the limits of the traditional scientific paradigm: an ecstatic experience with all its inaccuracy and subjectivity is a typical "non-scientific" topic. Yet the language referring to it can be approached with objective means as well.

[133] NVMEN vol. VIII. An example of the less convincing views is that in the *Book of Holy Hierotheos* the utterances placed in the mouth of the Mind (*hawnā*) are so literary that they have no "inspired quality", but the visions do have, and the latter may have been written down as auditory experiences introduced by the formula "I heard" or the like (p. 193).

[134] The problematic, not necessarily disprovable, statements include (1) presentation of *ḥezwā* and *hezātā* as "perfect synonyms", (2) *theoria* as a state following that of *demuta*, explained by Widengren as 'imagination' and (3) identification of *ḥezwā* with *visiones exteriores* (p. 191).

[135] The most remarkable omissions are *sukr, dhawq* and *šurb*, all essential signs for the ecstatic–mystical experiences.

utilised in chapters 3.5.2–3.5.3. The Qur'anic connections of the expression of mystical experience have been discussed more widely by Paul Nwyia in his doctoral thesis *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique* (1970).

Most of the pertinent literature on the mystical experience, however, has been written from such an all-embracing perspective that information of any particular tradition is more or less coloured by the presuppositions demanded by the author's universalistic perspective. The most noteworthy work dealing with both Syriac and Sufi mysticism, Margaret Smith's *Studies in Early Mysticism* (1931),[136] is informative in many ways, but in its treatment of the mystical experience it can hardly be regarded as perfectly objective: the author states at the beginning that 'mystical experience' means a sense of the "Beyond as a unity, from which all has come, to which all end, to which all things tend".[137] Such a definition would not be given or accepted by any Syriac author (except Stephen bar Sudhaile) – even though their experiences often seem to have been stronger than many of those that have sensed the "cosmic unity". Smith presents a kind of average mysticism that fails to do full justice to any particular tradition. It has value as one way of explaining the universal existence of mystical experience, but it falls short in representing what exactly is being said by the Syriac tradition. Therefore, the "universalistic" approach to mysticism is not necessarily a sufficient basis for understanding the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh, to name but one.

The "universalistic solution" is even more common in the case of philosophical approaches to mysticism – the authors may even apologise for their narrowness when they use no more than *one tradition* for reference![138] It is of course easy to proceed by picking up suitable quotations from all traditions in order to argue for one's own point and thereby complete the paradigm set at the beginning, but systematic analysis requires a little more focused corpus than a whole "tradition".

1.2.2. Expression of Mystical Experience

The theoretical perspective of this study might be called "philosophical", or to find something more exact, "deconstructive" in the literal sense of the word. This is not a reference to Derrida's famous deconstruction (which is not a method) where there is no need for pre-linguistic immediate experience, the mycelium of

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[136] Smith has been praised by B. E. Colless (1968, 9) for having shed "light on the part played by the mysticism of the Eastern Churches in the development of Sufism."

[137] Smith 1931, 2.

[138] So W. P. Alston 1992, 81: "Indeed, a majority of my examples will be drawn from a subregion of that territory, the tradition of Catholic mysticism. Admittedly, this narrowness of focus will prevent me from drawing any unrestrictedly general conclusions from my survey".

linguistic references being able to uphold itself. In my approach, however, the inner experience itself is supposed as the actual centre and starting-point, even though the difference between the experience and the language used is emphasised. The aim is to first outline a general model, idealistic by nature, in which all the possible stages and different components of the mystical discourse are disassembled and deconstructed apart from each other in order to outline the logical deep-structure of the discourse. With the concept of deep-structure I refer to the intentions and functions of the particular expressions. In the process of reconstruction, however, special care must be taken that the logical structure is not forced to possess more logic than the components of the discourse actually do. This means that if the original discourse contains a certain illogicality, the reasons and outcomes of this illogicality must be analysed without automatically transforming all the illogical parts into a system.

But first we ought to consider the concept of mystical experience itself. It has been given an endless number of definitions;[139] here it is sufficient to note that we are content with its use in the widest sense. More important than its definitions, however, are its characteristics. They have been described by W. James and W. T. Stace as follows:[140]

James	Stace
1. Ineffability	1. Sense of Reality
2. Noetic quality	2. Sense of peace, blessedness etc.
3. Transiency	3. Sense of holiness, or Divinity
4. Passivity	4. Paradoxicality
	5. Ineffability

Both scholars stress the inexpressible character of mystical experience. The concept of ineffability implies the actuality of a higher form of consciousness than the natural one with which the language is conditioned to operate; ineffability also underlines the usefulness of *via negativa* in the mystical discourse. James's series is obviously more concerned with the psychological characteristics: namely, the experience seems to contain "information" (noetic quality); the experience cannot be sustained for long, nor can its quality be perfectly reproduced from memory;

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139 A suitable example is to be found in W. P. Alston (1992, 80), who defines mystical experience as "any experience that is taken by the subject to be a direct awareness of (what is taken to be) Ultimate Reality or (what is taken to be) an object of religious worship".

140 James 1902, chapter 16; Stace 1960, 132. A wider list is given by Scharfstein (1973, 142–175): sameness (i.e. all existing things sensed as of the same essence), separation, uniqueness, inclusion, familiar strangeness, depletion, aggression, conscience, mirror-reversal, humour, reality.

nor is it sustained actively, and finally, it is more or less independent of the will. Stace, as a philosopher, adds an essential ontological observation: experience is sensed as something *real*, even more so than the normal reality.

The presence of a supernatural Other and the consequences produced by it (Stace's points 2 and 3) can hardly be expressed without an interpretation preconditioned by the religious context, but one should not, however, draw too far-reaching conclusions from this fact, since in fact the expression of *any* experience is in need of a conceptual framework.
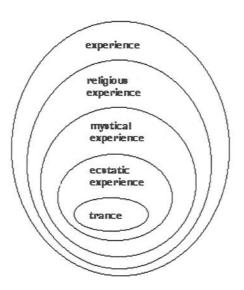
As one might expect, the definitions of the characteristics of mystical experience diverge further among different scholars. The variety is largely caused by the tension between the "objective" qualities and the interpretative ones, which already exists in the original discourse, and is in one way or another reproduced in the modern scholars' meta-interpretation, which aims to reduce the discourse to its basic components. A list of qualities where a few more interpretative features have been admitted has been drawn up by F. J. Streng:

1. The apprehension of ultimate reality
2. Attainment of perfection through mental, emotional, and volitional purification
3. An attitude of serenity and total (transcendent) awareness
4. A sense of freedom from time-space conditions
5. Expansion of consciousness and spontaneity through self-discipline.[141]

In my opinion, the most reasonable and fruitful way of developing a more detailed understanding of the mystical experience without constraining it with over-definitions is to view it in a qualitative continuum from the weaker to the stronger, from the more usual to the extraordinary. In other words, the varieties of mystical experience may be arranged into actual phases from "experience in general" to ecstatic trance (see figure below). Nevertheless, it must be admitted that when operating with an ancient text we are only occasionally able to locate (with the aid of the context) an individual expression so that its reference can be traced as clearly belonging to one of the following phases and definitely not to another.

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[141]   Streng 1978, 142.

Levels of experience.[142]

experience

religious
experience

mystical
experience

ecstatic
experience

trance

As the scheme shows, mystical experience, in spite of its unique features, is still only one mode of experience-in-general, and therefore it obviously contains psychological characteristics like sensations, perceptions, emotions, conations, cognitions – i.e. dynamic structure and complexity of content. Since the co-ordinates in the inner field can be drawn in various ways, the concept of 'mystical experience' will be used in this study as a general concept which includes all of its modes, including the stronger ones here called 'ecstasy', a state with certain limitations in controllability, and 'trance', an unconscious state with hardly any informative content.[143]

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[142] The order of the circles implies the disposition of the semantic fields of concepts according to the set theory: confined concepts are encompassed by wider ones. It also shows the shift from the ordinary towards the extraordinary from a modern psychological view where the extraordinary experiences are found in and originate in the depths of a person's unconscious.

[143] Moore 1978, 119–122. (An illustrating discussion on the diversity of mystical experience and the problems of the thesis of "unity of all mysticism".) Moore differentiates four types of claims made by mystics in their discourses on mystical experience: *subjective claims* (e.g. changes in the subject), *causal claims* (i.e. conditions of experience, when is it possible), *existential claims* (e.g. evidence for God) and *cognitive claims* (facts revealed of the ordinary or transcendent world).

Yet the sphere of 'religious experience', which could be defined as the sense of the reality of something-called-God as experienced by most believers with all of its variations,[144] must be excluded. If we were looking for a mere religious feeling in the general sense, we would have very little to exclude from the textual material since the sense of religious experience is connected with all the constituents of the discourse. By mystical experience, however, must be meant something *extraordinary*. Yet the differentiation of the two may be somewhat arbitrary since the mystical experience may be seen as a religious experience that is exceptionally intense.

In order to understand the phenomenon it is also useful to realise the difference between *mystical experience* and *mystical attitude*. We may use an analogy from the field of aesthetics: a judge in figure-skating competitions fully concentrates on the aesthetic aspect of the performance, but he/she does not necessarily have an aesthetic experience. Whether he/she has one or not, is in fact not important, yet his/her mental capacity is all the time active in the category of the aesthetic. In the same way, a mystic may have a permanent mystical attitude, which means an approach, intention and orientation that is meditative or contemplative and, on a more or less conscious level, connected with his/her religious beliefs, theological presuppositions and a certain mystical world-view. By the concept of mystical experience, however, one should understand something more extraordinary, perhaps a kind of emotional peak.

However, it seems that we cannot proceed much farther with the question of the meaning of mystical experience without discussing the concept of meaning itself. This is connected with the fact that the decisive criterion of determining whether an experience is mystical or not, is linguistic by nature. There are (usually) no physical or behavioural reactions – unlike in the case of pain, for example – that would differentiate the mystical experience from other religious, aesthetic or cognitive experiences that appear to be similar in absolutely objective observation. Any discussion of the experience is necessarily dependent on the religious language and its connections with mystical doctrines. A study of the ecstatic readings leads finally to an analysis of these conceptual associations.

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[144] Of the present sources I would count in the category of religious experience, for example, the Sufi discussions on at least humility, fear, piety, sincerity, gratitude, trust, satisfaction (Kalabadhi, *Kitāb al-taʿarruf*, chapters 39–45), and even most of the discussion under titles such as "intimacy" or "nearness".

1.2.2.1. Problems of Expression – Ineffability and Natural Language

It is often stated that because mystical experience is ineffable, mystical doctrine is approximate, and mystical language is allusive.[145] Ineffability, however, is a relative concept. An object is ineffable if it cannot be described. Yet mystical experiences are extensively described by mystics and non-mystics alike. And besides, is not *all* language approximate and allusive?

Firstly, we can make a differentiation between logical ineffability and accidental ineffability. Logical ineffability is determinate – *x* cannot be described in any circumstances due to its "ineffable essence", which has nothing describable. An ineffable item should be equidistant from all concepts. Are there reasons to suppose that "ineffable" mystical experiences are somehow inaccessible to concepts? Accidental ineffability, on the other hand, is due to the limitations of language (there may perhaps be an accidental lack of a term for a certain concept) and understanding, deficit in knowledge, i.e. the *describer*'s limitations or inability. Yet if anything exists, it unavoidably possesses properties, and properties in principle may be described.

> When you say, "In this present age words are of no account," you say this with words, do you not? If words are of no account, then why do we hear you say this with words? (Rumi)[146]

Therefore, if the mystical experience exists, it has properties that are basically describable. In terms of logic, partial describability rules out ineffability,[147] which in fact means that in the case of things that exist, there is no ineffability – only limitations in description. The question is, therefore, how do these limitations function?
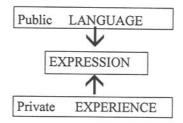
The core of the question is in the encounter and interaction between public language and private experience. All inner objects of mental reality, psychological or "mystical", lack the kind of criteria of identity that would be verifiable in public language.

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[145] E.g. Homerin 1994, 190.

[146] Rumi: *Fihi ma fihi (discourse 16)*, 135.

[147] For further discussion, see Yandell 1994, especially pp. 61–62, 66–68.

Formation of expression

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┌──────────────────────┐
│ Public   LANGUAGE    │
└──────────────────────┘
            ↓
      ┌──────────────┐
      │ EXPRESSION   │
      └──────────────┘
            ↑
┌──────────────────────┐
│ Private   EXPERIENCE │
└──────────────────────┘
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In order to analyse the meaning of an expression it is necessary to understand what is a meaning, or to be more exact, how a meaning functions. Generally speaking, the answer is quadripartite. In linguistics a basic way of approaching the concept of meaning is to differentiate between the aspects of *referential (denotative) meaning* that operate in relation to the external world, *affective (expressive) meaning* in relation to the mental state of the speaker, *cognitive (ideational) meaning* in relation to intellectual aspects, and *contextual (situational) meanings* in relation to extralinguistic situations.[148] The mystical *parole* seems to be active in the category of *affective meaning* with some dispersion to the latter two varieties of meanings. Nevertheless, we can be sure that any mystic would not hesitate to add to our list a fifth category, probably calling it *spiritual meaning*. This illustrates the unique nature of our topic: the mystic's demand is that the meaning of his *parole* refers to a dimension beyond ordinary mental phenomena.

The most useful differentiation, however, is that between two different aspects (or dimensions) of meaning, which actually function despite the actual nature of the "mystical" reality behind the verbal level. Firstly, there is the original meaning that the *author* of an expression had in his mind when writing, and this may be called *reference*. Secondly, there is the meaning produced or perceived by the *reader*, and this may be called *significance*.[149] Yet these are often perhaps no more than a framework for the *discussion*, a process of dynamic

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[148] Crystal 1992, 47.

[149] Approximately corresponding differentiations have been made in various ways by different philosophers, the most famous possibly being G. Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* (explained with the classical example of "morning star" and "evening star": both have the same *Bedeutung*, Venus, but a different *Sinn*), which corresponds to R. Carnaps's distinction between *intension* and *extension*. Mill distinguishes between *connotation* and *denotation*. The basic idea is more or less connected with epistemology: what X "really" means and what it is "thought" to mean. For further discussion, see A. W. Moore, *Meaning and Reference* (Oxford University Press 1993) and L. J. Cohen, *The Diversity of Meaning* (Methuen 1962).

interaction between the two, the totality of which is the "full meaning". Due to the limitations of the process of expression, the reference is never to be reached by outsiders – especially not by those from a different culture and from the other side of a gap of a thousand years. In the historian's perspective the aim is to polish the significance closer to the reference; in religious discourse, however, the significance may well "surpass" the reference (this happens, for example, in an allegorical interpretation of a biblical passage originally referring to concrete incidents). The positions of expression, reference and significance on the chronological continuum are radically different. The expression remains the same, being in fact timeless, but the reference and the significance occur under certain historical conditions and are in many ways connected with and dependent upon their (contemporary) contexts and preconditions.

It seems, therefore, that there can be no way of giving exact definitions for inner experiences – not necessarily because of the experience itself, but because meaning is a relative process consisting of vital components and interactions. In practice this means that any definition would not contain vocabulary without the very same need for further "exact" definitions. This also means that we must accept a certain insecurity and inaccuracy within the concept of "experience", and for this reason we ought to understand the concept of mystical experience in its widest possible sense.

In spite of the basic "ineffability" emphasised by all mystics, it is also evident that language is not rejected but firmly present in all the major mystical traditions as a psycho-spiritual means of radical re-orientation and instruction. Many religious and mystical traditions in fact consider the language of their worship sacred. Syrian authors believed that Syriac was the first language spoken in Paradise and indeed by God Himself, and the Sufis attributed the same status to Arabic.[150]

Language is essential for mystics due to its twofold function as power and instruction. The most obvious example of language as power – transformative, magical or theurgical – is to be found in the Kabbalah, but similar notions exist in Sufism (Bistami's language of the *mi'rāj*, Ibn Arabi's ideas of prayer *causing* man to ascend, and the whole practice of *dhikr*), as well as in Syriac metatheology, where there are cases of saints' authoritative speech, at least in the hagiographic anecdotes. The noetic quality of the experience means that mystics' language functions as instruction[151] insofar as they are able to resolve it into linguistic discourse.

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[150]   Katz 1992, 15–16. The belief that Syriac was the first language, however, is not mentioned by our mystical authors; it is referred to, for example, in the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* (Budge 1927, 132).

[151]   Katz 1992, 20–24.

For these reasons the concept of ineffability should rather be understood as indicating a mystic's *unwillingness* or *inability* to describe his experience in greater detail or to specify its phenomenal qualities, than the impossibility of expression. There is necessarily some kind of continuity between the experience and its vocabulary – and between the mystic author and his readers. This continuity enables the operation and interaction which is the heart of the discourse of "ecstatic readings".

1.2.2.2. Discourse of Ecstatic Readings

Whatever the actual nature or content of an experience, its verbal expression and textual signing moves it to a completely new dimension by adjoining it as a part of contextual discourse with various connotations and endless associations arising from the signs chosen. In the following I aim to outline the basic structure and characteristics of such discourse with the aid of a ramifying scheme showing all the potential levels of the discourse.

The notion of 'ramification' has been used as a criterion in estimating the ability of the discourse to deliver information of the mystical experience over the linguistic and cultural barriers. According to N. Smart, less ramified language is likely to be closer to the immediate experience because more ramified language with more allusions suggests a wider epistemological context.[152]

The theme can be illustrated by the following schema,[153] the logic of which is based on the central role of the experience in the heart of religious thought. Namely, the closer consideration of the mystical experience leads one to view it as the source whence genuine religious language and behaviour draw their vitality. As William James stated in his classic lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> Personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light.[154]
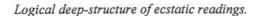
In the actual original sources, however, the discourse usually surges associatively or perhaps following a procedure systematised on totally different principles. This
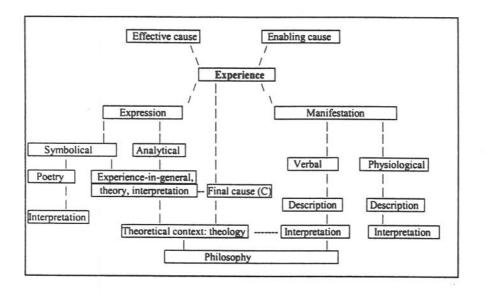
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[152] Smart 1992, 105.

[153] The construction of the scheme is based on an application of Aristotle's classical division of the four different causes: material, efficient, formal and final. They were taken as a starting-point, but just as in modern studies of causality, only one out of four appeared to be unproblematic by the clarity of its causality, i.e. the formal one (which would be called "efficient" by a positivist).

[154] James 1902, Lecture 16 (page numbers vary in different editions).

means that in outlining the dimensions of ecstatic discourse we have to demarcate and point out aspects and make differentiations that the writers themselves were probably not aware of. When the levels are deconstructed apart from each other, we may view the discourse of ecstatic readings as being constituted as follows:[155]

Logical deep-structure of ecstatic readings.

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   [Effective cause]            [Enabling cause]
            \                      /
              [ Experience ]
          /          |          \
  [Expression]       |         [Manifestation]
    /      \         |           /         \
[Symbolical] [Analytical]   [Verbal]    [Physiological]
    |          |              |              |
[Poetry]  [Experience-in-general,      [Description]  [Description]
    |      theory, interpretation]--[Final cause (C)]
    |          |                    |        |            |
[Interpretation]  |                 [Description]
               |                         |
  [Theoretical context: theology]------[Interpretation]  [Interpretation]
              [ Philosophy ]
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The very experience itself, corresponding to Aristotle's *causa materialis*, is an inner-consciousness event or process, of which we have no immediate observation, and of which nothing exact can be said directly.

The *enabling cause*, a modification of Aristotle's *causa formalis*, refers to the general preconditions, prerequisites, presuppositions and circumstances of the subject in order to achieve the experience. This is also where the discussion concerning the specific mystical techniques takes place (if we honour the mystics themselves who strictly opposed the view that their experiences were *caused* by their methods, and their methods alone).

The mental orientation towards the mystical may be outlined in various ways. Perhaps the most famous concepts for certain types of the inner activity, medita-

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[155] Since we are using a synchronic approach, the above scheme still lacks one basic dimension, that of history: the chronological continuum. To the figure above it would relate like a third dimension growing upwards from each box.

tion and contemplation, could be defined as follows: *meditation* involves disciplined but creative application of the imagination and discursive thought to a certain spiritual topic, and *contemplation* attempts to transcend the activities of the imagination and intellect through an intuitive concentration on a perhaps simpler object.[156] In the studies of mystical experience as a universal phenomenon the techniques have been differentiated into eight types:

(1) Techniques of concentration, i.e. excluding unwanted perceptions or thoughts.
(2) Physical techniques: posture, breathing, cleansing.
(3) Associative techniques, to make certain thoughts categorically displeasing.
(4) Techniques to arouse spontaneity.
(5) Techniques to arouse ecstasy: music, dancing, chanting, mantras.
(6) Sexual techniques.
(7) Techniques of projection (of ideal selves).
(8) Psychophysical dramas.[157]

These techniques in fact cover the areas of "mystical attitude" and "religious experience" as well. Which of these fit the monotheistic traditions analysed in this study, will be reviewed in chapter 4.1.3.

A closer analysis of the enabling cause would imply psychological definitions. The experiential aspect of the account of sense perception, however, happens to be a hotly debated topic among psychologists and philosophers, even in the case of ordinary sensory experience.[158] It seems that, generally speaking, philosophical studies of mystical experience neglect discussion on the position of mystical techniques *in* the experience, which is often treated as an independent entity separate from the associated processes; and on the other hand, the psychological approach usually over-emphasises the position of techniques, even neglecting the very relevant possibility that the correlation between the methods and the experience is not necessarily an uncomplicated causal one.

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[156] Definitions adopted from Moore 1978, 113.

[157] Scharfstein 1973, 99–100.

[158] The basic question is whether sensory experience is "adverbial" or "sense datum": "When I perceive a ball as round and red, the sense datum theorist would say that my sensory experience is a direct awareness of a red, round non-physical entity, [...] while the adverbial theorist would say that the experience is a matter of sensing redly and roundly." A third possibility is to view the ball as an object that *appears* to have, or *presents itself* with, such-and-such qualities (Alston 1992, 83–84).

In the above scheme, the mechanisms of reference and signification function in the line from experience to expression. They also include conscious and unconscious *selection*: mystics choose what to describe and what to omit.

I have divided the category of expression into two – analytical and symbolic.[159] These should be understood as two tendencies. The analytical approach aims to produce as exact signs as possible, the ideal result being an irreducible *parole*; the symbolic expression functions through analogies and metaphors, the result being more open to different interpretations (or creative significations) but not necessarily less informative. Both may have behind them the intention to illustrate the experience as clearly as possible, but the symbolic approach can also be used in order to conceal the message from outsiders, as may happen in the case of Sufi poetry, for example. Due to the change and development of human thought, however, the analytical aim was at the time of our sources accomplished by means that differ from what we would adopt for discoursing. Consequently, the study of analytical description means – for us – a "deconstruction" of the discourse into its most reduced elements: the psychological qualities of the experience, as far as they are traceable from behind the existing analytical descriptions.

The transition from the expression of experience to its interpretation is obscure and subject to interpretation itself. (The whole field could be divided into three concepts instead of two by adding between them a level of "description", but this would prove artificial in reading the discourses, at least those of the present corpus.) It is a matter of definition whether there exists any expression without an interpretative aspect. Basically, however, interpretation is clearly more than mere description, for through it the experience is connected to the language of religious tradition, the theological context.

The distinctive feature of the level of interpretation is that all the metaphysical elements belong to it, whether in the cause or in the function of the experience. Moreover, if any of the linguistic signs of the experience gains intrinsic value, being abstracted from its descriptive function, it becomes a technical term, the nature and relations of which are discussed on the level of interpretation. The concept of interpretation has often been undervalued by modern scholars because it is supposed to conceal the "real" experience under conventional religious formulations. Yet the actual function of interpretation is usually to make full use of the experience by defining its role in religious thought.

Nevertheless, if we examine the concept of interpretation closely, it is possible to maintain that experience and interpretation are not even in principle mutually exclusive epistemological categories. P. Moore has differentiated four theoretically distinct elements in the process of interpretation that penetrate deeply

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[159] Alston (1992, 88–89) has an equivalent division under the terms *Literal* and *Non-literal*.

into the area of expression and continue further towards the process of experience itself:

1. *Retrospective interpretation* – i.e. references to doctrinal interpretations formulated after the experience is over.
2. *Reflexive interpretation* – references to interpretation spontaneously formulated either during the experience itself or immediately afterwards.
3. *Incorporated interpretation* – references to features of experience which have been caused or conditioned by a mystic's prior beliefs, expectations and intentions. This may be (a) *reflected interpretation*: ideas and images reflected in an experience in the form of visions and locutions and so forth, or (b) *assimilated interpretation*: features of experience moulded into what might be termed phenomenological analogues of a belief or doctrine.
4. *Raw experience* – references to features of experience unaffected by the mystic's prior beliefs, expectations, or intentions.[160]

On the other hand, it must also be noted that the reality of experience does not logically imply that it should be veridical: the subject may become directly aware of something "objective" which may in fact be radically different from what the subject supposes it to be.[161]

The effective cause, Aristotle's *causa efficiens*, refers to a cause *outside* the subject, to the "giver" of experience, the existence of which is in this case not properly verifiable. According to the idealistic ontological logic of the mystics' own discourse, the *causa efficiens* is an independent entity, but the demands of empirical objectivity would rather lead one to view it as something produced in the category of interpretation, since the subject does not seem to have infallible knowledge of the *causa efficiens* outside his own interpretation of his experience. Yet the naturalistic explanations are by no means categorically sufficient, and the possibility of a transcendent, non-subjective source of reference cannot be disproved either, so the most objective approach seems to be *to bracket* the external cause, keeping the matter under consideration yet leaving aside the question of its actual existence.

Our idealised experience-centred approach is, moreover, exponentially complicated by the fact that the processes function in both directions. Expression

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[160] Moore 1978, 108–109. The scheme is consistent with the general principles of psychology and epistemology, yet it does not imply a reductionist account of mystical experience since the fourth category leaves open the question of the ultimate source and significance of mystical experience.

[161] See Alston 1992, 83.

and interpretation are not mere acts of description produced by the content of experience but they are, to a large extent, conditioned by the cultural (religious, linguistic, philosophical) context. In the same way "theology" does not exist in a vacuum but is conditioned by various philosophical principles. In the above scheme the postulates of theological discourse are therefore labelled as "philosophy".

The direction of the lines between the experience itself and its *causa finalis* and their theological context depends on the perspective of the beholder. The more reality attributed to the experience, the more its *causa finalis* (and to some extent even the doctrinal theology) seems to be caused by it;[162] but the more obscure the experience, the more its *causa finalis* – and even its own characteristics – seems to be caused by the theological framework. In any case, there is an important circle of interaction between the experience and theological thought, in which the direction "backwards" means being conditioned by the cultural context. Whether the theological presuppositions exercise a direct influence on experience or whether the line should be drawn from theology to the expression or to the interpretation only, is one of the fundamental questions that continues to divide scholars. The more space one gives to the existence and operation of the supernatural reality, the more independent the experience is understood to be.

However, conditioning also means that the experience is not less real in its interpreted form; the doctrinal elements are indeed able to mediate information about the phenomenological character of the experience. An Islamic experience is Islamic because of its Islamic components, and without these perhaps nothing would be left. Those who tend to see the doctrinal conditioning as simply a restraining element, should consider whether it would be at all possible to have a case of "pure" mystical experience produced in "universalistic" laboratory conditions without particular religious traditions and their "restricting" doctrines (that usually have a firm connection with the enabling cause)! Doctrinal connections, therefore, may be seen as keys to the understanding of experience rather than doors which keep outsiders away from it. And for the mystic himself, doctrinal concepts facilitate not only the understanding and description of the experience but they may even help him to penetrate into dimensions of experience which would otherwise remain at the margin of consciousness.[163]

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162   An instance of this approach is the notion that the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately based on the experience of the early Christians of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

163   For further discussion, see P. Moore's article " Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique" in which he argues that interpretation is not necessarily "something added to, or superimposed upon, an existing or independent nucleus of experience" (Moore 1978, 110). It is also good to recall that the doctrinal framework includes instruction for the attainment of the mystical states, just as the very existence of "ecstatic readings" encourages

Verbal manifestation means a spontaneous, reflexive linguistic reaction during the moment of experience. Since the description takes place afterwards, the *verbal manifestation* is basically a more premeditative and more objective account of the experience. But, as we saw above, it is not to be expected that the verbal manifestation, even the most spontaneous one, could be totally outside the category of (reflexive) interpretation. Verbal manifestation may also operate after having lost its immediate nature, turning into a technical, even customary practice with its own traditions of retrospective interpretation, as is often the case with the ecstatic utterances of Sufism.

The *physiological manifestations* exist and present themselves in a totally different dimension, yet they must not be disregarded in a semantic analysis of the expression and interpretation. Since the empirical features are less disputable, they are useful in justifying the use of terms like "ecstasy" or "trance" with reference to certain experiences, even when the etymology of a Syriac or Arabic term would not justify or indicate this.

After differentiating between the different levels of ecstatic readings, there still remain questions as to the relationship between the levels. What is the position and function of mystical experience within the whole discourse? What kind of causalities are connected with it? I shall attempt to outline some general trends in the final chapter.

In the present approach the "mystical experience" is treated as one broad entity with its stronger varieties and multiple interpretations, the aim being to avoid such divisions of mystical experience as do not arise naturally from the original sources. For example, even the differentiation between *extrovert* and *introvert* experience, a distinction standardised in modern literature but not made by the authors in the corpus of this study, is likely to be a matter of interpretation because the experience as a mental unit, an emotional fascicle, does not necessarily contain either of these two intentions but these may be added to it by the subject either consciously or unconsciously: if the mystic happens to have been thinking of the creation when the (non-conceptual) ecstatic state occurs, he may *express* his experience either as "Love towards the whole world" – or "Unity with it", depending on his theological postulates. In this way the process of interpretation may have begun already on the unconscious level.

Within the field of "mystical experience", however, *visions* seem to be in a category of their own, consisting of two kinds of experiences: a *hallucination* is an experience of perceiving objects or events that have no external source, and an *illusion* is a misinterpretation or over-interpretation of an actual external stimulus.

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and motivates readers to cultivate their own mystical experiences. And moreover, most religious doctrines originally arose not from reasoning but from a person's or a community's (mystical) experience.

In the present corpora visionary experiences are considered more or less questionable by the mystical authors themselves, and in most cases, moreover, the reference of expressions such as "to see a vision", not to mention the abstract concept of mere "vision", may also be a non-visionary experience, since sensory concepts are usually to be taken symbolically in a mystical discourse. In other words, inner "seeing" does not necessarily imply that any actual shapes are seen visually, since the shapeless "mystical" perception is considered more reliable than sensual or hallucinative ones.

The experiences that are interpreted as perceptions of "God" (in the widest possible sense of the word) have been resolved by W. P. Alston into four aspects, the first two being on the subjective side, the latter two on the objective side:

1. The account of the mode of consciousness involved (what it is like to be directly aware of God).
2. Conscious reactions, largely affective.
3. The identification of the object.
4. A specification of how the object appeared to the subject, what the subject experienced the object as, i.e. *modes of appearance*.[164]

To sum up, "mystical experience" is a general concept that may contain heterogeneous experiential varieties. I prefer not to stress the diversity, since it seems reasonable to see most varieties as developed or at least strengthened in the process of interpretation. (Therefore the discussion of the patterns of mystical experience will take place within the category of interpretation.)

1.2.2.3. A Parallel Case: Aesthetic Experience

As noted above, however extraordinary a mystical experience is, it is still an experience, and consequently it has certain characteristics in common with other modes of experience, and for this reason it is useful to make here a brief excursus to a parallel case. If we look at the psychological characteristics of the experience "under" the interpretative level of the discourse, the closest parallel to the mystical experience might be an aesthetic experience. This, however, has received very little attention in philosophical studies on the mystical experience. Yet when the psychological qualities of these two cases are differentiated and analysed, the emotional features appear predominantly similar.[165] For this reason, understand-

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[164] Alston 1992, 87.

[165] Such comparison is, of course, problematic due to the apparent diversity of *different* mystical experiences, which in turn largely depends on the problem of interpretation.

ing of the aesthetic experience may be able to open up some new perspectives on the mystical experience.

The most undisputed features of the aesthetic experience, according to Beardsley, are (1) *relation with an object*: "attention is firmly fixed upon ... components of a phenomenally objective field", (2) *intensity* of an emotional nature that is able to shut out the negative responses "like whiskey does", which in turn causes (3) a sense of *unity* or coherence, and (4) that of *completeness*.[166] A. Kinnunen has developed a slightly more detailed differentiation where the aesthetic experience has the following psychological components:

1. Attention of the subject is concentrated on a heterogeneous yet organised field: his perception is focused.
2. Intensity: the consciousness is concentrated.
3. Untroubled delight: the senses are not dimmed.
4. Coherence, a kind of identity: even after an interruption it may be possible to return to the same experience.
5. Extraordinary soundness.
6. The object is sensed somehow in a limited way, i.e. without questioning the reality of its existence. Aesthetic objects are primarily complexes of qualities.[167]

It is good to realise that this kind of list, of course, represents a typically theoretical and completely analytical approach by an objective *outsider*; only an expert in the field would describe his own experience in this way, as most people would use more symbolic expressions instead. And it has to be admitted that aesthetic experiences, just like mystical ones, are complex fields full of heterogeneous cases.

Moreover, it seems that the study of the aesthetic experience has often concentrated on experiences that are experienced upon seeing a painting, yet the "purest" and potentially strongest one would be the kind experienced with the aid of music: an experience of instrumental music has few if any conceptual associations, i.e. components from the stage of interpretation "disturbing" the actual experience, and it is even capable of possessing some intoxicating quality. For instance, when moved by the beauty of Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, one may describe one's feelings as deeply heart-rending, joyous yet tearful, bright, warm and so on. In other words, the psychological qualities seem to be rather similar whether one is sensing the presence of God or listening to Bach! Aesthetic experiences, however, can be quite easily (re)produced due to the clear causality between the object (painting, composition) and the subject, even though

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[166]   Beardsley 1958, 526–528.
[167]   Kinnunen 1969, 16–17 (translation mine).

its intensity may vary. Aesthetic experience, moreover, has no (need of a) doctrinal system corresponding to the theology of religious experience.

The most interesting case in the list above, however, is number six. When someone has yielded himself totally to a strong aesthetic experience, his discursive faculty is somehow turned "off" during it. We have good reason to assume the same about mystical experience, even though the mystics seldom describe their own or their masters' faculties as being limited![168] Yet in both cases a discursive mental action may, in fact, interrupt concentration and thereby spoil the experience, partially at least. In spite of their noetic quality, mystical experiences resemble states of feeling more than states of intellect. This is also a fundamental reason for their "ineffability". Yet students of mysticism quite seldom explicitly differentiate the absence of discursive thought among the features of mystical experience.[169]

Subjects of aesthetic and mystical experiences have, therefore, a common problem which is caused by the *sensitivity* of the experience. One can hardly be at the same time both an objective, analytical observer capable of producing definitions and the subject of a strong, perhaps ecstatic, experience. Too analytical an approach towards mystical language may be sensed as a deconstructive attack against the sensitive field of the experience: the discursive reasoning may disturb the "power" of the experience itself. For this reason, even the descriptions given afterwards very seldom aim to exhaust the experience into verbally controlled conceptual units. We may also assume that those capable of giving analytical presentations are typically not the most ecstatic seers themselves, and ecstatic visionaries with the ability to give an analytical description with an objective touch are always rare and exceptional.

Since experiences such as the aesthetic and mystical have common characteristics, there is evidently a danger that they be attached to "wrong" conceptual families. But on the other hand, if there is no absolutely objective criterion to determine the right one, there can be no wrong one either. Indeed, beauty is a basic feature of the Christian mystical experience in both the Syriac and Greek traditions.[170] Theoretically speaking, it is possible, and not unreasonable, to think that the experience itself is not aesthetic or mystical as such, but its conceptual connections and associations make it one by naming it. This also means that with-

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[168] The avoidance is due to the holistic understanding of the concept of "knowledge" in the pre-Cartesian period. All spiritual activity, no matter how non-discursive, was considered "rational" if it was seen to be in accordance with the Divine will.

[169] Cf. pp. 49–50, 62.

[170] Which is, on the other hand, closely connected with, and to some extent a result of, the fact that the Syriac root *ŠPR* and the Greek καλός mean – or are used of – both 'goodness' and 'beauty'.

out linguistic categorisations there would actually be no way of differentiating between them at all. And naming, again, is not merely an outward act of labelling but a process that begins in the subject's (subconscious) mental reality, perhaps already during the experience.

Nevertheless, the very existence of specific aesthetic experience has been doubted or denied by some scholars. Their view easily finds supporting arguments in the very fact that the aesthetic experience, like most forms of experience that are considered "different" from each other, may seem to have too many common characteristics, and all the decisive differences seem to be produced linguistically in the stage of interpretation. Instead of answering this objection, however, we can reshape the original question: Is it useful to have a concept of aesthetic experience in speech? And as in the case of mystical experience, its existence is justified, if not by anything else, at least by the existence of the need to find a term referring to it.

Mystical experiences are inevitably an exceptional category of their own, but where exactly does their uniqueness lie? Since the emotional content of the mystical experience does not necessarily differ from that of a strong aesthetic experience, the most obvious difference is in the category of the object – but what is the object of mystical experience? If the mystic's own answer (God etc.) is taken as being mere interpretation preconditioned by the religious context, as the scientific approach presupposes, the answer depends on one's philosophical or psychological theory of experience.