4. COMPARATIVE CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DISCUSSION

In this chapter I shall discuss first the most crucial parts of the study (analytical and symbolical expression, and the question of methods) on a comparative basis, and then I shall outline the most important common features and differences between the discourses of the two traditions. Since my corpus is rich in details, I shall here avoid the repetition of quotations given in the previous chapters, and therefore some conclusions may be argued and explained with "unused" citations whenever they are more illustrative.

Instead of presenting quantitative results, I shall concentrate mainly on qualitative observations. This does more justice to the source material where the aim has not been to cover the subject systematically in a logical order: what is said and what is left unsaid in the corpora is to some extent an incidental matter, and this is one reason why conclusions of the type "tradition X lacks thought Y" should be reached with extreme caution, especially since some features may have been omitted from the discussion because of their self-evident character. Therefore, my main aim is not to draw conclusions as to the existence or lack of details but to understand the discourses as totalities.

But on the other hand, when inquiring as to the mechanisms of expression, a single innovative description is more valuable than frequently occurring repetitions of conventional expressions. For this reason the presentations of the expression of experience (chapters 2 and 3) concentrate on the most illustrative expressions, regardless of their frequency. But my aim here is to outline some general trends in the discourses of the two traditions, yet admitting a certain variation within each discourse.

The Syriac corpus does constitute a reasonable and sound totality. The differences of expression are largely matters of style or unavoidable variations in the use of terminology. The only exceptional case, *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, received little attention in the above presentation.

The Sufi corpus is more problematic. The position within Sufism of perhaps the most outstanding author, Niffari, is at best insecure, and his extreme views also cause some noteworthy variation in the present Sufi corpus. The fundamental problem, however, is the position of the whole corpus in relation to "Sufism" itself. It is a matter of consideration how well the corpus actually represents

"Sufism", since it consists mainly of the authors who present "official" sober Sufism as a kind of everyman's version of its general doctrine. Some of the most interesting remarks in the corpus are actually made by those considered heretics by the authors themselves. Yet I would prefer to favour a broad interpretation of Sufism, covering all the different movements under the umbrella concept of *taṣawwuf*, some closer to Sunnite orthodoxy, some far from it. This is the unavoidable difficulty which all studies of "Sufism" have to face.

4.1. COMPARATIVE OBSERVATIONS

4.1.1. Analytical Expression

Mystical-ecstatic experience is an extraordinary state of mind in which the psyche functions in a limited way, being perhaps only partly conscious, or to use another mode of expression: the consciousness functions in an exceptionally smooth and "rapid" way and the subject is unable to receive information in the normal way. This all has been more or less explicitly stated in the discourses of both traditions. The psychological and emotional characteristics of the experience may vary, however, and their linguistic presentations even more so.

We may recall here the qualities of the experience, according to the analytical mode of expression, as they have appeared above:[1]

SYRIAC METATHEOLOGY	SUFISM
– Totality	– Totality, intensity
– Involuntariness	– Involuntariness
– Restfulness, tranquillity	– Emotional content: joy, sorrow, fear, confusion, bewilderment or shame
– A stunning and dazing quality	– Immediacy
– A feeling of joy or delight	– Tranquillity
– A sense of refreshment	– Amenity
– Warmth	– Intentionality: yearning
	– Consuming character

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[1] If one had a presupposition or hypothesis as to the essential consubstantiality of the experience in the two traditions, it would be possible to force the wording into (more) similar categories in both traditions when reading the material. Now, however, the minor differences between the two traditions in the wordings arose when reading the original sources, and I have preferred not to harmonise the qualities too much. The details concerning these qualities were set out on pp. 80–86 and 200–203.

These rosters, however, are not absolute truths. Firstly, the results of our study are determined by the demarcation of the corpus: the greater the number and variety of sources, the greater the number of aspects to be encountered – and the fewer the differences between the traditions, as I realised when analysing the sources. This is the reason why, when comparing the two traditions, the results must not be looked for in the details of the discourse but in its general emphases; the differences must not be seen in details but in the things stressed. And secondly, the presentation and arrangement of the basic qualities shown above is certainly not the only one that can be derived from the complex textual material. None of the qualities above is "given" but they have resulted from my own meta-interpretation. This means that we must content ourselves with the most relevant qualitative observations.

The content, the psychological qualities, of the mystical experience seems largely similar in the two traditions. It is total and involuntary, delightful and tranquil. Totality is such a general concept that it in fact includes or is the cause of several other qualities such as intensity or stunning and dazing qualities.

The fact that the qualities appear largely similar, however, should not surprise us, for we noted in the introduction that the psychological qualities of the experience are largely similar even if we compare the mystical-experience-in-general with the (strong) aesthetic experience.

Nevertheless, there are some obvious differences of emphasis as well. Apparently the emotional content of the mystical experience has a remarkably greater variety in Sufism, which is characterised by the possibility of ecstasy with the negative emotions of sorrow, fear, confusion or shame. The emphasis on the consuming quality is closely connected with, or produced by this variety of negative qualities. The Syrian peculiarity, on the other hand, is that they seem to put more stress on the aspect of warmth, images of burning being abundant.

There may be no obvious explanation for the existence of negative feelings in the Sufi experience, but it seems reasonable to suggest that in one way or another they are connected with the social character of Sufism, which is a potential cause of restlessness and pessimism. Secondly, they may also reflect the influence of the Islamic theological position: the lack of dualistic tendencies and the fatalistic tendency to see one and the same God behind all – in this case, all emotions.

The fact that Syriac metatheology does not present the qualities of immediacy and intentionality as explicitly as Sufi works do, of course does not indicate that these features were somehow deficient in the mental reality; the difference is rather due to the more modest amount of abstraction in the Syriac authors' thought, in other words: to an insufficiency in expression. It is also a question of our meta-interpretation: what we decide to accept as indicators of "immediacy" in the textual material. As pointed out in the introduction, the notion of inexpressi-

bility means either *ineffability* or *inability* of expression. The Syriac authors seem to show a certain inability at this point, as Sufi analytical expression in general seems to be hindered by unwillingness, which in turn is caused by the aim of the authors to produce presentations for general use.

However, as a general overall observation it is to be pointed out that the aspect of yearning is a very characteristic Sufi feature, as the Syrians see their experience rather as the fulfilment of all yearning.[2] This in turn is undoubtedly in many cases due to the preconditioning of the context of discourse, yearning having become a standard topos in Sufi parole, but it is likely that there were differences in the experience itself as well, not least because such differences may actually be produced in the psychological reality by such preconditioned expectations. And moreover, there must also exist reasons for the origin and growth of the particular prevailing preconditioning context – in this case most probably the transcendent nature of the Islamic God, which caused the Sufis to approach Him in perhaps a slightly pessimistic mood, and the sources seem to imply that the prevailing emotion present during the "arrival" of the mystical experience may intensify to become ecstatic itself, and in that sense constitute the emotional character of the experience.

4.1.2. Symbolic Expression

If the qualities behind the analytical descriptions are largely similar, the modes of symbolic expression show perhaps even less variation, which may seem somewhat surprising. However, the analogies of the ordinary natural senses are used in both traditions: taste, hear, smell and sight.[3] Moreover, the analogy of tasting leads in both traditions to equivalent images of 'nourishment' (Syr. *saybartā*, Ar. *ṭaʿām*), 'sweetness' (Syr. *ḥalyūtā*, Ar. *ḥalāwa*, *ʿadhb*) and various images of drinking, especially those of drunkenness.[4] Both traditions may also present a fiery and a liquid image concurrently, which underlines the symbolic (metaphorical) character of the expression.[5]

In the present corpora, the symbolical expression of 'touching' did not appear in the Christian sources, and 'eating' did not occur in the Sufi corpus. Touching is in fact avoided in both traditions, and eating seems to be more at home in the Christian context due to its sacramental connotations. Breathing the Spirit, which

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[2]   The trend is seen already in the Odes of Solomon. (OS 3:6–8, 8:3–5, 15:6–8, 23:1–4, 25:7–12).

[3]   See above, p. 86–89, 204.

[4]   See above, p. 88–92, 204–206.

[5]   See above, p. 89, 206.

in the Christian context means to breathe God,[6] appears to be a distinctively Christian expression, but these differences would probably not remain if the corpus of the Sufi sources was sufficiently extensive.

The image of drunkenness is common to both traditions, as well as the basic symbolism connected with it (wine, cup). The use of symbolism, however, seems to be slightly more metaphorical in Sufi readings, the Syriac use being more analogous. This is one reflection of the difference between the functions of the writings. Accordingly, the images of heat are important in both traditions (heat, fire, flames and the burning effect). And moreover, it is no surprise that several basic symbols such as a gate and key, general enough to be likely to appear in any religious thinker's discourse, are present in both traditions.

Symbols of experience in prose works.

	SYRIAC METATHEOLOGY	SUFISM
WATER	fountain	
	swimming, pearl, harbour	
DRUNKENNESS	wine (living/strong)	wine
	cup	cup
HEAT	hotness	fire
	burning	flame
	fire	fever
	flame, flame of joy	
LIGHT	light, brightness	light
	illumination	shimmering
	shapeless light; cloud of light	
	sun of joy, sparkling rays of joy ...	
PECULIARITIES	tickling	melting
	bread of angels	veil
		sting
		overmastery
		(*ghalaba*)

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6   In the Greek Orthodox tradition, at least Philotheos of Sinai (dating obscure) exhorts one to "breathe God always" (τὸν Θεὸν ἀεὶ ἀναπνέειν, *Filokalía* 2, p. 284, § 30). The image arises from the attachment of the remembrance of God to one's breathing, and for that very reason the image is perfectly suitable in the Islamic context as well. Kadloubovsky's translation based on the Russian version has "call God with sighs" (*Writings from the Philokalia*, p. 336); the translation based on the Greek original has "always breathe God" (*The Philokalia*, p. 27).

The clearest difference in the emphasis of the present corpus is the preference shown by the Syrian metatheologians for images connected with water, especially a 'fountain' (*mabbō'ā*). Perhaps unexpectedly, the same applies to a large extent to the imagery of 'light', and even to the various images of the 'sun'. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that in a wider selection of Sufi sources the difference would be balanced. In fact, if the poetic sources were included in the list below, the balance would immediately turn in favour of the Sufis due to the rich variety of poetic symbolism. But in the Sufi prose works, too, there are symbolic expressions that are absent from the Syriac sources: 'melting', the analogy of 'fever' employed by Jilani, 'overmastery' (*ghalaba*). The qualitative differences in the images of light and heat are cosmetic and depend on the nuances of the vocabulary of each language. It must be stressed also that the occurrence of more peculiar symbols[7] is more dependent on the poetic talent of a single author than on the particular religious tradition and its postulates. There are naturally numerous single symbols that occur in the parlance of a single author. These are often interesting from the aesthetic point of view, but they do not affect the general nature of the discourse.

Most Syriac metatheologians also employ the symbolism of light noticeably more than do the Sufis in our corpus, even though light has Qur'anic as well as biblical subtexts. Nevertheless, this may still be a feature more dependent on the particular author than on his religious tradition. There even exist a number of Sufi works on 'light' mysticism, such as *Miškāt al-anwār*, but they do not necessarily portray personal mystical experiences, rather they represent a speculative mysticism of a more general kind. The evidence for the Syriac fondness for the light-experience is clear, but it is problematic to pronounce general conclusions concerning "Sufism". The problem is that we have good reason to ask whether it is at all sensible to state that Sufism *lacks* something, since the potential source material is immense and heterogeneous. (Or, how could one conclude from thoroughly paradoxical material, as in the case of Niffari, that it does not contain something, when it is obviously open to divergent, perhaps opposite interpretations?) However, in our corpora the mystical experience as illumination "in shapeless light" was indisputably discussed more often in Syriac metatheology.

Sufi imagery contains very little that would be impossible in Oriental Christian discourse. The main exception is the imagery of sensual love – and even this is found almost exclusively in poetry – which would show thoroughly bad taste in the Syriac Christian context, with its rigorous admiration for celibacy. Nevertheless, even these are not completely unknown in Syriac poetry: the Odes

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7   E.g. John of Dalyatha's 'likeness of sapphire', 'colours of the shades of heaven', 'bright darkness', 'statute of light', 'total living lustres', 'indivisible whirls of rays of light'. See above, p. 92–95.

of Solomon contain some quite bold images of sensual love with a spiritual intention.[8]

To sum up, the process of both analytical and symbolic description functions in a similar way and applies practically similar terminology in both traditions. The position of symbols, however, may vary due to the divergence in the orientation of the discourse. In reading and analysing the textual material, it became clear that most results concerning details (such as a lack of a certain symbol in one or other tradition) disappear insofar as the corpus is widened. Poetical minds sooner or later find the same symbols regardless of their tradition. In other words, the differences in detail are more due to the creativity of the individual author than to his tradition.

The differences between the traditions become evident on the level of interpretation where the discourses take distinctive directions. The Syriac metatheologians show obvious unwillingness for the production of technical terminology and consequent speculative discussion.

4.1.3. Ecstatic Methods

Now we may take another look at the methods for the arousal of mystical experience as they have been categorised in comparative religious studies, and see how far these general characteristics were applied in our sources.[9]

(1) Techniques of concentration

(2) Physical techniques: posture, breathing, cleansing.

(3) Association techniques, to make certain thoughts categorically displeasing

(4) Techniques to arouse spontaneity

(5) Techniques to arouse ecstasy

(6) Sexual techniques

(7) Techniques of projection (of ideal selves)

(8) Psychophysical dramas

(1) The ascetic teaching in both traditions, generally speaking, places great stress on the concentration of thoughts and of all inner faculties, which means exclusion

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8 ܡܣܘܚܐ܂ ܐܬ ܗܪ܂ ܐܘܟ ܗܠܘܬܗ ܡܠܠ . "For towards you are my breasts, my delicacies" (Ode 14:2). ܐܝܢܘܗ ܗܡܠ ܐܗܝܐ ܕܒܒܪܗ ܠܠ ܗܠܝܐ ܐܗܝܐܘܐ "I have united (with him), because the lover has found the Beloved" (Ode 3:7); the 'breasts' of the Father in Ode 19:3–4.

9 The division is taken from Scharfstein 1973, 99–100.

of unwanted perceptions and improper thoughts. This is a logical postulate of the quality of *totality* in the experience. The authors, however, are not keen on presenting a causal connection between concentration and ecstasy, since this would be not in line with the involuntariness of the experience. Concentration in fact is not a separate method, at least in the Syrian tradition, but rather a constant attitude (simplicity of mind being one of the most important spiritual ideals in the early Syriac kerygma[10]). We may even assume that the meditative and contemplative ways of thought found their strongest applications in the Syriac tradition where the practice and ideal was total withdrawal. The mystical experiences arise from the background of a (lifelong) mystical attitude – a lifelong concentration, as the concept of *šelyā*, the most important method in the metatheological discourse, might be understood.

(2) As for the category of physical techniques, our sources are not very fruitful. The Syriac tradition is known for its custom of spending the nights in a sitting or even standing posture; prayers may be intensified by the use of chains or other methods of self-torture, but the details appear only sporadically in the sources. The most frequently mentioned physical exercise is that of prostration. Sufi breathing techniques are also commonly known but the practical aspect is not discussed in detail in our corpus of Sufi classics. Fasting, for example, appears in the Sufi discourse, often in anecdotes,[11] but not in connection with the teaching on the mystical conditions.

(3) Association techniques are effectively used by the Syrian Fathers in the struggle against sin, but this is not necessarily connected with the ecstatic experience. The mystic's inner personal desires are personified and named as demons in order to provide motivation for the struggle against *external* enemies. Sufis define the enemy as one's (lower) self, but the situation is mostly parallel: the combat is against selfish motives.

(4) Spontaneity is not seen as a special virtue in the Syrian Christian tradition, which places great emphasis on discipline, albeit somewhat less than in other Christian monastic traditions. Nevertheless, especially the phenomenon of ecstatic fallings mentioned on pp. 148–150 imply an ability for most spontaneous reactions. In the Sufi sessions of *samā'*, however, the spontaneity developed into a collective art in a way that has no parallel in the entire Christian tradition (until some recent movements with a Pentecostal background).

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[10]   See, for example, the *First Letter to Hypatios* in S. Ephraemi Syri, *Opera Selecta* (translated in *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*).

[11]   E.g. Qušayri: *Risāla*, 140–144; *Principles of Sufism*, 79–84.

(5) The concrete methods for arousing actual ecstasy – music,[12] dancing, chanting, mantras – are in full use in Sufism, although the sources are divided, hesitant or even hostile in their attitude towards such shortcuts to ecstasy. The Syrians, on the other hand, have no more than the recitation of Psalms, which may appear questionable as a "method for arousing ecstasy", but as a continuous exercise it was surely effective, not least because of the varied contents of the Psalter that depict situations from feelings of guilt (e.g. Ps. 51) to heavenly visions (e.g. Ps. 104:1–4) most suitable for contemplation.

(6) Actual sexual techniques are completely absent from the Syriac tradition and scarcely present in Sufism ("gazing at beautiful youth"). Yet the surrogate effect, to use the modern term, of sexual energy seems to be understood, albeit occasionally interpreted in a different light. For the Christian mystic it is closer to the "demonic" influences from the dark side, something that must be understood and controlled – not necessarily by subduing its effects, if they are good in themselves, like spiritual zeal, but rather the motives behind them should be purified. The main line of Sufi thought is perhaps more balanced in sexual matters, due to the general Islamic approach in preferring marriage to celibacy. The mere possibility of "gazing at beautiful faces" as a method of spiritual affection, albeit a disputed one, is something that could not be a part of Syriac discourse in any sense. The same can be said of Jilani's remark that even the "sighing of lovers" may be a pure and solid *causa efficiens* – if his words are taken in a literal sense. The discourse in the present sources is not comprehensive enough to draw firm conclusions on this interesting point, however.[13]

(7) Techniques of projection of ideal selves do exist in the Syrian tradition, yet in a perhaps somewhat unsophisticated form. The authors often present the world of spiritual experience with the help of an ideal subject that they either identify with the saints of earlier generations or (more often) leave unnamed, even though they are probably discussing their own experiences. The telling-technique of leaving the subject unmentioned is not uncommon in Syriac literature in general, yet it is evident that the mystical experience is furthered by the example of saints and spiritual fathers. In both traditions the portrayal of saints functions as an idealised model of the mystical experience. In Sufism the formation of a saint may be somewhat more difficult due to the lack of a distinctive monastic institution that provides easily recognisable special forms for potentially spiritual personalities. Nevertheless, the Sufi tradition also developed a tradition of saints

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12   It is interesting to note that Hujwiri and John Climacus seem to agree that music is essentially neutral in itself: it only strengthens the tendencies that already exist in the soul. Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 403; John Climacus, *The Ladder* 15:59.

13   See above, p. 67–68, 232.

more or less corresponding to the Christian one.[14] (The difference is that the Christian emphasis shifted more to the saints' heavenly role.)

(8) The concept of 'psychophysical drama' may sound somewhat extreme in the Christian context, yet the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Churches does in fact belong in this category. It is very remarkable, however, that the authors give no clue about mystical experiences in the liturgical context or in common prayers. The practical reason for this is that we are dealing with hermit monks who attended in liturgical services quite seldom. The theoretical explanation could be given from two opposite angles. According to the mainstream of Christian tradition, the mystical reality present in the sacraments of the Church should never be measured by personal feelings, which are seen as unworthy to confirm divine mysteries; and to criticise the effect of the sacramental elements, the most precious thing in the life of the Church, would in fact mean to criticise Christianity itself. But on the other hand, if the mystics experienced the Divine presence directly, it is hard to justify a need to experience it through the (symbolism of) liturgical and sacramental life.

It is interesting that in the Sufi corpus we encounter a similar position concerning congregational prayer. Mystical experiences do not take place, but even cease, during ritual prayers. The Sufi sessions such as *samā'*, however, are psychophysical dramas in a very concrete sense.

Curiously, the only reference to the liturgical beauty of the Syrian Church is – perhaps – made by Ibn 'Arabi who through his obscure symbolism (see p. 213) may refer to a liturgical experience. (It would in fact be a quite natural, and not uncommon, phenomenon that liturgical beauty more easily touches those who are less accustomed to it.) But in the end, we must once more refer to the total character of monasticism: if we adopt a broader definition of 'psychophysical drama', the whole ascetic life of a monk or hermit can surely be considered as one. This is in fact in line with the view expounded by Scharfstein:

> Mystical training, when long and complicated, has the nature of a psychophysical drama. It is slow, setbacks interrupt it, and during its progress mind and body injure and aid one another. When the ascension is ended, the mystic looks back and discerns the plot of the drama he has enacted.[15]

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[14]   Rumi comments on disciples who are in love with a 'foolish sheikh': "If misguided and misdirected love for a phantom can produce ecstasy, still it is nothing like the mutual love enjoyed with a real beloved." Rumi: *Fihi-ma-Fihi* (discourse 43), 287.

[15]   Scharfstein 1973, 112.

4.2. COMMON FEATURES

4.2.1. Purification

The discourses of both the Syriac and Sufi traditions interrelate the experience to an extensive ascetic paradigm in which inner purification from all variations of selfishness is essential, down to a person's motives and the deepest impulses of the will. The best sections of the ascetic discourse concerning the ways to attain purification cannot avoid convincing the reader at least of the fact that the pursuit is honest – and often ineffectual, as Christian authors indicate every now and then by making bitter remarks with regard to their misfortunes and constant sinfulness, as do the Sufis with their emphasis on yearning.

One example of the common ascetic ideas is the concept of 'repentance' (*tawbā*), which as a "dynamic principle of radical reorientation"[16] and as constant inner purification, rather than as a definitive act of conversion, is very similar in both Sufism and Syriac (and Greek) Christianity. It is not necessary here, however, to go into the details of the homiletics of ascetic psychology. The essential point is that in both traditions ecstatic experiences belong to the latter phases of the path, for those who have been purified in the ascetic struggle. (An exception to this is the Sufi custom of producing ecstasy by almost unfailing methods like dancing and whirling.)

4.2.2. The Autonomous Character of the Experience

Both traditions agree that pure ecstasy is not a product of striving or human effort but it occurs suddenly and autonomously, "outside of choice and will". The experience is essentially something given from outside, called a 'gift' in both traditions. Its autonomous character is indicated made by references by Syrians to "sudden visitations of Grace", as well as Sufi exhortations "to wait for its own arrival".[17]

This aspect should not, it seems to me, be passed over as merely an obligatory feature of a religious language game, for this is one of the fundamental aspects of the discourse, and the portrayals of the experiences in question have a strong flavour of lived and experienced reality. In fact most authors cannot be considered in any sense mere reiterators of conventional self-evident formulas:

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16 A definition formulated by G. Böwering (1999, 45).

17 See above, p. 127–128, 228–230.

they are at their best profound and original (Isaac of Nineveh, John of Dalyatha, Niffari, Ghazali), sometimes even critical and objective thinkers (Hujwiri, Ghazali, Barhebraeus). The awareness of the impure motives and effects of the lower soul is widely present in their thinking, which sets limits to the easiest psychological interpretations of the ecstatic readings.

4.2.3. The Inexpressible Expressed – the Problem and Solutions

It is essentially the same set of difficulties that thinkers in both traditions encountered in their effort to find a public language for their inner states, which cannot be assigned the criteria of identity from without. In practice this means that the same phenomenon may be referred to with divergent signs and the divergent phenomena with the same sign. Some authors were more concerned and more deeply aware of the problem than others. Practically all the authors make remarks on the ineffable and inexpressible character of the experience, and at least Isaac of Nineveh presents quite explicitly the idea of a generally prevailing free variation of the signs of inner states in the mystic discourse.

"Free variation" does not mean that the texts are incomprehensible, but it does mean that after a certain point (or within a certain field, to use a more appropriate image) the understanding is essentially dependent on the subject and on one's manner of comprehending, outlining and analysing the signs used. It seems, however, that this problem was not always fully understood in 20th-century theological studies, where one often finds the tendency to approach such discourses as if there was an objective and commensurable system embedded in it, the aim of the scholar being merely to discover the "right" code and thereby interpret the text with the aid of "reconstructed semantic points", as if all the terms had an exact reference and universal significance within the mystics' discourse, only waiting to be found.

Nevertheless, the ecstatic phenomenon is, and remains, essentially non-linguistic, and this aspect cannot be overemphasised. The topic – mystical experience – is something which "no one knows from books or from hearing, but only from his own experience",[18] but which must, if any communication is intended, be subjected to language, to its vocabulary and conceptual system. The fact that this universal philosophical problem is common to both traditions, alone largely explains why the images used of the experience end up being very similar.

The similarity of the images, however, does not inevitably imply similarity in the nature or in the causes of the experiences: it may result from a kind of semantic necessity. It is natural that in both movements the images were picked up from

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[18]   Mingana/ʿAbdišoʿ, 157 (150a).

the cultural context, where there was a limited number of alternative states suitable for points of comparison for extraordinary states of mind: mainly drunkenness and sleep, and perhaps falling in love[19] (the selection is in fact still about the same today). Sleep, due to its surreal nature, was probably felt to be a somewhat uncomfortable point of comparison,[20] so that drunkenness was left as more or less the only way to illustrate the transformed state of consciousness. Both traditions indeed use much symbolism of wine and drunkenness, as well as terms derived from ordinary sensing like that of 'tasting'. Massignon bases the Sufi symbolism of 'wine' and 'cup' on the Qur'an,[21] but these are universal concepts to be freely invented by any writer, and it is unnecessary to trace them back to any "influence". This also applies to the symbolism of fire and light, which are to be found in the Bible as well as in the Qur'an.[22]

Ineffability seems to lead to two seemingly contradictory conclusions: at the general (theoretical) stage we end up with the *incommensurability* of the discourses, but at the stage of particulars there is *similarity of symbolism*. The former is due to the lack of exact terms, the latter to the existence of imprecise approximations, limited in amount.

4.2.4. The Epistemological Function

Both traditions employ the concept of knowledge in a typical pre-Cartesian manner, that is, in a slipshod way. It is discussed in a wide variety of senses, most of which refer to something outside the scientific (in the ancient or modern sense) concept of knowledge. Many of the usages are basically identical. Both traditions present the 'knowledge' in question as given, not acquired; both connect it with contemplation and identify it with ecstasy in one way or another. This already makes it clear that both *īda'tā* and *ma'rifa* are better understood as 'gnosis' or 'mystical knowledge', for neither is certain "knowledge" in the modern sense.

If we were to go into the details of mystical knowledge, however, we would evidently encounter endless variation in detail between the traditions, since the Sufis in particular give varying definitions among themselves – or ones that are contradictory to their own definitions, or definitely paradoxical statements.

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19   Isaac of Niniveh makes beautiful use of the analogy in homily 33 (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218–224). See also Sahdona: *Oeuvresspirituelles*, II, 4:15–19.

20   In the present corpus only one Sufi dares to compare the "mystery of annihilation" with sleep that "resembles the states of the next world". (Chittick 1992, 100.) The standard analogy in both traditions was that "sleep may be compared to death, vigil should be compared to life" (Barhebraeus: *Ethikon I*, 3:3).

21   Massignon 1954, 108.

22   Massignon 1954, 108; *Qur'ān* 24:35, 28:29.

The main point for our approach is that both traditions present the ecstatic experiences as influences that expand the consciousness, widen the understanding, and deliver some kind of 'knowledge' concerning the spiritual dimension, the creation and the causality between these two. The cognitive component of the experience is connected with the transcendent reality in such an elementary way that it might in fact function properly as an argument in favour of the existence of the *causa efficiens* (i.e. God) behind the experience.

The main difference in the use of the concept seems to be that according to the Sufi emphasis, 'knowledge' deals with the attributes of God, while the Syriac authors do not state this explicitly, the attributes not being a central topic in Christian theology . The Syriac authors, on the other hand, make great use of the concept of *sukkālē*, single entities of gnosis, being delivered in the experience, and this use is unparalleled in Sufism.

The most fruitful way to comprehend the concept of mystical knowledge in both cases, it seems to me, is to see it as a perspective, a way of knowing and as a contemplative attitude rather than as 'knowledge' in the discursive sense. Consequently, it would often be more accurate to comprehend *gnosis* as "understanding" or even "widening of consciousness" than as "knowledge", a *way* of looking rather than an *object* of looking.

On the other hand, the fact that the authors avoid giving any actual content to the mystical knowledge may sometimes give the impression that "gnosis" had become a homiletic typos that a mystical author was supposed to refer to every now and then.

4.3. IMPLICIT DIFFERENCES

Perhaps the most important observations made during the analysis of the two corpora with the present approach were that (a) the greater the number and variety of sources available, the less there will remain differences between the traditions on the level of (symbolic and analytical) expression, as remarked above, and (b) the wider the sampling, the more there will show up differences in the level of interpretation where the discourses orientate themselves in totally different directions under the conditioning of the religious context.

Besides the technical dimensions of expression, another fundamental new phase introduced into Sufi discourse is poetical expression. Syriac Christian poetry, a bountiful field indeed, encompasses biblical, liturgical, eulogistic and theological topics of many kinds, but the actual mystical experience as a poetic topic and motif remains a typical Sufi feature. Sufi poetry displays an endless reservoir of symbols with no equivalents or examples in Syriac metatheology. The greatness of Sufi poetry – among all world literature – is, however, based not only

on its originality or volume, but on the fact that it is at its best extraordinary beautiful, not only because it is fluent in form (Arabic poetry always is) but also touching in content (Arabic poetry is not always necessarily so!).

Concerning the distinctive features of both traditions on a general level, I would describe Syriac discourse as simpler and more sincere. The authors' touch is more down-to-earth (if such an expression is appropriate in this context!). Sufi discourse is more concealing – mystical – which results, for instance, in a certain dimming of the difference of categories of expression and interpretation of the experience. (This caused me some difficulties in determining the nature or function of certain expressions.)

Sufi discourse is in many respects clearly more intelligent in its definition of categories, conceptual differentiations and various abstracted dimensions. Nevertheless, if one tries to discover the basic qualities of the experience itself, the Sufi material is, generally speaking, less fruitful than the more open and vivid descriptions in the Syriac sources.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of the lack of abstraction are also evident: many interesting aspects remain untouched by the Syriac authors, who, for instance, do not discuss the concept of time, either in general or in relation to mystical experiences. Philosophical ideas penetrated into Sufism in a deeper way than was ever the case with Syriac metatheology.

The abstract discourse of the Islamic mystical authors, on the other hand, has also had remarkable consequences in the historical perspective, for it has greatly developed the Islamic literary languages – not only Arabic and Persian but also Turkish and the Indo-Muslim languages (Sindhi, Panjabi, Urdu, Pashto).[23]

It is impossible to make a comparison of the traditions in great detail here, due to the variation within each corpus. There are variations in style: John of Dalyatha is a master of beautiful expression and has a much more artistic touch than other Syrians, and on the Sufi side the ideas of Ibn 'Arabi soar to even higher spheres. Both traditions also have their black sheep who have difficulties in remaining within the flock of orthodoxy (Stephen bar Sudhaile, Niffari).

4.3.1. The Intention of the Discourse

As noted above many times, Syriac and Sufi writings have a different orientation: the former are answers and exhortations written by ascetics to fellow-ascetics of a like disposition, but the latter are general doctrinal constructions intended mainly for outsiders. The Sufi classics seem to portray Sufi experience in a more abstract and therefore more superficial way than Syriac literature. This is in fact a good

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23   Schimmel 1975, 33.

reason to question the whole idea of comparison, to consider whether it does full justice to either tradition.

The very position itself, however, can be considered as a result in itself. Its mere existence in fact symbolises certain profound differences between Christianity and Islam.[24] The different intention of the texts may even be considered as an indicator of the fundamental variance between the two religions. Since it seems reasonable to estimate that the present corpus of texts represents the most significant line in the thought of both mystical traditions, we face the question: why did the Christian ascetics have little if any need to make endless apologies to their hierarchy, as the Sufis encountered recurrent friction with Islamic orthodoxy?

4.3.2. The Attitude towards "the World"

The fact that Christian ascetics did not feel the need to make apologies for asceticism to their own orthodox leadership, is an outcome of the different early history, different ideals, and in that sense of the different essence of the religions in question. The process of the formation of early Christianity left behind a heritage of a sectarian movement of "protest" suitable for a minority group with its idea of "withdrawal from the world", such as the ascetics in their own way tried to maintain. In the case of Islam, however, the emphasis was from the very beginning of its chronology (*hijra*) not on individual but on communal, collective forms of religion (which, of course, do not exclude individual religious enthusiasm).

Even though during its long history Christianity could not avoid a certain shift towards a "national religion", it is reasonable to consider the earliest forms of a religion as its "true nature" (the churches call themselves 'apostolic'!), and in that sense it should be evident that Christianity by its inner logic offers a suitable basis for asceticism, while Islam since its very emergence has been more inclined to function as a state religion. On the practical level this is manifested in the fact that the Christian mystics could in many cases interpret their sacred texts (NT) more literally than the Sufis. Especially the radical commandments of the Gospels provide a short cut to asceticism when interpreted literally.

Compared with Syriac asceticism, the Sufi classics present a kind of rationalised asceticism that is purified from a few extreme features that may appear somewhat pathological. In the Sufi classics the ideas of staying awake through the night, celibacy and seclusion do not come even close to the position

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[24] One may wonder whether a discussion of "Christianity" and "Islam" is meaningful at all, due to the indefiniteness of the concepts. The best way to focus such a problem, it seems to me, is to state that the heart of a religion is to be found in its *earliest ideals*, from which all else – its earliest practices as well as its latter ideals – is derived or developed.

they have in Syriac literature. (Naturally, for any such generalisation there are exceptional cases to be found as well.)

The obvious advantage of the Sufi paradigm is that mystical experience is not reserved for a small (celibate) spiritual elite only, but is approachable for every man; Sufi ecstasy, compared with the mainline of Oriental Christian thought, is for "laymen".

4.3.3. Taxonomy

Sufi discourse largely follows the models of expression found in Syriac metatheo-logy, but in the field of interpretation Sufism sovereignly surpassed its precursors. This is the most remarkable difference between the structure of the discourses. In Sufism the interpretation of the experience is refined into more theoretical and technical categories, to the extent that the actual character of the experience seems to remain unapproachable behind the complicated terminology. Syriac metatheo-logy never produced such an inherent technical vocabulary, the discussion of the terms and their definitions being almost completely absent, and since the types of states were not "terminologised", there consequently emerged no comparison of states either.

For example, Isaac of Nineveh, with his conception of 'abandonment' (*meštaqbānūtā*), comes close to starting a technical discussion on various states and is delayed only by his lack of intention for a more abstract discourse that would be more dependent on terms – certainly not by his lack of ability to engage in more abstract reasoning.

Generally speaking, Oriental Christian asceticism has not been favourable soil for very speculative mysticism (cf. Kabbalah, theosophical Sufism, Islamic neo-Platonists like Ikhwān al-safā' etc.). On the contrary, in the Syriac tradition even the most ecstatic seers are unwilling to develop linguistic systems about "processes of emanation" or "primordial lights". Theoretical speculation was presumably felt to be a man-made structure, and as such quite worthless when compared with the divine reality experienced in the ascetic life. Consequently, there may be found remarks with even a slight hint of jeering at over-speculative theoretical systems of mysticism.

> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself. This is the exercise which brings men nigh unto God, and *this is the short way in which there are no ascents or descents* (Joseph the Seer).[25]

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25   Mingana/Joseph, 178 (86a, p. 256).

> Do not be like those who love to hear descriptions of various things; rather be eager for
> the words spoken by the perfect, which will show what is the way of life of the perfect
> (John of Apamea).[26]

Similar homiletics naturally occur in Sufi literature as well, and perhaps even more often, but certainly with less effect. Are there any reasons for this difference in the theoretical interests? The philosophical set of concepts would have been available to the Syriac metatheologians as well – indeed, it was the Syrian Christians who introduced philosophy to the Arabs – so the basic reason seems to be that the metatheologians simply lacked interest in theoretical speculation.

This basic fact perhaps gained support from a few linguistic factors. Firstly, despite the claims of various traditions, there is no Christian holy tongue. The Bible itself was written in three languages, yet the words of Christ were not, with a few exceptions, preserved in the original Aramaic, and the Christians of the Near East have used, and continue to use, several[27] literary and liturgical languages. These facts are apt to diminish, indirectly at least, the sanctity of each language and thereby prevent the over-scrutinising of its vocabulary. Secondly, Syriac vocabulary is not as abundant as that of Arabic, and the possibilities of word derivation are less numerous, so therefore it would be a less favourable background for playing with words.

Nevertheless, it is evident that the Syriac authors most acquainted with the sciences (Simon the Graceful, Barhebraeus) are distinguished by a more theoretical approach, but even in their cases the terms do not acquire intrinsic value. The Syriac author with the most terminology-centred approach is probably Sahdona, who here and there introduces subjects by their names and engages in Sufi-like homiletics where the concept may be praised even at the expense of its content.[28] Yet even he does not aim to produce new concepts or new technical usages for the old ones.

As for Sufi taxonomy, one of its consequences is the tendency to make comparisons, which is deeply absorbed in Sufi discourse. Not only are the various states presented by constituting them in relation to each other, but the tendency is

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26 The Syriac text in *Malpānûtā d-abbāhātā*, 38; English translation from Brock: *Syriac Fathers*, 91.

27 The classical languages of Oriental Christians are Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopic; the first three have been largely replaced by Arabic. Persian was also tentatively used as a literary language, but without a real tradition of Christian Persian literature. Modern Christian authors employ Arabic, English and French, the use of Syriac being preserved in monasteries.

28 For example, in *Oeuvres Spirituelles II*, 4:3 Sahdona praises 'love' so that it "surpasses in greatness all good works" – as if love and good works could actually be contrasted or even separated. On 'solitude' he even states explicitly that "in its name all beauties are hidden" (*Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:165).

rooted in other contexts as well. Even Kalabadhi's chapter on Angels and Messengers[29] is a discussion on the preference: which of these, and of the different ranks of believers, are to be considered worthier than others. This kind of discussion is totally absent from the Syriac Fathers. The irony is that Islam is essentially a religion of equality, while the Christian churches are known for their hierarchy and ranks. Perhaps the spiritual authors in both traditions represent an unconscious counter-reaction to the standards of their religion.

4.4. EXPLICIT DIFFERENCES

4.4.1. Causa Efficiens

Among the effective causes of the mystical experience there are several differences to be found. Evidently, the difference between the Islamic God (*allāh*) and the Christian God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) is present in the discourse both implicitly and explicitly. Since the Syriac authors, however, did not concentrate on speculation concerning the roles of the divine Persons in the mystical experience, the verifiable difference is not here as striking as one might expect. There are indeed places where Jesus or the (Holy) Spirit is presented as the giver of experience, but several Syriac expressions would in fact also be acceptable in Sufi discourse, albeit with divergent connotations ('Spirit', 'mercy'). And *vice versa*, some Sufi expressions ('power of the Spirit') would be possible in Syriac discourse. The most famous Sufi attribute of God as the *causa efficiens* is 'the Truth' (*al-ḥaqq*), which as a biblical attribute of Christ would be applicable in Syriac discourse as well.

The interpretation of experience as an effect of 'grace' (*ṭaybūtā*) is a peculiarly Christian emphasis, which is well in line with the biblical tradition of St. Paul. Yet it is good to recall that the whole concept of grace in the Semitic languages does not have definite "juridical" connotations but is hyponymous with love and compassion.

Perhaps more surprisingly, 'love' and 'beauty' are posited as the cause of mystical experience with considerable frequency in the Syriac corpus,[30] but extremely seldom in the Sufi one. In this respect Sufi prose works do not correspond to the reputation of Sufi poetry.

Nevertheless, the most striking difference in this category is the case of angelic beings. Angels are present in Sufi discourse as well, but the Syriac authors

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[29] Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 41–43; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 53–55.
[30] See above, p. 130–131.

only represent the mystical experiences as an outcome of angelic activity.[31] The angels provoking fiery experiences is also in accordance with the traditional Judaeo-Christian concept of angels as fiery beings (the seraphim in Is. 6:1–4).

Accordingly, the role of the devil is also different.[32] For Sufis the devil is a somewhat impersonal character, an instrument of God's anger, who is able to affect believers only by 'whisperings', sinful inspiration, as the Syriac authors present the devil as an enemy who is a potential source of deceiving visions. The difference continues in the tradition of the sacred writings.[33] In the Qur'an the sovereignty of Allah is stressed to the extent that there is no power whatsoever left for the devil.[34]

4.4.2. The Enabling Cause

The differences in the principles described above become concrete in the dis-course on the enabling reasons of the experience. Silence and solitude, presented in Syriac metatheology as the most important and necessary prerequisite for the experience, are not mentioned at all among the preconditions for acquiring the experience in Sufi discourse. The collective ecstatic methods (*samā'*, dance) aroused strict disagreements in the Islamic context, but in the context of the Christian admiration for silence it would be absolutely impossible even to discuss them. If the Sufi ideal is to be outwardly in the company of men and distant from them inwardly,[35] Christian monks would surely express the matter *vice versa*.[36]

The language used with reference to the remembrance of God (*'uhdānā*, *dhikr*) is occasionally matching to a surprising extent: remembrance is presented in both traditions not only as an act but as a continuous state. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Syriac texts do not recommend any repetitive formulas.[37]

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[31]   See above, p. 133.

[32]   The difference, it seems to me, might be even more striking if the comparison was with the Greek Orthodox tradition.

[33]   In the "local dualism" of the New Testament Satan is "the prince of this world" who has "come to kill and destroy" (John 10:10, 12:31, 14:30).

[34]   For further discussion, Finnish readers may consult my article on the Islamic devil compared with the devil in the Christian and Jewish traditions: *Kivitetty saatana – paholainen Koraa-nissa ja islamissa* (Logos 2/1998).

[35]   Qušayri: *Risāla,* 102; *Principles of Sufism,* 20.

[36]   Namely, if the "inward presence with men" is understood, as is indicated by the social function of the experience, as a cause of love for mankind.

[37]   The Greek hesychasm, with its famous Jesus prayer and other formulas, arose at a later date, when Syrian monasticism was already in decline.

4.4.3. The Concept of 'Ecstasy'

The difference between the words signifying 'ecstasy', or its approximation, raises questions. Is it only an etymological accident that the literal basic meaning of 'ecstasy' is 'wonder' in Syriac, but 'finding' in Arabic? The former could be explained either as a semantic borrowing from Greek, or as an internal Syriac development arising from the sense of wonderment in the experience itself, or most probably, as an interaction between these two processes. The basic attitude before God is that of wonder, an intentional state with no limit.

In the case of *wajd* it is possible to find an explanation in the sense 'to encounter' of the verb *wajada*. At least for Finnish readers this should be an elucidatory point, since in Finnish an ecstatic uncontrolled (pathological) experience can be referred to as *kohtaus* ('a fit'), literally: 'an encounter'. The same explanation can also be traced in the relationships between a few English concepts. Namely, the word 'shock', commonly used of a kind of ecstatic state, can also be used in the sense of 'crashing'; and on the other hand, 'encounter' in the negative sense may signify 'clash'; and, to pull the strings together, the semantic fields of 'clash' and 'crash' have a common sector, and in that way ecstasy as 'shock' and 'encounter' are related phenomena. In any case, it is essential to note that both the Syriac and the Arabic concepts imply the existence of *the other*, someone that is 'wondered at' or 'encountered' – or 'found'.

The meaning of 'finding' for ecstatic experience also provides an interpretative sense with obvious aesthetic merit: the yearning and search for God end up in finding, in ecstasy. And moreover, the fact that in Arabic *wajada* in the sense of 'finding' also has the meaning of 'existing', provides a firm basis for ontological speculation as to the true nature of existence, i.e. God, being present (found, encountered) in ecstasy. Because of all these connotations, *wajd* is a very fruitful concept for expressing ecstasy, albeit technical in character and somewhat conventional in its use compared with Arabic outside Sufism.

The symbolic signs of the experience contain a few specific features.[38] For some reason, 'fragrance' (*rēḥā*) seems to be a predominantly Syriac expression. A linguistic reason for this might be the close etymological and phonetic connection between the words *rēḥā* and *rūḥā*, the connotation of which has special theological significance in the Christian context, since the latter is regularly used of the divine Person of the Holy Spirit. A practical parallel to the quality of fragrance is

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[38]   As far as I can see, Greek Orthodox monastic writings contain basically the same symbols as the Syriac tradition, the most noteworthy "addition" being κατάνυξις, a distinctively Greek symbol meaning 'stupefaction', literally 'act of pricking', from the verb νύσσω 'to prick'.

to be found in hagiographic literature, where a precious odour is a general motif in the stories of relics of saints. In the Syriac tradition a beautiful odour has commonly been connected with Paradise[39] and hence with the world to come, but this does not fully explain the Syriac dominance in the use of the concept, for the absence of a Sufi equivalent as a sign of ecstatic experience remains unexplained (Sufis have Paradise on their minds as well).

Almost all the other symbolic signs used in Syriac have a parallel in Sufi works, as seen above, but the Sufi works do contain a large number of concepts unknown in Syriac metatheology. Most of the specific Sufi terms that have no Syriac counterpart (*fanā'*, *ghayba*), are unparalleled simply because in Syriac the interpretation of the experience did not develop as far as in Sufism. There have been scholars (e.g. Nicholson) who have endeavoured to trace counterparts for *fānā'* and *ghayba* in Hindu terminology, but Massignon has correctly pointed out that the use of these terms is so complex and ambiguous that exact parallels with Indian concepts cannot be maintained.[40]

4.4.4. Causa Finalis

The category of *causa finalis* contains at least four basic differences in emphasis, the first two being due to certain deficiencies in Sufi discourse. It must be stressed that I do not claim that these features are utterly absent from Sufi thought, but that they do not occur in the discourse in connection with mystical-ecstatic experiences.

When we look at the *causa finalis* as a psychological matter, there is one noteworthy difference in the emphases of the interpretation of the experience. The Sufis, perhaps surprisingly, do not stress the purifying character of the ecstatic experience, even though they do disclose its consuming effect. Instead, the present sources stress that the purification depends on deeds, on obedience to the law, and on the ascetic methods.[41]

Another surprise is contained in the social function of the experience. In spite of the "worldly" character of Sufism, and in spite of the fact that the works are intended for a wide public, the Sufi classics seem to lack the social function of ecstatic experience as a cause of love for one's fellow-men – even though there

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[39]   E.g. Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4, where the vision of Paradise made the author drunk with its fragrance. Isaac of Nineveh (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa,* 577) tells beautifully how animals become tame when recognising in saints the smell of Paradise which had been lost in the Fall and regained in the advent of Christ.

[40]   Massignon (1954, p. 93): "ce sont des termes complexes, par trop amphibologiques".

[41]   E.g. Qušayri: *Risāla*, 67; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 120; see above, p. 192, 218–224, 252–253.

was an evident opening for such an explanation to justify abnormal experiences in an appealing manner. In Sufi texts there is certainly much discussion about love in general and the love of God in particular, but this is practically never connected with discussion as to how to show love towards men. A curiosity in this respect is that the Sufis find the archetype of the soul that is annihilated completely to God in Muhammad at the actual *battle* of Badr: "It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah".[42] In Syrian monastic thinking, or in any early Christian context, the idea of a warrior-saint fighting in an earthly battle under the highest possible spiritual influence would have been totally inappropriate.

When considering the *causa finalis* as a theological phenomenon, there is again some difference in emphasis. Firstly, there is variation in the eschatological function. Both traditions interpret experience as a reflection of the existential states of the other side, but there is a clear difference in how the eschatologies of the interpretations are focused. In Syriac metatheology mystical experiences strongly prefigure the states of the world to come, but in Sufi discourse it is the pre-existent states that in fact receive more attention.[43] The difference in the eschatological emphasis is not necessarily due to the sacred Scriptures, the Qur'an and the NT both having an eschatological emphasis, but somehow the Syriac authors seem to have been orientated in a more immediate relation to the here-after, which is reflected in their (descriptions of their) experiences. This is in fact not surprising if we consider absolute withdrawal from the world as a psychological reality and context for the experience: the monks lived in the constant ex-pectation of the world to come. The Sufi preference for insistence on the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul fits in with the esoteric character of the movement.

Secondly, Sufi discussion of the ontological function inevitably begins to differ somewhat from the corresponding Christian discourse, but this difference is mainly present implicitly. The Syriac authors were practically free to use images of unification[44] without attracting any special attention. The most essential under-lying explanation is that all of these images, albeit open to various interpretations, are more or less adaptations of the main theme of Eastern Christian thought: "The Word became flesh that we might be deified".[45] For example, John of Dalyatha's

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[42]   *Qur'an* 8:17 according to Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation. For Sufi interpretation, see Chittick 1992, 46; Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-ta'arruf*, 77 (tr. 100), 91 (tr. 119) and Schimmel 1975, 144.

[43]   See above, p. 268–269.

[44]   See above, p. 136.

[45]   The formulation comes from the "Father of Orthodoxy", Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373). A thousand years later Gregory Palamas specified the meaning of *theosis* as participation in the Divine *energies*, not in the Divine Essence, but during the period concentrated on in this study, the differentiation was not always made. It might be tempting to suggest that this differentiation was indirectly influenced by Islamic theology, but it seems that there is no

analogy of God as the food and nourishment of those who love him,[46] does not in fact differ from the standard sacramental symbolism of the Eastern Churches. Already the Apostolic expression "to be filled with the Holy Spirit" is an image that introduces a Person of the Divinity into a human subject. For example, according to Sahdona, God has

> mingled (*ḥelaṭ*) our spirit with his Spirit, and mixed (*mezag*) into our bodies the gift of his grace, causing the fire of the Holy Spirit to burst into flames in us.[47]

In Islamic thinking, however, any "uniting" poses a challenge to its fundamental doctrine, the solemn and unchallenged *tawḥīd*, which means that the most courageous interpretations are inevitably in confrontation with the main principles of dogmatic theology. The position means that the discourse has to acquire speculative features or develop scabrous subjects such as ecstatic utterances or ambiguous poetry. The way in which Sufi discourse treats images of unification is somewhat puzzling: on the one hand, unification is condemned as an impossible and heretical error, yet on the other hand, it is admired, praised and pursued. Perhaps the matter itself is perceived as true and proper, but the language referring to it is thought of as insufficient and misleading and therefore inappropriate? However, the problem is also dependent on the esoteric nature of Sufism. Perhaps the concept of union, as well as that of "ineffability" itself, in mystical discourse should be taken as a paradoxical concept: non-propositional, truth-like predicate, both true and false at the same time,[48] and as such a suitable concept for meditation.

In the Christian context 'God' (*allāhā*) is a common name, and the (Syriac-speaking) authors are more easily able to call people both 'god' and 'divine' (*allāhāyā*). In the case of Islam, however, *allāh* developed *de facto* into a proper name, and its use in other senses diminished.

Obviously God is closer to man in Christian thinking because of the Incarnation (God became man). This position indirectly allows anthropomorphisms and favours bold language on perceiving the Divine, like the expressions of seeing Him repeatedly used by Sahdona. This may be illustrated with a sentence from Sahdona's Arabic version: *in kunta turīdu an tanzhur allāh*, "if you only want to behold God", which looks curiously like Niffari's heretical expressions.[49]

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actual evidence for such influence. The question was an internal Christian one, and the influence came, albeit negatively, from the West with Catholic scholasticism.

[46] Beulay: *La Collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 45:2 (pp. 452–453).

[47] Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:64. ܠܒܝܬܐ ܕܡܘܗܒܬܗ – literally "grace of his gift".

[48] Cf. Matilal 1992, 153.

[49] Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles IV*, p. 103. Other interesting Christian usages of Arabic vocabulary include *jihād* in its spiritual meaning: "There are three degrees in which Liberty acts

Nevertheless, it must also be stated that the Christian view of the individual's unity with the Divine has its limits as well, the main concern of which are eschatological: the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, formulated by Origen and condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 553, indicates the ultimate restoration of all created beings. Of our sources it is *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* alone which explicitly restores even the fallen angels into union and fusion with God's Essence.

4.4.5. Manifestation

Mystical experience is manifested in both traditions as physical reactions that seem to a large extent similar. However, especially in this very case it is not useful to make detailed, comprehensive comparisons about the details with the aid of textual material where references to the physical manifestation are quite incidental. In the light of the general emphasis of the accounts, however, we may point out two diverging emphases. Firstly, the Christians evidently did weep more: even if we counted most references to the shedding of tears as a homiletic typos, subject to hyperbole, a great deal indeed would remain. Secondly, it is also evident that all the most radical manifestations, such as the rending of garments, withstanding fire, dying in ecstasy, belong to an exclusive Sufi domain; nothing in fact could be more alien from the Christian point of view.

4.4.6. Ecstatic Utterances

The ecstatic utterances of Sufism, compared with the paradoxical and philosophically orientated abstract formulations of the experiences of "unity" found in many other religious traditions, are as if incarnated: their contents have acquired concrete applications that have developed somewhat unequalled depth in the personal dimension.

The defiant and provocative nature of the ecstatic utterances is even more remarkable in the Islamic context, and their originality is further emphasised by the fact that even the most radical Christian ascetic movements offer no parallels. Thereore, the ecstatic utterances may be considered as the third substantial renewal introduced to the discourse by the Sufis (the first two were the technicality of interpretation and the refined poetic expression).

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and works, and there is combat in all of them. But the most frequent fight is in the middle degree, because there are obstacles that multiply the struggle (*jihād*)" (ibid. p. 104).

The very existence of ecstatic utterances calls for explanation. They might be seen as a kind of "prophetic humour", as protests against egoism,[50] as a kind of revenge of emotion against rationality, or perhaps most accurately, as counter-reactions to strictly juridical Islamic orthodoxy. Comparison with the context of Oriental Christianity is also illustrative. The religion of Incarnation may have been regarded by the Muslims as clearly mistaken in its theological views on the dogmatic level, but still the mere existence of the Christian practices and beliefs may have pointed out a certain *lack of something* in Islam, and this may have unconsciously strengthened the spiritual pressure to express the proximity of God and man in an unconditional way.

4.5. PARALLELS BETWEEN THE TRADITIONS

Finally, I shall discuss in brief a question that has been, so to speak, waiting for us between the lines. Namely, the aspects presented so far make one consider the possibility of historical influences between the two traditions. These have been seen from different angles by different scholars:

1. (*Syriac scholar:*) Sufism is "wholly based on the teaching and practices of the Christian monks and ascetes ... There is hardly any point in Islamic mysticism which has not been borrowed from the main body of earlier Christian mystical thought."[51]

2. (*Muslim scholar:*) Syriac tradition is a parallel of interest rather than direct source of influence ... Plotinus is a likely inspiration to both schools.[52]

3. (*European scholar:*) Sufism is an endeavour to reproduce the experience of Muhammad with some influences from Christian asceticism and Hellenistic mysticism.[53]

Several features traditionally considered as typically Sufi occur more or less frequently in Syriac works: wine, love, drunkenness, passionate yearning,[54] and the whole ecstatic phenomenon itself. The textual material of our corpora could

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[50] The definition is derived from J. Hämeen-Anttila's forthcoming book *Jumalasta juopuneet – islamin mystiikan käsikirja* (Helsinki 2002).

[51] Mingana 1934, v.

[52] A.H. Abdel-Kader from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, quoted from Abdel-Kader: *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd* (London 1962) by Colless 1968, 10.

[53] Nicholson 1974, 211–213.

[54] E.g. ܪܚܡܬܐ ܝܩܝܕܬܐ in Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:147.

possibly have been arranged in such a way that the Sufi allegories of drunkenness would have been ostensibly shown as the outcome of Christian influence. This kind of hypothetical speculation, however, should have been constructed as if on an empty space, and this would in fact also make the whole experience questionable, as if the Sufis had been writing about their experiences dependent on Syriac scrolls, which in turn would make the whole idea of ecstatic readings senseless.

And moreover, what is an "influence"? In practice it implies a historical causality between a Christian and a Sufi, which, however, can be shown indisputably in extremely few cases. Usually we are able to find only parallel lines of thought, which in a few exceptional cases[55] may justify speaking of influences, but on the other hand, the discussion of "influences" usually tends to distort the perspective by minimising intuition, inspiration, inventiveness and creativity. And as far as something has been borrowed, it is mainly *ideals* (virtues, aims), and this kind of borrowing may take place unnoticeably and unconsciously.

In other words, if one wishes to talk about influences, one should show not only parallels in content but the channels of transmission as well. One interesting general observation in this respect deserves to be pointed out. The 9th century is considered as a period of mass conversions from Syriac-speaking Christianity to Islam. Whatever the exact number of conversions, it is statistically probable that many of the 10th- or 11th-century Sufis were grandchildren of Christians. In other words, some of our authors perhaps had Christian (great-) grandparents. If this be the case, it is inevitable that some ideals and values – or religious needs – had been transmitted even unconsciously inside the family from one generation to another. This of course is far from transmission of the details of Syriac scrolls, not least because the whole of Syriac literature was almost entirely a monastic product and in that sense non-hereditary.

Regardless of this kind of causally derived influences, in the most general sense of the word, the two discourses naturally contain an endless number of common motives and topics. In the following I shall demonstrate several interesting *types of parallels* between Sufism and Oriental Christianity (without providing evidence of a causal relation between them).

Firstly, there are parallels in which a causal historical connection is possible and even probable, the parallel being of a detailed and non-universal nature. Examples are provided in the *ḥadith*-collections that contain numerous maxims which probably originated in the Christian kerygma, but the fact that they were transmitted orally means that the verification of causality always remains disput-

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55   Barhebraeus adopted the disposition of al-Ghazali's *Iḥyā* into his *Ethikon* and filled it with Christian material, albeit admitting a considerable amount of Islamic questioning into his presentation. A full comparison has been given by Teule in Appendix I to his translation of *Ethikon*.

able to some extent. Some such examples are present in the Sufi classics as well. One of the most interesting parallels contains two seventh-century sayings, but this case is exceptional in that the Islamic version slightly predates the Syriac one:

> Recollect God, that he may recollect you (Isaac of Nineveh).[56]
> Recollect Me, and I will recollect you (*Sūrat al-baqara*).[57]

Most probably there is a centuries' old Syriac kerygma behind both, but still the idea could also have been created by any religious thinker. In any case, the remembrance of God is one of the common ideals of the Syriac Fathers and the Sufis.

As another example I would suggest *the secret name of God*, a famous topos in Islamic thinking, yet discussed by John of Dalyatha, who argues that firstly there are the disclosed names that God has given for His glory – obviously those revealed in the sacred books – but these are all insufficient "since all appellations and names are inferior" to the greatness of God, and so John proceeds to allude to "the secret one that You in Your love have mysteriously given to me".[58] How about the possibility of historical connection? It is not at all unreasonable to think that the topic may have been broached by the East Syrian monks in their contacts with the Arabs when the latter desired to hear about their faith and the former did not wish to disclose it all (in order both to arouse interest and to protect the mysteries of the faith).

Secondly, there are parallels where the historical connection is not impossible but not probable either, and verification is impossible due to the lack of relevant sources. For instance, St. Paul's heavenly journey is a well-known biblical account and a relatively widely used literary topos, which could have been the model of Muhammad's *mi'rāj*. We can at least imagine how the transmission could have taken place through a monk teaching or telling tales to Arabs who in turn were inspired, and the idea of a heavenly journey began to develop in their minds – but this convinces only those who want to be convinced.

Thirdly, there are parallels where the influence is probable, but the matter is so general that the verification of the causality is impossible due to its indefiniteness. For example, the ideal of *pain and suffering* is a central Christian motif, hardly existent in the Qur'an and early Islam, but strongly present in Sufism.[59] The setting seems an obvious one for "influences", but there still remains the possibility that such an ideal may have developed within Islam regardless of its

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56   Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 72; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 50.
57   *Qur'an* 2:152; Qušayri: *Risāla*, 210.
58   Beulay: *La Collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 47:7.
59   Schimmel 1982, 71–72.

Christian context. Another example of this category of parallels could be Niffari's twofold division of men into the 'elect' (*khāṣṣ*) and the 'common' (*'āmm*); both groups seem to have their own standard of salvation: the standard understanding (*'ilm*) is "almost enough" for the common, but the elect person perishes unless he acts on the principle that he is elect; the categories are not predestined but a person may become elect by turning towards God. The doctrine of two categories of believers is alien to early Islam, but it has an obvious predecessor in Syriac spirituality, the clearest and earliest example being the fourth-century *Liber graduum*.[60]

Fourthly, there are parallel motifs based on parallel lines of thought, where "influence" is a completely unnecessarily supposition, but there may be a kind of indirect causality: the authors in each tradition may have derived the idea from the common cultural context or from the common monotheistic paradigm. As an example I would suggest the concept of *spiritual deterioration*, which is ultimately based on the myth of "Paradise Lost", represented by the purity of the first saints of the tradition in question. Simeon the Graceful tells the story of a man who brought precious perfume from China and gave it to his children. When the actual perfume decreased, they added water and slowly adulterated it so that in the end there was no odour left.

> In this way the ancient fathers [...] delivered themselves to spiritual sacrifice, implored Christ with sorrow and tears until they obtained the gift of grace, were found worthy of spiritual knowledge, became the temple of God, wrought miracles and became aware of the mystery of the revelations. The mystery, however, deteriorated little by little in its transmission, until we alone remained, who have only the name and the garb.[61]

Jilani has practically the same teaching in his mind (without the bottle, however, so that we are surely not justified in appealing to the concept of influence!):

> The companions (of Muhammad) were in a state of spiritual rapture (*kānū ahl al-jadhba*), by the power of the companionship of the Prophet. Later on this spiritual level dissipated. It passed to the sheikhs of the divine path, which in turn divided into many branches. It was divided into so many sections that the spiritual power thinned and dispersed. In many cases all that was left was only an appearance wrapped in the appearance of a spiritual teacher without any meaning.[62]

The same category of parallels might also be illustrated with Niffari's two basic principles on the recognition of the *causa efficiens*: (1) if the experience separates the subject from the things that separate him from God, it is divine,[63] and (2) if

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60 E.g. Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 29:4–10. For *Liber Graduum*, see my *Kerubin silmin*, pp. 195–198.

61 Mingana/Simon, 26 (173b).

62 Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 141; the translation is a modified version of the one in *Secret of Secrets*, 119.

63 Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 30:7.

the experience starts off in the right way but is consummated too early, before a man has been "separated", he should be afraid of deception (*makr*).[64] Both principles are completely valid in the Christian context, but may of course develop independently without any actual influence.

Fifthly, there are parallels where it is not a question of "influences" in the historical sense but of the art of seeing parallel functions in the thought-world of two traditions, i.e. meta-interpretation. This kind of parallel may be very interesting, even if they were only creative inventions. For example, the analogy between Christ and the Qur'an, both being the Word of God, is well known, but it applies further to the Sufi *devotion to Muhammad*, which corresponds to the Christian *veneration of the Virgin Mary*. Muhammad and Mary are seen as pure vessels that carried the eternal Word of God and thereby conveyed salvation to mankind. Both are also more important in popular devotion than orthodox doctrine would *de facto* imply.

The phenomenon of "influence", however, does not operate in parallels only, but also in indirect and diverse ways, probably being manifested in a negative way too, as counter-reactions to the claims of another tradition. An interesting detail in this respect is that Niffari presents a negation of the very words of Christ that an average visitor is most likely to encounter in the Eastern Orthodox Churches: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life", which is perhaps echoed in the declaration of Niffari's divine subject: "To me there is no gate or way".[65] A less disputable example of a more direct counter-reaction might be seen in that Niffari considers the 'desert' (*mafāza*) to be a 'station' (*manzil*) of 'polytheists' (*mušrik*) and of those who are veiled, apparently an anti-monastic and anti-Christian remark.[66] But the most curious incident is that Niffari even criticises the conception of 'wonder' ('*ajab*) as a mystical state![67]

Examples of the varieties of parallel outlines of thought could be presented almost endlessly. It is, of course, not impossible that some Sufis were aware of Christian turns of phrase and desired to describe their own experiences in the same way, but if there is no actual quotation, it is practically impossible to show and verify the historical causality from the Christian language to the Sufi author. The very causality is probable, indeed. It is often stated that many of the early Sufis were in contact with Christian hermits in the desert,[68] and "that even in its

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[64] كلما بدا لك فابتدأ يجمعك قبل قطعك فخف مكره "Whatever appears to you, and begins to concentrate you before you have been severed, fear its deception." Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 30:8.

[65] Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 50:8.

[66] Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 35:4–5.

[67] Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 51:4. As these examples indicate, Niffari's possible Christian subtexts or parallels deserve a study of their own.

[68] Arberry 1961, 451.

early stages Sufism was influenced by the Christian anchorites and ascetics of Syria [...] cannot be denied" (D. Martin).[69] Concrete examples exist as well. The legendary character of Ibrahim ibn Adham, whose conversion resembles that of Buddha, is reported as having said to his disciples: "I have learned Knowledge from a monk called Father Simeon".[70] Dhu al-Nun allegedly heard from a Lebanese hermit a poem in which the Beloved is described as a Physician, a typical emphasis in early Syriac theology.[71] Qušayri relates not only sentences attributed to Jesus or the Torah, but also a quotation heard from a monk (*rāhib*), albeit seemingly obscure in origin.[72]

Nevertheless, it is essentially a question of two independent and vital traditions that encountered the same kind of problems and ended up with the same kind of solutions. As C.W. Ernst expresses the same idea in another context:

> Unknowing became a central concept in Christian mysticism after Dionysius, and it also formed a part of the Sufi outlook, not because of any direct historical influence, but because it is the answer to a riddle posed in both traditions.[73]

On the other hand, some scholars (e.g. Idries Shah)[74] have regarded the Western Catholic mysticism of the Middle Ages as deeply saturated by Sufi influences, due to the numerous parallels in images and topoi. Such esteem, however, is set in an entirely new light when we encounter in 7th-century Oriental Christianity all the main vocabulary, themes and images of drunkenness,[75] love and yearning for God, even "burning reeds",[76] which have often been considered as especially Sufi features.

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[69] Martin 1992, 211.

[70] Arberry 1961, 451 (cit. Abu Nuʿaym, *Hilyat al-awliya* ii, 134). For more details, see Colless 1968, 11; J. Bowman: 'The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift XIX* (1965), 177–201.

[71] Schimmel 1982, 25. The religion of the hermit is not explicitly stated. For Christ as Physician, see Brock 1989, 41–42.

[72] "A monk was asked, 'Are you fasting?' He answered, 'I am fasting with his remembrance (إني صائم بذكره). If I remember other-than-God, my fast is broken.'" Qušayri: *Risāla*, 225; *Principles of Sufism*, 212.

[73] Ernst 1985, 33.

[74] Shah 1964, xi, xvi-xix; Shah has also traced many Sufi influences from European literature in general (Shah 1968, 20).

[75] See p. 65, 79 (note 103), 83 (notes), 89–93, 101, 130, 133, 134, 142, 144–146, 152.

[76] Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316–317).

4.6. FINAL REMARKS

The question that is probably the main one, is still untouched. What are mystical experiences all about?

The modern approach resorts to psychology. Yet psychological explanations are sometimes no less slippery than the unutterable wisdom uttered by the mystics. It has even been stated that mystical experiences are not only an outcome of the transformation of libido but also a sign of its actual reassertion: "the delights said by our mystics to transcend everything which the world and the senses can procure, involve some activity of the sexual organs".[77] The basic paradigm of the psychological approach accompanied by "religious" fanaticism may produce statements of this kind:

> The energies of the instincts normally turn outwards, but in mysticism they are directed inwards inducing there high pressure, deepening the inner life and filling it with its creations. There has been no mystic with a normal sexual life [...] The 'unio mystica' of the pious dreamer is an evident surrogate of sexual life.[78]

A good critical faculty but bad thinking! This kind of caricature, though widespread, misses the point that the enormous body of Islamic mysticism favours a completely "normal" sexual life (if the possibility of several wives is regarded as normality!).

In the case of Islam, solutions should rather be sought in the theories of self-suggestion (*dhikr*) or mass hysteria (*samā'*). But in the case of Syriac metatheology, however, these would not work at all; the surrogate theories should be applicable there, but it is a matter of taste how satisfying it would be to think of a whole tradition as merely a reflection of a single inner instinct – an instinct that the ascetics themselves were aware of and took decades to learn how to deal with. This kind of critique is often repeated in the criticism of the psychoanalytical theory.

It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss these problems in detail, but one more possible explanation is worth pointing out. Freud and the psychoanalytical school suggested *regression*. The mystical experience, in this view, is a reflection of a person's early childhood when an infant is unable to tell the difference between himself and the outer world. This kind of theory tends to be undis-

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[77]   Leuba 1925, 138; McGinn 1992, 224.

[78]   Kaila 1990, 642. (Translation mine.) For discussion of sexual images in mystical discourse, see B. McGinn (1992) who points out: "For Freud it was enough to show how various symbols consciously or unconsciously symbolize sexual intercourse; the mystic [...] asks 'But what does sexual intercourse symbolize?'" (p. 224).

provable, which guarantees that it is abundantly criticised as well.[79] What is more significant, however, is that the theory is based on extrovert experiences that are interpreted as experiences of cosmic unity, which is always problematic in monotheistic mysticism and especially so in the case of Syriac metatheology.

It is also questionable whether the traditional distinction into extrovert and introvert experience, based on the fact that most books on mysticism are based on Far Eastern mysticism (and on Western Catholic mysticism usually interpreted more or less in the light of Far Eastern mysticism),[80] fits our sources or does justice to their traditions. We might estimate that the Syriac tradition represents introvert experience with some exceptions (the source of love for mankind) and Sufism perhaps more extrovert with many more exceptions, but I consider it a matter of doubt how justified the whole division is, since it does not naturally arise from the textual material itself.

But curiously, if the reality behind the mystical language was nothing more than natural psychological reactions, or even if there was no reality there at all, it would be quite irrelevant for this study, after all. We have outlined the structure of the linguistic discourse referring to mystical realities whose actual nature remains open – for further discussion.

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[79] For example, according to Kvalstad (1980, 79), it is not a theory but a flimsy hypothesis.

[80] For example, Stace 1960, Kvalstad 1980.