

Serafim Seppälä

“IN SPEECHLESS ECSTASY”

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

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study is to survey the phenomenon of “mystical experience” as described (a) in Syriac literature, (b) in classical Sufism and (c) to enumerate the common and divergent features in the two bodies of literature. The study is based on a systematic analysis of almost 3,000 pages of Syriac and Arabic literature from the 7th to 11th centuries. Problems (a) and (b) are treated with a qualitative approach, and (c) with a more quantitative emphasis. Even a mere descriptive presentation is of relevance, since the subject has not so far been treated exhaustively in a systematic way.

The vague phenomenon of mystical experience, with its psychological qualities and the semantic mechanisms of its linguistic expression, is discussed from a philosophical point of view in chapter 1.2. The methodological aim is to reconstruct the function of the components of the discourse in accordance with its logical structure, yet without destroying the semantic openness (i.e. varying usages) of the terms used to describe the mystical experience.

The expressions relating to the mystical experience are essentially similar in both traditions. The analytical descriptions display corresponding features, and the symbolic expressions consist of basically equivalent images (light, heat, drunkenness) and analogous senses (taste, hearing, smell and sight). The main reasons for this are the apparent similarity of the psychological qualities of the experience, the common limitations in the possibilities of linguistic expression, and the common cultural context whence the images for symbolic expression are derived.

In the interpretation of the experience, however, there is remarkable diversity, each tradition linking the experience to its own Scriptural and theological tradition. Sufi discourse is characterised by the massive production and employment of technical terminology and by a degree of confrontation with orthodox Islamic theology. Differences in interpretation reflect the differences in the context of the experience and in the function of mystical literature: the Syriac sources are basically internal monastic correspondence between monks and hermits, while the Sufi works are directed more towards outsiders and have an apologetic purpose.

Foreword

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

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

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

Due to a certain religious sensitivity associated with the subject, combined with my present position as a professional would-be-mystic (sic.), I can hardly avoid making a few more preliminary remarks on the choice of subject and on the non-theological method. One of the original motives underlying the study was my unattainable dream of studying and comparing the religions themselves – not only some of their accidental properties, but the actual real substances of such religions as Oriental Christianity and Islam. Such substance, of course, remains unattainable, and was banned from academic discussion long ago (i.e. the logical need for the concept of “substance” in the scholastic sense has been set aside as unnecessary). Scientific thinking deals with language and forms, “external attributes”, the function of which it aims to define. Consequently, the aim here is not to make statements about God or “spiritual realities”, existent or imaginary, but about the language referring to them; nothing more, nothing less.

Nevertheless, this also means that since scientific discourse does not pretend to touch on substance, it cannot *harm* it either – one of the most profound advantages of objectivity!

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

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

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

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

I wish to dedicate this work to the memory of the late Mr. George Kaplanian, whose friendship I had the privilege to enjoy at the time I began to prepare this study in Jerusalem. After an “existential break” the work was completed under quite different circumstances in monastic surroundings. “Methods are adopted according to circumstances”, George used to say. And I still disagree.

Veli-Petri Seppälä
(Monk Seraphim)

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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. 45 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 ‘Abdišo’ (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-mahjūb*, 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 thematically 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. 49-62); 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 Vööbus¹ 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 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

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 (πάθος) 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).

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 assemblies, 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

⁵ See 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”.

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

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 AD. 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 texts¹⁰ 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 irrelevant whether the hermit movement originated in the third or in the fifth 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 (306-373) 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.

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 Cyrillus, 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.

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 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

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.

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 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 Eštōnāyā* (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

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.

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.)

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 fifth century and a good portion of the sixth 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. 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

²⁰ Vööbus 1960, 321-326; AbouZayd 1993, 296-298.

²¹ Vööbus 1960, 361-383; AbouZayd 1993, 280-284.

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

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 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

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.

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.

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

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):

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.

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.

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

All this hindered the formation of a strict monolithic type of monasticism obligated 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 permission 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 monastic 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 community, serving in its common labours, but the actual monastic life from the beginning 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

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

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*).

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 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

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 Išo'denah, 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

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 providential 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

new comprehensive general survey by H. Alfeyev: *The World of Isaac of Nineveh*, in the Cistercian studies series.

³⁶ ܐܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ 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).

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.

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 Henānīšo' (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 Qaṭraye, 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

⁴¹ Brock 1997, 55.

⁴² I have given some examples in *Kerubin Silmin*, 230-231.

⁴³ Italian translation by Bettio (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. 173, 180.

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.

topic by describing it. His methods, however, seem somewhat merciless in their uncompromising preference for withdrawal into silence and seclusion. Dadišo' 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 Dadišo' 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 Dadišo' 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

⁴⁸ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 12a-13a, pp. 209-210 (tr. 88-89), *ibid.*, 19a, p. 216 (tr. 98).

⁴⁹ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 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. 158-159.

expected that 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 sixth century grammarian, and moreover, even his name 'the Seer' was interpreted by Wright⁵⁵ 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.

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

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.

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

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 a unique masterpiece 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 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

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.

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 Evagrius. 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.

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 Islamic minarets were inspired by the Stylites' columns.⁶² It is typical of the

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 Trimmingham 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 .)

⁶² The suggestion has been made by Peña 1992, 35. Theodoret of Cyrhus 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

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 seventh century.⁶⁴

Tolerance prevailed during the first half of the era of the Omayyads (650-750), 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 eighth 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 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

platforms.” (Al-Akhtal: *Diwan*, ed. Salhani, Beirut 1891-1892, 71:5). 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 Jihād 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 ninth century.

⁶⁶ Vööbus 1988, 306-310, 316.

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.

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

⁶⁸ Mingana 1934, 165.

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 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 –

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, 1855-1861] i, 396).

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-naḥs*, 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 (*ḥalāwa*) of devotion.⁷³

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

⁷¹ Smith 1931, 158-159. For more details, there is an excellent study for Finnish readers: J. Hämeen-Anttila, *Jesus, 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.

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.

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 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-Khatīb, *Ṣafā' al-dhikr* by Abu Hamza (d. 883).⁸² The corresponding Christian

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.

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 Quṣayri, *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. Quṣayri).

⁸² Smith 1935, 30.

practice, the Jesus Prayer, which developed about simultaneously⁸³ 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. 874) 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 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 barefoot into a freshly-cut reedbed in a moment of ecstasy.⁸⁷ When Sufis

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.

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.

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.

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 synthesis. 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

⁸⁸ Böwering 1999, 57-58.

⁸⁹ Quṣayri: *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* 1, 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-Hallāj'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).

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 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-lumā'* 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

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.

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 (1165-1240), 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 *wahdat 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 (*tarīqa*) 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 traditionally been more famous in the West. The most familiar themes

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.

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.

*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?) Dadišo' Q. (700?) John D. (780?) John/'Abdišo' H. (790?)	Hasan of Basra (728) Rabi'a (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) Suhrawardi (1234)
Barhebraeus (1286)		Ibn 'Arabi (1240)	

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.

1.1.5. The Corpus of Sufi Authors¹⁰¹

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 Jilani¹⁰² 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.

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 (*hāl*).¹⁰⁵

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-lumā’*, 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>

¹⁰³ Damghani 1993, 37.

¹⁰⁴ Schimmel 1975, 85.

¹⁰⁵ Damghani 1993, 38.

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’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)¹⁰⁶ 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 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

¹⁰⁶ The year of Niffari’s death is either 965 (AH 354) or 976-977 (AH 366).

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.

employs in an idiosyncratic way (e.g. *wajd*, *ḥarf*), 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

1.1.5.3. Quṣayri

Abu al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Quṣayri (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, Quṣayri'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 translation¹¹⁴ 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.

Risāla, just as Kalabadhi's *Ta'arruf*, aimed to present Sufism in perfect agreement with Sunni Orthodoxy. In the case of Quṣayri 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.

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.

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.

1.1.5.4. Hujwiri

‘Alī ibn Uthmān al-Ghaznawī al-Hujwirī (d. 1071)¹¹⁵ was a Hanafī 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, *Kaṣf al-maḥjūb 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 very objective way. *Kaṣf al-maḥjūb* in fact contains the earliest known synopsis of different Sufī groups and their special characteristics. The plenitude of divergent opinions ensures that Sufism is presented in its most colourful and multiform light.¹¹⁶

1.1.5.5. 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.¹¹⁷

1.1.5.6. 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

¹¹⁵ The exact year is sometime between 1071 and 1077 (465-469 AH).

¹¹⁶ Nicholson’s introduction for *Kaṣf al-maḥjūb*, ix-xii; Hosain 1971, 546.

¹¹⁷ 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).

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.

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, *Iḥyā' '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 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.

1.1.5.7. Ibn 'Arabi

Muḥyī'l-dīn Ibn (al) 'Arabī (1165-1240) was an Andalusian Arab by birth, but he influenced the whole Arab world, not least because of his extensive travels.¹²¹ 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.¹²² A good proportion of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, moreover, may be reckoned as the most difficult Islamic literature to explicate and interpret.

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.

¹²¹ 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.

¹²² 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.

Scholars have read them thoroughly without achieving certainty as to their meaning.¹²³ The manuscript tradition is unique as well: many of the works have survived as originals or as copies affirmed by the author himself.

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-naḥs* (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.¹²⁴ *Tarjumān al-aṣwāq*, 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 *Fihī ma fihī*.

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.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶

The latest work used as a source is 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāšānī's (d. 1330) *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt al-šūfiyya* (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

¹²³ Chodkiewicz 1993, 1.

¹²⁴ Because of its discerning quality *Rūḥ al-quds* proved to be a more suitable source than, for example, Attar's classic *Tadkirat al-awliyya*. The English translation of *Rūḥ al-quds* also includes selections from *Al-durrat al-fākhira*.

¹²⁵ Radtke & O'Kane 1996, 21-22, 180-185.

¹²⁶ al-Sabbagh: *Durrat al-asrār*. Unfortunately I had no access to the Arabic original.

author does not bother to explain many of the simple terms at all – even though the work is 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.¹²⁷

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,¹²⁸ 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.

¹²⁷ Ernst 1992, 183-187. Qašani’s omissions include many of the most general ecstatic terms, such as *ghayba*, *wajd*, *sukr* and, *šuhūd*.

¹²⁸ In addition to the Arabic classics of Sufism, I have included Hujwiri’s *Kašfal-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.

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 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.

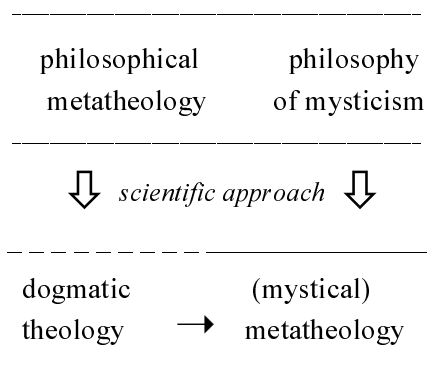
1.2.1. The Objective: Ecstatic Mystical Experience

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:



The mystical experience has indeed been a topic of numerous overviews based on psychological¹²⁹ or philosophical standpoints or on comparative religious studies.¹³⁰ The discourse and dispositions of these works are regularly based on

¹²⁹ 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.

¹³⁰ 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*,

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.

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.¹³¹

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.¹³² 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.¹³³ The best basic introduction to

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).

¹³¹ 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.

¹³² 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).

¹³³ The problematic, not necessarily disprovable, statements include (1) presentation of *ḥezwā* and *ḥezātā* 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).

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.¹³⁴ Carl W. Ernst's *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (1985) is an outstanding study on ecstatic utterances, which I have 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),¹³⁵ 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".¹³⁶ 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!¹³⁷ It is of course easy to proceed by picking up suitable quotations from all traditions in

¹³⁴ The most remarkable omissions are *sukr*, *dhawq* and *šurb*, all essential signs for the ecstatic–mystical experiences.

¹³⁵ 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."

¹³⁶ Smith 1931, 2.

¹³⁷ 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."

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 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. 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 definitions¹³⁸; 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:¹³⁹

James

1. Ineffability
2. Noetic quality
3. Transiency
4. Passivity

¹³⁸ 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".

¹³⁹ 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.

Stace

1. Sense of Reality
2. Sense of peace, blessedness etc.
3. Sense of holiness, or Divinity.
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; 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:

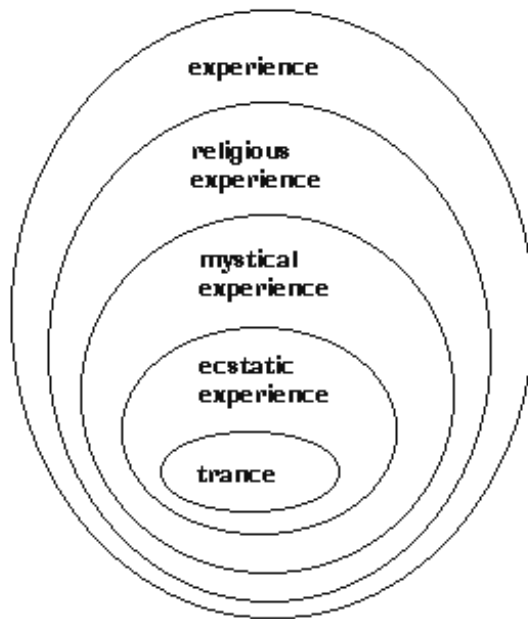
1. The apprehension of ultimate reality
2. Attainment of perfection through mental, emotional, and volitional purification
3. An attitude of serenity and total (transcendent) awareness
4. A sense of freedom from time-space conditions
5. Expansion of consciousness and spontaneity through self-discipline.¹⁴⁰

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

¹⁴⁰ Streng 1978, 142.

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.

*Levels of experience.*¹⁴¹



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 coordinates 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.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ 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. The traditional monotheistic view might prefer to insert the most extraordinary experiences in the outer circles since they are seen to be caused by (the presence of) a power from outside one’s own ego.

¹⁴² 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

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,¹⁴³ 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.

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).

¹⁴³ 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-ta'arruf*, 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.¹⁴⁴ 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)¹⁴⁵

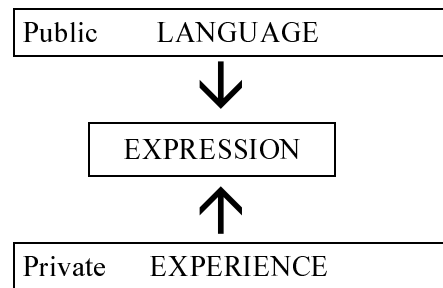
Therefore, if the mystical experience exists, it has properties that are basically describable. In terms of logic, partial describability rules out ineffability,¹⁴⁶ which in fact means that in the case of things that exist, there is no ineffability – only limitations in description. The question is, 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.

¹⁴⁴ E.g. Homerin 1994, 190.

¹⁴⁵ Rumi: *Fihi ma fihi (discourse 16)*, 135.

¹⁴⁶ For further discussion, see Yandell 1994, especially pp. 61-62, 66-68.

Formation of expression

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.¹⁴⁷ 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*.¹⁴⁸ Yet these are often perhaps no more than a framework for the *discussion*, a process of dynamic 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

¹⁴⁷ Crystal 1992, 47.

¹⁴⁸ 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. Carnap'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).

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.¹⁴⁹

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 instruction¹⁵⁰ insofar as they are able to resolve it into linguistic discourse.

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

¹⁴⁹ 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.

¹⁵⁰ Katz 1992, 20-24.

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.¹⁵¹

The theme can be illustrated by the following schema,¹⁵² 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.¹⁵³

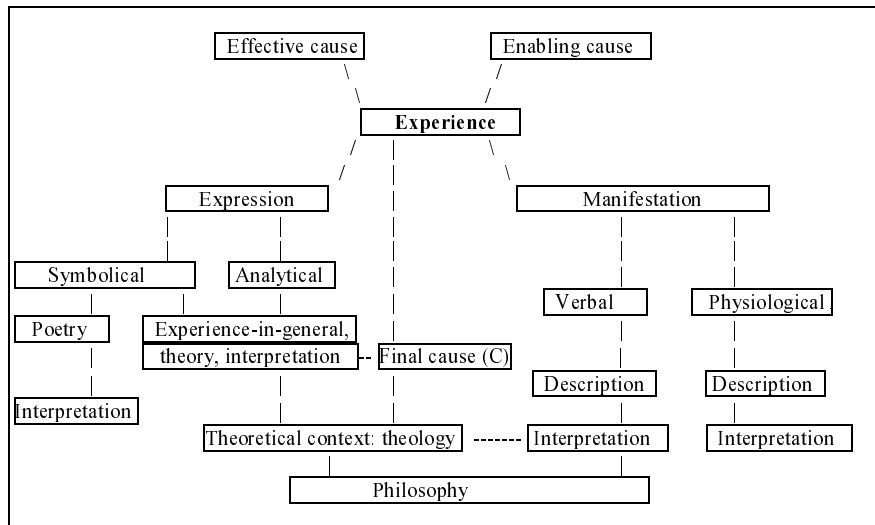
In the actual original sources, however, the discourse usually surges associatively or perhaps following a procedure systematised on totally different principles. This means that in outlining the dimensions of ecstatic discourse we have to demarcate and point out aspects and make differentiations that 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:¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Smart 1992, 105.

¹⁵² 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).

¹⁵³ James 1902, Lecture 16 (page numbers vary in different editions).

¹⁵⁴ 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.



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, meditation 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.¹⁵⁵ 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 dramas¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Definitions adopted from Moore 1978, 113.

¹⁵⁶ Scharfstein 1973, 99-100.

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.¹⁵⁷ 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.

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.¹⁵⁸ 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

¹⁵⁷ 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.

¹⁵⁸ Alston (1992, 88-89) has an equivalent division under the terms *Literal* and *Non-literal*.

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 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.¹⁵⁹

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.¹⁶⁰

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’

¹⁵⁹ 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.

¹⁶⁰ See Alston 1992, 83.

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 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;¹⁶¹ 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

¹⁶¹ 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.

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.¹⁶²

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.

¹⁶² 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 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.

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. 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*.¹⁶³

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

¹⁶³ Alston 1992, 87.

emotional features appear predominantly similar.¹⁶⁴ For this reason, understanding 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*.¹⁶⁵ 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.¹⁶⁶

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 *Tocatta 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

¹⁶⁴ 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.

¹⁶⁵ Beardsley 1958, 526-528.

¹⁶⁶ Kinnunen 1969, 16-17 (translation mine).

clear causality between the object (painting, composition) and the subject, even though 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!¹⁶⁷ 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.¹⁶⁸

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.¹⁶⁹ 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 without 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.

¹⁶⁷ 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.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. pp. 49-50, 62.

¹⁶⁹ 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 *κάλος* mean – or are used of – both ‘goodness’ and ‘beauty’.

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.

2. ECSTATIC READINGS IN SYRIAC METATHEOLOGY ¹

2.1. The Enabling Cause

2.1.1. Ascetic Practices

Syrian asceticism, as we saw in the introduction, is rich in severe methods of mortification. It is probably not an exaggeration to consider the Syrian tradition as the most rigorous of all Christian disciplines,² yet the most extreme manners and the cruellest exercises are not a general standard but rather belong to the domain of exceptional cases. This is pointed out in the writings of the official hierarchy, from the oldest to the latest sources: the canons of Bishop Rabbula (d. 435), a rigorous ascetic himself, do not allow all monks to carry iron chains, and Barhebraeus (d. 1286) opposed the practice of binding oneself for the night in a standing posture.³ These and other severe forms of mortification continued to be practised until the early 20th century.⁴

However, if we wish to classify various ascetic practices as specific “ecstatic techniques”, it is to be admitted that the results are somewhat arbitrary, due to the *total* character of ascetic life. The concept of totality here indicates that the chosen mode of life is constant and unbroken: the stylites, for instance, never stepped back on the ground after having once ascended their columns. Totality also means that ascetic life, seclusion into silence, is both an outer and inner pursuit in which prayer and recitation, as well as reading and meditation, intermingle in order to constitute the actual reality of the ascetic’s life. Abstinence in the inner dimension means warfare against selfish thoughts and evil intentions.

The outer aspect of Syrian asceticism simply means abstinence in eating, sleeping, social relations and all sensual pleasure. These can be covered by the general term *nezīrūtā*, ‘abstinence’, literally ‘Naziritehood’. The external exercises include silence (*šetqā*), fasting (*ṣawmā*), vigil (*šahrā*) and practices connected with prayer, the most important being prostrations (*būrākē*), the daily number of which might surpass 300.⁵ These exercises can be referred to as

¹ Translations of the quotations from Isaac of Nineveh’s *Perfectione Religiosa* (ed. Bedjan) are my own (though often following Wensinck), but those from Isaac’s *Second Part* follow Brock’s translation unless otherwise indicated. The translations of the texts published by Mingana follow his translations with some alterations, the most noteworthy of which I point out in the footnotes. All English translations of John of Dalyatha are my own.

² For details, see: AbouZayd 1993, 235-260; Vööbus 1960: *History of Asceticism II*, 19-33.

³ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 50-51 (tr. 43); Vööbus: *Syriac Documents*, 28.

⁴ Chaillot 1998, 129.

⁵ See, for example, Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 10a, p. 207 (tr. 85); Brock: *John the Solitary, On Prayer*, 98; Vööbus: *Syriac and Arabic Documents*, 105-108; Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 39 (tr. 43).

‘works’ (*amlē*), ‘labour’ (*pulhānā*) or *dubbārē*, a term signifying, in the singular, ‘course’, ‘order’, ‘rule’, ‘custom’ or ‘manner of life’. In a general sense these practices function as a cause that enables the mystical experiences to occur, even though the actual causality is hardly ever expressed explicitly. Isaac of Nineveh does state that compulsory works (*amlē de-’eṣyānā*) cause a burning fervour (*rethā*) to be born in the heart.⁶

It is noteworthy that in spite of the great admiration of fasting shown by the authors, it is practically never connected with the achievement of certain experiences, either as a prerequisite or as a cause, in the sources of the present study.⁷ Isaac of Nineveh does mention in passing that “various beautiful things originate from it”.⁸ The basic function of fasting, however, is on the prerequisite level. As soon as a man begins to fast, “his mind will yearn for intercourse with God”.⁹ According to Isaac of Nineveh, fasting is inevitably the actual starting-point for all struggles against sin and sinful passions.¹⁰ Accordingly, fasting receives special attention only in the beginning of the way, as it slowly becomes a natural and obvious mode of life. The connection between experiences and fasting is perhaps mainly in the category of motivation: the one who is motivated to fast is eager for the higher experiences as well.

Seclusion in complete solitude can be perpetual or temporary. In the East Syrian tradition a period of seven weeks was favoured.¹¹ The character of the exercise is shown by the recommendation by Dadišo’ of Qatar that a beginner (*aḥḥā šārōyā*) undertaking the period of solitude of seven weeks “should never go out of the door of his cell, even one step, from the beginning of his solitude till its end, and should never converse with anybody.”¹²

Since fasting and seclusion are not exactly methods but rather characteristics of ascetic life, they function as the basis from which the mystical

⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 127. (Wensinck translates “From works performed by compulsion, in solitude there is born a blazing and immeasurable heat.” *Mystic Treatises*, 87.)

⁷ Accidentally, there may be indirect correlations between fasting and mystical experience, as in the anecdote in which John the Seer, presumably speaking of himself, notes that a brother had gone two days without food or sleep when he was suddenly filled with unspeakable light. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbuga to a Friend*, 21 (15*).

⁸ ܐܡܠܝܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 239 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 161).

⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 239 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 161).

¹⁰ Isaac calls fasting “strengthening of all the virtues, the beginning of the struggle [...] the beginning of the way of Christianity, the father of prayer, the fountain of placidity, the teacher of quiet, and the forerunner of all good qualities”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 238; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 160-161.

¹¹ The East Syrian tradition in general used to favour monasticism of the *laura* type, in which the monks lived in separate cells like hermits. The practice of seven weeks is connected with the East Syrian liturgical calendar which consists of periods of seven weeks, of which the most important is the Great Lent (Mingana 1934, 76,78; Seppälä 1999, 362-363). For details of the calendar, see A.J. MacLean: *East Syrian Daily Offices* (Eastern Church Association, London 1894).

¹² Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 9b, p. 207 (tr. 85). He does not say here that this is how it always happens, but this is his ideal as to how it should be.

attitude grows. The textual material in fact gives the impression that solitude is a basis that unavoidably causes one to reach the sphere of mystical experience. Indeed, the silent eremite life (*šalyūtā*) is said naturally (*keyānā 'īt*) to raise impulses in the soul that cause it to remain in wondrous ecstasy (*temhā*).¹³ But if we wish to locate more specific methods, does the mystical literature relate certain ascetic practices to the specific mystical experiences? Compared with, for example, the ecstatic Kabbalah,¹⁴ the lack of specific methods is striking. Perhaps surprisingly, breathing techniques or recommendations to use a particular Christian mantra seem to be absent from the Syriac metatheology.

Of all the external “methods” of mortification described in Syriac literature, the one that is mentioned explicitly most frequently in relation with mystical experience, seems to be, perhaps unexpectedly, seclusion in silence and solitude (*šelyā*).¹⁵ Barhebraeus, for example, in his systematic presentation gives as the first and most important advantages of silence “spiritual joy” and “true knowledge concerning the divine nature”.¹⁶ It is to be stressed, however, that in Syriac metatheology the concept of silence (*šelyā*), like the Greek ἡσυχία, means much more than absence of sound: a way and attitude of life free of all restless and vain thoughts, i.e. calmness of soul.¹⁷ The semantic field of *šelyā* also includes a slight nuance of secrecy, which in turn is closely connected – and etymologically identical – with ‘mystical’. The breadth of the concept makes it difficult to consider silence a method or technique.

However, the connection between silence and the mystical–ecstatic phenomena is explicitly presented in the texts as a causal one. According to Isaac of Nineveh, for example, the pacification of heart from the recollection of external things enables one to receive the mystical (or ecstatic, depending on the choice of translation) understanding of the words of Scripture.¹⁸ Moreover, “to get drunk at all times by ecstatic impulses [...] is greatly promoted by solitude (*šelyā*).”¹⁹ According to John of Dalyatha, “the area of wondrous visions is an area of ecstasy, and it is surrounded by the fence of silence”.²⁰ John of Apamea proposes ‘ecstasy of silence’ (*tahrā de-šetqā*) as the highest and purest form of consciousness, and he even declares that “God is silence”.²¹

¹³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 127; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 87.

¹⁴ See Idel 1988, 13-54.

¹⁵ *Šelyā* has also been translated as ‘retreat’ (Widengren 1961, 174).

¹⁶ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ [...] ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon* 3:3, 101 (tr. 87).

¹⁷ E.g. John of Apamea in Brock: *John the Solitary*, 98, 90. For silence in its basic sense the word *šetqā* is usually used.

¹⁸ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ [...] Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37.

¹⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

²⁰ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܘܡ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܬܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (p. 306-307).

²¹ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܘܡ ܠܘܨܘܬܐ Brock 1979, 90-91, 98-99 (Brock translates *tahrā* – ‘wondrous awe’).

Isaac of Nineveh goes on to describe ecstasy as an *inevitable* consequence of full seclusion in solitude.²² He admonishes the hermits against scrutinising or sentimentalising about uncompromising solitude, for even the commandment “Love the Lord your God with your whole soul and with your whole heart” is fulfilled in solitude, for the latter part of the commandment implies that God must be loved more than the natural world, and this can be realised only through withdrawal from it.²³ One way of explaining the great admiration of silence as an ideal would be to pay attention to the cultural background whence it derives: the social values and customs of Oriental culture have much room for (idle) talk, so that withdrawal from the world may be stimulated to some extent by a certain psychological counter-reaction.

Account idleness (*beṭlāmā*) the beginning of psychic darkness; verbal contacts (*'enyānā de-mamlā*) as darkness beyond darkness; and the latter as the cause of the former.²⁴

Even after making all these unambiguous statements, the strictest preacher of solitude seems to be Dadišo' of Qatar, who even goes on to claim that real spiritual experiences “have never been given and will never be given outside the cell and solitude (*šelyā*)”.²⁵ Only those who withstand the solitude and “taste its bitterness” are able to “appreciate the savour of the sweetness of solitude”²⁶ and receive “the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of spiritual treasures”.²⁷

It seems, therefore, that the ideal experience of the Syriac metatheologians is something like the absolute opposite of mass hysteria. The authors are fully unanimous that the purest experience is the one experienced in the life of solitude and silence – and without methods, it might even be added.²⁸ This, in fact, is a considerable obstacle to a psychological understanding of the phenomenon, for there is little material of equivalent conditions for comparison.

²² “This first gift (i.e. ecstasy) is tasted through solitude (ܠܘܠܐ). And those who, in service and observance, have abided within absolute solitude, must necessarily know it (literally: it is not possible that they do not know).” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 490; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 329.

²³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 312-313; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 208.

²⁴ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 329. (Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 220, translates ܠܘܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ – ‘oral intercourse’).

²⁵ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 11b, p. 209 (tr. 87) “...but all those who love solitude and endure its trials will receive them without diminution.”

²⁶ ܠܘܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ [...] ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 12a, p. 209 (tr. 88).

²⁷ ܠܘܠܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ
Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 11a, p. 208 (tr. 87). Mingana translates *maggēnānūtā* ‘visitation’; see p. 129-130.

²⁸ See Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 46b-48a (tr. 128-130).

Nevertheless, solitude creates a general background for all other “methods” that enable the experience to emerge.

Another factor which has a strong effect on human consciousness is the vigil, the practice of staying awake through the night in prayer and meditation. The ascetic texts unanimously represent a general feeling of repulsion towards sleep, as a result of which any sleeping happened in a sitting position, on the bare ground or otherwise, as uncomfortably as possible. The best Syriac expert in this field is perhaps Isaac of Nineveh.²⁹

According to *A Letter sent to a Friend* (attributed to Philoxenus of Mabbug, but most likely by Joseph the Seer), the ideal nightly vigil consists of one third reading, one third recitation of psalms while kneeling, and one third meditation on theological topics and singing of hymns. The author of the letter promises that the monk (*ihidāyā*) who keeps this nocturnal vigil, has no struggle in the daytime since his thoughts are upon the good of the world to come, and declares that he who has prepared himself for this occupation has become worthy of “those unspeakable blessings” which are given in the vigil of the night.³⁰

Vigil does not mean observance of a general, standardised rule. It seems that each monk might make his own rule for prayers and recitations (presumably under the direction of his spiritual father, even though this is not explicitly stated). Some spent the whole night reciting the Psalter, others used liturgical texts or Sacred Writ, singing hymns of praise, perhaps with mournful melodies, while others prayed the whole night with kneeling and prostrations. Most were accustomed to set themselves additional physical limitations by spending the night, for example, in a standing position without kneeling or genuflections – others maximised the number of their movements by kneeling and prostrating themselves. An ideal resting posture was to sit with one’s back against the wall and face eastwards – and even while asleep the mind was not supposed to be ‘idle’ in relation to the spiritual pursuit.³¹

On account of these kinds of labour performed in wisdom, the holy ones are deemed worthy of the ecstasy (*temhā*) of divine revelation (*gelyānā allāhāyā*), which is high above fleshly thought (Isaac of Nineveh).³²

It is important to note that sleep, when it occurs, is by no means considered as leisure in relation to the ascetic struggle: dreams can in fact be used to measure the actual spiritual stage of the ascetic.³³ In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* it is stated

²⁹ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 137-138; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 94.

³⁰ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 26 (19*).

³¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548-549; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, XXI, 368-369. See also Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 51 (tr. 43); Vööbus: *Syriac Documents*, 106; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548-549, 551; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 368, 370.

³² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 549; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

³³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 191b, p. 311 (tr. 54) On dreams, see Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 52-53 (tr. 44-45). The idea in question is a basic feature of Eastern Christian monastic thinking, in both the

that “even when the hermit is lying in sleep [...] his mind does not cease reciting the psalms.”³⁴ Simeon the Graceful mentions a kind of half-sleep meditation, where the one who falls asleep is recommended to

throw sweet spices of prayers, psalms and spiritual theory on the censer of your heart, and meditate (*harog*) upon them while you are half asleep. When you wake you will feel the happiness (*hanni'ūtā*) that has wafted through your soul all the night.³⁵

According to Simeon, this is also a way of being liberated from bad dreams.

Isaac of Nineveh, obviously speaking about himself in the third person, mentions a case in which meditation (*theoria*) on the things read in the evening continued during sleep and led to ecstasy (*tahrā*) that overwhelmed the sleeper so that suddenly he woke up “while his tears dropped as water and fell upon his breast.”³⁶ Ecstatic experience may also take place during the night while one is between sleep and waking, “asleep though not asleep, and awake though not awake.”³⁷

It seems that the ascetics’ nightly exercises were not completely subject to certain rules at the expense of intuition and inspiration. Isaac of Nineveh criticises those who concentrate in their prayers on the mere forms of words and on counting the number of prayers in order to observe a mere fixed programme. He considers the following of details to be a slavish rule that is utterly alien to the path of true knowledge, because it does not make allowance for divine activity. This is contrasted with the “rule of liberty”, which consists in “unfailing observance of the seven offices”, but every office can include variation in the number of Psalms and in prayers.³⁸

One does not set a time limit for each of these prayers, nor does one decide upon specific words to use. Rather, one spends on each prayer as long as Grace provides

Oriental and Greek Orthodox traditions, up to the present time. For instance, the very same thought can also be found in the writings of Pope Shenouda III, the 20th-century leader of the Coptic Church. (Shenouda 1990, 13).

³⁴ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 39 (29*).

³⁵ ⲛⲟⲩⲏ ⲛⲓⲙⲉⲟⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲛⲉⲧⲉⲛⲏⲓ ⲛⲉⲛⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲛⲉⲛⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲛⲉⲧⲉⲛⲏⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲛⲉⲧⲉⲛⲏⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲓ ⲛⲉⲧⲉⲛⲏⲓ
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Mingana 1934/Simon, 173a, p. 292-293 (tr. 26).

³⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 492; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 330.

³⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

³⁸ Brock: *Second Part*, 14:34-35 (ed. 67-68, tr. 77-78) Yet this freedom is far from the kind of individual spirituality where one freely follows intuitive emotional impulses alone. Isaac does not mean that there was something wrong with the traditional forms of spirituality in the Church. According to him, those who “abandoned prayer’s venerable outward forms, turning instead to their own rules and special customs” have gone astray because they have neglected Holy Communion, and the teachings of the Fathers (Brock: *Second Part*, 14:42).

the strength, asking whatever the pressing need of the moment may require, using whatever prayer one is stirred to use.³⁹

According to Isaac, the illumined (*nehīrē*) and those endowed in insight (*yād'ay sukkālē*) are not concerned with the sequence and order of words.⁴⁰

From the modern point of view, however, excessive wakefulness is an obvious explanation at least for the hallucinatory experiences, traditionally often attributed to demonic influence. The reports of ascetics' hallucinations include human voices or sounds of knocking heard in the empty cell, a sense of the walls and ground quaking, or even apparitions of dragons.⁴¹

On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that the ascetic Fathers were surely not naïve in the understanding of the emotional forces behind the mental movements. On the contrary, it seems that sometimes they were even over-critical of their own motives, seeing vice where we would see weakness and weakness where we would see prudence. Due to their constant self-examination, they were well aware of the psychological processes functioning in the conscious and subconscious mind. To name the favourite example for modern readers, the desert Fathers did understand the surrogate effect of sexual energy, the burning of which functions in the psyche mixed with spiritual fervour, taking on the disguise of righteousness.

The lust of fornication hides in disguise, it does not appear distinctly, as passion is mingled with passion, and fervour with fervour, and love with love, and the pious brother cannot tell the love of (spiritual) labour from this other love.⁴²

2.1.2. Recitation

Prayer (*ṣelōta*) is of course a necessary prerequisite for spiritual experience, but I have preferred to include it under the category of recitation, since the recitation of the Bible, especially the "Psalm service" (*tešmeštā de-mazmōrē*), is the basic element of prayer in the entire Eastern Christian tradition, and one of the most essential monastic activities. It was a common practice to read the Psalter through

³⁹ Brock: *Second Part*, 14:35 (ed. 67-68, tr. 78).

⁴⁰ Brock: *Second Part*, 14:38 (ed. 68-69, tr. 79).

⁴¹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 47, 49 (35*, 36*).

⁴² Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 13 (9*). A Greek parallel can be found in John of Climacus (*Ladder*, 15:45, pp. 177-178): "During the singing of the psalms we should examine, consider and observe what kind of *sweetness comes to us from the devil of fornication* and what kind comes to us from the words of the Spirit and from the grace and the power which is in them. Know yourself well, young man. For in fact I have seen men *pray earnestly* for their loved ones, men who thought they were fulfilling the requirements of love, when in reality it was the *spirit of fornication* that was *stirring them*."

daily,⁴³ so it is no wonder that it was customary among the Syrian monks and clergy to know the Psalms by heart.

The whole concept of praying in Syriac often in fact refers to the recitation of the Psalms, and the meditative (non-verbal) forms of prayer are preferably to be called by other names than prayer.⁴⁴ Therefore, it would be difficult and somewhat arbitrary to draw exact distinctions between recitation and prayer. Prayer is described explicitly as one of the causes behind the experience.

At the time of prayer (*selōta*) it [=experience] is granted to those who are worthy. And the cause proceeds from prayer, for this glorious (gift) cannot be granted except at that moment.⁴⁵

Sahdona, a diligent utiliser of biblical discourse, states explicitly that the “work of reading the Scriptures”⁴⁶ fills one with joy and causes one “to be illuminated in prayer”.⁴⁷

Anyone whose soul, after having laboured in reading and been purified by spiritual meditation (*hergā rūḥānāyā*), is fervent (*rāthā*) with love for God (*be-ḥubbā d-allāhā*), will pray in a luminous manner when he turns to prayer and the Office.⁴⁸

In the dynamics of recitation we may differentiate between two components, one positive and the other negative. On the one hand, during the reading one may depict before one’s eyes “the lovely beauty of the saints’ way of life” so that one becomes “fervent in spirit”.⁴⁹ On the other hand, continual meditation upon the Scriptures makes one also “feel ashamed of oneself”. How do these relate to each other? Sahdona’s answer is, not surprisingly, that the aspect of repentance, strengthened by the comparison with the ideal self as reflected in the Scriptures, leads little by little to purification and illumination. The latter is described by Sahdona as the ability of the “eye of the soul”⁵⁰ to gaze upon God at all times, which in turn enables one to approach the essential light of the divinity.⁵¹

⁴³ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 55 (tr. 47). As a curiosity I may remark here my own observation that the recitation of the whole Psalter takes about four hours.

⁴⁴ Namely, *hergā*, *renyā* (both usually translated as ‘meditation’), *thē’ōryā* (‘contemplation’).

⁴⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171. Wensinck (*Mystic Treatises*, 116) translates ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܕܢܘܨܝܢ as “in prayer it has its starting point”. With the last words of the quotation Isaac in fact contradicts himself (see p. 125-126), but here he argues that prayer is the time when a man is prepared and concentrated to look unto God.

⁴⁶ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ

⁴⁷ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ

⁴⁸ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. (Translation from Brock 1987, 223.)

⁴⁹ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles*, 8:51. ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ ܠܗܠܝܠܝܢ

⁵⁰ The Eye of the *mind* (ܠܗܝܠܝܢ) and that of the *soul* (ܠܗܝܠܝܢ) are used interchangeably.

⁵¹ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles* 8:52, 8:55.

The vocal recitation could be accompanied by beautiful melodies, especially in the case of chanting the Psalms.⁵² Since a melodic way of recitation is a source of pleasure, the danger of pride is present. One is advised to beware of the “demon of vainglory” while chanting, for the beauty may distract one’s concentration away from praise.⁵³ Evagrius’s advice is to read more slowly during moments of dejection, and faster when pride is threatening.⁵⁴ Recitation is to be performed irrespective of one’s mood. According to Barhebraeus, this is to be done “with understanding” but also without attention because “it leads to recitation with understanding”.⁵⁵

Barhebraeus analysed the general structure of musical experience so that musical enjoyment (*hannī’utā*) consists of pain (*ḥaššā*) caused by the disappearance of beautiful sound and comforting pleasure brought by the following sound.⁵⁶ Concrete ecstatic musical methods, however, are out of the question in the Christian context, due to the lack of instruments in the early Church and the suspicion of worldly music.⁵⁷

Isaac of Nineveh states explicitly that recitation in solitude is a factor that enables man to be drawn into ecstasy (*tahrā*).⁵⁸ Dadišo’ of Qatar tells of old men of prayer who in their vigils could recite hardly ten Psalms “on account of the wonders that happen⁵⁹ to them through divine grace: weeping, tears, sighs, spiritual thoughts⁶⁰, divine consolations and revelations of the Spirit.”⁶¹ According to him, spiritual joy has been blended with the Psalms by the Spirit, and consequently one is encouraged to concentrate on their recitation: “If you become worthy of this, the life of solitude will not be tiresome for you.”⁶²

The mere possibility of varying experiences and ecstatic occurrences indicates a readiness to adapt one’s practice of recitation according to circumstances. Isaac of Nineveh advises one to change the order of reading or to continue repeating the most significant verses for some time in order to preserve the meditative character of the recitation rather than mere mechanical repetition: “I do not wish to count milestones, but I seek to enter the Apartment.”⁶³

⁵² E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 54-56 (tr. 46-47).

⁵³ See below, p. 128.

⁵⁴ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 54 (tr. 46). (Quoting Evagrius, *Tractatus ad Eulogium*, PG 79, 1105 A.)

⁵⁵ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 61 (tr. 52).

⁵⁶ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 75-76 (tr. 64-65).

⁵⁷ For a clear synopsis and bibliography on music in the early Church, see Ferguson 1998, 787-790.

⁵⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 43; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 31.

⁵⁹ Literally ‘visit’ (ܘܨܝܘܬܐ).

⁶⁰ Mingana translates as ‘spiritual visions’ (ܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ). *Sukkālā* is a general term for any mental movement, usually an ‘act of understanding’. In our mystical contexts it is usually something given; perhaps a ‘ray of understanding’ might be an appropriate translation.

⁶¹ Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 52b-53a, p. 245 (tr. 139).

⁶² Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 21b, p. 219 (tr. 101).

⁶³ Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 548; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 367-368.

2.1.3. Meditation

Under the category of meditation I include the speechless ways of prayer, not called by the name of prayer in the Syriac tradition, and various intentional, reflective and introspective meditations that are an important factor behind the experience. Instead of separate practices or exact techniques of meditation, however, the stress in the discourse is on a permanent meditative attitude of life, ‘continuous remembrance’, one of the basic ideas of Isaac of Nineveh. This is approximately what we called ‘mystical attitude’ in chapter 1.2.2. The following extract from Sahdona illustrates an ideal case of the one living in a contemplative attitude:

The stirrings of his soul are meditating (*rānēn*) on God continuously, and his heart is carried away (*ḥetīf*) towards Him. His body is sojourning on earth, but his mind (*madde’ā*) is living in heaven with Christ. His body has died away from this world and his soul burns with love of the heavenly ones. He stands amidst corporeal beings, but his mind (*re’yānā*) is moving swiftly among spiritual ones and is sanctifying (i.e. chanting ‘Holy holy holy’).⁶⁴

The practice of meditation is usually not described in great detail, but the number of topics for meditation seems to be abundant. The recommended ones include the words of Scripture, the Cross and other key events of salvation history, the tribunal throne of Christ, sin, death⁶⁵, God’s creative and dispensive powers, the sufferings of the martyrs, the writings of the Fathers⁶⁶ and the lives of the saints – or simply, God. Also, the use of *imagination* to approach the divine realities, often suspect in the Greek Orthodox tradition, is encouraged by Isaac of Nineveh, who refers to spiritual meditation by the term *šeragrāgyātā*, the basic sense of which is fantasies and mirages. Isaac urges one constantly to practise *šeragrāgyātā* of the divine things for their fiery and purifying effects.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151.

⁶⁵ According to Isaac of Nineveh, “the fulfilment of life is meditation (ܠܠܗܘܘܬܐ, lit. ‘study’) upon death for the sake of God. This brings our mind near to union with God (ܠܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܠܗܘܘܬܐ).” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 462; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 310.

⁶⁶ Mingana 1934/Simon, 169a-169b, pp. 288-289 (tr. 20).

⁶⁷ ܫܪܘܘܬܐ ܠܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܠܠܗܘܘܬܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 122. (Wensinck translates “thinking of divine things”: *Mystic Treatises*, 82.) According to some Greek Orthodox claims, ‘contemplation’ in the Western sense is a “quasi-spiritual exercise” based on the “creation of images in the imagination”, while the Eastern *theoria* is seen as a purely imageless operation of the Holy Spirit. These polemics can be seen in the Introduction of the *Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian* (p. cxi) where the expression in question is translated “forming of vivid conceptions of divine subjects”. Accordingly, the use of *šeragrāgyātā* often seems to be negative in Syriac authors under Greek influence; e.g. Philoxène de Mabboug, *La lettre à Patricius*, 90, 92, 105 (834-837, 848-849). However, my impression is that the benefits of the use of imagination seem to remain somewhat obscure in the Greek tradition. (Logically speaking, the problem would have been avoided if Westerners had used the term ‘meditation’ instead of ‘contemplation’.)

Isaac of Nineveh portrays a living picture of the meditative consideration of death, presented as resulting in a silent state of ecstatic stupor. The meditation is twofold: in the macrocosmic dimension the focus is on the beauty and order of the creation, its sudden determination and the appearance of the new order; as for the personal level, one considers “how long the bodies remain mixed with dust, and how will that mode of life be, and in what kind of likeness that nature will rise”.⁶⁸

The most noteworthy aspect of meditation in the East Syriac tradition, however, is the mysticism of the Cross (*ṣelībā*). One is recommended, especially when beginning to pray, to concentrate one’s thoughts and meditate on the Cross. There is a rich field of ideas associated with the Cross, which as the sign of the death and resurrection of the Son of God symbolises the culmination of salvation history, and it is therefore an apt symbol for the whole of Christianity. In the Syrian tradition the understanding of the Cross, however, is developed even further, the Cross being considered not only as the means of redemption of mankind but also as the prototype of man, and even the foundation of the universe.⁶⁹ The eternal creative power is said to reside mystically in the Cross, the ark of the new covenant.⁷⁰

The aim of the meditation of the Cross is to strengthen participation in both the Passion of Christ and the victory over death and sin accomplished by it.⁷¹ To put it briefly, since in the divine economy all things have been accomplished through the Cross, it is through the Cross that all things may be acquired. When Dadišo’ of Qatar issues instruction to recite prayers in front of the cross, he also outlines an explicit connection between the Cross and the mystical experience:

Kiss our Lord on His Cross, twice on the nails of His right foot and twice on the nails of His left foot, and say at each kiss: “Let me be healed with your wounds,” until your heart is stirred (or ‘awake’) and burns in His love.⁷²

A Letter Sent to a Friend includes a detailed description of an attack by the demon of distress and its expulsion by means of genuflection before the cross, followed by a mystical experience.

⁶⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 257; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 172-173.

⁶⁹ Yousif 1990, 38. See also P. Yousif, Le symbolisme de la croix dans la nature chez saint Ephrem de Nisibe, *Symposium Syriacum* 1976, OCA 205, Rome 1978, pp. 207-227.

⁷⁰ Isaac of Nineveh, *Second Part*, Chapter 11 (ed. 43-52, tr. 53-62). According to Isaac, the same *shekhina* that was in the Ark of the Covenant resides mysteriously in the Cross.

⁷¹ For Dadišo’ on the cross, see Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, pp. 136-138; for Stephen bar Sudhaile, see Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 35, 45-59; for Isaac of Nineveh, see Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 16; Wensinck: *Mystical Treatises*, 11; *Second Part*, Chapter 11 (ed. 43-52, tr. 53-62).

⁷² Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 52b-53a, p. 244 (tr. 138).

I only saluted the cross and made a genuflexion before the cross. After a short time he was urged by the power of the cross and let loose my tongue, and I began to praise God. [...] I was filled with unutterable joy and gladness.⁷³

Much more detailed descriptions of the methods, however, are not available.

The difference between the concepts of meditation and contemplation is clear in theory but obscure in practice. We may consider “meditation” as psychological activity directed towards spiritual realities with the help of the imagination and other psychic faculties, and “contemplation” as a higher state that is more passive and less intentional by nature, perhaps also more or less exceptional. The Syriac terms – mainly *renyā*, *hergā*, *tē’ōryā* – referring to meditation or contemplation are used quite hyponymously, however, and the authors have no desire to differentiate between them by assigning technical definitions to them.⁷⁴ Moreover, in the metatheologians’ perspective, contemplation is not an actual method to *produce* experiences but on the contrary, a state *resulting* from the experience itself: according to Dadišo’ of Qatar, the Lord Himself fills the soul with numerous spiritual visions, so that one’s mind rejoices in a meditative-contemplative operation consisting of

1. Meditation (*renyā*) on the greatness of the divine nature
2. Contemplation (*hergā*) of the glorious Trinity
3. Continuous support (*’udrānā*) of the Love of Christ and of the light of his divine glory
4. Meditation (*renyā*) on the hierarchies of angels
5. Cogitation (*’uhdānā*) on Paradise and on the ‘spirits of the perfected’,⁷⁵
6. Cogitation on the apparition of the Lord from heaven and on the ascension of the holy ones to heaven⁷⁶

Another main object of meditation is Holy Writ. In St. Ephrem’s *Paradise Hymns* there is a vivid, detailed and psychologically accurate description of the meditative process between the reading of the Scriptures and the spiritual rapture resulting from it.

⁷³ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24*).

⁷⁴ Of these concepts, *renyā* is the most ordinary one (‘anxiety’, ‘thought’, ‘reflection’, ‘meditation’), *hergā* refers to active meditation (or ‘study’), and *tē’ōryā* is clearly the most abstract, due to its wide use, and therefore potentially the most mystical. The dictionary of Payne-Smith gives for *theoria* (ܬܘܪܝܐ, the Syriac form of the Greek θεωρία) the following basic meanings: (a) philosophical speculation, (b) spiritual contemplation, ecstasy, (c) concept, idea, view, (d) theory, inner meaning hypothesis, argument. Simeon the Graceful defines *theoria* as an “intelligible vision of the eyes of the soul” (Mingana 1934, 188b-189a), but he does not try to differentiate it from *hergā* or *renyā*. The main point in contemplation, according to Simeon, is not *what* is seen, but *how* it is seen.

⁷⁵ Mingana: ‘souls of the just departed’ (ܐܘܪܫܐܝܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ [...] ܕܥܘܠܡܐ)

⁷⁶ Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a-23b, p. 220-221 (tr. 104; for more detailed instructions on prayer and meditations, see pp. 136-141).

Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise,
 and the mind, which is spiritual,
 stood in amazement and wonder as it entered,⁷⁷
 the intellect grew dizzy and weak
 as the senses were no longer able to contain its treasures,
 so magnificent they were,
 or to discern its savors
 and find comparison for its colors,
 or take in its beauties so as to describe them in words.⁷⁸

It is important to realise that just as there is an organic connection between prayer and reading, so there is one between reading and meditation. A monk is supposed to read meditatively, not necessarily in large quantities. Attention should be concentrated not on the form of the words but on their content. According to the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, a word perceptible to the senses is empty without one conceivable by the mind. A brother is advised not to let his external tongue advance ahead of the mental tongue of the intellect, the application being that one may even be occupied with “one word of a psalm for seven nights and days”.⁷⁹ Simeon the Graceful gives a pithy definition of the contemplative approach to reading: “if the eyes of our mind are opened, every word contains a volume”.⁸⁰ But on the other hand, the outer verbal constructions are a necessary framework of spiritual insights: “a hymn perceptible to the senses is the prerequisite for the incorporeal chant”.⁸¹

Isaac of Nineveh also gave a vivid description of the meditation on saints, in which the mind of the meditating person follows the holy men through the deserts and forgets itself; it seems to him that he is personally in the company of the saints and sees them manifestly. By remembering their tales and meditating upon them sleep is driven away, the spirit is strengthened and fears disappear. The mind is concentrated and it smoothly slides into the sphere of ecstatic phenomena: tears begin to flow, the heart burns with heat and the mind is intoxicated.⁸²

One of the basic psychological characteristics of meditation is concentration (*kenīšūtā*), but even this is not seen as a psychological exercise or “method” but rather as a result of total withdrawal from the world. It is emphasised that the mind must be free of distraction caused by worldly things before entering the realm of mystical experience. This teaching is in fact

⁷⁷ ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ ܕܥܝܢ ܗܝ

⁷⁸ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:2 Translation according to Brock 1990, 109.

⁷⁹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 22 (16*).

⁸⁰ Mingana 1934/Simon, 169b, p. 289 (tr. 20).

⁸¹ ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ ܕܥܝܢ ܗܝ ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ ܕܥܝܢ ܗܝ ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ ܕܥܝܢ ܗܝ ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ ܕܥܝܢ ܗܝ The translation by Olinder misses the point here: “emotional song is the prerequisite for the studied hymn”. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 22 (16*).

⁸² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 555; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 372.

characteristic of all Eastern Christian traditions: mystical experiences are seen to belong almost exclusively to the world of the spiritual elite who have first abandoned the world and worldly thoughts.⁸³ The positive side of this “elitism” is that the intellect (*hawnā* or *madde 'ā*), after preliminary difficulties, “can easily be brought to concentration (*metkannes*) and be collected in the store-house of the heart after a long period of time, when it receives solid training.”⁸⁴ Moreover, concentration is said to be facilitated by the occurrence of (the first) mystical experiences, indicating that the causality between them is understood as taking place in the reverse direction to what we might expect.⁸⁵

Finally, we may quote the three prerequisite components that enable one to begin to gain experiences, as given by Isaac of Nineveh:

1. Good will directed towards God
2. Various exercises in solitude
3. Freedom from perversity (*lā-me 'aqemūtā*)
caused by total renunciation of the world.⁸⁶

The first one is the most important since all the others are inevitably based on it; since the will is seen (especially in the Antiochene tradition) as the most central function in the inner man, it could also be given as one definition of “mystical attitude”. According to John of Dalyatha, the basic cause of all mystical gifts, and of purification, is constant yearning for and beseeching of the love of God. He calls this a “mother that gives birth to the new secrets of the new world”.⁸⁷ The second one has been treated above, and the third corresponds to the idea of concentration.

⁸³ Concentration in the sense of abandonment of worldly thoughts is in fact a prerequisite of prayer in general, and applies to all Christians; see Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 10-14 (tr. 9-12).

⁸⁴ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 11 (tr. 10).

⁸⁵ “Especially, when it receives a small part of the sweetness of prayer, then, it climbs higher than anything on earth and heaven and [they know] that it hurries to wonder only at its Lord and to converse with him.” Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 11 (tr. 10).

⁸⁶ (1) ܠܐܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐܐܢܝܡܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐܢܝܡܢܐ , (2) ܠܐܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐܐܢܝܡܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐܢܝܡܢܐ , (3) ܠܐܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐܐܢܝܡܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐܢܝܡܢܐ ... ܠܐܡܝܢܐ ܕܐܠܘܗܐܐܢܝܡܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐܢܝܡܢܐ
Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 128; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 87. The basic meaning of *lā-me 'aqemūtā*, albeit translated as ‘uprightness’ by Wensinck, is ‘non-perversity’.

⁸⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:9 (pp. 318-319).

2.2. Expression

2.2.1. Analytical Expression

Blessed is the man who has been found worthy of this gift, the workings of which cannot be expressed with a corporeal tongue⁸⁸. Indeed, there will then be made manifest mysteries and revelations which only a mind can receive spiritually from a mind, because having no power over them a corporeal tongue is not able to express them (*nemallel ennōn*) ('Abdišo' the Seer).⁸⁹

When the inexpressible experiences are to be expressed verbally, there are in principle two different ways of approaching the problem, and these constitute the two methods of describing of the indescribable: the analytical and the symbolic. Due to the indefinite character of indistinct inner experiences in the hazy mental field, however, there are no exact descriptions in the absolute sense of the word. Only negations can be analytical in the strictest sense, since they alone contain clearly propositional statements of the experience. Therefore, the analytical approach infers an analytical intention.

We may define here the analytical description as focusing of the concept (X) by the signs (A, B...) whose concepts (Ax, Bx...) are better known. In practice this results in a variety of *different* expressions. The problem is not unfamiliar to the Syriac Fathers themselves.

The one who has never seen the sun with his eyes is not able to imagine (*la-mhaggāgū*) its light in his mind, or to receive any kind of image in his soul, or to perceive the beauty of its rays on the basis of hearing alone. In the same way the one who has not perceived the taste of spiritual service (*ṭa'mā pulhānā rūḥānā*), and whose course has never brought him the experience (*nesyānā*) of its mysteries, and who therefore cannot receive in his mind an image [=X] bearing likeness of the true one, is unable to find real conviction in his soul through mere human teachings and exercises in writings
(Isaac of Nineveh).⁹⁰

The problem of verbal description is illustrated in the fact that an ideal ecstatic experience is wordless and silent. This applies to both its "methods" (especially if we consider at least some phenomena under the name of 'pure prayer', *ṣelōtā dekītā*, as such) and generally to its manifestation, too. Isaac of Nineveh makes a

⁸⁸ ܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ

⁸⁹ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 145a, p. 263 (tr. 150).

⁹⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 54; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 38.

clear connection between ecstasy and silence, the order being that the soul is actually silenced by ecstasy; here ‘silence’ (*šetqā*) is clearly something much deeper and more total than mere absence of physical sound.⁹¹ According to Simeon the Graceful,

Prayer does not consist in learning (*yulpānā*), in knowledge or in words, but in an emptiness of the mind (*sefīqūtā de-madde 'ā*) and peaceful and rational intelligence (*hawnā behīlā we-hawnānāyā*), which is collected and quietened (*mešayyen*) by the stillness (*šetqā*) of the faculties (*zaw 'ē*) and of the senses, resulting in a complete destruction (*'aṭāyā*) of the thoughts and a complete rejection of all cares.⁹²

All peace and consolation which a tongue is able to describe to others is imperfect: a mind (*hawnā*) teaches another mind in silence (*be-šetqā*).⁹³

Since even the most analytical positive description of the indescribable always contains symbolic components, the two ways cannot be separated with absolute accuracy. This becomes evident when looking for the most reduced possible analytical description, the word ‘ecstasy’ itself. If a language lacks a word for ecstasy, one must be produced by adopting a symbolic sign in a somewhat technical use. (A good example of an “analytical sign” is provided by the word *hurma* and its derivatives in Finnish, since it does not seem to be derived from any natural phenomenon, and therefore is not a symbolic but a “pure” way of signifying an unusual state of consciousness.⁹⁴)

If we consult the Latin-Syriac dictionary, it offers two terms for EXSTASIS: *heṭīfūt*, derived from *HṬP*, ‘to take by force’, and *hezūqyā madde 'ā*, ‘departure of mind’, an attempt to reach approximate to the idea of ἔκ – στασις.⁹⁵ In the sources of this study, however, *heṭīfūt* is quite rare and *hezūqyā* is practically impossible to find in the context of mystical experience.

Instead, there are two Syriac words which are very widely used as an equivalent of ‘ecstasy’: *tahrā* and *temhā*.⁹⁶ They are translated ‘ecstasy’ by

⁹¹ “The soul [...] has no more no idea (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) of itself, but is muzzled (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) by/in ecstasy (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) and silence (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ), nor it is allowed to return unto the means of knowledge.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 360; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 242. “When man has been deemed worthy to receive this power within his soul, he abides only in ecstasy and silence.” *Ibid*, 489 (328).

⁹² Mingana 1934/Simon, 193a-193b, p. 312-313 (tr. 57). Mingana’s translation above may give a little too tough an impression. ‘Emptiness’ (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) is not to be understood as a negative term, for in Syriac it is also used in the sense of ‘freedom’. Accordingly, ‘quietened’ (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) could also be translated ‘calm’ or ‘pacify’. ‘Destruction’ is perhaps a little too aggressive a term, for Payne-Smith gives ‘cancelling’ and ‘abolition’ for ܐܘܪܘܚܐ.

⁹³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 196a, p. 315 (tr. 62).

⁹⁴ Toivonen 1981, 90.

⁹⁵ Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, pp. 225b & 228a.

⁹⁶ Vocalised *tehrā* in the West Syrian tradition. The adjective (passive participle) form *temihā* occasionally appears synonymously with *temhā*. The etymological background offers a functional possibility to translate *temhā* as both ‘ecstasy’ and ‘astonishment’ when they appear twice in the

Mingana and Wensinck; ‘stupeur’ and ‘émerveillement’ by Beulay, who regards them as “difficilement distinguable” from each other.⁹⁷ But curiously, the standard meaning of both is originally ‘wonder’, in the sense of astonishment and amazement. Most contexts would in fact admit the use of ‘wonder’ as well as that of ‘ecstasy’, but often a concept from somewhere in-between would be preferred. This ambiguity is due to the character of mental phenomena: when the sense of wonder grows strong enough it becomes ecstatic. At first sight their usages appear synonymous, but a closer look shows that *temhā* is used more often, and it seems to have a slightly wider usage in definitely non-ecstatic contexts.⁹⁸ Consequently, the relationship is rather one of hyponymy: the semantic field of *tahrā* is included in that of *temhā*. The close relationship between the words has also affected the manuscript tradition. In the letters of John of Dalyatha it may happen that when *tahrā* occurs in a sentence, another manuscript has *temhā* instead, and in a third one *temihā* occupies the same position.⁹⁹

How did the signs of ‘wonder’ actually end up signifying mystical experiences? The semantic history of the words *temhā* and *tahrā* in classical Syriac is discussed in more detail in Appendix 1 (p. 331–341), resulting in two answers. On the one hand there seems to be a semantic borrowing from Greek, where the word ἔκστασις has an equivalent double meaning, and on the other hand, there is an intra-Syriac development that can be illustrated with the aid of the poetry of St. Ephrem.

Regardless of the details of the semantic history, however, the nature of ecstasy in Syrian thought is to some extent characterised by the fact that it is expressed with words that originally meant ‘astonishment’. Wonder can be regarded as the basic attitude when approaching the presence of God. The connection is also strengthened by a parallel phenomenon: the actual word for astonishment, *dummārā*, is in some cases, albeit rarely, used in a context where ‘ecstasy’ would also do appropriately. The following statement by John of Dalyatha is an obvious example of the word in an ecstatic context: “Ordinary thoughts are silenced by the power of your *dummārā*”.¹⁰⁰ One of the dictionary meanings of *dummārā* (in Costaz) is, indeed, ‘stupor’.

On the other hand, there is a fundamental question: why not translate *temhā* and *tahrā* as ‘astonishment’ or ‘wonder’ rather than as ‘ecstasy’? Often both would in fact do, but frequently there are strong contextual reasons that

same sentence, as Wensinck does: “The mind absorbed in *ecstasy* (ܐܘܨܬܐܝܬܐ), the senses being at rest” is soon followed by “*astonishment* (ܐܘܨܬܐܝܬܐ) at these things even when prayer is cut off.” (*Mystic Treatises*, 328; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 490). The dictionary meaning of ‘miracle’ for *tehrā* seems not to be valid in the metatheological discourse.

⁹⁷ Beulay 1990, 397; Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (pp. 306-307), 12:3 (pp. 336-337), 25:4 (pp. 384-385) etc. Brock gives ‘wondrous awe’ or ‘wonder’ for *tahrā* (cf. Brock: *Second Part*, 5:14).

⁹⁸ Usually when the root *THR* appears in non-ecstatic contexts, it is as the verb *tehar* (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 32). An example of the cases where *tahrā* clearly means more than ‘wonder’ in *ibid.*, 492. Non-ecstatic occurrences of both *temhā* and *tahrā* in *ibid.*, 98.

⁹⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, footnote 28, p. 306.

¹⁰⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 45:3 (pp. 452-453.)

favour the choice of ecstasy. The concept of ecstasy indicates an experience stronger than mere mystical feeling, even a certain uncontrollability. The factuality of ecstasy is proven in an empirical way in its different manifestations.¹⁰¹

A very illustrative difference can be found in the Syriac Life of John of Dailam (d. 738): when discussing an objective, outer cause of wonder, a miracle such as an earthquake, the word *tadmūrtā*, from the root *DMR* ‘to wonder’, is used, but a subjective inner wonder is described with the words *tahrā we-dummārā*.¹⁰² Often, however, all these concepts overlap or are used interchangeably, which is due to the fact that on the psychological level, in the mental reality, the transition from astonishment to ecstasy (through “daze” or otherwise) is a stepless glide, but on the linguistic level the borderlines must be sharply drawn.

An interesting aspect of the concept of *temhā* is shown in its use in the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh where at least once *temhā* in the sense of ‘wonder’ is proposed as the reason for the *temhā* in the sense of ‘ecstasy’. The usage, occurring in a long and syntactically complicated group of sentences, is probably unintentional.¹⁰³

Of the other terms, the most remarkable candidate for an analytical sign of ecstatic experience might be *bulhāyā*, which appears occasionally in the writings of John of Dalyatha, Isaac of Nineveh and Barhebraeus. Its basic meaning seems to be ‘horror’, from which it has developed the meanings of ‘paralysis’ and ‘astonishment’, on the one hand, and of ‘hastening’ on the other. It is translated into French by Beulay as ‘stupéfaction’ and into English by Brock accordingly as ‘stupefaction’.¹⁰⁴

The term that perhaps occurs even most frequently in connection with mystical experiences, however, is *zaw’ā*, ‘motion’, ‘impulse’, which is a general term for all inner movements, mystical or natural, and for emerging mental effects but with no focus on any of their emotional or interpretative characteristics. Due to the stupefying character of the mystical experience, during the most forceful experiences the impulses cease, which would actually justify the translation ‘trance’.¹⁰⁵ Yet there is no guarantee that any author, not to mention different

¹⁰¹ For details, see chapter 2.4.

¹⁰² Brock: *Syriac Life of John of Dailam*, 137, 141, 146, 150. Brock, however, translates both as ‘wonder’.

¹⁰³ Namely, the one who receives in his mind the greatness of God, the glory of his nature and the wonder (*temhā*) of his works, [...] gets drunk every moment in the ecstasy (*temhā*) of the motions. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 254. Isaac’s syntax is often somewhat careless and imprecise, which is connected with the fact that at least some of his treatises were written by dictation.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 112 (tr. 97); Beulay: *Lettres*, 2:4 (pp. 310-311); Brock: *Second Part*, 7:2 (ed. 19, tr. 24); Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258.

¹⁰⁵ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 53; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37. “How many times the power of contemplation (*theoria*) [stimulated] by the Scriptures has silenced (*mešatteq*) and stupefied (*mebalhē*) him, also from prayer, and left him standing with no impulse!”

authors, would employ even the concept of impulse in a precise manner, since the recognition of a part of the mental operation as an ‘impulse’ is not empirically verifiable but implies one or another kind of interpretation.

Because an analytical description given with one word is always allusive in nature and for that reason insufficient, those who aim to produce an analytical description must proceed by developing specifications of the inner processes during the experience, abstractions of the different parts of human mentality and their function in the experience, and definitions on the level of consciousness: how far the experience is under control. The problems here, for our taxonomy, are that even the most analytical descriptions include signs that could or should be taken as symbolic, and secondly, such abstractional discussions easily shift into interpretation rather than description – just as the interpretative elements penetrate into the experience itself – and the boundary between analytical description and interpretation is to be abstracted out of the discourse by a deconstructing approach that is sometimes completely contrary to the metatheologians’ own views (e.g. the discussion on *causa efficiens* below).

The Syriac descriptions that can be taken as representative of the analytical(ly intended) description of mystical experience seem to include the following characteristics – or “modes of appearance”, to use the term preferred by W.P. Alston:

- Totality: the subject is overwhelmed by the experience
- Involuntariness: it does not arise or operate under the control of the conscious will
- Restfulness
- A stunning and dazing quality, potentially leading to loss of the sense of identity or disorientation
- A feeling of joy or delight
- A sense of refreshment
- Warmth

The differentiation of qualities is partially arbitrary and discretionary since any quality may have an endless variety of modes according to its intensity: intense restfulness may become intense enough to be stunning or dazing; involuntariness may grow into uncontrolledness and so on. In the mental reality, we must stress again, there are no definitive boundaries between the phenomena, unlike in the verbal dimension.

Perhaps the most important feature of ecstatic experience in the Syriac discourse is that of totality, which is also a safe criterion for differentiating a ‘mystical experience’ from religious experience in the general sense. It also justifies our speaking of ‘ecstatic’ experiences. The differentiation between

(ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ). “Their impulses are silenced in drunkenness”
(ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܠܗܘܢ) Beulay: *Lettres*, 25:4 (pp. 384-385).

mystical and ecstatic experiences always remains to some extent obscure, due to the hyponymy of these overlapping concepts produced by the indefiniteness of the mental phenomenon itself, but at least when the quality of uncontrolledness is present, we are well justified in designating the experience as ‘ecstasy’.

When the metatheologians discuss the subject of totality, the most analytical units of the discourse operate in the category of negations, portraying what the experience excludes from the subject. Generally speaking, during the experience the ordinary sense of reality recedes into the background. This may be expressed as “ceasing of ordinary thoughts and their natural operation”,¹⁰⁶ or ‘closing’ (*ammīšūtā*) of the senses, meaning both the physical and psychic faculties.¹⁰⁷ ‘Abdišo’ the Seer does his best to produce an analytical description, which ends up as a kind of *via negativa* stressing the total nature of the experience:¹⁰⁸

Mind will not even perceive and distinguish itself [...] neither thought (*renyā*) of anything, nor any consciousness (*huššābā*) or remembrance (*maḥšabtā*), nor any impulses (*zaw ‘ē*) and inward movements (*refāfē*), but only ecstasy in God (*temhā de-b-allāhā*) and an ineffable rapture (*tahrā de-lā metmallal*).¹⁰⁹

Not one of the Seers (*ḥazzāyē*) or the Illuminated (*yaddū‘tānē*) would then be able to distinguish the identity of the mind (*qenūmā de-hawnā*) from the vision of that glorious light of the Holy Trinity, because all the hidden mansions of the heart will be filled with that sublime light in which there are neither shapes nor likenesses nor forms (*eskēmē*) nor constructions (*rukkābē*) nor numbers (*menyānē*) nor colours (*gawnē*). This one light in singularity (*ḥedānāyūt*) of vision cannot be divided into any shapes (*eskēmē*) or figures (*demwātā*). I would also like to tell you that at that time there are neither different impulses (*zaw ‘ē*) nor different thoughts (*huššābā*) nor different meditations (*renyā*), but one single ecstasy (*tahrā*) which is higher than all meditations, impulses and thoughts.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ ܟܘܠܗ ܕܡܚܘܘܛܐ ܕܠܘܐ, ܡܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܟܘܬܐ : ܟܘܠܗ, ܡܘܬܘܬܘܟܘܐ : ܟܘܠܗ ܕܟܘܠܗܐ
Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 5. (Cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 3.)

¹⁰⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 9; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 6.

¹⁰⁸ We may note here that John Climacus seems to have a different approach to the totality of experience in the *Ladder*, where he encourages one to “pay careful attention to whatever sweetness there may be in your soul” (27:46). And in addition, “Blind tears are suitable only to irrational beings, and yet there are some people who try, when they weep, to stifle all thought. Tears are actually the product of thought (γέννημα ἐννοιῶς) and the father of thought is a rational mind.” (7:20; PG 88, col. 805.) The views of John and ‘Abdišo’, however, are not necessarily in contradiction if they are discoursing on experiences of different kinds or varying intensity, or if they understand the concept of ‘thought’ in different ways. Yet it is evident that John, representing the Greek Orthodox approach, is more careful and emphasises the relative nature of the experience.

¹⁰⁹ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144b-145a, p. 263 (tr. 150).

¹¹⁰ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 155b, p. 274 (tr. 165). These two quotations illustrate the difficulties in translating Syriac psychological concepts. ܟܘܠܗ is first translated by Mingana as ‘consciousness’, then in the second extract as ‘thought’; ܟܘܠܗ is correspondingly first ‘thought’,

process is in fact impossible in ecstasy, where all the movements of the intellect are silenced.¹¹⁷ And not only the process of thinking but the mere reflection of images ceases: “the ecstasy of mind (*temhā de-re ‘yānā*) is free of all images”.¹¹⁸ John of Dalyatha states that “in the sphere of wonder and ecstasy there is no movement or any continual motion, either that of the soul, or that of the spirit.”¹¹⁹

Loss of control may indicate, as the wording of a prayer by John of Apamea suggests, that during the experience in question one loses the sense of place.¹²⁰ Either the senses do not function normally, or their functioning is not apprehended normally by the subject. According to John of Dalyatha, when ecstasy takes place, prayer ceases and the sense of hearing no longer receives stimuli.¹²¹ According to Isaac of Nineveh, the world is indiscernible¹²² and the senses are at rest.¹²³ During the experience the physical senses and faculties are passive “as in sleep” (‘Abdišo’ the Seer).¹²⁴ This is briefly expressed in a notion that in a strong mystical experience the mystic “goes out of his order” (*nāfeq men takseh*), an idea which essentially corresponds to the etymological meaning of ecstasy as ἔκ + στασις.¹²⁵

Ecstasy by definition has a certain stunning character. This is described in a lively manner by John of Dalyatha, who makes it clear that the intellectual faculty becomes stupefied in ecstasy, and the sense of identity is lost in the experience.¹²⁶ The dazing effect of the ecstatic experience is also shown in the statement that when the ascetic is orientated in his mystical pursuit as he should

63, tr. 74).

¹¹⁷ ܟܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ “Thoughts bound fast with the bounds of *temhā*.” Brock: *Second Part*, 35:1 (ed. 139, tr. 151). ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ “In drunkenness movements (of the intellect) are silenced.” Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:4 (pp. 384-385), 16:1-2 (pp. 354-355), etc.

¹¹⁸ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ Brock: *Second Part*, XV:11 (ed. 76, tr. 87)

¹¹⁹ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ : ܟܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:1 (pp. 420-423).

¹²⁰ E.g. Brock: *Syriac Fathers*, 346. “so that for a period of time he is where he knows not, being totally raptured and drawn towards you.” For some reason, the modern edition of the Syriac text (*Malpānūtā d-abbāhāthā*, Bar-Hebraeus Verlag 1988) omits these ecstatic verses.

¹²¹ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ [...] ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 12:3 (pp. 336-337),

ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ *ibid.*, 13:3 (pp. 344-345).

¹²² ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ . “The world is not at all visible for him because of the drunkenness in you.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 504.

(Wensinck translates: ‘he does not see the world at all because of his drunkenness in thee’. *Mystic Treatises*, 339.)

¹²³ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ The senses are literally ‘silenced’. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 489; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 328.

¹²⁴ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ – “faculties (or: movements) of mind become silent and restful as in sleep”; Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 153b, p. 272 (tr. 162).

¹²⁵ Vööbus 1988, 332. (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr 124, fol. 314a.)

¹²⁶ ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ – “My understanding is stupefied in the ecstasy in you”; ܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ ܕܘܚܪܐ – “At that time I comprehend myself as if non-existent.” Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316-317).

be, ecstasy (*tahrā*) is the only thing that is able to calm down the psychological feeling of praise.¹²⁷

Simeon the Graceful defines basic psychic restfulness as the sign of the coming of experience. Firstly “the outer senses and the inner passions become at rest”,¹²⁸ which is followed by the ‘spiritual impulses’ (*zaw’ē de-rūh*) and ‘mystical consolation’ (*būyā’ā kasyā*).

As we have already seen in connection with recitation, joy is a basic feature of the mystical experience in the Syriac sources. The joyous quality is occasionally presented in organic connection with ‘ecstasy’ by the use of expressions like ‘ecstasy in joy’ (*temhā dab-ḥaddūtā*).¹²⁹ It is possible to view joy either as the content of experience or as its product. Joy may overwhelm the whole body and “make the tongue silent”; a stronger joy may be expressed as ‘exultation’ (*rewāzā*).¹³⁰ In the mental reality the impression of joy is close to feelings of ‘delight’ (*bussāmā*) and ‘pleasure’ (*hannī’ūtā*).

[...] his body will be moved in weeping mingled with joy (*ḥaddūta*) that exceeds the sweetness of honey.¹³¹

[...] from time to time, from the plentiful rushing streams of inner movements (*ḥuššābē*) (came forth something) that kindled him with its heat, and he was no longer able to bear that flame of joy (*ḥaddūtā*) [...]¹³²

The experience may also have other emotional tones. Isaac of Nineveh knows a heart-rending, stabbing and painful emotion (*ḥarrīfūt ḥaššā de-nāšfā be-lebbā*)¹³³, an expression that seems to correspond closely to the pain of love experienced by the mediaeval Spanish mystics, especially the *arrobamiento* of St. Theresa of Jesus.

Qualities of the mystical experience resulting from meditation on death are defined as the spread of tranquillity (*šelyā*) in the soul, the disappearance of perception (*regeštā*) of physical things, and being *tehīr*, here to be translated

¹²⁷ ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ

Beulay: *Lettres*, 31:4 (pp. 392-393).

¹²⁸ ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ Mingana 1934/Simon, 169a, p. 288 (tr. 19).

¹²⁹ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 12:8 (pp. 340-341).

¹³⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326. Further examples of intense experiences of joy on p. 150-155.

¹³¹ ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ

(Isaac of Nineveh). Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126;

Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85. For the use of the 3rd person singular, see p. 183.

¹³² ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ

ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ

ܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ ܕܩܘܿܠܘܿܬܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

¹³³ Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120. The Greek word κατάνυξις would make a pithy equivalent to the term.

perhaps as ‘wondering’ rather than as ‘ecstatic’.¹³⁴ The aspect of losing ordinary consciousness during the experience is expressed as being *de-lā nafšā*, ‘without self’ or ‘without soul’, a strong yet seldom used expression open to many interpretations, and as being ‘led away’ (*netdebar*) from all “motion of senses and impulses” (*mettezi’ānūtā de-regšē wad-zaw’ē*).¹³⁵ The corresponding qualities also occur as produced by solitude, albeit with different vocabulary: the mystic “loses (consciousness) of himself” (*tā’ē nafšeh*) and “forgets his nature” (*metnešē la-kyāneh*).¹³⁶ These expressions seem to refer in the first place to a static mode of being, but the ecstatic context actually allows them to be taken as qualities of specific mystical experiences as well. Correspondingly, the cessation of the experience may be described as “coming back to one’s self/soul” (*etā le-wāt nafšeh*).¹³⁷

Warmth is a psychosomatic feature that is even more noteworthy in the original context – the cold caves amidst the rocks of Northern Mesopotamia.¹³⁸ When the images of warmth become strong enough, however, they are to be taken symbolically. In practice the dividing line between analytical and symbolical warmth is impossible to draw, since perhaps the most common word used in these contexts, *reḥā*¹³⁹, covers a wide area from warm heat to burning (or boiling!) fervour, and is generally used in the metaphorical sense. Almost the same applies to the root *HMM*, signifying temperatures from warm to hot, and symbolising fervent, violent emotions of zeal. Moreover, even the subject himself is hardly aware of whether his heat is mental or physical since during the experience it may be difficult to perceive the difference between the two dimensions.

If warmth is counted as being in the category of psychophysical phenomena, what then would be its merely psychic counterpart? Depending on its strength and intensity, I would suggest (one expressed as) ‘consolation’ (*būyā’ā*), the operation of which is described as delightful and refreshing (*metbassam*).¹⁴⁰ The expression has a slight nuance of interpretation, since in common thought the concept of consolation implies the existence of the *other* who does the consoling.

¹³⁴ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 257-258; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 173.

¹³⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 173.

¹³⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

¹³⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 249; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 168.

¹³⁸ E.A. W. Budge, who examined monks’ caves in Mesopotamia in the late 19th century, saw “no marks of fire in any of the cells” (Budge 1893, clxviii) in spite of the fact that in December-February the temperature frequently drops below zero.

¹³⁹ E.g. Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

¹⁴⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 248; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 167.

2.2.2. Symbolic Expression

A symbol has been defined as “an exact reference to something indefinite”,¹⁴¹ and there indeed seems to be a kind of tension always present in the semantics of symbolic expression. The concept of symbol has a twofold function: it may either reveal and illustrate or hide and confuse, depending on the purpose of the author, his method of application, the position of the recipient, and on the mechanisms among these three. The choice of the sign itself may be more or less arbitrary (symbols relying on resemblance are sometimes differentiated by calling them ‘icons’) but usually there is an analogous or metaphorical relationship behind the use of a symbol. Usually symbols are chosen from the imagery of the respective context, in this case Christian and Biblical.

Syriac theology enjoys a reputation for “symbolic thinking”, which has often been contrasted with the “philosophical thinking” of Greek theology.¹⁴² The most outstanding early Syriac theologians St. Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh and Narsai, were in fact poets. Symbolic language is a general Semitic phenomenon, abundant in the Hebrew OT itself, and the Syriac authors derived many of their images from the Syriac Bible. The Divinity as ‘fire’, the incarnation as ‘clothing’, anthropomorphisms and images of ‘light’, ‘eye’ and ‘mirror’ are common themes in Syriac literature. Brock, in his articles on the thought of St. Ephrem, speaks about ‘divine descent’ by a ‘ladder of symbols’.¹⁴³

For our topic this kind of ideological background provides space and freedom in the choice of signs, yet within the boundaries of biblical tradition. It is also clear that the ascetic authors are no poets: their language has neither the tendency nor the aim to produce aesthetic images for the sake of form.

In principle, mystical experience may be described with the help of any of the allegories or images derived from ordinary natural sensing, like that of tasting,¹⁴⁴ hearing (“sounds of spiritual beings”)¹⁴⁵ or smelling (“the sweet odour, the perfume of which is ineffable”).¹⁴⁶

The category of tasting generates analogues of a more detailed nature, such as “the palate of his mind tastes the delight of these divine secrets.”¹⁴⁷ In Syriac usage tasting is also a symbolic way of expressing perception in general, and, as a vital concept with a certain subjective ardour, it is very suitable for use with reference to a mystical experience. Tasting may be focused as ‘sweet taste’

¹⁴¹ Tindall 1955, 6.

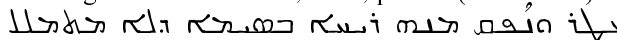
¹⁴² The position has recently been challenged by U. Possekel: *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian*. (CSCO 580, 1999.)

¹⁴³ Brock 1984, 10-12, 24-48.

¹⁴⁴ E.g. Mingana 1934/Simon, 194b, p. 314 (tr. 59).

¹⁴⁵ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 153b, p. 272 (tr. 162).

¹⁴⁶ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 143b, p. 262 (tr. 148-149).

¹⁴⁷  Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30*). The analogy is further employed in p. 54 (40*).

(*ṭe'āmtā ḥalītā*).¹⁴⁸ The usual function of the concept of sweetness (*ḥalyūtā*) in the discourse is to activate the quality of pleasure and joy present in the experience and adjoin it to the symbolic parlance. The idea of tasting naturally gives rise to images of eating¹⁴⁹ and drinking, and the category of eating in turn produces further signs like ‘nourishment’ (*saybartā*)¹⁵⁰ or ‘victuals’ (*tūrsāyā*) to depict the mystical experience.¹⁵¹ Accordingly, the image of drinking is naturally connected with the symbols of the cup, wine or fountain.

In preserved solitude this meditation (*renyā*) will pour endless pleasure (*hannī'ūtā*) into the heart and will quickly draw the mind towards unspeakable ecstasy (*temhā lā-metmallelānā*). Blessed is he to whom this fountain (*mabbō'ā*) has been opened and who drinks (*eštī*) from it at all times, day and night.¹⁵²

Of all the various ways of perception, the sense of touch seems not to be used to symbolise mystical experience. In its most concrete sense it is the least appropriate in terms of analogical symbolism when set in relation to spiritual phenomena. Somewhere between tasting, smelling and touching, however, is the image of breathing. Isaac of Nineveh writes about “breathing the ecstatic air of the new world”,¹⁵³ Philoxenus of Mabbug about “breathing the air that is above”,¹⁵⁴ and John of Dalyatha urges his reader to “breath the Spirit of life” (*sūq rūḥ ḥayyē*)¹⁵⁵ so that the Life may mingle with his material substance. The continuous breathing of the scent of the Beloved represents, for John, an ecstatic mode of being.¹⁵⁶ In this connection John also utilises the double meaning of *rūḥ* as ‘wind’ and ‘Spirit’, and the derivative of the same root ‘smell’ (*rīḥ*):

He inhales (*merīḥ*) your Holy Spirit like a child that breathes in (*sā'eq*) the smell of his parent, he exhales (*pā'eḥ*) the smell (*rīḥ*) of your Grace from his body like a child the smell of his nourisher.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 6-7; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 4.

¹⁴⁹ “Blessed be he who eats (ܐܝܬܐ) from these things continually.” Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 163; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 110.

¹⁵⁰ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܝܘܨܦܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܗܘܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ

“Nourishment is given to the mind by the Holy Spirit mystically.” Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 169 (158b, p. 277) The old Semitic form ‘Spirit of holiness’ is used here.

¹⁵¹ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 161a, p. 279 (tr. 172).

¹⁵² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 258-259; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 174.

¹⁵³ ܕܠܗܘܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܗܘܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܘܚܘܪܐ ܕܩܘܕܝܫܐ (Isaac of Nineveh) Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 125. (Wensinck translates ‘wonderful air’ in *Mystic Treatises*, 85.)

¹⁵⁴ Philoxène de Mabboug, *La Lettre à Patricius*, 97 (842-843).

¹⁵⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 28:2 (pp. 388-389).

¹⁵⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 31:4 (pp. 392-393).

¹⁵⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474-475). Another word play is ‘child’ (*yallōdā*) – ‘parent’ (*yālōdā*).

Blessed is he who breathes Holy (*rūh*) Spirit and who has mixed also the smell (*rīh*) of his own body into the one who has taken delight in his aroma.¹⁵⁸

In spite of the fact that the fragrance is in the first place not a concrete fact but a symbolic sign of a spiritual phenomenon, *A Letter Sent to a Friend* contains a curious description of an olfactory mystic experience which claims that the quality of fragrance may cling to one's actual clothing (one way to explain the existence of objects containing *baraka!*) and therefore a lovely smell may be experienced in a concrete physiological way as well.

And from the heart of man comes forth a sweet smell, that the senses of a mortal body are unable to perceive, until the clothing and the whole body of man has that holy smell and has changed to its likeness.¹⁵⁹

The ambiguity of the mystical–ecstatic phenomenon is illustratively shown by the fact that it may be referred to with symbols whose basic meanings are somewhat antithetical, such as ‘fountain’ (*mabbō ‘ā*)¹⁶⁰ and ‘fire’ (*nūrā*)¹⁶¹, and this may take place even in the same sentence:

Prayer becomes a gift of God when the spring (*mabbō ‘ā*) of the heart is kindled with the fire (*nūrā*) of love and with the wood of sacrificial labours (Simeon the Graceful).¹⁶²

The symbol of a fountain is employed in the discourse to activate the joyous and refreshing qualities of the experience, the result being signs like ‘fountain of pleasure’ (*mabbō ‘ā de-hannī ‘ūtā*).¹⁶³ The joyous quality of the experience produces further symbolic signs that have adopted figurative characteristics such as ‘sun of joy’,¹⁶⁴ ‘flame of joy’,¹⁶⁵ or ‘sparkling rays (*zalgē*) of joy’.¹⁶⁶

The aspect of sensitivity and perhaps a certain irritation present in the mystical experience can be seen in the use of the term ‘tickling’ (*huthātē*).¹⁶⁷ The

¹⁵⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:1 (pp. 408-409).

¹⁵⁹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30*).

¹⁶⁰ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 259; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 174.

¹⁶¹ E.g. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 159b, p. 278 (tr. 171).

¹⁶² Mingana 1934/Simon, 193b, p. 313 (tr. 58). I have altered Mingana’s ‘mental labours’ (ܠܘܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ) to ‘sacrificial labours’, in accordance with to the Old Testament use of the word ܠܘܘܝܢܐ, ‘separation’.

¹⁶³ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41.

¹⁶⁴ ܠܘܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ – “the sun of joy shines into them”; Beulay: *Lettres*, 11:6 (pp. 334-335).

¹⁶⁵ ܠܘܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

¹⁶⁶ Isaac of Nineveh. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 125; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84.

¹⁶⁷ ܠܘܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ. ܠܠܘܝܢܐ ܠܠܘܝܢܐ. “Pray God that He would allow you to perceive the ticklings of the Spirit”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218. (Wensinck translates as ‘spiritual allurements’, *Mystic Treatises*, 147.)

function of tickling in the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh is that it is crucial in orientating the subject from the ‘world’ to occupy himself with the spiritual phenomenon. These ‘ticklings’, however, cannot be perceived without solitude (*šelyā*), emaciation (*nāḥōbūtā*) and attentive recitation – except in a deceptive way, where they soon change into ‘bodily’ (*gešīmē*) ones.¹⁶⁸

Most of the qualities that we encountered in the previous chapter are present on the level of the symbolic expression as well, but in other, more refined forms. Even the loss of the sense of place, itself a result of the dazing quality of the experience, is expressed on the symbolic level by John of Dalyatha in a poetical fashion: “The earth that I used to walk on has vanished from before me.”¹⁶⁹

What, then, would be the most suitable and functional linguistic icon of ecstasy, with sufficient ability to bear close resemblance? Perhaps the most accurate solution, and certainly one of those most commonly applied, is to employ the analogy of drunkenness,¹⁷⁰ which is a very illustrative symbol, since it is about the only thoroughly ecstatic extraordinary state of mind that is commonly known. It also has some potential connotations with vine-symbolism, an important topic in Syriac theology, deriving from the Gospel of John.¹⁷¹ The Syriac verb to express drunkenness is *rewā*, but *balhī* is sometimes used in a similar or parallel way.¹⁷²

From his Good he gives to drink that wine whose drunkenness (*rawwāyūtā*) never leaves those who drink it (Isaac of Nineveh).¹⁷³

The mind will also become intoxicated (*rāwē*) and enraptured (*metbalhī*), as with strong wine (Abdišo’ the Seer).¹⁷⁴

Drunkenness can be described as taking place through ‘wine’ (*ḥamrā*) or through a stronger symbol, *ḥamrā ḥayyā*, a broad expression signifying pure or unmixed and therefore strong wine, not to mention the connotation derived from the basic

¹⁶⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 147.

¹⁶⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6. (This being, of course, only one perspective from which the sentence may be interpreted.)

¹⁷⁰ E.g. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149), Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 555; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 372.

¹⁷¹ The ecclesiological and Christological aspects of vine-symbolism are presented exhaustively by Murray in his excellent work *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (pp. 95-130). Nevertheless, he pays no attention to the symbolism of personal experience.

¹⁷² The four-radical (BLH’) verb ,ܡܠܚ and its derivation ,ܡܠܚܐ are quite rarely used, and not in the context of the mode of drunkenness caused by alcohol, but rather of falling into a rapturous state in general. For example, see Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 77; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 53.

¹⁷³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 77; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 53.

¹⁷⁴ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149).

meaning of *ḥayyā*: living wine. By deriving the same idea further it is also possible to speak merely of ‘the cup’ (*kāsā*).¹⁷⁵

If a brief excursion is allowed, we may also note here that the most detailed and vivid portrayal of drunkenness in Syriac literature is perhaps that given by St. Ephrem in his *Hymns on Virginity*. The point of comparison is relevant because St. Ephrem described spiritual drunkenness as well.¹⁷⁶ In their context the following lines do not actually refer to spiritual ecstasy, yet they may be quoted in order to enlarge our picture to cover the other side of the process of symbolism (“the exact reference”, as it was called above).

For the path of the voices that batter his ears does not lead to his heart.
 The gates of his ears are open to the other:
 a word that entered by his ear
 went out on the opposite by the other ear.
 While his teacher supposes that he is listening to him,
 he does not perceive that his warning is pouring forth outside,
 because there is no place in his heart to receive [it].¹⁷⁷
 For full and congested and cramped is the spacious gulf of his reason
 from one drop of the love surged and became a great sea.
 Thoughts plunge in and arise like a sailor whose ship is wrecked.
 Thought is afloat in waves of desires like a ship whose navigator has
 abandoned it.¹⁷⁸

In his *Book of Perfection* Sahdona gives a long description of earthly drunkenness in order to parallel it with the spiritual one. Here drunkenness and *temhā* are identified, and heat is attributed to both. Those who love God are likened to ‘drunkards’ (*rawwāyē*), and their observational capacity is described as extremely weak. The stress here is on the inner reality that a drunken person experiences at the expense of the external one:

Those who love God and are smitten with love for him are like people who are drunk (*rawwāyē*), for a drunk who is enflamed with wine is in a complete state of *temhā*: he walks on the ground, but is not aware of it; he stands among people, but he does not distinguish who they are. Often enough he may struck a blow, but he does not suffer anything; he may be insulted, but he is not offended; he may be

¹⁷⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 511; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 344. Possibly the earliest Syriac occurrence of these images is in the Psalms of Solomon (8:15), where *kāsā ḥayyā le-rawwāyūtā* is used in the negative sense as an instrument of God’s wrath. (See Harris, R. – Mingana, A. *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*. Vol. I. The Text, Manchester 1916.)

¹⁷⁶ ܠܟܝܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܗܘܝܬ ܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ (Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9:24). Here the cause of inebriation is beautifully described as “waves of glory flowing from the beauty of that sublime Beauty”. For more details, see below, p. 106.

¹⁷⁷ ܠܟܝܢ ܠܗܘܢ ܗܘܝܬ ܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܗܘܝܬ ܕܡܝܬܘܢܝܬܐ

¹⁷⁸ Ephrem, *Hymnen de Virginitate*, 1:13-14. Translation from McVey 1989, 264-265.

praised, but is not puffed up by it – simply because he is incapable of understanding what he hears as a result of his great drunkenness (*rawwāyūta*). When a large number of people address him, he is not aware of it, for the awareness of his heart is snatched away (*ḥeṭīf*) as a result of the heat (*ḥammīmūtā*) of the wine which enflames (*sāgrā*) him. And when he sleeps on the floor, he imagines he is flying in the air.¹⁷⁹

Isaac of Nineveh gives an expression of the same phenomenon in a more spiritual context, stressing the negative character of intoxication, the state in which the normal functions of the mind cease so that even the differentiation between mind and body is no longer sensed:

The mind is engulfed in ecstasy (*tahrā*) and the desired object of prayer is forgotten. The impulses are drowned in deep drunkenness and he is no longer in this world, and since then there is no longer discernment of body or of soul, nor recollection of anything.¹⁸⁰

Other aspects of the experience are emphasised in the two clusters of concepts that are often connected with each other: those of heat and light, both occurring frequently in Syriac texts. Symbols of heat arise from the aspect of warmth in the mystical experience and they include ‘hotness’ (*ḥammīmūtā*), ‘burning’ (*reḥā*) and the more concrete signs ‘flame’ (*šūlhābā*) and ‘fire’ (*nūrā*).¹⁸¹ Symbols of light include the concepts of ‘light’ (*nuhrā, nūhārā*)¹⁸², ‘illumination’ (*nahhūrūtā*)¹⁸³ and perhaps *šafyūtā*¹⁸⁴ in the sense of transparency. The difference between *nūhrā* and *nūhārā* is so slight that I have found no way to express it in English;¹⁸⁵ however, even in Syriac this difference is not discernible in unvowelized texts. The totality of the experience is often expressed with the

¹⁷⁹ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:150. English translation (except the terms in Syriac) according to Brock 1989, 110-111. A similar description by John of Dalyatha in Beulay: *Lettres*, 37:4.

¹⁸⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 174; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 117-118: ‘engulfed’ – literally: ‘swallowed’ (ܩܠܠܐܢܐ) . The last sentence is attributed by Isaac to Evagrius.

¹⁸¹ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 156a, p. 274 (tr. 165)

“love of God burns in the heart of a man like fire”:

ܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ

Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149); ‘fiery impulse’ – ܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ.

¹⁸² E.g. Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a, p. 220 (tr. 104); Brock: *Second Part*, 6:1 (ed. 16, tr. 20).

¹⁸³ E.g. Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 23a, p. 220 (tr. 104); Brock: *Second Part*, 6:2 (ed. 16, tr. 20).

¹⁸⁴ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316-317), 51:13 (pp. 480-481) etc. Beulay treats John of Dalyatha’s *šafyūtā* as a technical term that is regularly to be translated *la limpidité*. In some contexts ‘brightness’ would make a nice, slightly poetic alternative, especially when the root occurs in the adjective *šāfyā*.

¹⁸⁵ In Finnish, at least, it is possible to differentiate between ‘valo’ and ‘valkeus’, approximately corresponding to *nūhrā* – *nūhārā*. (Cf. French ‘lumière’ – ‘lueur’.)

symbolism of light: “And all my body together with my soul was one strong light.”¹⁸⁶

The symbolism of fire has a rich number of subtexts, for it has deep roots in the Biblical tradition,¹⁸⁷ and in the Syriac Church it was further developed by St. Ephrem towards sacramental connections.¹⁸⁸

In the labour of prayer there blazes up in the soul the fire (*nūrā*) of Christ’s love (*nūrā de-reḥmeteh da-mšīḥā*) and the heart becomes frantic (*šānē*) with longing (*reggetā*), and kindles (*mawqed*) all the members on flames (*šulhābē*); it exults with love and goes out of its order (John of Dalyatha).¹⁸⁹

The image of fire is common in Sahdona, who employs a great deal of parallelism in his discourse, together with drunkenness as parallel modes of experience: “When he is drunk (*rāwē*) with the love (*ḥubbā*) of God and is inflamed (*šegīr*) with the compassion (*reḥmetā*) of his Lord...”¹⁹⁰ The most fervent advocate of fiery images is perhaps John of Dalyatha, who declares that when a person perceives the mystical experience, “his heart is enflamed and burns constantly”.¹⁹¹ And further, “Then the blaze is kindled again in you. Your heart grows fervent and your flesh burns in its fervour.”¹⁹²

The symbol of light has the capacity to produce further images, such as Isaac’s ‘flower of the shine of truth’ (*zahrā de-denḥeh da-šrārā*). Accordingly, the description of participation in this experience belongs to the symbolism of ‘seeing’.¹⁹³

The symbolism of light, often expressed as ‘shapeless light’,¹⁹⁴ which emphasises the non-physical character of the light in question, is one of the most distinctive features of the East Syrian authors, and for John of Dalyatha in particular it is a basic motif. His language is probably the most colourful in all Syriac metatheology; he develops the theme of light with more poetical expressions, such as ‘cloud of light’ (*‘arpelā de-nūhrā*)¹⁹⁵, and adopts further

¹⁸⁶ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24*).

¹⁸⁷ “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29, Deut. 4:24, Gr. πῦρ καταναλίσκον, Peshitta: ܠܗܘܐ ܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ); “He will baptise you with Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11, Luke 3:16). In 2 Tim. 1:6 (“Fan into flame the gift of God”), however, is in the Peshitta the idea of fire (Gr. ἀναζωπυρεῖν) merely ‘stir up’ (*te’ir*).

¹⁸⁸ Yousif 1977, 241-246.

¹⁸⁹ Vööbus 1988, 332. (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr 124, fol. 314a.)

¹⁹⁰ ܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151.

¹⁹¹ ܡܝܢ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380-381).

¹⁹² Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:2 (pp. 390-391).

¹⁹³ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ

“Let your prayers be followed by the works of excellence, that your soul might see the flower of the shine of truth.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52; Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises*, 37.

¹⁹⁴ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ ܕܥܘܕܢܐ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:11 (pp. 504-505).

¹⁹⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400-401). The symbol of a cloud, well known from Pseudo-

images like the ‘likeness of a sapphire’ (*sappīlā*) and ‘colours of the shades of heaven’ (*gawnā da-krōmā da-šmayyā*) to signify the states of soul; to counterbalance the symbolism of light he may make use of the ‘darkness of the Glory’ (‘*amṭānā de-šubḥā*) of God, or praise the ‘bright darkness’ (‘*amṭānā nehīrā*’);¹⁹⁶ he illustrates the “foaming founts springing up from an indescribable sea” with the “indivisible whirls of rays of light (*zallīqay nūhrā*)”.¹⁹⁷

After this glorification the mind (*hawnā*) is silenced and engulfed in the light of the vision (*ḥazzetā*) of sublime and immaterial contemplation (*te’oryā*) like a fish in the sea.¹⁹⁸

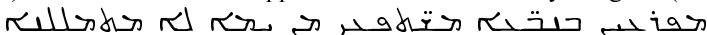
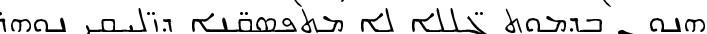
Light is a symbol which by its mere existence implies something originating from outside of the subject. The experience is described both as full of light in itself and as movement towards light – one more inexact feature in the discourse.

Immediately after the mind has been illuminated and risen upwards, it becomes conscious of the rays of impassibility, and desires all the more earnestly to be drawn towards the shapeless eternal light (*nūhrā ityāyā de-lā demū*) (Simeon the Graceful).¹⁹⁹

It is also a matter for discussion whether the *parole* on light reflects a quality of brightness in the analytical sense or whether it is rather a symbolic expression. ‘Abdišo’ the Seer tries to explain the vision (*ḥazzetā*) of mind in analytical terms: it has ‘neither image nor likeness’, for the mind ‘does not know and does not distinguish its own self from the glory of that imageless light’.²⁰⁰ He tells us that even the remembrance of that vision of light leads him to complete ecstasy, physical and psychic in nature. And moreover, ‘Abdišo’ also makes it clear that the light in question is not physical²⁰¹ light, just as the sound of spiritual hosts and conversations is different from our voices, and spiritual food is dissimilar to earthly food.²⁰² In other words, ‘light’ is to be understood as a symbolic concept rather than as an analytical one.

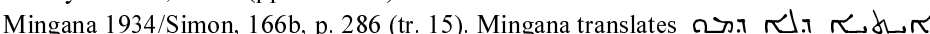
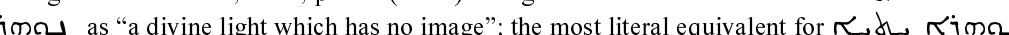
Dionysius, does appear in other authors as well: E.g. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144b, tr. 150.

¹⁹⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:11 (pp. 504-505), 48:12 (pp. 504-505), 36:5 (pp. 404-405), 46:3 (pp. 454-455). For the ‘vision of a sapphire’ there is a subtext by Evagrius (see *ibid.*, 17:2, p. 357).

¹⁹⁷ 


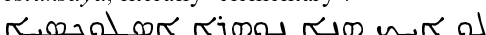
Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:6 (pp. 424-425).

¹⁹⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:12 (pp. 514-515).

¹⁹⁹ Mingana 1934/Simon, 166b, p. 286 (tr. 15). Mingana translates  as “a divine light which has no image”; the most literal equivalent for  would be ‘substantial light’.

²⁰⁰ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 149a-149b, pp. 267-268 (tr. 156).

²⁰¹ *estuksāyā*, literally ‘elementary’.

²⁰²  Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 152a, p. 270 (tr. 160).

Since the interests of the metatheologians – with the possible exception of John of Dalyatha – were not in symbolism itself or in aesthetic qualities, they show no tendency to seek for especially peculiar symbols. Even the most extraordinary ones usually come from the religious context, which usually means a biblical subtext, such as the ‘pearl’ (*margānītā*), which occurs in a symbolic function in the New Testament²⁰³ and in Syriac literature in general (symbolising Christ, the Word of God, faith, virginity and communion),²⁰⁴ as well as in Manichaeism. Isaac of Nineveh employs it as a symbol of ecstasy received in prayer; in the same context he also employs the symbolism of spiritual swimming (*sahwā*), which is further connected with pearl-diving.²⁰⁵ This is one part of his image of spiritual life as an ocean, from the depths of which one can encounter surprises of many kinds:

Numerous are the varying states (*šuhlāfē*) of this ocean. Who knows its labours and its multifarious pursuits, the wonderful pearls (*margānyātā tmīhātā*) in its depth and the animals (*ḥaywātā*) rising from it? (Isaac of Nineveh)²⁰⁶

These images fit well with Isaac’s background in Qatar, the coast of which has been famous for its submarine treasures sought by divers.²⁰⁷ The sea – a mysterious, non-exhaustible entity – was used as a symbol of God by John of Dalyatha, who also wrote a discourse on the ‘spiritual sea’.²⁰⁸

Among curiosities we may encounter even more peculiar symbols, such as Isaac’s ‘harbour full of peace’,²⁰⁹ referring to an ‘ineffable stupefaction (*bulhāyā*)’, John of Dalyatha’s ‘total living lustres’ and ‘statute of light’.²¹⁰ The more exotic the symbols become, the more difficult it is to retain the connection with the original experience, the result being a variety of possibilities as to how to interpret the images. The more extraordinary the symbol is, the more the signification of the expression is the product of a subjective interpretation. One might argue that not all of the above expressions have a mystical experience as their reference. The images in question, however, are in their context spiritual objects that are aimed at and yearned for by the authors. In this case the definition

²⁰³ Matt. 7:6, 13:45-46, Rev. 21:21.

²⁰⁴ Harviainen 1999, 342.

²⁰⁵ “During such acts (of worship) all of a sudden someone might sometimes discover a pearl (ܩܘܢܝܬܐ, Gr. μαργαρίτης).” Brock: *Second Part*, 14:24 (ed. 62, tr. 74), 34: 4-12 (ed. 136-138, tr. 148-150). The Syriac associations of *sahwā* are different from the ‘swimming’ of more water-rich cultures: the semantic field of the verb *sehā* covers ‘bathing’ and ‘baptism’ as well.

²⁰⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 179; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 121.

²⁰⁷ Other marine images include the little boy being taught to swim (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 273; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 183).

²⁰⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:8 (pp. 476-477), 50:14-15 (pp. 466-469).

²⁰⁹ ܩܘܢܝܬܐ ܩܘܢܝܬܐ ܩܘܢܝܬܐ Brock: *Second Part*, 7:2 (ed. 19, tr. 24).

²¹⁰ Another possible way of translating ܩܘܢܝܬܐ ܩܘܢܝܬܐ is that suggested by Beulay: ‘Les resplendissements de la Vie totale’. ܩܘܢܝܬܐ ܩܘܢܝܬܐ – ‘la colonne de lumière’. Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:9 (pp. 426-429).

given above – “a symbol is an exact allusion to something indefinite” – is particularly true: mystical experience is at least as wide and elastic an entity as the heterogenic language that refers to it. Moreover, there is also a difference as to whether a symbol has as its reference a single mystical experience or the concept of mystical experience in general, and this is not necessarily reflected in the level of significance.

When symbolic description is separated from strict analogy, the discourse easily drifts to the aesthetic, from the strictly religious to the artistic. If this be the case, it should be possible to find descriptions that surpass the beauty of the reference, the experience itself. Especially in that case the symbols may operate regardless of the existence of mystical experiences as their reference. Perhaps an example of exaggerative symbolism might be seen in the image of ‘flying in a spiritual chariot’:

While astonished (*metdammar*) [with spiritual thoughts] he places his mind in the spiritual chariot and lets it fly and be occupied with all the holy fathers of all generations, the inheritance of whose behaviour he possesses. (Isaac of Nineveh)²¹¹

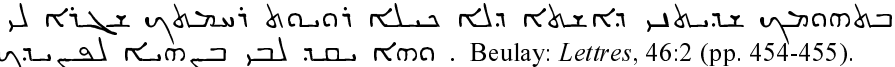
The following samples from John of Dalyatha are full of verbal jubilation with poetical archetypes such as abyss, pond, song, flames, thirst, breathing and flying:

You have thrown me into your abyss (*tehūmā*) in order that I might drink without measure; intoxication of your love (*rawyūt reḥmetāk*) is burning me, and behold, my heart is enflamed out of thirst for your pond (*peṣīdā*).²¹²

Blessed is the one who spreads out his bed in the unceasing amazement of your mysteries, and stays in peace and silence (*ṣāli we-ṣāteq*) in ecstasy (*tahrā*) that is in them, and breathes from them fragrance of life (*rēḥ ḥayyā*) for the delight of his assiduous heart.²¹³

My heart kindles from your love, and because of the flames (*ṣulhābā*) of its yearning it rises to fly from its place/position. My soul is thence as it was set in annihilation (*tullāqā*).²¹⁴

²¹¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 551-552; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 370. The image of ‘chariot’ (*markabtā*) happens to be thematically analogous and etymologically equivalent to the Kabbalistic *merkava* mysticism, but there is, of course, no reason to suppose any “influence” here. The same set of images is common stock and easily accessible to any poetical mind in each tradition.

²¹²  Beulay: *Lettres*, 46:2 (pp. 454-455).

²¹³ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3 (pp. 474-475).

²¹⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 17:1 (pp. 354-355).

Cause your hidden power (*ḥaylāk kāsyā*) to dwell in us, so that the senses of our soul (*regšay nafšāk*) may be strengthened, in order that our soul may mystically (*rā'zānā'ūt*) strike up a song filled with *tahrā* (Isaac of Nineveh).²¹⁵

When the aesthetic values of the expression grow, the cognitive ones correspondingly lag behind, and understanding of the expression is more and more subjectively dependent on each reader's personal experience and subtextual background. For example, what experience does Simeon the Graceful mean by saying: "Blessed is the soul which has eaten the 'bread of angels' (*lahmā demala'kē*) from the table of God"?²¹⁶ He seems to assume that the reader already knows what it is all about, that he is one of those "who have tasted". In other words, he uses a symbol that is unclear to outsiders, but potentially adequate to be a common code for mystics; others are dependent on their subtexts. In Christian theology bread as a biblical symbol of Christ is usually connected with the Eucharist, but in the discourse of ascetics this is not necessarily the case. In fact Simeon makes no mention of the sacrament of the Eucharist anywhere in his discourse. A more likely subtext for the concept of bread is the 'spiritual bread' (*lahmā rūhānāyā*) of Stephen bar Sudhaile's *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, where the context reveals its meaning to be a symbol of divine help received in the spiritual ascent.²¹⁷ These kinds of "obscure" images, however, do not actually describe experience as an incident, but rather interpret it as a phenomenon by connecting it as part of a wider religious system of thought.

To make some concluding remarks, the symbolism of mystical experience is basically conventional and largely biblical but every now and then also "poetical" and of indisputable aesthetic value. Conventionality means in practice that inappropriate symbols like sexual or otherwise defiled images are absent from the discourse. Nevertheless, a fairly wide set of images can be used if they have sufficient analogous value: even a 'dog' can be used in a positive way as a symbol of the soul's spiritual zeal.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Brock: *Second Part*, 10:41 (ed.42, tr. 52)

²¹⁶ Mingana 1934/Simon, 171a, p. 290 (tr. 23). The word used of the 'table' (ܐܘܠܬܐ) often refers to the Communion table, the altar, but 'bread of angels' (ܠܚܡܐ ܕܡܠܐܝܩܐܝܠ) is not employed as a symbol of the Eucharist. It is a biblical image (Ps. 78:25) which in the Syriac version of Pseudo-Hippolytos refers to God's will and acting in accordance with it. (Brock: *Some New Syriac Texts*, 177-199.)

²¹⁷ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 39 (Syriac 35*).

²¹⁸ Isaac of Nineveh adopts the 'dog' from Evagrius; Brock: *Second Part*, 17:3 (ed. 81, tr. 92).

2.2.3. Poetical Expression

Poetical language differs from symbolic description only in the form of expression, the semantic mechanisms of symbolic allusion on the level of deep-structures being fundamentally similar. Yet poetry is characterised by a certain freedom of expression: the poetical approach allows more variation in the choice of symbolism, and the limitations set by the theological context are not in full force.

How, then, are mystical experiences expressed in Syriac poetry? Despite the abundance of *memra* and *madraša* poetry in Syriac literature, the vehicle of mystical discourse among the Syrian monks is almost exclusively prose. This fact is remarkable in itself, for it again shows that the metatheologians felt no need or desire to develop the forms of expression towards artistic purposes with aesthetic motives.

Something, however, can be found outside the main streams of metatheological tradition. *The Odes of Solomon* (OS), a Jewish-Christian work from the second century AD, is exceptionally rich in this respect.²¹⁹ In the historical perspective OS forms a relatively detached phenomenon in Syriac literature (also by its poetical form, or lack of it), yet its topics and images are in fact surprisingly similar to those found in later Syriac literature, including the sources of the present study. For that reason I see a more detailed survey of the imagery of OS as being of relevance for our synchronic approach, even though this entails a brief excursion from the mainstream of our corpus. For the purposes of this chapter I shall also employ a reference from St. Ephrem's *Paradise Hymns*, which is undoubtedly one of the most fruitful sources from the golden era of Classical Syriac poetry in regard to expression of personal experience. And finally I shall make a brief excursion to a lesser-known epic of Rabban Hormizd.

The general atmosphere of OS is very charismatic. Primarily, we may differentiate three different ways in the expression of the mystical encounter:

1. Explicit: (symbolic) description of the encounter.
2. Implicit: aspects in telling-technique
3. Description of visions

²¹⁹ A methodological note here to illustrate the *systematic* analysis; the selection of quotations has been made in two basic stages. First, from the whole discourse of OS I have selected all features that seem to include traces of *personal* experience. Thus most biblical allusions, for example, are omitted. Second, I exclude all expressions that seem to belong more to general religious experience. What remains then, should be the elements of expression of extraordinary "mystical experience". It is to be admitted, however, that there is no ultimately objective criterion for defining the exact course of decisions in either of these stages. The translations of OS are my own, usually representing a compromise between the ultra-literal solutions of Franzmann (1991) and those of Charlesworth (1973).

The symbolism of OS operates in two directions: from man to God (we could name it "natural") and from God to man ("supernatural"). An example of the natural can be found in Ode 40, where from the heart of the Odist there 'wells up/forth' (*gāsē*) praise to the Lord "like a spring" (*mabbō'ā*). The Odist likens his praise to milk (*halbā*) and honey (*debšā*).²²⁰ We shall, however, concentrate in the following on the "supernatural" case, the more "mystical" aspect of the two – although it is also important to note that the former leads to the latter²²¹.

2.2.3.1. Symbols of Mystical Encounter

OS is full of imagery of God touching on the human soul. This experience is often described with imagery connected with water. For example, 6:8-12 depicts the waters of the Lord as a flooding river which fills the whole earth. This liquid and refreshing character of spiritual experience fits well with the Syrian, Oriental, origin of OS – one might expect a Scandinavian to place more stress on the aspect of warmth in spiritual experience!

Ode 30 gives an exposition of this immaterial water. Its origins are in the "living spring (*mabbō'ā hayyā*) of the Lord"; it issued forth from the lips of the Lord (*sefwāteh de-māryā*). Its characteristics are described as "beautiful and fresh" (*šappir-ū we-nāqed*) and as "giving rest to the soul" (*wa-mnīḥ nafšā*). These waters are also 'sweeter' (*bassīmīn*) than honey. Verse 6b reads "and from the heart of the Lord is its name".²²² The 'name' is a broad concept in Syriac; especially in theological contexts it functions like a "totality of attributes" that often refer to a person's "social surface", i.e. image, reputation, hence even authority.

Other water-related symbols include dew (*ta'lā*)²²³ and sprinkling (*resīsē*).²²⁴

Sprinkle (*rōs*) upon us your sprinklings (*resīsayk*),
open your abundant springs (*mabbō'ayk*)
which flow milk and honey to us.²²⁵

If we try to reconstruct the semantic process of the formation of meanings behind the signs, the development might be illustrated as follows:

²²⁰ OS 40:1-2.

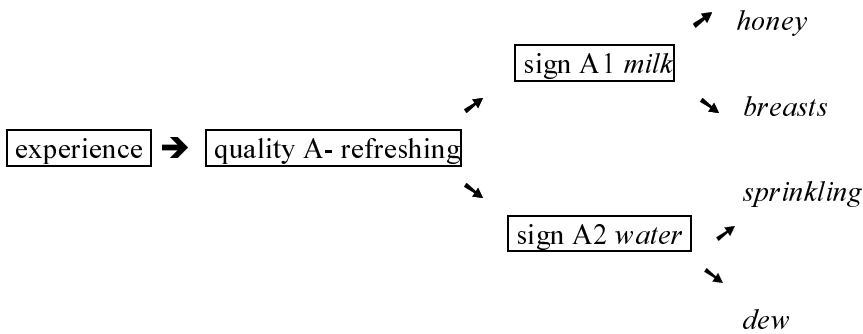
²²¹ The Odist himself hints at this in OS 40:3-4.

²²² ܡܘܨܝܘܬܝܢ ܕܡܝܢ ܠܒܝܘܬܝܢ ܕܡܠܟܝܢ

²²³ OS 11:14 "My face (ܐܦܝܝܢܝ) received dew."

²²⁴ OS 4:10, 35:1.

²²⁵ OS 4:10.



In this semantic process the character of experience is first recognised by the subject as something refreshing (A). The mind then searches for analogies for such experience in the natural world and finds one in the physiological experience of drinking. The object of the process of drinking, a drink, serves as an analogy for the spiritual experience. The signs of different drinks (A1, A2) may then be adopted into the discourse, and these in turn produce through associations new images that lead the discourse in further directions. For example, sign 1 *milk* causes an association with the biblical images of 'milk and honey'. It also opens another connection towards the feminine imagery of God.²²⁶ Sign 2 *water* opens new water-like images, such as *sprinkling* or *dew*. In this way the discourse, all the time dependent on the subtextual capacity of the poet, develops towards its final form. This associative process, semiosis, plays a dominant role, especially in poetical discourse.

The nature of these different signs is symbolical and their character optional, i.e. they function as indicators of the same reality. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that water ('sprinkling') and milk are in fact identified with each other in explicit terms: "And He gave me milk, the dew of the Lord."²²⁷

The imagery is by no means restricted to these "refreshing" cases. Since the main subtext of the Odist is the (Hebrew) Bible, most of the imagery is biblical. Ode 28 likens the inner experience to the presence of covering wings (*geppē*) and to the joy it brings to a leaping foetus ('*ūla de-dā'es*). Both are biblical expressions – the latter may even be the original Aramaic expression underlying the NT Greek.²²⁸

²²⁶ See OS 19:1-5, where the Holy Spirit (ܠܫܝܚܐ ܠܫܝܚܐ) mixed (ܕܠܝܚܐ) the milk, which is therefore called a 'mixture' (ܠܫܝܚܐ). The grammatical gender of 'Spirit' in Syriac is feminine in origin.

²²⁷ OS 35:5b. This heavenly milk (ܠܫܝܚܐ), immediately explained as the 'dew of the Lord' (ܠܫܝܚܐ ܡܠܝܚܐ), carries on the same analogy in its consequences: it makes the subject "grow up" and "rest". Milk and water also come together in OS 4:10: "Sprinkle upon us your sprinklings, and open your abundant springs, from which flow milk and honey to us."

²²⁸ Luke 1:44. The same words are found in both the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels. It seems to be certain that the first chapters of Luke are based on Aramaic sources. See R.A. Martin (1987): *Syntax Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels*, 73-74, 89-90, 105.

As the wings of doves over their nestlings,
and the mouths of their nestlings toward their mouths,
so also the wings of the Spirit over my heart.
My heart is (continually) delighted and leaps for joy,
like a foetus which leaps for joy in the womb of his mother.

In metatheological texts mercy (*raḥmā*) is not necessarily a collective noun similar to the Western understanding of the concept of mercy. *Raḥmā* seems to function as an indicator of the effects of grace, sometimes translated as ‘proceedings of grace’. Recognition of this sense is often facilitated by the use of the plural.²²⁹

The famous Syriac imagery of clothing is fully represented in OS.²³⁰ The Odist puts on or urges one to put on ‘mercy’²³¹, a ‘seal’²³², ‘holiness’²³³, ‘incorruption’²³⁴, ‘light’²³⁵ and ‘joy’²³⁶.

The Lord renewed me with His garment (*ba-lbūšeh*),
and gained me by His light (*nūhreh*)²³⁷

God’s action towards the human soul is depicted with verbs like ‘overshadow’²³⁸ and ‘renew’.²³⁹

2.2.3.2. Characteristics of the Encounter

So far we have dealt mainly with individual terms used of the experience. Next we may differentiate some more interpretative features in the expression of the encounter. The characteristics of the experience may be divided into seven basic qualities:

- (A) refreshment
- (B) intoxication
- (C) totality
- (D) rest
- (E) delight

²²⁹ OS 14:9 “According to the multitude of your *mercies*, so grant to me.”

(ܐܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ). A similar expression in OS 16:7.

²³⁰ For further details, see Brock 1982: *Clothing Metaphors*, and Seppälä 1999, 147-148.

²³¹ Or ‘goodness’ – ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 4:6, 19:7.

²³² ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 4:8.

²³³ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 13:3.

²³⁴ Or ‘imperishableness’ – ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 15:8.

²³⁵ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 21:3.

²³⁶ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 23:1.

²³⁷ OS 11:11.

²³⁸ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 35:1.

²³⁹ ܐܘܪܝܢܐ OS 11:11.

- (F) pleasure
(G) knowledge

The logical structure of the discourse might imply differentiation between the qualities included in the experience itself and the consequences resulting from it. The Odist himself, however, does not make clear distinctions in this respect, which is no surprise because in poetical language such distinctions are rather left hidden. We may consider features A–C (refreshment, intoxication, totality) as belonging to the first category; qualities D–G (rest²⁴⁰, delight, pleasure, knowledge) seem to function in both, i.e. in the experience itself, and in the state following it.

The refreshing character (A) has already been mentioned above as perhaps the most typical quality of OS. It is something that can be found in classical Syriac poetry with images developed a few steps further. St. Ephrem, in his visions of Paradise, “swam around in its [of Paradise] magnificent waves.”²⁴¹ The utterly symbolic nature of the expression is here clarified by mixing it with other dimensions: drinking air and swimming in it:

How much the more, then, can this blessed air
give to spiritual beings pleasure as they partake of and drink it,
fly about and swim in it – this veritable ocean of delights.²⁴²

The intoxicating quality (B) leads the Odist to use an analogy, depicting himself as being drunk, an expression very familiar from Sufi poetry 800 years later. “I drank and got drunk (*rawwēt*), but my drunkenness (*rawwāyūtā*) was not without knowledge”.²⁴³ This image, too, is not limited to OS in the field of Syriac poetry. We may find the following lines from St. Ephrem:

I forgot my poor estate,
for it (i.e. vision of Paradise) had *made me drunk with its fragrance*.
I became as no longer my old self,
for it renewed me with all its varied nature.
I swam around in its magnificent waves
[...]
I became so inebriated that I forgot all my sins there.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Rest as a consequence in OS 30:3 (above). In OS 36:1 resting – in the Spirit of the Lord – is even portrayed as a “method” leading to spiritual uplifting.

²⁴¹ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

²⁴² Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 9:16. English translation according to Brock 1990, 142.

²⁴³ OS 11:7.

²⁴⁴ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

The Syriac for the words in italics: ܕܠܘܟ [ܕ]ܐܘܪܝܢܐ and ܕܠܘܟ ܕܠܘܟ ܕܠܘܟ

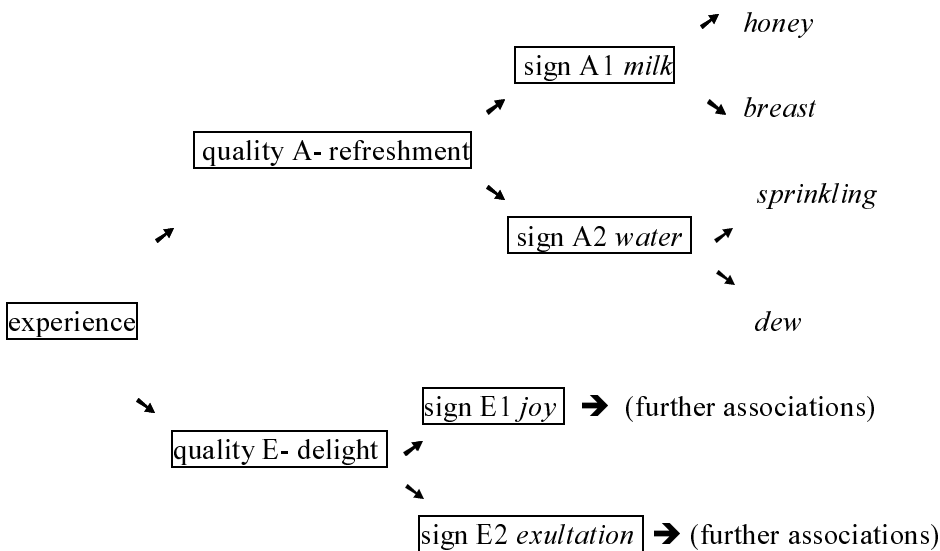
St. Ephrem contrasts this spiritual inebriation with earthly nourishment; both sustain but one is deceitful, the other trustworthy:

The burden of food debilitates us, in excess it proves harmful,
but if it be joy which inebriates and sustains,
how greatly will the soul be sustained on the waves of this joy.²⁴⁵

All qualities operate in OS in the way described above, and thus each one could be arranged according to a similar scheme:

experience → quality B- intoxicating → sign B1 ܕܠܐܝܢ → further associations

These other qualities could, in turn, be combined in a single semantic chart (A, B ...X). For example, a chart including lines A and E would look like this:



As we have seen, totality (C) is generally considered to be one of the basic attributes of mystical experience in all religions. “Pure totality”, however, is somewhat awkward to express in itself alone. St. Ephrem expresses it beautifully through the refreshing and visionary characters in a hymn where he is swimming in the waves of Paradise:

Although I was not sufficient for all the waves of its beauty,
Paradise took me up and cast me into a sea still greater.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 9:23. English translation according to Brock 1990, 144.

²⁴⁶ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:5. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

The theme of totality is also present in the discourse of OS.²⁴⁷ Here also we may note an example of semantic cross-reference. The water-related images (in line A) may also be employed for the expression of this phenomenon: “My heart overflowed, it was found in my mouth, it dawned upon my lips.”²⁴⁸

Among the most essential qualities one may also find (D) ‘resting’²⁴⁹ and (E) delight, expressed as ‘joy’²⁵⁰ and ‘exultation’²⁵¹. Closely connected with E we may add the quality of pleasure (F), expressed with vocabulary portraying love and tenderness. Ode 15:5b reads ‘I was given pleasure (*etpanqet*) in His hands.’ The verb *penaq* means ‘treat with affection’, ‘cherish’, or ‘pamper’. (In later Syriac literature its derivative *mefanneqā*, ‘one living in luxury’ became a negative term, the opposite of ‘*anwāyā*, ‘ascetic’.) Charismatic character is further stressed by expressions like ‘He filled me from His love’ (not ‘with’ His love – in this way it is stressed that there is something to be transmitted; that something we call “mystical experience”).²⁵²

Among these other qualities there is a certain “informative”, almost “verbal” quality, extremely problematic to define or analyse, connected with prophetic phenomena and spiritual knowledge. The Odist likens himself to a harp played by the Spirit²⁵³ – later on ‘Harp of the Spirit’ became known as a title of the most beloved Syriac poets (Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh and Narsai) – so that the Spirit of the Lord is speaking through him. Thus one feature of the experience in the OS is that in the mystical encounter something called ‘knowledge’ (*īda’ tā*) is transferred. The concept of knowledge has exceptionally charismatic features in OS.²⁵⁴ The Lord has made His knowledge great, and desires eagerly that it might

²⁴⁷ “In this way the Spirit of the Lord speaks in my members, and I speak in/by His love. For what is strange is destroyed, and everything is of the Lord” (OS 6:2-3).

ܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ . ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ
ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ . ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ

²⁴⁸ ‘Overflowed’ (ܥܦܢܩܬܐ); literally ‘was caused to pour forth’. OS 21:8.

²⁴⁹ ܥܦܢܩܬܐ OS 11:12, 28:3, 36:1, 37:4. *Neyāhā* is a broad concept indicating rest, calm, quiet, relaxation, satisfaction, pleasure, refreshment; often ‘(inner) peace’ would do well as a translation.

²⁵⁰ ܥܦܢܩܬܐ OS 7:2, 23:1.

²⁵¹ ܥܦܢܩܬܐ OS 8:1, 23:4.

²⁵² ܥܦܢܩܬܐ OS 11:2.

²⁵³ OS 6:1-2.

²⁵⁴ The Odist has partaken of (11:4, 12:3) and received a conception of knowledge (15:5), in the end all shall partake of (7:24) it. Spiritual drunkenness is inferior to it (11:8), it has been given sincerely (17:13), opponents of the Messiah lack it (28:14, see also 18:12), those who know, understand and are not polluted (18:13). Ignorance has been destroyed, replaced by the knowledge of the Lord (OS 7:24). According to 34:5, the good tidings are in all simplicity declared to those without knowledge. This verse, it seems to me, has been mistranslated by previous translators, who have read the verb ܡܦܥܠܐ in *etpe’el* ‘considered by’ instead of *etpa’al* ‘declared to’. (ܡܦܥܠܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܡܢ ܗܘܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ) This translation of mine is supported by contextual reading. The joyous message of the 34th Ode, parallel to that of Matt. 11:25, declares that the truth can be known by a simple and undivided heart. In verse 5 the message of verses 1-4 is declared to those who do not know, and the next line gives a parallel thought in the 2nd person plural: ‘revealed for your salvation’ (34:6).

corresponding sexual connotations).²⁶³ The Odist also boldly declares that he has been ‘mixed’ (*etmazget*) [with God], “since the lover has found the Beloved.”²⁶⁴ The same verb (*mezag*) was later on used by St. Ephrem to describe the relation between the human and divine natures of Christ, but after the Council of Chalcedon (451) this idea was declared heretical.

The imagery of unification – not to mention ‘breasts’ of God – is exceptionally bold when considering the fact that the Odist seems to come from a more or less Targumic background.²⁶⁵ It is also remarkable that the expressions of unification were already employed in OS a couple of hundreds of years before the mystical theology of Evagrius and Pseudo-Dionysius, with its neo-Platonic overtones, made its way to the Syrian Orient.

Does OS give any hints as to how this unification takes place? A noteworthy point of encounter is praise, glorification, (*tešbōhtā*) which is not only something offered to God by man, but also something given by God: ”His praise He gave us, for his name”.²⁶⁶ In 18:1 the Odist declares that his heart is lifted up in the Love of the Highest in order to praise Him.

The description of God is correspondingly bold. God is depicted as the ‘Beloved’²⁶⁷, a term characteristic of Sufi poetry 800 years later. The best-known way of describing God in OS, however, is the feminine imagery. God has even prepared His breasts that men might drink His holy milk.²⁶⁸ In another famous verse the Odist declares:

The Son is the cup;
and the one who was milked, the Father;
and she who milked, the Spirit of Holiness.
Because His breasts were full,
it was necessary that His milk should not be cast out without cause.
The Spirit of Holiness opened Her womb,
and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father,
and She gave the mixture to the world although they did not know.²⁶⁹

²⁶³ OS 4:9, 21:5.

²⁶⁴ OS 3:7 – ܐܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ

²⁶⁵ The influence of the Targums has been discussed by Harris-Mingana (1920, 171-174). The Targums are not quoted in OS as such, but a certain Targumic background can be seen in the treatment of expressions derived from the Hebrew Psalter in OS. For example, God is never called a ‘rock’. The Odist also frequently uses the Targumic expressions ‘it was revealed’ (ܐܘܢܝܢܐ) and ‘before’ (ܥܘܢܝܢܐ) a person.

²⁶⁶ OS 6:7 – ܐܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ The concepts of praise and glory are closely connected in the Semitic languages: to ‘praise’ God means to ‘glorify’ him.

²⁶⁷ Both Syriac terms for ‘Beloved’ are used in OS: ܐܘܢܝܢܐ in 3:5, 3:7, 7:1, and ܐܘܢܝܢܐ in 8:21. The most common terms for God in OS, however, are ‘The Lord’ (ܐܘܢܝܢܐ) with about 100 occurrences, and ‘The Highest’ (ܐܘܢܝܢܐ), which appears about 30 times.

²⁶⁸ ܐܘܢܝܢܐ OS 8:14.

²⁶⁹ OS 19:2-5.

The step from analytical to more symbolical expression is sometimes clearly differentiated by the use of the comparative conjunction *ayk*. In this way God is compared to the ‘sun’ (*šemsā*).²⁷⁰ This image is further explained in another Ode:

For He is my sun,
His rays have lifted me up,
His light has released all darkness from my face.²⁷¹

God is also likened to *kelīlā*, ‘crown’ or ‘garland’. This image refers both to His action,²⁷² and also to Himself: this is shown in Ode 17, where it is stated that the crown is a living one.²⁷³ The same theme is already present in the first Ode, preserved only in Coptic translation. The Coptic word used in 1:1 is **ΚΛΟΜ**, which also has the equivalent double meaning of ‘crown’ and ‘wreath’. The latter meaning, in fact, makes more sense in the context: **ΚΛΟΜ** is plaited for the Odist in 1:2, and verses 3-5 confirm that it is a living one, the Lord Himself.

His love has nourished my heart,
unto my lips He has fed (*gāšē*) His fruits²⁷⁴

One aspect of God in OS is beauty. Since in the Syriac language and in Syriac thinking, however, beauty and goodness are strongly identified in a way very similar to that in Greek, it is actually a matter of choice as to whether *yā'yūtā* should be translated ‘beauty’ or ‘goodness’.²⁷⁵ In favour of the former we can find the expression *šappīrā*, ‘the beautiful one’, used of God’s acting in human souls, producing harmony of mind – but it is also used in the sense of ‘good’ as well.²⁷⁶

However, God is not only milk and honey, but – to use the biblical expression²⁷⁷ – a ‘burning fire’ as well. Ode 39 is a powerful and beautiful presentation of the destructive aspect of His presence – but even here the water-symbolism is employed, the power of the Lord being compared²⁷⁸ to mighty rivers that destroy all except the faithful.

²⁷⁰ OS 11:13.

²⁷¹ OS 15:2.

²⁷² OS 5:12 ”like a *crown* (ܩܠܝܠܐ) He is on my head”.

²⁷³ OS 17:1.

²⁷⁴ OS 16:2. Since the verb ܩܘܠܝܠܐ literally means ‘to vomit’, the idea seems to be that the Lord (or ‘Love’) feeds the Odist directly from His mouth. This maternal image also enriches our picture of the early Syriac feminine imagery of God. The possibility does not appear in the English translations: ‘poured out’ (Mingana 1920), ‘poured unto’ (Charlesworth 1973), ‘belched up’ (Franzmann 1991).

²⁷⁵ OS 12:4, 15:7, 16:5, 16:17.

²⁷⁶ OS 34:3 ܩܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ . ܩܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ

²⁷⁷ Heb. 12:29.

²⁷⁸ The Syriac verse in question (OS 39:1) reads ܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ . The level of analytism vs. symbolism of the expression is further dimmed by a grammatical possibility existent in the Semitic languages, i.e. that of omitting the word “like” in a comparison (a more familiar example is ܩܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܠܝܠܐ in Ps. 45:6(7), which in most Bible translations is

Mighty rivers are (like) the power of the Lord,
 they bring those who despise him head downwards.
 And they entangle their steps,
 destroy their fords.
 And they snatch their bodies,
 corrupt their souls.²⁷⁹

2.2.3.4. The Poetic Subject as an Indicator of Unification

One of the striking features of OS is a certain inconsistency in the narrative. The subject of a verse is often problematic to define; the possibilities remain manifold even after the vocabulary is grammatically analysed. This had led scholars to divide some odes into sections where "Christ speaks" and others where "the Odist speaks".²⁸⁰ With this kind of simplification, however, something is lost from the general impression. This 'something' could be called "the beauty of obscurity".

The obscurity of the subject, moreover, does not seem to be a consequence of clumsiness of style but an intentional effect. This functional poetic device has not been recognised by many Western scholars who have tried to force the Odes into strict "either-or" logic in a very unfruitful way. The effect, however, has been recognised by the Swedish translators:

Den kristne identifieras med Kristus till den grad att man inte alltid säkert vet vem det är som odet talar om, och detta antyder ett slags mystisk Kristusfromhet.²⁸¹

Intentionality itself, however, is a relative concept in poetry: an inspired writer is never fully conscious of all aspects or changes in his telling. Moreover, "meaning" cannot be constituted by the writer alone, but to some extent by the recipient of the data as well. For example, in Ode 41 the subject is clearly the Odist in verses 1-7. Then, line 8a 'All those who see me, will marvel', seems, *after* a logical analysis of the entire Ode, to be the beginning of the words of Christ. For anyone who in his recitation arrives at verse 8, however, the whole

"Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever", but in the Finnish translation it reads: 'Sinun valtaistuimesi on niin kuin Jumalan', 'Your throne is *like* God's'.

²⁷⁹ OS 39:1-3.

²⁸⁰ The divisions made by Harris-Mingana (1920) in Odes 8, 10, 17, 22, 28, 31, 36, 41 and 42 are reproduced in Charlesworth's edition (1977); in the Swedish translation (Beskow 1980) these divisions are omitted. See Franzmann 1991, 4; further reading in Aune, D.E.: *The Odes of Solomon and Early Christian Prophecy*, *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982), 435-460, and Aune, D.E.: *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (Michigan, 1983). Due to the non-canonical character of OS there has been no enthusiasm to produce any redaction theories to explain the variation.

²⁸¹ Beskow – Hidal 1980, 91. "The Christian identifies himself with Christ to such an extent that it is not always sure who is it that the ode is talking about, and this hints at a kind of mystical Christ-piety."

attitude and attention are still concentrated on the human subject of verses 1-7. In this way line 8a may also serve as an expression of the consequences of mystical experience – unification – when read in the sense that it is a believer speaking. This means that OS also gives the reader plenty of opportunities to identify himself with Christ.

Examples may be found in several odes. Ode 15 clearly consists of words of man praising God, but in the middle of it the words of verse 9 seem to be uttered by Christ. In Ode 17 the subject seems to be man in verses 1-5, and Christ in 6-16. It is, however, possible to interpret at least verses 1 and 5 with reference to Christ and 7-9a with reference to man. In Ode 36 the subject changes smoothly from man to the Son of God around the third verse. In Ode 42 the first verse is spoken by the Odist, but the sixth verse cannot be spoken by anybody but Christ. Where did the switch occur? Here verses 3-20 seem to be spoken by Christ. There is, on the other hand, the possibility of a believer identifying himself with the subject at least in verses 3-5a and 10.

The change of subject as it takes place in three odes can be illustrated as follows:²⁸²

Ode 10	Ode 29	Ode 36
1 man (Son)	1 man	1 man
2 man (Son)	2 man/Son	2 man
3 man/Son	3 man/Son	3 Son
4 Son	4 Son/man	4 Son
5a Son (man)	5a Son/man	5 man
5b man (Son)	5b man/Son	6a Son/man
5c Son	6 man	6b man
6 Son	7 man	7 man/Son?
	8 Son	8 Son/man?
	9 Son/man	
	10 man/Son	
	11 man	

The rotation is considerable, especially since OS contains no elements of dialogue poems (otherwise much beloved in Syriac literature). In many cases the subject might, of course, be identified in a different way from that suggested above, but the main point remains unquestioned: the subject changes without warning and without clear points of change.

The production of this kind of classification, however, presupposes certain dogmatic dispositions in the questions (1) how evident imperfections we

²⁸² The numbers of the verses in question in vertical columns; where both subjects are possible, the more probable is given first. The one in brackets is less probable than the one after the diagonal line.

are willing to attribute to Christ (the perfect man!), and (2) how bold expressions we dare to attribute to the human subject (made divine!). The further we dare to go, the more "mystical" the contents seem to become. This is an illustrious example of how mystical meanings are constituted *into* texts in the reading-process.

A further feature to be noted is that occasionally the discourse may also take place between God the Son and God the Father.²⁸³ Ode 28, for example, seems to be a charismatic effusion by a man resting in the bosom of God. From the ninth verse onwards, however, the ode is clearly Messianic. In the light of these latter verses the first eight verses could also be read as the speech of the Son tenderly describing His close relationship with the Father. Or, on the other hand, most of the latter verses could be read according to the human perspective of the previous verses. Thus 'my birth unlike theirs'²⁸⁴ could be read as referring to either the physical birth of Christ or to the spiritual birth of the Odist or of any believer.

Moreover, it is important to note that the "mystical" way of reading is not arbitrary, for the subject-play seems to be intentional. The Odist occasionally declares his unification plainly, as we have already noted. He is also aware of his prophetic status in entirely explicit terms: "The Spirit of the Lord is speaking in me".²⁸⁵

Similar reflections appear in a number of particular expressions. For example, 'servant' at the end of the afore-mentioned Ode 29 seems to refer, on the one hand, to Christ, and to the believer on the other.²⁸⁶

2.2.3.5. Visions

Visions constitute a special category in mystical language. There are not many criteria, however, to outline any semantic processes or formation of meanings in this case. The basic way to differentiate visionary language from a spiritual discourse is the explicit demand in the 1st person singular.²⁸⁷ For example, "I behold a dwelling there and a tabernacle of light" in the Paradise hymns of St.

²⁸³ Ode 22 is basically a thanksgiving Psalm addressed by the Son to the Father, his protector in Sheol. At the end of the ode, however, the subject seems to be a human one.

²⁸⁴ OS 28:17. *אֲנִי לִבְרֵאשִׁית וְלִבְרֵאשִׁית*.

²⁸⁵ OS 6:2. Divine inspiration is claimed in at least eight different places: 10:1-2, 11:6, 12:1, 15:5, 16:5 ("I open my mouth, and His Spirit will speak in me"), 17:5 ("And the thought of truth led me"), 36:1 and 42:6 where the risen Christ declares: "I arose and am with them, and I will speak by their mouths."

²⁸⁶ "And I gave praise to the Most High, because He has made great His *servant* and the son of His maidservant" (OS 29:11). Most scholars and commentators remain silent about the ambiguity; some have chosen to support one or other of the possibilities. Charlesworth 1973, 113.

²⁸⁷ The classical example being Ezekiel 1:4 (וַיֹּאמֶר וְהִנֵּה רוּחַ סְעָרָה בָּאָה מִן־הַצָּפוֹן), traditionally considered as the starting-point of the Jewish *merkava* mysticism.

Ephrem.²⁸⁸ The curious aspect in such expressions is that they may give an even more profound impression when there is no actual visionary reference behind them, but they represent the “beholder’s” ability to see when there is nothing to see.

The presence of (the Spirit of) the Lord is occasionally described with expressions indicating a visionary encounter, also in OS.

And I was lifted up by the light,
I passed before His face.²⁸⁹

I went up into the light of Truth, as into a chariot.²⁹⁰

Ode 38 starts with a solemn declaration: “I went up to the light of Truth as into a chariot”, and contains a vision of a corruptive couple, a bride and bridegroom imitating the Beloved and His bride with their own feasts and wines.

OS also contains descriptions of visions of Paradise, a famous topic in latter Syriac literature and a basic element of the theological thinking of Syriac authors.

And He brought me to His Paradise,
wherein are the riches of the Lord’s delight.²⁹¹

This theme is further developed in the Paradise hymns of St. Ephrem. His vision develops as a result of reading the sacred Scriptures and meditating upon them.

Both the bridge and the gate of Paradise
did I find in this book. I crossed over and entered;
my eye indeed remained outside but my mind entered within.
I began to wander amid things not described [lit. ‘unwritten’]
This is a luminous height, clear, lofty and fair:
Scripture named it Eden, the summit of all blessings.
There too did I see the bowers of the just [...]²⁹²

Paradise raised me up as I perceived it,
it enriched me as I meditated upon it;²⁹³

The spiritual character of Paradise is expressed beautifully in OS by transferring (should we say, transplanting!) human beings among the vegetation:

²⁸⁸ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 8:3. English translation according to Brock 1990, 131.

²⁸⁹ OS 21:6.

²⁹⁰ OS 38:1. (ܐܘܢ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܢܐ)

²⁹¹ OS 11:16.

²⁹² Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 5:5-6. English translation according to Brock 1990, 103-104.

²⁹³ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso* 6:4. English translation according to Brock 1990, 110.

Blessed are they, Lord,
 who are planted in your earth,
 those who have a place in your Paradise.²⁹⁴

Eastern theology in general, and theological/liturgical poetry in particular, operates in a way that could be described as timeless or synchronic. In other words, X can be connected with Y regardless of their difference in time or space, if they have a common element in substance. Poetic language is full of such associations. Therefore, 'Paradise' and 'crown' are joined by the Odist who urges: "come into His Paradise, make for yourself a crown (*kelilā*) from His tree."²⁹⁵

Is there something to be deduced about the experiences themselves behind the words? Due to their visionary and prophetic character, they clearly belong to the "mystical". That the ecstatic quality is present in them is revealed by images of drunkenness, even though it is not a central theme or motive for the Odist, and even less for St. Ephrem.

2.2.3.6. Charismatic Themes in the Epic of Rabban Hormizd

As a curiosity, we may note a less known poetical work which constitutes a peculiar tribute to a 7th-century saint, Rabban Hormizd. The text was written perhaps in the 14th century by the otherwise unknown Sergius of Azerbaijan, and was probably meant to be recited at Rabban Hormizd's feast. This gigantic (3496 lines) epic is arranged into 22 'gates' according to the letters of the Syriac alphabet, so that every line of each 'gate' ends with its corresponding letter. This difficult system led the author to use uncommon words and derive new nouns and verbal forms from existing roots. Since the epic repeatedly deals with charismatic topics, one might expect to find peculiar expressions for the mystical experience.²⁹⁶

Often the images correspond to those found in other works, yet there are several less customary features as well. Rabban received 'joy',²⁹⁷ the "extent of which the tongue of flesh cannot relate".²⁹⁸ He remained in 'wonderment' (*tedmōrtā*)²⁹⁹, and in 'ecstasy' (*tahrā*) for three hours.³⁰⁰ Experiences are caused

²⁹⁴ OS 11:18.

²⁹⁵ OS 20:7. 'Wreath' is also, of course, a suitable translation here.

²⁹⁶ Especially Rabban Hormizd's legendary encounter with Mar Sylvanus is portrayed in great charismatic detail; it is reputed that the latter's soul delighted (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ) in 'divine visions' (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ) Budge 1894, line 1061 (p. 50). Budge 1902, 366.

²⁹⁷ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ Budge 1894, line 677 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345. 'Joy' resulting from ecstatic experience, see also line 1093 (p. 52).

²⁹⁸ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ Budge 1894, line 678 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345.

²⁹⁹ ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ Budge 1894, line 1087 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 368.

³⁰⁰ Budge 1894, line 1091 (p. 52). Budge translates ܐܘܪܘܚܐ as 'wonderment', which is

by the ‘mercies’ (*rahmē*) of Jesus, and these were abundantly ‘flashing’ (*ettabraqw*) like thunder upon Rabban.³⁰¹ Another somewhat rarer expression is that the Holy Spirit ‘adorned’ (*šabbet*) him.³⁰² Christ “filled him with the Spirit and all gifts”,³⁰³ and the experiences he enjoyed enabled him even to blow ‘fiery flashes’ against devils.³⁰⁴

The leading quality of the mystical experience in the Epic is warmth, which culminates in the “flaming fire of his love of Jesus our Lord”³⁰⁵, and is identified with the fire which Christ was to cast into this world.³⁰⁶ Rabban Hormizd became “flaming and burning”.³⁰⁷ “He was warmed (*ethamem*) with the love of Jesus as with a flame of fire (*nabraštā de-nūrā*).”³⁰⁸

The image of union occurs several times. Rabban used to delight in ‘divine union’ (*meḥaydūtā allāhāyā*)³⁰⁹; he was ‘united (*meḥayyed*) unto Him’³¹⁰ in prayer. Nevertheless, the same verb is used in the Epic even of the fellowship of monks who were ‘united’ (*ethayyedw*) and ‘intermingled’ (*etmezagzagw*) together in ‘one soul and one body’.³¹¹ The brothers also ‘mix’ (*ḥallet*) and ‘mingle’ (*mazzeg*) their love with the love of their Lord.³¹² Furthermore, the light is ‘united’ (*ethayyed*)³¹³ to Rabban’s soul.

A large proportion of the experiences are visionary in character. Christ filled Rabban with ‘revelations’ (*gelyānē*)³¹⁴ and ‘visions of the spirit’ (*ḥezwānē de-rūḥ*)³¹⁵; ‘he shone (*nehar*) and was illuminated (*ettanhar*) by the visions of the Spirit (*hezway rūḥā*)”³¹⁶; he was even ‘fattened’ (*metpaṭṭam hwā*) with

nevertheless also the way he renders ܪܘܚܢܐܘܪܐ above (1902, 368).

³⁰¹ Budge 1894, line 3122 (p. 151). Budge (1902, 492) translates ܪܘܚܢܐܘܪܐ as ‘shone’.

³⁰² Budge 1894, line 2227 (p. 107). Budge 1902, 437.

³⁰³ ܪܘܚܢܐܘܪܐ ܕܠܗ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ, ܡܠܟܐ Budge 1894, line 661 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344-345.

³⁰⁴ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Budge 1894, line 672-673 (p. 33).

Budge (1902, 344) translates: “And suddenly lightning, which was full of fiery rays; He breathed on the camp of the foul devils which were in ambush.”

³⁰⁵ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Budge 1894, line 515 (p. 26). Budge 1902, 336.

³⁰⁶ “The Fire that our Lord cast” (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ). Budge 1894, line 516 (p. 27). Budge 1902, 336. Luke 12:49.

³⁰⁷ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Budge 1894, line 517 (p. 27). Budge 1902, 336.

³⁰⁸ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Budge 1894, line 2404 (p. 116). Budge 1902, 447.

³⁰⁹ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Budge 1894, line 671 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344.

³¹⁰ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ Budge 1894, line 670 (p. 33). Budge 1902, 344.

³¹¹ Budge 1894, line 1242 (p. 59). Budge 1902, 377. ܡܠܟܐܘܪܐ seems to be Sergius’s own derivation of the root *MZG*.

³¹² Budge 1894, line 1281 (p. 61). Budge 1902, 380.

³¹³ Budge 1894, line 676 (p. 34). Budge 1902, 345.

³¹⁴ Budge 1894, line 2249 (p. 108). Budge 1902, 438. Sometimes the expression ‘divine revelations’ (ܡܠܟܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ) is used. Budge 1894, line 1242 (p. 59). Budge 1902, 377.

³¹⁵ Budge 1894, line 2249 (p. 108). Budge 1902, 438.

³¹⁶ Budge 1894, line 3123 (p. 151). Budge 1902, 492. Also, in line 2249 (p. 108) Christ filled him with revelations and visions (ܡܠܟܐ).

‘revelations’ (*gelyānē*)³¹⁷ What, then, did these revelations entail? The author does not go into detail. Things revealed include ‘corporeal and incorporeal’, ‘secret things’ (*rāzē*) and ‘hidden mysteries’ (*setīrātā*).³¹⁸ There is also a description of the appearance of light. During a *theoryā* an ‘unsettling light’ (*nūhrā de-lā ‘āreb*) started to ‘blaze’ (*azleg*).³¹⁹ The vision consisted of a ‘pillar’ (*‘ammūdā*) of light which ‘illuminated’ (*manhar*) and ‘shone’ (*mazleg*).³²⁰ Besides the light, there was also ‘an unvanishing odour’.³²¹

The cause of the experiences is more frequently than in any other source named simply as ‘Jesus’. Sometimes the causes are referred to in a more ambiguous way: they spring up (*nebīg*) from the ‘hidden power’ (*ḥaylā kasyā*) which in turn is received in the ‘secrets’ (*rāzē*),³²² a term which can refer either to the Sacraments, especially Holy Communion, or to the secrets revealed in the revelation. The very broadly used concept of ‘contemplation’ (*te’oryās*) is mentioned as having been caused by ‘bestowal’ (*šukkānā*) of the Spirit,³²³ a word which comes from the same root as Hebrew כָּדַן; in Syriac it means ‘gift’, especially ‘spiritual gift’.

We may also note the exceptionally rich variety of expressions indicating the *cessation* of mystical experience: “he returned to his mind”³²⁴; “mind (*hawnā*) returned to its taste (*ta’meh*)”,³²⁵ “his mind returned to him”³²⁶, and perhaps the strongest one, in the case of three hours of ecstasy: “they came back to themselves”.³²⁷

The result of this parade of experiences is that Rabban Hormizd “ascended the lofty grade of spirituality and became magnified”; his whole being became ‘fire in fire’ (*nūrā be-nūrā*) like a cherub (*ba-dmōt kerōbā*).³²⁸ He also reached his ‘perfection’ (*gemīrūtā*)³²⁹ And finally, the author turns the charismatic language towards the reader by exhorting that “by his guidance let us suck the milk of the Spirit (*ḥeleb rūh*)”.³³⁰

³¹⁷ Budge 1894, line 1063 (p. 50). Fattening is a typical Semitic expression of welfare, translated “fed abundantly” by Budge (1902, 367).

³¹⁸ Budge 1894, line 1117 (p. 53). Budge 1902, 370.

³¹⁹ Budge 1894, line 1187 (p. 56). Budge 1902, 374.

³²⁰ Budge 1894, line 1215 (p. 58). Budge 1902, 376.

³²¹ ܟܘܪܐ ܕܐܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 1189 (p. 56). Budge 1902, 374.

³²² Budge 1894, line 1290 (p. 62). Budge 1902, 380. In line 1073 this power hidden in him ‘restored the dead to life’.

³²³ Budge 1894, line 1075 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 367.

³²⁴ ܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 1198 (p. 57). Budge (1902, 375) translates “returned to himself”. The return is here caused by the ‘Grace of Jesus the Lord’.

³²⁵ Budge 1894, line 1118 (p. 53). Budge (1902, 370) translates “their understanding returned unto its power of discerning”. The return is here caused by the ‘divine action’ (ܕܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܪܐ).

³²⁶ ܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 1076 (p. 51). Budge 1902, 367.

³²⁷ ܕܥܘܪܐ ܕܥܘܪܐ Budge 1894, line 1092 (p. 52). Budge 1902, 368.

³²⁸ Budge 1894, line 1164, 1167 (p. 55). Budge 1902, 373.

³²⁹ Budge 1894, line 1196 (p. 57). Budge 1902, 374.

³³⁰ Budge 1894, line 3105 (p. 150). Budge 1902, 491.

Several features of the syntactic and semantic deep-structure of the discourse in the epic may be illustrated in detail by means of the scheme outlined in figure below, based on the following verses.

(lines 1061-70:)

And his soul used to refresh itself in divine visions,
 he continually took delight in contemplations,
 he was enriched with revelations at all times.
 He was led by the divine providence,
 Three days he sat in the cell close to the community,
 the brethren having completed the compline and the first *kathisma*,
 and the reader having sat down to read the commentary on Genesis to the brethren,
 the mind of Mar Sylvanus was carried away in contemplation,
 all the things to come and hidden secrets were revealed to him,
 and he learned the meaning of the hidden secrets of the new world.

(lines 1075-77:)

And by the bestowal of the Spirit having enjoyed the contemplation,
 his mind returned to him again by the power of Grace
 and he understood the mysteries and the hidden things he had learned.

Charismatic terminology and relations in lines 1061-1077 of the 'Epic of Rabban Hormizd'. The concepts shown by the context are in square brackets.

<i>SUBJECT</i>	<-----	<i>EXPERIENCE</i>	<-----	<i>CAUSE</i>
RELATION:		RELATION		
<i>hawnā</i>	carry away	<i>te'oryā</i>	[revealing]	
[Sylvanus]	enjoyment	<i>te'oryās</i>	donation	<i>rūḥā</i>
[Sylvanus]	feeding	<i>gelyānā</i>		
[Sylvanus]	learning	<i>ḥezwā</i>		
<i>nafšā</i>	enjoyment	<i>ḥezwā allāhāyā</i>		
<i>hawnā</i>	carry away	<i>te'oryā rūḥānītā</i>	settling	gift (<i>mawhabtā</i>)
[Sylvanus]	return	<i>hawnā</i>	powerful	<i>ṭaybūtā</i>

The last case is a curiosity, essentially different, albeit parallel in its syntactic structure, the interesting thing being that it shows that the cessation of ecstasy may also be viewed as sent by God. As the table shows, the cause is often left

unmentioned, perhaps because it is too self-evident; the anthropological terminology referring to the subject is not always used in a completely logical way; the effects of experience are manifold and many-sided.

Finally, we may make a few concluding remarks on the poetic expression of the mystical experience. The semantic mechanisms in the expression of the experience do not differ essentially from those of Syriac prose. The choice of signs, the vocabulary, of OS, or that of St. Ephrem, is not radically different from other Syriac sources of this study, all the basic imagery of mystical experience appearing in the poetic form. The peculiar feature of OS is its flickering play with the subject, taking place somewhere beneath the grammatical level of the text. The epic of Rabban Hormizd contains a few extraordinary words and expressions, mostly rare forms of the roots commonly used in mystical contexts, but mostly the approach is based on the use of quite conventional expressions.

2.3. Interpretation

In the previous chapter the focus was essentially on the expression of whatever takes place in a single experience. We shall now move on to a more abstract level, aiming to outline the interpretations that operate with the general nature of experience, and to make some deductions as to the position of experience in relation both to God and to the subject.

2.3.1. Language and Interpretation

Before considering the problem of interpretation it is necessary to point out certain observations concerning the mechanisms in the use of language. The very differentiation of expression and interpretation, seemingly a modern one, was in fact already observed by John of Dalyatha:

To express the modality of the revelation of God in sanctified minds (*madde 'ē meqaddešē*), is not allowed for the tongue. But the interpretation (*pūšāqā*) of the great mystery is appointed for pure and illuminated minds. It is, however, immersed in silence.³³¹

The problems of signification that we encountered on the level of expression are reflected on the level of interpretation so that the signs of inner states may be in almost free variation. The problem was also realised by Isaac of Nineveh; in his discussion of the prevailing conceptual confusion, he attempted to produce a basic division into “spiritual” and “psychic” levels.

The holy fathers are accustomed to designate all profitable emotions and all spiritual working by the name of prayer. [...] Sometimes they designate by spiritual prayer (*ṣelōtā rūḥānāyā*) that which they sometimes call contemplation (*tē'ōryā*), and sometimes knowledge (*īda'tā*) and sometimes revelations of intelligible things (*gelyāne de-metyad'ānītā*). Do you see how the fathers change their significations of spiritual things? This is because naming can be established with exactness only in the case of things of this world. The things of the new world do not have a real name, but only a simple cognition (*īda'tā pešītā*), which is above all names, signs, forms and colours.³³²

³³¹ The first phrase literally: “to tell the howness of revelation”; Beulay: *Lettres*, 1:4 (pp. 306-307).

³³² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 168-169; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 114. *Metyad'ānītā* is the opposite of sensual perception: “conceivable by the mind; intellectual, spiritual, immaterial, mystical.” Payne-Smith, 316.

For this very reason there is not, and cannot be, any completely objective way to understand the mystical accounts. A reader must interpret subjectively what idea is signified by what sign. In other words, it is impossible to put together categories consisting of all occurrences of a certain term without including cases where the same term is used with a different meaning. Similarly, it is probable that a single author may employ several terms to refer to the same state of being, the result being that their semantic fields interpenetrate.

In the case of terms referring to concrete realities it is usually possible to make reasonably sharp distinctions between the various meanings of one word, and to decide whether a usage is a variation on the basic meaning or a completely different one (even though etymologically speaking the origin of the different meanings are often in the varying usages of the original basic meaning). In the case of abstract terms, however, the difference between the divergent meanings and varying usages regularly seems to be stepless and indefinite.

The process of interpretation operates on various levels. Even a one-word sign of the experience may be interpretative. The most imprecise interpretative concept to signify mystical experience and in that sense the most general one (albeit not by its frequency) is the overall term ‘the good’ (*tābtā*),³³³ the use of which implies that a conception of good and bad is being applied, the experience, of course, being interpreted into the former. What makes this sign more interpretative in comparison with the signs indicating ‘warmth’, for instance? Could one not say that the signification of the experience as ‘warm’ implies a conception of the corresponding disposition of warmth and coldness, and an interpretation that attaches the experience to the former category? I would argue that there is a difference, albeit not necessarily a precise one, and it is in the fact that ‘warmth’ is a more objective quality, as good and bad are related to values and are therefore more dependent on subjective interpretation. One may verify and possess empirical certainty of the feeling of warmth, but not of “goodness”.

In the verbal field it is completely possible, and presumably not infrequent, that the interpretation is inspired by the symbol itself, regardless of its original reference in the mental dimension. The concept of fountain, for example, is a very fruitful one for interpretation, since it implies a certain notion of creativity and vitality; God Himself is often designated the source of life, the ‘spring of all worlds’ (*mabbō’ā de-kul’ālmē*).³³⁴ John of Dalyatha pulls these strings together by declaring that “I stupefy myself (*tāhar bī enā*) and exult spiritually, for in me there is a source of life (*neb’ā de-ḥayyē*)”. He considers this to be the ultimate end of the incorporeal world.³³⁵

³³³ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41. “His knees are not able to lean on the earth before that exultation. It is that *good* which is exuding in his body.”

³³⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:8 (pp. 476-477).

³³⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 27:1 (pp. 388-389).

2.3.2. Classification of Experiences

Once the experiences are expressed, whether analytically or symbolically, the expressions are open for various discursive plays in the verbal field, regardless of their original reference. For example, the contradiction between certain symbolic expressions can be put to discerning use by a skilful author such as John of Dalyatha, who draws a functional synthesis between the symbols of fire and water: “A blaze (*šalhebītā*) has kindled in my kernels, and the springs (*me'īnē*) have gushed out to moisten my flesh so that it might not be burnt up.”³³⁶

The notion of inexpressibility is in fact an interpretative feature itself, indicating inability or unwillingness to employ a more revealing expression, as we have discussed above. Consequently, it is also possible to interpret the inexpressibility as being caused by some of the elements that we encountered on the level of expression. For example, we once again face the concept of joy in the category of interpretation in expressions such as (joy) “makes the tongue silent” and is “inexpressible”.³³⁷ The former remark may also be interpretative if the relation between joyous experience and silence is *de facto* mere correlation without causality, and the minimal significance of the latter expression is that the joy in question cannot be reproduced for sensation by means of discursive description. The notion of inability of expression actually implies lack of awareness of all the mental processes taking place during the experience, which in turn provides various possibilities for understanding the concepts, and especially extraordinary ways to draw causalities between the recognised aspects of the experience. For instance, Isaac of Nineveh states that “enjoyment envelops the whole being in rapture without your perceiving it”, as if one could enjoy something without being aware of it!³³⁸

Single experiences may, in principle, be arranged into sets of similar or parallel experiences, and the naming of these sets produces technical terms for various types of experience. In the Syriac sources of this study, however, very little attention was paid to the classification of different experiences and their relation to each other. As far as I can see, different types of inner states are not classified with technical terms in Syriac metatheology, perhaps with the exception of *maggēnānūtā*. In fact the very word closest to the concept of ‘state’ (*mešūhtā*)³³⁹ is seldom used.

Why then should we not classify *temhā* and *tahrā* as “technical terms”? The answer depends on the definition of technicality. The terms are used with such high frequency that there is inevitably some conventionality in their usage. But the concept of “technical term”, as I see it, indicates that the position of the

³³⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316-319).

³³⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

³³⁸ ܕܘܪ ܕܘܢܝ ܕܘܢܝ

Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

³³⁹ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 152b, p. 271 (tr. 160); Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug sent to a Friend*, 55 (40*).

particular term in the discourse should have a certain inherent value and be the starting-point. This, however, is not the case in our textual material, where *temhā* and *tahrā* are not given any technical content; their specific features in relation to other experiences or states are not specified, and the metatheological discourse contains no explicit or implicit attempt to distinguish between them. As noted above, especially *temhā* does appear in positions where the original meaning, ‘wonder’ or ‘amazement’, is definitely the only possible translation.³⁴⁰ The same is true in the case of ‘drunkenness’, which may also be used in a negative sense as a symbol of the effects of passions.³⁴¹

Consequently, there are no actual theories of various states. On the contrary, the totality and all-assimilating nature of the experience is more stressed, at the expense of special features: its contents may be described as sour and sweet, fiery and watery,³⁴² and above all wordless.

Nevertheless, the source material does contain several means of arranging mystical experiences in quite a general way. A simple way to divide them into two categories is based on the presence or absence of a visionary aspect in shapeless and visionary experiences. This does not take us very far, however, since there are very few cases in which something actually seems to have been seen.³⁴³ The boldest Syrian seer is surely the author of *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, who declared that he had seen Paradise and the Tree of Life with his own eyes.³⁴⁴ Still even he, among all the other metatheologians, considers shapeless experiences to belong on a higher grade.³⁴⁵ For the same reason, however, it is also possible that the *parole* on the visions of Paradise does not signify a concrete visionary experience; seeing in the physical sense is not considered necessary, since it cannot offer greater certainty than inner intuition (or whatever it is called). In other words, when claiming to have ‘seen’ something the author may have simply meant ‘being certain’.

³⁴⁰ E.g. “striking our enemies with *amazement*”; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 242; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 163.

³⁴¹ “Send aid to (my) scattered impulses which are drunken (ܦܪܘܢܝܘܬܐ) with the multitude of the passions.” (Brock: *Second part*, 5:4, ed. 6, cf. tr. 7.) ‘Drunkenness’ is also used by him in a negative sense as a symbol of the ‘sight of men’. (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 132; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 90.)

³⁴² For example: “As long as this *fire* works inwardly, a current of thoughts breaks forth like a spring of *water*.” Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30*).

³⁴³ The concept of ‘revelation’ (*gelyānā*) does not necessarily refer to visions; it is rather a general term for inner spiritual insight, a kind of “partial illumination”. See below, chapter 2.5.2.

³⁴⁴ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 87 (79-80*) “I say with boldness that I have seen with my own eyes the things which I am telling; for I have seen Paradise and the Tree of Life, and have mystically and divinely been made partaker in its living and life-giving vitality.”

³⁴⁵ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 118 (107*) Here the shapelessness is connected with the general disappearance of shapes in the neo-Platonic eschatological vision. “For, when the mind is accounted worthy of these things, it will not see by vision (ܦܪܘܢܝܘܬܐ), nor by ‘form’ (ܦܘܪܡܐ); and it will no longer ascend and descend, and will no more see above and below; for then, the shape of the world passes away, and (the Mind?) is no longer limited but limits all.”

Another basic way to outline main types for the inner phenomena is the division into psychic and spiritual, behind which lies the standard classification in Syriac metatheology, i.e. the threefold division of spiritual life into physical, psychic and spiritual stages.³⁴⁶ The psychic and spiritual are thoroughly discussed by Isaac of Nineveh. His criterion of differentiation is very interesting, albeit perhaps a little frustrating for us. Namely, all phenomena that include thoughts, and that are for that reason expressible verbally, belong to the psychic (*naḥṣānāyā*) – for example, “prayers of fervour (*reḥā*) and understanding” (*īda ’tā* lit. ‘knowledge’). In the spiritual (*rūḥānā*) stage there is a thought-free silence, so that prayer, strictly speaking, is not even possible. Concerning the ecstatic phenomenon, this means that the more ordinary joyous ecstatic experiences are preceded by and inferior to the more uncommon, total and silent ecstatic experience. “The sight (*ḥezātā*) during prayer is more excellent than the delight (*hannī’ūtā*) during prayer, as an adult man is superior to a little boy.”³⁴⁷

Truly ecstatic experiences, in which “the body is as lifeless”³⁴⁸ – an expression which justifies the translation ‘trance’ – belong to a rare state after prayer, identified with the wordless state of ‘pure prayer’ (*ṣelotā dekītā*, which usually does not seem to indicate ‘trance, however). This ultimate mode of being has no more prayers, tears, emotions, yearnings, applications, power or freedom, for prayer by definition entails intention, reaching something, and turning away from something, which is no longer the case in the state of pure prayer.³⁴⁹ Since this ‘prayer of spirit’ (*ṣelotā de-rūḥ*), however, originates in ordinary prayer, continues Isaac, it is commonly but carelessly called ‘prayer’. This is connected with Isaac’s doctrine of the corporeal, psychic, and spiritual stages. In the psychic stage there is freedom, but the spiritual man’s will and nature do not rule but are ruled, which culminates in his ignorance of whether he is in the body or not. Consequently, it is impossible to pray a spiritual prayer, for in this perspective prayer and spirituality are concepts that are mutually exclusive! In this way the discourse of Isaac has developed a new technical term, ‘spiritual prayer’, by defining its meaning as something clearly distinct from the general connotations of ‘prayer’. Yet for this very formal similarity of the concept Isaac does not recommend the term of ‘spiritual prayer’: the condition in question should, according to him, rather be called the ‘child of pure prayer’.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ For more details, see p. 161-163.

³⁴⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 164; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 111. Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter 32 (ed. 130-131, tr. 142-143).

³⁴⁸ According to a more static interpretation, however, such expressions could be taken to mean simply that the body is dead to the passions, and the flesh does not resist the spiritual activity.

³⁴⁹ “It would be a blasphemy if there was found among the creation somebody who says that spiritual prayer can be prayed at all.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 168; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 114.

³⁵⁰ ܐܘܠܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170-175; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115-118.

Isaac's use of the concept of prayer here seems to be somewhat unequalled in earlier monastic thought. His approach, curiously, is perhaps at least to some extent due to a mistranslation in the Syriac version of Evagrius that Isaac was reading. The result, however, is an original, and not illogical, line of thought.³⁵¹

When the emotional occurrences have been signified verbally and arranged into mystical states, the next step would be the portrayal of spiritual life as a system of different stages in which the abstracted states are placed in turn. The orders of various states and their arrangement into separate stages of spiritual life may, however, easily become more or less arbitrary: theoretical systems directed by literary motifs tend to disengage themselves from the existential reality. Therefore it is important to make it clear that the various stages do not essentially rule each other out but rather they interpenetrate one another. In *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, for example, it is stated that those who are still at the 'bodily stage', which in the East Syrian monastic reality corresponds to the coenobite period of the noviciate, do every now and then receive joy, knowledge, conviction of the remission of sins, or the gift of tears.³⁵²

Syrian metatheologians are not especially fond of producing systematic classifications. Authors acquainted with the thought of Evagrius could relate the experiences into divisions arising from the Evagrian system. In the basic scheme of John of Dalyatha the world of experience is divided into three spheres: purity, serenity and a third one, each being symbolised by a cosmological image. The first is that of 'impassible purity of soul' (*dakyūtā de-lā ḥāšōšūtā de-naḥšā*) which is characterised by the contemplation of the corporeal beings and symbolised by the light of the moon. The sphere of serenity (*atrā de-šafyūtā*), or the sphere of 'serenity of the intellect' (*šafyūtā de-madde'ā*), is characterised by the contemplation of the incorporeal and symbolised by the stars; in it the workings of Grace are manifold. The third one seems to lack an actual name, being referred to only as 'the one above both'; it is characterised by the vision of the Light of the Holy Trinity and symbolised by the light of the sun. In biblical language, according to the allegorical interpretation, it is the 'Promised Land'. The experiences are related to this model so that in the first sphere the mind (*hawnā*)

³⁵¹ This curiosity was first noticed by I. Hausherr in his article "Par delà l'oraison pure, grâce à une coquille. A propos d'un texte d'Evagre" in *Revue d'Ascétique et de la Mystique* XIII, no. 50, 1932 (see pp. 186-188). The Greek original of the verse of Evagrius reads, in Hausherr's translation, "La prière est un état de l'intellect qui ne s'avère que sous la seule lumière de la Sainte Trinité", but in the Syriac version the verb in italics is *metpasseqā*: "Prayer is a state of intellect (*hawnā*) that is not cut off except by the single light of the Holy Trinity by the means of ecstasy (*tahrā*)." Beulay 1990, 217-218. Isaac does not actually quote the passage but has a similar expression in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 174.

³⁵² ܡܠܟܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐ – "God constantly visits them in his Grace"; Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 9 (6*).

appears clothed in shapeless light, in the second sphere the vision is a fiery one, and in the third sphere the vision is of crystal light.³⁵³

John of Dalyatha in particular is fond of designating the inner states in a very charming way with the concept of *atrā*, ‘area’ or ‘sphere’. The concept of sphere creates – literally – more space around the concept by referring both to the state and to its context. The actual significances of John’s frequent references to different spheres, modes that are entered in the mystical pursuit, are open to our meta-interpretation. One may either attempt to reconstruct a logical system of various spheres, or to view the spheres described with different vocabulary as merely varying ways of expressing the same reality, or to be exact, expressing its overlapping aspects. To designate a concept as a ‘sphere’ is also one way of abstracting the discourse about the actual concept. “Blessed is the one who knows the ‘sphere of knowledge’ (*atrā de-īda’tā*) and understands that there are no knowers.”³⁵⁴ Thereby the author may sign non-discursive intuitions as the ‘voiceless sphere’ (*atrā de-lā qālā*),³⁵⁵ an oppressive condition as the ‘sphere of robbers’ (*atrā de-gayyāsē*),³⁵⁶ a joyous quality as the ‘sphere of joys’ (*atrā de-ḥaddewātā*),³⁵⁷ and a certain feeling of alienation (in relation to the present world) as a ‘sphere that is not mine’ (*atrā de-lā dīlī*)³⁵⁸. Accordingly, the ecstatic experience itself can be depicted as the ‘sphere of wonder and ecstasy’ (*atrā de-dummārā wad-tehrā*).³⁵⁹ In the upper spheres the dominant feature is unification (see below, p. 139-141). On the other hand, John also discusses spheres that have no actual names, for instance “the sphere that is preserved from alien perception”.³⁶⁰ The lack of a name indicates a certain lack of artificiality in the discourse, which is not directed by the vocabulary.

In addition to the general divisions presented above, individual authors have several minor classifications. For instance, from the discourse of the cosmic rising in *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* we may note the three upper stages of the individual’s evolution: love, unification and intermingling (*ḥubbā – ḥadyūtā – ḥebīkūtā*).³⁶¹

³⁵³ Beulay: *Lettres*, 48:4-13 (pp. 500-507; the connections with Evagrius are pointed out in the footnotes). The author of this particular letter is, according to Beulay, not John but rather Joseph the Seer. The use of the name *atrā de-šafyūtā* seems to cover the third sphere as well. For a synopsis of the thought of Evagrius, see A. Louth: *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981), 101-113. A corresponding division occurs, for example, in Philoxène de Mabboug: *La lettre à Patricius*, 74 (820-821). We may here remark the free use of symbolism: an earthly concept such as ‘crystal’ may be used to signify a state higher than the one designated with a more immaterial concept of shapelessness.

³⁵⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:2 (pp. 408-409).

³⁵⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:4 (pp. 414-415).

³⁵⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:4 (pp. 414-415).

³⁵⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424-425).

³⁵⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 39:10 (pp. 418-419).

³⁵⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:1 (pp. 422-423).

³⁶⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424-425).

³⁶¹ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 119-130 (108-118*); Widengren 1961, 196.

The most profound classification of mystical experiences into different stages can be found in 'Abdišo' the Seer's *Book of Answers*. He describes "the workings of grace of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" as eleven different stages (*šuhlāfā*) that constitute a somewhat unique series in the whole Syriac corpus. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the stages are not given any actual names, nor is their number restricted to ten, twelve or any other sacred number. These features show an evident reluctance to engage in theoretical speculation, but on the other hand this discursive abstinence does imply concentration on the reality of experience.³⁶²

1. The stage of complete physical and psychical rest (*neyāḥā*). During this period one must keep one's quietude and not commune with anyone, and try to "respond to what is being done".³⁶³ 'Abdišo' gives a biblical parallel to this stage: the mind (*hawnā*) is baptised with the same baptism with which Moses was baptised at Mount Sinai.
2. The stage of 'workings of intuitions' (*ma'bdānwātā de-sukkālē*) during which one must keep on preserving quietude, not allowing one's mind to leave the inner gate of the heart, and especially being on one's guard against distraction of mind, images (*demwātā*) and understandings that are subjectively composed (*merakkeb sukkālē*). Practices such as recitation of Psalms and prostrations before the Cross are recommended.
3. The stage of the 'love of Psalms and of recitation' (*reḥmetā de-mazmōrē wad-qeryānā*), in which one must beware of the demon of vainglory who 'accompanies this stage'. The motive of recitation should be love of God alone. If the mind is free from vainglory one can reach the next stage.
4. The stage of the 'flow of tears' (*terī'ūt dam'ē*) and continual prostrations (*mappūltā ammīntā*) before the Cross. This is a boundary between purity (*dakyūtā*) and serenity (*šafyūtā*).
5. The stage of contemplation (*tē'ōryās*) of divine judgement and providence. This produces love for one's fellow-men and continual prayer (*bā'ūtā ammīnūtā*) for their conversion. Men are seen inwardly: not as just or unjust, bond or free, male or female, but in the likeness of the image (*demūtā de-šalmā*) in which they were created; Christ is seen in all.

³⁶² Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 158b-161a, pp. 277-279 (tr. 169-173). The stages are not numbered by the author, and the division between stages seven and eight is somewhat indistinct, so the number might in fact be ten, but the author does not express an opinion on this matter.

³⁶³ ܘܢܘܨܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܘܨܐ ܕܥܘܢܘܨܘܬܐ

6. The stage of impulses (*nebhē*) of light and fire (*nūhrā da-mmazgā*) stirring and rising (*nābhīn we-sālqīn*) in the heart (*be-gaw lebbā*), during which the Spirit operates in the senses of smell and taste.

7. A higher state of ‘hearing the voice of a fine sound of glorification’;³⁶⁴ psychic and physical capacities do not suffice for their description, since the stage belongs to the sphere of the world to come. The stage includes contemplation of the ‘cloud of the intelligible Cherubim’ (*‘enānā da-krōbē metyad’ānē*); the mind hears their voices and is united with them in glorious praise. ‘Abdišo’ also gives a biblical reference for this stage: the intercession of the Holy Spirit referred to by Paul in Rom. 8:27.³⁶⁵

8. After the glory of the previous stage the mind is silenced and swallowed up in the light of the vision of lofty and sublime contemplation.³⁶⁶ The mind is mingled (*methallat*) with the divine visitation (*sā’ōrūtā*), so that it is “not distinguished from the sea in which it swims”. The sense affected is that of sight.

9. The stage of clothing oneself with fire (*lābšā leh le-bar-nāšā nūrā*), in which one sees oneself, not as a material body, but as fire. One also receives knowledge concerning the world to come. ‘Abdišo’'s portrayal of this stage is, exceptionally, based on the writings of Palladius and Evagrius, fiery appearance being a literary topos in hagiography. The senses affected are those of sight and touch.

10. The stage ‘inexpressible in a letter’;³⁶⁷ in which one feels joy and sheds tears without knowing the reason why. The senses of smell and touch are active, as well as those of sight and touch, but the distinction between the senses is somewhat blurred.

11. The stage of ‘flow of spiritual speech’ (*terī’ūt mamlā rūḥānā*), during which ‘the second sense’ (i.e. hearing) is active.

If we wish to find actual technical terms for the mystical states, the most potential candidates appear in the writings of Isaac of Nineveh. There are terms which have a close to technical sense, due to their quite rare and specific usage, but they do not necessarily refer to mystical or ecstatic states. As an example of “semi-

³⁶⁴ *ܘܚܕ ܡܠܐ ܕܠܘܐ ܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ*

³⁶⁵ Mingana’s translation has skipped over the words “your mind is united with *them* in the glorious praise [or: highest glory]” (*ܘܚܕ ܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ*), referring to the *intelligible Cherubim*, and the phrase ‘after this Glory’.

³⁶⁶ *ܘܚܕ ܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ*

³⁶⁷ The “name” of the stage could not be less technical: “another state that cannot be written in a letter” (*ܘܚܕ ܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܡܠܘܚܐ*).

technical” terminology we may note the word ‘abandonment’ (*meštaqbānūtā*), a negative term which denotes not an actual withdrawal of God but a subjective feeling of God’s absence. It could in fact be translated ‘absence’, or even more poetically as ‘eclipse’, adapting Martin Buber’s concept of the eclipse of God. The state is further commented on by Dadišo’ of Qatar, who understood the “withdrawal” itself as an act of God (through an angel) in order to keep the ascetic in balance with occasional spiritual defeats.³⁶⁸ The actual “technicality” of the concept, however, is a matter of definition, but it is to be stressed again that usually the discourse is not built around the term. Even *meštaqbānūtā* in its context is not a starting-point for the discourse, nor is anything systematic developed around it, but the terms occur scattered throughout the discourse.

A clear exception to this rule, however, is the term *maggenānūtā*, ‘overshadowing’,³⁶⁹ which is discussed by Isaac in a separate chapter. The term has an interesting two-dimensional biblical³⁷⁰ background. *Maggenānūtā* is a derivation of the verb *aggen*, whose two most important usages in the Syriac Bible are Luke 1:35 “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Most High will *overshadow* (Gr. ἐπισκιάσει) you”, and John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and *dwelt* (Gr. ἐσκήνωσεν) among us (or: in us!, *aggen ban*)”. The term and its (technical) usage remained exclusively Syriac, for the chapters explaining *maggenānūtā* are absent from the Greek translation of Isaac.

In the Discourses of Isaac of Nineveh *maggenānūtā* indicates operation on two levels: the practical and the “mystical”. The former protects and the latter bestows a heavenly gift. The mystical *maggenānūtā* was fully experienced by Mary and partially by the saints; it is not, however, an exact truth but rather a revelation that makes manifest certain hints and signs, corresponding to human capacity. It is a gift, but humility is the key to its perseverance.³⁷¹ In spite of the “technical” character of the term, its semantic field is left very open. (Technicality does not necessarily indicate a narrow, exact use.) The only differentiation Isaac dares to make is that *maggenānūtā* is not ‘knowledge’.³⁷² Dadišo’ of Qatar employs the same term twice, referring to the gifts of the Holy Spirit,³⁷³ and

³⁶⁸ Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 45b, p. 237 (tr. 126). For this reason, “withdrawal” becomes a sign of the action of God!

³⁶⁹ ܡܓܓܢܢܘܬܐ Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter XVI (ed. 77-79, tr. 88-90) For a full discussion on the background and use of the term, see Brock 1988, 121-129. Besides referring to incarnation, *maggenanuta* is used in Syriac literature with reference to the Eucharistic epiclesis and the activity of Holy Spirit at Pentecost; it also occurs in the context of baptism and in contexts indicating divine protection and sanctification.

³⁷⁰ Is. 38:6, Jer. 17:17, Zech. 12:8, Ps. 138:7.

³⁷¹ Brock 1988, 122-123. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 103, 160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 70, 109.

³⁷² Brock 1988, 122-123. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 160. (Wensinck translates the term as ‘inspiration’, *Mystic Treatises*, 109.)

³⁷³ “...visitation of the Holy Spirit and gifts from the spiritual treasures.” Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 11a, p. 208 (tr. 87). “The power of the Spirit derives from [...] *maggenānūtā*.” Dadišo’: *Commentaire du Livre d’Abba Isaac*, 218.

Isaac of Nineveh states plainly that ascetic exercises (*'amlē*) are able to produce a state over the passions (*lā-hāšōšūtā*), physical mortification and repose of thoughts (*nawhā de-ḥuššābē*), but they are not able to bring about the peace (*šaynā*) or tranquillity (*behīlūtā*) that belongs to the “mystical”.³⁷⁹ The breadth of the concepts indicates that the phenomenon interpreted as being caused from without covers a wider field of inner operation than merely extraordinary peak-experiences. Isaac also makes a distinction between ‘spiritual perception’ (*margešānūtā de-rūḥ*) generated by means of meditation (*hergā*) and that generating spontaneously by itself.³⁸⁰

Isaac also emphasises that the experiences do not arise as a result of investigation (*'uqqābā*) or at will, but they fall on human nature all of a sudden (*men šel*),³⁸¹ the subject being unaware of them until they appear³⁸² and uncertain of the reason why they occur.³⁸³ The transiency and passivity of the experience, emphasised by James, could not be expressed more explicitly than by Isaac here. The occurrence of pure experience is not a matter of choice. Isaac criticises those who claim to be able to “pray ‘spiritual prayer’ whenever they like.”³⁸⁴ Isaac even goes on to state that the phenomenon does not take place at all if it is purposely willed and actively sought!³⁸⁵ He also rejects the possibility of reproducing or reactivating them by stating that when certain experiences are sought again, they are to be found “cooled and insipid by their taste”.³⁸⁶

Isaac tells an illustrative story about a brother who was leaving his cell “in order to be occupied with idle things”. He had already put the key in the lock of his cell, when suddenly “Grace visited him there, so that he returned immediately”.³⁸⁷ For this reason Isaac states that if a brother neglects a congregational service or does not open his door for a visiting brother, he must not be blamed, for he is being visited by Grace.³⁸⁸

In brief, the quality of surprise means that despite all the ascetic struggle the experience is not sensed as an outcome or result of a man’s own spiritual progress.

³⁷⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 248; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 167.

³⁸⁰ Brock: *Second Part*, 7:1 (ed. 19, tr. 23). The former brings the soul joy and exultation; the latter falls upon the soul every now and then, after the soul has been purified in the exercise of the former; the first occurrences of the latter are the sign of entering the ‘spiritual’ stage.

³⁸¹ The Syriac idiom *men šel* happens to have a very appropriate etymology, for it literally means ‘from silence’. Cf. Brock: *Second Part*, 18:20 (ed. 91, tr. 101).

³⁸² ܡܢ ܫܠܐ . ܟܝܘܢ ܕܡܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 124; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84.

³⁸³ Brock: *Second Part*, 34:2 (ed. 135, tr. 146-147).

³⁸⁴ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 171; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 116. On the concept of pure prayer, see below, p. 125-126.

³⁸⁵ “They do not happen at will, nor when one is seeking.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 163; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 110.

³⁸⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 131; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 89. The same thing could be said concerning the most vivid aesthetic experiences.

³⁸⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 178; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

³⁸⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 178; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120-121.

The order of revelation (*gelyānā*) is not the same as that a man deepens his emotions (*zaw'aw*) by the study of wisdom and by intellectual labour so as to reach some understanding, development and contemplation (*theoria*) of something by mental wandering (*pehyā*) after these things.³⁸⁹

The actual identity of this *causa efficiens*, however, remains to some extent unidentified in the metatheological discourse. This can be seen as a result of two separate phenomena. On the one hand, the identity of the *causa efficiens* as the Christian God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is so self-evident that it does not need to be explained or even mentioned, and on the other, the exact nature of God had been so thoroughly examined in dogmatic theology, with all of its schismatic consequences, that the ascetic authors were in custom of avoiding dogmatic statements, both intentionally and unintentionally. Lack of speculation on the Divine Being is connected with the humble ideals of Christian asceticism; monks are critical of their experiences and careful not to “over-explain” them in general, and in particular not to misinterpret God for their own experiences’ sake. And ironically, the ascetics’ surrender to orthodox doctrines happens to make the metatheological readings more suitable for a non-Christian readership without orthodox subtexts.

Therefore the discourse is to a surprising degree free of speculation concerning the roles of the different Persons of the Holy Trinity in the experience. The Person implied by the theological context is the Holy Spirit, described by John of Dalyatha as the preparer of the mysterious ecstatic fragrance: “It is prepared by your Holy Spirit (*rūḥāk qaddīšā*), the Guardian of the purity of his lovers.”³⁹⁰ Generally speaking, however, there is a great variety of expressions referring to the *causa efficiens*. The most common ones refer to the Holy Spirit or to the Son, or to Grace, their common attribute, in various combinations: ‘Spirit’, ‘grace of the Holy Spirit’, ‘Jesus’, ‘mercy of Jesus’ (*rahmaw de-yeššū*),³⁹¹ ‘grace of Christ’ or ‘grace’ (*ṭaybūtā*) which very often occurs alone.³⁹² The paradoxical

³⁸⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 154-155; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105. Wensinck translates ܠܘܘܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ as ‘mental investigation’, omitting ܠܘܘܢܐ, which I understand here to signify the process of searching (knowledge) and thereby ‘development’.

³⁹⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3 (pp. 474-475).

³⁹¹ “Thirst after Jesus, that he may make you drunk with his love.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 34; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 24. Budge 1902, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta*, fol. 31b.

³⁹² Cf. Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276 (tr. 169). Isaac of Nineveh heads his discourse on various experiences as “working that is from Grace” (ܠܘܘܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ) (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 489), translated ‘influences proceedings from Grace’ by Wensinck (*Mystic Treatises*, 328).

The word ܠܘܘܢܐ, (also indicating ‘goodness’) has an independent charismatic function in Syriac. In the Peshitta of 2 Cor. 1:11 ܠܘܘܢܐ ܠܡܢܐ ܠܘܘܢܐ corresponds to εἰς ἡμᾶς χάρισμα. In the canons of Rabbula (d. 435) monks are forbidden to distribute oil – except those who have an evident charisma (ܠܘܘܢܐ). (*Synodicon I*, 19:7) Later on the same term was used to indicate a charismatic mixture made of dust from a martyr’s or apostle’s grave, water

Christian understanding of God as Unity and Trinity makes it possible to use the terminology referring to God (*allāhā*) or His Persons in a very vital way – or very carelessly, if we approach the material with logical demands.

Due to the self-evident character of the *causa efficiens* it can even be left completely unmentioned, which makes the language produce the impression of the experience as a “subject” acting almost independently in the mental world.

‘Abdišo’ the Seer gives a theological interpretation and explanation of the very existence of the visions of *shapeless* light. He admits that Christ did appear in material shapes and images to the ancient Patriarchs and prophets, but since He has now appeared conclusively in the flesh to renew all material beings he no longer appears in material images. ‘Abdišo’ goes on to declare that if all our knowledge of Christ and of his vision in our hearts were to reach only the stage of material likeness, Christ would have died in vain without profiting us at all. His thought seems to be that knowing (or admitting) the existence of Christ’s manhood as a physical reality is not sufficient to profit anything because the purpose of the Incarnation was to connect man and supramaterial divinity, first in Christ himself, and then in those who are in Christ. The idea is similar to the Greek concept of θεώσις, although the word itself remains unspoken. (The notion is also in complete contradiction with the traditional polemic conceptions of “Nestorianism”.)

The most philosophical sign occurs in the discourse of *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* where the cause of mystical experience is named in accordance with the neo-Platonic tone of the book as *ūsyā*, ‘substance’, ‘essence’.³⁹³

More aesthetic or poetic signs for the *causa efficiens* include love and beauty. According to Sahdona, fervour of spirit is set on fire by love (*hubbā*).³⁹⁴ John of Dalyatha in particular emphasises the beauty (*šufrā* and *pa’yūtā*) of the divine Glory as an effective cause of the experience.³⁹⁵ The concept of beauty can be connected with the images of light, fire or drunkenness; it may intoxicate (*rāwē*),³⁹⁶ stupefy (*etbalhī*) or inflame (*eštalhab*).³⁹⁷ When one gets drunk with the Love of God, one’s “heart is illumined by His beauty (*nehar be-šufreh*)” and one’s “eyes are blinded by His light”.³⁹⁸ Due to its potency, beauty is presented as a basic level of the ecstatic mood that prevails when praise ceases, and due to its

and oil, used as a remedy for various diseases and infertility. (Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, 600-601.)

³⁹³ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 39 (35*).

³⁹⁴ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:68. (Tr. Brock 1987, 229.)

³⁹⁵ ܡܝܘܨܘܟ ܩܘܡܝ ܡܢ ܗܘܪܝܘܬܝܗ – “They stupefy themselves in your beauty.” Other examples in Beulay: *Lettres*, 7:2 (326-327), 10:1 (330-331), 12:2 (336-337), ‘ecstasy of *tehrā de-šufreh* 31:4 (392-393), 36: 2 (402-403), 51:7 (476-477). For ܪܘܘܫܝܗ , see *ibid*, 25:4 (384-385), 51:10 (478-479): “indescribable ecstasy in the glory of the splendour of your beauty.”

ܡܝܘܨܘܟ ܩܘܡܝ ܡܢ ܗܘܪܝܘܬܝܗ ܕܝܗܘܐ ܕܝܗܘܐ

³⁹⁶ Mingana 1934/Simon, 182b, p. 302 (tr. 40).

³⁹⁷ “Blessed is he who is stupefied in/by the beauty of these things”, Beulay: *Lettres*, 38:2 (408-409); “you are enflamed of his beauty”, *ibid.*, 28:1 (pp. 388-389).

³⁹⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400-401). Or: “in His light”.

intoxicating capacity, it may even have an addictive quality: the intoxicated are “considered as madmen, for they are swallowed in the desire of beauty which captivates the thoughts.”³⁹⁹

This use of the vocabulary shows that “God” was sensed as love, grace and goodness. The Syriac terms intermingle here: *ḥubbā* is in principle equivalent to ‘love’, but the vocabulary derived from *RḤM* corresponds equally to love, grace and mercy, while *ṣaybūtā* signifies goodness, grace and benefit.

Perhaps the most honest attempt, however, to define the *causa efficiens* is an apophatic way of leaving the question open: “now and then something⁴⁰⁰ entices your mind and lifts it up to the region of unutterable light”.⁴⁰¹ A certain insecurity and irregularity in the *causa efficiens* of the experience underlines its vital nature, which is the feature that makes it easy to interpret as being dependent on the encounter with the *personal* Divine Being. It is not uncommon to encounter in the texts utterances such as: “Man does not know the reason for this joy, he only knows that he is rejoicing.”⁴⁰²

What is surprising about the onset of the experiences is that they can be caused, or interpreted as being caused, by any small thing that may be more or less insignificant *per se*. Isaac of Nineveh describes a case where a monk was suddenly overcome by an inner motion so that he startled and sat down in a moment when there was no actual reason to exhibit any special behaviour. When laughed at by others, the monk said that he became afraid – not of the motion that he had but of the fact that so often negligence in small things leads to significant losses in great things. This once more underlines the total character of the ascetic pursuit.⁴⁰³

Under the category of *causa efficiens*, however, there is also something less self-evident: dualistic features that present the causes of certain experiences as features of the dark side. According to ‘Abdišo’ the Seer, during prayer the soul (*naḫšā*) is like a ship and the mind (*hawnā*) like a captain, and the impulses stirred in the soul are like winds: some favourable, some not. The favourable ones are homogenous (*pešīte*, ‘simple’), but the non-favourable are heterogeneous (*merakkebē*) material compositions.⁴⁰⁴ ‘Abdišo’ elsewhere divides these two – albeit using different terminology – into two categories: ‘idol-like shapes’ (*demwātā petkaryātā*)⁴⁰⁵ and ‘substantial shapes’ (*demwātā qenūmyatā*).⁴⁰⁶ The

³⁹⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:4 (pp. 458-459).

⁴⁰⁰ The Syriac has in fact a zero morpheme here; ‘something’ as the subject is the translator’s addition, but it does accurately emphasise the Syriac syntactic style of frequently leaving the subject unmentioned, which often forces the translator to produce more exact information than the original text actually contains. This is especially problematic in the mystical texts in that in comparison with historical narrative they contain very little obvious implicit information.

⁴⁰¹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 58 (43*).

⁴⁰² Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:16 (pp. 516-517).

⁴⁰³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 289-290; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 193.

⁴⁰⁴ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 154a-154b, pp. 272-273 (tr. 163).

⁴⁰⁵ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157b, p. 276; Mingana translates as ‘material images’ (ibid, 168).

⁴⁰⁶ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276; Mingana’s translation (ibid., 168) is somewhat

‘idol-like shapes’ proceed from sexual lust and anger, manifesting themselves in material images of women, animals and landscapes, whereas the ‘substantial shapes’ consist of spiritual images proceeding from vainglory. In these demons appear as bright angelic beings.⁴⁰⁷ The *Letter Sent to a Friend* also warns of the attacks and images, corporeal and incorporeal *theories*, produced by demons in the “psychic stage”.⁴⁰⁸ Demons, therefore, are considered to be one source of mystical experience, especially of the visionary kind.

This leads us to examine the nature of the devil in Syriac metatheology. Curiously enough, Isaac of Nineveh gives, on the one hand, an extremely modern definition: “Satan is a name of the deviation of the will from the truth, but it is not the designation of a natural being”,⁴⁰⁹ but on the other hand, he is concerned with the methods employed by Satan in cunningly tempting ascetics.⁴¹⁰ If Isaac really stands behind both definitions, and if the former is interpreted literally,⁴¹¹ the whole teaching concerning demons is set in a new light: certain parts of the man’s will are, as it were, separated outside the ego and called demons so that the struggle might be conceived as one against an adversary on the other side, and hence more easily motivated. In the categories of the present study this means that if Satan is understood as a real spiritual being, it may be the *causa efficiens* of the experience; if not, as a psychological enabling cause.

These two positions, however, are not necessarily completely irreconcilable, if we think of Satan’s nature as an *angelic* being. In the Mediterranean cultures it was widely believed that in the soul there is a stepless continuum (what we would call the subconscious) to one’s own guardian angel, who could be considered as the real self.⁴¹² In this view, the angelic activity is on the fringes of personality; the Christian imagination usually places angels closer to the divine realm. The Syriac authors also reflect such conceptions. Simeon the Graceful draws a parallel between the Lord as the ascetic’s comforter and the angels serving him, thereby indirectly indicating that the same action could be

misleadingly ‘personal images’.

⁴⁰⁷ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157b-158a, p. 276 (tr. 168).

⁴⁰⁸ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 55 (41*).

⁴⁰⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 189; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 128. The sentence includes a word-play: ‘deviation’ – ܠܘܘܘܘܬܐ and ‘Satan’ – ܠܝܘܘܬܐ .

⁴¹⁰ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 269-280; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 180-88.

⁴¹¹ The former definition is probably adopted from Pseudo-Dionysius, but it is still a part of Isaac’s own discourse. In its context, however, the notion may refer to the *origin* of evil in the ontological sense, not necessarily to the non-existence of Satan as a (personal) being. In this perspective the idea is that (the tendency to do) evil does not actually exist (in God), Satan being the name of a being who took upon himself actions that have no actual substance. (Cf. note 3 in *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 133). For further reading, see J. Martikainen: *Das Böse und der Teufel in der Theologie Ephraems des Syrers: eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung*. (Åbo akademi, Åbo 1978).

⁴¹² A common belief from the Eastern Mediterranean cultures before the Christian era, also to be found in Gnosticism and Manichaeism. See the chapter ‘Invisible Friend’ in Brown’s *Cult of Saints*. The classic example of an ego-angel is in Acts 12:15.

accurately described as divine or angelic activity.⁴¹³ This is in accordance with the general orthodox conception of angels as somewhat impersonal instruments of God. Accordingly, angelic beings have access to the soul by its lower parts that belong to the subconscious.

Occasionally the (genuine) experience is explicitly interpreted as coming through an angel, or resulting from the proximity of an angel.⁴¹⁴ According to Dadišo' of Qatar, the duties of the guardian angel include enlightenment of the soul.⁴¹⁵ The angels act from a divine sign in a way that enables man to feel his love towards God and to rejoice in his mind, or in a way that his mind is reinforced and strengthened, so that he does not feel alone. The feeling of the presence of the Other is perhaps the most important aspect, if we consider the concrete context of the experience, the absolute loneliness of the cell. And on the other hand, the angels in turn profit by following the hermits' spiritual victories in the ascetic struggle.⁴¹⁶ In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the guardian angel kindles fire in the heart so that it becomes drunk with joy and tears run without measure.⁴¹⁷ Angels are also considered to deliver knowledge to men that they first perceive and acquire themselves. The speculation on the role played by angels in the experience reaches a culmination in an actual neo-Platonic vision recorded by Isaac of Nineveh. In this vision no-one is able to move towards the Good or be illuminated without the intercession and transmission of the (angelic) beings on a higher level in the hierarchy of the spiritual order.⁴¹⁸

John of Dalyatha has an interesting section where he portrays the mystical experience as participation in the supernatural angelic parlance in which the mind (*hawnā*) is first raised to a sphere (*atrā*) where the hosts of angels of light fly in unceasing movement, where it may be in contact with them by 'subtle whispers' (*le'zē qattīnē*) in a 'non-fleshly tongue' (*leššānā lā-besrānā*), and at times reach a 'unity' (*ḥadyūtā*) which is described as indescribable.⁴¹⁹ John calls the state in which the subject is stupefied together with the Angelic beings 'the sphere of the cloud of light' (*atrā de-'arpelā de-nūhrā*).⁴²⁰ Probably John is here talking about the same matters as Dadišo' above, John's expression merely being superior in aesthetic standards.

⁴¹³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 179b, p. 299 (tr. 35). "A monk who crucifies himself to the world [...] the Lord is his comforter and consoler, and [...] he will be served by angels."

⁴¹⁴ Brock: *Second Part*, 18:19-20 (ed. 90-91, tr. 101).

⁴¹⁵ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 30b, p. 229 (tr. 113). Dadišo' asserts that his teaching on angels is derived from the Psalter. Yet the crucial section – "With each one of us is an angel who follows us, accompanies us, guards us, delivers us, prays for us, illuminates our mind and fills it with spiritual visions, and comforts us in secret" – has only a very slight parallel in the canonical Psalter (91:11-12).

⁴¹⁶ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 46a-47a, pp. 237-238 (tr. 127-128).

⁴¹⁷ Olinde: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 39-40 (29*).

⁴¹⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 196-199; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 133-134.

⁴¹⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424-425).

⁴²⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:6 (pp. 458-459).

An analytical approach to the question of *causa efficiens* is to be found in the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, where the possible sources of inspiration are differentiated as follows (in the logical approach, however, a), d) and e) would belong in the category of the enabling cause):

- a) Serenity of mind
- b) A guardian angel: fiery experiences
- c) The grace of the Holy Spirit: experiences of shapeless light
- d) Reading
- e) The natural seed in one's heart: the thought of the soul is
"like a ship on the water"
- f) A demon ⁴²¹

The process of interpretation also applies to the various psychological qualities of the experience in the process where they are connected with the *causa efficiens*. The primary quality of pleasure, for example, which was modified as 'sweetness' on the level of symbolic expression, is further focused on the level of interpretation as the 'sweetness of Christ' (*ḥalyūteh da-mšīḥā*).⁴²²

Correspondingly, the analogous symbol of drunkenness can be described as taking place in an immediate relationship with God, as 'drunkenness in you', or through His attributes, especially love: 'drunkenness of His love' (*rawwāyūt raḥmeteh*).⁴²³

John of Dalyatha connects the symbol of breathing with wider theological implications by identifying the object of breathing with the One who is the source of all breathing, and the whole process is interpreted as being ultimately an operation of the Holy Spirit.

When they breath on that unified sphere which unifies the divided beings, they are breathing the Invigorator of mind and soul in unity higher than them with that pleasant breath (*nešmā*) that is stirred by the Paraclete.⁴²⁴

The *parole on causa efficiens* helps us to recognise in the discourse the entities deserving to be included within the concept of mystical experience. If an abstract entity X is reputed to have been "suddenly given by God", the most plausible interpretation is that X is an "experience" because it appears suddenly, and "mystical" since it is interpreted as being of divine origin. (The psychological accurateness of the reference is not our actual concern, since we are dealing with the parlance only.)

⁴²¹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 37 (28*), 40 (30*).

⁴²² Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14).

⁴²³ Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400-401); Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151 (ܠܘܢ ܠܡܠܟܐ ܠܥܘܒܐ).

⁴²⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:6 (pp. 424-425).

Finally, we may point out that the role *causa efficiens* need not be over-emphasised either, since there is also an aspect of liberty in ecstasy (*tahrā*), which can be seen in the fact that John of Dalyatha uses the root in the imperative when addressing his fellow-monks: “Get stupefied (*tehar*) in love of God towards us”.⁴²⁵

2.3.4. Causa Finalis

The category of final cause contains the discussion concerning the results and functions of mystical experience. The *result* can be understood as the continuum of the enabling cause of the experience, showing forth its purpose and outcome in the empirical world, while the *function* is connected with the *causa efficiens*, for they are both characterised by the idea of purposeful intention. Any more detailed treatment of the problem, however, is relative and dependent on the choice of paradigm. The objective perspective of the scientific approach is again in contradiction with the principles of the discourse itself. Namely, there are things that, objectively speaking, belong in the category of *causa efficiens* – e.g. contemplation and remembrance of God that may appear as psychological methods – but in the discourse of the ascetics themselves these are rather portrayed as consequences caused by the Divine action and in that sense they may be seen as the *causa finalis* of the mystical experience.

In the following I shall discuss the *causa finalis* of the mystical experience from three viewpoints: the relation to the Divine in synchronic terms (ontological function), the relation to the Divine in diachronic terms (eschatological function) and the relation to the empirical world (social function).⁴²⁶

2.3.4.1. Ontological Function: God and Man

Extraordinary experiences are not seen by the metatheologians as objects of intrinsic value, worth pursuing as goals in themselves but in the wider context, the totality of which is the crucial aspect and elementary dimension. The ontological function of the experience seems to be understood by the Syriac authors in two ways. On the one hand, it is seen as a kind of point of spiritual transition within

⁴²⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380-381). The use is also remarked on by Beulay (1990, 397.)

⁴²⁶ The psychological function is absent here since the main psychological qualities have been described above, and it would be somewhat arbitrary to differentiate qualities *present* in the experience from the emotions that follow from it and thereby function as its aim or purpose, since this differentiation is not made explicitly in the sources.

the process of reaching a higher level in spiritual growth, and on the other hand, as a manifestation of the fact that the higher level has already been attained. In any case, it is clear that experiences are not unattached “peaks” but part of a new, more spiritual state of being.

The theological interpretation of this is likeness to or even unification with God, in one sense or another. John of Dalyatha defines the end of all spiritual activities, and of the solitary life, as a state where one has become ‘divine’ (*allāhāyā*) and ‘alike with God’ (*dāmē l-allāhā*).⁴²⁷ Or to express the desired state more poetically, the person who experiences it has become a “mirror (*maḥzītā*) in which the invisible is seen”, and “Christ shines forth” in him.⁴²⁸

The Syriac terms used of the actual unification are *hedāyūtā*⁴²⁹ and *ḥūdāyā*⁴³⁰, as well as *ḥultānā*, ‘mingling’⁴³¹, and their verbal equivalents – in fact the boldest terminology available. According to Sahdona, love can make man a ‘mansion of the Trinity’ (*awwānā da-tlītāyūtā*), and man can mix (*meḥallet*) and unite (*meḥayyed*) with God through Love, and harmonise His will as one with Him.⁴³²

Isaac of Nineveh several times mentions ‘complete mingling with God’ (*ḥultānā gemīrā da-b-allāhā*),⁴³³ albeit without speculation as to the ontological nature or exact meaning of the term. The concept of unification appears and disappears in the discourse, with its various signs, as if its reference was generally understood. The terminology as such is analytical in nature, most expressions even being derived from the numeral ‘one’ (*ḥad*), but since the concept of unification does not seem to have been in any way problematic in Syriac discourse, it seems that the notion was generally understood as a symbolic expression. In the Christian context, moreover, the concept of ‘union’ (*ḥūyādā*)⁴³⁴ can be focused with the help of a Pauline subtext, the idea of becoming a member of the body of Christ.

My Lord, make me a member in the body of your Only-begotten One, so that I may perceive the secret of union (*ḥūyādā*) with you, as far as my weak nature allows.⁴³⁵

⁴²⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 13:1 (pp. 342-343).

⁴²⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 14:2, 4:9 (pp. 344-345, 318-319). For further discussion of the problem of unification with God in the Syriac context, see Beulay 1990, 465-487, and on the ‘vision of God’ on pp. 423-464.

⁴²⁹ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:1 (pp. 390-391), 40:1 (pp. 422-423), 40:6 (pp. 424-425). Widengren vocalises the word as *ḥadyūtā*.

⁴³⁰ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:16 (pp. 480-481).

⁴³¹ E.g. Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:1 (pp. 380-381).

⁴³² Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles II*, 4:3.

⁴³³ ܐܘܢܐܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐ Brock: *Second Part*, Chapter 35 (ed. 139, tr. 151), 19:6 (ed. 93, tr. 104) etc.

⁴³⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318-319).

⁴³⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318-319).

Ecstasy and unification go together in many religious traditions – which is due to the psychological quality of stunning totality wherein distinctions are not sensed – and the Syrian one is no exception. John of Dalyatha shows in quite bold terms how unification results from the ecstatic experience:

Bear constantly in your spirit (*hawnā*) [...] the ecstasy (*tahrā*) of his Greatness, until it becomes glorified in His glory and transformed into (His) image, and you shall become a god in God (*allāhā b-allāhā*). (Then your spirit) has reached the likeness of its Creator and likened to Him in union (*ḥadyūtā*).⁴³⁶

The concept of union obliterates the difference between subject and object, which in turn opens the possibility of likening symbols of the experience to its Giver. This effective stylistic device is employed by John of Dalyatha, who explicitly identifies the concept of gift (*mawhabtā*) with God himself: “Blessed are your lovers who are continually glorified in your beauty, for you give yourself as a present.”⁴³⁷ Accordingly, John ultimately proceeds to declare God to be ‘food’, ‘drink’, ‘joy’, ‘exultation’, ‘clothing’, ‘the abode’, ‘the sun’ and ‘daytime’ for those who remain in wonder and ecstasy at His mysteries.⁴³⁸

Unification, as an interpretation, seems to be a consequence of the quality of totality present in the experience. John of Dalyatha describes how the mind is stupefied by the unifying effect:

In the beginning, my mind (*hawnā*) being not accustomed, it happens that when the Light of the Holy Trinity shines in incomprehensible simplicity into the mind which is deprived of apprehension (*īda'tā*) because of the stupefaction in the Light of Life, and when the mind perceives the unifying exultation, the mind is assailed by the fear that this might not happen to him ever again.⁴³⁹

It must be stressed too, however, that unification is not among the most frequently used images for the mystical experience. The main exception to this rule is *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, which is actually constructed on the theme of cosmic ascent towards unification (*ḥedāyūtā*)⁴⁴⁰ with the Essence.⁴⁴¹ This latter, however, is the very expression in which the limits of traditional theological thinking are exceeded, according to which unification should not be considered as substantial. According to Barhebraeus, the entity that is united (*methallaṭ*) in God (*b-allāhā*) in prayer is *hawnā*, usually translated as ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 29:2 (pp. 390-391).

⁴³⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:7 (pp. 318-319).

⁴³⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:3-4 (pp. 474-475).

⁴³⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:3 (pp. 422-423).

⁴⁴⁰ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 40 (36*).

⁴⁴¹ See the extract on p. 147.

⁴⁴² Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14). ܪܘܚܢܐ ܕܥܠܘܬܐܝܗܘܢ Teule’s translation for *hawnā*: ‘intellect’. The sentence in question is a quotation from John of Dalyatha (one example of the

also have a biblical reference in St. Paul's teaching on the activity of the Spirit in Christian believers.⁴⁵⁰

The main principle of the interpretation of ecstatic experience within the discourse of Isaac of Nineveh can be defined as the disappearance of the sense of the subject-object structure between man and God, even though Isaac gives no exact definition of this unity. The actual 'unification' is mentioned by Isaac only when he quotes Dionysius the Areopagite (*ḥedāyutā*) or Evagrius (*le-methallātū*).⁴⁵¹ Yet in connection with the highest experiences Isaac rejects the use of terms that refer implicitly to subject-object structure, for example 'praying', which indicates one person praying and another being prayed to.⁴⁵² The basic themes presented by Isaac on the psychological level are to be found in *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* as cosmological applications.

Description of the Godhead based on the experience is an extremely interesting topic. In this respect we may firstly note the use of very intimate expressions. Isaac of Nineveh speaks of God as 'Beloved' (*ḥebībā*)⁴⁵³ and 'Friend' (*rāḥmā*)⁴⁵⁴ with whom it is possible to "discuss in silence".⁴⁵⁵ And on the other hand, the solitary one with no worldly cares is a 'friend of God' (*rāḥmā d-allāhā*).⁴⁵⁶ In historical perspective this is not an invention of the mystics: the term 'Beloved' (*ḥebībā*) is applied to God in the Odes of Solomon, and to the Son in the writings of St. Ephrem.⁴⁵⁷ John of Dalyatha, moreover, calls God 'the Beautiful One' (*šappīrā*).⁴⁵⁸

From these terms of intimacy the discourse proceeds towards an even more daring topic, that of seeing God. Isaac of Nineveh boldly declares: "It is not possible for you to love God, if you have not seen Him."⁴⁵⁹ Seeing, however, means for him not vision but knowing God, as he later explains, referring to a way of knowing deeper than the discursive sense. Nevertheless, he elsewhere states that without the distraction of earthly cares and with at least some mindfulness in vigil, the mystic can "ascend to God to be in delight, and he will easily observe (*metbaqqē*) that Glory".⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁰ Rom 8:26. The image of a musical instrument occurs in a similar context in I Cor 13:1.

⁴⁵¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 169, 462; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, xlv, 115, 310.

⁴⁵² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170-175; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115-118.

⁴⁵³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 261; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 175.

⁴⁵⁴ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148. The same word is also used of the holy ones who are 'friends of God'. *Ibid.* 427 (*ibid.* 286.)

⁴⁵⁵ ܪܘܡܐ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡܐ 'Converse/intimacy with God' is almost a technical expression. S. Brock gives examples of its occurrences in Syriac literature; see the note in Brock: *Second Part*, 30:1-3 (ed. 122, tr. 134).

⁴⁵⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 150; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 102.

⁴⁵⁷ Ephrem, *Hymnen de Fide*, III:1

⁴⁵⁸ Beulay: *Lettres*, 13:3 (pp. 344-345). The word is an adjective in form, but is here used as a noun.

⁴⁵⁹ ܪܘܡܐ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡܐ : ܪܘܡܐ ܕܥܡ ܕܥܡܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 222; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 150.

⁴⁶⁰ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܥܡܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 134; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 91.

The search of explicitly mentioned phenomenal qualities for the Divine Being⁴⁶¹ based on the vision of Him is not as fruitful a pursuit as one might expect. It may well be true that the characteristics of the Divine Being are brought *to* the description of experience rather than derived *from* it. This fact as such justifies us in considering the topic in the category of interpretation.

The phenomenon of “seeing” God seems to merge into the total character of the experience. In the highest spiritual sphere of ‘Abdišo’ the Seer the human mind is not able to differentiate even its own nature from the light of the Holy Trinity, but it perceives only the immaterial glory of the Saviour, the Lord Christ, whose appearance was transformed in his Resurrection into ineffable Glory, which is far above his material flesh, which he took from human beings for their salvation.⁴⁶² In the thinking of John of Dalyatha the topic is treated by exploring the limits of language with paradoxical descriptions: “His shape (*demūtā*) is not a shape”; before the glory of God “knowledge is taken away from those who have knowledge, and sight from the seers by the greatness of knowledge and the ecstatic force of true vision (*tehīrūt ḥazzetā šarrīretā*).”⁴⁶³

Sahdona uses the expression “lives in us and is seen by us”⁴⁶⁴ as a continually increasing effect of purification and illumination in contact with God’s Spirit and His writings. Sahdona boldly declares, “He can be seen by us in the Spirit even now, if we wish.”⁴⁶⁵ Yet he also states that God is “hidden in the loftiness of his hiddenness in the inaccessible light of his nature”.⁴⁶⁶ The idea seems to be that seeing does not imply an object. Under the burning influence of love one is all the time ‘beholding God’.⁴⁶⁷

The intimate imagery leads the discussion to man’s identification with God, and to the application of the divine names to man. The use of bold terminology is not necessarily problematic for orthodox theology, for concepts like ‘divine’ have been generally understood as having a different reference when applied to man than when used of God. In his *Hymns on Paradise* St. Ephrem leads the reader to the threshold of the concept of deification, *theosis*, but leaves

⁴⁶¹ How God is actually viewed in the metatheological works deserves a systematic study of its own. Besides the use of the general concepts of mercy and love, the emotional qualities of the mystical experience are not, it seems to me, explicitly projected as qualities or attributes of God in an exact way. Indirectly the view of God and the whole world-view are surely strongly influenced by the authors’ experiences.

⁴⁶² Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 150a-152a, pp. 268-270 (tr. 157-160).

⁴⁶³ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:7 (pp. 476-477). Beulay’s edition has a misprint here: ܕܢܠܡܕܐ instead of ܕܢܠܡܕܐ.

⁴⁶⁴ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ (or alternatively, “lives in us and is visible to us”). Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:57.

⁴⁶⁵ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:6. (Brock 1987, 204.)

⁴⁶⁶ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:6. (Brock 1987, 204.)

⁴⁶⁷ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ ܕܢܠܡܕܐ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:147. The expression of ‘looking at’ (ܕܢܠܡܕܐ) reads in Sahdona’s Arabic version: *in kunta fī allāh tanzhur* [...]; Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles IV*, p. 105.

the word itself unmentioned. Namely, he first compares body, soul (*naṣṣā*), spirit (*tar'ītā*) and divinity (*allāhūtā*) with each other, and then he concludes: “In the end the body will put on the beauty of the soul, the soul will put on that of the spirit, while the spirit shall put on the very likeness of (God's) majesty (*demūtā de-rabbūtā*).⁴⁶⁸ The analogy, however, is not completed with the term implied by the first part, perhaps because the Syriac word for ‘divinity’, *allāhūtā*, is used of the Godhead, or of pagan deities, so that it was sensed as being unsuitable for use with reference to man. There does exist a literal equivalent for *theosis* in Syriac, *metallāhānūtā*, but it is extremely seldom employed in discourse.⁴⁶⁹ The word ‘god’ itself, however, can be used in a metaphorical way, as it is by Isaac of Nineveh when he states that “(ascetic) labours and humility make man a god (*allāhā*) on the earth.”⁴⁷⁰ The adjectival use is also conceivable: when the holy men are called ‘divine’ (*allāhāyā*),⁴⁷¹ the idea of *theosis* is present.

2.3.4.2. The Eschatological Function

The mystical experience itself can be viewed as the aim of the whole ascetic life and its practices. It is stated that as long as the solitary monk remains in the ecstatic state “he is not in need of the performance of the offices, nor is he in the need of reading, for all this is the work of the merchant, up to the time when the costly pearl falls into his hands.”⁴⁷² This is not because of the emotional content of the experience but because of (the interpretation of) the Divine reality present in it – or beyond it, to use a more apophatic expression.

When interpreted in the wider theological context, however, the experience is even more than the goal of asceticism. The eschatological function of the experience is revealed by adopting the ontological function of the experience on the chronological axis, connecting the experience with salvation history. In this perspective the experiences are interpreted as a foretaste of the states of the world to come and of life in its angelic mode. In fact the main purpose of Christian asceticism is spiritual perfection, transformation into man's final heavenly character. “Continuous drunkenness in ecstatic impulses”, in the words of Isaac of Nineveh, is “as in the life after resurrection”.⁴⁷³ This kind of imagery also stresses the unity and continuity between this life and the hereafter, at least implicitly. “The mind”, according to Simeon the Graceful, has tasted

⁴⁶⁸ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9:20. *Tar'ītā* also means ‘intelligence’, ‘thinking’.

⁴⁶⁹ An instance in Simeon the Graceful in Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a.

⁴⁷⁰ ܬܘܠܕܐ ܕܫܘܒܝܢܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܝܫܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 95; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 64.

⁴⁷¹ E.g. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 124-125; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 84-85.

⁴⁷² Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 42 (31*). Here the mystical experience is expressed by the symbol of a ‘pearl’.

⁴⁷³ ܕܥܝܫܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

partially here, and when it has become free of the density of the body, (it will taste) completely.”⁴⁷⁴

This means that the experience itself may be expressed with signs that contain eschatological components. For instance, John of Dalyatha speaks of ‘emotions of the new world’ (*nebhē de-’ālmā hedattā*).⁴⁷⁵ Correspondingly, the experiences that are opposite to the foretaste of heaven may be designated as the opposite of heaven: John of Dalyatha calls the ‘veil of passions’ ‘dark hell’ (*gēhannā*).⁴⁷⁶

Isaac relates that those who experienced this foretaste could become so overwhelmingly enraptured by it that they were no longer aware of their physical being, their “coat of flesh”. “On account of the delight and the joy of their heart [...] they imagine themselves to have put off the body and to be already in the state which comes after the resurrection.”⁴⁷⁷ Or the same sense of totality expressed in other words yet with the same eschatological nuance in the interpretation: during the experience “it seems as if the kingdom of heaven were nothing else but this”.⁴⁷⁸

The encounter with of the world to come in the ecstatic experience can also be depicted in very concrete, even visionary terms, like those employed by ‘Abdišo’ the Seer when enumerating the consequences of ecstasy (*temhā*) as follows:

mingling (*ḥuṭānā*) with spiritual orders (*tegmē*), vision (*ḥazzetā*) of the souls of the holy ones, vision of Paradise, eating from its tree of life, and intimacy (*’enyānā*) with the holy ones who dwell in it, together with other ineffable things.⁴⁷⁹

If we reverse the perspective, this position also means that the world to come is more or less co-equal to the state of total ecstasy. Isaac of Nineveh stresses that the ecstatic states are entirely free of memories of worldly thoughts, and accordingly, the state of being in the world to come is free of passionate psychological movements and even memories of the past world. The result actually comes close to a Christian version of Nirvana, yet the distinction of personalities remains. “The holy ones do not pray prayers in the new world. When the mind has been engulfed by the Spirit, they dwell in ecstasy (*temhā*) in that delightful glory.”⁴⁸⁰ Yet the idea of the world to come as a non-verbal entity is well in line with Ephrem’s non-physical Paradise and its immaterial pleasures that cannot be accurately described employing the concepts of this world.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁴ Mingana 1934/Simon, 194b, p. 314 (tr. 59).

⁴⁷⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316-317).

⁴⁷⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318-319).

⁴⁷⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 550; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

⁴⁷⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326.

⁴⁷⁹ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

⁴⁸⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 170; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 115.

⁴⁸¹ Ephrem, *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 11:3-9. Ephrem’s ideas, however, have sometimes been

Moreover, Isaac states that the heavenly mansions promised in John 14:2 are not locations but different spiritual levels, according to which the inhabitants enjoy their portion of glory.⁴⁸²

And finally, Isaac's eschatological vision is embedded in love. He describes beautifully how the Creator made this world in Love, sustains it in Love, and will bring it to completion in Love.

In love did he bring the world into existence; in love does He guide it during this its temporal existence; in love He is going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state (*šuhlāfā tehīrā*), and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised. And since in the New World the Creator's love rules over all rational nature (*keyānā melīlē*), the ecstasy (*temhā*) at His mysteries that will be revealed (then) will captivate to itself the intellect of (all) rational beings (*hawnā da-mlīlē*) whom He has created so that they might have delight in Him, whether they be evil or whether they be just.⁴⁸³

If these ideas are developed to their logical end, the result is the ultimate disappearance of distinctions; the boundaries of heresy are crossed at the point at which personalities cease to exist. This kind of climax and the logical fulfilment of all eschatological visions, however, is to be found only in the revelatory *Book of Holy Hierotheos*, where the eschatological vision culminates in full ontological harmonisation of the Creator and the creation in a most neo-Platonic fashion:

Orders that are above pass away, and the Distinctions that are below are abolished, and Everything becomes One thing: for even God shall pass, and Christ shall be done away, and the Spirit shall no more be called the Spirit, for the names pass away and not the Essence (*Ousia*); for if distinctions pass, who will call whom? And who, on the other hand, will answer whom? For One neither names nor is named. This is the limit of All and the end of everything.⁴⁸⁴

confused with an "Islamic" conception of Paradise filled with virgins (E.g. Palva 1998, 180). This conclusion was originally based on the misinterpretation of one verse (7:18, see Brock's comment in *Paradise Hymns*, 193).

⁴⁸² Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 86; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 58.

⁴⁸³ Brock: *Second Part*, 38:2 (ed. 148, tr. 160).

⁴⁸⁴ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 133 (120-121*).

2.3.4.3. The Social Function

One of the paradoxes of metatheology is that in spite of all appreciation of solitude the social function of the experience is positive: it is considered to cause strong love and a merciful attitude towards all men.

Love is characterised by a non-judgemental attitude. As long as the hermit is under the influence of the spiritual experience, “there is before his eyes no sinner in creation, but all men are regarded by him as righteous.”⁴⁸⁵ This feeling may even intensify to become ecstatic itself: “man becomes drunk, as with wine, with the love of men, because all actions of men, whether of sinners or of righteous men, and whatever they do, all of them, are seen by him with the eyes of the *theoria* (of the corporeal things).” And correspondingly, when man regards the feeble deeds of his fellow-men and is moved thereby, this may in turn cause the fire of love to fall into his heart.⁴⁸⁶

Isaac of Nineveh does see the commandment to love God as implying withdrawal from men, as we have seen above, but he goes on to state, somewhat surprisingly, that the commandment to love one’s fellow-men is included in the very same commandment. According to the reasoning of Isaac, love of man is a consequence of fulfilling the command to love God.

Do you want to acquire the love of your fellow-man, according to the commandment of the Gospel, within yourself? Withdraw from him. Then the flame of love will burn in you and you will be eager to meet and see him as (if he was) a vision of the angel of light.⁴⁸⁷

Isaac of Nineveh even claims that without drunkenness in God (*rawwāyūtā da-b-allāhā*) it is impossible to receive the pure love (*ḥubbā šafyā*) that man by nature lacks. This love and compassion for all creation is total towards sinners as well as animals.⁴⁸⁸ On the other hand, Isaac also states that “the key of divine gifts (*šukkānē*) unto the heart is given through the love of the neighbour”.⁴⁸⁹ This creates a paradoxical circle, very typical of eastern Christian thought: one needs spiritual experience in order to be able to love, yet one must love in order to be able to receive the experience. We might say that this circle is closed in terms of logic and self-supporting in terms of vitality.

⁴⁸⁵ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30*).

⁴⁸⁶ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 54 (40*).

⁴⁸⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 313; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 208-209, translates the end: “thou wilt run to see him as if thou wouldst see the angel of light.”

⁴⁸⁸ Brock: *Second Part*, 10:35-36 (ed. 40-41, tr. 49-50).

⁴⁸⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 330; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 221. The word *سكينة* is very suitable with reference to spiritual gifts, since it comes from *ŠKN*, the root of the *šekinah*.

If you are desirous of tasting the love of God, my brother, ponder and meditate with understanding⁴⁹⁰ on the things that belong to Him, and which have to do with Him and His holy Nature: meditate and ponder mentally, cause your intellect to wander (on this) all your time, and from this you will become aware how all the parts of your soul become enflamed in love, as a burning flame alights on your heart, and desire (*raḥmā*) for God excels in you; and out of the love (*ḥubbā*) of God, you will arrive at the perfect love of (your fellow) human beings (Isaac of Nineveh).⁴⁹¹

A third sign of the working of the Spirit in you consists in the kindness (*meraḥmānūtā*) which represents within you the image (*dūmyā*) of God, through which, when your thought extends to all men, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all men were dwelling in your heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all. [...] you do not think evil of anyone, but you do good to all men, both in your thought and in your deed ('Abdišo' the Seer).⁴⁹²

On the other hand, however, ecstatic phenomena do have some consequences with a somewhat negative social function as well. Ecstasy is reputed to make the subject who undergoes it to become alienated from the world. Here the allegory of wine can be continued to its consequences: getting drunk makes one forget the world (and sin) and causes apathy towards it.⁴⁹³ The result of this is an ability to adopt a haughty attitude towards earthly passions⁴⁹⁴ and it makes the mystic regard the whole "world" from an outsider's point of view:

Through your love may my life become inebriated (*nerwōn*), so as to forget the world and its affairs (Isaac of Nineveh).⁴⁹⁵

Blessed are those who are drunk of your love, my God, for through their drunkenness in you they have become possessed by madness (*šānyūtā*), and they have forgotten the things previously necessary for them (John of Dalyatha).⁴⁹⁶

From the concept of madness we can smoothly proceed to discuss the question of the outer manifestation of the experience.

⁴⁹⁰ ܘܢܘܨܝܢܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܝܢܘܢ ܘܢܘܨܝܢܘܢ

⁴⁹¹ Brock: *Second Part*, 10:29 (ed. 39, tr. 48).

⁴⁹² Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 156b, p. 275 (tr. 166).

⁴⁹³ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 511, 543; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 344, 364.

⁴⁹⁴ ܡܬܘܨܝܢܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܘܢܘܢ "They despise the stinking desire in the intoxication of their love"; Beulay: *Lettres*, 11:4 (pp. 332-333).

⁴⁹⁵ Brock: *Second Part*, 10:41 (ed. 42, tr. 51).

⁴⁹⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 326-327.

2.4. Manifestation

2.4.1. Physiological Manifestations

In the Syriac tradition mystical experiences are not restricted to the mental or psychological aspect only, but are manifested outwardly as well. In the doctrinal perspective this view presupposes a holistic and non-dualistic anthropology in which the mind and body are not separated, for this enables both to participate in the experience so that all the inner impulses exercise a certain influence on the physiological reality as well. Consequently, the physiological aspect of experience is in principle empirically perceptible, due to the force of spiritual experience which “palpitates through the whole body”.⁴⁹⁷ The physical aspect of man, however, may have difficulty in adjusting itself to the presence of the spiritual reality, which is regarded as something purer and stronger in nature. Isaac of Nineveh, who bases his teaching on love, expresses this as follows:

Love is something hot by nature. And when it alights on anyone without measure, it renders that soul as it were mad. Therefore the heart that perceives (Love) cannot contain and bear it without unusual excessive variations becoming manifest in it. And these signs it publishes in a perceptible way, openly.⁴⁹⁸

In short, the mystical experience applies to the physical aspect and operates in the whole body (*be-kulleh gušmā*).⁴⁹⁹ The result may be, curiously enough, that the character of manifestation is described as analogous to mental disease. Madness indicates a disability – in this case a disability of the mental faculties to control the force and pressure of the experience. According to Isaac of Nineveh, the bodies of those who cannot stand what is unusual will begin to move (*mezī*, ‘be moved’) during moments of joyous tears.⁵⁰⁰ Barhebraeus, who approached the subject systematically, collected the following samples on the “madness” of the experience :

For, sometimes, through the Spirit, (joy) will emerge from the heart without a clear cause and make a person joyful to the extent, that, if somebody unacquainted saw that perfect solitary (*iḥīdāyā gemīrā*) or heard his voice, he would think him to be mad (*šenyā*).⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁷ ܐܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ. The verb also means ‘to glide’, ‘stir’. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 486. (Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 326, translates: ‘flows through the whole body’).

⁴⁹⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

⁴⁹⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 58; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 41.

⁵⁰⁰ ܕܠܗ ܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ ܕܘܨܝܘܬܐ. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85.

⁵⁰¹ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 16 (tr. 13-14). The root ŠNY means transformation: alteration in general and in the direction of mental illness in particular. The quotation is taken from John of Dalyatha;

...in (prayer) the intellect is commingled with God and becomes the likeness of its maker, the recipient of His gifts and the fount of His mysteries. [...] Through (prayer) it is made worthy to behold His glory and to abide in the cloud of light of His greatness (‘*arpelā de-nūhārā de-rabbōteh*) within the place of the spiritual beings, in stupefaction (*bulhāyā*) and silence (*šetqā*), void of motions (*zaw’ē*), in ecstasy (*temhā*) and is in wonder (*tāher*) at the many splendoured rays of light dawning upon it, and these are the life and delight of the spiritual beings.⁵⁰²

Sometimes, a person will be on his knees during the preparation of prayer, his hands outstretched towards heaven, his eyes fixed upon the cross and, so to say, his whole motion stretched towards God in supplication. And at that moment all of a sudden a fountain of delight will spring up from his heart, his limbs (*haddāmaw*) will relax (*metrašlīn*), his eyes will be closed, his face bowed towards the earth and his thoughts will be confused (*meštagnēn*), so that even his knees cannot remain down on the earth at the joy of the blessing surging in his heart.⁵⁰³

The most interesting single term here is *metrašlīn*, which literally signifies that the limbs become ‘paralysed’ or ‘relaxed’ – an obvious expression of a physiological reaction, the exact nature of which remains concealed from us.

The operation of the experience – joyous in its psychological quality – in the physical faculty is described with the verb *nāšfā*, a polysemous concept that signifies ‘hissing’ (as by snakes), ‘shrieking’, ‘raging’ and ‘dilating’. All of these possible translations make some sense, varying the significance into a more or less symbolic way of expression, and applying a more or less radical character to the experience.

The slightest physiological signals mentioned in the texts are accelerated breathing, ‘sighs’ (*tenḥātā*),⁵⁰⁴ red colour on the face and a rise in body temperature.⁵⁰⁵ Alongside these, Isaac of Nineveh mentions loss of fear (*qentā*), bashfulness (*kuḥḥādā*) and stability (*suttātā*), these being replaced by impetuosity (*ḥēfā*) and disorder (*duwwādā*); the body reacts like a ‘wanton’ (*zallīlā*)⁵⁰⁶ or

his Syriac original is edited by B. Colles in his unpublished dissertation *The Mysticism of John Saba* (Melbourne, 1963), 41, 184.

⁵⁰² Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 17 (tr. 14). The quotation is from John of Dalyatha (Colles: *The Mysticism of John Saba*, 74, 206.)

⁵⁰³ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 16 (tr. 14). The extract is taken, in slightly modified form, from Isaac of Nineveh (*Perfectione Religiosa*, 58).

⁵⁰⁴ ܢܘܫܦܐ Mingana 1934/Simon, 194a, p. 313 (tr. 58); Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 491; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 329.

⁵⁰⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

⁵⁰⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148. Wensinck translates ܙܠܝܠܐ as ‘concentration’, ܕܘܘܘܐܕܐ as ‘disturbance’.

‘mad’ (*šenē*) person.⁵⁰⁷ To these we may add a certain enlightened outlook; Simeon the Graceful, for example, mentions an ‘illuminated face’.⁵⁰⁸

Are there signs of the physical reactions that are clearly uncontrolled? Evidently, during ecstatic moments hermits could occasionally lose their balance and fall to the ground. This fact, which is not surprising if we consider the combination of physical weakness and spiritual fervour, has been documented quite unquestionably:

One does not know how to control (*la-mtakāsū*) one’s senses from the intensity (*ma’bdānūtā*) of the joy and the jubilation of the heart, for no man is able to endure (*mesaybar*) the working of this fiery impulse (*zaw’ā nūrānā*). Therefore, as soon as this fiery impulse expands in the soul, a man falls (*nāfel*) to the ground and eats its dust like bread, because of the ardour (*reḥā*) of divine love and the heat and burning of its fervour (*šulhābā we-yaqdānā de-ḥammīmūteh*) (‘Abdišo’ the Seer).⁵⁰⁹

Sometimes it stirs up hot and fiery impulses (*zaw’ē ḥammīmē we-nūrānē*) in his heart through the love of Christ. Then his soul is enflamed (*meštalhab naḥṣeh*), and his limbs are paralysed (*meštarrī haddāmaw*) and he falls on his face (*nāfel ‘al appaw*). Sometimes he generates a fervent heat in his heart and his body and soul are enkindled so that he assumes that every (part) of him is consumed by the burning, except that which is in the heart (John of Dalyatha).⁵¹⁰

Isaac of Nineveh relates how “they leave their Psalms every now and then and fall on their faces on account of the power of the gladness moving in their soul.”⁵¹¹

The problem of the interpretation of such passages, however, is how to differentiate between descriptions of incidents of ecstatic, uncontrolled falling and portrayals of enthusiastic series of prostrations, perhaps slightly exaggerated. The crucial expressions *nefal* and *remā* (*‘al appaw*) may be used in both active and uncontrolled cases: the mystic ‘throws himself’ or ‘is thrown’ to the ground. It is the context where the decisive expressions are found. The most explicit in this respect are expressions such as “not knowing how to *control* his senses” or “paralysis of limbs” that clearly indicate uncontrolled ecstasy. What actually did happen may remain beyond our knowledge, but if the textual material is read without presuppositions as to the tranquil, thoroughly controlled character of hermit life, it seems evident that the phenomenon of ecstatic falling was well known among the hermits in these monastic circles.

⁵⁰⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 254; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 171.

⁵⁰⁸ Or ‘enlightened appearance’ (ܬܘܬܢܘܩܬܐ) Mingana 1934/Simon, 199a, p. 318 (tr. 66).

⁵⁰⁹ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144b, p. 263 (tr. 149). Translation mine.

⁵¹⁰ Vööbus 1988, 332 (cit. Ms. Vatican Syr, fol. 170b)

⁵¹¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 550; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 369.

Whether a certain expression refers to something that happens under the control of the will or to an uncontrollable occurrence, is in essence a parallel case to the difference between the conscious and the unconscious, and the definitions are therefore more or less discretionary. The centre of personality directs the effects of the experience to the physical organs, causing movement and other reactions. In the mental reality there are hardly clear boundaries between controlled and uncontrolled reactions. Impulsive and inspirational acts may be defined (and sensed) as partly controlled.⁵¹²

One of the clearest indications of incidents of uncontrolled fallings is to be found in *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, where the author states that it often happens that a man falls to the ground, and “he cannot rise, because no body can endure this joy”. This experience is accompanied by lack of the need for sleep or bodily nourishment, “because the body is nourished together with the soul by spiritual nourishment (*tūrsāyā rūḥānā*).”⁵¹³

As we have seen, the linguistic significations of ecstasy may produce opposite entities such as water and fire. The same can also be said of the physiological signs. This applies at least in the case of *silence* and *elevation of the voice*, and perhaps even in the case of tears and laughter. Isaac of Nineveh tells of a hermit who could not bear the flame of joy⁵¹⁴ so that he elevated his voice because “he could not restrain himself”.⁵¹⁵ Yet silence, too, can be a manifest outcome of inner ecstasy (*tahra*), which may seize the monk’s tongue and “not allow him to speak”. It is explicitly stated that this happens “involuntarily”.⁵¹⁶

The most important phenomenal feature, however, is that of tears (*dem’ē*), an indicator of strong emotional charging. The sources are filled with allusions to weeping, and even when after excluding a certain amount of the hyperbolism of oriental homiletics, the phenomenon seems to be remarkable enough. Different ways of weeping have been divided into categories which are very similar from writer to writer, although they appear under different names.

On the quantitative basis, tears have been divided into those that ‘visit’ occasionally, several times a day, and those that flow unceasingly⁵¹⁷ and continuously⁵¹⁸. According to Isaac of Nineveh, it happens many times a day that

⁵¹² An example of an experience that is mostly controlled yet strongly inspired can be quoted from Isaac of Nineveh: “Then, all of a sudden, he might leave the service, fall on his face, and beat his head on the earth approximately a hundred times ardently and severely, on account of the fervour which Grace had kindled in his heart.” Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140 (cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 95-96.)

⁵¹³ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 41 (30*-31*).

⁵¹⁴ אֵשׁ מִתְּהוֹרָתוֹ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ Literally: “that flame (arising) from joy”; Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

⁵¹⁵ אֵשׁ מִתְּהוֹרָתוֹ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ לֵבָרְכָהּ Literally “was not able to hold himself (or: his soul)”. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 140; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 96.

⁵¹⁶ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 42 (31*).

⁵¹⁷ אֵשׁ מִתְּהוֹרָתוֹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 128; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 87 etc.

⁵¹⁸ אֵשׁ מִתְּהוֹרָתוֹ. According to Isaac, the state of tears may last about two years! Bedjan:

a brother is surprised in his cell by a visitation of Grace; during these periods of “tears without measure” nothing could make him leave his cell or receive visitors even if he were given “the kingdom of the world”.⁵¹⁹ The purpose of continuous tears is in their causes (‘sweetness of revelation’, ‘love and humility of God’),⁵²⁰ and in their effects, which may be described as purifying.

On the qualitative basis, tears can be divided into *tears of repentance* shed over one’s own sins (i.e. sorrow for one’s sinfulness) and *tears of grace* that are poured into the soul as a spiritual gift. The division is mentioned, albeit in slightly different ways, by Sahdona,⁵²¹ Dadišo’,⁵²² and ‘Abdišo’, who describes the former as flowing from sorrow and the latter from joy.⁵²³ *Tears of joy* and *tears of sorrow* appear in the 4th-century Liber Graduum, where they are provided with a biblical justification based on John 16:20.⁵²⁴

According to Isaac of Nineveh, the tears of sorrow caused by sin must be experienced first. They make the body lean and burning with heat, and they often cause pain in the marrow. Tears of grace, on the contrary, “make the body fat” (a Semitic expression of welfare), they flow spontaneously, moistening the whole face, and change the aspect of the face due to happiness. These tears of joy are “sweeter than honey”.⁵²⁵ On the importance of these “given” tears Isaac notes that they are the only physical manifestation that one should request.⁵²⁶

According to Sahdona, tears of repentance are necessary for spiritual life. Joyful tears are caused by remembrance of God, which in the case of perfect ones grows fervent with love so that one “who burns with love cannot avoid tears when looking at God”.⁵²⁷ Sahdona proceeds by encouraging his readers to pour out every day “wine (*ḥamrā*) and anointing (*mešḥā*) of pure tears”.⁵²⁸

According to a further interpretation – perhaps a somewhat loose one in the discourse – the thoughts inspired by the guardian angel come with “tears without measure”, but those coming from Grace “work without tears”.⁵²⁹ The charismatic, supernatural nature of the tears is emphasised by the notion that a mere natural inclination towards weeping does not deserve praise more than the actions of irrational beings.⁵³⁰

Perfectione Religiosa, 126; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 86.

⁵¹⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 177; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 120.

⁵²⁰ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 58 (tr. 49).

⁵²¹ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:45.

⁵²² אֲבִי־שׁוֹ and אֲבִי־שׁוֹ הַיְהוּדִי Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 12b, p. 210 (tr. 89).

⁵²³ Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 155a, p. 273 (tr. 164).

⁵²⁴ Liber Graduum, 18:1.

⁵²⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126, 245-246; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 85, 165.

⁵²⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 49; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

⁵²⁷ אֲבִי־שׁוֹ הַיְהוּדִי לְמַעַן לִשְׁמַחַת הַיְהוּדִי Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:44, 9:45, 9:81.

⁵²⁸ אֲבִי־שׁוֹ הַיְהוּדִי לְמַעַן לִשְׁמַחַת הַיְהוּדִי Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 9:47.

⁵²⁹ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29*).

⁵³⁰ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 57 (tr. 49); Isaac of Nineveh, *Second Part*, 18: 4-17.

In this way the discourse on weeping has made tears the subject of multiple interpretation. The tears have also been related to Evagrius' threefold division (see above, p. 126, and below, p. 163), where they function as a separator located above the sphere of purity but below the sphere of serenity.⁵³¹

Spiritual joy (*ḥaddūtā*) and happiness (*bussāmā*)⁵³² are considered as the aim and sign⁵³³ of the ascetic life. Dadišo' of Qatar defines the aim of solitary asceticism as experience of the joy caused by the presence of the Lord and the sweetness of his victory.⁵³⁴ Actual laughter, however, is not viewed in a favourable light, mainly because of its frivolous connotations. It was noted already by St. Ephrem that "Jesus did not laugh on earth but cried".⁵³⁵ But on the other hand, there is a joyous aspect in the spirit of asceticism as well. According to Isaac of Nineveh, for example, the joyous tears of grace cause joy to "diffuse over the face".⁵³⁶ It is difficult, however, to think of a joyous face except with a smile and perhaps with moderate laughter! This produces a strange conclusion: laughter as an esoteric aspect of Oriental Christian mysticism. This does in fact find some distinct support in John Climacus, who states that a man who stands and recites the Psalms may be moved "sometimes to laughter and sometimes to tears"⁵³⁷ because of vainglory. The remark is a most interesting one, since it indicates that if laughter during prayer could grant honour and (vain) glory to a monk, it must have been considered as a genuine spiritual effect by some at least.

The external manifestations of mystical experiences are so interesting a topic that their occasional mention in the texts usually raises more new questions than it provides satisfying answers. One of the basic problems is how to determine when a phenomenon is mentioned because it is typical, and when because of its exceptional nature?

One example of the problem is the duration of ecstatic experiences, on which subject the sources offer very little information. The existing data refer to especially long or frequent experiences. Isaac of Nineveh mentions ecstasies that lasted for three or four days;⁵³⁸ one lasting for hours does not seem at all

⁵³¹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:8 (pp. 512-513). For Evagrius scheme, see *Kerubin silmin*, 217-220.

⁵³² Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 155a, p. 273 (tr. 164).

⁵³³ 'Aim' and 'sign' are expressed in Syriac by the same word (*nšā*).

⁵³⁴ Mingana 1934/Dadišo', 13a, p. 210 (tr. 89).

ܗܘܢܝܢܝܢ ܕܘܒܝܘܬܝܗܘܢ ܥܒܕܝܢܝܘܢ ܥܘܕܝܢܝܘܢ ܕܡܢܝܘܢ ܕܪܘܚܢܝܘܢ ܕܒܝܗܝܘܬܝܗܘܢ
ܕܡܢܝܘܢ ܕܘܒܝܘܬܝܗܘܢ ܕܥܒܕܝܢܝܘܢ ܕܥܘܕܝܢܝܘܢ ܕܡܢܝܘܢ ܕܪܘܚܢܝܘܢ ܕܒܝܗܝܘܬܝܗܘܢ

Literally: "He is fully satiated by the joy of the face of his Lord and by the sweetness of the victory of His right (hand). This is a solitary (*ihidaya*), and this is the sign (aim) of eremitism (*ihidayutha*)."

On spiritual joy, see also *ibid*, 93 (15b, p. 213) etc.

⁵³⁵ Vööbus 1960, 278-286.

⁵³⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 246; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 165.

⁵³⁷ John Climacus, *Ladder* 21:7 (in some translations 22nd Step), p. 202.

⁵³⁸ The reference to a case of ecstasy lasting four days is derived from perhaps legendary tradition concerning St. Anthony. (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 261; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 175.) The case of three days, on the other hand, seems to indicate personal experience on the subject. Brock: *Second Part*, 6:4.

attacks as harder and more bitter than the fire and torture that the martyrs had to undergo. Extreme asceticism and rigorous fasting will surely produce painful physiological reactions of many kinds, but the fact that ordinary natural sicknesses are not meant here, is implied by the advice not to leave one's cell nor let others come in during this kind of violent attack.⁵⁴⁶

2.4.2. Verbal Manifestation

The Syriac mystical tradition places stress on the silent, non-verbal character of the experience to the extent that there seems to be no room whatsoever for verbal manifestation. On the contrary, the effects are quietening in nature. Isaac of Nineveh, for example, mentions as a sign of 'enlightenment of the mind'⁵⁴⁷ that the "tongue stands still and his heart becomes silent".⁵⁴⁸ Consequently, we find no Syriac equivalents for the "ecstatic utterances" familiar from Sufism (if we do not interpret the loose reference to the lifting up of the voice, mentioned in the previous chapter, as such).

There is no rule without an exception, however. The most interesting anomaly is to be found in the writings of 'Abdišo' the Seer. He mentions 'a burst of spiritual speech' (*terī'ūt mamlā rūḥānā*) as a product of ecstasy (*tahrā*), but the nature of this interesting phenomenon is, unfortunately, left unexplained in his text.⁵⁴⁹ The safest explanation for the expression is that *mamlā rūḥānā* refers to the recitation of prayers that flow fluently when one knows a sufficient number of prayers by heart so that one need not concentrate on the act of reading or on the wording in general, yet the mystical context favours a somewhat more extraordinary interpretation. The expression 'burst of spiritual speech' would be apt with reference to glossolalia, but this possibility does not seem to be very likely, since such a phenomenon would probably have required further explanation in the context and further discussion elsewhere.

And moreover, the reference is not the only one. In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the author adds to the experiences produced by the guardian angel "a swift burst of speech",⁵⁵⁰ and to those proceeding from Grace "a burst of speech without interruption",⁵⁵¹ images indicating a spontaneous or somehow

⁵⁴⁶ One is instead encouraged to increase the recitation of the Psalms and the reading of the sufferings of the martyrs, and genuflection before the Cross. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 34-35 (25-26*).

⁵⁴⁷ ܬܪܝܘܬ ܡܡܠܐ ܪܘܚܢܐ – one of the seldom used signs of mystical experience.

⁵⁴⁸ Brock: *Second Part*, 6: 2, 4 (ed. 16, 17, tr. 20, 21).

⁵⁴⁹ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

⁵⁵⁰ ܬܪܝܘܬ ܡܡܠܐ ܪܘܚܢܐ. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29*). The burst does not last long because "it is restrained by the fervour from the touch of the guardian angel."

⁵⁵¹ ܬܪܝܘܬ ܡܡܠܐ ܪܘܚܢܐ. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (30*).

uncontrolled verbal flow. This latter gift is permanent, valid day and night, and in it “secrets are revealed” in a way which cannot be learnt from books or from others.⁵⁵² This seems to refer to a form of prophecy, perhaps even to the gift of interpretation of tongues.⁵⁵³

However, it is not an insignificant matter here that the letter in question as well as the writings of ‘Abdišo’ quoted above, should both probably be attributed to Joseph the Seer. But on the other hand, we know for certain that the phenomenon is not his private pursuit only, since we can also find in another East Syrian work from the same period, *The History of Rabban Hormizd* (approximately 7th century), the following encounter:

After discussing an hour about the world of judgement [Mar Sylvanus and Rabban Hormizd] began to speak also with new tongues (*lammallālū be-leššānē ḥaddetē*) concerning the new and glorious world. And in accordance with the Divine Providence which investigates all, they both were suddenly clouded over (*et’arpalw*) in contemplation (*tē’oryā*) of existing things, both corporeal and incorporeal. And they were gazing at ethereal (*qaṭṭīnā*) and spiritual (*rūḥānāyā*) intuitions (*sukkālē*), and secret things (*setīrātā*) and hidden mysteries (*rāzē genīzē*) which were revealed unto them there by the mercy of Jesus. Then their thoughts settled (*šeknāt*) on them again, and their understanding (*hawnā*) returned to its own character (lit. ‘taste’).⁵⁵⁴

The *History of Rabban Hormizd*, however, has so much imbedded material of a legendary nature that the historicity of the event is not the most certain. But what is interesting here, is that the existence of the story does in any case indicate that speaking with new tongues was considered at least an ideal possibility in the Syrian Orient shortly before the time of Joseph the Seer. Presumably the ‘new tongues’ were taken as a biblical topos from Mk 16:17, but at any rate the remark is important since such references are rare in the history of the Church.⁵⁵⁵ Nevertheless, if glossolalia did exist in the Syrian Orient c. 700, it must have been a well-kept secret, a kind of esoteric feature in the lonely prayers of the most charismatic hermits.

We may conclude this chapter by noting the existence of a peculiar form of verbal manifestation that may be called “syntactic manifestation”. John of Dalyatha, likely the most enthusiastic author in our Syriac corpus, has a few ecstatic features even in his syntax. Firstly, a good portion of the discourse of his fervent letters is directed to Christ in the second person: “My understanding is

⁵⁵² Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40 (29*-30*).

⁵⁵³ 1 Cor. 12:10, 28-31.

⁵⁵⁴ Budge 1902, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta*, fol. 31a-31b.

⁵⁵⁵ For further discussion of charismatic phenomena in the Early Church, see McDonnell, K. & Montague, G.T., *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Evidence from the First Eight Centuries*. (The Liturgical Press, Minnesota 1991.)

stupefied in the ecstasy in you”.⁵⁵⁶ Secondly, he uses interjections as if his mystical experience were bursting from his pen: “How stupefying (*temḥā*) is the Love (*raḥmetā*) that leads us to him!”⁵⁵⁷ Or he may combine both stylistic devices: “How stupefying is your clemency, our God!”⁵⁵⁸ Sometimes the subject is moaning as if his discourse was suffocating: “(My) reed (*qanyā*) is burnt up by the force of your fire, my right hand has ceased to write, and my eyes are consumed by the rays of your Beauty.”⁵⁵⁹ His enthusiasm is also shown by the use of a series of exclamations: *rāz lī, rāz lī, rāz lī*, “the secret is mine” or “the secret (is) for me”.⁵⁶⁰ This kind of *parole* would in fact well deserve to be counted in the category of “ecstatic utterances”, and it again shows John’s literary talent.

2.4.3. Visions

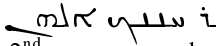
In the approach adopted in this study mystical experiences are treated as a single mental phenomenon, the parts of which are constituted into separate entities on the level of the verbal discourse, where the constituents are adopted as parts of theoretical presentation, which may be more or less systematic in character and largely symbolic in nature. In this perspective the differences between the various experiences in the mental dimension lie in the intensity of the experience.

Visions, however, constitute an exceptional category of their own. The reason why I place them under the heading of manifestation is that hallucinatory visions might be considered as a *subjective manifestation* of the experience. The difficulty here, however, is in the differentiation of the symbolic descriptions of mystical phenomena with visionary vocabulary from visions where there really is something to “see”, an object of the vision, whether illusory or not. As noted above, it seems that the numerous references to the ‘shapeless light’ are to be taken as symbolic expressions of non-visionary reality. Most references to “visions and revelations” do not really seem to imply any object that is actually seen, as the information is delivered in a more immaterial way. Especially the imagery of light and brightness probably does include examples of non-symbolic usages referring to the visionary experiences, but it is impossible to differentiate between them if the context does not point this out explicitly.

Moreover, the difference between visionary and non-visionary sensing may be difficult or even impossible to recognize even by the subject of the

⁵⁵⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316-317).

⁵⁵⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:5 (pp. 316-317).

⁵⁵⁸  Beulay: *Lettres*, 24:2 (pp. 380-381). The interjections in the 2nd person may also be directed to the ‘world’ (*ibid.*). See also 40:4.

⁵⁵⁹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316-317).

⁵⁶⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 36:2 (pp. 400-401).

experience in his conscious mental reality. "I know that I saw and heard, but about what I saw or about what I heard, I do not know anything to tell you."⁵⁶¹

Nevertheless, there are a few indisputable cases where monks claim to have had visionary experiences in the basic sense of the word:

I saw as it were the palm of a hand that took from my head what seemed a heavy stone, and at the same moment that weight was lightened for me.⁵⁶²

Visionary seeing may be perceived with the physical eyes so that the sight is likened to hallucinations or illusions, or it may take place as an inner vision in "the eye of the mind", something like a dream seen while awake.

The whole problem, however, is de-emphasised in the discourse, because an illusory character is frequently attributed to the visionary experiences due to their possible origin as demonic deception, as the interpretation of such experiences often suggests: apparitions in the likeness of stars, an arch of clouds (rainbow), a throne, chariots or fiery horses are considered as likely "deceit of the demons."⁵⁶³ Genuine revelations and visions, according to *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, come in sensual form only as long as one is in a "psychic state" on one's path, as was the case with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and other righteous men before the Law was given.⁵⁶⁴

Since seeing, or beholding, God is a symbolic expression indicating mental orientation towards God, 'vision' may consequently function as a general term for this orientation. For example, John of Dalyatha addresses God with the words: "Every moment You console with Your vision (*hezātā*)."⁵⁶⁵ The more interesting and illustrative point, however, is the way in which he continues his discourse, giving an indirect definition of the constant vision:

When he is eating, in his food he sees You; when he is drinking, in his drink You are sparkling; when he is crying, in his tears You are shining. Everywhere he looks, there he sees You.⁵⁶⁶

This shows that the concept of vision means a ceaseless intention to think of God, to meditate on Him through every particular concrete object. This is probably the closest we can approach to a panentheistic experience in Syriac metatheology, but the emphasis of the expression may be viewed either as active and subjective (i.e.

⁵⁶¹ ܦܫܘܬܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ . ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ .
 ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ
 Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 21 (15*).

⁵⁶² Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 32 (24*).

⁵⁶³ Beulay: *Lettres*, 49:24 (pp. 518-519; The author of this particular letter was possibly Joseph the Seer.)

⁵⁶⁴ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 51-52 (38*).

⁵⁶⁵ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474-475).

⁵⁶⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 51:5 (pp. 474-475).

the transcendent God is introduced in the creation by the subject's meditative effort) or as passive and objective (i.e. the omnipresent God is perceived in the creation in the contemplative vision). The reading is open to both interpretations.

Vision in this broad sense is also identified with ecstasy by John, who declares: "Blessed is he who carries your ecstasy (*tahrāk*) in his heart at all times, for he sees (*hāzē*) you in himself at every moment."⁵⁶⁷

2.5. The Theoretical Context

The discussion on experiences is very seldom an independent topic in the discourse, where personal experiences are usually presented in a more indirect way. Usually the expressions and interpretations of mystical experiences occur in connection with topics of a more general nature, the most important of which concern the varying phases of man's progress on the spiritual path, or more philosophical issues that adapt the anthropological, cosmological and epistemological postulates and premises of the discourse.

2.5.1. The Metatheological Context: the Course of the Ascetic's Path

Ascetic life is not stagnant in nature, but strongly intentional: negligence is among the hermits' most dangerous enemies – and not the least frequent, it might be added, due to the monotonous character of their daily routine. For this reason the Fathers urge discernment. One should not observe one's practices merely for the sake of tradition.⁵⁶⁸ When this progress is described with at least a degree of systematic thought, the result is a portrayal of an ideal way of spiritual progress culminating in perfection. The schedule of this progress also functions as the context of ecstatic experiences that becomes parsed into part of a chronological axis. Due to their non-speculative approach, however, the ascetic authors were not specialists in producing detailed systems.

The traditional pattern of spiritual life in three stages (corporeal, psychic, spiritual) is usually taken for granted, and it appears in most authors. It is in harmony with the biblical anthropology of St. Paul, but seen in historical

⁵⁶⁷ Beulay: *Lettres*, 47:8 (pp. 460-461).

⁵⁶⁸ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 108 (tr. 93), quoting Isaac of Nineveh (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 466.)

perspective it is in more agreement with Alexandrine than Antiochene thought.⁵⁶⁹ In fact, this division does not take us very far, since in the metatheological discourses the psychic stage seems to be the basic state of a monk, the corporeal being his past, and the spiritual, albeit the most interesting one, is more like an ideal goal. The position is illustrated by the *Letter Sent to a Friend*, which is dedicated to the subject of the three stages, but only 4.5% of its contents deals with the spiritual stage, and the discourse dealing with it is quite apophatic. Already before the spiritual stage there is to be differentiated a state of purity, beginning at the end of the psychic stage, which according to the author of the letter can be recognised by two signs: the first is that during the recitation (of the Psalms) ‘ecstatic wonder’ (*tehrā*), ‘flames of fire’ (*šalhebūtā de-nūrā*) and joy fall into the heart so that the hermit has to stop reading. The second is that the remembrance of God dwells constantly in the soul and the “tongue of the mind stammers⁵⁷⁰ a secret endless prayer” in the heart.⁵⁷¹ The former phenomena, however, occur outside the state of purity as well.

John of Dalyatha observes the tripartite division with the following emphases: the corporeal (*pagrānā*) stage entails refusal or denial of corporeal comfort. The psychic (*naḫšānā*) stage is characterised by penitence, the intention to renew one’s life with the help of both dimensions of asceticism, the outer and the inner. The spiritual (*rūḥānā*) stage consists of purity (*dakyūtā*), a total liberation from passions, and limpidity (*šafyūtā*), which is defined by Beulay as “une sorte de transparence qui permet à l’esprit de l’homme de recevoir les révélations des mystères de Dieu et du monde nouveau”.⁵⁷²

Simeon the Graceful presents the way of the ascetic as consisting of seven phases, and the role of spiritual experience obviously grows towards the end.⁵⁷³

1. The noviciate (*šarwāyūtā*) – obedience in everything one is ordered to perform.
2. Change of habits, qualities, manners and ways of conduct.
3. Struggle against the passions through the fulfilment of the commandments.
4. Labours of discernment (*pūrsānā*), understanding of hidden powers.
5. Contemplation (*tē’oryā*) of the high and incorporeal beings.
6. Contemplation of and wonder (*tā’ar*) at the secrets of the Godhead.
7. Secret working of grace, occasional submersion in divine love.

⁵⁶⁹ This division is found in almost all Syriac authors writing on spiritual topics, and it is in accordance with St. Paul’s tripartite anthropology. The Antiochene school, however, and early Syriac authors like St. Ephrem prefer bipartite anthropology: corporal and spiritual (or: material and immaterial; outer and inner; the first substance being that of animals, the latter that of angels). See Seppälä 1999, 115-116. Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 130; El-Khoury 1982, 1359-1363.

⁵⁷⁰ The nature of the prayer may be clarified by the use of the verb *lagleg*, obviously an onomatopoeic word.

⁵⁷¹ This would be a pithy description of the aim of Byzantine hesychasm as well.

⁵⁷² Beulay 1990, 35. For the three stages in the discourse of Joseph the Seer, see Brock 1987, 314-315, and my book *Kerubin silmin*, 237-238.

⁵⁷³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 167b-168a, p. 287 (tr. 17).

‘Abdišo’ the Seer portrays the ascetic’s progress as three phases that are usually called ‘stages’ (*mešūhtā*), ‘orders’ (*taksā*, from the Greek τὰξίς), ‘levels’ (*dargā*) or ‘spheres’ (*atrā*). The concepts are used quite irregularly and even interchangeably, or they may be omitted completely. ‘Abdišo’ seems to avoid strict logic in the terminology: his purpose is to help his reader forward, not to provide him with a system – an annoying fact for a scholar.

Yet if they need to be arranged in relation to each other, I would suggest that the contents of the phases in ‘Abdišo’’s discourse be understood as a threefold scheme expressed in two different series that interpenetrate and overlap each other as presented below. The series on the left is more on the background of the discourse, functioning as a subtext for the series of ‘spheres’.⁵⁷⁴

Corporeal stage	ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ	
↓		Sphere of purification
Psychic stage	ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ	↓
ecstatic visitation	↓	Sphere of serenity
Spirituality	ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ	↓
		Sphere of perfection

The ‘corporeal’ is a basic stage, from which one rises to the stage of ‘purification’ (*dakyūtā*).⁵⁷⁵ It includes prayers, ascetic exercises and good works in order to be freed from passions. Purification leads to and culminates in the soul’s ‘natural state’ (*taksā keyānā*) – i.e. natural in relation to God – where “prayers resembling fiery perfumes arise in the heart purifying and cleansing the soul”,⁵⁷⁶ enabling it to perceive a spiritual vision (*hezātā*). The way forward proceeds through ecstasy, a ‘wondrous visitation’ (*sā’ōrūtā temihā*).

From this opens a new ‘sphere of serenity’ (*atrā de-šafyūtā*), which includes unceasing prayer, a vision of spiritual knowledge hidden in the creation, unending joy, peace and certainty, that in turn produce love and compassion towards all. The mental resources reserved for the struggle against weakness and passions are here idle and therefore prayer is no longer needed (which is in accordance with the teachings of Isaac of Nineveh). For our theme it is interesting to note that the ecstatic phenomena seem to belong to this middle stage. ‘Serenity’ itself may grow into ‘complete serenity’, an expression approximately

⁵⁷⁴ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 145a-151a, pp. 263-269 (tr. 150-158). The use of concepts is not ultimately logical. For example, ‘corporeality’ (ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ) is described as both ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ (145b) and ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ (147a); the psychic stage as both ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ (145b) and ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ (145a).

⁵⁷⁵ Mingana translates ⲕⲁⲃⲓⲛⲁ as ‘purity’ according to the standard basic meaning of the word. The sense of ‘purification’, however, is evident from the context. The word is derived from the basic stem, which also has the meaning of ‘to become pure’.

⁵⁷⁶ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 147b-148a, p. 266 (tr. 154).

synonymous with ‘the stage of true serenity’ (*mešūḥtā de-šafyūtā šarrīretā*), in which there is a vision in the shape of a heavenly ‘crystal light’ (*nūhrā da-qrustallos*).⁵⁷⁷

The highest possible stage is that of ‘spirituality’, a term employed by ‘Abdišo’ interchangeably and quite synonymously with ‘perfection’. In its vision one cannot distinguish shapes and likenesses, “nor does the mind know (*yāda*) and distinguish (*pāraš*) its own self (*qenōmeh*) from the glory of that shapeless light (*šubḥā de-nūhrā hū de-lā demū*)”.⁵⁷⁸

According to Barhebraeus, in the highest stages voices and words pass away, and the mind deals only with spiritual meanings. While still moving upwards one must enter the ‘divine cloud’.⁵⁷⁹ The note on the ‘divine cloud’ seems to reflect a subtext from the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, referring to the ascent towards the Deity as described there.

The foremost Syriac source for speculations on mystical ascent is certainly the *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, whose discourse, however, operates on such an abstract, timeless and ideal level that the individual experience does not take shape in the midst of the stream of dream-like visions. (One could, of course, consider the whole book as representing an outlook derived from mystical experience.) The main theme of the work, the cosmic rise of the mind (*hawnā*), is embedded in the vision of the cosmological structure that consists of neo-Platonic ideas on emanation combined with the biblical material, and the outcome is a very charming context for any mystical experiences, open to many interpretations.⁵⁸⁰

2.5.2. Metatheological Anthropology

The anthropology of the Syrian metatheologians deserves a study of its own, based on a systematic analysis⁵⁸¹ of the Syriac anthropological concepts, Syriac being exceptionally rich in terms that refer to the inner man. The large number of words with similar equivalents pose difficulties for translators:

⁵⁷⁷ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 149a, p. 267 (tr. 155-156).

⁵⁷⁸ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 149b, p. 268 (tr. 156).

⁵⁷⁹ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 60-61 (tr. 52).

⁵⁸⁰ I have made a more detailed synopsis of the thought of the *Book of the Holy Hierotheos* in *Kerubin silmin*, 221-225.

⁵⁸¹ Such systematic contextual analyses, however, will be feasible only after the editions of Syriac literature have been made available in electronic form. This process has hardly begun and will surely take at least a few decades, but once it is completed the comprehensive results will be attainable with such moderate effort that at the moment it does not in fact seem reasonable to carry out such projects. (Unfortunately, this is true of the studies of Syriac mystical vocabulary as well!)

<i>naḥšā</i>	soul, self	<i>rūḥā</i>	Spirit, wind
<i>madde'ā</i>	mind, spirit, understanding	<i>melletā</i>	logos, intellect
<i>hawnā</i>	spirit, mind, intellect	<i>tirtā</i>	the innermost, consciousness
<i>tar'itā</i>	mind, intellect, thinking	<i>qenōmā</i>	self, substance, person
<i>re'yānā</i>	mind, intellect, thought, consciousness	<i>yātā</i>	substance, self

It seems to me that it is most reasonable to regard these terms not as psychic entities but as abstractions of mental functions. Namely, the emotional or epistemological qualities of the subject's mental functions are abstracted on the linguistic level into the "sub-subjects" given above, but since the mental operations are indefinite and lack exact criteria of identity, the identities of these sub-subjects are correspondingly inexact, the result being a multitude of varying translations for the above concepts.

Instead of a systematic anthropological survey, however, we shall here make only a few remarks relevant to our topic. The basis of metatheological anthropology could be taken from the following points in the writings of Simeon the Graceful. Inside a man, according to him, there is a bright, ineffable and immaterial mirror (*maḥzītā*), a picture and dwelling-place of God wherein His Spirit establishes Himself in baptism. Since the creation of the world mystical knowledge has been implanted in human nature; it can be activated by purification and prayer, which make one conscious of the spiritual nature of the world and know things of both the past and the future, those near-by as well as those far-away, and secret mysteries become comprehensible.⁵⁸² Anyone who purifies this mirror

will see all the spiritual powers which accompany the natures and the affairs of this world, whether they be far or near, through the sublime rays that emanate from it, as if they were set in array before his eyes; and will contemplate them without any darkness, by means of the inner power (*ḥaylā kāsyā*) of the Holy Spirit, which dwells and works in the creation.⁵⁸³

Where then does the mystical experience take place? John of Dalyatha states precisely that the body (*pagrā*) and the soul (*naḥšā*) are able to enjoy the mystical experience equally (*šawyā'īt*) but it is the *hawnā* (spirit, mind) alone that is the recipient of the perception of the experience in question.⁵⁸⁴ This definition is sufficiently holistic to exclude the dualistic implications, but it also preserves the

⁵⁸² Mingana 1934/Simon, 195a-196a, pp. 314-315 (tr. 60-61).

⁵⁸³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 195b, p. 315 (tr. 60-61). Mingana's translation 'inner power' (ܚܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܝܐ) could as well be translated 'hidden power', 'secret power' or 'mystical power'; an alternative suggestion for "contemplate them without any darkness" is "observe them without veil" (ܚܝܠܐ ܕܩܘܝܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ).

⁵⁸⁴ Beulay: *Lettres*, 34:2 (pp. 398-399).

apophatic aspect of the experience by leaving the kernel of the process outside the mere psychic (conscious) aspect of man.

The most frequently used “sub-subjects” of the mystical experience seem to be *hawnā* and *madde'ā*, which probably implies a certain influence of Greek subtext (mainly Evagrius), for both terms function largely in a way corresponding to the Greek *νοῦς*, since the most Semitic way of expressing the innermost part of man, the very essence of one's personality, would be simply ‘heart’, which appears frequently in the discourse. The authors may operate in various dimensions by activating varying (sets of) terms, thereby describing the same psychological reality in different ways.

Heart-centred anthropology is a common trend in Semitic thought and hence a biblical pattern as well. The heart is the centre of a person, a kind of connector between the physiological and mental aspects, for it is seen to belong to the former by its material and to the latter by its nature. Through the heart the experiences perceived spread to the limbs and produce various manifestations.⁵⁸⁵ The mystical experience may take place in the heart of man that may be “suddenly opened by Grace”.⁵⁸⁶ “I know one brother, whose heart [...] was suddenly opened and filled with an unspeakable light.”⁵⁸⁷ The opening of the man's heart vividly portrays the psychedelic character of the mystical experience.

When the discourse moves in more dynamic terms of function, the heart of man is his free will, which is able to change ‘passions into virtues and virtues into passions’.⁵⁸⁸ Freedom of the human will is a basic component of, and a central theme in, Syriac theology, and it is also connected with purification: the first goal is that of impassibility, the second is freedom. The sinful passions, desires, are defined outside real humanity, and the function and aim of the freedom of will is to be liberated from them.

Probably the deepest and most original analyst of the human mind among the Syrians was Isaac of Nineveh – and therefore occasionally the most difficult as well. Often we may trace behind his, and other East Syrian authors, parlance the Platonic three-fold division of the activities of the soul, which has two different series as its Syriac equivalents, although these do not dominate Isaac's anthropology entirely, for it frequently operates with the concept of ‘heart’ as well.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148.

⁵⁸⁶ Isaac of Nineveh. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 547; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 367.

⁵⁸⁷ Presumably John the Seer is here speaking of himself. Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 21 (15*).

⁵⁸⁸ Mingana 1934/Simon, 199b, p. 319 (tr. 67). Perhaps the most sophisticated model of will-centred anthropology (and cosmology) is that of A. Schopenhauer (1788-1860), an ascetic of a kind, who identified the Kantian ‘das Ding an sich’ with the Will in his classic work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819).

⁵⁸⁹ Brock: *Second Part*, 17:1, 19:2 (tr. 91, 103).

		either:	or:
Reasonable	λογιστικός	כחוללות	כחוללות של
Passionate	θυμοειδής	כחול	כחול
Desiring	ἐπιθυμητικός	כחולות	כחול

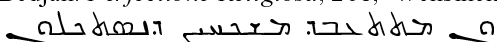
The rationality (*melilūtā*) of the human mind consists of two different capacities, the intellectual capacity (*ḥaylā melilā*), limited by nature, and the understanding (*yaddū tānā*) capacity whereby nature may become perfect. The former seems to be the discursive faculty which *handles* information, but the latter *produces* it by what Isaac would consider “inspiration”, and where we would perhaps rather talk about imagination and creativity. The latter is also the more experiential capacity, and Isaac hints that it is the area where the joyous experiences occur. Isaac consciously leaves something unsaid here, remarking only that this applies in a mystical way (*rāzā’ūt*) to a few men in the present time, but only in a state called *šunnāyā*, translated ‘trance’ by Wensinck but literally meaning any transformation from one mode of being into another. This happened “to the primeval rational beings without trance”, asserts Isaac in a mysterious tone, “but for us it is an annihilation (*buṭṭālā*), because of the sickness of our flesh.”⁵⁹⁰

It must be admitted, and even stressed, that a certain insecurity and obscurity in the parlance belongs organically to the subject since there always remains an apophatic dimension to the experience. John of Dalyatha, after describing what has taken place during the experience in the angelic realm, states that those who undergo the experience “are unable to comprehend anything of what operates in them.”⁵⁹¹ In admitting that not all knowledge of the nature of experience can be derived from the experience itself, he implicitly admits that existing knowledge is (at least to some extent) produced independently of its expression and description, that is: on the level of interpretation.

2.5.3. Metatheological Cosmology

The cosmological position of our authors is, not surprisingly, God-centred, but the discussion functions in two directions and dimensions. The basic perspective opens towards the immaterial kingdom of heaven, the ‘world of light’ (*‘ālmā denūhrā*)⁵⁹², but on the other hand, the discourse also operates with the creative role of God in the present cosmos, particularly emphasising the active creative process by which the world is sustained. The latter leads to the assertion that God may be seen beyond or through any *natural* phenomenon – a suitable definition for the

⁵⁹⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 208; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 140.

⁵⁹¹  Beulay: *Lettres*, 40:5 (pp. 424-425).

⁵⁹² Beulay: *Lettres*, 15:2 (pp. 348-349).

contemplative attitude. This does not reach a pantheistic extent, however, since God in his Essence is all the time considered as being beyond his Creative Power, although this is not always expressed explicitly.

The cosmological postulates of the discourse also include the position taken on the classical question concerning the nature of the created world, whether it is “good” or “evil”. The answer must be read between the lines. Due to the lack of abstract questioning in the discourse of the Syriac Fathers, their standpoint could be understood as a kind of meliorist existentialism: the abstract ‘world as such’, its goodness and evil nature, is an uninteresting and even unanswerable question and therefore outside the discourse: the goodness and the evil exist in man and in his perspectives only; they are attributes of man, not of the world. For this reason withdrawal from the world means in the first place withdrawal from thoughts that are not in accordance with the divine will, and this is reflected in outer withdrawal from impulses that function as stimuli for sin.

For our topic, however, the most important observation is that it is the experience of the subject that determines whether one’s perspective is coloured with good or evil.

When grace visits us, the light of love of our fellow-men which is shed on the mirror of our heart is such that we do not see in the world any sinners or evil men; but when we are under the influence of the demons we are so much in the darkness of wrath that we do not see a single good and upright man in the world (Simeon the Graceful).⁵⁹³

2.5.4. Metatheological Epistemology

Let no one think about reaching Knowledge by diligent inner working (*hūfātā*) and human thinking (*renyā*), for this happens by spiritual operation so that he to whom the revelation is imparted, at that time is not aware of any psychic thought (*huššābā nafšānāyā*) nor of those things which are perceivable by the senses (Isaac of Nineveh).⁵⁹⁴

Mystical knowledge (*īda’ tā*), gnosis, is often presented as a consequence of experience, which raises many questions. What is the content of gnosis and how does it relate to ordinary knowledge? It has already become clear, at least implicitly, that the emphasis of gnosis is beyond words, and indeed it is not “knowledge” in any usual epistemological sense: it may be without any actual discursive content. The problem is further obscured by the fact that the ascetic

⁵⁹³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 179a, p. 298 (tr. 35).

⁵⁹⁴ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

authors usually employ the vocabulary connected with rationality in quite a careless way: for them ‘reason’ means ‘thinking’, and ‘reasonability’ correspondingly the ‘ability to think’. For modern readers, however, ‘reason’ has more to do with logical reasoning, discursiveness and argumentation. Nevertheless, since it is evident from the majority of sources that mystical experiences do have a certain informative quality and consequently instructive character, it is necessary to discuss the topic from this perspective, too, yet bearing in mind that according to the metatheologians themselves, the contents of gnosis cannot be known by reading, i.e. their reference is not attained by treatment of verbal entities.

The sources show that mystical knowledge, gnosis, is not a product of exercises in “angelic life” but a gift of Grace: even the pure angels are unable to stir ‘divine revelation’ (*gelyānā allāhāyā*) from themselves without divine Grace.⁵⁹⁵ On the other hand, the gift is not separate from the ascetic struggle. According to *A Letter Sent to a Friend*, the gifts of ‘sight of itself’ (*hezātā da-qnōmeh*) and ‘intuitions of the natures of the created beings’ (*sukkālē da-kyānā da-beryātā*) are given to the mind when one has stood firm against the physical attack of the demons.⁵⁹⁶

The *causa efficiens* of mystical knowledge is essentially the same as that of mystical experience: it may be God, perhaps focused as the Holy Spirit, or an angel. Isaac declares that “the mind (*hawnā*) will see hidden things (*kasyātā*) when the ‘Holy Spirit’ (*rūḥā de-quḏšā*) begins to reveal to it heavenly things”.⁵⁹⁷

A wider epistemological context is provided in the writings of Simeon the Graceful, who outlines a kind of mystical epistemology. He understands the difference between ‘natural knowledge’ and ‘supernatural knowledge’ with the aid of ascetic practice, i.e. in relation to the purification of various parts of the mind: there is no “secret knowledge” without freedom from sin. A proper term for this might be *ascetic pragmatism*.⁵⁹⁸

One way to understand mystical knowledge is to view it as a static, enduring form of what ecstasy represents dynamically, as a certain emotional peak. Isaac of Nineveh urges one to stay in solitude and in silence, unaffected by sensual impulses. Then

⁵⁹⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 161; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 109.

⁵⁹⁶ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 35 (26*), translates “nature of the forms of creation”.

⁵⁹⁷ מַחְשַׁבְתִּי יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר בְּרִי אֱלֹהִים . וְהַאֲדָמָה בְּרִי אֱלֹהִים . בְּרִי אֱלֹהִים בְּרִי אֱלֹהִים . Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 126-127; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 86.

⁵⁹⁸ According to C.S. Peirce (1839-1914), the father of *philosophical pragmatism*, the meaning of abstract and intellectual concepts is exhausted by the effects they exert, or are able to exert, on human experience and actions. See W.B. Gallie, *Peirce and Pragmatism*, Penguin 1952; A.J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism*, Macmillan 1968.

the intellect (*re'yānā*) rises above the existence, and the body ceases from tears and of perception and movement, besides natural vitality (*ḥayyūt keyānāytā*). For that knowledge (*īda'tā*) does not submit to take the appearances of the things of the sensible world as its companion.⁵⁹⁹

Isaac of Nineveh draws a connection between ecstasy and mystical knowledge which he gives an eschatological interpretation, describing 'ecstasy in the divine nature' (*temhā de-'al keyānā allāhāyā*) as 'a revelation of the new world'.⁶⁰⁰ Sahdona, too, makes an explicit connection between ecstatic experience and mystical knowledge:

And he meditates in wondrous ecstasy (*rānē be-tahrā temihā*) on the Glory of God, and he examines wondrously the great depth of his secret wisdom, and he is stunned (*tāmeh*) marvellously by the riches poured out by His Goodness.⁶⁰¹

According to 'Abdišo' the Seer, prolonged ecstasy introduces to the soul spiritual contemplation (*tē'ōryā rūḥānītā*) concerning the vision (*ḥezātā*) and intuitions (*sukkālē*) of the past and future worlds,⁶⁰² operating with secrets of the future (*gestā de-rāzē da-'tīdātā*). The immaterial impulses during prayer are inward spiritual knowledge hidden in the nature of creation, 'ecstatic intuitions' (*sukkālē tehīrē*) of the incorporeal, and the sight of divine providence.⁶⁰³ 'Ecstatic wonder of the Wisdom of God' (*tahrā de-ḥekmeteh d-allāhā*) makes the intuitions (*sukkālē*) of the judgement and providence (*dīneh da-mfarnesānūteh*) of God shine in the soul.⁶⁰⁴ Other epistemological consequences of ecstasy (*temhā*) include

knowledge of both worlds, the one that has passed and the one that shall pass, and also the consciousness of the secrets of future things, together with a holy smell and taste; (the hearing of) fine sounds of the spiritual minds (*madde'ē*): joy, jubilation, exultation, glorification, chants, praises, and hymns of magnification.⁶⁰⁵

⁵⁹⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 49; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

⁶⁰⁰ ܐܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ Brock: *Second Part*, 8:4 (ed. 22, tr. 27).

⁶⁰¹ Sahdona: *Oeuvres Spirituelles I*, 3:151.

⁶⁰² ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 144b, p. 263 (tr. 150). This spiritual contemplation is likened to a 'cloud' (*ܥܘܠܡܐ*). The use of this image may arise from the twofold meaning of the particle ܥܘܠܡܐ 'above', 'concerning'.

⁶⁰³ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 154b, p. 273 (tr. 164), 275 (tr. 167). For the term *sukkālē*, see below note 619.

⁶⁰⁴ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 148a, p. 266 (tr. 154). Mingana translates as "Ecstasy in the Wisdom of God".

⁶⁰⁵ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 157a, p. 275 (tr. 167).

a ‘gnostic’ (*īhīdāyā gnōstīqā*).⁶¹³ The use of the word, however, does not imply “gnosticism” as opposed to the Christian Church.⁶¹⁴

Transmission of knowledge is also an indefinite issue. It is covered by the concept of *gelyānā*, usually translated ‘revelation’ and thereby easily understood as a form of vision. Revelation, however, is a wider concept than mere visual experience: it may function as a general term for inner enlightenment. “Revelation (*gelyānā*) is silence of intellect”, says Isaac of Nineveh, the author with the most profound approach to the subject.⁶¹⁵ Isaac sharply differentiates higher forms of knowledge from visions and revelations. The phenomenon of revelation (*gelyānā*) is divided by Isaac of Nineveh into six basic types based on biblical examples:

1. Non-ecstatic revelation perceived with the senses:
 - a) material – the burning bush.
 - b) immaterial – Jacob’s ladder, the light that blinded St. Paul.
2. An ecstatic vision (*hezwā*) perceived psychically – Ezekiel’s chariot, Isaiah 6:1.
3. The mental act of being carried away (*heṭūfyā re’yānāyā*)
 - St. Paul’s journey to the ‘third heaven’.
4. The rank of prophecy (*taksā nebīyūtā*) – Balaam.
5. Through understanding (*mestaklānūtā*) – Col. 1:9, Eph. 1:17-19.
6. In the likeness of a dream (*ayk de-ḥelmā*)
 - Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar, Joseph the husband of Mary.⁶¹⁶

Isaac argues that by the biblical examples one may conclude that all the revelations that God has given for the guidance of mankind have come through images (*demwātā*), especially to those who are “of simple understanding and of small insight”. Nevertheless, divine comfort and instruction destined for individuals are received without images, by intelligible apperception (*margešānūtā matyad’ānītā*), which is the perfection of knowledge, the highest form of understanding. Revelation, however, is inferior to knowledge for three reasons: it is dependent on recipient, symbolic in nature (i.e. it only refers to the truth partially), and the inspiration provided by it is transient. This is why it should not, according to Isaac, be called ‘knowledge’ but ‘overshadowing’ (*maggenānūtā*). Real ‘knowledge’ is concerned with metaphysical issues such as God’s foreknowledge, His incomprehensible nature, His various qualities, and understanding of the mysteries of His will concerning mankind. These are attained by the ‘intellect’ (*madde’ā*) that attains ‘insights into the divine nature’,⁶¹⁷

⁶¹³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 200b, p. 320 (tr. 69).

⁶¹⁴ This is evident since Simon was writing centuries after the heyday of the actual Gnostic movement, and the Gnostic movement did not have a monopoly on the use of the Greek word γνῶσις, ‘knowledge’.

⁶¹⁵ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

⁶¹⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 156-160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 106-108.

⁶¹⁷ *ܡܕܕܗܘܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ*

whereas many of those who have received a revelation have known God as children only.⁶¹⁸

A single entity of “active” mystical knowledge is often – especially by Isaac of Nineveh – called *sukkālā*, the most literal meaning of which is ‘understanding’ or ‘intellect’. Yet in most contexts it is clearly something that is conveyed to man from above, and the certain definiteness in the meaning of the concept is shown by its use in the plural (*sukkālē*), which makes ‘intuitions’ a good rendering.⁶¹⁹ The ecstatic quality present in its acceptance is reflected in the use of the terms *tahrā dab-sukkālā* and *sukkālē tehīrē*, and these offer many possibilities for translators: the former is translated ‘ecstatic understanding’ by Wensinck, the literal composition being ‘ecstasy (wonder) that is in understanding’, and for the latter Wensinck gives ‘wonderful intuitions’, but in principle ‘ecstatic intuitions’ would do as well.⁶²⁰ The sweet taste of mystical experience is reputed to stupefy (*matmehīn*) the soul with *sukkālē*.⁶²¹

The many-dimensional essence of mystical knowledge gave rise to further interpretations. Simeon the Graceful presents a tripartite division of spiritual life as “three intelligible altars” of mystical knowledge, corresponding to the mysteries of Friday, Saturday and Sunday (referring to Christ’s Passion, descent to the nether world and Resurrection). The first altar is the mystical knowledge of works (*īda ’tā de-sū ’rānē*), corresponding to the mystery of Friday, signifying the practical fulfilment of the commandments. The second altar is the knowledge of contemplation (*īda ’tā de-tē ’ōryā*), illuminative in character, and described as “the key to the mysteries of God that are hidden in the natures of the created beings”. The last altar is the mystical knowledge of hope (*īda ’tā de-sabrā*), the living altar of Christ, corresponding to the mystery of Sunday: the mind is united to Christ for ever as Christ is united to the Father.⁶²²

Simeon the Graceful also beautifully describes the consequences of the experience of shapeless light by placing his stress on mystical knowledge, the basic idea of which here is the awareness of the divine mysteries:

The (illuminated mind) desires to be drawn towards the shapeless eternal light (*nūhrā ītyāyā de-lā demū*) and towards the divine knowledge (*īda ’tā ītyāytā*) which transcends all intelligence. Grace will then dwell in that impassibility, and (the

Literally ‘mysteries of understanding’. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 160; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 109.

⁶¹⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 159-161; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 108-109.

⁶¹⁹ The term has been translated as ‘intellections’ (Beulay), ‘Einsicht’ (Bunge), ‘understanding’ (Wensinck), ‘ecstatic understanding’ (Mingana) and ‘intuition’ (Teule). ‘Abdišo’ the Seer uses the plural *sukkālē* (‘intuitions’) in the same way as Isaac of Nineveh. In my project of producing a Finnish translation of Isaac’s works I have produced an apt equivalent from a slightly poetical expression *ymmärryksen säteily*, ‘radiation of understanding’, which expresses well the supernatural, given and rather definite character of these intuitive understandings.

⁶²⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 52, 20; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 37, 14.

⁶²¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 6-7; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 4.

⁶²² Mingana 1934/Simon, 183b, p. 303 (tr. 41-42).

mind) will be conscious (*margeš*) of the sublime and endless mysteries which are poured out by the Father and Source and all the lights, which shine mercifully on us in the secret likeness (*demūtā genīzetā*) of His hidden Goodness; and the mind will be impressed by them, with the likeness (*demūtā*) of the glory of goodness, as much as it can bear, according to its expectation, its eager longing, and the measure of its growth in spiritual exercise. It will then avow immediately that it understands that everything is vanity when compared with one thing: the Highest Divinity.⁶²³

‘Abdišo’ the Seer, on the other hand, states explicitly that in the highest sphere of spirituality there can be no vision or contemplation of either corporeal or incorporeal beings, nor any vision concerning divine judgement or Providence; there is no impulse or understanding whatsoever concerning anything that exists – only the vision of the Redeemer. The vision is completely ‘spiritual’ and has no forms (*eskēmē*) or likeness (*demūtā*).⁶²⁴

Do Simeon and ‘Abdišo’ disagree? Since they happen to employ quite divergent vocabulary in treating the topic, there are no absolutely explicit disagreements, but implicitly there is an evident discord in emphasis. Simeon receives mystical ‘knowledge’, but for ‘Abdišo’ gnosis remains on a lower level, his aim being to portray an experience of a more absolute kind. Yet they may refer to the same reality, Simeon only from a wider perspective and therefore with a wider reference for concepts such as *īda’tā*. In other words, ‘Abdišo’ may approach a similar experience with a more focused perspective, while Simeon adjoins to his portrayal some of the (psychedelic) consequences of the experience. Or they may speak about experiences of divergent intensity, ‘Abdišo’’s vision being more concentrated. Or the reason could be seen in the different use of the concept of *demūtā* (‘likeness’ or ‘image’), which ‘Abdišo’ seems to understand as an analytical concept, while Simeon treats it more as a symbolic one.

The different tones of the language of ‘Abdišo’ and Simeon illustrate how any discourse on gnosis is inevitably bound to a subjective perspective, but also how the reader of the texts has the keys of interpretation with which the meaning can be modified in accordance with one’s own paradigm.

⁶²³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 166b, p. 286 (tr. 15).

⁶²⁴ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 150b-151a, p. 269 (tr. 158-159).

לשם למנוח כראויא גוסלולא לא גלגל . לא גלגלולא
גלגלולא לא גלגלולא לא גלגלולא לא גלגלולא

2.5.5. Some Remarks on the Theological Context

2.5.5.1. On the Dogmatic Position

The emphasis we have placed on experiences raises many questions in relation to the Christian theological framework. How are they related to dogmatic theology? What is their role in Christian life? Why would a Christian actually need supernatural experiences?

The importance of spiritual experiences for ascetics may be illustrated with the opinion of Isaac of Nineveh, who declares that even the ability to perform miracles and raise the dead would be nothing if one had lost the sense and reality of the mystical experience.⁶²⁵ This is so simply because what we call “experience” is for Isaac no less than the active presence of the Divine.

‘Abdišo’ the Seer interprets the effects of the Spirit in man as actualisation of the potency existing in man: he defines the ‘fiery impulse’ (*zaw’ā nūrānā*) as a “spiritual key (*qelīdā rūḥānā*), which opens before the mind (*hawnā*) the inner door (*tar’ā gawwāyā*) of the heart (*lebbā*), and makes manifest to it the spiritual abode (*atrā*) in which dwells Christ our Lord within us.”⁶²⁶

How do these ecstatic readings relate to the official theology of the Syrian churches? Since the sources of this study are not far-removed in time from the golden era of Christological schisms and dogmatic speculations, it is even a little surprising that the metatheologians are free of practically all schismatic speculation. The discourse, both in its methods and aims, is quite removed from the Christological questioning and dogmatic theology which had divided the Church and had therefore been attached to all their members, including our sources. Consequently, no real disagreements on dogmatic matters arise, and neither do the ascetics seem to have any need to justify their position as members of a particular confession.⁶²⁷

The same applies to the use of the texts during history. It is typical that the “Jacobite” copyists adopted “Nestorian” metatheological works as such, changing only a few names in the texts: the quotations of Theodoret of Mopsuestia, for example, were allowed to remain in the text but under the name of St. Cyril of Alexandria.⁶²⁸ The same tendency took place in the Greek

⁶²⁵ Isaac does not, of course, use the concept of “mystical experience” but discourses here about “intimacy of the love of Christ with all its extraordinary consequences”, a good definition of Christian mystical experience. Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 488; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 327.

⁶²⁶ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 144a, p. 262 (tr. 149).

⁶²⁷ Yet the leaders of the Church could use theological points as means to justify their distrust of certain metatheologians (Sahdona, Joseph the Seer and Isaac of Nineveh; see above, pp. 19-20, 23).

⁶²⁸ Mingana 1934, 74-76. The procedure is a good indication of the fact that the essence of the disagreements was not in the content but in the persons!

translation of Isaac of Nineveh.⁶²⁹ On the other hand, Barhebraeus quotes the *Ladders* of John Climacus openly – the wounds perhaps already being healed by his time.⁶³⁰

2.5.5.2. The Bible

We have already seen examples of how the description of experiences is conditioned by biblical language. This happens both unconsciously and consciously; the subjects had read their Bibles and therefore the biblical images are amongst the most natural modes of expression, and this tendency is strengthened by the fact that the more biblical a description is, the more trustworthy it is considered.

But in order to realise and understand the experiential nature of the language it is essential to point out that the descriptions are not actually derived *from* the Bible. In fact the biblical justifications usually appear in other contexts than in descriptions of the highly mystical experiences. Many common terms like ‘fire’ or ‘light’ naturally do have parallels in the Bible, but it would be quite unreasonable to suggest “influences” – i.e. that the authors would not have been able to employ these concepts if they were not to be found in Sacred Writ.

If we examine more closely the technique applied by the metatheologians to the interpretation and quotation of the Bible, it seems that all the authors quote it quite freely (usually probably by heart); sometimes a quotation seems to be more an exposition of the verse than an actual quotation. A few times even sayings of unknown origin are introduced by the words “it is written”, as if they are authoritative. Moreover, the biblical passages are picked up and used without concern as to their context – in accordance with apostolic and Jewish exegetical traditions (e.g. St. Paul himself).

As a historical note we may also remark here that when the ascetics quoted the Bible in an approximately exact way, until the 5th century they often used the harmonised Gospel, the Diatessaron (*ewangelyōn damḥalletē*), when the more official translation of the Church was already the Old Syriac version of the Gospels (*ewangelyōn da-mfarrešē*), and accordingly, signs of the use of the Old Syriac version may be found until the 8th century, while the Church had long ago adopted the Peshitta, the “Vulgate of the East”.⁶³¹ This phenomenon is largely explained by the tendency to quote by heart, which enabled the old forms to survive in the kerygmatic tradition.

The interpretation of the Old Testament, especially when the Scripture is not in line with the principles of the New Covenant, functions in an allegorical

⁶²⁹ See the introductions of Wensinck’s *Mystic Treatises* (p. xviii) and *Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (p. lxxviii).

⁶³⁰ E.g. Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 111 (tr. 96).

⁶³¹ Vööbus 1951, 44, 97-98, 102-106.

way. For instance, passages referring to warfare and fighting are commonly taken as indicators of the inner battle against sinful passions in order to gain spiritual victories.⁶³² A certain historical sense, on the other hand, is to be seen in the fact that the Bible is quoted as “the word of a prophet” or of an apostle (not by a collective name like “the word of God”).

The dynamic understanding of the Scriptures is also demonstrated by Isaac of Nineveh’s teaching on the Lord’s Prayer.

Our Lord did not teach us a particular sequence of words here; rather the teaching He provided in this prayer consists in showing us what we should be focusing our minds on during the entire course of this life.⁶³³

In other words, it is the sense that is given, not the precise sequence of words for recitation. (This aim in fact happens to have been confirmed by the textual history of the prayer itself, since the original Aramaic wording was, curiously enough, not preserved in the early Church.⁶³⁴)

A certain independence of metatheological thinking from the biblical framework is reflected in the fact that the experiences are not made especially “biblical”, and neither is the discourse categorically forced within the limits defined by the biblical set of verses. ‘Love of money’,⁶³⁵ for example, is not considered as ‘the root of all evils’, as St. Paul suggests, but the hierarchy of passions is based rather on an exhaustive survey of a person’s own experience of his passions, and consequently the love of money is seen more as a consequence than as a cause.⁶³⁶ It is even a little strange that the apostles’ ecstatic experiences or charismata are quite seldom referred to.⁶³⁷ Isaac of Nineveh discusses the ecstasy of Peter,⁶³⁸ and also refers to the experience of the prophets in a general way:

Because the prophets were in ecstasy when revelations happened to them, they did not perceive any of the usual things, not even necessary thoughts under the control of the will, nor anything perceptible by the senses.⁶³⁹

⁶³² E.g. the use of Gen. 48:22 by Isaac of Nineveh in Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 9.

⁶³³ Brock: *Second Part*, 14:36 (ed. 68, tr. 78).

⁶³⁴ The existing Aramaic (=Syriac) versions are translations from the Greek. The traces of the original can be seen behind the differences between the two canonical versions, where the double meaning of the Aramaic **hawbā* is rendered ‘sin’ by Luke (11:4) and ‘debt’ by Matthew (6:12).

⁶³⁵ 1 Tim. 6:1. The Greek original for ‘love of money’ is φιλαργυρία, the Peshitta reads
ܠܥܡܐ ܕܠܘܒܝ.

⁶³⁶ For example, Mingana 1934/Dadišo’, 34b, p. 232 (tr. 119). “Love of money [...] does not fight against anyone who has conquered his belly and is endowed with generosity.”

⁶³⁷ Acts 2:2-4,13 and 1 Cor 12:1, 6-11 and chapter 14.

⁶³⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155, 173; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105, 117; Acts 10:10.

⁶³⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 155; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 105.

The most famous biblical parallel, however, is St. Paul's heavenly journey (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Isaac of Nineveh classifies Paul's experience as 'psychological rapture' (*ḥetūfyā re 'yānāyā*), and concentrates on discussing the inexpressibility of the experience recounted by Paul. Isaac argues that everything that it is possible to hear with one's ears can be expressed verbally as well.⁶⁴⁰ And consequently,

Paul did not hear through sensible voices or through material forms but in mental impulses (*zaw 'ē de-tar 'ītā*), being snatched away (*ba-ḥṭufyā*) from the body, his will having no share with it.⁶⁴¹

'Abdišo' the Seer even claims that the actual function of the journey was to show that "things revealed to the mind in the state of perfection cannot be constructed linguistically".⁶⁴² But *A Letter Sent to a Friend* goes even further, albeit in a different direction, by even revealing the very 'secret' that St. Paul left unexplained, and which has for that reason puzzled Christians in all ages – the secret is that St. Paul had seen Jesus in his divinity.⁶⁴³

The use of the Old Testament, according to the Eastern Christian tradition, includes typological elements. The biblical scenes and stories are used as typological prefigures of the New Covenant. Accordingly, metatheological authors sometimes use biblical figures to illustrate various aspects of ascetic life. A suitable example of the mystical experience is to be found in the life of Moses.

As the blessed Moses, when he stood in the cloud six days – which constitute the number of days in which the world was made by the wise Creator – had no definite prayer (*ṣelōtā glītā*), but only spiritual vision and sight (*ḥawrā wa-ḥzātā de-rūḥ*) of the creatures of God the Lord of all, together with communion (*'enyānā*) and conversation (*ṣewādā*) with the greatness of that high and sublime Being whose name is holy and whose dwelling-place is holy ('Abdišo' the Seer).⁶⁴⁴

The three stages of spiritual life are often connected with a biblical framework by assigning them biblical parallels: the corporeal stage (*pagrānūtā*) is symbolised by the Exodus from Egypt and the journey in the desert; the psychic stage (*naḥṣānūtā*) is parallel to the crossing of Jordan, the fight with the habitants representing the fight with demons; the spiritual stage (*rūḥānūtā*) corresponds to the entry to the "glorious Zion".⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴⁰ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 50, 158; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35, 107.

⁶⁴¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 50; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 35.

⁶⁴² Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 152a-152b, pp. 270-271 (tr. 160): (ܠܗܘܢ ܠܝܘܨܬܐ ܕܡܘܨܝܐ).

⁶⁴³ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 60 (44*). It is interesting here that both this letter and the previous reference attributed to 'Abdišo' are considered to have been written by the same author, Joseph the Seer. Yet the claims are not necessarily in contradiction, for 'Abdišo''s comment refers to the *account* of the journey, and the *Letter* to its actual course.

⁶⁴⁴ Mingana 1934/'Abdišo', 146b, p. 265 (tr. 152).

⁶⁴⁵ Brock 1987, 314-315.

To sum up, the use of biblical images shows that the biblical cases are employed more as additional illustrative material offering parallels than as a starting-point to justify the writer's position; they were not even arranged as reconstructed starting-points to function as the coulisse for spiritual doctrine. This also shows us something about the understanding of Holy Scripture which differs from the Islamic or Jewish conception of the nature of revelation, as well as from the traditional Protestant understanding of Christianity as *sola Scriptura*.⁶⁴⁶ Despite the extensive use of the Bible, there was evidently no theological need to prove all the aspects of thought and practice as being mere derivatives from the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, this does not indicate an arrogant attitude towards the Bible, which was certainly considered as sacred 'books',⁶⁴⁷ yet not so much as an authority from outside but as an elementary part of the common tradition – tradition inspired by God. For example, the writings of Sahdona contain biblical allusions to the extent that the discourse is like a biblical collage, yet he does not aim to derive his teachings on prayer and vigil *from* Holy Writ but explains them with reference to the practices of the early Church: "This (vigil) is also what the apostles used to do when they gathered together, spending the entire night in praise, prayer and addresses to the faithful."⁶⁴⁸ The biblical characters were understood not only as objects of imitation but also as being "of us".

It is also to be noted that the symbolism of the biblical images often fits excellently and fuses naturally with the metatheological discourse: for example, John of Dalyatha makes an adaptation from Psalm 34:9: "Taste, my brother, see the sweetness (*ḥalyūtā*) of our good Father."⁶⁴⁹

The free approach to the use of the Bible is especially typical of monks and hermits. When Philoxenus, the bishop of Mabbug, identifies the precious jewels mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:12, with vocabulary already familiar to us, as "pure thoughts and holy ideas, a mind that stirs completely in the Spirit, which bears in its impulses at all times the wonder of God (*tahrā d-allāhā*) and admiration (*dummārā*) for the greatness of His Being, and a spirit (*hawnā*) which preserves silence trembling before the inexplicable and inexpressible mysteries of God",⁶⁵⁰ the approach of his interpretation here is slightly more "biblical" than that of the other metatheologians, for his presentation is constructed in such a way that the truths in question are to a greater extent derived from the Bible.

Another interesting topic for a more detailed survey might be to analyse the use of the concept of 'mercy' in metatheological texts. The words for mercy (*rahmā* and *reḥmetā*) mean 'love' and 'compassion' rather than mercy in the juridical sense, which is illustrated by the fact that the corresponding verb (*reḥam*)

⁶⁴⁶ This is worth pointing out, since the East Syrian tradition has sometimes, in the spirit of missionary romanticism, been considered a kind of forerunner of Protestantism, "an anti-papal pro-scriptural Church of the East".

⁶⁴⁷ ܠܗܘܬܐ 'writings', e.g. Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a, 286 (tr. 16).

⁶⁴⁸ Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles III*, 8:68. (Tr. Brock 1987, 229.)

⁶⁴⁹ ܠܗܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܬܐ ܠܗܘܬܐ Beulay: *Lettres*, 7:2 (pp. 326-327).

⁶⁵⁰ Philoxenus: *Discourses*, 8 (tr. 6).

may have God as its object, and usually the word is in the plural (*rahmē*) when the “mercies” are described as proceeding from God, which already indicates that it concerns the particular influences of Grace. The problem of “juridical understanding” is caused by traditional Protestant thinking, where human acts of asceticism are set in opposition to true Christianity based on “grace” in the juridical sense. Nevertheless, Oriental metatheology sees human purification as being at the most another side of truth. According to the 9th-century East Syrian monastic author Thomas of Marga, it is impossible for ascetic practices to possess any intrinsic spiritual value or automatic merit deserving of reward, for many poor people actually undergo the same practices merely due to necessity.

For the happiness of that world is not given for the sake of labours, but is bestowed upon holy men by Divine Grace, for the wages which are laid up there are in proportion to the righteousness of God, and the [merits of the] labours of holy men are completely put out of sight by the Grace of God. So then, my beloved, let us not imagine that the little work which we do [here] can justify us before God.⁶⁵¹

2.5.5.3. Martyrdom

According to Simeon the Graceful, God has implanted in all intelligible natures something of the divine Goodness so that they may all long for the love of God, ‘Light above all light’.⁶⁵² The scheme is fulfilled by connecting the notion with the idea of incarnation:

The one who loved us and came down from the height of His goodness to the lowliness of our humility, in order to raise us from earthiness to spirituality by mixing the divinity (*ḥeliṭūtā d-allāhūtā*) that is in us with the Highest Divinity (*rēšūt allāhūtā*).⁶⁵³

The main point and central topic of Syriac metatheology seems to be the same as that of “official” dogmatic theology: manhood and divinity. The perspectives, methods and aims differ fundamentally, however. In metatheology the aim is not the production of ontological definitions of Christ by human means but the deification of one’s own humanity by Christ’s means: the basis of Christian asceticism is in the fact that the glory of resurrection implies death and suffering.

In early Christianity to follow Christ meant to suffer, the possibility of actual martyrdom being frequently present in a cultural context that was non-

⁶⁵¹ Thomas of Marga: *Book of Governors* 6:14, 377-378 (text), 644 (translation).

⁶⁵² Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a-167b, pp. 286-287 (tr. 16). The expression may reflect a Pseudo-Dionysian subtext.

⁶⁵³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 167a, p. 286 (tr. 16); Mingana gives ‘intercourse’ for ܠܗܘܬܐ and ‘contemplation’ for ܠܗܘܬܐ .

Christian and sometimes anti-Christian. Persecutions ceased but the ideals did not change; they only took different forms. Since Syrian Christianity is largely an outgrowth of the Antiochene tradition, it is appropriate to quote here Ignatius of Antioch, who crystallised the ideal of martyrdom in his Letter to the Magnesians in the solemn words: “unless we willingly choose to die through him in his passion (πάθος), his life is not in us.”⁶⁵⁴ “The bishop of Syria”, as he was wont to call himself, prepared for his own martyrdom in Rome (c. 110) by writing his Epistle to the Romans, famous for its yearning for death.

Suffer me to be food for the beasts, through whom I can attain God. I am God’s wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may be found pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb, and leave nothing of my body, so that when I fall asleep, I may be not burdensome to anyone. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not even see my body.⁶⁵⁵

Now I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing of things seen or unseen envy me my attaining to Jesus Christ. Let there come on me fire, and the cross, and struggles with the wild beasts, cutting, and tearing asunder, rackings of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ.⁶⁵⁶

This ideal remained the *primus motor* of Oriental Christianity for centuries, and metatheological thinking was based on this same tradition. Among the sources of this study it is especially *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*⁶⁵⁷ and Isaac of Nineveh who describe the spiritual progress as ‘ascension on the cross’ (*massaqtā la-zqīfā*), where the body goes through crucifixion and the mind rises to the sphere of higher experiences.

The greater the sufferings of Christ become in us, the greater is our consolation (*būyā’ā*) in Christ. Consolation means contemplation (*tē’ōryā*), which renders the sight (*hezātā*) of the soul possible. It is not possible that our soul produce spiritual fruits, unless our heart becomes dead for the world. For the Father raises the soul that has died the death of Christ, in contemplation of all the worlds (Isaac of Nineveh).⁶⁵⁸

Isaac of Nineveh notes that when the martyrs received a spiritual revelation concerning the date of their execution, they often used to spend their last night

⁶⁵⁴ Ign. Magn. 5:2. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 200-201.

⁶⁵⁵ Ign. Rom. 4:1-2. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 230-231. I have slightly altered Lake’s translation.

⁶⁵⁶ Ign. Rom. 5:3. *The Apostolic Fathers*, 232-233.

⁶⁵⁷ Marsh: *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, 2:21-24; Vööbus 1988, 158-159.

⁶⁵⁸ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 544; cf. Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 365.

standing in prayer praising God joyfully without tasting any food, in this way preparing themselves to receive the crown. Isaac urges his brethren to keep this preparatory state perpetually. He calls the ascetic pursuit ‘invisible martyrdom’ (*sāhdūtā de-lā methazyā*) in order to receive the ‘crown of holiness’ (*kelīlā de-qaddīšūtā*).⁶⁵⁹ *A Letter Sent to a Friend* similarly promises the hermits who live in solitude and watch their thoughts the crown of glory along with the martyrs.⁶⁶⁰ And to complete the perspective on the reality common to both ways of martyrdom, Isaac also considers martyrs as having participated in the ecstatic experience by being ‘inebriated’ (*rāwēn*) with love for their ‘Beloved’ (or Friend, *rāḥmā*).⁶⁶¹

2.5.5.4. Humility

We may conclude this section by paying attention to the factor that is basic to Syrian, and all Eastern Christian, spirituality: that of humility (*makkīkūtā*). One might even argue that the understanding of the concept of ‘spirituality’ in the Eastern Christian tradition comes very close to that of humility. Real spiritual growth is not measured in the quantity of visions nor in the quality of spiritual comprehension but in one’s conception of oneself and in one’s attitude towards others. After all, extraordinary experiences as such are not regarded as aims or methods but rather as a kind of “sight” along the road that one is expected to travel. Isaac of Nineveh considers constancy to be better than ‘trance’ (*šunnāyā*), but when transformations of the state of being must take place, he continues, they should be for the better.⁶⁶²

For this reason the position of all the mystical phenomena described above in a sense belongs on the margins of the structure of metatheological discourse. Yet for the same reason, humility can be seen as the background from which the experiences arise, as Simeon the Graceful relates in the following:

The following is the sign that a monk is progressing in the Lord: his heart is contrite in asceticism and humble in grief over small sins previously committed. Respect and modesty even with regard to the lowly and the weak reign over him; his heart is artless and simple, even when bearing the fruits of the Spirit. His face is illuminated and joyful in his love towards all, and he communes with everybody as

⁶⁵⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 242; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 163.

⁶⁶⁰ Olinde: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 46 (34*).

⁶⁶¹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 219-220; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 148-149.

⁶⁶² ܪܘܘܥܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ ܕܥܠܝܐ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 208; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 140. The context refers to angels and their immaterial motion towards the Good, but the same position also applies to men, for whom the change in question may be painful, because of the weakness of the flesh.

if everybody were good. Do not, however, rely on your righteousness, although the grace has come upon you (Simeon the Graceful).⁶⁶³

This order of precedence is further clarified by the fact that a visionary experience of angelic beings is considered demonic if it emanates from vainglory and pride.⁶⁶⁴

In *A Letter Sent to a Friend* the motion of humility working in the soul is the first sign whereby one can distinguish true experience from the demonic. As long as the motion of humility is preserved in the soul, “it burns like a flame of fire in the heart of man”.⁶⁶⁵

The final chapter of Isaac of Nineveh’s discourses forms a subtle tribute to humility, which seems to be the way to actualise the mystic’s unification with God. “And (the humble one) is reckoned by everyone as a God, though he is simple in his words and of mean respect.”⁶⁶⁶ Moreover, in humility lies the hidden power of God.

Humility is a mysterious power (*ḥaylā rāzānāyā*), which the perfect saints receive when they have reached accomplishment of behaviour. And this power is not granted except to those who, by the power of Grace (*ḥayl ṭaybūtā*), have personally accomplished the whole of excellence, in so far as nature in its domain is able to do this. For humility is all-comprehending excellence.⁶⁶⁷

Accordingly, humility is for Barhebraeus one of the three main causes of weeping, the other two being the power of pleasure (*hannī’ūtā*) present in the mystical intuitions and the ardent love of God. Humility itself is caused by two factors: knowledge of one’s own sinfulness, and the remembrance of God’s greatness.⁶⁶⁸

The charismatic character of humility is confirmed by Isaac when he makes a clear distinction between man’s natural humble characteristics and the mystical degree of humility granted as a gift. “Not every one who in his nature is peaceful or quiet or discrete or without blame, has reached the rank of humility (*dargā de-makkikūtā*).”⁶⁶⁹ Real humility is a permanent state of mind, independent of any causes or circumstances.

Humility is also the reason behind the projective telling-technique of Syriac metatheologians. Experiences are described in the third person singular yet the subject is left unmentioned, which may leave the modern reader with an insecure feeling: whom is the author writing about? This way of telling, however, is not unique or even infrequent in the Semitic languages, but in the discourse of

⁶⁶³ Mingana 1934/Simon, 199a, p. 318 (tr. 66-67).

⁶⁶⁴ Mingana 1934/‘Abdišo’, 158a, p. 276 (tr. 168).

⁶⁶⁵ Olinder: *A Letter of Philoxenus of Mabbug to a Friend*, 40-41 (30*).

⁶⁶⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 577; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 386.

⁶⁶⁷ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 578; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 387.

⁶⁶⁸ Barhebraeus: *Ethikon*, 58 (tr. 49-50).

⁶⁶⁹ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 578; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 387.

mystical experiences it serves the author to minimise his own role and to project his own experiences onto an ideal self (and then perhaps to project the experiences of the ideal subject back into his own mental reality).

Isaac goes on to present permanent humility as a state necessary for reception of revelations of divine mysteries that in turn deliver spiritual knowledge. So we are back where we started in chapter 2.1. – presenting a constant state as an enabling condition of a particular (peak) condition, i.e. mystical experience.

In the end, almost all of the metatheological discussion can be seen to take place in some kind of relation to mystical experience. The symbols open various possibilities for homiletic discoursing on all aspects of spiritual life. For example, the symbol of fire is utilised by John of Dalyatha to fulfil the exhortative function of the discourse by urging his readers to “give material to the fire of Jesus” so that its purity might catch the soul “if it is not overcome by alien waters”.⁶⁷⁰ This may serve as an example of how the mystical experience penetrates the whole religious discourse.

The components of the metatheological discourse that we have roughly differentiated according to their logical functions, are ultimately combined and mingled in the metatheological discourse, where vision, for instance, may be presented as beauty and likened to food, and the revelation identified with drink. “My Lord, give me the beauty of your vision to nourishment, and the revelation of the secrets hidden into the bosom of your Essence to drink.”⁶⁷¹ In the mental reality the various phenomena constitute a single whole, and accordingly, in Syriac metatheology everything leads to everything, and the decisive category is that of totality.

⁶⁷⁰ Beulay: *Lettres*, 15:8 (pp. 350-351).

⁶⁷¹ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:8 (pp. 318-319).

3. ECSTATIC READINGS IN SUFISM

The following presentation of Sufi discourse is essentially based on the same disposition as was used in the analysis of Syriac discourse, but the differences in the contents and emphasis of the Sufi material bring about some changes in the arrangement. The general characteristics concerning the nature and limitations of language also apply to Arabic Sufi discourse, and so unnecessary repetition concerning these is avoided as much as possible.

3.1. The Enabling Cause

Sufi literature provides plenty of allusions to particular methods. It is noteworthy that, although usually not very detailed, they are not disparaged either. The Sufi attitude towards human effort to promote the appearance of ecstasy will be discussed further in chapter 3.3.2. First we shall take a look at the general enabling methods that correlate with the experience but not necessarily with actual causality.

3.1.1. General Methods

The Sufi setting is entirely different from the monastic context of the Syriac scrolls. Rather than remote hermit cells, the practical context is usually communal: the participants in Sufi gatherings live in the “world”. The practice of solitude does exist as a temporary method, but interestingly, the difference (or any speculation on the relation) between these two radically divergent contexts is not presented in our corpus in relation with mystical experiences.

The general term for all exertion to produce ecstasy (*wajd*) is *tawājjud*, a derivative of the corresponding ecstatic root *WJD*. According to Hujwiri’s definition, *tawājjud* is “taking pains to produce *wajd*”.¹ Qušayri defines *tawājjud* as “petitioning of ecstasy through some kind of free will”.² Jilani, too, recognises that ‘spiritual ecstasy’ (*wajd al-rūḥāniyya*) usually comes by means of exterior influences and stimuli.³

The other side of the matter, however, is that when ecstasy is an intent of determined efforts, the outcome is not spontaneous and the subject’s attention may

¹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 415.

² Qušayri: *Risāla*, 61. استدعاء الوجد بنوع من الاختيار.

³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; *Secret of Secrets*, 90.

be distracted to various forms at the expense of content. Hujwiri states that a merely outward *tawājjud*, which is imitation of outer movements and methodical dance, is “absolutely unlawful”.⁴ Niffari offers striking criticism of the nature of ecstasy produced by recitation of the Qur’an: “The (divine) word turns into ecstasy (*wajd*), but using the word to induce ecstasy turns unto the raptures induced by words.”⁵

Generally speaking, the ascetic attitude of life is a kind of indirect cause behind the ecstatic phenomena, but in the textual discourse the causality between ascetic practices and actual ecstasy is not expressed in very clear terms. This is not entirely by chance. Hujwiri states as his own view that “although mortifications are excellent, intoxication and rapture cannot be acquired at all”, the meaning being that an experience cannot be a product of human effort if it is supposed to be a real experience.

This provides some elucidation as to why the methods are not explained in great detail in the present corpus. In literary discourse the stress is placed on the ideal nature of the experience and on the purity of the motives leading to it. All actions in the mystical life should take place for the sake of God alone, surely not for the sake of the activities themselves. Authors who emphasise this, like Niffari, have a constant “de-methodologising” tendency in their discourse. Niffari’s divine subject may even exhort: “How could you be with me, when you are (occupied) between ‘descending’ (*nuzūl*) and ‘ascending’ (*su‘ūd*)”⁶

The first prerequisite of the experience, in logical order, takes place before the actual ecstatic methods: one should of course *learn* to know what to do and what kind of obstacles to remove. This is, generally speaking, where Sufi instruction and discipline is needed. “Who knows the veil, is near to the unveiling”.⁷ This is connected with a basic requisite mentioned by Niffari: since the mystical experience takes place in the psychological dimension one must first know it. “If you do not know who you are, you do not belong to the people of my mystical knowledge (*‘ahl ma‘rif*).”⁸ Self-knowledge, however, is subjective and thereby a matter of practice and personal direction, and consequently the textual corpus does not directly discuss it to a large extent in relation to the mystical experience. And in any case it is a kind of implicit prerequisite: at the moment of the experience itself, one’s ‘self-experience’ must be set aside.⁹

In logical order, the next enabling cause that is required would be acceptance of the experience. This somewhat obvious aspect is implicitly present in the discourse. It is not, however, taken as a subject of independent exploration

⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 415.

⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 34:5 (Arberry’s translation slightly altered).

⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 21:6. كيف تكون عندي وأنت بين النزول والصعود

⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 29:2. من عرف الحجاب أشرف على الكشف

⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 14:9; cf. Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 14:1.

⁹ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 24:27. بيئي وبينك وجدك بك فألقه أحجيك عنك

“Between Me and you is your self-experience (*wajduka bika*): cast it away, and I will veil you from yourself.”

in the discourse which, according to what we might call a “Semitic paradigm”, puts more stress on God’s might than on the individual’s responsibility. Niffari, however, in his chapter on ‘choice’ (*ikhtiyār*) portrays this feature as if he was illuminating it from various perspectives, all the while implicitly, however. “I have planted at every gate a tree and a spring of cool water, and I have made you to thirst”¹⁰ – what is required is acceptance.

Contemplation, or a contemplative attitude, is certainly an important factor behind the experience; it is usually implicitly present in the discourse. Junayd, however, declares boldly that “If a man says *allāh* without first experiencing contemplation (*mušāhada*), he is a liar.”¹¹ Junayd’s idea is that God as an entity, as an “object”, is so different from all other objects that he must be approached in a way which is correspondingly unique. This is a basic aspect in ‘contemplation’, which is, however, a wider phenomenon. A functional way to define it is to state that in contemplation one sees all things through (one’s conception of) God, or that one sees God in all and before all. According to Niffari, God has “friends who do not see except through Him”.¹² Contemplation (*šahāda*), unlike vision, implies some knowledge.¹³

3.1.2. Specific Methods

What then is one to do in practice? This question, a most interesting one, is given relatively little and non-systematic attention in the present texts, partly because the subject is more a matter of practical instruction. Evidently one is supposed to pray. Islamic ritual prayer, however, is more a matter of sobriety and hence not mentioned in our corpus as a cause of mystical experience.¹⁴ Yet prayer in the general sense is counted among the prerequisites. Niffari’s divine subject urges: “Pray to me with your heart, and I will reveal to you the pleasure in prayer.”¹⁵

Yet on the other hand, in the sensitive world of man’s inner dimension, praying, as a verbal activity, may also be a hindrance to mystical experience. When the sense of the presence of supernatural power is intense, one should pay no attention to thoughts that suggest that one should start petitioning, which would be essentially a pursuit of the state that was already at hand. The position is described by Kalabadhi in the following story:

God’s nearness (*qurb allāh*) cut me off from the (desire to) petition God (*su’āl allāh*). Then my soul contended with me, that I should petition God, but I heard a

¹⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 50:15.

¹¹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 75; Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 97.

¹² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 27:10-11.

¹³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 36:44; cf. *Mukhāṭabāt*, 27:1-2.

¹⁴ On the contrary, we are told that ecstatic states may cease for the time of ritual prayers. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66.

¹⁵ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 9:2. صل لى بقلبك أكشف لك عن قرة عينه فى الصلوة

voice saying: “After you have found God, do you petition another than God?”¹⁶

For this reason, prayer is not presented as a logical postulate of mystical experience; it rather belongs to the context from which the experiences arise.

As examples of specific *tawājjud* Hujwiri gives some meditative practices such as representing to one’s mind the bounties and evidences of God, thinking of union (*ittiṣāl*) and of the practices of holy men, and the recitation of the Qur’an.¹⁷ The latter is for Sufis even more important than the Psalter for Christian monks, due to the different understanding of revelation. For Sufis the mere listening to God’s speech is a sacramental experience, for it is where the transcendent God is brought near to the human level, and accordingly the one who recites the Qur’an in a sense becomes a mouthpiece of God through whom His eternal word moves. The specific methods mentioned by Jilani include recitation of the Qur’an “with a beautiful voice”, the chanting of poetry and the special Sufī ritual of *dhikr*.¹⁸

Niffari, on the other hand, seems to be in opposition with his negative remarks concerning those who want to stay up all night in prayer reciting all the sections of the Qur’an but do not really pray. Niffari’s point is that the concentration on the rosaries and verses and other methods that are more or less separate entities disconnected from the rest of man’s existence are not able to guarantee genuine mystical experiences.¹⁹

The most interesting details on the matter are revealed in the discourse of Niffari, in spite of the cryptic character of his verses. Among the enabling causes in the psychological dimension perhaps the most important is concentration, which may be seen as an outgrowth of meditation, a dynamic culmination of the contemplative attitude. According to Niffari, one should consider one’s ‘attention’ (*hamm*) and ‘heart’ (*qalb*) as if they were ‘faces’ (*wajh*) that one is supposed to turn *wholly* towards the experience.²⁰ The divine subject of Niffari’s discourse urges one to beware of paying attention to any kind of thought that occurs, not to mention closer dealings with them. “When you stay before me, everything will call you: beware of paying attention to it in your heart, for if you pay attention to it, it is as if you had answered to it.”²¹ Concentration means that one sets aside one’s expectations²² and does not accept any discursive thoughts during prayer but rather concentrates on the motion of one’s heart, seeking divine assistance from it, and continues to recollect God during the sense of his absence so that no other things might arise to disturb the forthcoming experience.²³

¹⁶ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 115. Slightly altered from Arberry’s translation (*Doctrine of the Sufis*, 153).

¹⁷ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 394-396, 415.

¹⁸ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; *Secret of Secrets*, 90.

¹⁹ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 50:1.

²⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 74:21.

²¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 24:2.

²² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 48:1.

²³ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 4:5,7.

When knowledge (*'ilm*) with all its conditions (*jawāmi'*) calls you at the time of prayer, and you answer it, you are separated from me (*infaṣalta 'annī*).²⁴

The process of concentration also applies during the acceptance of the experience itself: Niffari advises one to 'summon' to oneself as many qualities of experience as possible and resort to those that one experiences as 'responding' most forcibly.

Experience the experience (*wajd*) of presence, in whatever quality the experience (*wajd*) may come to you. If the qualities avoid you, summon them, and the things qualified by them, to your experience. If they respond to you, well; otherwise, flee to the quality in which you experience the experience of presence.²⁵

Complete concentration is the logical postulate of the quality of totality present in the experience. Concentration also means that when the experience is about to come, unreserved surrender is required. Niffari's instructions are: "Experience the experience of presence in whatever quality the ecstasy may come to you."²⁶

The remembrance of God, *dhikr*, the Islamic version of mantra practices, is the most important form of *tawājjud*. The verb *dhakara* signifies remembering, recalling, and hence reminding, mentioning. *Dhikr* has a corresponding double meaning, concrete mentioning and mental remembering. If these aspects are understood as separate entities, the inner one is naturally seen as the more important. According to Quṣayri, vocal remembrance or repetition (*dhikr al-lisān*) leads to inner remembrance (*dhikr al-qalb*), which in the widest sense is continual remembrance, unceasing orientation towards God.²⁷ Jilani agrees that the *dhikr* of language is the first step towards inner states of *dhikr*.²⁸ The inner *dhikr* is credited with the fact that it is not restricted to time or place.²⁹

Kalabadhi differentiates three levels in *dhikr* depending on whether it deals with remembering the one remembered, (*dhikr al-qalb*, 'recollection of the heart'), recollecting the attributes of the One remembered, (*dhikr awṣāf al-madhkūr*) or

²⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 24:3.

²⁵ جد وجد الحضرة على أى صفة جاءك الوجد ،

فإن عارضتك الصفات فأدعها وأدع موصوفاتها الى وجدك ، فإن

استجابت لك وإلا فاهرب الى الصفة التي تجد بمقامك فيها وجد الحضرة

The nuances of the verbs used here are noteworthy: 'summoning' is expressed with the verb *da'ā* which means to 'call', but often in a very causative sense: 'call forth', 'cause', 'provoke';

'responding' is expressed with *istajāba*, stem X of *jāba*. Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 72:14.

²⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 72:14. جد وجد الحضرة على أى صفة جاءك الوجد

²⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 221-223; *Principles of Sufism*, 207-209.

²⁸ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 80-81; *Secret of Secrets*, 45 (for details, see p. 242). The difference between inner and outer *dhikr* is also stepless in practice: the tongue may move but without the voice, which is often regarded as the third main type of mantra technique alongside the silent one and the one uttered aloud. It is also to be remembered that the practice of *dhikr* is not restricted to mystics alone but is characteristic of Muslims in general.

²⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 223 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 209).

‘contemplation of the One remembered’ (*šuhūd al-madhkūr*).³⁰

Shadhili gives four meanings for *dhikr*:

- (1) Act of remembering (portion of the common people).
- (2) Object of remembrance (punishment or bliss etc.)
- (3) *Dhikr* that evokes one’s remembrance concerning (a) good things from God, (b) evils due to the lower self, (c) evils due to the Adversary and (d) evils created by God.
- (4) *Dhikr* that causes one to be remembered by God.³¹

The most common phrases in practising *dhikr* are *subḥān allāh* (‘Praise the Lord’), *allāhu akbar* (‘God is greater’), *lā-ilāha-illā-llāh* (‘There is no God but God’) and *al-ḥamdu lillāh* (‘Thanks to God’) and the simple invocation *allāh, allāh*. These may be repeated a thousand times a day, for example.³² The twelve names that are supposed to be invoked in the inner *dhikr* are *lā-ilāha-illā-llāh, allāh, hū* (‘He’), *ḥaqq* (‘Truth’), *ḥayy* (‘Life’), *qayyūm* (‘Self-existing’), *qahhār* (‘Subduer’), *wahhāb* (‘Donor’), *fattāḥ* (‘Opener’), *wāḥid* (‘the Only One’), *aḥad* (‘One’), *ṣamad*, (‘Eternal’).³³

In the practise of *dhikr* the most important thing is to concentrate one’s thoughts intensively, so that ultimately *dhikr* is the only attribute of which one is aware. “Real recollection consists in forgetting all but the one recollected.”³⁴ This may, according to Hujwiri, lead to a kind of ecstasy in which one speaks something not resulting from one’s own thought.³⁵ On the other hand, the repetition of even the best formula (*lā-ilāha-illa-llāh*), according to Sayf al-Din, does not lead the common people to the highest degrees “even if they have heard it from a sheikh who is the possessor of governing control” unless it happens out of an untainted conviction.³⁶

The importance of *dhikr* has been expressed with maxims like “No one reaches God except by continual *dhikr*”,³⁷ “Sufism is *dhikr* with concentration”

³⁰ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 76; Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 98. Kalabadhi bases the divisions on the writings of Ibn ‘Ata.

³¹ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 163.

³² So Makhluḥ al-Qaba’ili in Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 123. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 221 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 206). Al-Tustari (d. 896) used *allāhu šāhidī*, ‘God is my witness’. (Böwering 1999, 60.)

³³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 108, 115-116; the twelve names are given by Bayrak in *Secret of Secrets*, 77, 85-86.

³⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 74; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 95; Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 254.

³⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 254.

³⁶ Chittick 1992, 147. Chittick also stresses that usually there is nothing unusual about *dhikr* (p. 173).

³⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 221 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 207). The sentence also shows the wide meaning of *dhikr* as a general term for orientation towards God.

(Junayd)³⁸ and justified with a Qur'anic commandment.³⁹ According to Hujwiri's explanation derived from (or into!) salvation history, all the prophets had their own spiritual stations (*maqām*) and that of Muhammad was *dhikr*.⁴⁰ In this way *dhikr* becomes a subject of its own in the Sufi discourse. The importance of the mantra practice is implicitly connected with the belief in the power of the word, common in the thought of Semitic religions, in which the world is believed to have been created by the word (*kalima*) of God, so that there is a kind of ontological kinship between speech and the world.⁴¹

The numerous praises of *dhikr* in Sufi literature, however, encounter a peculiar but sublime counterbalance in the works of Niffari, who makes somewhat arrogant remarks about a state where the reiteration of *dhikr* is no longer necessary.

The recollection of Me in the vision of Me is an outrage.⁴²

If you recollect Me in vision, you are veiled by your recollection.⁴³

For Niffari the practice of *dhikr* is a veil, albeit the most elected thing that God has manifested.⁴⁴ He prefers a total, existential *dhikr*: "Remember me in everything, and I will remember you in everything."⁴⁵

However, Niffari does offer some practical advice as well. He urges one to turn one's soul (or self, *nafs*) to an 'encounter' (*liqā'*) of God once or twice every day, casting away all external things, and meeting him alone. This takes place through guarding one's heart, which enables one to keep one's attention under control, and then turning to God in the 'endings of prayers' (*adbār al-ṣalawāt*) or once a day and once a night.⁴⁶ One should turn one's attention from one's own practice to the bountiful guidance of God, from cognition (*'ilm*) to forgiveness (*'afw*).⁴⁷

The collective application of *dhikr*, that is *samā'*, 'hearing' is a phenomenon the nature of which it is impossible to express in a single word. The

³⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 281 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 304).

³⁹ *Qur'ān* 33:41 (*yā 'ayyuhā-lladhīna 'āmanū-dhkurū-llāha dhikr^{an} kathīr^{an}*; literally "O you who believe, recollect God with a great recollection".) For example, Quṣayri begins his chapter on *dhikr* with this sentence. (Yet Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates: "O ye who believe! Celebrate the praises of Allah, and do this often".)

⁴⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 371. "The station of Adam was repentance (*tawbat*) that of Noah was renunciation (*zuhd*), that of Abraham was resignation (*taslīm*), that of Moses was contrition (*inābat*), that of David was sorrow (*ḥuzn*), that of Jesus was hope (*rajā*), that of John (the Baptist) was fear (*khawf*), and that of our Apostle was praise (*dhikr*)." (Translation Nicholson's.)

⁴¹ E.g. Burckhardt 1976, 100.

⁴² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 23:6.

⁴³ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt* 30:11. True to his all-challenging approach, however, Niffari does state elsewhere that "the true servant is he who rests in the *dhikr* of God" (*Mukhāṭabāt*, 20:3).

⁴⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 49:2.

⁴⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 33:27.

⁴⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:42-45.

⁴⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:42-46.

basic meaning of the term refers to the hearing of God as the individual's act, and as a technical term, general in Sufi use, to a special gathering of ecstatic music, a Sufi session.

The most detailed description of the ritual *samā'* is to be found in Hujwiri's *Kaṣf al-Maḥjūb*. The principles of his rules run as follows: Firstly, one should not practice *samā'* habitually by custom, but only so seldom that one does not lose one's reverence for it. Secondly, *samā'* should not be set out according to one's own will, but instead it should be practised when it comes by itself. Thirdly, a spiritual director should be present. Fourthly, *samā'* should not be practised in the presence of outsiders, "the common people". Fifthly, the singer should be a respectable person free of worldly thoughts. Sixthly, the aim of *samā'* must not be amusement. All artificial efforts should be put aside, and one should not exceed the proper bounds until the *samā'* itself manifests its power. The participant must have the ability to distinguish strong natural impulses from real ecstasy (*wajd*), which is meant to be followed, not repelled. Ecstasy must not be opposed when it is intensifying; nor should it be revived or stimulated when it is declining. During ecstasy one is not allowed to expect help from anyone, but if it is offered, it should not be refused. Seventhly, during the *samā'* it is forbidden to direct any disturbing comments, questions, estimations or applause to the singer or to anyone – this remark obviously applies to those not in an ecstatic state themselves. And lastly, beginners especially must be careful (even neglect the whole practice, as some maintain) because of the dangers posed by disturbing elements like women watching the scene "on the roofs or elsewhere".⁴⁸

From *samā'* we are able to shift smoothly to the most troublesome ecstatic method, that of dance (*raqs*). Our Sufi sources are somewhat irritated concerning *raqs*, since it is in practice the most famous and best-known method, but from the theoretical and theological point of view it is a most peripheral aspect. Kalabadhi and Quṣayri do not treat it at all; Hujwiri has a short, somewhat fretful chapter on dancing. According to him, dancing belongs entirely outside both Islamic law and Sufism.

Dancing (*raqs*) has no foundation either in the religious law or in the path. [...] Since ecstatic movements and the practices of those who endeavour to induce ecstasy (Pers. *ahl-i tawājud*) resemble it, some frivolous imitators have indulged in it immoderately and have made it a religion. I have met with a number of common people who adopted Sufism in the belief that it is this (dancing) and nothing more.⁴⁹

Jilani has the same position. He lists eleven heretical sects, six of which attempt to reach ecstasy through dancing, singing, shouting or hand-clapping; some of them also claim that the state to be reached is beyond the jurisdiction of religious law,

⁴⁸ Hujwiri: *Kaṣf al-Maḥjūb*, 418-420.

⁴⁹ Hujwiri: *Kaṣf al-Maḥjūb*, 416.

and still others practise gazing at beautiful faces, do not see any difference between the sexes or favour free sexual relations.⁵⁰

Solitude is not presented as a decisive key to the world of experience, as the formation of Sufi ecstasy is basically social in character. Even during seclusion the idea is to participate in the common prayers in a mosque five times a day.⁵¹ The function of concrete methods of retreat (*khalwa*) and seclusion (*'uzla*) is the inner purification which in turn functions as a prerequisite of the experience, although logically speaking, it is not an absolutely necessary requirement, due to the "own coming" of the experience. Seclusion, spiritual exercise (*riyāḍa*), silence (*ṣamt*) and perseverance in *dhikr* purify the inner being and hence "the repression of outer sensation opens the inner qualities".⁵² An explicit causal connection between seclusion and mystical experience, however, is very seldom mentioned in the texts. Niffari's divine subject does bid: "Go forth to the empty desert, and sit alone, until I see you."⁵³ (Niffari and his admiration of solitary experiences, however, is a somewhat exceptional case in the present corpus.) Shadhili mentions as a result of *khalwa* 'unveiling' (*kaṣf al-ghīṭā*'), descent of mercy, experience of true love and veracity (*ṣidq*) in speech.⁵⁴ "Some are provided drink without an intermediary."⁵⁵ Jilani mentions as the advantages of seclusion the enlightening of the heart and the reformation of the ego, caused by silence and spiritual exercise, but counterbalances this immediately by stating that the way is not one's own, but that of the Prophet and of those who follow him.⁵⁶

More than seclusion, however, the sources emphasise the necessity of a spiritual guide (*muršid*).⁵⁷ Abu Yazid is reputed as having said: "He who has no sheikh has Satan for his sheikh."⁵⁸ The intermediary may be an angel, learned man or a saint.⁵⁹ The role of the Sufi community, however, appears in the texts mainly implicitly or indirectly. For example, the 'circles of remembrance' (*majālis al-dhikr*) are likened to 'meadows of Paradise' (*riyāḍ al-janna*).⁶⁰ The main line of Sufism is social in character, and *khalwa* remains merely a temporal method that

⁵⁰ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 140-141; *Secret of Secrets*, 117-118.

⁵¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 98; *Secret of Secrets*, 127. Chapter 21 gives a detailed description of the midnight prayers that the one in seclusion is supposed to perform. The fixed number of certain prayers (e.g. 100) intimates the use of the rosary.

⁵² Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 121, 124; cf. *Secret of Secrets*, 93, 95. According to Quṣayri, the right motive for seclusion is not to hide oneself from the evil of the world, but rather to save others from one's own evil. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 101-102 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 19-20.) For anecdotes in favour of *khalwa* and *'uzla*, see *ibid*, 101-104 (tr. 19-24) and Kalabadhi, *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 111; Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 147.

⁵³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 50:10.

⁵⁴ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 114.

⁵⁵ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 144.

⁵⁶ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 124-125; *Secret of Secrets*, 95.

⁵⁷ E.g. Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 85, 102, 115, 135; *Secret of Secrets*, 50, 71, 85, 112.

⁵⁸ Anonymous Sufi text from the 13th century. Chittick 1992, 1992, 55.

⁵⁹ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 144.

⁶⁰ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 222 (tr. *Principles of Sufism*, 208).

belongs primarily to the early stages of the path.⁶¹

It is of course difficult to say anything exact concerning the relationship between the two ideals. Yet they may be harmonised by stating that the ideal is to be outwardly with men and distant from them inwardly.⁶² The seventy-one Sufis introduced by Ibn 'Arabi include one sitting on the top of a mountain, one who remained 60 years in his house "without leaving it once" and still another who withdrew to the wilderness seeking solitude,⁶³ but these are mentioned more as exceptional cases, albeit admired, the main line of Sufism being more collective in character.

We may also note the ideal of staying awake. Yet the practice, an extreme one, is very seldom dealt with in the sources of the present study, and when it does occur, the question is expressed in quite a sophisticated way, based on the somewhat technical questioning of the literary Sufi discourse. Hujwiri discusses the question on quite an abstract level: why do other Sufis advise novices to avoid sleeping as far as possible and would not allow "the lover sleep or rest by day or night", but others consider sleep as a gift of God and even encourage their novices to constrain themselves to sleep?⁶⁴

However, actual wakefulness is considered to be one of the ideal pursuits, partly because of the early hour of the Islamic morning prayer. Ibn 'Arabi, for example, mentions with reference to a sheikh who was "almost free from sin" that he "would sometimes sleep the whole night through, which caused me doubts regarding his spiritual effort."⁶⁵ According to Hujwiri, some sheikhs regarded sleep as a state resembling death, and therefore considered "not permissible for a novice to sleep except when he is overpowered by slumber". Others, however, considered sleep as a state of innocence or even "God's act towards us" (Junayd), and thereby held that a novice may sleep at will and even constrain himself to sleep.⁶⁶

Finally, we may note here that age does not necessarily set any limitations to achieving ecstatic states, as is revealed by the following incident:

⁶¹ Some examples in Ibn 'Arabi's hagiography show the ideal of modesty in communication. Sufis who lived in society could, for example, keep "aloof from men and maintain long periods of silence" (*Sufis of Andalus*, 124), and another "was never the first to speak and only answered when it was really necessary" (*ibid.*, 92). Al-Rundi is reported to have "kept to the mountains and coasts and avoided the inhabited areas for nearly thirty years." (*ibid.*, 116).

⁶² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 102; *Principles of Sufism*, 20.

⁶³ Sitting on the mountain was not continual but only one of the practices he was known for. Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalus*, 118, 87, 126.

⁶⁴ Junayd's answer is that sleep is to be preferred since it is God's gift, independent of the human will, and his acts towards man. On this point Junayd is exceptionally in agreement with the principles of drunken Sufism. Others consider sleep as a veil since it is not needed in Paradise. Both views are supported with miscellaneous, mainly apocryphal, anecdotes. Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 352-354.

⁶⁵ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalus*, 111 (for praying in the night, see also p. 140).

⁶⁶ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 351-352.

He had a daughter under one year of age. So influenced was she by his spiritual state that when the brethren had attended for the Invocation and had formed a large circle, she would jump down from her mother's lap and stand in the middle of the circle on her legs. At such times ecstasy would overcome her (Ibn 'Arabi).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalus*, 109. However, the end of the story reads: "She died before she was weaned" (sic).

3.2. Expression

If one wishes to find descriptions of the experience itself, what it is and what it feels like, the Sufi sources give surprisingly few “direct” descriptions. The emphasis of the discourse takes its character from the more theoretical stages presented below.

As we have seen before, there is no established, permanent vocabulary to express the ecstatic experience, and the creation of such terminology cannot take place without theorisation that is inevitably more or less incommensurable. The problem is definitely comprehended by the Sufis themselves. The following sayings are attributed to al-Makki:

Ecstasy does not admit of explanation, because it is a secret between God and the true believers. Let men seek to explain it as they will, their explanation is not that secret, inasmuch as all human power and effort is divorced from the Divine mysteries.⁶⁸

There is no explanation for the nature of ecstasy (*kayfiyyat al-wajd*), for it is a secret of God among firm believers (*al-mu'minin al-mūqinīn*).⁶⁹

This is even more the case when the non-linguistic experience is silent in its manifestation and even in its methods. According to Hujwiri, the one who possesses a state (*ḥāl*), becomes silent in tongue, and its reality is proclaimed in his works instead. “To ask about *ḥāl* is absurd, since *ḥāl* is the annihilation of speech.”⁷⁰

The verbal reality divides the mental reality in a way that may be misleading or insufficient. Therefore, concentration on the experience itself diminishes concentration on its expression. Niffari states plainly that “the more the vision (*ru'ya*) increases, the more the expression (*'ibāra*) decreases.”⁷¹ The sensitivity of the matter is shown by the fact that the character of mystical experience may be reversed if the subject concentrates on the discursive aspect. According to Niffari, if the state of concentration takes place on the verbal level, it is actually separation.⁷²

Moreover, language itself is limited in expressing absolute truths because of its instability. Niffari expresses this quite modern idea sublimely by stating that

⁶⁸ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 138.

⁶⁹ Sulami, 202 (§5); *Adab al-mulūk*, 134.

⁷⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 369-370.

⁷¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 28:2. *Ru'ya* is for Niffari a wide concept that does not imply actual visual apparitions.

⁷² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 33:3-4. “How long will you be concentrated by nothing but words (*aqwāl*)? [...] If you are concentrated by other than Me, you are separated so long as you are concentrated.”

“people of names are people of shadow”.⁷³

But on the other hand, semantic insufficiencies do not put an end to the discussion, which is allusive in intention. Mystical discourse is essentially non-reaching by character, always tending to point further. One indicator of this is that Niffari proceeds to declare that it is not only language (*kalām*) but also silence (*ṣamt*) that can function as a veil during the mystical experience.⁷⁴

Mystical language operates in a twofold tension field. On the one hand, it is bound to be insufficient, due to its operation with unlimited and indefinite entities, the connotations of which are constituted on a subjective basis. And on the other hand, the terms are universal in form: they are the same for all users and recipients, and this common form may easily delude one into thinking that one has grasped its meaning in its pure or full form. The misleading character of language is disclosed various times by Niffari in maxims like “expression is a veil” (*al-‘ibāra sitr*)⁷⁵, “speech is a veil” (*al-qawl hijāb*)⁷⁶ or “letter is a veil” (*al-ḥarf hijāb*).⁷⁷

Entanglement in human language and the outlines produced by it also support the tendency, psychologically very natural, to project human qualities and one’s own conceptions onto the mystical reality. Niffari is again well aware of the danger. His divine subject announces: “My attributes (*‘awṣāfī*) which are supported by expression (*‘ibāra*) are in a sense your attributes”.⁷⁸

3.2.1. Analytical Expression

The *whole* Sufi discourse takes place in some kind of relation to the mystical experience, in the broad sense of the term. In order to find a description in which a case of actual ecstasy, an actual ecstatic experience, has been designated analytically, one should first unravel what “ecstasy” is in Arabic, regardless of Sufism, and then proceed by differentiating the symbolic terms in Sufi terminology (and there are about a dozen of them⁷⁹). This is, however, a very tricky question. It is in fact doubtful whether there ever was any literal discussion about “ecstasy” in Arabic before the era of Sufism.

Besides, the whole question is perhaps formulated inaccurately. If the inner states have no fixed criteria of identity, the hunt for “exact equivalents” will remain fruitless. And to be more exact: *to what* one should look for an equivalent?

⁷³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 67:10. أهل الأسماء أهل الظل

⁷⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 28:10. The experience in this case is ‘vision’ (*ru‘ya*).

⁷⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 28:3. العيادة ستر

⁷⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 20:15.

⁷⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:2, 67:2.

⁷⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:18.

⁷⁹ These include *sukr*, *wajd*, *ṣurb*, *dhawq*, *‘adhb*, *samā’*, *fanā’*, *ghayba*, *jadhba*, *ḥāl*, *ghalaba*, *lum‘a* – depending on the context and the tradition of interpretation.

Should the starting-point be the Greek ἔκστασις? Or perhaps the Syriac *temhā*?

If this be the case, we are fortunate to have access to the portions of the oldest surviving manuscript of the Arabic New Testament, Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151, which dates back to 867 AD, slightly predating our Sufi corpus. The fact that it was translated from Syriac by a man who could make comparisons with the Greek original,⁸⁰ actually provides us with the Arabic equivalent of both ἔκστασις and *temhā*. Perhaps a little surprisingly, the translator chose to translate *temha* (ἔκστασις) as *sahw*, the basic meaning of which is ‘inattentiveness’, ‘absent-mindedness’. But does this choice tell of the equivalence of concepts or of the difficulty faced by the translator? The usual classical Arabic usage of *sahw* in fact refers more to inattention in the sense of negligence than to ecstatic states. Fortunately, the text is provided with a note, most likely by the translator himself, where we are given an analytical definition of the mystical experience that is expressed by ἔκστασις in Greek, *temhā* in Syriac, and *sahw* in Arabic:

it makes the person free from his thoughts which generally come to him; and it gathers all his thought, and snatches his mind, and he sees distant absent matters as though they are near and present. And this is like the absent-mindedness (*sahw*) which fell upon Adam and Abraham.⁸¹

According to the definition, the experience consists of four characteristic features: (1) discharge of ordinary discursive mental activity, (2) a concentrating effect, (3) a sense of the more rapid, smoother motion of consciousness, as I see the basic idea of being snatched, and (4) the prophetic quality of clairvoyance. The definition is, of course, focused on the prophetic character of the particular experience in question (Acts 10:10). It may also be asked whether the giver of the description really knows of ecstasy from his own experience or whether he derived the qualities by reasoning (most likely) or from some other source. But in any case the very decision to attach an explanation is already an indication of the difficulty faced by the translator here.

The choice of *sahw*, however, did not gain permanent acceptance in the Christian tradition, neither did it gain favour in the Sufi *parole* – even though it would have provided a nicely rhyming counterpart to *sahw*, ‘sobriety’. In the later version of the Arabic Bible⁸² ἔκστασις is translated as *ghayba*, which in its most

⁸⁰ The translator Bišr ibn al-Sirrī, an East Syrian, made the translation in Damascus during Ramadan, 253 AH (867 AD). His knowledge of Greek, as well as his extensive knowledge of theology, and even of Greek mythology, is apparent from the remarks in the margins, which are most probably by him.

⁸¹ يعني بالسهو ان يصير الانسان متبرئا من فكره التي جرت بها عادته يجمع جميع افكاره ويخطف بعقله ويرى الامور البعيدة الغائبة كالقريبة الحاضرة وهذا شبيه بالسهو الذي وقع على ادم وابراهيم Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151 II, 25. (Translation by Staal, 26.) The same choice (*sahw*) is also made when ἔκστασις occurs in less ecstatic contexts (Acts 3:10). In 11:5 and 22:17 the concept of ecstasy is omitted, as in the Peshitta.

⁸² The early history of the Arabic translations of the New Testament is somewhat obscure, but the

literal sense denotes absence; the most recent translations have *ghaybūba*, a word often translated as ‘trance’, or a whole sentence *ghibtu’an wa’ī*, “I went off from my consciousness”, the closest classical parallel to which in the present classical corpus is Junayd’s *ghayba’an ḥālī*, literally “absence from my state”, but to be translated simply ‘ecstasy’.⁸³ The Arabic version of Isaac of Nineveh has a very good equivalent for *temhā*, the Arabic *dhuhūl* which signifies ‘perplexity’, ‘daze’, ‘stupor’, ‘amazement’, but this concept does not occur in Sufi vocabulary.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Oxford Dictionary gives three Arabic equivalents for ecstasy, all different from the ones above: *ibtihāj*, the primary meaning of which is literally ‘joy’, *ṭarab*, an expression of strong emotion, either joy or sorrow⁸⁵, and *našwa*, which seems to be the least symbolic and therefore perhaps the most analytical concept of the three.

However, the Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms by al-Qašani does not mention any of these! *Našwa*, in fact, never did become a part of Sufi vocabulary. This can be illustrated with the example given by E. Homerin. The first verse is an original secular poem composed by the legendary wine poet Abu Nuwas (d. 813), and the second version is from Qušayri, who quotes it in the chapter on *ṣaḥw* and *sukr*.

lī našwatāni wa-lin-nudmāni wāḥīdatun
*šay’un khuṣiṣtu bihi baynahumū waḥdī.*⁸⁶

lī sakratāni wa-lin-nudmāni wāḥīdatun
*šay’un khuṣiṣtu bihi baynahumū waḥdī.*⁸⁷

To me two *intoxications*, to my companions one,
 by this I am marked among them alone.

Therefore, *sukr* is more technical and as such fits Sufi discourse better than *našwa*. However, there is no actual reason to suggest that *našwa* should be

version edited by Staal was hardly the first one. The documented versions include the 9th–10th century Jewish versions of the Old Testament, as well as the 16th-century manuscripts of both testaments in St. Petersburg, and the Arabic versions included in 17th-century Paris and London polyglots. The Arabic manuscripts have not been exhaustively investigated since they are not among the most relevant for textual criticism. The first printed edition of the Arabic Bible was published in Rome in 1671, followed by Protestant (London, 1822) and Catholic reprints. I have used a reprint of the 19th-century Protestant edition.

⁸³ Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā’*, 79; Zaehner 1960, 219.

⁸⁴ The translation is a more recent version of Isaac by Ishaq ‘Atallah. The version is abbreviated, and in fact the most ecstatic points of the discourse are among the sections omitted. Ishaq al-Suryānī: *Naskiyyāt*, 18.

⁸⁵ This peculiar mode of expression is typical of the Semitic languages, especially Arabic, portraying the intensity of feeling, not its ‘colour’, resulting in two opposite meanings.

⁸⁶ Abū Nuwās: *Diwān*, 180. Translated in Homerin 1994, 191.

⁸⁷ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 71. Translation according to Homerin 1994, 191.

considered as the most exact Arabic equivalent of ecstasy. The whole idea of having exact signs for indefinite entities, such as ecstasy as a mental phenomenon, is in fact a logical impossibility. Perhaps the most reasonable solution is to acknowledge the incommensurability of the signs of the concept of ecstasy and leave the very possibility of analytical signification in brackets.

As for the practice, the English translations of Sufi texts customarily translate *wajd* as ‘ecstasy’, yet it must be borne in mind that its basic meaning is that of existing and being found. The clearest exception here is Niffari, who often employs *wajd* in the more general sense of experiencing oneself or God; Arberry therefore usually translates it as ‘experience’, but sometimes as ‘ecstasy’. Often both possibilities would make perfect sense.⁸⁸ In any case, the fact that *wajd* is used as a symbol of ecstasy indicates the notion that in mystical experience the true nature of *existence* is *encountered*. Reality, for Sufis, is existential,⁸⁹ and existence is experiential.

The corresponding verb *wajada* may be used of the emergence of the relation between the subject and the experience. Consequently, an expression like *yajidūna* (*fī ‘asrārihim karāmāt wa-mawāhib*)⁹⁰ may be understood as a continuum of the three basic meanings: ‘they find’, ‘they encounter’ and ‘they experience’ (favours and gifts in their inmost being). But the connotation with *wajd* introduces an evident nuance of ecstasy into the expression, that of ecstatic experience.

Besides *wajd*, Nicholson also adjoins to the category of terms “more or less equivalent to ecstasy” *ghayba* (‘absence’), *jadhba* (‘attraction’), *ḥāl* (‘state’, ‘emotion’).⁹¹ The strong ecstatic nuance of *jadhba* is evident from the use of the same root in the passive participle (*majdhūb*) to refer to the possessed and lunatics. The function of these terms in the discourse, however, is more active in the category of interpretation. *Ḥāl* is in fact an analytical term for “state in general” which could, however, be understood as a symbolic and specific term when used of a single ecstatic experience (and translated ‘ecstasy’). In principle a single *ḥāl* could be expressed by its feminine counterpart *ḥāla*, but this grammatical possibility has seldom been utilised in the actual discourse.⁹²

Curiously enough, one could even suggest that Sufi Arabic lacks an actual equivalent for ‘ecstasy’, since all the potential candidates seem to have a wider or more symbolic range of meanings than the English word ‘ecstasy’, and in any case considerably different from the Greek ἔκστασις. This, however, is not to deny the

⁸⁸ Cf. Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 3:4, 7:2, 11:17, 13:7 (here Arberry’s translation ‘ecstasy’ does not really fit the context), 17:1, 2, 4, 6; 18:13, 68:1.

⁸⁹ “Existential” in the theistic context does not imply alienation but a stress on (the active use of) free will and personal responsibility, and particularly a tendency to view *passionate commitment* as a prerequisite for true existence (as in the case of Kierkegaard in *Avslutande ovetenskaplig efterskrift [Concluding Unscientific Postscript]*, 2:2-3).

⁹⁰ E.g. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 51; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 66.

⁹¹ Nicholson 1914, 59.

⁹² E.g. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 62.

possibility of analytical expression which may take place in two ways: as parlance that is analytical in intention or as discussion that is analytical in content (components). In the former case the author intends to describe the experience as objectively and exactly as he is able, and the latter deserves to be called analytical due to the disclosure of the psychological characteristics which are after all the most objective information we have, even though it is often presented through the elements of symbolic expression. Moreover, the two often overlap in the discourse.

Since we are dealing with *religious* and *mystical* experience, not just any ecstatic phenomenon, some criteria should be elaborated for the differentiation of supernatural experiences from other emotional peaks. The Sufi texts and the Arabic language in general, however, lack the concept of “supernatural”, which would be useful in this respect.⁹³ But does the lack of a sign imply the lack of a concept? Does the idea of the “supernatural” lie behind the actual expressions? The discourse may give the impression that the differentiation between the two things is indeed lacking, and the reader with a “Western” approach should outline the division from his own presuppositions – in the following quotation the line between natural emotion and mystical ecstasy would be somewhere between ‘grief’ and ‘vision’:

Ecstasy (*wajd*) is a sensation which encounters the heart, whether it be fear, or grief, or the vision of some fact of the future life, or the revelation of some state between man and God (Kalabadhi).⁹⁴

From Jilani’s analysis of ecstatic experience we may note that it may be by nature joy (*surūr*) or sorrow (*ḥuzn*).⁹⁵ Moreover, he describes fear (*khawf*), confusion, bewilderment (*ḥayra*) and shame (*ta’assuf*) as varieties of ecstasy.⁹⁶ The quality of pleasure (*qurrat al-’ayn*) is mentioned by Niffari.⁹⁷ The quality of the joyous pleasure of ecstasy is also described as *irtiyāḥ*, ‘satisfaction’, ‘delight’,⁹⁸ or with the almost synonymous concept *mut’a*, ‘enjoyment’, ‘pleasure’.⁹⁹ In other words, any motion when strong enough may be ecstatic.

Similarly, the mystical influence may make its recipients happy (*as’adahum*) or wretched (*ašqāhum*), and give rise to a sense of intimacy or of

⁹³ The lack is at least partly due to the structure of the Semitic languages, which lack prefixes like *super-* or *hyper-* familiar from the Indo-European languages. The Greek word ‘supernatural’ (ὑπερφυσικός, ὑπερφυσικός), a combination of *hyper* + *physis*, has an equivalent in Syriac: ܩܘܪܪܐܬܐܝܢܐ (e.g. Brock: *Second Part*, 20:1).

⁹⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 82; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106.

⁹⁵ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 118; *Secret of Secrets*, 89. Here Jilani is quoting Junayd.

⁹⁶ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 92.

⁹⁷ E.g. Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 9:2.

⁹⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 331; *Principles of Sufism*, 345. The meaning of *irtiyāḥ* is altogether equivalent to Syriac *neyāḥā*: ‘pleasure, relaxation, delight’.

⁹⁹ Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā’*, 79, 80.

despair. Quṣayri states that “the varieties of the acts of the Truth cannot be counted, and details of its acts cannot be explained or recounted.”¹⁰⁰ The multiple number of possible emotional contents for the ecstatic experience is actually the main reason for the non-existence of a semantically exact sign for ecstasy.

However, the idea of ecstasy surpassing the natural may be found in the Sufi texts at the points where the discourse indicates that experience is not willed nor purposed.¹⁰¹ The aspect of involuntariness is regarded as one of the basic qualities of the mystical experience, and therefore we may consider the criterion of the “supernatural” as being constructed in relation to the will of man.

Despite all the problems of analytical expression, it is possible to differentiate in Sufi texts, if not exact terms, at least descriptions that are analytical in intention.¹⁰² Yet they have a constant tendency to turn into speculation and drift away from the mechanisms of expression to those of interpretation.

Often in that condition, one becomes unconscious of sense and mental perceptions so that one knows neither what is said nor what one says, and that is intoxication (*sukr*). (al-Sabbagh)¹⁰³

The attestation (*ṣāhid*) appears, and the attestations pass away, the senses depart, and sincerity is abolished. (Yazdaniyar concerning the presence of God)¹⁰⁴

The analytical descriptions chart the various qualities of the experience, the most basic of which are present in the discourse more or less implicitly (the most explicitly expressed qualities are mainly the emotional ones described above), subject to our meta-interpretation. Since all the basic activity of the human mind is intentional, one of the main characteristics of ecstasy is correspondingly a certain **vitality**. The concept of ecstasy may be seen as an abstraction for the result of the process that functions as a kind of stimulus for the prevailing content of mind, and for this reason one of the most analytical signs for ecstasy is that of ‘motion’ (*ḥaraka*), a functional overall term covering all emotional variants of ecstasy. “When the spiritual motions (*al-ḥarakāt al-rūḥāniyya*) prevail in the soul, the ecstasy (*wajd*) is true and spiritual.”¹⁰⁵ Jilani divides the ecstatic phenomenon into ten ‘motions’, the last of which is signified as ‘alteration’ (*taghayyur*), a term

¹⁰⁰ وأنواع أفعاله لا يحيط بها حصر ، ولا يأتي على تفصيلها شرح ولا ذكر

Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 118.

¹⁰¹ E.g. Jilani’s differentiation of ‘psychic ecstasy’ (*al-wajd al-naḥsāniyya*) and ‘spiritual ecstasy’ (*al-wajd al-rūḥāniyya*) in *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; *Secret of Secrets*, 90.

¹⁰² E.g. ‘In that moment you see no above or below, mastership or discipleship, or even yourself, which is nearer to you than all else’ Rumi: *Fihi-ma-Fihi* (discourse 24), 186.

¹⁰³ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 145.

¹⁰⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 104; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 137.

¹⁰⁵ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 91.

which potentially covers most of the field of ecstasy though seldom used.¹⁰⁶

The **intensity** of experience is shown by the fact that physical control, will and the ability to make choices disappear in ‘spiritual ecstasy’. Jilani compares the effects of true ecstasy with ‘fever’ (*ḥummā*), which keeps the body under its control so that one cannot avoid physical reactions.¹⁰⁷

The non-conceptual nature of the experience already implies that one of its main characteristics is **immediacy**. Niffari suggests that a genuine experience can be achieved not by aiming to attain it (i.e. the state which is in the first place a verbal concept) but only by orientating oneself towards the direct experience (i.e. God himself). “You desire either me or *waqfa*, or the shape (*hay’a*) of *waqfa*. But if you want me, you are in *waqfa*.”¹⁰⁸

Quṣayri has several descriptions of mystical experiences that are analytical in intention. The quality of **totality** is expressed in an unequivocal way: “When effacement (*maḥw*) comes to dominate a person, he has no knowledge, no reason, no understanding, and no sense.”¹⁰⁹ The physical part has no ability to make choices and is void of power.¹¹⁰ When one is seized (*istawlā*) by the experience, one does not experience (*yaṣhadu*) identity (*‘ayn*)¹¹¹, ‘vestige’ (*athar*), impression (*rasm*) or remains (*talal*) of oneself or of others, and this happens through the ‘cessation of one’s perception of oneself’ (*zawāl iḥsāsihi bi-nafsihi*) and of other beings of this world.¹¹² The use of certain verbs also suggests several interesting features: Quṣayri employs the word *mukhtatīf*, from the root *KH-Ṭ-F*, already familiar to us from Syriac metatheology, to describe one’s disappearance from among the created as ‘being snatched away’ when ‘overpowered’ (*istawlā*) by a greater force.¹¹³

Totality, as a total concentration, is in fact also a prerequisite for an ecstatic mystical experience, which by definition can hardly be only a partial aspect of consciousness. Niffari expresses this idea in his enigmatic fashion by stating: “if you see other than Me, you do not see Me”.¹¹⁴

One way of signifying the extraordinary character of consciousness during the ecstatic experience is to employ the quality of ‘rapidity’ (*sur’a*), which

¹⁰⁶ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; cf. *Secret of Secrets*, 92. The ten modes of ecstasy (*wajd*) are 1. affection of the heart (*mayl al-qalb*), 2. remembrance of God, 3. reading of the Qur’an, 4. weeping (*bakkā’*), 5. pain (*ta’allum*), 6. fear (*khawf*), 7. sorrow (*ḥuzn*), 8. shame (*ta’assuf*) and perplexity (*ḥayra*), 9. isolation (*tajarrud*) and support (*muṣra*), 10. inner and outer alteration (*taghayyur*).

¹⁰⁷ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119-120; *Secret of Secrets*, 91.

¹⁰⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 18:1.

¹⁰⁹ فأما إذا كان الغالب عليه المحو فلا علم ولا عقل ولا فهم ولا حس
Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 64.

¹¹⁰ فلا يبقى للجسم قوة واختيار Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; *Secret of Secrets*, 90.

¹¹¹ ‘*Ayn*, literally ‘eye’, is sometimes used in the sense of ‘core’, ‘substance’, ‘self’. The present case is translated ‘vision’ by Sells in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 120. Also, ‘personality’ or ‘individuality’ might not be out of the question.

¹¹² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 68.

¹¹³ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66.

¹¹⁴ إن رأيت غيري لم ترني Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 5:2.

expresses the intoxicating aspect in a very functional way.¹¹⁵ The parlance on the smooth character of the experience also functions to express the idea that one of the aspects of the experience is the loss of control of ordinary consciousness. In mystical experience one is “reconciled with one’s own self, utterly removed from sensation (*ihsās*)”.¹¹⁶ According to Niffari, ‘cause’ (*sabab*) and ‘relationship’ (*nasab*) are cut off during the experience – a description indicating the absolute totality of the ecstasy.¹¹⁷

Niffari also discloses the quality of **tranquillity** by defining the term *sakīna* as ‘ecstasy in Me’ (*al-wajd biyya*). *Sakīna* is in both form and in meaning the Arabic form of the Hebrew שָׁכַן, ‘(divine) presence’. In the psychological reality this kind of *wajd* may be sensed as something that ‘establishes’ (*athbata*) or ‘effaces’ (*maḥā*).¹¹⁸ Close to this comes the quality of **amenity** which is opened in the discourse by the use of the word *na’īm* (‘bliss’, ‘comfort’, ‘ease’).¹¹⁹

The aspect of warmth (*ḥarāra*) in the ecstatic experience is emphasised by Jilani.¹²⁰ He combines the qualities of warmth and uncontrollability in the following analytical description:

The psyche (*nafs*) is unable to obstruct/hinder it, since these motions overpower the physical motion, like that of fever; and when the fever prevails, the psyche becomes too weak to control it and it has no choice at that time.¹²¹

The **intentionality** of Sufi ecstasy is evident since the experience may contain an element of yearning, which may even be regarded as the basic mode of the Sufi experience. Especially Junayd describes the ecstatic experience as a furious longing, as a God-given ‘thirst’ (*zhama*) for God. “Their (sense of) loss distresses them, and their (sense of) finding (God) humbles them as they yearn and ache for him, longing for him in ecstasy.”¹²²

Sufi ecstasy may also have a **consuming**, even violent character, since a “being of flesh cannot endure the appearance” of the power of experience.¹²³ This quality may be described as pain (*ta’allum*) and torment (*law’a*) in the inner heart (*fu’ād*), ‘passion’ (*gharām*) in the innermost conscience (*ḍamīr*), and ‘inconvenience’ (*inzi’āj*) in the subconscious (*bāṭin*).¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 61; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 79.

¹¹⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66. مصطلحاً عن نفسه مأخوذاً بالكلية عن الإحساس

¹¹⁷ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 36:4.

¹¹⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:1-2. Arberry translates *wajd* here as ‘experience’.

¹¹⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 67:12-13, where Niffari in fact denies the value of the experience in question.

¹²⁰ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 91.

¹²¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 91.

¹²² قد شجاها فقدانها ونلها وجدانها أسوفة عليه موجعة لديه Junayd, *Kitāb al-fanā*, 82; Zaehner 1960, 223.

¹²³ لا يكون للبشرية بقاء عند ظهور سلطان الحقيقة (Literally “appearance of the Real Sovereignty”). Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 62. For the physiological manifestations, see p. 267 ff.

¹²⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 202; *Principles of Sufism*, 177; Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 92.

And finally, we may make a remark concerning the relationship between the mystical experience and sleep. Namely, Niffari hints at the possibility of continuance of the experience while asleep, which seems to be a somewhat ideal case. He refers to sleeping ‘in the vision’ of God,¹²⁵ vision being for him a general term for the mystical experience, and in a more cryptic passage, he refers to sleeping under the divine assistance or while weeping.¹²⁶ Niffari also requires purity of dreams.¹²⁷

3.2.2. Symbolic Expression

When attempting to depict a single experience, one soon ends up using symbols derived from the sensible world. Symbolic expressions operate in various ways. Firstly, they may describe the experience itself as if it were a separate object: these include, for example, the images of flame, wine or cup. Secondly, symbolic expression may portray the *influences* of the experience on the subject on an analogous basis: these include ‘drunkenness’ (*sukr*) and ‘fever’ (*ḥummā*). Quṣayri uses the symbol of ‘melting’ (*tadhwīb*) to represent the psychic sense of diffidence and bashfulness during the experience.¹²⁸ Thirdly, the focus may be on the *relation* between the subject and the experience, the most important being ‘tasting’ (*dhawq*), ‘drinking’ (*ṣurb*) and ‘hearing’ (*samā*). Tasting can be focused as ‘sweetness’ (‘*adhb* or *ḥalāwa*)¹²⁹, or ecstasy can be signified as ‘nourishment’ (*ta’ām*) with the aid of analogy.¹³⁰ In addition, touching and smelling are mentioned at least by Hujwiri,¹³¹ and the image of ‘seeing’ is actually the basic category of mystical apprehension in Niffari’s discourse, where its wide usage implies that it has little if anything to do with actual visual apparitions.¹³² And finally, the symbolic expressions may indicate the contribution of the *causa efficiens* behind the experience as, for example, ‘favours’ (*karāmāt*) and ‘gifts’ (*mawāhib*).¹³³ These signs hint at the given nature of the experience and therefore contain a certain interpretative element.

The expressions concerning the nature and characteristics of the

¹²⁵ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 30:13.

¹²⁶ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 13:6.

¹²⁷ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 34:8.

¹²⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 217.

¹²⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 152, 222; *Principles of Sufism*, 96, 208. Tirmidhi’s experiences of sweetness in Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 22, 180.

¹³⁰ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120. الوجد طعام المحبين – “Ecstasy is the meal of lovers (of God)”.

¹³¹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 406. He explains lines from a poem by Abu Nuwās (“Give me drink to drink and tell me it is wine. Do not give it me in secret, when it can be given openly”) as follows: Let my eye see it and my hand touch it and my palate taste it and my nose smell it [...]

¹³² E.g. Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 4:11, 7:20.

¹³³ E.g. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 51; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 66; Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā*, 79.

experience are often analytical in intention but symbolic in content. The aspect of warmth is expressed with the symbol of fire (*nār*), one of the most common symbols.¹³⁴

Ecstasy is a flame (*lahīb*) which springs up in the secret heart (*asrār*), and appears out of longing, and at that visitation (*wārid*) the members are stirred either to joy or grief (al-Nūrī).¹³⁵

Whoever [...] knows the ecstasy (*wajd*) in Me, and departs from it and is tranquil in his departing – for him I kindle a solitary fire (*nār mufrada*) (Niffari).¹³⁶

The symbol of light (*nūr*) is referred to by Jilani, the subject of whose narrative contemplates light with the “two eyes of the heart” and becomes luminous (*nūrāniyya*) himself and is enlightened (*munawwar*) in the same light.¹³⁷ Also, in Tirmidhi’s experience “the heart is filled with the wonders of lights”. The symbolic nature¹³⁸ of the light in question is illustrated in his statement that those who receive supernatural speech receive *sound as light*, “utterances in the form of light”.¹³⁹

The analogy of drinking produces further images such as ‘cups’ (*kawwāb*).¹⁴⁰ According to Quṣayri, the experience both ‘gives drink’ (*saqā*) and ‘makes drunk’ (*askara*).¹⁴¹ Drunkenness is a state of mind that is extraordinary in character, yet not in any sense ultimate. As Quṣayri puts it, “a person who is drunk (*ṣāhib al-sukr*) can be feeling good (*mabṣūṭ*) even though he does not attain the full share of his drunkenness.”¹⁴² Drunkenness also makes one forget and lose one’s will.¹⁴³ Due to the rich derivative faculties of Arabic, there is a word for the one whose drunkenness is to some extent self-induced, *mutasākir*, ‘would-be-drunk’. In Sufī parlance it has been defined as the one “whose oncoming has not completely taken him over, so that he still has access to his senses”.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁴ For instance, the divine subject of Niffari declares: “Who indicates (*dalla*) the veil (*hijāb*), for him I have raised the fire of union (*nār al-wuṣūl*).” Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 34:1.

¹³⁵ Kalabadi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 82; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106.

cf. Smith 34 (cit. Attar: *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, ii).

¹³⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:59.

¹³⁷ E.g. Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 90; *Secret of Secrets*, 56.

¹³⁸ The “symbolic nature” here, of course, results from our “empirical” perspective; a mystic whose world-view is structured from the spiritual dimension would rather present the material light as metaphorical if compared with the Eternal Divine Light. See al-Ghazali: *Miškāt al-anwār*, 55 (tr. 57).

¹³⁹ Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 180, 115. The same image functions in both directions: an utterance can be taken as a symbol of an entity of non-verbal information.

¹⁴⁰ E.g. Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 1:3.

¹⁴¹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 118.

¹⁴² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 71.

¹⁴³ Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 184.

¹⁴⁴ المتساكر الذي لم يستوفه الوارد فيكون للإحساس فيه مساع

Drink may be identified with love. This is especially true in poetical language, but also in prose one may partake of the “pure drink of the cup of His love (*wadd*).”¹⁴⁵ Yahya ibn Mu’adh claims: “I am drunk from the long draught I drank from the cup of his love (*maḥabba*).”¹⁴⁶

The symbols may also be combined in seemingly illogical ways – by connecting fiery and liquid images, for example. The mystical experience is said to ‘inflammate’ (*aḥraqa*) one’s heart (*qalb*) so that the subject partakes of the “drink (*šurb*) of the cup (*ka*) of His love”.¹⁴⁷

The aspect of uncontrollability in the experience has led to its being signed with the symbol *ghalaba*, which literally means ‘conquest’ or ‘victory’. However, Arberry translates it as ‘overmastery’ and Nicholson as ‘rapture’. According to Kalabadhi, it means a certain force of fear, shame, reverence or the like which controls the subject for a short time, after which he returns to his original state.¹⁴⁸ ‘Inspiration’ might function as a dynamic translation.

The consuming quality of the experience may be described on the symbolic level as a ‘sting’ (*ladgha*) in the heart or, using the imagery of heat, as ‘fires’ (*nīrān*) blazing in the heart.¹⁴⁹

The quality of tranquillity (*sakīna*) is further developed by Niffari, who expresses it on the symbolic level with the symbol of a ‘gate’ (*bāb*). “Tranquillity is that you enter to me through the gate.”¹⁵⁰ The limited duration of the experience and its dependence on the subject’s choice is expressed as ‘entering’ and ‘departing’ from the gate. In this respect the ‘gate’ refers to the beginning and end of the experience.¹⁵¹ Likewise, the masters of mystical knowledge who enter with cognition (*ilm*) are called ‘masters of gates’ (*aṣḥāb al-abwāb*).¹⁵²

Symbols, however, are apt to be interpreted in diverse ways, which tends to direct the emphasis of the discourse towards refinement of the forms of expression, which more or less means departure from the actual experience in the mental reality towards even more colourful symbols that may, by gaining inherent value, occupy an independent position in the discourse. Then the discourse has moved to the category of interpretation.

Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 71; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 124-125.

¹⁴⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 327; *Principles of Sufism*, 339. صفا شربه من كأس وده

The concept of *wadd* is somewhat wider than *maḥabba*, for it covers the meanings ‘affection’, ‘amity’ and ‘friendship’.

¹⁴⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 325; *Principles of Sufism*, 335. سكرت من كثرة ما شربت من كأس محبته

¹⁴⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 327; *Principles of Sufism*, 339.

¹⁴⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 83-85; Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 108-110; Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 184. It is interesting to note that *ghalaba* does occur in the Arabic version of Sahdona, where it is accurately translated by Halleux as ‘la victoire’. Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles IV*, p. 104.

¹⁴⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 202; *Principles of Sufism*, 177. The emphasis of the context indicates that fire does not here represent warmth but painful rapture.

¹⁵⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:3. السكينة أن تدخل إلى من الباب

¹⁵¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:4, 71:1.

¹⁵² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:5.

Perhaps the most ambiguous concepts in this sense are the expression of ‘annihilation’ (*fanā*) and all analogous or metaphorical descriptions related to it, such as ‘iron melting in fire’ or ‘light in light’. As symbolic expressions these are more forceful than the previous cases – again a feature which leads the discussion towards the category of interpretation. In principle these expressions may be understood either as (a) descriptions of experiences of a similar kind, albeit bolder in the form of expression only, or (b) descriptions of experiences similar in nature but stronger in effect, or (c) descriptions of experiences that are of an entirely different character but the difference is not efficiently reflected on the verbal level. And moreover, in the actual discourse they usually seem to function as theological statements without actual reference to the subject’s factual experience. Further reasoning on the question of the relationship between such expressions and (psychic) reality is prevented by the lack of objective criteria.

Not all symbols necessarily have an analytical quality as their counterpart: they may be based on a theological function, for example. ‘Shimmer’ (*lum’a*), one of the most beautiful symbols, may be used either because of the enlightening quality sensed in the experience or it may be derived from God’s attribute of light, which in turn may precondition the whole process by causing the mystic to suppose that the experience of Him is inevitably enlightened or illuminating in nature. However, Quṣayri considers the following statement by “a certain sheikh” as a description of ‘evident ecstasy’ (*wajd zhāhir*): “shimmer glimmering with a language deprived of normal discernment”.¹⁵³

Arabic discourse is often characterised by the tendency to allow the choice of vocabulary be poetically orientated even in prose *parole*. Most authors are fond of choosing terms that rhyme, as with Quṣayri’s use of the words *istiy’āb* (encompassing), *istighrāq* (immersion) and *istihlāk* (extinction) that describe the relation between the subject and his experience.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the exact choice of words is often adjusted by homiletic means as in the case of Quṣayri’s hyperbole: “If I was without ecstasy, I would die of yearning.”¹⁵⁵

The Sufis discussed the topic of mystical experience from such manifold aspects that we may also inquire whether they produced signs that are able to function as negative symbols, expressing the non-experience of ecstasy? And indeed, there is a symbol arising naturally from the Oriental cultural context, that of the veil (*hijāb* or *sitr*), one of the most common symbols in all Sufi discourse, and therefore a wide field of functions are attributed to it. Principally it may signify any hindrance between man and God with which one veils oneself from

¹⁵³ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 316. Von Schlegell translates “tongue of one who is taken away from normal modes of discernment” (*Principles of Sufism*, 323). The original, however, is more poetical: *lum’a lama’at bi-lisān ma’khūdh ‘an al-tamyz al-ma’hūd*.

¹⁵⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 63, 73.

¹⁵⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 223. Von Schlegell actually translates the sentence (*kuntu bi-la wajd_{in} ‘amūtu min al-hawā*) in a more logical way: “Without ecstasy I would almost have died from love.” (*Principles of Sufism*, 209). The original is superior in beauty.

the divine reality,¹⁵⁶ and therefore it may ultimately be anything but God Himself: even his ‘service’ (*‘ibāda*), ‘veneration’ (*ta‘zhīm*) or ‘vision’ (*ru‘ya*) are veils in this perspective.¹⁵⁷ Due to this breadth of meaning, however, the image of veiling may be used even to refer to the quality of totality of the experience. Niffari’s semantic movements on the symbolic level are at times somewhat cryptic, but in the following the idea is clear: all sensual experience and rational thought is a veil over the mystical experience.

Experience (*wajd*) of what is other than Me is a veil over ecstasy (*wajd*) in me; according to the intensity of the veil over experience of Me, the manifestations (*bādiyyāt*) will take hold of you, whether you belong to them or not.¹⁵⁸

According to some maxims, the greatest veil is man’s own personality, his ‘self’ (*nafs*).¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, since God in his almightiness is behind all, the veils may be taken as something prepared and given by Him, which alone justifies the use of symbols such as ‘veil of light’.¹⁶⁰ But the ‘veil’ is also used in a way that justifies us in considering it as a negative symbol of mystical experience. Niffari explicitly refers to the veil as the opposite of ecstasy: if one fails to accept the qualities of genuine experience, one will be ruled by the qualities of the veil.¹⁶¹ This implies that both realities exist by their qualities – and in them alone, a modern positivist might add.

Niffari directs the symbolisation further by calling the veil (*hijāb*) in turn *al-balā*, a term which may signify either ‘affliction’, ‘trial’ or ‘visitation’ and which functions in the discourse on a squared level, as a symbol of a symbol.¹⁶²

When the symbols separate themselves from the clear analogous relation, the possibilities for their interpretation begin to display dispersion. In the following quotation from Niffari’s prophetic speech we could take ‘treasures’ (*kunūz*), and perhaps also the ‘keys’ (*maḥātib*) leading to them, as signs of mystical experience, yet the passage is open to other interpretations as well (e.g. it would also serve as an analogy of man’s spiritual growth in a more static sense).

Your time has come, so gather for Me about yourself my bands. Treasure up my *treasures* with my *keys* which I have given you. And be firm and strong, for you are close to your manhood. Appear before Me in that in which I manifest you, and

¹⁵⁶ See Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 64:1, 26:14, 68:13.

¹⁵⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:28-29.

¹⁵⁸ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 1:23. Arberry’s translation, which I tend to follow, here gives ‘experience’ for each occurrence of *wajd*, yet I suggest the possibility of ‘ecstasy’ in the second case. It is not completely unusual for Niffari to use the same word in the same sentence with two different references, a kind of word play enjoyed by others as well (e.g. Jilani: *Sirr al-asrār*, 86).

¹⁵⁹ E.g. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 152; *Principles of Sufism*, 97.

¹⁶⁰ E.g. Ghazali: *Miškāt*, chapter 3:3.

¹⁶¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 72:14.

¹⁶² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 26:14.

recollect Me through my compassionate bounty.¹⁶³

In terms of semantic logic this kind of parlance is, albeit grammatically prose, perhaps closer to poetry in essence.

3.2.3. Poetic Expression¹⁶⁴

The forms of expression reached their structural and aesthetic peak in Arabic and especially Persian Sufi poetry, which developed into a most important means of expression, with the result that finally Sufi ideas and images were adopted by non-Sufi authors as well. Schimmel makes a distinction between descriptive poems, in which the aim is to express the experiences, and technical poems with complicated word plays, puns and allusions,¹⁶⁵ but as might be expected, the division is somewhat indistinct. Since the structure of Persian poetry allows thematic inconsistency, it was possible to express satirical, didactic and mystical themes in the same *ghazal*. The thematic incoherence resulted in variation in interpretation: even the most erotic verses may be interpreted as mystical allegories, and this means a quite unique mixture and co-ordination of the sacred and profane. On the other hand, since poetry does not reveal the poet's personal circumstances or conditions, the themes were established into somewhat impersonal ones.¹⁶⁶

Most themes, images and metaphors (*al-ma'ānī*) are common to all poets. Does this mean an intentional allusion to a specific subtext, or a conditioned, somehow automatic process in the state of poetic inspiration? The problem of creative originality and imitation has been discussed by both Muslim and Western scholars. Losensky estimates that it is possible to "broadly distinguish between formulaic or conventional usage and conscious allusion."¹⁶⁷

The critic Ibn Rašīq (d. c. 1064-1070) made a distinction between theft (*sarq*) and the original inspiration (*badī'*). He admitted that not one of the poets can claim to be free of borrowings (*sariqāt*).¹⁶⁸ He gives ample latitude for *tawārud*, 'unintentional coincidences' between two texts resulting from similarity of topic, the demands of metre and rhyme, or from the unconscious. The point is in the way in which the theft is carried out. A good thief leaves no clues! Without

¹⁶³ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 57:5.

¹⁶⁴ Sufi poetry is an extremely wide field, and very relevant to our topic, so I have here chosen to approach the subject by using the existing data from outside the actual corpus. The only entirely poetic work among my sources is Ibn 'Arabi's *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, utilised in the present chapter; in addition Qušayri and Kalabadhi frequently quote Sufi poetry.

¹⁶⁵ Schimmel 1982, 18.

¹⁶⁶ Yarshater 1988, 23-28, 147-50, 191. (*Ghazal* is a monorhyme of approx. 7-14 lines.)

¹⁶⁷ Losensky 1994, 227.

¹⁶⁸ Losensky 1994, 227-228.

traces of the intended allusion to the original source, the result is a “real and independent *ibtidā'* ”.¹⁶⁹

The poet may also intentionally activate a subtext by referring to an earlier text. According to Losensky, “the distinction between systematic repetition and conscious allusion is fundamental to medieval Arabic discussions of *sariqāt*, but it is not easy to draw.”¹⁷⁰

The main theme of Sufi poetry is usually considered to be ‘Love’, often taken as the opposite of legalism and reasoning. The main symbol is that of wine, the everlasting wine of love, the house of wine (tavern), the cup of wine and the cup-bearer (who is, for instance, a Christian boy of fourteen). According to a Persian key of interpretation called *Risāla-yi Mišwāq* by Muhsin Fa'id Kašani (17th century) wine (*šarāb*) means an enraptured experience of the manifestation of the true Beloved, which destroys the foundations of rationality, but a ‘jug’ (Pers. *sabū*), for example, means the manifestation of God’s names and attributes.¹⁷¹

Symbolic usages of various persons, animals, flowers, stones, instruments and letters of the Arabic alphabet found in Persian mystical poetry have been put together by Schimmel (1982 and 1984). They all signify various states of the lover or the Beloved. There are symbols for ecstasy selected from nature and the animal kingdom, for instance a *hawk* is able to carry away a feeble pigeon, a *daffodil* is a symbol of seeing, and home-sickness is symbolised by a *reed-pipe* or by an *elephant* tugging at its chains. Symbols such as light, fire, embraces and kisses are widely used.¹⁷²

The choice of symbol is usually based on metaphorical or allegorical correlation. For example, Attar employs of divine experience the functional symbol *reward* – which in turn is symbolised with a symbol of a symbol, *swimming towards the dry land*.¹⁷³ The choice of words is also guided by technical requirements; refinement of the forms of expression may mean that the choice of word is based on its fittingness to the rhyme. Generally, however, even a more peculiar symbol is not an arbitrary sign chosen at random, but one arising from the religious cultural context. For example, in Attar’s poetical work *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* the ‘black cave’, to judge by the context, seems to be a symbol of a certain experience; it was chosen, according to Davies, on the basis of the story of Muhammad and Abu Bakr hiding in the cave.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Losensky 1994, 228.

¹⁷⁰ Losensky 1994, 228 (referring to Hasan Ibn Rašīq al-Qayrawānī: *al-'Umdah fī mahāsin al-šī'r*, Dār al-Jīl, Bayrūt 1981).

¹⁷¹ Arberry 1950, chapter 10; Schimmel 1982, 60, 78. See also J. Nurbakhsh: *Sufi symbolism: the Nurbakhsh encyclopedia of Sufi terminology (Farhang-e Nurbakhsh)*, (Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, London).

¹⁷² Schimmel 1984, 148; Schimmel 1982, 73-78.

¹⁷³ Attar: *Conference of the Birds*, 152.

¹⁷⁴ Attar: *Conference of the Birds*, 30. “Break nature’s frame, be resolute and brave, then rest at peace in Unity’s black cave.” (Davis adds in a footnote that the episode became a symbol of withdrawal from the world.)

One advantage of poetic expression is that it is free to surpass the limits of the analogy and adopt a more metaphorical function or make use of surreal ideas. A Sufi poet may boast that “the cup was passed around, and they became drunk, but my drunkenness comes from the cup-bearer (*sukrī min al-mudīr*)”.¹⁷⁵

If we want to know the “right” interpretation of a poem, we should first select the reference. In historical perspective the right reference would be the original intention of the author: what did he mean, what did he cogitate? (A psychoanalytical interpretation would go even further, to the motives and subconscious aims behind these very cogitations.) Since these are impossible to trace, we may understand poetry as being an open field for unregulated interpretations, resulting in an endless variety of meanings. In practice, however, the religious cultural context usually develops a kind of consensus of the principles of interpretation, which is based on the most generally accepted ways of interpretation, and this in turn, psychologically speaking, is based on the human need to know the “right” meaning, which gives rise to the tendency to seek authorities. The assigning of a meaning to a verse, therefore, is by no means a process limited to the authors of poetry alone. Meaning is produced by the reader as well, the result in this case being a kind of “second-hand Sufi poetry”: secular poetry with a spiritual interpretation.

Now we may turn to our main sources. It is probably not a serious exaggeration if we take Ibn ‘Arabi as the ultimate culmination of Sufi symbolism. And what is even more applicable, his poetic work *Tarjumān al-ašwāq* offers an indisputable way of entering into the symbolism since he himself wrote a profound commentary on it. Through his interpretations we are able to find a variety of miscellaneous symbols to signify ecstatic experiences. These interpretations by their very nature already represent the mechanisms of interpretation which we shall deal with in more detail in the next chapter, but on the other hand, Ibn ‘Arabi himself claims that some of the interpretations were “suggested to him in moments of ecstasy” as the reference had remained unclear to him during the original inspiration¹⁷⁶ – a honest remark indeed.

*salāmun ‘alā salmā wa-man ḥalla bi-l-ḥimā
wa-ḥaqqā li-mithlī riqqatan an yusallimā*¹⁷⁷

Greetings to Salma and to those who dwell in the shelter,
for it behoves one like me to give greetings.

¹⁷⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 326; *Principles of Sufism*, 336.

¹⁷⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 7. Ibn ‘Arabi’s style of interpretation exercised a great influence on later Sufis.

¹⁷⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq* 4:1 (p. 16). I follow Nicholson’s principle in translating *ḥāla* as ‘ecstasy’, but I deviate from his translation (p. 57): “...who dwell in the preserve, for it behoves one who loves tenderly like me to give greetings.”

The female name Salma, according to Ibn 'Arabi, alludes to 'Solomonic ecstasy' (*ḥāla sulaymaniyya*), a kind of prophetic station; *ḥimā* means 'refuge', 'protection', 'sanctuary' and symbolises an unattainable station of prophecy, the gate of which was closed by Muhammad.¹⁷⁸ Salma is a name used generally in poetry when the true identity of the beloved is intended to be hidden.¹⁷⁹

*lama'at la-nā bi-l-abraqayni burūqu
qaṣafat la-hā bayna-l-ḍulū'i ru'ūdu.*¹⁸⁰

Flashes of lightning gleamed to us at al-Abraqan,
and their peals of thunder crashed between the ribs.

Here 'peals of thunder' (*ru'ūd*) is a Mosaic ecstasy (*ḥāla mūsawiyya*) which is a divine conversation (*munājjāt*) following from the manifestation of the divine essence in the visible world. The plural 'flashes' indicates that there is variation in the forms of manifestation. The reference to Moses is derived from the idea that he first saw the fire and afterwards heard God speak.¹⁸¹

For the context of our study we can hardly think of a more interesting symbol than the following:

*bi-dhī salamin wa-l-dayri min ḥādiri-l-ḥimā
zhibā'un turīka-l-šamsa fī šuwari-l-dumā.*¹⁸²

At Dhū Salam and the monastery in the abode of al-Ḥimā,
are gazelles who show you the sun in the forms of marble statues.

The 'monastery' (*dayr*), according to Ibn 'Arabi, refers to a Syrian ecstasy (*ḥāla suryāniyya*). Here we have the temptation to accept the impression that the Syrian monasteries still enjoyed a kind of "ecstatic" reputation, at least being a potential context for mystical experience, in the 13th century when Ibn 'Arabi travelled in Mosul and other parts of Northern Mesopotamia. The choice of image as such does not necessarily imply this (more than the idea that all women called Salma are ecstatic), but the parallelism with the earlier prophets does, at least to some extent. We might even see a connection between the images in this verse and the liturgical beauty of the Syrian Church in the fact that Ibn 'Arabi explains *Dhū Salam* as a station "to which submission is rendered on account of its beauty", and 'abode of al-Ḥimā' meaning "that which surrounds the most inaccessible veil of Divine glory. 'Gazelles' are forms of divine and prophetic wisdom. The word

¹⁷⁸ Ibn 'Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 57.

¹⁷⁹ Schimmel 1982, 27-28.

¹⁸⁰ Ibn 'Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 9:1 (p. 18).

¹⁸¹ Ibn 'Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 63-64.

¹⁸² Ibn 'Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq* 12:1 (p. 19).

suwar, here translated as ‘statues’, in fact refers to images and pictorial representation in general, which could be interpreted as a reference to icons, objects strictly forbidden in Islam but revered in Orthodox Christianity. These are explained as being classes of knowledge with no connection with either reason or lust, which would fit in with the spiritual outlook of iconic presentation.¹⁸³

We may note here that in Persian Sufi literature *dayr* may metaphorically represent the universe and the unity of existence, or occasionally the material world (*nasūt*). In Sufi parlance *dayr-e Moghān* referred to an assembly of mystics and saints. The fact that Christian monasteries served as hostels, providing temporary lodging for pilgrims and travellers, gave rise to literary uses of the word *dayr*, by itself or in constructs, as a metaphor for the transitory life of this world, comparable to *falak* (revolving firmament) and *čark* (the wheel of fortune). Such examples as *dayr-e kāki* (earthly), *dayr-e sepanjī* (transient), *dayr-e šešjehatī* (six-sided), *dayr-e kohān* (decrepit), and *dayr-e mīnā* (enamel) are listed and explained in dictionaries (e.g., *Dehkodā*, s.v. *dayr*).¹⁸⁴

Other, and even more peculiar, signs of ecstasy in *Tarjumān al-ašwāq* include a ‘camel saddled’ for a journey (*bāzil raḥḥalū*). It is used for the kind of ecstatic experience that should illuminate the mystery of the Almighty but becomes an inherent value in itself so that it actually turns into an obstacle between its subject and God.¹⁸⁵ ‘Zarūd and his sand’ (*zarūd wa-ramlahā*) stands for elusive types of knowledge which can be reached only in ecstasy.¹⁸⁶

The process of signification achieves a new level when the symbols of symbols are introduced. As examples of these second-degree symbols we may note ‘paradise of refuge’ (*jannat al-ma'wā*),¹⁸⁷ which seems to be employed by Ibn ‘Arabi as a symbol of wine, which is elsewhere usually used as a symbol of spiritual joy, sometimes referring to the divine sciences leading to it, or in contexts that are ecstatic in some other way.¹⁸⁸ And further, ‘escaping’ (*falat*) is used as a

¹⁸³ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 70-71. The actual statues were never introduced into the Churches of the Orient, the only exception being the Uniate churches, which received them as an import from Rome at a relatively late date (c. 18th century). The connection between church decoration and the imagery of the poem seems to be confirmed by the following verses (12:2-4) that contain further images from a Christian context:

“Therefore I watch spheres and serve in a church (*bī’a*),
and guard a many-coloured meadow in the spring.
And at one time I am called the herdsman of the gazelles in the desert,
and at another time I am called a Christian monk (*rāhib*) and an astrologer.
My Beloved is three although He is One,
even as the Persons (of the Trinity) are made one Person in essence.”

¹⁸⁴ Q. Āryān: *Dayr*. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, www.iranica.com (The sources are given as: Bākarzī, pp. 244-45, *Mer’āt al-’oššāq*, p. 150; cf. ‘Erāqī, p. 414, *Hedāyat*, p. 39.)

¹⁸⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 30:15, (p. 34, 117, 118).

¹⁸⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 21:6 (p. 91, 25).

¹⁸⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 26:8 (p. 28). Nicholson translates ‘The Garden of Eden’ (p. 103).

¹⁸⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Ašwāq*, 31:10 (p. 118), 26:6-7 (pp. 102-103), 48:12, (p. 136).

symbol of the yearning of tasting (*dhawq*)¹⁸⁹, ‘killing by a glance’ (*qatalat bi-l-laḥzh*) as a symbol of immersion in contemplation (*al-fanā’ fī-l-muṣāhada*),¹⁹⁰ and so forth.

In conclusion we may remark that in Sufi poetry represented by Ibn ‘Arabi the processes of signification are extended to their uttermost limits. In principle any sign may be adopted to signify mystical experiences and the processes of reference may be continued forward. A symbol that is freely chosen, however, cannot be comprehensible, as Ibn ‘Arabi had to admit: the rarest symbols demanded a commentary of their own. The very need to find exact meanings for every particular symbol is especially a problem of religious poetry since the meanings must be controlled in relation to orthodox doctrine. Secular poetry is freer to leave more room for open meanings.

Consequently, mystical poetry, because of its extraordinary themes and syntactic complexity, is often esoteric to the point of being unintelligible. Yet mystical poems are challenging and fascinating reading, and this is true not only from the semantic, but also from the syntactic point of view. In one line there may occur a number of contrasts, paradoxical oppositions, some play with subject-object relations, and maximal use of transitive allusions, which have great potential for opening new subtextual associations.¹⁹¹

<i>‘ajibtu minka minnī</i>	I am amazed by you, by me
<i>afnaytanī bika ^cannī</i>	You annihilated me in you from me.
<i>aqamtanī bi-maqām_m</i>	You stood me in a station
<i>zhanantu annaka anī</i>	where I supposed that you were me.
(Ibn Jinnī) ¹⁹²	

The poetry of Hallaj is reputed to contain “antithesis (*tibāq*), paronomasia (*jinās*), repetition of verbs and an abundance of prepositions in contrast and opposition within a single verse. The result is a paradox which ruptures the psychological barriers of space, time, and rationality.”¹⁹³ This estimation may be applied largely to Sufi poetry in general.

¹⁸⁹ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Aṣwāq* 59:14 (p. 45, 147) *li-tuflita min mikhlabi al-ṭāyir*, “that she might escape from the claw of the bird”.

¹⁹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Aṣwāq* 2:4 (pp. 15, 50).

¹⁹¹ For some examples, see Homerin 1994, 193-194.

¹⁹² Homerin 1994, 196. The poem is from the end of the 10th century.

¹⁹³ Homerin 1994, 193.

3.3. Interpretation

The level of interpretation is a wide field where mystical experiences undergo typification, termification, valuation and speculation as to its causes and effects and are set in their position in various contexts in theological discussion. On this level the experiences are no longer treated as single experiences but rather as general types.

Valuation means estimations as to the importance of the experience in relation to religious doctrines and values. Any aspect of the experience, for instance its joyous quality,¹⁹⁴ is certainly not an end in itself but part of a wider process. The value of the experience is actually determined by its interpretation concerning its relation to the theological aspects.

But the way in which the discussion actually operates in the Sufi classics, is somewhat unequalled. The experience is modified into terms and types in a most circumstantial way.

3.3.1. Classification of Experience: Sufi Taxonomy

The enormous set of technical vocabulary developed for various types of experience or diverse modes of being, more or less mystical, is certainly one of the most distinctive characteristics of Sufi literature, the classics of which are largely based on the presentations of technical terms referring to general types of experiences, and the whole discourse is structured around them.

The formation of Sufi theory, however, is quite an ambitious endeavour since the inner states are essentially lacking in actual identifying criteria. In order to succeed in treating the interpenetrating existential states, imminent to each other in the mental reality, as independent entities, the semantic fields of the technical terms referring to them should remain so fixed that no significant variation occurs among the different authors. In principle this might not be totally impossible since natural languages are not closed systems but creatively employable: they grow like living organisms whenever there is an actual need to express something.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, all logical reasons indicate that if we survey what kind of usages the terms have in contextual reading, and what kind of meanings are generated by these usages, we will find substantial differences. How then do the Sufis succeed in their pursuit of creating public language for inner states?

¹⁹⁴ For instance, Arberry translates Niffari's enigmatic utterance *استعد بي من سرّك بايوانك إلى* as: "Seek refuge with Me from your joy in taking refuge in Me." Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 30:18.

¹⁹⁵ B.K. Matilal 1992, 149.

The aim of the Sufi discourse is to classify and arrange experiences into different states (*ḥāl*) along the mystic's path. Obviously there is much to interpret, since in principle the whole field of mental phenomena is potentially connected with mystical and ecstatic experiences. As has already been pointed out, the mystical influence may manifest itself in various ways: according to the qualities that are clearly interpretative in nature, it may 'guide' (*hadā*) or 'lead astray' (*aḍalla*), 'blind' (*a'mā*), 'veil' (*ḥajama*), 'attract' (*jadhaba*), 'bring into intimate closeness' (*a'nasa*) or 'distance' (*ab'ada*), 'cause to despair' (*ay'asa*), 'honour' (*akrama*), 'uproot from desires' (*aṣṭalahum 'inda rawmihim*), 'awaken' (*aṣḥā*), 'efface' (*maḥā*), 'bring near' (*qarraba*) or 'make absent' (*ghayyaba*), 'bring close' (*adnā*), 'make present' (*aḥḍara*), 'give wretchedness' (*aṣqā*) and 'alienate' (*akhkhara*), 'treat cruelly' (*aqṣā*) or 'abandon' (*hajara*).¹⁹⁶

The states are usually presented in such a way that the state which has a single aim is shown from two different angles, as though positive and negative. Most of these could be arranged under the umbrella concepts of 'negation' (*nafy*) and 'affirmation' (*ithbāt*); the former referring to the negation of the attributes of humanity, and the latter to the affirmation of the power of the Truth. For example, both 'violence' (*qahr*) and 'tenderness' (*lutf*) may be used as divine methods of guidance: *qahr* annihilates human attributes, and *lutf* signifies God's help.¹⁹⁷

In the following I shall compare systematically the most important pairs of concepts in Kalabadhi's and Quṣayri's works with some reference to Hujwiri, Niffari, Ghazali and Qaṣani. The pairs themselves are not completely identical. It is noteworthy that even a basic concept like *ghayba* may have a different pair in different authors.¹⁹⁸

Kalabadhi

sukr (drunkenness) – *saḥw* (sobriety)
ṣuhūd (witness) – *ghayba* (absence)
jam' (concentration) – *tafriqa* (separation)
tajall_m (revelation) – *istitār* (covering)
fanā' (annihilation) – *baqā'* (staying)

Quṣayri

sukr – *saḥw*
ḥuḍūr (presence) – *ghayba*
qurb (nearness) – *bu'd* (farness)
jam' – *farq* (differentiation)
sitr (cover) – *tajall_m*
kaṣf (uncovering) – *ḥijāb* (veil)
fanā' – *baqā'*
hayba (awe) – *'uns* (intimacy)
maḥw (effacement) – *ithbāt* (affirmation)
qabḍ (seizing) – *baṣṭ* (spreading)
badāwa (beduism) – *hujūm* (attack)
tahwīn (colouring) – *tamkīn* (strengthening)

¹⁹⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 118. To what extent the processes are caused by mystical experience or are general trends in spiritual growth is a matter open to different interpretations.

¹⁹⁷ Hujwiri: *Kaṣhf al-Maḥjūb*, 377.

¹⁹⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 58-80.

The state-pairs can be seen as the mental context of an ecstatic experience, since in principle any state may grow stronger and therefore become an ecstatic one. Yet the manner in which Kalabadhi employs these terms implies that almost all religious emotions are constituted in relation to their opposite pole, carnal passions, lusts and instincts, and in this approach an ecstatic experience is at most a passing curiosity. Also, the progression of spiritual states is measured in relation to passions. For this reason, Kalabadhi's teaching on **drunkenness** (*sukr*) is strongly connected with choice: a drunk person cannot differentiate between pleasant and unpleasant. Kalabadhi gives as an example a Sufi in whose eyes stone and clay were similar to gold and silver. In **sobriety** (*saḥw*) there is the ability to differentiate between pleasant and unpleasant – and preferably to choose the latter. This is a higher state, because adversity has been a conscious choice.¹⁹⁹

Quṣayri treats the same terms in different ways. For him they are not moral standards but states of consciousness. He defines their strength and quality in relation to each other – “sobriety is the measure of drunkenness” – and with other terms. He speculates as to how *sukr* and *ghayba* interpenetrate: *ghayba* is more forceful, yet *sukr* can intensify to the point that it surpasses *ghayba*. “Through an intensification of *sukr*, the drunk can exceed in *ghayba* even one who is in the state of *ghayba*, or the one who is absent can be more completely absent than the drunk.”²⁰⁰ The lack of semantic points is shown precisely by the fact that the terms must be constituted dependent on each other. “The servant in the state of his drunkenness experiences (*yuṣāhidu*) a state, and in the state of sobriety he experiences knowledge (*ilm*) [...] sobriety and intoxication come after *dhawq* and *šurb*.”²⁰¹

According to Hujwiri, the basic feature of *sukr* is insatiability: “The man of intoxication is he who drinks all and still desires more.” *Sukr* may be divided into two categories with the aid of the symbol of wine: drunkenness with the wine of affection (*mawadda*) and with the cup of love (*maḥabba*), the former being ‘caused’ (*ma'lūl*) but the latter having no cause, since it is based on regarding the Benefactor, so that one sees all things through Him without seeing oneself at all. Correspondingly, sobriety is divided into sobriety in heedlessness (*ghafla*), “the greatest of veils”, and sobriety in love, the latter being ‘the clearest of revelations’. But are these divisions arbitrary in relation to the mental reality wherein such distinctions are far from being precise and their outlines are dim? Hujwiri poses a brilliant solution to the problem by intersecting the concepts and reversing their semantic fields: “The sobriety that is connected with heedlessness is really intoxication, while that which is linked with love, although it be intoxication, is

¹⁹⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 85-87; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 110-112.

²⁰⁰ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 71; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 125.

²⁰¹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 71-72. Sells translates the verb *šāhada* (‘see, watch, observe, witness’) in a slightly different direction: “The servant in the state of his drunkenness is under the sign of the state. The servant in the state of his waking is under the sign of knowledge” (*Early Islamic Mysticism*, 126).

really sobriety.” Hujwiri explicitly states that ultimately “the boundaries of both are joined, and the end of the one is the beginning of the other”. The reason given for this is that ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ are “terms that imply separation, which has only relative existence.”²⁰²

Kalabadhi’s teaching on **absence** (*ghayba*) and **presence** (*ṣuhūd*) is an illustration of the relationship between the subject and passions: in ‘absence’ a person is not aware of his passions even if they are still present in him. Kalabadhi gives the example of a man who was told: “We saw your blue-eyed handmaid in the market”, and he replied: “Is she blue-eyed?” – thereby disclosing indirectly, according to Kalabadhi, that he still had “a delight for dark-eyed maidens”. In ‘presence’ “man regards his passions as belonging to God”, and therefore the action does not take place because of pleasure but because of God.²⁰³

For Quṣayri, however, *ghayba* is a state related to drunkenness, full of hope or fear in its emotional content. His definition of *ghayba* is modelled as “absence of the heart from knowledge derived from the states of creation”.²⁰⁴ Here absence applies not only to the passions but to the whole mode of consciousness, being absence from the human senses (*ihsās*). The difference of approach is also evident in Quṣayri’s examples of *ghayba* that are instances of varieties of trance where a person is not at all aware of himself and does not feel his physical organs: Rabī’ ibn Khaytham saw an oven at the blacksmith’s and ‘fainted’ (*ghaṣī*), remembering the people of fire in Gehenna; Abu Ḥafṣ put his hand into the fire and took out the glowing iron with his bare hands without feeling any pain.²⁰⁵ For some like Abu Yazid, according to Quṣayri, the absence may be constant, but most people return to their senses, i.e. to the presence (*ḥudūr*) of creation. Yet the first, more essential, meaning of *ḥudūr* signifies being in the presence of God (*ḥaqq*) – through the remembrance of Him – during absence from creation. In this sense the concepts are dependent on each other and semantically parallel: the more one is absent, the more one is present.²⁰⁶

Hujwiri starts with the notion that *ghayba* and *ḥudūr*²⁰⁷ are in opposition to each other only apparently: they rather express the same phenomenon from different angles, as if a kind of ontological scales. “Absence from one’s self is presence with God, and *vice versa*.” Then he proceeds to say what Kalabadhi does not, namely that it is during ecstasy – Hujwiri here employs the term *jadhba* – that both concepts reach their climax. When the heart of the seeker is overpowered by it, “the absence of his heart becomes equivalent to its presence.” And moreover, the interpretation becomes even bolder: “partnership (*ṣirka*) and division (*qisma*) disappear.”²⁰⁸

²⁰² Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 187-188.

²⁰³ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 87-88; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 112-113.

²⁰⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 69. الغيبة هي غيبة القلب عن علم ما يجري من احوال الخلق

²⁰⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 69.

²⁰⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 70.

²⁰⁷ Hujwiri uses the same pair (*ghayba* – *ḥudūr*) as Quṣayri.

²⁰⁸ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 248. Hujwiri here expounds the teaching of the Khaffis.

As for Niffari, he uses *ghayba* as the opposite of ‘vision’ (*ru’ya*), with the sublime arrogance characteristic of him. In brief, *ghayba* means that one does not see God in anything, *ru’ya* that one sees God in everything. Niffari stresses that petitioning and *dhikr* belong to the former, which indirectly places most Sufis in the state of absence of God! Niffari considers *ghayba* as a ‘veil’ and identifies it with ‘this world’ (*al-dunyā*): both are prisons (*sijn*) of the believer. *Ghayba* belongs to the common people, *ru’ya* to the ‘elect’ (*khāṣ*) only.²⁰⁹

In Kalabadhi’s discourse **concentration** (or ‘union’,²¹⁰ *jam*’) and **separation** (*tafriqa*) are also constituted in relation to the passions. In the former the choices are concentrated and harmonised in accordance with the will of God without the subject’s own efforts; in the latter the subject has moved completely outside his passions (i.e. the passions are defined outside his ego), so that he is even able to observe them as from outside. “Their knowledge that they exist for God in his knowledge of them caused them to lose themselves (*nafs*) during the period when they came to exist for him: so concentration produced the state of non-existence (for the passions).”²¹¹

Quṣayri has a “subjectual” approach to the terms: *jam*’ is the position in which the Deity acts in human nature and *farq* refers to acts of worship carried out by the human agent. “*Farq* is what is attributed to you, and *jam*’ what is stripped from you.” This union is like a ‘sign’ (*šāhid*) which a person is under when “the Real allows him to witness what the Real has entrusted to him of His own acts.” Both states are equally important: without separation there is no worship.²¹² To sum up, Quṣayri leaves the semantics of the terms quite open, focusing the significance, so to say, on the framework, so that the terms signify two categories of religious activity, which together may include practically almost any actual form of mental or concrete action.

Quṣayri also mentions one more way in which the terms *jam*’ and *farq* are used: *jam*’ is how the Real unites the whole creation by his free ‘disposition’ (or ‘alteration’, *taṣrīf*) over them, and *farq* refers to the separation caused by his various acts and influences that give rise to different ontological distances in the spiritual status of the created beings. Thus the discussion of mystical states diffuses on effects of God’s general action in the creation. Quṣayri does give a list of 24 different modes of *farq*, but it is difficult to estimate which of these are meant to describe mystical experiences: most seem to be general characteristics of Sufi spirituality.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 28:7, 29:16, 30:2; *Mukhāṭabāt*, 24:26, 26:5, 27:8. Niffari hints that commandments and prohibitions belong to the state of *ghayba* only (*ibid*, 29:23). In his challenging parlance he places the next world in the same category as this world and *ghayba*, contrasting both with *ru’ya*, the actual ‘vision’ (*ibid*, 30:2).

²¹⁰ The basic meaning of the word is not so much in the “state-of-being-in-union” than in the “process-of-becoming-together-in-union”.

²¹¹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 88-89; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 114-116.

²¹² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 64-65; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 116.

²¹³ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 118. For the modes in question, see above, p.

In Hujwiri's discourse *jam'* is in the first place connected with the Islamic conception of salvation history. The omnipotent God unites all mankind in his call and separates them by his command. He may control the process by inverse means: for example, he commanded Abraham to behead Ishmael and Adam not to eat the corn but in both cases he actually willed the contrary. "The real mystery of union is the knowledge and will of God, while separation is the manifestation of that which he commands and forbids." This indirect prick for the legalistic interpretation of Islam implies that union is something totally dependent on God, and that it is far from being an emotional matter. "Union is that which he unites by his attributes, and separation is that which he separates by his acts." In the personal perspective of an individual *jam'* means cessation of human volition and exclusion of personal initiative.²¹⁴ In another context, however, Hujwiri presents *jam'* as the perfection of a saint, 'union' in which one attains such a degree of rapturous love that one's intelligence is enraptured in gazing upon the act of God (*fi'l*), and one is longing for one's Maker (*fā'il*) on the brink of losing control, but outwardly one remains in separation (*tafriqa*).²¹⁵

In Qašani's glossary, however, *jam'* means to "witness Truth in the absence of creation" (*šuhūd al-ḥaqq bi-lā khalq*).²¹⁶ This definition refers directly to the experience of God that is characteristically total in nature, and is more suitable for "mystical experience" than the ones above.

Annihilation (*fanā'*) and **persistence** (*baqā'*) are in Kalabadhi's discourse, as one might expect, primarily the last phases in the mortification of the passions.²¹⁷ *Fanā'* means first of all the disappearance of all 'pleasures' (literally 'portions', *ḥuzhūzh*) and 'personal demand' (*muṭālaba*) as well as 'sense of discrimination' (*tamyīz*), or to adopt Arberry's interpretation, the passing-away of all passions and feelings. This mental emptiness is why the concept is invalid without *baqā'*, persistence in the properties (*ḥuzhūzh*) of another, i.e. God. This is Kalabadhi's first basic meaning for *fanā'* and *baqā'*: to pass away from one's own characteristics and persist in those of another. In this perspective, however, *fanā'* still focuses on the morality of actions. Kalabadhi's example of the annihilated, 'Āmir ibn 'Abdillah, obtained this position in the discourse by urging: "I do not care whether I see a woman or a wall."²¹⁸ This is a phase, according to Kalabadhi, in which all the inner movements that function for one's own personal advantage have ceased to exist; emotions of passion or fear do exist but only in accordance with the limits decreed by God. This seems to be somewhat similar to the higher state of 'absence', "another *ghayba* beyond the ordinary *ghayba*", in which the

217.

²¹⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 252-255.

²¹⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 237-238. The context is a polemical one, and it is directed against those who consider *jam'* too easily attainable by anyone.

²¹⁶ Qašani: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 58.

²¹⁷ It is to be recalled that Kalabadhi represents a collection and synthesis of the views of various Sufis, with no intention of expressing or describing his own experiences.

²¹⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 92-93; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 120, 122.

subject is not aware of his own annihilation since “the one in annihilation in the presence of persistence is no different from the one in persistence”.²¹⁹ In this way the emphasis on sound action leads Kalabadhi close to the identification of *fanā'* with *baqā'*.

Another way of defining *fanā'* operates with an ontological perspective: “being absent from human qualities in (undertaking) the fearful burden of the divine qualities”. The absence of human attributes, however, does not imply that they cease to exist, but that “they are covered by a pleasure (*ladhdha*) which supplants the realisation of pain”. One loses every intention directed against the Divine aim and one’s consciousness (*ṣuhūd*) of inconsistencies (*al-mukhālifāt*) between oneself and God. To this Kalabadhi adjoins a few somewhat indefinite references to more extraordinary experiences of an exhausting vision (*ru'ya*) which makes one unconscious of one’s present non-passionate quality. On the practical level the idea seems to be one of focusing one’s attention away from oneself and acting without paying attention to the acting or to its nature, so that even opposite emotions seem to lose their identities.²²⁰

The believer (*'abd*) does not attain unification (*tawhīd*), until he feels totally alienated from his own conscience, in order that the Truth may be manifested to him (*al-Šiblī*).²²¹

A third way of approaching the interpretation of *fanā'* is to set the starting-point of the perspective on the limited scope of human understanding in interpreting one’s own self. During a mystical moment (*waqt*)

he (the mystic) remains without persistence so far as he knows, without passing-away (*fanā'*) so far as he is conscious, and without moment so far as he can understand; rather, it is the Creator who knows of his *baqā'* and *fanā'*.²²²

This approach of *via negativa* is surely able to comprise even the most radical “peak” experiences, and therefore it is applicable to the kind of dynamic *fanā'* that manifests itself as ecstatic phenomena, but it also leaves the matter open for all views. The most crucial disagreement in the Sufi discussion is that concerning the duration of *fanā'*, whether one returns to one’s own attributes at all. The existence of disagreement on such a fundamental matter may in fact question the meaningfulness and sensibleness of the whole discourse on *fanā'*. At least it shows that the Sufis were adjoining to the concept of *fanā'* most divergent mental processes.

To sum up Kalabadhi’s discussion, without becoming entangled in the

²¹⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 93, 87; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 121, 113.

²²⁰ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 94-95; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 122-125.

²²¹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 103. Translation mine.

²²² Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 96; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 126.

terminology, we could say that in the mystic's final state the centre of identity has, as it were, moved from ego towards the Other, the result being that positive emotions (pleasure) do not feel different from negative ones (displeasure). Yet Kalabadhi's underlying aim to produce an orthodox work causes him to "orthodoxify" his discourse. This makes him very careful with the most ecstatic experiences, which in turn causes him to stress moral purity in every phase and to interpret all states in relation to moral purity. The totality of his interpretation forms a kind of field of inner phenomena which may function as a context for the ecstatic experience.

Quṣayri, too, starts with the moral aspect of *fanā'*, which he defines as 'shrugging off the blameworthy properties' (*suqūṭ al-awṣāf al-dhamīna*). He actually extends the semantic field to cover the whole sphere of religious life: the servant of God is not in any circumstances free from either *fanā'* or *baqā'*.²²³ Thereby *fanā'* applies to and operates in all human attributes: "Whoever passes away (*fanī'*) from his ignorance, endures through his knowledge. Quṣayri also gives a division of three different dimensions of *fanā'*: (1) *fanā'* of the self and its attributes, (2) *fanā'* from the attributes of the Real, and (3) *fanā'* from witnessing one's own passing away.²²⁴

And how are *fanā'* and ecstatic experience related? As we have seen, *fanā'* as a concept is so complicated and paradoxical that any discussion is doomed to drift into very theoretical speculation which is apt to lose all causal relations with the experienced reality, proceeding as a conceptual play according to certain rules. We might suggest, however, that one could read into the Sufi interplay an intersection where *fanā'* and "ecstasy" are identified in a way that the former is static, the latter a dynamic aspect of the same reality – in other words, ecstasy as a culmination of *fanā'*. "Drinking from the cup of union"²²⁵ can be taken as a point of contact with God in the process of unification and annihilation, and in that sense also the final cause of the experience. This may also apply when *fanā'* is understood in an orthopractic sense, i.e. consisting rather of acts and omitted actions than of somewhat emotional states.

We are united in one respect, but we are separated in another.
Although awe has hidden you from the gladness of mine eye,
ecstasy has made you near to my inmost parts.²²⁶

The most fervent state in Kalabadhi's discourse is **overmastery** (*ghalaba*), to be translated as 'inspiration' as suggested above, yet the discourse around the term concentrates on ascertaining that during *ghalaba* "it is permissible to do things not

²²³ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 67.

²²⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 68-69.

²²⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 392.

²²⁶ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 255 (quotation from a poem by "a certain great Shaykh").

allowed in the state of repose (*ḥāl al-sukūn*).²²⁷ In the eyes of outsiders these seem to be objectionable. Kalabadhi's examples include 'Umar, who in his zeal for Islam and against pagans opposed even Muhammad himself, and Abū Ṭaybah, who cupped the prophet Muhammad and then drank his blood, against the law, yet Muhammad forgave him.²²⁸ For Hujwiri, however, *ghalaba* seems to be one type of ecstasy equivalent to *sukr*, and his main point is to defend its given nature as the opposite of something acquired or produced by one's own means.²²⁹

Most of the symbolic expressions of ecstatic experience developed into technical terms that function in the discourse intrinsically. Especially important in the "stateological" discussion are *šurb* (drinking) and *dhawq* (tasting). According to Hujwiri, *šurb* refers to the drinking of spiritual pleasure, which is for the soul as important as water is for the body, and hence *šurb* is necessary for novices as well. *Dhawq* is used as a somewhat broader concept that includes bitter or painful experiences as well.²³⁰ According to Quṣayri, *dhawq* appears before *šurb*, which is a more powerful experience: "the possessor of *dhawq* is pretending to be drunken, but the possessor of *šurb* is drunken".²³¹

As for Ghazali, he employs *dhawq* as the opposite of something acquired by scientific learning, and consequently his *dhawq* as an experience is characterised by subjectivity and emotionality. Indeed, Watt, in his translation of *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, gives 'immediate experience' for *dhawq*, and Gairdner in *Miškāt al-Anwār* translates the adverb *dhawqiyy^{an}* 'experimentally and subjectively', meaning the opposite of the scientific (*'ilmiyy^{an}*).²³²

In Qaṣani's definition, however, the basic idea of *dhawq* is that it is the category of beginning: it refers to the "first steps of the vision of Truth" (*awwal darajāt šuhūd al-ḥaqq*). If this vision increases and grows stronger, it is to be called *šurb*, and in its final stage it is 'seeing' (*rayy*).²³³ Since Qaṣani's interest as a whole is in the everlasting *extension* of experienced 'knowledge' or 'vision' – both terms are symbolic here – of God, he interprets practically all terms in relation to this pursuit.

Also, the standard equivalent to the sign 'ecstasy', *wajd*, is used as a technical term which adopts diverging tones in different contexts. In Hujwiri's discourse *wajd* adopts the meanings of 'finding' and 'uniting' in the context of *ḥāl* and *waqt*. Both of these states include admittance of the problem of human understanding in relation to the past and future; these are both abandoned as

²²⁷ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 85; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 110.

²²⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 83-85; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 108-110.

²²⁹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 184.

²³⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 392.

²³¹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 72. صاحب الذوق المتساكر و صاحب الشرب سكران

²³² Watt 1953, 62, 66; Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 57 (tr. 60).

²³³ Qaṣani: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 500. *Šuhūd* means literally 'witness', but 'vision' is an appropriate translation because it culminates in 'seeing' (*rayy*) – although the latter is translated 'quenching' by Safwat, who wants to emphasise its continuity with 'drinking'!

‘veils’ in order to devote oneself to God in the present.²³⁴ On the other hand, *wajd* as a state during *samā’* signifies sorrow caused by the loss of the Beloved, and *wujūd* correspondingly torrent of emotions resulting from finding – but both “cannot be reached by investigation”.²³⁵

Qaṣāni, however, defines *wujūd* as “the realisation that the essence of Truth is in its essence”.²³⁶ The definition is typical of his “existential ontology”, where the true nature of the existence and the (development of) personal illumination are combined, and this combination is projected into the definitions of the terminology.

The endless number of various states is illustratively shown by the existence of “squared states”, to use a mathematical expression. Quṣayri has *jam’ al-jam’*, ‘union of union’ which is ‘beyond union and separation’; in it the subject is “utterly removed from perceiving any other”, his whole consciousness being overpowered (*istawlā*) by the Divinity.²³⁷ It is hard to see any other function for the term than indication of a complete and extreme *jam’*, an ultimate concentration. Quṣayri continues even further, beyond *jam’ al-jam’* where there is a state called ‘second separation’ (*farq al-thānī*):²³⁸ this means a sober state to which one is returned from one’s ecstatic state in order to perform one’s prescribed duties, i.e. ritual prayers. The obvious benefit of this concept is that thereby one may prove that the mystic’s apparently normal state is high above the apparently equivalent normal state of the ordinary people!

When the discourse operates on this more abstract level, with states that are built on others, the outcome may be states as colourful as *talwīn*, literally ‘colouring’, which seems to mean a fusion of states – a necessary concept indeed from the point of view of psychological reality. Junayd uses it in the sense of ‘variety’ of states.²³⁹ However, Ernst translates the word as ‘rapture’²⁴⁰, Sells as ‘transformation’²⁴¹ and Sawfat as ‘change’. Qaṣāni explains that *talwīn* is the “veiling of the properties²⁴² of an exalted mystical state, or stage by the effects²⁴³ of a lowly state, or stage”, and quoting Ibn ‘Arabi he even states that it is the most perfect of all stages, even though “to most others it is an incomplete stage (*maqām nāqis*)”.²⁴⁴

²³⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 367-370.

²³⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 413.

²³⁶ Qaṣāni: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, no. 87 (p. 26). وجد ان الحق ذاته بذاته

²³⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 65-66.

²³⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66.

²³⁹ Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā’*, 82; translated “different modes” by Zaehner (1960, 223).

²⁴⁰ Ernst 1985, 49.

²⁴¹ *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 135; Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 17. Since the interpretative translations vary remarkably, I prefer the literal translation ‘colouring’.

²⁴² *aḥkām*, more literally ‘dominions’, ‘regimes’ or ‘authorities’. ‘Properties’ is the translation given by Sawfat. Qāshāni § 487 (text 156, tr. 107).

²⁴³ *āṭār*, literally ‘traces’ or ‘signs’. ‘Effects’ is Sawfat’s translation. Qaṣāni: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 487 (text 156, tr. 107).

²⁴⁴ Qaṣāni: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 487 (text 156, tr. 107).

As for Quṣayri, he presents *talwīn* with its opposite pair *tamkīn* ('fixity'), the ultimate goal being the latter. For *talwīn* he gives a solemn yet quite non-distinctive definition: "*talwīn* is an attribute of the lords of the states".²⁴⁵ The idea seems to be that *talwīn* indicates the totality of the uplifting process in which the various states change constantly by transformation or interpenetration or otherwise. The essential point, however, is that the mystic is a possessor of *talwīn* as long as he is on the path "because he is rising from state to state (*ḥāl*), changing from one attribute to another".²⁴⁶

We may already make a few concluding remarks. As we have seen above, the authors are basically, albeit not absolutely, consistent within their own discourse but not commensurable with each other. This is because the endeavour to systematise and classify ancient ascetic modes of thinking and acting into dissimilar types and exact terms has no alternative for being more or less an artificial pursuit, a language game. This possibility is in essence recognised by Kalabadhi himself:

Faith which is true, and faith which is merely formal, have outwardly the same appearance, but their real natures are diverse: on the other hand, annihilation (*fanā'*) and all the other special stations (*maqāmāt*), are diverse by their appearance (*ṣuwar*), but their true natures (*ḥaqā'iq*) are the same.²⁴⁷

Different authors use different terms in different ways. These varied usages give rise to meanings with different nuances that vary from author to author. This process reinforces itself: since the meanings are understood to be varied, the terms are, in turn, used in diverging ways. The varying meanings, however, are usually not to be understood as exclusive but rather as complementary in character. Nevertheless, they do demolish the idea of a public language consisting of exact signs for inner states: ways of application do not match, and hence the meanings cannot be exact either. This is also why the terms are impossible to understand in a specific manner when taken out of their context. I have no reason to disagree with the estimation given by Ernst:

There is sometimes a wide variation in the definitions themselves, from one author to another; each one seems to have felt a considerable freedom to add or to subtract from the received definitions, in accordance with personal experience or the authoritative pronouncement of a teacher.²⁴⁸

The endless differentiation of states is connected with, and to some extent resulting from, the peculiarities of the vocabulary of classical Arabic. For

²⁴⁵ التلوين صفة أرباب الأحوال Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 78.

²⁴⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 78.

²⁴⁷ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 98; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 129.

²⁴⁸ Ernst 1992, 187.

example, *musāmarāt* and *muḥādathāt*, two states of a perfect Sufi, refer to different times of day; the former originally signifies something like “silent nocturnal discussion (between lovers)” and the latter the same in the day-time.²⁴⁹

Sufi speculation concerning terms has developed a construction of concepts on concepts, the process being in a way analogous to the development of Western philosophical thought. Concerning the structure of the use of language, such terms of second degree form a parallel to the symbols of symbols employed in Sufi poetry (see above, p. 214-215). These new special terms produced in the discourse can be understood only through the previous terms, for example: “*Muḥāḍarāt* denotes the presence of the heart in the subtleties of *bayān*, while *mukāṣafāt* denotes the presence of *sirr* in the domain of ‘*iyān*.’”²⁵⁰ (The basic thought here is simply that the former has the signs of God in his mind, the latter the greatness of God.)

The Sufis, however, go still further. They adopt technical usages and mystical meanings for ordinary words that one perhaps would not expect to encounter in Islamic mystical vocabulary. For example, ‘name’ (*ism*) may refer to the names of God which are His attributes and therefore experiential qualities through which He may be experienced.²⁵¹ And correspondingly, ‘letters’ (*hurūf*) are “elementary realities deriving from the Essences”.²⁵² This phenomenon should perhaps be seen as the outcome of a mystical attitude rather than of mystical experience.

The number of various terms for the inner states employed in the books is in the hundreds, and unknown in the actual practical relationship between master and disciple. For the practisers of Sufism the richness of Sufi language, particularly the contemplative and enigmatic character of the definitions of technical terms, means that the mystical experience is not restricted by too inflexible a linguistic system: instead, the process of conditioning may take place in various ways, through boundless possibilities.

On the other hand, the complexity of discourse produced by the over-specification may also give it a certain arbitrary taste. This cannot avoid causing a certain counter-reaction among the mystics themselves. One of the constantly present tendencies in Niffari’s discourse is to leave the concentration on various states and turn towards the essence of the matter instead. “Leave nearness (*qurb*), and you will see God”, he courageously declares.²⁵³ The words, the verbal level, are for mystics only a means, not a goal, and therefore the lack of exactness is a problem only for outsiders.

²⁴⁹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 380-381.

²⁵⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 373. Nicholson gives ‘demonstration’ for *bayān*, ‘spirit’ for *sirr* and ‘vision’ for ‘*iyān*’.

²⁵¹ “It is not the utterance of the Name which matters, but rather the essence of the thing named.”

Qāshāni: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 12; Ernst 1992, 189.

²⁵² Qāshāni: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 117. الحقائق البسيطة من الأعيان (‘Name’ and ‘letter’ happen to be crucial concepts in Jewish mysticism.)

²⁵³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 67:61.

3.3.2. Causa Efficiens

If we were to build our discussion on the ontological structure of discourse as seen by the Sufis themselves, the effective cause of experience would be a logical starting-point. In an objective analysis, however, the problem of the external cause behind the experience belongs within the category of interpretation.

In the Sufi perspective, the very ecstatic quality of the experience itself results from the existence of an outer cause and from its confrontation with man's physical capacity. If the effect is forceful enough, human "reason and natural faculties are too weak to sustain its rapture and intensity",²⁵⁴ and for this reason it manifests itself as an ecstatic phenomenon.

Junayd states explicitly that the experience "does not result from their own striving or from any perception or imagination" but from the fact that God exists and is at work in them (*al-ḥaqq bihim*).²⁵⁵ Quṣayri depicts the given nature of experience as follows:

(Sufis') realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) are not collected by any sort of effort (*takalluf*) nor gained by any kind of action (*taṣarruf*); rather, they are meanings (*ma'ān*) that God has promised to the hearts of a people.²⁵⁶

According to the Sufi authors, the effective cause, as might be expected, is God (*allāh*): "The state (*ḥāl*) descends from God into a man's heart."²⁵⁷ Most often, however, this is expressed by referring to some of God's epithets like 'gentleness' (*lutf*).²⁵⁸ The most common of these is the Truth, *al-ḥaqq*. "Ecstasy is the glad tidings sent by the Truth (*baṣārāt al-ḥaqq*) of the mystic's promotion to the stations of His contemplation (*maqāmāt muṣāhidātihī*)."²⁵⁹ Junayd presents as *causa efficiens* 'the lights of His Essence' (*anwār huwiyyatihī* – literally 'He-ness').²⁶⁰ Jilani employs 'power of the Spirit' (*quwwat al-rūḥ*) as the cause of the ecstatic experience which comes in 'intoxicating power' (*bi-quwwat al-jadhhaba*).²⁶¹

However, even on this basic point Niffari's daring expressions move in their own categories, for according to him ecstasy (*wajd*) means to be in God,

²⁵⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 254.

²⁵⁵ حضورهم فقد Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā'*, 80; Zaehner 1960, 220.

²⁵⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 53. (Translation according to Ernst 1992, 188.) The term *ḥaqā'iq*, 'truths', here signifies the mystical states by emphasising their (ultimate) reality. It is also an esoteric expression since the truth (*ḥaqq*) of a state is beyond the ordinary explanations of the terms referring to it.

²⁵⁷ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 181. The idea is in fact so obvious that it is quite seldom mentioned.

²⁵⁸ Radtke & O'Kane 1996, 95.

²⁵⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 83. Arberry (*Doctrine of the Sufis*, 107) translates 'sent by God'.

²⁶⁰ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 327; *Principles of Sufism*, 339.

²⁶¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119-120; *Secret of Secrets*, 90-91.

which in turn is a result of *seeing* God:

Oh servant! The one who sees me, stays with me, and the one who stays with me, remains in ecstasy (*wajd*) in me.²⁶²

The very existence of *causa efficiens* outside the subject of the experience is shown most apparently by the references of its autonomous coming.²⁶³ The notion also implies a distinction between real ecstasy and the product of a person's own psychological process. Hujwiri differentiates between ecstasy (*wajd*) effected by God and the natural impulses sensitised by music.²⁶⁴ Shadhili recommends discernment when watching over one's heart: "If any good comes upon you from God, you accept it; and if the contrary comes upon you, you disapprove it, having recourse to God with respect to averting and procuring."²⁶⁵

Quṣayri defines ecstasy (*wajd*) as what happens to one's heart and comes upon one without intention (*ta'ammud*) or effort (*takalluf*). He proceeds to state uncompromisingly that "any ecstasy which contains anything of its possessor is not ecstasy".²⁶⁶ The use of the verb *ṣahada* ('to witness') to mark the mystic's relation to the experience is also illustrative in this respect: in that state (*ḥāla*) the servant "witnesses the one who originates through his divine power his own identity and essence."²⁶⁷

The existence of a *causa efficiens* is also used as a criterion behind the standard Sufi classification of experiences into states (*ḥāl*) and stations (*maqām*). According to Quṣayri, "States are bestowed; stations are attained. States come freely given while stations are gained with effort (*majhūd*)."²⁶⁸ Similarly, a state, unlike a station, can also be taken away from a person. Whether the states are really only momentary, is a debated question. Some claim, Quṣayri agreeing with them, that the true states are continuous although there may be variation in their intensity at different times.²⁶⁹ The very existence of disagreement on such a basic matter once more shows the difficulty of using a public language for objects that are inner and private in essence. Kalabadhi's solution here is to relate the items so that they overlap: "every station has a beginning and an end, and between these are the various states".²⁷⁰

The description of the quality of tranquillity, which was expressed by Niffari on the symbolic level as a 'gate', is completed on the level of interpretation

²⁶² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt* 12:6. Arberry (p. 143) translates: "Whoso sees Me, abides for me; and whoso abides for me, abides in the experience of Me."

²⁶³ E.g. Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 418 (*samā*).

²⁶⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 419.

²⁶⁵ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 109.

²⁶⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 62.

²⁶⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 66; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 118. يشهد مبدءاً ذاته وعينه بقدرته

²⁶⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 57. (Translation according to M.A. Sells in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 104.)

²⁶⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 57-58.

²⁷⁰ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 59; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 76.

by portraying it as ‘entering unto God’; the gate is opened and kept open by God, and finally it leads to the seeing of God: “when you entered to me, you saw me”.²⁷¹ And moreover, the gate is used from the other side by the ‘self-revelation’ (*ta’arruf*) of God that enters through it to the subject of the experience.²⁷²

The consuming quality of the experience may be portrayed on the interpretative level as love-sickness, infatuation, passionate yearning, and ardent desire for God. It seems that the quality derives its vitality from two directions: from the psychological passion of longing and yearning for God on the one hand, and from the burning divine presence on the other. The discussion on the subject takes place under the concept of *irāda*, ‘desire’.²⁷³

Jilani differentiates real ecstasy from artificial or self-produced ecstasy by the fact that ‘physical-psychological ecstasy’ (*wajd al-jismāniyya al-nafsāniyya*) is outward and under the control of the will, and therefore hypocritical and worthless, whereas in ‘spiritual compassionate ecstasy’ (*wajd al-rūhāniyya al-raḥmāniyya*) the body has no choice, which indicates that spiritual ecstasy is uncontrolled.²⁷⁴

The difference between sound ecstasy and artificial ecstasy is an important yet difficult topic. It has been perhaps somewhat avoided by many of the Sufi authors, however. Kalabadhi, for example, does not comment on it at all. This negligence is very understandable, for the problem is common to all religions: if one applied to one’s own (or to one’s tradition’s) religious experience the same degree of criticality and rationality as one does to that of heretics, evidently the whole experience would be in danger of being lost in the category of psychic phenomena.

There is, however, an analysis given by Quṣayri concerning the source of *khawātir*, a broad concept including all kinds of ideas, thoughts, desires and inclinations that rise to the mind more or less unannounced. They may have four different kinds of origin. (1) Those caused by **angels** are called ‘inspiration’ (*ilhām*). (2) Those caused by the **self** (*nafs*) are called ‘ideas’ (*hawājis*); these are usually connected with carnal desire or pride. (3) Those caused by **Satan** (*ṣayṭān*) are called ‘temptations’ (*wasāwis*, literally ‘whisperings’), these usually entice a person to commit acts of disobedience. (4) And finally, those caused by **God** are ‘true ideas’ (*khātir ḥaqq*).²⁷⁵ These four are the basic varieties of *causa efficiens* of mystical experiences, three of them transcendent.

Niffari discloses two basic principles concerning the recognition of the *causa efficiens*, the first actually leading to the *causa finalis*. It is possible to recognise the cause from the effects: if the experience separates the subject from

²⁷¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:3-4, 8. اذا دخلت إلى فرأيتني

²⁷² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:3.

²⁷³ E.g. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 202; *Principles of Sufism*, 177.

²⁷⁴ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 118-119; *Secret of Secrets*, 89-90.

²⁷⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 84. In *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf* (p. 62) Kalabadhi makes the same division, except for ‘enemy’ (*’adūw*) instead of Satan.

the things that separate him from God, it is divine.²⁷⁶ Another principle is that even if the experience starts to function in the right way but too early, before he has been “severed”, the subject should be afraid of deception (*makr*).²⁷⁷ True illumination does not come before purification, to use a Christian expression.

The role of Satan (*šayṭān, iblīs*) in the analysis of Sufi experience is very limited in character. According to Jilani, the devil cannot assume the form of Muhammad or any of his followers even in a dream. The devil may pretend to be God only with respect to anger and wrath, by assuming the attributes of God’s delusion or anger. “The devil cannot appear with the character of any divine attribute in which there is a trace of guidance.”²⁷⁸ However, Jilani admits the existence of a satanic (*šayṭāniyya*) ecstasy (*wajd*) which is distinguishable from the lack of light (*nūr*, a divine attribute) and infidelity (*kufr*).²⁷⁹ In this phase the position of the decisive criterion is left to Islamic law. According to Quṣayri’s instruction, the differentiation between demonic and angelic inspiration can be made only by those who do not eat forbidden food.²⁸⁰

Among things mentioned as effective causes of ecstasy there are also a few curiosities. Jilani mentions the singing of birds, the sighing of lovers and melodies of songs as movers of spiritual energy, and “evil and the ego have no share” in them.²⁸¹ These profane sources of inspiration seem to be in contradiction with the non-psychological origin of the spiritual experience. (The analytically orientated prosaic context does not support symbolic interpretation here.) Jilani’s idea is probably that the three causes belong to the luminous spiritual realm and not to the dark side since they all are part of God’s creation.

Quṣayri also mentions the aspect of ‘beauty’ (*jamāl*) as an effective cause behind the experience: “If the attribute of beauty is unveiled to the servant, he attains drunkenness, his spirit is transported and his heart is wander-lost.”²⁸² According to Niffari, however, beauty (*ḥusn*) does not affect those who are on the highest spiritual level.²⁸³

Perhaps surprisingly, ‘love’ is hardly ever explicitly mentioned as the *causa efficiens* in the prose works that form the corpus of the study; Quṣayri does state that “When a person’s love is strengthened, his drink becomes endless.”²⁸⁴

²⁷⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 30:7.

²⁷⁷ كلما بدا لك فابتدأ يجمعك قيل قطعك فخذف مكره “Whatever thing appears to you, and begins to concentrate you before you have been severed, fear its deception.” Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 30:8.

²⁷⁸ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 133; *Secret of Secrets*, 109-110.

²⁷⁹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 133; *Secret of Secrets*, 109-110.

²⁸⁰ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 84.

²⁸¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; *Secret of Secrets*, 90 (wherein the words *alḥān al-aghānī*, ‘melodies of songs’ are neglected.)

²⁸² فإذا كوشف العبد بصفة الجمال حصل السكر وطربت الروح وهام القلب Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 71. The beauty of God as a profit (*riḥḥ*) in Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 60 (cf. *Secret of Secrets*, 23).

²⁸³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:39. The statements are not in complete contradiction, not only because they seem to refer to people of different ranks but also because *ḥusn* is a broader concept than *jamāl*.

²⁸⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 72. ومن قوي حبه تسرمد شربه

The Sufis also discussed the possibility of receiving two divergent influences from God. (Actually, the problem has been present in Islamic thinking since the case of “satanic verses” during Muhammad’s early career.) Quṣayri puts forward three opinions: Junayd considered the first of these the strongest “because when it endures, its possessor returns to contemplation (*ta’ammul*)”, Ibn ‘Aṭa’ preferred the second “because it builds upon the power of the first”, and the third opinion is that they are equal “because both are from the Real one (*al-ḥaqq*)”.²⁸⁵

Another aspect of Sufi criticality is directed towards the methods adopted. The dilemma is that the mystic’s life largely consists of his mystical exercises, yet these are not supposed to produce genuine experiences. The problem is acknowledged, the artificial experiences are condemned by the authors, yet the dilemma remains. “Raptures (*mawājīd*) induced by words (*muqāwalāt*) are an infidelity (*kafīr*) by definition.”²⁸⁶

The fact that the existence of *causa finalis* and the actuality of particular methods behind the experience do not necessarily exclude each other, has an additional argument behind it in the Islamic context: the possibility of appealing to the idea of predestination so that the methods themselves may be viewed as being ultimately caused by God. This may be concluded from the predestining actions of God, or the single methods may be seen as having taken their rise from God’s action. For instance, contemplation may be interpreted as being caused by God.²⁸⁷

Finally, we may point out that the confident parlance concerning the effectual cause does not imply that the Sufis were somehow blind to the human aspects of the phenomenon. The mystical experience takes place in the mental reality, and for that reason it is also fully dependent on the subject’s psychological condition. Quṣayri expresses this idea by stating that the purity – and he does not say ‘quantity’ – of the mystical states (*aḥwāl*) follows the purity of acts (*a’māl*).²⁸⁸

The Sufis also recognised that the subjective aspect of the experience makes it relative: the subject’s awareness and consciousness of the experience (or state) may disturb the act of experiencing so that the attention is focused on the more psychological dimensions that are inevitably less essential. Quṣayri expresses it compactly in a poetic fashion: “the vision of nearness is a veil over nearness”, i.e. to realise that one is close to God does not help one to come closer to him.²⁸⁹

The principle of relativity is reflected on the linguistic level as well. What this means concerning the discourse is brilliantly expressed by Niffari: “In everything there is a trace of me. If you speak of it, you change it.”²⁹⁰ This crystallises the notion that language does not describe the outside world

²⁸⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 84-85; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 145.

²⁸⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 34:6.

²⁸⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 19:4. This is implied simply by the use of the causative *aṣḥada*.

²⁸⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 67; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 120.

²⁸⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 82; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 140. ورؤية القرب حجاب عن القرب

²⁹⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 5:6.

objectively but *reshapes* the reality by forcing it into categories, as well as by supplying the semantic keys to all its users. When the mystical experience is portrayed verbally, its signs (both symbolic and analytical) become parts of discourse in which the meanings are reproduced in a process dominated by subjective significances.

3.3.3. Causa Finalis

What is the function of the experience? For Sufis the only inherent value is God Himself, and any other functions or effects of the mere experience are essentially misunderstandings and for that reason not widely discussed in a direct way. If we disregard God here as a feature of “theological interpretation”, there are only occasional references to the *causa finalis*.

Firstly, in the mental reality the mystical experience effects certain rearrangements in the emotional field. This may mean feelings of joy *produced* by participation in the experience, for example: “Your joy (*farah*) for that which I give you is better than your sorrow for that which I do not give you.”²⁹¹ This joy is in principle different by its position in the discourse from the joyous quality in the experience itself (described in chapter 3.2.2). Or it may mean a certain balancing effect. “When you *see* me, security and fear become equal.”²⁹² This sense of the *causa finalis* infuses with the whole discourse where the control of the emotions is a basic motive constantly present in one way or another. However, in most contexts it is difficult – and artificial – to see or make differentiations between the emotional qualities present in the experience itself and those produced by it.

Secondly, there is the eschatological function. We may conclude from the discourse of Kalabadhi that mystical experiences function with a twofold relation to salvation. On the one hand, they function as the *causa efficiens* of salvation, and on the other, they are signs that indicate that their possessor will inherit salvation. Namely, in the Sufi perspective spiritual superiority is after all not based on religious practices such as prayer and fasting, but on the favours (*karāmāt*) and gifts (*mawāhib*) that are experienced in the inner heart and on the spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) that are signs (*a'lām*) of God's friendship (*wilāya*).²⁹³

Niffari expresses the same idea in a slightly different way, indicating that the experiential states are a kind of participation in the existential state of the world to come. He proclaims: “Your body after death is in the place where your heart is before death.”²⁹⁴ And moreover, Niffari adds one more perspective to the

²⁹¹ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 25:10.

²⁹² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 4:11.

²⁹³ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 50-51; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 65-66.

²⁹⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 24:7.

same theme by hinting that the mystical states follow one after death: “As you enter to me in prayer, so you will enter to me in your grave.”²⁹⁵

Unlike many mystics, however, Niffari is not too confident concerning the world to come: “Fear is the sign of him who knows his end: hope is the sign of him who is ignorant of his end.”²⁹⁶ The notion may be simply due to the fact that Niffari is constantly willing to set himself in opposition to other Sufis, if at all possible. As a drunken one he is above the sober speculators, and as a divine oracle he is above the drunken ones who are not concerned about salvation because they have identified themselves with God while on earth. Niffari’s subtle discourse reprehends mystics who are high in wisdom but low in fear, and who thereby end up with mockery.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 12:8. The sentence, however, is open to other kinds of interpretation as well.

²⁹⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 15:21.

²⁹⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 15:28.

3.4. Theoretical Context

3.4.1. Speculation on the States

As we have already glimpsed, the Sufis do not contend themselves with working up emotional states and impulsive moments into general types and adapting them into technical terms, but they enthusiastically proceed to speculate on the relationships between them as well. In this discursive “game” the states may be arranged into contrasting or consecutive series.

3.4.1.1. Contrasting Comparison

One of the surprising features of Sufi literature is the emphasis given to the question of superiority of one state in comparison with its counterpart.²⁹⁸ As we noted above, the states are often arranged and presented in polar pairs. In principle they may be opposites of various kinds: directional opposites (*jam' – tafriqa*), antipodal opposites (*ḥudūr – ghayba*), counterparts (*qurb – bu'd*), reversives (*kašf – ḥijāb*). Yet in practice any pair, especially the most abstract ones like *fanā' – baqā'*, may be understood as belonging in various categories of oppositions; this is largely due to the semantic structure of the Arabic noun, which often means both *being* in the state of X and *becoming* (more and more) the state of X.²⁹⁹ When the contents of these states are contrasted and their relationship discussed in great detail, the discourse often proceeds by means of negations so that the presentation of state X does not necessarily contain much more than speculation on its relation, usually superiority, to its opposite (-X).

The discussion on sobriety (*saḥw*) and drunkenness (*sukr*) is one of the most famous features of classical Sufism, and as we have seen, of our sources Kalabadhi and Quṣayri in particular represent the definitive works of sober Sufism. Niffari's discourse, on the other hand, is above the whole questioning, and his terminology does not even contain the problematic pair at all.

According to Hujwiri, the ultimate state is that of sobriety, perhaps the most peculiar argument being that the prophets used to perform miracles in sobriety but the saints are able to perform them only in drunkenness. Yet he does also present the confronting view in great detail; the superiority of drunkenness is argued from the fact that the greatest veil between man and God is composed by the human attributes, and these are at their strongest in sobriety. This is in turn

²⁹⁸ Contrasting pairs (*tazādd*) are also famous in Persian poetry. Schimmel 1982, 59.

²⁹⁹ On opposites, see Cruse 1986, 223-231.

opposed by the view that man should become continually more sober in order to comprehend the true Reality and in order to be released from entanglement in superficial phenomena; as the drunken person supposes that he has been annihilated, even though the attributes have not really disappeared, which is a more serious veil than any other. This notion indicates that there is no valid criterion for annihilation on a subjective basis. However, there is “agreement” on the fact that even if the attributes be successfully annihilated, the speculation goes on: there is an equal diversity concerning the superiority of the next stages as well.³⁰⁰

When Hujwiri treats the controversy between ‘absence’ (*ghayba*) and ‘presence’ (*ḥuḍūr*), he recognises that it is essentially the same problem as the basic debate on drunkenness and sobriety. He even admits explicitly that the whole distinction is “merely verbal, for they seem to be approximately the same”. Nevertheless, there are numerous Sufis who prefer *ghayba*³⁰¹ and others who prefer *ḥuḍūr*³⁰². The former argue that man’s self is the greatest veil between God and man, and when one becomes absent from oneself, one’s evils are annihilated as though as they are “consumed by the flame of proximity (*qurba*) to God”. The latter argue that the value of ‘absence’ depends on the ‘presence’, ‘absence’ being only a means that leads to ‘presence’, for ‘absence’ involves the sorrow of being veiled, while ‘presence’ involves joy.³⁰³

The notions on the status of the states appearing during *samā’* – namely, *wajd* and *wujūd* – vary according to the same pattern. *Wujūd*, according to its supporters, is superior because it is the state of love and of lovers. Those preferring *wajd*, on the other hand, consider *wujūd* to be a state of novices: they argue that since God is infinite, even the experiences of *wujūd* cannot be more than emotions (Pers. *mašrabī*). Yet there is agreement on the fact that the “power of knowledge should be greater than the power of *wajd*, since, if *wajd* be more powerful, the person affected by it is in a dangerous position”.³⁰⁴ This remark reveals a certain distrust, as if an experience given by God could lead one into danger (in relation to the revelation and to one’s own self). The explanation is that one overcome by *wajd* is deprived of the ability of discrimination (*khiṭāb*), and cannot be recompensed or punished, for he is in the “predicament of madmen”.³⁰⁵

In Quṣayri’s discourse *wujūd* comes after one rises beyond *wajd*. “*Wujūd*

³⁰⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 118, 151-152, 184-187, 226, 248-249.

³⁰¹ E.g. al-Hallaj, Ibn ‘Ata, Abu Hamza “and numerous sheikhs of Iraq”. Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 249.

³⁰² E.g. al-Muhasibi, Junayd, Sahl ibn ‘Abdallah, Abu Ja’far Haddad and Muhammad ibn Khaffif, to whom Hujwiri attributes the authorship of the doctrine in question; Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 249.

³⁰³ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 248-251. Undoubtedly the choice of preferred terminology is largely a question of mentality: personalities with a tendency towards radicalism like bolder concepts, and those of a moderate temper find the positive concepts more pleasant.

³⁰⁴ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 414.

³⁰⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 413-416.

is an end, and ecstasy (*wajd*) is an intermediary between the beginning and the end.”³⁰⁶

The question of the duration of *fanā'* belongs to the same theme. Kalabadhi takes the view of those who consider this state permanent (Junayd, al-Kharraz etc.); his arguments, however, do not seem to be more convincing than those of his opponents: the use of the Qur'an on both sides appears a little arbitrary. Those in favour of permanence and stability, in their own opinion, represent a more genuine experience, since they stress the given nature of experience setting it in opposition to that acquired by human effort.

There appears to him a revelation of God's power, and shows him his desire of God departing in reverence to God; then there appears to him a revelation of God, and shows him the departing of his desire of the vision of the departing of his desire; and there remains the vision of what was of God for God, and the One and Eternal is alone in His Oneness; and with God there is not for other than God either passing-away (*fanā'*) or persistence (*baqā'*) (al-Kharraz).³⁰⁷

The formation of theoretical speculation unavoidably has the potential to develop intrinsic values out of abstractions. If this be the case, the result is a variety of speculations on the states that always seem to be almost as unique and ultimate as the one following it.

If the state of discrimination (*ḥālat al-tamyīz*) even causes me to be aware only of what is God's, and to lose sense of what is mine, what will the state of intoxication (*ḥālat al-sukr*) be like, a state in which discrimination passes away?
(Kalabadhi)³⁰⁸

The basic disposition behind the discussion concerning the superiority of any particular state regularly functions according to the same pattern. Once the experience has been attained, one can either place stress on its decisive character and hence its finality and base one's conclusions as to its value on its divine origin, or one may recognise the casual quantity and subjective quality of the experience and use these facts as a basis for further conclusions. In other words, the problem is the value of subjective infallibility; even if one has attained perfect certainty one may still admit that the sense of certainty is not a universal proof. On the other hand, the question is also one of authority: who is able to define the truth on the Islamic status of the “enlightened” from a lower state? Moreover, it is possible that the masters of discourse may define more judgements on the matter than their personal experience of mystical experiences would allow. In the words of Ibn al-Farghani: “Who knows the form (*rasm*) becomes proud, and who knows

³⁰⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 62-63.

³⁰⁷ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 94; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 123.

³⁰⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 87; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 112.

the content (*wasm*) becomes bewildered.”³⁰⁹

The same juxtaposition is reflected in the discussion of the value of the Sufi session, *samāʿ*, ‘listening’. Others estimate it as belonging to beginners who still need to listen to God, “the Other”. And according to others, *samāʿ* is presence with God and staying with the Beloved; listening is for the ear the same as service is for the body, union for the spirit, contemplation for the subconscious (*sirr*),³¹⁰ love for the heart (Pers. *dil*), or seeing to the eye.³¹¹

Also, a state that is seemingly sound may contain a built-in opposition. The fact that the consuming quality of the experience functions, according to the perspective chosen for the interpretation, as both *causa efficiens* and *causa finalis*, produces a discussion on the juxtaposition of those who desire God (*murīd*) and those who are desired (*murād*) by Him, the result being that “every *murād* is a *murīd*”, and *vice versa*: both concepts have the same reference but from opposite angles. However, according to those Sufis that use these concepts with divergent meanings, a *murīd* is a beginner and a labourer controlled by rules and regulations but a *murād* is at the highest degree, being controlled by the care and protection of God. Junayd puts this in brief: ‘The *murīd* walks; the *murād* flies.’³¹²

The principle of the very existence of antithetical pairs, however, may have a great deal more significance than a mere verbal play. It introduces to Islamic thinking the category of paradox which is behind all the main doctrines of Christianity but not present in the basic doctrines of Islam. Yet paradoxes have always been a basic feature of mystical thought, due to their ability to test and extend the limits of common thought. The speech of Niffari’s divine subject proclaims explicitly: “If you do not see Me behind every pair of opposites (*diddiyya*) with a single vision, you do not know Me.”³¹³

Another good example of this “psychedelic function” of mystical language is also given by Niffari, who displays a paradoxical way of expressing the proximity of God who is so close to man that He is actually between Himself and man. “When you see me, and (when) you see the one who sees me, I am between both, listening and answering.”³¹⁴

On the other hand, the value of the whole system of multiple states can be questioned as well. Since the states as denominations are part of a complex that is ultimately verbal in nature, they are far from being intrinsic in comparison with the actual experienced dimension. Niffari disputes the value of state-concepts by

³⁰⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf*, 102; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 134. (Translation slightly altered.)

³¹⁰ *Sirr*, literally ‘secret’, refers to the undermost hidden part of the soul, so it is often a very functional solution to translate it as ‘subconscious’, albeit a somewhat a modern expression. Here Nicholson’s ‘soul’ would also do.

³¹¹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 405-407.

³¹² E.g. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 203-205; *Principles of Sufism*, 179-181.

³¹³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 19:7. The use of the root ‘RF’ of ‘knowing’ (*taʿrifnī*) implies that it is *maʿrifa* rather than ‘ilm’ that is referred to. Arberry translates the end “thou hast no gnosis of me”.

³¹⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 25:17.

setting even *waqfa*, his own preferred state, in opposition to the actual experience, which does not deal with concepts but with God himself. “You desire either me or *waqfa*”, proclaims Niffari’s divine subject.³¹⁵

This may be the main reason for interpreting a state as deceit, a possibility that has also produced a technical term of its own. Namely, a state might be designated as ‘fraud’ (*makr*),³¹⁶ defined by Qašani as follows:

This is following up blessings with misdeeds, sustaining mystical states without regard for propriety, and divulging signs and miracles without authority or restraint.³¹⁷

3.4.1.2. Consecutive Comparison

The discursive play with states can operate in another, more harmonious way where the aim is to compare the states in order to arrange them not in antithesis but in succession, as a consecutive series, which may produce images of a path to be travelled or a ladder to be ascended. This applies to the whole system of states and to the other concepts connected with them, and in that way it also sets the ecstatic experiences in a new perspective.

For example, Ibn ‘Arabi grades the states from the faintest to the strongest, the order being ‘tasting’ (*dhawq*) – ‘drinking’ (*šurb*) – ‘quenching’ (*riyy*) – ‘intoxication’ (*sukr*).³¹⁸ Qušayri starts in like manner but has a slightly different arrangement: ‘tasting’ – ‘drinking’ – ‘quenching’ (*irtiwā*).³¹⁹ The idea of the latter division is that a person may become accustomed to the ecstatic states so that “drink no longer makes him drunk”³²⁰ and he reaches the final state of intoxication, a kind of sober serenity where he is unaffected by what he encounters and is incapable of being moved emotionally.³²¹

The position of ecstatic experience in Sufism has also been set in its proper context in a series of consecutive comparisons representing a broader perspective on the phenomenon. Ecstasy, characterised by its quality of ‘rapidity’ (*sur’a*), is presented as one of the ten basic elements (*arkān*) of Sufism.³²²

³¹⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 18:1.

³¹⁶ Cf. Massignon 1954, 368 (45-46), 375 (72).

³¹⁷ Qašani: *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt*, § 224.

³¹⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Tarjuman al-Aswaq*, 75

³¹⁹ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 72.

³²⁰ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 72. لم يورثه الشرب سكرًا

³²¹ The procedure, according to Sells, is parallel to the conception of drunkenness in classical poetry where one drinks wine in order to forget one’s beloved, yet the wine makes one remember her all the more. (*Early Islamic Mysticism*, 126).

³²² A quotation from al-Farisi; Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 61; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 79.

1. Isolation of unification (*tajrīd al-tawḥīd*)
2. Understanding of audition (*fiḥm al-samā'*)
3. Good fellowship (*ḥusn al-'iṣra*)
4. Preference for preferring (*īthār al-īthār*)
5. Yielding up of personal choice (*tark al-ikhtiyār*)
6. Rapidity of ecstasy (*sur'at al-wajd*)
7. Revelation of thoughts (*kaṣf 'an al-khawāṭir*)
8. Abundant journeying (*kathrat al-asfār*)
9. Yielding up of earning (*tark al-iktisāb*)
10. Refusal to hoard (*tahrīm al-iddikhār*)

Quṣayri displays the most crucial ecstatic terms according to their ontological effects: *tawḥīd* entails the encompassing (*istiy'āb*) of the servant, *wajd* entails the immersion (*istighrāq*) of the servant, and *wujūd* entails the extinction (*istihlāk*) of the servant.³²³

Niffari gives an interesting structure of states that start from *waqfa*, Niffari's highest mode of knowledge, and ascend towards the solemn attributes of God. When reversed, this somewhat panentheistic ladder looks like this:

1. Essentiality (*dhātiyya*)
2. Oneness (*waḥdāniyya*)
3. Might (*'izza*)
4. Impermeability (*ṣumūd*)
5. Majesty (*kibriyā'*)
6. Splendour (*bahā'*)
7. Dignity (*waqār*)
8. Staying (*waqfa*)³²⁴

These states, moreover, are displayed in the discourse so that the lower one is always “only one of the qualities” of the one above, which implies a pyramid-like structure of states that are almost endless in number. This fits well with the principles of mystical discourse, which aims to keep perspectives open forwards and avoids setting any limits.

When intrinsic merit is attributed to a series, the result is an objective (i.e. independent of the subject) field in the mystical dimension. Tirmidhi, whose terminology frequently differs somewhat from the main stream of Sufism,³²⁵

³²³ The tripartite division is derived from al-Daqqāq; Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 63. Translation according to M.A. Sells in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 114).

³²⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 18:2.

³²⁵ For example, al-Tirmidhi (in the translation by Radtke & O'Kane 1996) apparently manages to treat the whole subject of 'sainthood' without many of the basic concepts of classical Sufism (such as *wajd*, *fanā'*, *baqā'*). And on the other hand, he has some quite original speculations about 'supernatural speech' (*ḥadīth*) and the 'seal of the Friendship with God' (*khaṭm al-wilāya*).

presents the states as various ‘domains’ or ‘dominions’ (*mulk*), a kind of cosmic field for the mystic sojourner, that all have their own functions in the experience. The terms function as a cosmological macrocosm that is realised in the subjective microcosm.³²⁶

<i>mulk al-jabarūt</i>	makes upright
<i>mulk al-sultān</i>	refines
<i>mulk al-jalāl</i>	disciplines
<i>mulk al-jamāl</i>	purifies
<i>mulk al-bahā'</i>	renders sweet-smelling
<i>mulk al-bahja</i>	broadens
<i>mulk al-hayba</i>	educates
<i>mulk al-rahma</i>	refreshes, strengthens, promotes
<i>mulk al-fardiyya</i>	nourishes

When these kinds of consecutive series are connected with a Gnostic or neo-Platonic vision of creation, the result is a set of aspects of emanation which the subject is supposed to return backwards and upwards towards its original source. This is presented by Jilani so that the first realm of the emanation from the Essence of the Creator is the realm of the world of divinity (*'ālam al-lāhūt*) in which was created the ‘holy spirit’ (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī*) which descended through the realms of ‘omnipotence’ (*jabarūt*), ‘kingdom’ (*malakūt*),³²⁷ ‘power’ (*mulk*), being clothed with the garment of each realm and renamed first as ‘the sovereign spirit’ (*rūḥ sultāniyya*), then as ‘moving spirit’ (*rūḥ sīrāniyya*), and finally the holy spirit to enter the world of matter as ‘bodily spirit’ (*rūḥ jismāniyya*). God ordered the spirits to enter the bodies prepared for them. The macrocosm of the realms of spirits are in turn reflected in man where the spirit has various ‘taverns’ (*ḥānūt*) in his body: the physical aspect of the extreme limbs (*badan ma' al-jawāriḥ al-zhāhira*), the psychological aspect of the heart (*qalb*), an inner heart (*fu'ād*) and the subconscious secret part (*sirr*). The task of man is to ascend in the knowledge of names towards the Divine unity.³²⁸

The principle of consecutive series operates on all levels of the discourse. The symbol of the veil is categorised by Niffari in five grades as veils of ‘essences’ (*a'yān*), referring to the whole creation, ‘sciences’ (*'ulūm*), ‘letters’ (*ḥurūf*), ‘names’ (*asmā'*) and ‘ignorance’ (*jahl*).³²⁹ Even the category of methods has been enumerated with progressive divisions. Jilani gives seven stages for the

³²⁶ Radtke & O'Kane 1996, 94.

³²⁷ It is also possible to derive *malakūt* from *malak*, ‘angel’, and translate it accordingly as ‘angelic realm’.

³²⁸ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 55-60; *Secret of Secrets*, 18-22.

³²⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 64:2.

dhikr, one outward and six inner ones, which become progressively deeper:³³⁰

1. Tongue (*dhikr al-lisān*) – demonstrating that the heart has not forgotten remembrance
2. Soul (*dhikr al-nafs*) – inner emotional movement
3. Heart (*dhikr al-qalb*) – sensing the divine splendour (*jalāl*) and beauty (*jamāl*)
4. Spirit (*dhikr al-rūḥ*) – enlightenment through perceiving the lights of attributes
5. Secret (*dhikr al-sirr*) – revelation of divine secrets
6. Hidden (*dhikr al-khafīy*) – “lights of the beauty of Essence” (*anwār jamāl al-dhāt*)
7. The most hidden of the hidden (*dhikr akhfā al-khafīy*) – beholding the ultimate Essence of Absolute Truth.

The arrangement of states easily becomes a mere verbal exercise, even competition, as the anecdotes embedded in the Sufi classics reveal. When someone declares that he has “drunk from the cup of love, after which there is no thirst”, another may marvel at the weakness of his state, boasting: “Here is one who has drunk up the seas of creation”.³³¹

3.4.1.3. Ecstasy and Time

All mystical and ecstatic experiences take place in the category of time. This somewhat self-evident aspect has been discussed by the Sufis from various viewpoints.

First, the time dimension can be used to settle some unsolved dilemmas in the interpretation. Quṣayri manages to harmonise the dispute over ‘states’ and ‘stations’ by setting the experience in the category of chronological change. For example, the mental condition of ‘satisfaction’ (*riḍāʾ*) is both attained by human effort and bestowed by God: attained in the beginning and bestowed in the end, and in that sense it is both state and station.³³²

Most of the Sufi discussion on time, however, takes place under the concept of *waqt*, literally signifying both ‘time’ and ‘moment’, which in its widest sense in the Sufi *parole* refers to the present moment that is between past and future. The more specific usage of *waqt* is one of the most common signs of the mystical experience and due to its basic meaning, it operates especially in the chronological dimension, signifying the moment during which the subject is under the influence of a mystical-ecstatic experience, and thereby distinguishing an actual (emotional) peak from abstract concepts in a very functional way. *Waqt* is

³³⁰ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 80-81; *Secret of Secrets*, 45-46. Bayrak interprets the seventh stage as “annihilation of the self and unification with the truth” (*al-nazhar ilā ḥaqīqa al-ḥaqq al-yaqīn*).

³³¹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 73; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 127.

³³² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 193; *Principles of Sufism*, 163.

used as a technical term of the mystical experience-in-general of any emotional content, and therefore *waqt* may signify anything that dominates a person completely yet transitorily. Qaṣāni defines *waqt* as “whatever becomes present to you in the (ecstatic) state (*ḥāl*)”.³³³ According to Quṣayri, it is what happens to Sufis “through the dispositions of the Real that come upon them without any choice on their part”.³³⁴ But on the other hand, even if the mere *waqt* was temporary, its effects may remain constant because of the state (*ḥāl*) granted during it.³³⁵ In these definitions Qaṣāni and Quṣayri seem to employ the concepts of *ḥāl* and *waqt* in a somewhat reverse way.

Some of the emotional modes of experience are intentional in character in the sense that they refer to the future, like ‘fear’ and ‘hope’, the others being more immediate and self-fulfilling. Examples of the latter include states like ‘constriction’ (*qabḍ*) and ‘expansion’ (*bast*) whose mode of consciousness “occur in the present moment”.³³⁶ ‘Constriction’ operates like fear, but in the present moment only, not intentionally.

Qaṣāni points out that concentration on either the past or the future is actually a waste of time (*taḍyī’ al-waqt*), since a Sufi should be *ibn waqtihī* and concentrate on the present moment only.³³⁷

In the existentialist perspective, time is attributed a somewhat unmerciful character caused by the uniqueness and transitoriness of the present moment. The uniqueness of the *waqt* is the reason why there can be no general rules to guide one’s actions during the mystical moment: every *waqt* must be encountered casually, sometimes resorting to invocation, sometimes to maintaining silence, as Quṣayri instructs.³³⁸ The mystical moment is even more unyielding, however, due to the consuming force of the experience. Sufis also express this idea by using of *waqt* the symbol ‘sword’.

As the sword is cutting, so the moment prevails in what the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) brings to pass and completes. It is said: “The sword is gentle to the touch, but its edge cuts. Whoever handles it gently is unharmed. Whoever treats it roughly is cut. Similarly for the moment, whoever submits to its decree (*istaslama li-ḥukmihi*) is saved, and whoever opposes it is thrown over and destroyed.”³³⁹

Consequently, the ‘moment’ (*waqt*) itself may also be favourable or opposing.³⁴⁰ From this perspective *waqt* may be interpreted as consisting of ‘effacement’ (*maḥw*) and ‘confirmation’ (*ithbāt*), one more pair of states describing the same

³³³ Qaṣāni: *Kūb iṣṭilāḥāt*, no. 101 (p. 32). ما حضرک فی الحال

³³⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 55. ما یصادفهم من تصریف الحق لهم دون ما یختارون لأنسهم

³³⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 367-370.

³³⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 58. وأما القبض المعنى حاصل في الوقت وكذلك البسط

³³⁷ Qaṣāni: *Kūb iṣṭilāḥāt*, no. 101 (p. 32-33).

³³⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 265; *The Principles of Sufism*, 277.

³³⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 55; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 100-101.

³⁴⁰ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 56; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 101.

phenomenon from opposite angles. This pair portrays the divine action in man as an interplay of two complementary tendencies: “*maḥw* is what the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) veils and purifies, *ithbāt* is what it manifests and discloses”.³⁴¹ Quṣayri divides *maḥw* into three categories the meanings of which he aims to elucidate, even though his exposition almost yields itself up to the stream of words in his appetite for using rhyming concepts: the first is “effacement of any lapse in performance of exterior duties” (*maḥw al-zalla ‘an al-zhawāhir*), the second “effacement of any negligence in the inner mind” (*maḥw al-ghafla ‘an al-ḍamā’ir*), and the third “effacement of any defect in the secret part of man” (*maḥw al-‘illa ‘an al-sarā’ir*). Similarly, the first is the ‘confirmation of good conduct’ (*ithbāt al-mu‘āmalāt*), the second the ‘confirmation of the encounters’ (*ithbāt al-munāzalāt*), and the third the ‘affirmation of the intimacies’ (*ithbāt al-muwāṣalāt*).³⁴²

Hujwiri makes a corresponding division but using different vocabulary. *Waqt* as a specific term refers to two kinds of moments given by God, firstly ‘losing’ or ‘departing’ (*faqd*) and secondly, ‘finding’ or ‘uniting’ (*wajd*). In the latter case the effect given by God descends into the soul and gathers it together from the distraction caused by the tension between past and present.³⁴³

Sufism has been given multiple definitions, the most remarkable of which is undoubtedly Junayd’s: “Sufism is the preservation of the moments (*awqāt*)”.³⁴⁴ The fruitfulness of the definition is not only in its quest for continuous experience but also in its aim to surpass the fleeting nature of time and the uniqueness of the present moment. The experience may certainly *surpass* time subjectively, in the sense that the subject loses the sense of time during it. Niffari suggests that during the moment, of which he uses the term *mīqāt*, derived from the same root *WQT*, one may attain an experience of eternity beyond time, even though the moment is an external phenomenon as well: “The hearts of those who know see eternity (*abad*) and their eyes see the moments (*mawāqīt*)”.³⁴⁵ Eternity is an attribute of God, and it may be experienced in a way analogous to seeing – but not expressed exactly.³⁴⁶

The experience of a timeless, eternal state is only one result of the *intensity* of the experience: if one is deprived of all ordinary sensing due to the all-filling nature of the ecstatic experience, inevitably one does not pay attention to the passing of time either, somewhat like a person who falls asleep and loses his awareness of time. Sufis do not express the idea precisely, perhaps because time itself was not understood in such an exact fashion as in modern times with our clocks and timers. Nevertheless, Quṣayri describes *ibn waqtihi*, ‘man of his

³⁴¹ فالصحو ما ستره الحق ونفاه ، والإثبات ما أظهره الحق وأبداه.

Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 73; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 128.

³⁴² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 73; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 128.

³⁴³ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 367-370.

³⁴⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta‘arruf*, 62.

³⁴⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 57:17.

³⁴⁶ رأيت الأبد ولا عبارة في الأبد – “You have seen eternity, but there is no means of expressing eternity.” Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 60:3-4.

moment' as one for whom the future does not exist so that he has no fear or sorrow, and no concern either for the past or for the moment to come.³⁴⁷ Naturally it is the capacity of the subject which largely determines how quickly and how completely he is filled by an experience, and his will may to a large extent determine whether he retains the discursive reasoning during it.

The possibility of experiencing a state beyond time led some Sufis to reach the conclusion that since the only timeless entity is God, the one who has passed beyond time consequently has a good reason to declare his ultimate identity with God. The logical "mistakes" here – even if the experience is considered real – are that the mere losing of the *sense* of time is regarded as *surpassing* its limits, and secondly, even if one actually surpassed time, which is in fact true in the subjective sense, there is still an incoherent supposition that if the soul proceeds beyond time it cannot be a soul anymore, as if its identity was dependent on time and lost with it.³⁴⁸

3.4.1.4. Special Cases of "Stateology"

In the discussion on ecstatic experience there are also several curiosities connected with the problems of various states. The one we must not miss is Hujwiri's chapter on the 'rending of garments' (*kharq*), which is undoubtedly among the most bizarre religious regulations ever written down. The reading is characterised by a peculiar tension between the rational approach and its insane subject, inspired behaviour.

Hujwiri notes in the beginning that the one who is in full command of his senses must not rend his garments, since this has "no foundation in Sufism". Yet rending one's clothes may be a blissful act depending on one's motives and circumstances. One is firstly allowed to rend one's garments in rapture caused by *samā'*, and secondly, others are allowed to rend their garments at the command of a spiritual director; and thirdly, they do this in the intoxication of ecstasy. The most difficult problem seems to be the treatment of the intact garments thrown off and torn during *samā'*, for the ascertaining of their destination implies clarification of the thrower's motives at the moment of throwing. The garment may be delivered to the spiritual leader or to the singer, or it may be divided among the party, depending on the thrower's intention and on the nature of his ecstatic state. For the sake of clarity it is recommended in many cases that "all should throw off their garments in sympathy".³⁴⁹

When treating the perception of esoteric knowledge (*samā'*),³⁵⁰ Hujwiri

³⁴⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 55; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 100.

³⁴⁸ See the discussion in Zaehner 1960, 90, 123.

³⁴⁹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 417-418.

³⁵⁰ Here *samā'* means 'reception of knowledge'. Besides 'hearing' and 'Sufi ritual' there is one more separate meaning: Ibn 'Arabi, for example, "gave certificates of authenticity (*samā'*)" for his

starts with ordinary perception through the five senses. Of these, hearing is the most important, since it is crucial when embracing the religion. Similarly, the use of the sense of hearing involves more problems: Hujwiri gives a long analysis of characteristics and qualities of different types of hearing according to various schools. This was necessary because the use of music to achieve ecstasy had greatly increased among the Sufis, which in turn had divided opinions into various camps. According to one theory the temperaments of all living beings consist of sounds and melodies blended and harmonised. Therefore, for example, deer could be hunted by encircling them, “and sing until the deer are lulled to sleep by the delightful melody”. On the other hand, this indicates universal musicality: “he who finds no pleasure in sounds and melodies [...] is outside of the category of men and beasts.” Paradise is full of auditory enjoyment, for there is a different voice and melody coming from every tree.³⁵¹

Hujwiri recognises that since the temperaments vary, it would be tyranny to pursue one law for all. The same sound can be heard outwardly in a material way or in a spiritual way, with understanding. If listening to music seems to strengthen the passions, the problem is in the way in which the audition is performed: it does not correspond to reality. *Samā'* is proper to strengthen the tendencies that already exist in the soul, whether good or bad, not so much to change them. A participant may, in accordance with his grade, receive supernatural influence, which may cause him to lose control of his senses, or even lead to death. The main purpose, however, is the transportation of the novice by audition to “such an extent that his audition shall deliver the wicked from their wickedness”.³⁵²

3.4.2. Ecstasy and Theology

The speculation concerning ecstasy inevitably leads from a comparison of the states to a discussion of the evaluation of the experience in the wider Islamic context. What is the relation between ecstatic experience and Islamic systematic theology? The divine cause of ecstasy raises questions as to its evaluation: does it give authority somehow comparable with the Divine revelation, Sunna or *šarī'a*, Islamic law?

The basic Sufi answer is simple: the inspiration of genuine experience is in principle the same and therefore as sure as the inspiration of the Qur'an, and for this very reason such experience cannot contradict but only support the truths of revelation.³⁵³ Nevertheless, Niffari's answer, I assume, would assign the

works. (Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, Austin's Introduction, 43).

³⁵¹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 393-413.

³⁵² Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 402-403, 406-410.

³⁵³ Radtke & O'Kane 1996, 117.

revelation of the Qur'an, as far as it is verbal, to the dimension of the creation, but sound mystical experience, as far as it is immanent, is above the divine *parole* subdued to human language.³⁵⁴ Even if the meanings of the words of the Qur'an were divine in reference, they are surely human in significance.

A closer appraisal of the topic, however, is impeded by the esoteric principle prevalent in Sufism, according to which people should be approached according to their ability to comprehend and secrets should be guarded from the "common folk".³⁵⁵ The position could be described with a linguistic term such as 'situational acceptability': what is appropriate depends on the current context. Hallaj, for example, is reputed to have acted as a member of every particular sect he happened to encounter – yet in the end his sin, from the Sufi point of view, was the very disclosing of secrets.³⁵⁶

The esoteric principle is one result of the recognition of the limitations of language in describing inner realities that lack objective criteria of identity. According to Kalabadhi,

if a man discoursing does not take account of the spiritual conditions (*aḥwāl*) of his hearers, but expounding a certain station (*maqām*) denies and affirms, it is possible that there may be in his audience one who has never dwelt in that station: what he denies may be affirmed in the station of the hearer, so that he will imagine that the speaker had denied something which knowledge (*ilm*) affirms, and that he has either made a mistake, or fallen into heresy, or even perhaps relapsed into unbelief.³⁵⁷

This twofold intention is one of the basic characteristics of Sufi discourse. It means that the terms may function to facilitate the understanding of the topic for Sufis and to make it perplexing for outsiders. Quṣayri states in the preface to his dictionary of Sufi vocabulary:

The Sufis employ terms (*alfāz*) on matters they share, through which they intend to reveal (*kaṣf*) their meanings to themselves, and to veil (*sitr*) from those who disagree with them in their path (*ṭarīqa*) so that the meanings of their terms may be a mystery for outsiders, out of jealousy toward them for their secrets.³⁵⁸

Also, the sources of the present study set themselves explicitly behind the Qur'an and Sunna, and within their orthodox interpretation, when the question is under discussion, but indeed outside these settings the discourse often seems to be quite

³⁵⁴ P. Nwyia even states that "il a démasqué l'idolâtrie du *ḥarf*" (Nwyia 1970, 370).

³⁵⁵ For instance, Quṣayri has a division of four groups of people: the masses (*amma*), the elect (*khāṣṣa*, literally 'special'), saints (*awliyā'*, often translated 'friends of God') and prophets (*anbiyā'*). *Risāla*, 108; *Principles of Sufism*, 29.

³⁵⁶ Ernst 1985, 124-125, 131.

³⁵⁷ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 60; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 77.

³⁵⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 53. (Translation mine, cf. Ernst 1992, 184.)

independent of them. This is clearly illustrated in the way the Sufis *use* the Qur'an.

3.4.2.1. Ecstasy and the Qur'an

The main line of Sufism determinedly underlines its substantial unity and historical continuity with Muhammad and his revelation. The Qur'an is therefore the main subtext for all Sufi discourse, which is no wonder since many Sufis had learnt the whole book by heart. Even the discourse of such an esoteric and original thinker as Ibn 'Arabi is full of Qur'anic allusions and quotations.³⁵⁹

This means that the expression of the mystical experience is potentially influenced by the preconditioning effect of the Qur'anic subtext. This applies both to the reference and to the significance of the expression. For example, all references to light have a Qur'anic connotation, since 'light' is a divine attribute in the famous light verse.³⁶⁰ Jilani states that ecstasy is the conjunction of human light with the divine light (*al-nūr ilā al-nūr*).³⁶¹ When the awareness of the subtext is present in the subject, any emotion interpreted as Divine proximity will potentially be signed by the subject with the symbol of 'light'. In the present corpus this possibility has been especially utilised by Jilani and Ghazali.³⁶²

What is more remarkable, however, is the fact that the Qur'an is repeatedly used as a source where justification for Sufi doctrine is sought. This has often been accomplished by reading *into* the text new meanings in a way that may appear somewhat arbitrary. Perhaps the grammatical and graphemic structure of the Semitic languages – e.g. the root consonants and their derivatives in the unvocalised consonantal script – is especially favourable for the development of the practice of loading the old text with new meanings?³⁶³

The outcome of the position is that almost any mystical state may be described as Qur'anic by isolating a phrase from the Qur'an and reconstructing it as the starting-point of the doctrine in question, at least if the root in question occurs in the Qur'an. For example, Shadhili employs the verse *kullu man 'alayha fān*_{in} from the *Sūrat al-rahmān* (55:26) as the basis of his doctrine on *fanā'*, although the verse in its context only emphasises the mortality of man.³⁶⁴ Jilani

³⁵⁹ Chodkiewicz 1993, 20-21.

³⁶⁰ "God is the light of the heaven and earth..." (*Qur'ān* 24:35).

³⁶¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119; I follow the interpretation of Bayrak in *Secret of Secrets*, 90.

³⁶² E.g. Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 108; *Secret of Secrets*, 77; Ghazali's *Miškāt al-amwār* is thoroughly based on the idea.

³⁶³ The phenomenon can be compared with the development of the thirty-two methods of interpretation employed in Rabbinical Judaism. It is useful to remark here that the appearance of the Qur'an was still in the early tenth century AD somewhat different from the present standard. The vowels and the diacritical points were gradually added, when considered necessary, after c. 700 AD, but the process was not completed before 934 AD. (Hämeen-Anttila 1997, 80-81.)

³⁶⁴ Shadhili: *Qawānin ḥikam al-Iṣrāq*, 70. The translation to be expected for 55:26 is "All that is on earth will perish".

points to verse 23 from *Sūrat al-zumar*, where “the skins of those who fear their Lord tremble”,³⁶⁵ and considers it as an account of the ecstatic state, and thereby presents it as the basis and starting-point of his teaching. As for Kalabadhi, he justifies *fanā’* by explaining how the women who were admiring Joseph cut their hands because “their attributes (*awṣāf*) had disappeared”.³⁶⁶ Quṣayri, however, uses the same verse to illustrate human fallibility in the estimation of spiritual realities, not to mention in the case of Divine qualities.³⁶⁷ The teaching on ‘drunkenness’ Quṣayri flavours with the verse “When the Lord manifested at the mountain, he caused it to shatter. And Moses fell down in a swoon”³⁶⁸ – undoubtedly one of the most fruitful verses for ecstatic purposes.

Are there arguments to consider this kind of interpretation “right” or “wrong”? The *choice* of the way of interpretation is a philosophical question that concerns the whole paradigm of religious thought, and as such it cannot be solved within Holy Writ: the principles of interpretation cannot be deduced from the reading of the Qur’an. In any case, it is obvious that the esoteric way of interpretation makes the meaning of the sacred text relative, and this *de facto* moves the authority from the text to its interpreter.

Due to the abstract and “open” nature of the various states and stations, it is not impossible to find in the Qur’an indirect allusions that might be associated with them. The custom of presenting the states in pairs opens the possibility of making use of parallel structures employed in the Qur’an. For example, Quṣayri takes verse 1:5 and divides it into two, explaining the first part “You do we worship” as referring to ‘separation’ (*farq*), and its sequel “and your aid we seek” to ‘union’ (*jam*).³⁶⁹

In spite of the frequent use of quotations and subtextual allusions, it is easy to agree with Ernst’s assessment that the “Sufi authors are unanimous in agreeing that the real source of their terminology is mystical experience [...] Occasionally, verses from the Qur’an are cited as illustrations.”³⁷⁰ The definitive bulk of the material in Quṣayri’s and Kalabadhi’s discourse consists of quotations from authoritative Sufis, and often even poetic testimonies of non-Qur’anic origin appear more frequently.

However, one must also admire the skilfulness and subtlety of Sufi interpretation. The ‘inner sense’ is a dimension which is able to contribute

³⁶⁵ The verse *تقشعر منه جلود الذين يخشون ربهم* (*Qur’ān* 39:23) is employed by Jilani in *Sīr al-Asrār*, 118 (tr. *Secret of Secrets*, 89), as well as by Niffari, the most original mind in our corpus, who entitled one of his mystical stations (*Mawqif* 73) as ‘standing of the trembling of skins’ (موقف إقشعرار الجلود).

³⁶⁶ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 95; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 125.

³⁶⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 67.

³⁶⁸ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 72; *Qur’an* 7:143 (فلما تجلى ربه للجبل، جعله دكاً، وخز موسى صعقاً). My translation of the verse is a compromise between Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s (*The Holy Qur’an* 1934) and that of M.-A. Sells in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 126.

³⁶⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 65; *Qur’an* 1:5 (إياك نعبد و إياك نستعين).

³⁷⁰ Ernst 1992, 187.

interesting projections to the basic meaning, and thereby increase the value of Holy Writ. The phenomenon produced further speculations on the matter. Jilani, for example, divides the Qur'anic information into three dimensions that are assigned to different groups: (1) the kernel (*qišr*) is the 'science of mystical states' (*'ilm al-ḥāl*), given to 'real men' (*rijāl*), (2) the husk of the kernel (*qišr al-lubb*) is given to the '*ulamā*' and it deals with external matters, the good and the forbidden, and (3) the husk of the husk (*qišr al-qišr*) is political wisdom dealing with justice and given to those in authority.³⁷¹ The fullest development of the inner dimension (*bāṭin*), however, was attained in the texts of the more philosophical schools of theosophic Sufism that are beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, it is to be noted also that Sufis, in principle at least, do not mean the divergent dimensions of meanings to compete with or oppose but rather to fulfil each other in one totality. Sometimes, however, semantic confrontation may be difficult to avoid; for instance, in Jilani's 'paradise of intimacy' (*jannat al-qurba*) there is neither milk and honey nor dark-eyed maidens, for "man should know his worth".³⁷² In such cases there is an evident possibility that the significance surpassed the reference.

3.4.2.2. Ecstasy and *šarī'a*

The Sufis explicitly committed themselves to the tradition and practices of the Prophet and his companions, claiming these to be ecstatics (*ahl al-jadhba*)³⁷³ themselves. Nevertheless, the Sufis' own practices were at least occasionally more or less in contradiction with the customs of orthodox Islam. The very development of technical terms, for example, irritated orthodox jurists, since the Sufi definitions were in fact different from the way in which Muhammad and his followers had used the same vocabulary.³⁷⁴ This tension reflects the position already referred to: the authors commit themselves to orthodox doctrine in plain words, yet the intention of the discourse occasionally seems to observe divergent principles.

As we have seen, Kalabadhi interprets all states in relation to moral choices, and his path certainly does not culminate in trances or any ecstatic phenomena. We might even say that in Kalabadhi's *fanā'* and *baqā'* everything contrary to *šarī'a* is lost. Kalabadhi avoids even mentioning the name of Hallaj; instead he uses the periphrasis 'one of the great ones' (*ba'd al-kubbār*). Kalabadhi, in stressing constant human responsibility, makes polemical comments

³⁷¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 73; *Secret of Secrets*, 38. It is interesting to note that the "political" aspect of Islam is not excluded or underrated even in the discourse of a "spiritual" author.

³⁷² Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 60; *Secret of Secrets*, 29.

³⁷³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 141; *Secret of Secrets*, 119.

³⁷⁴ Ernst 1985, 123.

concerning the *malāmatiyya* sect, unlike Hujwiri, who praises the attitude of *malāma*.³⁷⁵ A weak ecstasy, according to Kalabadhi, is when a man cannot control himself but discloses it; whereas when the ecstasy is strong, he controls himself and remains passive.³⁷⁶ Unfortunately, he does not try to argue this opinion in any way, but the appeal to the concept of strength does not attach a very emotional character to the ecstasy in question. Moreover, he undervalues ecstatic experiences in relation to permanent things, i.e. states or knowledge that are really worthy of endeavour.

Ecstasy (*wajd*) is akin to passing-away (*zawāl*),
while knowledge (*ma'rifa*) is stable and does not pass away.³⁷⁷

It is also remarkable that a considerable portion of Kalabadhi's chapter on 'ecstasy' (*wajd*) consists of poetic quotations stressing the relativity of ecstasy in relation to the Truth.

In ecstasy delights he who finds in it his rest:
But when Truth comes, ecstasy itself is dispossessed (Junayd).³⁷⁸

I hold that ecstasy is doubt
If it spring not of witnessing (Al-Shibli).³⁷⁹

Hujwiri, too, emphasises that even the most sanctified Sufi must obey the law of Islam, and therefore statements made in a state of intoxication do not represent ultimate wisdom but are rather a transient phase: "He who says: 'I have arrived' has gone astray".³⁸⁰ For the same reason, Hujwiri argues, a character like Hallaj should not be taken as an ideal example, for "his experiences are largely mixed with error". On the other hand, Hujwiri does mediate and arbitrate by explaining that Hallaj's words are pantheistic only in appearance, for "no Muslim can be a witch".³⁸¹

Jilani follows the same line. He sees it as necessary to disregard miracles as no more than the first of the thousands of stages leading towards God. Jilani calls miracles 'menstruation of men' (*ḥayḍ al-rijāl*).³⁸² His view on the position of the religious is strict and unambiguous.

³⁷⁵ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 63; Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 83; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 107, see also 121, 112, 170-71.

³⁷⁶ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 82; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106.

³⁷⁷ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 82; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106.

³⁷⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 82; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106.

³⁷⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 83; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 107.

³⁸⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 118.

³⁸¹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 151-152, 184-187, 248-249.

³⁸² Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 54; *Secret of Secrets*, 17. The reference to men is not incidental but characteristic of Sufism, which was basically a masculine pursuit.

On the way to God the body (*jism*) must follow the straight way
(by obeying) the precepts of *šarī'a* day and night.³⁸³

According to Shadhili, impulses that resemble knowledge (*'ilm*) arising from inspiration (*ilhām*) or unveiling (*kašf*), inasmuch as they are products of the imagination (*tawahhum*), must be rejected by returning to the decisive truth of Scripture or Sunna.³⁸⁴ According to a 13th-century Sufi author, whenever something is “shining down from the horizon of the dominion upon the tablet of his heart, he must compare it with the Book of God. If it agrees with the Book, he should accept it; if not, he should pay no attention to it.” After this the matter should still be compared with the Sunna, with the consensus of *'ulamā'*, and with the consensus of the sheikhs of the community.³⁸⁵ Individualism or freedom of thought are certainly not among the virtues of classical Sufism!

According to Qušayri, one should adopt one's behaviour in relation to one's mystical moment (*waqt*): “If his moment is sobriety (*saḥw*), his performance³⁸⁶ is of the *šarī'a*, and if his moment is effacement (*maḥw*), the rules of Reality (*aḥkām al-ḥaqīqa*) prevail upon him.”³⁸⁷ Qušayri tells a story where a man went out of his mind when realising that people are starving as a result of famine, when there was plenty of wheat in his own house. “His mind become disordered (*khūliṭa fī 'aqlihi*) and he did not come to consciousness (*lā yufīqu*) after that except for the times of prayer.”³⁸⁸ By the last remark Qušayri wants to show how the ‘people of the Reality’ (*ahl al-ḥaqīqa*) are protected wondrously so that their experiences do not lead them to disobey the *šarī'a*. Elsewhere he states explicitly that the servant in a state of drunkenness is protected, yet not through his own intentional efforts.³⁸⁹

The discussion of the value of ecstasy has surely divided opinions more than it may appear from the readings of the mouthpieces of sober Sufism described above. As the authoritative authors of basic classical works of sober Sufism they *are* in fact sober Sufism. In the sources of the present study it is Niffari alone who seems to be in actual opposition towards those who unconditionally submit to the Qur'an, Sunna and *šarī'a*. This is most clearly realised in his way of presentation: the speech of God in the first person, which in terms of logic *de facto* sets itself on the same level as the Qur'an itself. Niffari, moreover, does not even try to reach harmonious compromises. He states plainly that the one in *waqfa* is “not approved by theologians (*'ulamā'*), and the

³⁸³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 82. (Translation mine.)

³⁸⁴ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 113-114.

³⁸⁵ The author may be al-Qunawi. Chittick 1992, 55.

³⁸⁶ or ‘subsistence’ (*qiyām*).

³⁸⁷ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 55.

³⁸⁸ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 64.

³⁸⁹ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 72. أنه في حال سكره محفوظ لا بتكلفه

theologians are not approved by him”.³⁹⁰

3.4.2.3. Ecstasy and *tawhīd*

Ecstatic experience poses a special problem for Islamic theology mainly because almost all the images used of it refer to some kind of unification with God. Since even to set something *beside* God is the worst possible heresy, it is clear that unification is a concept that causes counter-reactions among the Sufis themselves, not to mention Sunnite orthodoxy. Any possibility of “God being in the created” was judged in Orthodox dogmatics as an impossibility because it would imply three mistaken conclusions: (1) God would no longer be an absolute existent, (2) there would be two eternal beings, and (3) mixing with a concrete being would introduce separation in God. *Ḥulūliyya*, ‘incarnationism’, became a general term that has been used to label various dubious parties and groups.³⁹¹

Hujwiri states explicitly that it is impossible for God to become incarnate (*ḥulūl*), mix (*imtizāj*), unite (*ittiḥād*) or join (*wuṣūl*) with man. According to him, *wuṣūl* means only that God appreciates men, and even ‘nearness’ (*qurb*) or ‘neighbourhood’ are not appropriate concepts to be applied to God. Nevertheless, in other contexts he does use *qurb* without problems or criticism.³⁹²

Ghazali, too, argues in *Munqidh min al-dalāl* that images like *ḥulūl* (incarnation, befalling), *ittiḥād* (unification) and *wuṣūl* (joining) are clearly erroneous. Instead he would prefer to talk about the nearness (*qurb*) of God.³⁹³ However, in his latter work *Miškāt al-anwār*, certainly intended for smaller circles, he does consider it possible to use *ittiḥād* metaphorically – and *tawhīd* even *de facto*!³⁹⁴ Here we again face the lack of a “scholastic skeleton” resulting from the esoteric aspect of Sufism. If this be the case, it is hardly surprising that Niffari, uncompromising as ever, does not have the slightest hesitation in using the term *wuṣūl*.³⁹⁵

3.4.2.4. Visions

The Sufi discussion of visions operates in a wide field which contains (a) general visionary insight, (b) actual visions, visionary revelations and (c) dreams. The first case is actually what we have encountered before as the “symbolical expression of the mystical experience”: some indefinite inner enlightenment that is expressed

³⁹⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:32.

³⁹¹ Ernst 1985, 122.

³⁹² Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 118-119, 254, 260, cf. 226-227, 238-239.

³⁹³ Ghazali: *Munqidh* 85; Watt: *Faith and Practice*, 61 (where *ḥulūl* is translated ‘inherence’).

³⁹⁴ Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 58 (tr. 61)

³⁹⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 57:13, 64:18 etc.

with images of seeing in the analogous sense.

Reports of actual visions, visual apparitions, are rare or non-existent in Kalabadhi's and Quṣayri's discourse where they occur in more or less trustworthy anecdotes to fulfil a homiletic function.³⁹⁶ Hallucinatory visions are attributed mainly to heretical Sufis who were reputed even to have had sexual intercourse with the fanciful 'dark-eyed maidens' (*ḥūr*) during their ecstasy.³⁹⁷

The theological problem of visionary experiences is in the nature and possibility of the vision of God. Due to the strong preconditioning effect of the Islamic context, the questioning in Sufi discourse is not in the description of actual particular visions but concerns the limits of what is appropriate to be said of any visions of God in general. Even Muhammad, according to "most Sufis", did not see God during his heavenly journey.³⁹⁸ Kalabadhi, however, puts forward as the general Sufi view that in the next world God will be seen 'with eyesights' (*bi-l-abṣār*) but in this world not even with the heart (*bi-l-qulūb*), and the vision (*ru'ya*) is possible through the intellect (*'aql*).³⁹⁹ The vision in question is better seen as a general mental orientation towards God and realisation of his presence, being and acting *as if* seeing him. This kind of conception of the "vision" may apply to other heavenly subjects as well: "(It was) as though I beheld (*ka-annī anzḥuru*) the throne of my Lord coming forth."⁴⁰⁰

As might be expected, Niffari is also in this respect bolder than other authors, claiming to have literally seen Paradise and even the Lord (*al-rabb*) both without His servants and with His servants.⁴⁰¹ Whether the difference between Niffari and others is in his experience or in his parlance, is beyond our knowledge. However, this somewhat rare description of a literal vision must be kept apart from what Niffari means by the concept of 'vision' (*ru'ya*), which for him is a technical term of the relationship with God based on the imminent awareness of him, "seeing God in everything". In this sense Niffari dares to state that whoever does not see God in this world, will not see Him in the world to come.⁴⁰²

The visions that are seen in sleep clearly constitute a definite category of their own within the field of visionary experiences. Kalabadhi, for example, discusses dreams under the title of 'visions' (*ru'ya*).⁴⁰³ Dreams are actually outside our topic, mystical and ecstatic experiences, although as a hallucinatory way of sensing they are in fact separated from what is considered "mystical" only

³⁹⁶ For example, two apparitions of a mystic man to a Sufi in Kalabadhi (*Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 117; Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 155) can in principle be interpreted as an encounter with an actual human being as well.

³⁹⁷ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 141; *Secret of Secrets*, 118.

³⁹⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 22; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 26.

³⁹⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 20; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 24.

⁴⁰⁰ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 91; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 117.

⁴⁰¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 21:1; "I saw the Lord without any servant... I saw the Lord in the midst of his servants" (*ibid*, 47:25-26).

⁴⁰² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 26:5, 14:4.

⁴⁰³ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 119-120, 123; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 157-159, 161.

by their general frequency! However, it is worth noticing that in their dreams Sufis have actually seen the Prophet Muhammad and even God Himself.⁴⁰⁴ In the thought-world of the Sufis and their contemporaries major epistemological authority used to be attributed to dreams since they were considered to be expressions of reality and a true dream (*ru'ya ṣādiqa*) as a part of prophecy.⁴⁰⁵ Jilani states that “when the body is asleep, the heart finds an opportunity to depart to its original homeland”⁴⁰⁶ and to become able to bring information when returning, for in the worship of God being asleep or awake are of equal worth.

Jilani divides dreams into ‘subjective’ (*anfasī*) and ‘extrinsic’ (*āfāqī*). The category of benign (*ḥamīda*) subjective dreams operates in connection with the heart (*qalb*) and these contain several Islamic archetypes such as the desert in white light, dark-eyed maidens, castles, young servants, the sun, moon and stars. Unfavourable (*dhamīma*) subjective dreams are connected with the lower soul and they comprise edible animals and birds, camels symbolising outer and inner pilgrimage, horses symbolising the two *jihāds*, and mules representing the lowest state of tranquillity. The extrinsic dreams also contain animals that have symbolic functions: tiger – pride, lion – arrogance, bear – anger, wolf – gluttony, swine – envy, malice and lust, snake – verbal sin, and so forth.⁴⁰⁷

3.4.3. Ecstasy and Epistemology

Epistemology as such is one of the most complicated and unfinished arts, and evidently the epistemology of mystical discourse is no less delusive a field. Cosmic knowledge, gnosis, is by definition indefinable and therefore unanalysable. Since the Sufis do present ecstasy and this knowledge (*ma'rifa*) in imminent relationship, we may take a look at Sufi epistemology and outline several features of the relationship between knowledge and ecstatic experience in the Sufi discourse.

Firstly, a few general remarks. The Sufi exposition of epistemology is based on a methodological approach. Ghazali presents four classes of seekers of truth: scholastics (*mutakallimūn*) who claim to be “men of independent reasoning (*ra'y*) and intellectual speculation (*nazhar*)”, esoterics (*bāṭiniyya*) who “claim to be the unique possessors of instruction (*ta'līm*) and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the infallible Imam”, philosophers (*falāsifa*), divided into further classes, who claim to be “possessors of logic (*manṭiq*) and apodeictic

⁴⁰⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 206, 102; *Principles of Sufism*, 184, 21.

⁴⁰⁵ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 132; *Secret of Secrets*, 108; Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 9. For more Sufi discussion on dreams, see Tirmidhi’s teaching in Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 18-36, 136-139, 236.

⁴⁰⁶ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 62,98; *Secret of Secrets*, 26, 65-66. Cf. Tirmidhi’s tripartite concept of knowledge: external knowledge (*al-'ilm al-zhāhir*) [of the jurists], interior knowledge (*al-'ilm al-bāṭin*) and knowledge of God (*al-'ilm billāh*). Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 42.

⁴⁰⁷ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 121-126; *Secret of Secrets*, 108-115.

demonstration (*burhān*)”, and Sufis. It is noteworthy that there is no empiricist school at all.⁴⁰⁸

According to Ghazali, the Sufis are distinguished by their access to the Divine Presence (*ḥaḍra*) and their ability of contemplation (*mušāhada*) and illumination (*mukāšafa*).⁴⁰⁹ Their knowledge surpasses the limits of reasoning and is in fact the same phenomenon as ‘prophecy’ (*nubuwiyya*). This knowledge is received with the ‘eye of the heart’ (*‘ayn al-qalb*); it is immediate and direct ‘presential knowledge’ (*‘ilm ḥudūrī*). Why then, if everyone has this inner eye, is mystical knowledge so uncommon? Simply because it is not a separate phenomenon from the transformation of the knower’s being which is veiled by passion. Therefore, mystical knowledge implies remembrance (*dhikr*) and annihilation (*fanā*) which function as its enabling causes.⁴¹⁰

Jilani presents Sufi epistemology in quadripartite arrangement. ‘Science of the law’ (*‘ilm al-šarī‘a*) deals with the external aspects of the life of this world and their rules, ‘science of the path’ (*‘ilm al-tarīqa*) deals with the meanings, causes and effects of the external aspects. ‘Science of the knowledge’ (*‘ilm al-ma‘rifa*) concerns their spiritual essence and thereby the divine, and ‘science of the truth’ (*‘ilm al-ḥaqīqa*) the Truth itself. We might name the four as empirical sciences, philosophy, theology and mysticism. It is to be noted that the field of *šarī‘a* seems to reach only the lowest quarter of the knowable. Correspondingly, there are four worlds that are analogous with the four sciences: *‘ālam al-mulk* is the world of matter (earth, water, fire and ether); *‘ālam al-malakūt* the world of spiritual entities (angels, jinns, dreams, death, eight paradises and seven hells), *‘ālam al-jabarūt* the world of the names of God’s attributes, and *‘ālam al-ḥaqīqa*, the world of God’s pure Essence, known to no-one but God himself.⁴¹¹

Qašani’s glossary of Sufi vocabulary is sublime enough to leave the concept of *ma‘rifa* totally unexplained; Shadhili classifies knowledge into two: bestowed (*mawāhib*) by God and acquired (*makāsib*), which in turn is divided into that learned by instruction and that developed by speculation (*nazhar*).⁴¹²

Kalabadhi discusses *ma‘rifa* on the basis of predestination. He starts with the notion that the human intellect is too limited to reach the Truth itself, and *ma‘rifa* is first of all God’s act consisting of Self-revelation (*ta‘arruf*) and instruction (*ta‘rīf*). In the former God causes man to know Him and to know things through Him, and the latter functions in the creation in a way that corresponds to the natural revelation of Christian theology.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁸ Ghazali: *Munqidh*, 47. The same division is to be found in Ghazali’s contemporary Omar Khayyam and seems to have become quite widely accepted among Sufi thinkers. For further discussion, see Bakar 1998, 181-197, whose translations are used in the expressions above (except that Bakar gives ‘Ta’limes’ for *bāṭiniyya*.)

⁴⁰⁹ Ghazali: *Munqidh*, 47.

⁴¹⁰ Bakar 1998, 194-195.

⁴¹¹ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 52; cf. the interpretation in *Secret of Secrets*, 14.

⁴¹² Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-asrār)*, 108.

⁴¹³ The division is from Junayd. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta‘arruf*, 37-39; Arberry: *Doctrine of the*

For Quṣayri *ma'rifa* means knowledge of God's attributes, purification from wicked qualities, withdrawal of the heart from earthly matters and enjoyment of the nearness of God. What is even more important, Quṣayri explicitly attributes the same qualities to *ma'rifa* as those we have encountered with the mystical experience (awe, tranquillity) and stresses that any feeling of attainment does not belong to it.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, we would be justified in considering *ma'rifa* as a sign which signifies mystical experience in a general way without referring to any of its particular characteristics. And in another perspective it is also possible to classify the contents of the mystical experience as knowledge, the object of which may be the transcendent Truth or created reality.⁴¹⁵

Also, the kind of experience that is expressly ecstatic in character is explicitly connected with epistemology: "Drink unceasingly of its full cup with intoxication (*sukr*) and sobriety (*saḥw*) [...] The cup is mystical knowledge of God."⁴¹⁶ "He who has access to the divine realities is drawn away in rapture."⁴¹⁷

Niffari in one place identifies ecstatic experience (*wajd*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) of the Divine;⁴¹⁸ elsewhere he presents ecstasy as a consequence of the *ma'rifa*.⁴¹⁹ He also suggests that ecstatic experiences imply mystical knowledge: "When the gnoses (*ma'ārif*) of a thing fail, the experience (*wajd*) of it fails also."⁴²⁰ And on the other hand, *ma'rifa* may also have a certain ecstatic quality since one of its prerequisites is given as *al-wajd biyya*, 'experience of me' or 'ecstasy in me'.⁴²¹ And true to his challenging approach, he finally denies the value of ecstatic experience in comparison to *ma'rifa*:

Pure bliss knows me not [...] if bliss knew me,
it would be stopped from enrapturing by my *ma'rifa*.⁴²²

Sufi literature contains numerous definitions of *ma'rifa*; these are seldom less

Sufis, 46-50.

⁴¹⁴ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 311-317. (Chapter 45 in the Arabic original, 41 in von Schlegell's translation).

⁴¹⁵ The latter definition is to be found in Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 101; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 132.

⁴¹⁶ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 143-144.

⁴¹⁷ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 108.

⁴¹⁸ "You will see his knowledge of that to be his *wajd*, and his *wajd* of that to be his knowledge." (Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 59:2.) In this kind of sentence, however, all the various tones of *wajd* – 'ecstasy', 'experience' and even 'finding' – would do in translation. Sells translates "its knowing is its experience and its experience is its knowing." (*Early Islamic Mysticism*, 290.)

⁴¹⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 57:4.

⁴²⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 18:13.

⁴²¹ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 4:1.

⁴²² النعيم كله لا يعرفنى [...] لو عرفنى النعيم انقطع بمعرفتى عن التنعيم
Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 67:12-13. My translation is a compromise between Arberry's ("If bliss knew me, it would be cut off by My gnosis from blessing") and that of Sells ("If bliss knew me, it would no longer enrapture" in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 290.) The fact that *na'im* refers to the mystical experience and not to worldly 'pleasure' is shown by the context where it is paralleled with divine punishment.

intuitive than its mysterious contents and quality. Their reference is left open in many directions, so that the production of significances remains a vital process where no ends or semantic points are reached, and this position demands of the reader a certain contemplative approach. The maxims below portray the various aspects of *ma'rifa* from different angles: the first one presents *ma'rifa* as a reconstructed *causa efficiens* of spiritual growth, the second as mastery of paradoxical thought, the third as reflective contemplation, the fourth shows its enabling causes and so forth:

Ma'rifa is that which has severed you from everything except God and brought you back to Him (Shadhili).⁴²³

Ma'rifa consists in knowing that, whatever may be imaged in the heart, God is the opposite of it (Junayd).⁴²⁴

Ma'rifa is the mirror of the knower. When he gazes in it, his master is shown (Ruwaym).⁴²⁵

Ma'rifa is built on three pillars: awe (*hayba*), shame (*ḥayā'*) and intimacy (*uns*) (Ibn 'Aṭā').⁴²⁶

Ma'rifa is the attribute of one who knows God (*ḥaqq*) – may He be exalted – by His names and attributes and is truthful toward God by his deeds, who then purifies himself of base qualities and defects, who stands long at the door, and who withdraws his heart continually (Quṣayri).⁴²⁷

Ma'rifa is the tongue of singleness (*lisān al-fardāniyya*). When it speaks, it destroys all beside it; and when it is silent, it destroys what makes itself known (Niffari).⁴²⁸

Ma'rifa is an insight (*baṣīra*) limited by My infused contemplation (*iṣhād*) (Niffari).⁴²⁹

Ma'rifa is a fire devouring love, because it reveals to you the reality of self-independence (*ḥaqīqa al-ghinā*) (Niffari).⁴³⁰

⁴²³ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 137.

⁴²⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 101; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 133.

⁴²⁵ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 314; *Principles of Sufism*, 319. Von Schlegell translates *ma'rifa* – Gnosis, 'ārif – Gnostic.

⁴²⁶ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 315; *Principles of Sufism*, 321.

⁴²⁷ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 311-312; *Principles of Sufism*, 316-317.

⁴²⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 9:11.

⁴²⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 17:14.

⁴³⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 37:18. And *waqfa* is a fire devouring *ma'rifa* (*ibid*, 37:18).

The ways of receiving *ma'rifa* are depicted by al-Sabbagh as twofold: firstly, from the 'source of generosity' (*'ayn al-jūd*) or by the 'great endeavour' (*badhl al-majhūd*).⁴³¹ These two aspects, one from God to man, and another from man to God, are present on most levels of the discourse. Quṣayri says of the former, "He who has no union, has no knowledge".⁴³²

The function of *ma'rifa* is in the first place to fulfil religious understanding and spiritual growth. Whenever a believer encounters a feeling of contraction coming over him, according to the words of Shadhili, illumination is provided by the stars of the knowledge of faith, the moon of unity (*tawhīd*), and the sun of knowledge (*ma'rifa*).⁴³³

When *ma'rifa* comes down to the heart (*sirr*), the heart has not the means to bear it: it is as the sun, whose rays prevent the beholder from perceiving its limit and essence. (Kalabadhi)⁴³⁴

When the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) gives him the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of himself, he so stays his *ma'rifa* that he feels neither love, nor fear, nor hope, nor poverty, nor wealth; for all these are short of the goals, and the Truth is beyond all ends. (Kalabadhi)⁴³⁵

If one wishes to find more *concrete* manifestations and results of *ma'rifa* and the world-view filled by it, it is actually the whole Sufi discourse that should be taken into consideration, due to the indefinite and multidimensional character of *ma'rifa* as both knowledge and a way of knowing. Even anecdotes in hagiographies should not be excluded, even though there was no explicitly shown causal direction between the acts related and a mystical experience. Feelings of cosmic unity may be found, as in the case of Al-Qaba'ili, in supplications that embrace "all things in heaven and earth, even the fishes of the sea".⁴³⁶ On the practical level *ma'rifa* may be manifested also as foreknowledge of future events. Ibn 'Arabi, for example, notes that a certain al-Šarafi "used to tell me of things before they occurred and they would always happen as he had said".⁴³⁷ Some Sufis are reported to have had the ability to recognise other people's spiritual state without knowing them or

⁴³¹ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 107. *Badhl* literally means 'giving away', 'sacrifice'.

⁴³² Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 65. من لا له جمع لا معرفة له

⁴³³ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 120.

⁴³⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 101-102; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 133-34. Kalabadhi is here quoting "one of the Sufis".

⁴³⁵ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 102. Arberry has 'God' for *ḥaqq* (*Doctrine of the Sufis*, 134). Again a quotation from "one of the great Sufis".

⁴³⁶ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 123.

⁴³⁷ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 77. Ibn 'Arabi also happens to make an interesting remark hinting at the possible source of al-Šarafi's inspiration: "This sheikh made his living from the sale of opium."

discussing with them.⁴³⁸

So far we have dealt with the epistemological conceptions of sober Sufism. The closest that we can reach to a “drunken epistemology” is certainly the one that can be deduced from Niffari’s opaque parlance. His epistemology is basically tripartite. Firstly, there is what we should call empirical knowledge (*‘ilm*), secondly what we might designate ‘mystical knowledge’ or perhaps ‘spiritual understanding’ (*ma’rifa*), and thirdly, an epistemological mode called *waqfa*, Niffari’s own contribution to Sufi discourse.⁴³⁹ In relation to each other they are, logically speaking, one within the other so that the minor is not able to bear the higher one. The one who is in *waqfa* comprehends *ma’rifa* likewise, and the one in *ma’rifa* comprehends *‘ilm*, so that every possessor of *waqfa* is inevitably a possessor of *ma’rifa* as well.⁴⁴⁰ The concepts are related to other mystical terms so that *‘ilm* belongs to the sphere of ‘farness’ (*bu’d*), and *ma’rifa* to that of ‘nearness’ (*qurb*) but *waqfa* is beyond both, dealing with God Himself.⁴⁴¹

All three modes of knowing function as a way of self-presentation of God: *‘ilm* is his ‘veil’ (*hijāb*), i.e. knowledge relating to the other, *ma’rifa* is his ‘speech’ (*khiṭāb*), i.e. knowledge of the divine attributes, but *waqfa* is his actual ‘presence’ (*ḥadra*).⁴⁴² Correspondingly, the authority (*hukūma*) of the knower of *‘ilm*, empirically based knowledge, is in the knowledge itself, in its inner logic and coherence; the authority of the possessor of *ma’rifa* is in the ‘pronounced speech’ (*nutq*), but the authority of the possessor of *waqfa* is in his silence (*ṣamt*).⁴⁴³

Niffari’s enigmatic utterances, however, are extremely problematic for a brief general outline. Nevertheless, it seems evident that *ma’rifa* has various modes. (If this goes unnoticed, much of Niffari’s discourse in fact remains incomprehensible.) In the widest sense *ma’rifa* is anything experienced in a mystical or contemplative way.⁴⁴⁴ This *ma’rifa* is non-composite and thereby non-resolvable. For example, Niffari declares that if one asks about *ma’rifa*, one does not know God, and the sign of *ma’rifa* is that one does not ask concerning it, nor does the master of *ma’rifa* pass on information about it to others.⁴⁴⁵ Since there does not seem to be any actual discursive content in *ma’rifa*, it might be concluded that in this sense *ma’rifa* is more a way of knowing than information to be known. The most interesting feature in this respect is the actual function of *ma’rifa*: Niffari may indicate that it harmonises various dimensions of knowledge and enables one to comprehend the unity of discursive thought and mystical

⁴³⁸ E.g. Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 153. A sheikh surprised Ibn ‘Arabi, who on a visit to Tunis was standing in an “unlawful place”, by saying: “The likes of you does not stand in a place like that”.

⁴³⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:91.

⁴⁴⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:43, 91.

⁴⁴¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:82, 90.

⁴⁴² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:92.

⁴⁴³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:94.

⁴⁴⁴ E.g. Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:95. “*Ma’rifa* is what you experience (encounter).” — المعرفة ما وجدته

⁴⁴⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 57:1-3, 5.

wisdom.⁴⁴⁶

More often, however, Niffari uses the concept of *ma'rifa* in another sense that refers to the theological knowledge based on the revelation – it is important to note that here *ma'rifa* is still verbal or, to be exact, it is the ‘end of the utterable’.⁴⁴⁷ In addition, it may be the apprehension of the inner dimension of ordinary knowledge (*'ilm*), since the possessor of *ma'rifa* comprehends *'ilm*. And finally, God Himself is the mystic’s *ma'rifa*.⁴⁴⁸ Niffari also discovers that *ma'rifa*, in some sense at least, is transient – which is logical since a good portion of it deals with the perishable world.⁴⁴⁹

Nevertheless, *ma'rifa* is not in the least dependent on human reasoning, since it must take place for the sake of God alone: “If you heed anything on its own account or on your own account, it is not *ma'rifa*, and you have no part of *ma'rifa*.”⁴⁵⁰ The relation between *ma'rifa* and the mystical or ecstatic experience is *supportive*: the culmination of *ma'rifa* is the preservation of one’s (ecstatic) state (*ḥāl*).⁴⁵¹

Ma'rifa is also a divine perspective to one’s self. Namely, it contains the knowledge of what the knower is in God’s opinion.⁴⁵² This indicates the notion that *ma'rifa* is a divine favour caused by grace (*marḥama*).⁴⁵³

Like the mystical language itself, and indeed all mysticism, *ma'rifa* is by nature intentional and orienting, always aiming forward, never reaching a complete fulfilment.⁴⁵⁴ For this reason we are told that *ma'rifa* always contains ignorance (*jahl*).⁴⁵⁵ And correspondingly, Niffari may sometimes present *ma'rifa* as vitality,⁴⁵⁶ whereby it is contrasted with a verbal expression that is compared to sleep, and sleep further to death.⁴⁵⁷

Niffari also presents a squared dimension of *ma'rifa*, called *ma'rifa al-ma'arif*, ‘gnosis of gnosés’, which is ‘true ignorance’ (*al-jahl al-ḥaqīqī*) of everything through God.⁴⁵⁸ It may concern all created beings: “every dominion (*mulk*) and kingdom, every sky and earth, land and sea, night and day, prophet and angel, *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*, and words and names, and all that is in that, and all that is

⁴⁴⁶ إذا ألفت معرفتي بينك وبين علم أو إسم أو حرف أو معرفة فجزيت بها

Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 57:4. Arberry translates: “When my gnosis *combines* between thee and science, or name, or letter, or gnosis, and thou proceedest by it...”

⁴⁴⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:95. المعرفة منتهى ما يقال

⁴⁴⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 16:5. انا معرفتك

⁴⁴⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 16:3.

⁴⁵⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 9:5.

⁴⁵¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 9:4. رأس المعرفة حفظ حالك

⁴⁵² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 1:9.

⁴⁵³ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 1:1.

⁴⁵⁴ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 7:13

⁴⁵⁵ Niffari expresses this in his own way: “*Ma'rifa* in which there is no ignorance is *ma'rifa* in which there is no *ma'rifa*.” Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 36:27.

⁴⁵⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 53:4.

⁴⁵⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 55:19.

⁴⁵⁸ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 11:1.

between that".⁴⁵⁹ This supra-gnosis seems to be derived from (or perceived in) both the rational and emotional dimensions of mentality, for it has 'two springing sources' of inspiration: 'spring of knowledge' ('*ayn al-'ilm*) and 'spring of wisdom'⁴⁶⁰ ('*ayn al-ḥukm*). In Niffari's paradoxical discourse, however, these are somewhat reversed: the 'spring of knowledge' flows from 'real ignorance' and the 'spring of wisdom' flows from the 'spring of that knowledge ('*ilm*)'.⁴⁶¹ Moreover, as the principles of mystical discourse indicate, all modes of *achieving* are avoided: even the 'gnosis of gnoses' is only 'one of his lights' (*nūr min anwārihi*).⁴⁶² The function of this kind of *parole* is "psychedelic", mind-expanding, in the sense that it aims to open up further perspectives: first the reader is led with verbal concepts into a new phase of understanding, then he is again shown an additional dimension in the mystical world-view.

The dimension beyond *ma'rifa*, as noted above, is called *waqfa*, which is "the spirit of *ma'rifa*, just as *ma'rifa* is the spirit of life".⁴⁶³ Niffari's idea seems to be that *ma'rifa* is here used in the sense that it concerns the knowledge of God's attributes, hence dealing with otherness, but *waqfa* is related to God Himself. Perhaps *ma'rifa* as a term had undergone a certain inflation in Sufi circles, and Niffari as a lofty spirit needed an unused and more unusual term to express his sense of superiority to an average Sufi.

There are certain features that indicate that we are justified in considering *waqfa* as an ecstatic state. (Or to be more precise, that an ecstatic state may be described as *waqfa*.) *Ma'rifa* is relative in character and its possessor comprehends the limits of his knowledge, but *waqfa* seems to be a total state which is not hindered by reasoning or discerning. The one in it (*wāqif*) is "beyond every limit"⁴⁶⁴ and he is not to be moved by desires.⁴⁶⁵ It is the only level from which one may see the (divine) reality.⁴⁶⁶

Niffari also seems to indicate that each Sufi should be faithful to his own mode of knowledge and persist in it, without aiming higher than his capacity admits.⁴⁶⁷ Behind this estimation is probably Niffari's twofold division of mankind into the 'elect' (*khāṣ*) and 'common' ('*ām*).⁴⁶⁸

Finally we may note that both ignorance and knowledge ('*ilm*) are,

⁴⁵⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 11:2, 5.

⁴⁶⁰ Arberry translates *ḥukm* 'condition' which makes better sense in the context.

⁴⁶¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif* 11:2, 5.

⁴⁶² Niffari: *Mawāqif* 11:15.

⁴⁶³ Niffari: *Mawāqif* 8:42; see introduction, pp. 14-16.

⁴⁶⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:83.

⁴⁶⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:93.

⁴⁶⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:81.

⁴⁶⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 8:86, 90.

⁴⁶⁸ E.g. Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 29:4-10. Both groups seem to have their own standard of salvation: '*ilm*' is "almost enough" for the common people, but the elect one perishes unless he acts on the principle that he is elect. The categories are not predestined but one may become elect by turning towards God. The doctrine resembles some works of Syriac spirituality, especially *Liber Graduum*.

according to Niffari, ‘veils’ (*hijāb*) in relation to the experience itself.⁴⁶⁹ In his thought knowledge (*‘ilm*) is more harmful than ignorance (*jahl*) for those who ‘see God’.⁴⁷⁰ In this way the dimensions of empirical and mystical knowledge are sharply separated, which once more shows that the latter is not a matter of discursive knowing.

3.4.4. Some Remarks on the Philosophical Postulates

Interpretations concerning the function of the experience have a latent capacity to link themselves with manifold problems in the whole field of theological thought. For instance, whether one understands one’s experience as an indicator of forgiveness granted by God, and in what way one relates it to one’s own sinfulness, lead to questions of freewill and predestination.

Some Sufis held that *tawba* means “that you do not forget your sin”, while Junayd maintained that *tawba* means “that you forget your sin” and concentrate on God instead.⁴⁷¹ According to the Mu’tazili view, God, because of His justice, is bound to accept sincere repentance, as the Ash’ari view emphasised that the Almighty has absolute freedom to grant or refuse forgiveness.⁴⁷²

Sufis are basically in line with the Sunna doctrines on predestination. Kalabadhi presents as the Sufi view the deduction that God is the Creator of all things, and since man’s actions and motions are things, God is the Creator of them as well. Consequently, happiness (*sa’āda*) and unhappiness (*šaqāwa*), for instance, are not caused by acts but prescribed by the will of God.⁴⁷³

During the time of our sources (around the 10th century) the prevailing poetical, philosophical and theological modes of expression were already internalised by the authors. This means that the ecstatic discourse is conditioned by the religious cultural context, and the expressions tend to be steered into the forms described above, and this is in fact the point where the discourse adopts its nature as Islamic discourse: if the expressions diverged too much from the Qur’an and Sunna, the discourse would no longer be Islamic.

The “philosophical” conditioning in the case of Sufism is a complicated matter, however, and much more sophisticated than in the case of Syriac literature, since philosophical ideas penetrated into Sufism in a more profound way, producing actual schools of speculative mysticism of a Gnostic nature (outside our corpus). We must content ourselves with quoting a few remarks from the authors of this study, the most scholastic of whom is Kalabadhi, who employs

⁴⁶⁹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 29:1. The experience in this case is called ‘vision’ (*ru’ya*).

⁴⁷⁰ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 25:1.

⁴⁷¹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 64.

⁴⁷² Böwering 1999, 45.

⁴⁷³ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 23-24, 35; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 28-29, 44.

philosophical reasoning mainly in the beginning of his work, where he discusses basic theological matters.

The main dilemma in mystical language is how to portray the final state so that there is nothing more to improve in the mystic's path towards God, but on the other hand the outcome should not be a nirvana-like essential oneness between man and God either. This boundary between the common identity of will and the identity of essence seems to have been surpassed by the bold teaching of Abu Yazid.

As an example of philosophical conditioning we may note the manner in which the climax of the mystical experience, that of *fanā'*, is explained as disappearance of the accidents (*'arad*), or attributes (*ṣifa*), of man and persistence of his substance – a derivation of one of the basic differentiations in Greek philosophy not present in traditional Semitic thought (e.g. the Old Testament).

Correspondingly, unification with God has customarily been divided as unification with the name of God's essence and unification with His Essence.⁴⁷⁴ This may be applied to all description of experiences interpreted as having a relation to God. For example, the experiences connected with the symbol of light, revealed by Jilani, are further interpreted by specifying them into the experiences of the "light of names and attributes" (*nūr al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt*) of God and those of the "manifestation of the lights of the Essence" (*tajalli anwār al-dhāt*) of God.⁴⁷⁵ The *parole* is apt to be taken as a description that refers to a static transformation rather than to an emotional peak.

In the same way Hujwiri's *fanā'* does not reach a pantheistic extent: it is likened to fire which transmutes the qualities by its burning but leaves their 'essence' unchanged. In other words, essences are not capable of annihilation, but attributes are.⁴⁷⁶ This is the way in which it was possible to explain how an experience that is interpreted as unity with the Divine was, on the one hand, final and ultimate, but on the other hand man was not one where man lost his humanity. (The interpretation, however, is now in a sense out of date, since modern analytical philosophy has actually abandoned the whole concept of substance: an entity is not considered anything else but its properties.)

If the disposition of the will as an attribute of the essence seems too obvious, it is good to note that man's essence and properties can be constituted in reverse order as well. The concept of "everlasting essence (of man) with disappearing attributes" implies a non-pantheistic cosmology, yet there are more pantheistic or metaphysical systems of philosophical thought in both East and West that offer alternatives. Perhaps the most sophisticated is that of Schopenhauer in whose philosophy even man is an accidental cover for the basic principle of the universe, *Ding an sich*, which is Will, the only thing beyond the

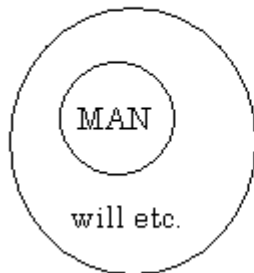
⁴⁷⁴ Morewedge 1992, 215 (quoting Najm al-Din).

⁴⁷⁵ E.g. Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 90-91; *Secret of Secrets*, 56.

⁴⁷⁶ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 171, xii-xiii (Nicholson).

structure of subject–object.⁴⁷⁷ This may be illustrated as follows:

Hujwiri's monotheism



Schopenhauer's philosophy



In historical perspective the identification of *fanā'* and ecstasy is a parallel for, and continuation of, Plotinus' neo-Platonic mystical theology in which ecstasy is a direct and immediate expression of return and unification to the first principle.⁴⁷⁸ Ecstasy and unification also appear together in poetical language: Rumi makes his lover and Beloved be “united in ecstasy”.⁴⁷⁹

One solution is to adapt the myth of the original existence of souls, corresponding to the neo-Platonic true identity in primaevial Reason, which has slender support in the Qur'an (7:172). According to 'Amr ibn 'Uthmān Makkī, God first created the hearts of men and kept them in a state of 'union' (*waṣl*), then after another 7000 years he created the spirits (Pers. *jānhā*) and kept them in the degree of intimacy (*uns*) for 7000 years, then he created the souls (Pers. *dilhā*) in the station of proximity (*qurb*) and again after 7000 years he finally created the bodies. Then God “imprisoned the heart in the spirit and the spirit in the soul and the soul in the body; then he mingled reason (*'aql*) with them, and sent prophets and gave commands; then each of them began to seek its original station.”⁴⁸⁰

Niffari refers to the same doctrine mostly in an indirect way. The ecstatic 'gate' of Niffari opens to consideration of that from which the one who enters is created.⁴⁸¹ The divine subject of his discourse exhorts: “I manifested creation, and divided it into classes: and I appointed for them hearts,”⁴⁸² and urges one not to forget one's creation.⁴⁸³ According to Kalabadhi, God operates with an annihilating mystic (*fānī'*) as follows:

God [...] makes him unconscious of the vision of his own attribute, that is, the vision of the departing of his desire. There then remains in him only what proceeds

⁴⁷⁷ E.g. Schopenhauer 1991, 61-70.

⁴⁷⁸ Morewedge 1992, 66; Plotinus, *Enneads* VI, 9:3.

⁴⁷⁹ Yarshater 1988, 193. (T.S. Halman's translation.)

⁴⁸⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 309.

⁴⁸¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:7. For the 'gate' in question, see above p. 207 and 230.

⁴⁸² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 53:2.

⁴⁸³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 20:21.

from God to him, and what proceeds from him to God passes away from him. So he becomes as he was when he existed in God's knowledge, before God brought him into being, and when that which came to him from God came without any act on his part.⁴⁸⁴

Similarly, the end of the individual is to be "as he was where he was before he was".⁴⁸⁵ In Sufism this pre-existential vision is effortlessly combined with a doctrine familiar from Pythagoras and Plato, according to which the memory of pre-existent Paradise is awakened in the soul by music.

Around the speculations on the return to the primordial state there gradually developed a whole neo-Platonic branch of Sufism (Suhrawardi, Ikhwan al-ṣafa', Najm al-Din etc.) which is beyond the scope of this study.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 95; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 124.

⁴⁸⁵ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 105; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 138.

⁴⁸⁶ See Morewedge 1992, 212-213.

3.5. Manifestation

3.5.1. Physiological Manifestation

Sufi sources, at least those of the present study, are quite sparing in providing any information on the outward forms of the manifestation of the experience. For the authors themselves these may have been self-evident and for the reader somewhat repulsive – it is to be recalled that the Sufi classics were intended mainly for a general audience.

How the discourse directed itself towards abstractions, may be demonstrated with the following beginning of Muḥāsibi's answer when he was asked for the *signs* of attaining ecstasy (*'alāmāt wujūd qalbihi*):

The hearts of such lovers are held captive in the hidden shrine of the Divine loving-kindness, they are marked out by their knowledge of the revelation of the Divine Majesty, being transformed by the joy of the Vision, in contemplation of the Invisible, and the enveloping Glory of God, and from them all hindrances are removed, for they tread the path of friendship with God, and are transported into the Garden of Vision and their hearts dwell in that region, where they see without eyes, and are in the company of the Beloved without looking upon him, and converse with an unseen Friend. [...] ⁴⁸⁷

Nevertheless, experiences are manifested empirically as well. Firstly, indicators of natural reactions like *sighing* are occasionally mentioned. ⁴⁸⁸ Hujwiri discloses stronger effects by reporting how the body firstly opposes the 'divine influence' descending on it – by crying out, for example – but when the body becomes accustomed to the continual influences, it is able to stand them quietly. ⁴⁸⁹ Najm al-Din, too, mentions 'screams and shrieks' as signs of union (*ittiṣāl*) with the Most High Name (*ism al-a'zham*). ⁴⁹⁰ This may be the reason why Jilani refers to the shame connected with *dhikr*. ⁴⁹¹

Jilani discloses several ways of the manifestation of ecstasy (*ḥarakāt al-*

⁴⁸⁷ Smith 1935, 247 (cit. *Ḥilyat al-Awliya* fol. 238a).

⁴⁸⁸ "Someone said to Rumi: 'When you sighed a moment ago, the ecstasy departed. Do not sigh, so the ecstasy will not leave.' Rumi answered: 'Sometimes that ecstasy departs if you do not sigh.'" Rumi, *Fihi-ma-Fihi* (discourse 41), 277.

⁴⁸⁹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 407-408. A sudden ecstatic cry in Rumi's *Fihi-ma-Fihi* (discourse 10), 78.

⁴⁹⁰ Morewedge 1992, 216 (D. Martin, cit.: Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā, *Die Fawā'ih al-G'amāl wa Fawā'ih al-G'alāl* [Wiesbaden 1957] 145, 147).

⁴⁹¹ التأسف والحيرة عند ذكر الله Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 120; *Secret of Secrets*, 92. Bayrak here interprets freely: "shame for one's moments of unconsciousness".

wajd).⁴⁹² These include symptoms of fever – shaking, trembling and moaning. Jilani uses the analogy between spiritual ecstasy and high fever because in both cases it is impossible to control the physical reactions – to prevent oneself from shaking, trembling and stiffening. The equivalent movements, however, are not legitimate if they take place under the control of the will. He also mentions weeping (*bakkā*) as a sign of ecstasy.⁴⁹³

Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi hagiographies include allusions to physical changes in the mystic. The phenomena include strengthening of the heartbeat⁴⁹⁴ and even a case of transfiguration of the body with bright light.⁴⁹⁵ Weeping is usually connected with sorrow for one's soul.⁴⁹⁶ The ideal of weeping is mentioned more often than one might expect on grounds of the classical works of Sufism, where the context of tears often suggests a homiletic hyperbole rather than analytical description. Sometimes weeping is mentioned with reference to a saying from the Prophet Muhammad's tradition, as if to offer a certain justification. As the cause of the flow of tears we are given *dhikr* and especially the recitation of the Qur'an.⁴⁹⁷ Ibn 'Arabi tells how one Sufi was unable to restrain his tears whenever he heard Holy Writ recited, the result being that his eyes had become ulcerous from his frequent weeping.⁴⁹⁸ Junayd considers weeping (*bakkā*) to be a result of joy and ecstasy (*wajd*) due to meeting the Beloved after passionate longing for Him.⁴⁹⁹

Tirmidhi sheds some light on the feature of crying by setting it at the point when the ecstasy is already fading. He compares the phenomenon with a child that has lost its mother. The verbal picture painted by Tirmidhi is beautiful: "a remnant of intoxication, however, still remains in him, namely his heart feels itself to be a

⁴⁹² Literally 'movements of ecstasy'; Bayrak translates as 'manifestations'.

⁴⁹³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 119-120; *Secret of Secrets*, 91-92. Bayrak here interprets the qualities of 'freedom' (*tajarrud*) and 'victory' (*nuṣra*) as indicators of the change of colour on one's face: "one grows pale, or the face flushes".

⁴⁹⁴ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 92. "So much was he dominated by the fear of God that the beating of his heart during prayer could be heard from a distance."

⁴⁹⁵ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 118. "A man was on a mountain and saw a shimmering pillar of light so bright that he could not look at it. When he approached he found that it was al-Rundi standing in prayer." See also Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 75-76; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 97.

⁴⁹⁶ When al-Šarafi prayed "the tears would fall down his face on to his beard like pearls" (Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 77); Abu Abdallah "wept much and kept long periods of silence" (*ibid*, 92); Al-Šakkaz "put down a new mat to pray on and, as he prayed, tears fell upon that mat." Afterwards "the spot where his tears had fallen had begun to rot" (*ibid*, 97). Al-Baghi al-Šakkaz was usually "in a sad and tearful state" (*ibid*, 110); Al-Rundi's "ecstasy was intense and his tears copious" (*ibid*, 116); Al-Qaba'ili "was also much given to weeping" (*ibid*, 123); Ahmad ibn Hammam "wept for his soul like a mother who has lost her only son" (*ibid*, 126-127); al-Salawi "was much given to weeping" (*ibid*, 127). An ecstatic weeping by non-Muslim 'unbelievers' is mentioned in Rumi's *Fihī-ma-Fihī* (discourse 23), 174.

⁴⁹⁷ E.g. Qušayri: *Risāla*, 193; *Principles of Sufism*, 169; Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 106; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 140.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 133.

⁴⁹⁹ Qušayri: *Risāla*, 333; *Principles of Sufism*, 348.

stranger in the wastelands of bewilderment, isolated in that Singleness (*fardiyya*). He experiences the scent of kindness in his heart and raises a cry to the Possessor of kindness”.⁵⁰⁰

Concerning the duration of a genuine experience Shadhili notes: “If that continues for anyone for an hour or two, he is the drinker in truth.”⁵⁰¹ Hujwiri mentions a dervish who during *samā’* kept his lips shut and was quiet “until every pore in his body opened; then he lost consciousness, and remained in that state for a whole day.”⁵⁰²

The practice of *dhikr* may become so earnestly conditioned that it is no longer dependent on active consciousness. Ibn ‘Arabi mentions a Sufi who was known for the fact that he used to continue the invocation while asleep. This could be recognised from the motion of his tongue, which Ibn ‘Arabi himself witnessed many times.⁵⁰³

Sufi anecdotes include cases of a trance-like state where the subject seems to be really “absent”. These may offer an entirely new kind of perspective on the state of *ghayba*. Al-Maghribi visited a sheikh, and they exchanged greetings according to the Arabic idiom. Since the sheikh, however, was “as if he did not see me at all, I repeated the greeting more than once until I realised that the man was absent. Then I left him and departed from the house.”⁵⁰⁴

A great emotional charge present in the concentration on prayer is reported to have been manifested in various ways. One Sufi did “groan and mutter so that no one could understand what he was saying”.⁵⁰⁵ The climax of the ideal of intensive concentration seems to have been attained by a Sufi who had gangrene in his feet: once when he was finishing his prayers, he found out that his foot had been amputated by the doctors without him noticing anything!⁵⁰⁶ The function of the story is clear: ecstasy concentrates one’s awareness and consciousness completely on the non-physiological dimension.

Moreover, during the ecstatic state one may become immune to fire, being unaware of what is happening and unable to relate it afterwards. Ibn ‘Arabi witnessed many times how “a spiritual state overcame (Ahmad al-Šariši) and he fell into a fire, but the fire did not harm him.”⁵⁰⁷

Among the physiological manifestations of Sufi ecstasy we may include various unconventional manoeuvres like the rending of garments or throwing them away, as mentioned above; some of the heretical groups reprehended by

⁵⁰⁰ Radtke & O’Kane 1996, 185.

⁵⁰¹ Sabbagh: *Mystical Teachings (Durrat al-Asrar)*, 145.

⁵⁰² Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 407-408. Another example of losing consciousness on p. 410.

⁵⁰³ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 68.

⁵⁰⁴ *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 115. The story appears in chapter 6 (entitled *al-tawājud wa-l-wajd wa-l-wujūd*) of Qušayri’s *Risāla* but is absent from the 1990 Beirut edition.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 73.

⁵⁰⁶ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 304.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 149.

Jilani threw away their clothing and were naked during their ecstasy.⁵⁰⁸ The anecdotes of the deranged actions are charming. Al-Ḥawari threw all his books into the sea, declaring: “A guide is needed only so long as the disciple is on the road; when the shrine comes into sight the road and the gate are worthless.” Šibli threw 400 dinars into the Tigris, for “stones are better in the water.”⁵⁰⁹

As might be expected, the hagiographic literature contains a multitude of stories concerning the miracles performed by the Sufis, and a good portion of the anecdotes are imbedded in our sources as well. The frequent topics include healings⁵¹⁰ and clairvoyance, which may be based on hearing inner voices (*hātif*) or intuitive insight (*firasāt*), or occurring thoughts (*khawātir*).⁵¹¹ (The boundary between the latter two may be more or less arbitrary.) In addition to these we may encounter even more curious cases such as levitation,⁵¹² the power to walk on water,⁵¹³ the ability to make fire without incendiaries, flying in the air,⁵¹⁴ disappearance (*ṭayy al-makān*),⁵¹⁵ magic (i.e. affecting other people’s thoughts or causing things to take place from a distance), turning of urea into water for ritual purification and even an instance of “open sesame”.⁵¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Ibn ‘Arabi, a brilliant mind, took these as evident facts and strongly criticised those (jurists) who did not believe in the existence of the spiritual degrees and miracles but instead assumed that all claims to this were fabrications and superstition.⁵¹⁷ Kalabadhi also mentions talking with beasts and a case of “apport mediumship” (production of an object in another place) in his chapter on miracles, where he utilises a few authoritative miraculous traditions of the Prophet and other saints of old, and discusses the functions of miracles in the divine economy.⁵¹⁸

The consuming character of the experience may manifest itself in various ways. Kalabadhi reports an incident in which a man was giving an exhortation in a mosque when he suddenly fainted (*ghuṣiya ‘alayhi*), by the divine action, and did not until before the following day.⁵¹⁹

⁵⁰⁸ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 141; *Secret of Secrets*, 118.

⁵⁰⁹ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 118, 417, 228.

⁵¹⁰ E.g. Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 81-82, 137. In the latter case a man reads a book that condemns Ghazali. Suddenly he becomes blind, which makes him prostrate himself and swear that he would never read it again, and then his sight is restored.

⁵¹¹ E.g. anecdotes by Kalabadhi (*Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, chapters 67-68), Quṣayri (*Risāla*, chapter 32) and Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 118 and 158 in which, for instance, a certain Abd al-Haqq visited Jerusalem with his wife, who refused to leave the city. Abd al-Haqq “told her that the Franks would come and take over Jerusalem and take her captive. Then she would go to Acre, but she would return to Jerusalem where she would die. Everything happened exactly as he had foretold.”

⁵¹² E.g. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 154; *Principles of Sufism*, 99.

⁵¹³ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 57; *Secret of Secrets*, 21.

⁵¹⁴ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 57-58; *Secret of Secrets*, 21.

⁵¹⁵ Jilani: *Sirr al-Asrār*, 58; *Secret of Secrets*, 21.

⁵¹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 83, 119, 153, 155, 103-104, 150, 132.

⁵¹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 106-107.

⁵¹⁸ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 44-51; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 57-66.

⁵¹⁹ E.g. Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 118; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 156. The function of

Sufi literature, oddly enough, does contain even the most absolute possible culmination for the category of manifestations, namely that of dying. Hujwiri presents several cases where the subject of the experience did actually die during his ecstasy. Even more odd is the fact that such an objective thinker as Hujwiri neither considers it necessary to judge this phenomenon nor tries to justify it in any way.⁵²⁰

A man cried out during *samā'*. His spiritual director bade him be quiet. He laid his head on his knee, and when they looked he was dead.

Some one laid his hand on the head of a dervish who was agitated during *samā'* and told him to sit down: he sat down and died on the spot.

the incident in its context is to teach one to guard one's own inner state before judging others.

⁵²⁰ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 408-410. See also Schimmel 1982, 24, 220, and the discussion in *Kitāb al-lumā'*, 267-299.

3.5.2. Verbal Manifestation

One of the most famous characteristics of Sufism, and perhaps its most unique feature overall, is to be found in the category of verbal manifestation. Ecstatic utterances (*ṣaṭḥ*, pl. *ṣaṭḥiyât*) indicate sayings given during the ecstatic state, but in most cases they appear to be given in a state of mind that does not seem in any way extraordinary – often as an answer to a question, sometimes even literally.⁵²¹ Since there can hardly be any reasonable criteria to differentiate such utterances according to the quality of the ecstasy behind them, and since they are generally considered ecstatic in the broad sense of the term, it is absolutely appropriate to take a closer look at the ecstatic utterances, their various types and their interpretations.

In the following I shall give a systematic presentation of the most important and best-known ecstatic utterances. I have arranged them into five main types according to their logical structure.⁵²²

The first type is to be called “**I–God**”. It consists of self-esteem given as with the mouth of God. The human subject here acts as a divine subject (or *vice versa*) concretely representing the divine in the world.

1. “I am I, and there is no God but me, therefore worship me.”⁵²³
– Abu Yazid Bistami (i.e. Bayazid) addressing the congregation in a mosque
2. “I am the Truth.” (*anā al-ḥaqq*)⁵²⁴
– Hallaj
3. “Praise to me! How mighty am I” (*subḥānī, mā a'zhama ša'nī*)⁵²⁵
– Abu Yazid

Cases two and three are the most famous: there are few books on Sufism, classical or modern, that leave them without comment. (Kalabadhi is one of the exceptions.) Hallaj has been considered as a kind of paradigmatic and normative ecstatic in whose utterances Islamic ecstaticism and the whole of Sufism in a

⁵²¹ Ernst 1985, 48.

⁵²² Niffari is a special case counted outside those who give ecstatic utterances, since his works would constitute a separate (and massive) category of ecstatic utterances.

⁵²³ Ernst 1985, 45. (Badawi: *Shatahat al-Sufiyah* I, 122.)

⁵²⁴ *Anā al-ḥaqq*, though simple in structure, has extraordinarily divergent equivalents when translated into Western languages: “I am the truth” (Arberry 1950, 59), “I am the Divine Truth” (Schimmel 1982, 92), “I am the Ultimate Reality” (Watt 1953, 14), “I am God” (Nicholson 1914, 150), “I am the ONE REAL!” (Gairdner in Ghazali’s *Mishkat al-anwār*, 60), “Je, c’est la Vérité Créatrice” (Massignon 1954, 38), “Ich bin die Absolute Wahrheit” (Schimmel 1984, 115).

⁵²⁵ Al-Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 57; Jilani: *Sirr al-asrār*, 136; Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 254; Ernst 1985, 10-11; Arberry: *Sufism/Handbuch der Orientalistik* 455 etc.

sense culminates.⁵²⁶

The second type “**I-He**” consists of like sayings that are not uttered in the character of the Divine subject but connected with the third person singular. The unity is just as evidently present, the result being a kind of bi-personal human estimation of one’s own “divine unity”.

4. “Behold, I am He!”⁵²⁷

– Hallaj

5. “I am the one I love, and the one I love is me.”

(*anā man ahwā wa man ahwā anā.*)⁵²⁸

– Hallaj

6. “I am my highest Lord.”⁵²⁹

– Abu Yazid

7. “There is nothing under the cloak but God.” (*mā fī-l-jubba illā-llāh*)⁵³⁰

– Abu Yazid

8. “My ‘am’ is not ‘am’, since I am He and I am ‘he is He’ (*huwa huwa*).”⁵³¹

– Abu Yazid

9. “I shed my self (*nafs*) as a snake sheds its skin, then I looked at myself, and behold! I was He (*anā huwa*).”⁵³²

– Abu Yazid

The third type, **I-Thou** is an application of the preceding case in the second person, which gives a slightly more emotional impression – especially so, if we allow ourselves a Buberian subtext. In fact this type functions as the ultimate form of Martin Buber’s famous I–Thou relation, which refers to an intimate encounter with the Other; here the logical deep-structure of the relation goes a phase deeper in intimacy and identity.

⁵²⁶ History seldom follows logic: the very same sentence was uttered by Abu Yazid decades before Hallaj without receiving hardly any attention (Ernst 1985, 43).

⁵²⁷ Shadhili: *Qawānin ḥikam al-īsrāq*, 72.

⁵²⁸ Schimmel 1982, 32 (Cit. Massignon [ed.]: *Diwān, muqatta’a* no. 57).

⁵²⁹ Ernst 1985, 51 (Cit. Badawi: *Shatahat al-Sufiyah* I, 103, 68.)

⁵³⁰ Jilani: *Sirr al-asrār*, 136; Ghazali: *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 57 (tr. 60).

⁵³¹ Ernst 1985, 26 (Cit. Ruzbihan: *Sharh*, chapter 76.)

⁵³² Ernst 1985, 27 (Cit. Badawi: *Shatahat al-Sufiyah* I, 77.)

10. "I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart and I asked:
 'Who are you?' (*man anta*) He answered: 'You' (*anta*)."⁵³³
 –Hallaj

11. "My spirit mixes with your spirit, in nearness and in distance,
 so that I am you, just as you are I."⁵³⁴
 – Hallaj

The fourth type, which we may name as **God in nature** consists of the cases of a kind of "local pantheism", i.e. applications of God's particular manifestations:

12. "Here am I, Lord!" (*labbayk*)⁵³⁵
 – Nuri when hearing a dog barking

13. "One morning I went out, and God came before me.
 He wrestled with me and I wrestled with him. I continued
 wrestling with him until he threw me down."⁵³⁶
 – Hasan al-Kharaqani

14. "Praise be to him whose humanity manifested the secret
 of the splendour of his radiant divinity, and who then appeared
 openly to his people, in the form of one who eats and drinks!"⁵³⁷
 – Hallaj

And finally I should like to add one more category based on the function of certain utterances: the category of **provocation**. A certain "teasing" aspect is always present in the ecstatic utterances, but some of them, it seems, do not necessarily have any other function or meaning than provoking the audience by exaggerating remarks that aim to break the barriers of conventionality in ever-renewing ways.

15. "I am greater than He."⁵³⁸
 – Abu Yazid as a response to the prayer call *Allāhu akbar*, God is great.

⁵³³ Schimmel 1982, 32 (Cit. *Le Dīwān d'al-Hallaj*, ed. Massignon, *muqatta'a* no. 10.)

⁵³⁴ Ernst 1985, 27 (Cit. *Le Dīwān d'al-Hallaj*, ed. Massignon, 82.)

⁵³⁵ Ernst 1985, 37. (Ruzbihan: *Sharh*, chapter 96.) In this case the conventional Sufi use of the expression is to be found in Niffari, whose divine subject urges one to say *labbayka rabbī* in every mystical state (*ḥāl*). Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 7:3 (cf. 33:1).

⁵³⁶ Ernst 1985, 38. (Ruzbihan: *Sharh*, chapter 182.) cf. Gen. 32:23-32.

⁵³⁷ Ernst 1985, 27. (Ruzbihan: *Sharh*, chapter 267.)

⁵³⁸ Ernst 1985, 38. (Ruzbihan: *Sharh*, chapter 53.)

To this category we may count remarks that challenge and question common Islamic presuppositions. For example, Abu Yazid said when passing a Jewish cemetery, “They are pardoned”, but when passing a Muslim cemetery he said: “They are duped.”⁵³⁹ The function of this kind of utterance is to show his contempt for all organised religion and belief in the worthiness of all spiritual religion. By this overstatement he perhaps aimed to create some balance between somewhat arrogant Islamic presuppositions and his own exaggeration.

Finally we may note that Niffari’s discourse, written in the form of divine speech, constitutes a type of its own: his opaque treatises are a kind of **divine oracle**. Due to his method of presenting his discourses in the 1st person singular as from God Himself, they contain a multitude of sayings that, when taken separately, would do well as instances of ecstatic utterances of extraordinary boldness:

I am God. (*anā allāh*)⁵⁴⁰

I am the Almighty, the Compassionate. (*anā al-‘azīz al-rahīm*)⁵⁴¹

I am the Merciful (*ra‘ūf*).⁵⁴²

I am God: none may enter to me in the body.⁵⁴³

I am the Mighty (*anā al-‘azhīm*) whose mighty can bear no other than He.⁵⁴⁴

I am the Manifest (*al-zhāhir*) without veil, and I am the Hidden (*al-bāṭin*) without unveiling.⁵⁴⁵

Obey me for that I am God, and there is no God except me.⁵⁴⁶

The time has come for me to unveil my face and manifest my splendour.⁵⁴⁷

Curiously enough, the divine subject of Niffari’s discourse requires to be addressed ‘You, you’ by those in the state of vision (*ru‘ya*), but ‘I, I’ by those in the state of absence (*ghayba*).⁵⁴⁸ This may be a pointed rebuke to those who utter ecstatic utterances without full inspiration (compared with Niffari’s own, of course).

⁵³⁹ Zaehner 1960, 108. (Cit. Sarraj: *Kitāb al-lumā’*, 138).

⁵⁴⁰ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 19:22-24.

⁵⁴¹ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 5:8.

⁵⁴² Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 47:26.

⁵⁴³ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 13:4.

⁵⁴⁴ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 54:5.

⁵⁴⁵ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 29:1. (cf. 48:6.)

⁵⁴⁶ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 33:12.

⁵⁴⁷ Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 5:8.

⁵⁴⁸ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 47:9.

3.5.3. Interpretation of Verbal Manifestation

A theoretical basis for the interpretation of ecstatic utterances was developed by Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.765), the sixth imam of the Shiites, who produced a theory of divine speech. It is based on the exegesis of the phrase *inni anā* spoken by God to Moses, and explained by God Himself: "I am He who speaks and He who is spoken to, and you are a phantom (*ṣabāḥ*) between the two, in which (*khiṭāb*) takes place."⁵⁴⁹ Nwyia (1970) and Ernst (1985) agree that this is a precise explanation for Sufi ecstatic utterances.⁵⁵⁰

Junayd (d. 910) wrote a commentary on ecstatic utterances (*Tafsīr al-ṣaḥīyāt*), in which he seems to estimate that Abu Yazid's utterances do not emanate from the highest mystical experiences. Junayd preferred not to talk openly about such experiences.⁵⁵¹ According to Sarrāj (d. 988), too, the ecstatic utterances belong to the beginning of the path rather than being intended for the advanced; he even avoids mentioning Hallāj's *anā al-ḥaqq*. Yet both of them considered ecstatic utterances worthy of *tafsīr*.⁵⁵²

Hujwiri explains the utterance given by Abū Yazīd during his ecstatic moment by shifting the subject of the clause from the created being to the Creator.

These words were the outward sign of his speech, but the speaker was God. [...] When the divine omnipotence manifests its dominion over humanity, it transports a man out of his own being, so that his speech becomes the speech of God. But it is impossible that God should be mingled (*imtizāj*) with created beings or made one (*ittiḥād*) with his works or become incarnate (*ḥall*) in things: God is exalted far above that, and far above that which the heretics ascribe to him.⁵⁵³

This choice of words is one way to unite the transcendent Islamic God and a mystic speaking as his mouth so that they are not united; man's psychic faculty is somehow turned "off" during the experience and the functioning subject is God.

Ghazali, in his classical work *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, distinguishes between two kinds of ecstatic utterances: (1) extravagant, exaggerated claims and (2) unintelligible babbling or otherwise misarticulated voices. Neither should be displayed in public, for the danger of misunderstanding is inevitable, and common folk would be misled by weird sayings. For that reason he even declares that "the killing of him who utters something of this kind is better in the religion of God than the resurrection of ten others."⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁴⁹ Nwyia 1970, 179; English translation according to Ernst 1985, 10; Massignon 1954, 201-205.

⁵⁵⁰ Ernst 1985, 11.

⁵⁵¹ Schimmel 1975, chapter 2.

⁵⁵² Ernst 1985, 11-13.

⁵⁵³ Hujwiri: *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 254

⁵⁵⁴ Ghazali: *Iḥyā'*, I:1; translation according to Ernst 1985, 14. (Ernst's views on Ghazali's ideas remain somewhat limited, for they are based on *Iḥyā'* alone.)

In his more esoteric book, *Miškāt al-Anwār*, however, Ghazali displays a much more positive attitude towards ecstatic utterances. He places them in the same category with those anthropomorphic traditions and Suras in which God “sits down on the throne”⁵⁵⁵ or otherwise acts in human terms.⁵⁵⁶ When treating utterances *Subḥānī* and *Anā al-ḥaqq* Ghazali places stress on the fact that a subject is always bound with a perspective: any state exists in relation to its subject (*bi-l-īdāfa ilā šāhib al-ḥāla*) who does not necessarily comprehend the phenomenon in its all totality.⁵⁵⁷ “In that state he is unconscious of his own self, and unconscious of his own unconsciousness.”⁵⁵⁸ This state may be called metaphorically ‘unification’ (*bi-lisān al-majāz ittiḥād*) and in the language of reality ‘unity’ (*bi-lisān al-ḥaqīqa tawḥīd*).⁵⁵⁹ This bold use of *tawḥīd* probably indicates here, as Zaehner puts it, “affirmation of the divine unity”.⁵⁶⁰ After such a choice of words even Ghazali has to calm down: “beyond these verities there are also secrets/mysteries, the treatment of which would take us too far.”⁵⁶¹ Elsewhere he states: “The words of passionate lovers in the state of intoxication are for hiding, not for discussing.”⁵⁶²

What, then, does Ghazali leave unsaid here? In his Persian commentary on *Miškāt al-anwār* he finally argues that since two different things can never become one, “perfect *tawḥīd* means that nothing exists except the One”.⁵⁶³ This is the secret which may be labelled ‘pantheism’ or ‘monism’, or it might be explained in terms of the concepts of Atman and Brahman – in any case it unquestionably surpasses traditional orthodox Islamic thought.

Various interpretations ultimately deal with the limits of the ego: has the (God of) experience filled the consciousness completely or has the subject surpassed the limits of his ego? In the previous case the subject itself will inevitably give an exaggerated interpretation: God is all and/or he is God. The second possibility is illogical and paradoxical itself: how could a subject surpass his *own* consciousness? (Wherever the subject goes to or is in, there is also his consciousness, by definition.)

According to Rumi’s mystical explanation, well in line with the position of

⁵⁵⁵ *Qur'an* 32:4. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates the phrase (*istawā ‘alā-l-‘arṣi*) in Targumic style “established Himself on the Throne”.

⁵⁵⁶ Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 61-62 (tr. 64-65).

⁵⁵⁷ Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 57 (tr. 61).

⁵⁵⁸ إنه ليس يشعر بنفسه في تلك الحال ولا بعدم شعوره بنفسه

Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 57 (tr. 61).

⁵⁵⁹ Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 58 (tr. 61). Gairdner translates *ittiḥād* as ‘identity’, and *tawḥīd* as ‘unification’.

⁵⁶⁰ Zaehner 1960, 166.

⁵⁶¹ وراء هذه الحقائق أيضا أسرار يطول الخوض فيها Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 58 (tr. 61)

Gairdner translates “... mysteries which we are not at liberty to discuss”, the basic meaning of *ṭāla* is no more than ‘to be long’, ‘lengthen’.

⁵⁶² كلام العشاق في حال السكر يطوى ولا يحكى Ghazali: *Miškāt al-Anwār*, 57 (my translation).

⁵⁶³ Quoted from Zaehner 1960, 166. Original in *Faḍā’il al-anām* (ed. M. Sābitī, Tehran 1333 A.H.), 24.

Ja'far al-Sadiq described above, Hallaj represented extreme humility by saying *anā al-ḥaqq*, for by calling himself God he made himself non-existent and recognised only one true Existent, God.⁵⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Rumi also states that “the mouth of a drunken camel must be tied”, in other words: experiences should not be divulged in public.⁵⁶⁵

The art of commentating on the ecstatic utterances reached its peak in the Persian work called *Šarh-i Šaṭḥiyat* by Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), which consists of 192 different ecstatic utterances by 45 Sufis. This exhaustive work also aimed at restoring the reputation of Hallaj. Ruzbihan describes beautifully the journey of the soul in the world of beauty and how it reaches various states that may “overflow” and hence be manifested to outsiders as ecstatic utterances. Ecstatic utterances are symbolic (*mutašabih*) expressions of divine secrets, just as certain secrets are expressed in the Qur'an symbolically as anthropomorphic attributes, or in *ḥadīth* as actions. The object that *šaṭḥ* symbolises is, according to Ruzbihan, firstly '*ayn al-jam*' (Pers. '*ayn-i jam*'), which is translated by Ernst as 'essential union' and secondly, 'clothing' (*iltibās*) which represents how man is clothed in the divine.⁵⁶⁶

According to Ernst, Ibn 'Arabi considered ecstatic utterances as vainglorious acts that merely indicate pride, and this actually became the final reason that resulted in the general devaluation and gradual disappearance of ecstatic utterances, since it was his school that occupied an eminent position in Sufism. Yet Ibn 'Arabi's own doctrine of *wajd al-wujūd* finally led towards similar formulations, though as if via another route.⁵⁶⁷ For example, he himself said after being saved from danger, “How may the one be imprisoned in whose humanity divinity resides?”⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁴ Rumi: *Fihī-ma-Fihī* (discourse 52), 349; Iqbal 1956, 97.

⁵⁶⁵ Schimmel 1982, 97.

⁵⁶⁶ Ernst 1985, 15-20. *Sharh-i Shathiyat* has been edited by H. Corbin in the series *Bibliothèque Iranienne 12* (Teheran 1966.) Ernst gives several long quotations.

⁵⁶⁷ Ernst 1985, 22, 24 (Ibn 'Arabi: *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* II:2, 238).

⁵⁶⁸ Austin's introduction in Ibn 'Arabi: *Sufis of Andalusia*, 39. (Cit. *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* IV, 560.)

3.6. Some Remarks in Conclusion:

Mystical Language and Mystical Experience

Sufi discourse is largely discussion about words. This makes an outsider wonder whether there is anything to be discovered about the mystical conditions themselves. The problem is recognised by Sufis as well, most profoundly by Niffari, who makes remarks on the introspectiveness of (Sufi) parlance and its “letter that speaks about letter”. As we have already seen, he also distances himself from the standard discourse by refraining from the usual classifications of states and their comparison.

One may also wonder whether, or to what extent, the spiritual phenomena are intended to be uncovered or concealed in the Sufi classics. Often the primary purpose of the discourse does not seem to be spiritual instruction but a certain intellectual, albeit not exactly rationalistic, discussion of the various ways of perceiving and arranging the inner states in spite of their imprecise and inexact nature. Perhaps we could call this a “metaspiritual” way of discoursing. One reason for this is that in Sufism, as in other mystical traditions, mystical literature is clearly secondary to practice. This is explicitly stated in the textual discourse itself. For instance, after a long discussion on various states, Quṣayri gives a division of three phases: (1) the master of the moment (*waqt*) is a beginner, (2) master of the states (*aḥwāl*) is in between, but (3) the master of the breaths (*anfās*) is an end.⁵⁶⁹ One way of interpreting this is that anyone can have individual experiences, and the ability to control their totality in linguistic discourse is reached by some, but only the one who *practises* it constantly – by recollecting God in every breath – has reached the point.

Yet on the other hand, mystical language is not a purposeless veil but an important means of mystical growth; a ‘letter’ is not only a ‘veil’ but a ‘treasury’ (*khizāna*) and ‘fire’ (*nār*) as well.⁵⁷⁰ Nor can genuine mystical language be independent of the experience. The primary function of mystical discourse is to direct one towards the experience: to make the reference and significance come together by the recipient’s participation in the same reality.

The true saying of every speaker is that which establishes you in the experience of Me (*al-wajd biyya*). Therefore, interpret (*i’tabir*) the sayings in the light of your ecstasy in Me (*bi-wajdika biyya*), and interpret your experience of Me in the light of your turning away from other than Me (Niffari).⁵⁷¹

The second function of mystical language is to extend the limitations of human thought and widen the subject’s perspectives towards the whole creation by opening new trails of thought for the mind. The function could be called

⁵⁶⁹ Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 83; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 142.

⁵⁷⁰ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 23:6, 53:1.

⁵⁷¹ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 19:27.

“psychedelic”: it reaches for the verbal and conceptual limits and aims to move them farther. Niffari’s divine subject promises:

Be through Me, and you shall see knowledge and ignorance as limits, and speech and silence in them as limits. You shall see every limitation veiled from Me by its limitation, and you shall see the servants to be in knowledge, and its inner part ignorance.⁵⁷²

The main factor in this respect is the paradoxicality of expression in various forms. The semantic openness of mystical language is revealed illustratively by the sentences that are absolute paradoxes in their formal structure. The logical structure of a sentence like “my speech is not speech (*mā nuṭqī al-nuṭq*)”⁵⁷³ implies that the same sign is used in two different senses: *nuṭq*₁ refers to the boundless expression of imperceptible thought, the significance of which is dependent on the recipient’s capacity of comprehension, and *nuṭq*₂ to the ordinary expression in natural language. The same principle of twofold meaning can be applied to any crucial term like *waṣl* or *ittiḥād*. Paradoxical sentences like “their presence is absence”⁵⁷⁴ shows that the reference is not bound to the verbal form – and not to the significance, we might add.

Consequently, a mystic like Niffari is not afraid of language (which may be seen as an indirect proof of the genuineness of his mystical experience that caused him to rise above the discursive level and above religious language games.) In his approach there is no force with the ability to veil or unite as such: the qualities and attributes are ‘paths’ in the created dimension but no more; God is not known by the letter, nor by that which is of the letter, nor in the letter.⁵⁷⁵ This “supra-linguistic” approach to reality is the one that the mystical language, in an analogous or metaphorical way, is all about. As uttered by a Sufi poet:

So Truth is known in ecstasy,
For truth will everywhere prevail;
And even the greatest mind must fail
To comprehend this mystery.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷² Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 14:8.

⁵⁷³ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 1:4.

⁵⁷⁴ حضورهم فقد Junayd: *Kitāb al-fanā’*, 80; Zaehner 1960, 221.

⁵⁷⁵ Niffari: *Mukhāṭabāt*, 56:6; *Mawāqif*, 67:10.

⁵⁷⁶ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*, 104; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 137.

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

- Totality
- Involuntariness
- Restfulness, tranquillity
- A stunning and dazing quality
- A feeling of joy or delight
- A sense of refreshment
- Warmth

SUFISM

- Totality, intensity
- Involuntariness
- Emotional content: joy, sorrow, fear, confusion, bewilderment or shame
- Immediacy
- Tranquillity
- Amenity
- Intentionality: yearning
- Consuming character

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. 85-90 and 201-204.

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 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 inexpressibility 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. *ṭa’ām*), ‘sweetness’ (Syr. *ḥalyūtā*, Ar. *ḥalāwa*, ‘*adhb*) 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 in the Spirit, which in the Christian context means to breathe God,⁶ appears to be a

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. 91-93, 205-206.

⁴ See above, p. 92-96, 205-206.

⁵ See above, p. 93, 207.

⁶ In the Greek Orthodox tradition, at least Philotheos of Sinai (dating obscure) exhorts one to “breathe God always” (τὸν Θεὸν ἀεὶ ἀναπνεΐν, *Filokalia* 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

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.

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

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 symbols⁷ 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

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. 97-99.

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 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

⁸ ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ. "For towards you are my breasts, my delicacies" (Ode 14:2). ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ "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.

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 kerygma¹⁰). 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. 151-152 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).

(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.

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.

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.

(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 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

¹³ See above, p. 73, 231.

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.

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. 213-214) 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.¹⁵

¹⁵ This is in fact in line with the view expounded by Scharfstein (1973, 112): "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."

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 unailing 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: they are at their best profound and original (Isaac of Nineveh, John of Dalyatha,

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

¹⁷ See above, p. 131-132, 228-229.

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 the cultural context, where there was a limited number of alternative states suitable for points of comparison for extraordinary states of

¹⁸ Mingana/’Abdišo’, 157 (150a).

mind: mainly drunkenness and sleep, and perhaps falling in love¹⁹ (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.

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

¹⁹ Isaac of Niniveh makes beautiful use of the analogy in homily 33 (Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 218-224).

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.

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 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

²³ Schimmel 1975, 33.

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.

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 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 metatheology, 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 metatheology 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, 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

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, several²⁷ 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.

²⁵ Mingana/Joseph, 178 (86a, p. 256).

²⁶ The Syriac text in *Malpānūtā 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.

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 rooted in other contexts as well. Even Kalabadhi's chapter on Angels and Messengers²⁹ 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.

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).

²⁹ Kalabadhi: *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf*, 41-43; Arberry: *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 53-55.

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' (*taybūtā*) 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 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

³⁰ See above, p. 134-135.

³¹ See above, p. 137.

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

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 discourse 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

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.

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 Koraanissa ja islamissa* (Logos 2/1998).

³⁵ Quṣayri: *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.

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 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 Paradise³⁹ 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

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’.

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.

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 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

⁴⁰ Massignon (1954, p. 93): “ce sont des termes complexes, par trop amphibologiques”.

⁴¹ E.g. Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 67; *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 120; see above, p. 193, 218-223, 250-251.

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.

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 hereafter, 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 expectation 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 unification⁴⁴ without attracting any special attention. The most essential underlying 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 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 (*helaṭ*) 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 *tawhīd*, 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

⁴³ See above, p. 265-266.

⁴⁴ See above, p. 140.

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 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. ܡܠܚܩܢܐ ܪܘܚܢܐ ܕܢܘܫܐ ܕܥܡܢ ܪܘܚܢܐ ܕܥܠܘܗܐ – literally "grace of his gift".

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

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

⁴⁸ Cf. B.K. 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 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).

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. Therefore, 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).

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.

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

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 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 cases⁵⁵ may justify speaking of influences, but on the other hand, the discussion of “influences” usually tends to distort the

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. *ܐܝܢܐ ܕܘܝܢܐ* in Sahdona: *Oeuvres spirituelles I*, 3:147.

⁵⁵ Barhebraeus adopted the disposition of al-Ghazali's *Ihyā* 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*.

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 disputable 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

⁵⁶ Bedjan: *Perfectione Religiosa*, 72; Wensinck: *Mystic Treatises*, 50.

⁵⁷ *Qur'an* 2:152; Quṣayri: *Risāla*, 210.

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 Christian context. Another example of this category of parallels could be Niffari’s twofold division of men into the ‘elect’ (*khāṣ*) and the ‘common’ (*‘ām*); 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 unnecessary 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.

⁵⁸ Beulay: *La Collection des lettres de Jean de Dalyatha*, 47:7.

⁵⁹ Schimmel 1982, 71-72.

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

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 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

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.

⁶⁴ "Whatever appears to you, and begins to concentrate you before you have been severed, fear its deception." Niffari: *Mawāqif*, 30:8.

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 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:

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.

⁶⁹ Martin 1992, 211.

⁷⁰ Arberry 1961, 451 (cit. Abu Nu‘aym, *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.

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.

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

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. 70, 84 (note 103), 88 (notes), 94-97, 106, 134, 137, 138, 145, 148-149, 155.

⁷⁶ Beulay: *Lettres*, 4:6 (pp. 316-317).

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).

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 undisprovable, 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.

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

⁸⁰ For example, Stace 1960, Kvalstad 1980.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CIIS = Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, Rome.
 CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Louvain
 ETSE = Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile, Stockholm
 JTS = Journal of Theological Studies, Oxford
 OCA = Orientalia Christiana Analecta, Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, Roma.
 OC = Oriens Christianus, Wiesbaden.
 PO = Patrologia Orientalis, (ed. F. Graffin) Paris/Brepols, Turnhout
 PG = Patrologia Graeca, Paris.
 PS = Patrologia Syriaca, Paris
 SEERI = St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam.
 SC = Sources Chrétiennes, Paris.
 SP = Studia Patristica. Peeters, Leuven.

APPENDIX

A CASE STUDY: SEMANTIC HISTORY OF THE WORDS *TEMHĀ* AND *TAHRĀ*(a) *Temhā* in the Peshitta Old Testament ¹

The corpus of the Peshitta OT is a very fruitful starting-point for investigating semantic developments, for it dates back to the mid-second century AD, thereby representing the oldest Syriac literature.² The root TMH occurs 75 times in the Peshitta OT, two-thirds of the occurrences being in the Prophets. The root appears 38 times in a verbal position, usually in *pe'al*, but twice also in *af'el*.³ The noun *temhā* occurs 37 times in the Peshitta OT, eighteen of these in Jeremiah alone. According to my estimation based on the contextual analysis, it has nine different basic usages. In the following examples the English counterpart of *temhā* is in boldface.⁴

1. 'Distraction' of mind as a mental disease decreed by God. In this sense *temhā* is used for three different Hebrew words:

The Lord will strike you with *wasting disease*.⁵

The Lord will strike you with... *confusion of mind*.⁶

I will strike all horses with *stampede* and their riders with stupor.⁷

2. 'Distraction' of mind as a painful mental state resulting from one's own awareness of a prevailing but inadmissible state of affairs, corresponding to two Hebrew words:

Horror grips me (for the destiny of the people).⁸

¹ It seems that the root THR is not used at all in the Syriac OT; nor is it found in Talmudic Aramaic (according to Jastrow's dictionary).

² The long discussion on the origins of the Peshitta OT seems to have been settled, for the time being, by Weizmann's extensive study. His conclusion is that the translation was made directly from Hebrew in the Edessa district by a non-rabbinical Jewish sect around 150 AD. See Weitzman 1999, 245-253.

³ I resort here to W. Strothmann's *Konkordanz zur Syrischen Bibel*.

⁴ The English translations are adopted from the New International Version (NIV), unless Syriac structure demands a freer translation. What I mean here by "context" is the semantic structure which is common to the English, Hebrew and Syriac sentence in each particular case (unless the basic texts seem to differ).

⁵ Dt. 28:22 (כַּלְמַת אֱלֹהִים – Heb. שִׁחָפָה).

⁶ Dt. 28:28 (כַּלְמַת אֱלֹהִים – Heb. תַּמְהוֹן לִבָּב).

⁷ Zac. 12:4 (כַּלְמַת אֱלֹהִים – Heb. תַּמְהוֹן) Riders are attributed as אֲרִוּוֹת, Heb. שִׁעָרוֹן.

⁸ Jer. 8:21. (Heb. שִׁמָּה).

(Jerusalemmites) will drink their water in *despair*.⁹

3. ‘Distraction’ as a prevailing but inadmissible state of affairs. Due to the strong tension in the content of the meaning, the concept also has some causative character: “a horrible thing causing horror”. The first sentence refers to (spiritual) prostitution, and its subject might be either the Lord or the Prophet himself:

I have seen a *horrible thing* in the house of Israel.¹⁰
A *horrible* and shocking *thing* has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy lies... and people love it.¹¹

4. ‘Distraction’ as a symbol of annihilation decreed by God as a final and complete destruction, the closer nature of which is indeterminate.

“How suddenly are [the wicked] swept away by *terrors*.”¹²

5. ‘Distraction’ as desolation of a city, by destructive divine action. To my knowledge, this is an unique usage of *temhā* in Syriac and it seems to be a slightly unsatisfactory translation for the Hebrew הַמְּשָׁח , the problem resulting from the double meaning of הַמְּשָׁח as both ‘desolation’¹³ and ‘astonishment’. It seems to me that *temhā* in the sense of desolation is a semantic borrowing from Hebrew to Syriac.

This whole country will become *deserted* and desolate.¹⁴
How *desolate* is Babylon among the nations!¹⁵
Their land will be *laid waste*.¹⁶
Therefore I will give you over to *ruin*.¹⁷
I will make the land *desolate*.¹⁸
I will make it [the land] *desolate* forever.¹⁹
(I will make) the land a *desolate waste*.²⁰

⁹ Ez. 12:19. (Heb. שָׁמַרְוִן)

¹⁰ Hos. 6:10. (Heb. שַׁעֲרֵי רִי ה – unvocalised in the Hebrew Bible.)

¹¹ Jer. 5:30. (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח)

¹² Ps. 73:18(19). ($\text{כִּי אֶעֱזָב אֶת עַלְמֵי אֱלֹהִים}$ – Heb. הַמְּשָׁח).

¹³ Is. 5:9 is an evident example of הַמְּשָׁח in the sense of desolation, ܟܘܚܘܬܐ in Syriac.

¹⁴ Jer. 25:11 ($\text{אֶתְּמַלֵּא אֶתְּמַלֵּא אֶתְּמַלֵּא אֶתְּמַלֵּא אֶתְּמַלֵּא}$ – Heb. $\text{לְחַרְבָּה לְשָׁמָה}$).

¹⁵ Jer. 50:23. (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח) A similar case in Jer 51:43.

¹⁶ Jer. 18:16. (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח) Similar or parallel cases in Jer 19:8, 25:9, 44:6,22.

¹⁷ Mi. 6:16 (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח).

¹⁸ Ezek. 15:8 (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח).

¹⁹ Jer. 25:12 (Heb. שָׁמַרְוִן).

²⁰ Ezek. 6:14. (Heb. הַמְּשָׁח וְ הַמְּשָׁח) Similar cases in 33:28-29, 35:3, and 35:7 (which is vocalized differently in Hebrew).

6. ‘Distraction’ as horror: mental distraction caused by a concrete distraction. This use is usually applied to a city under the threat of divine punishment, but sometimes of people also. In a couple of cases²¹ the context does not indicate whether *temhā* is referring to a place or its people, or both.

Babylon will be... an *object of horror* and scorn.²²

You will be an *object of horror* to the nations.²³

You will become a *thing of horror*...²⁴

You will become an object of cursing and *horror*.²⁵

Although the difference between cases 5 and 6 is unambiguous in itself, in divergent contexts they overlap, and the choice between the two significations remains undetermined. Whether *temhā* is referring to an act of desolation, or to the horror resulting from it, remains in many cases undetermined. The difficulty is due to the potentially causative character in the semantic capacity of the word. For example:

Bozrah will become *temhā* and an object of horror, of reproach and of cursing.²⁶

NIV here translates הַמְּשָׁה as ‘ruin’, but all the other three attributes of Bozrah are mental entities, which questions this concrete translation. Possibly the Hebrew, as well as the Syriac *temhā*, might be taken here in the sense of mental distraction and hence be translated ‘aversion’ or the like. An analogous case is Ez 23:33, where Jerusalem and Samaria, according to NIV, receive “*a cup of ruin and desolation*”,²⁷ but according to the King James version a cup of *astonishment* and desolation.

In addition to the previous six cases, *temhā* is employed in a few peculiar ways in the book of Job. It is to be regarded as a matter of doubt whether these are actually translations from the standardised Hebrew text, or whether they are derived from a different manuscript tradition, or whether they are explicatory translations in the Targumic fashion.

7. ‘Distraction’ as deficiency, inadequacy.

²¹ 2 Kgs. 22:19, Jr 25:18.

²² Jer. 51:37,41 (Heb. הַמְּשָׁה).

²³ Ezek. 5:15 (Heb. מְשָׁה).

²⁴ Deut. 28:37 $\text{לְאֵתְּמָהּ וְלְאֵתְּמָהּ}$ (Heb. הַמְּשָׁה). Here *temhā* is co-ordinated with “(an object of) scorn and ridicule”, in Syriac *matlā* (lit. ‘proverb’) and *renyā* (lit. ‘thought’).

²⁵ Jer. 42:18, similar cases in 44:12, 29:18. (Heb. הַמְּשָׁה)

²⁶ Jer. 49:13. $\text{וְהָיָה כְּכַסְּיָהּ וְכְכַסְּיָהּ וְכְכַסְּיָהּ וְכְכַסְּיָהּ}$ –

Heb. $\text{לְשִׁמְהָ לְחִרְפָּה לְחִרְבָּה וְלְקִלְלָהּ}$

²⁷ $\text{כּוּס שְׂמָה וְשִׂמְמָה}$ – Heb. $\text{כּוּס שְׂמָה וְשִׂמְמָה}$

(God) charges His angels with *error*.²⁸

8. ‘Distraction’ as deduction, reduction.

He leads councillors away *stripped* (*be-temhā*).²⁹

He leads priests away *stripped* (*be-temhā*).³⁰

9. ‘Distraction’ as a verbal entity referring to distraction in one’s social relations. This somewhat peculiar usage could be an ironic application of the case six above.

I have become a *byword* among them.³¹

In addition, the passive participle – or adjective – *temhā* occurs six times in the Peshitta OT, being used in the following four ways:

1. ‘Distraction’ of mind as melancholy

My soul, why are you so *disturbed* within me?³²

2. ‘Distraction’ of mind as anguish

I sat *appalled*.³³

3. ‘Distraction’ of mind as desolation. If this sentence, however, were translated against the prevailing traditions as “sat down in grief”, it would fit in the previous category.

(after being raped) Tamar lived *desolate*.³⁴

4. ‘Distraction’ of mind as an ecstatic mental state between revelations:

I sat for seven days among them *overwhelmed*.³⁵

So *temhā* and *temhā* more or less correspond to ten different Hebrew words from seven different roots.³⁶ Some of the Hebrew originals that seem to be behind the

²⁸ Job 4:18. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. אֲחַלְּלֵם .

²⁹ Job 12:17. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. אֲחַלְּלֵם .

³⁰ Job 12:19. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. אֲחַלְּלֵם .

³¹ Job 30:8 (9). Heb. מְחַלְּלֵם

³² Ps. 42:6,11. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם אֶתְּחַלְּלֵם אֶתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. אֲחַלְּלֵם [...].

³³ Ezra 9:3-4. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם אֶתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. מְחַלְּלֵם

³⁴ 2 Sam. 13:20. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם אֶתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. מְחַלְּלֵם .

³⁵ Ezek. 3:15. אַתְּחַלְּלֵם אֶתְּחַלְּלֵם – Heb. מְחַלְּלֵם .

³⁶ We may note here that the root *TMH* also appears in mediaeval Hebrew poetry in the context of ecstatic yearning for God: “*My thoughts astounded (הַתְּמַהֵם) asked me why / Towards the whirling wheels on high / In ecstasy I rush and fly / The living God is my desire / It carries me on*

Syriac *temhā* are somewhat uncommon (ܛܡܗܐ). Apparently *temhā* was used as a general solution in various difficult situations. It is to be noted that about a half of the occurrences of *temhā* in the Peshitta OT refer to an unusual mental state, extremely negative in nature, but only one case, that in Ezekiel, is connected with religious ecstasy.

Are there, then, other ways of signifying religious ecstasy in the Syriac Old Testament? The case of Saul and the prophets is smoothly dealt with by giving the Hebrew expression a Syriac form.³⁷ To answer the question, of course, the problem is to know when the OT is referring to ecstasy allusively or symbolically, whether a certain act is ecstatic (uncontrolled) in nature or not. For example, the Hebrew *nofel*, in the case of the Oracle of Balaam,³⁸ is rendered by *remā* in Syriac, “falls prostrate” (NIV), but also “falling into a trance” (King James) – not to mention ‘lankeaa loveen’ of the Finnish Bible of 1938.

(b) *Temhā, tahrā and êkstasis in the NT*³⁹

The Peshitta NT was translated from Greek in c. 400, but the result still to some extent exhibits the influence of earlier Old Syriac versions that date back to the 3rd century. When looking for ecstatic encounters, it is essential to recall once more that even the Greek term ἔκστασις is not an exact starting-point. Its meaning is not a distinct semantic item but its usage in patristic literature is extremely diverse. Most usages concern loss of ordinary sensual perception, or rising above it (e.g. Pseudo-Dionysius). Lampe gives the following usages for ἔκστασις:⁴⁰

1. Distraction of the mind caused by sin or fear
2. Drunkenness or its consequences
3. Separation (in christology)
4. Mystical experience connected with perfect prayer⁴¹
5. Mystical experience connected with visions⁴²
6. Other usages: (cf. Adam, the prophets, Christ on the cross).

The essential connection between ecstasy and silence is symbolized in an interesting way in the Peshitta; there are at least two cases (Gen 2:21, 15:12) where ‘silence’ (*šelyā*) is used in a position where the Septuagint has ἔκστασις.

wings of fire / Body and soul to Him aspire.” (Ibn Gabirol, *Selected religious poems*, 15; the (free) translation by I. Zangwill).

³⁷ 1 Sam. 10:6-13. Hebrew forms are given Syriac form as follows: *hitnabbūtā - tetnabbē*, *wayyitnabbē - etnabbē*, *nibbā - metnebē*, *hitnabbōt - lemetnebāyū*.

³⁸ Num. 24:4, 16.

³⁹ Due to the lack of a Peshitta NT Concordance, this is not necessarily an exhaustive catalogue; it is based on the use of concordances of other languages, and on my own study of the Syriac NT.

⁴⁰ Lampe 1961, 438-439.

⁴¹ John Climacus: *Ladder*, chapter 28.

⁴² E.g. Pseudo-Macarius, Palladius, Sozomen.

Curiously, the role of *temhā* in the Syriac NT is quite different from the one it has in the OT. The basic sense of both *temhā* and *tahrā* in the Peshitta NT is ‘wonder’ in the sense of amazement, i.e. the basic meaning of the words in classical Syriac. The contexts reveal practically no semantic difference between the two roots. The most common way, however, of expressing amazement in the Peshitta NT is to use the root *DMR*. (The fourth possibility is the verb *tewah*.⁴³)

But there is also one case where *temhā* is used of religious ecstasy/trance. The distension of the semantic field from amazement to ecstasy might be a semantic borrowing from Greek, being derived from the equivalent double meaning of the word ἔκστασις. This can be illustrated by the following table of the renderings of ἔκστασις in Syriac and English Bible translations. It is especially noteworthy that in two out of the three cases where ἔκστασις clearly signifies ‘trance’, the whole idea of ecstasy is bypassed with the expression “I saw in a vision”⁴⁴, which seems to indicate the absence of a proper Syriac term equivalent to ecstasy.

	Greek	Syriac	KJV / NIV
Mark 5:42	ἔκστασει (dat.)	<i>metdammerīn (h)waw</i>	astonishment / astonished
16:8	ἔκστασις (nom.)	<i>tahrā</i>	amazed / bewildered
Luke 5:26	ἔκστασις	<i>temhā</i>	amazed
Acts 3:10	ἔκστασις (gen.)	<i>temhā</i>	amazement
10:10	[ἐγένετο ἐπ’ αὐτὸν]	[<i>nefal ‘alaw</i>]	
	ἔκστασις	<i>temhā</i>	trance
11:5	ἔκστασει	–	trance
22:17	ἔκστασει	–	trance

Outside these occurrences *temhā* is quite rare in the Peshitta NT, and its meaning is consistently that of amazement: “Great *temhā* took hold of them” (after a demon had been driven out.)⁴⁵ Similarly, the verb *temah* functions in the meaning of amazement and astonishment.⁴⁶ It may also be translated “surprise”.⁴⁷ But it

⁴³ Mk. 9:15, 2 Thess. 2:2.

⁴⁴ ܐܘܢܝܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐܢܐܝܢܐ The expression has a biblical subtext in Dan 7:2 (*hāzē hawēt be-hezwā*).

⁴⁵ Lk. 4:36.

⁴⁶ *Temah* is usually used of a reaction towards something unexpected. Its quality may be expressed in another language in various ways. This can be illustrated by its English equivalents in NIV. The Greek originals are also varied (θαυμάζω, ἐξίστημι, ἐκπλήσσω, ἀπορέω). This indicates, on the one hand, the inexact nature of emotional states and thereby a manifest need for dynamic translation, but on the other hand it also shows a certain inconsequence in the Syriac translation technique.

– Mt. 22:33 Crowds were *astonished* [*Ethpa*.] at His teaching (Gr. ἐξεπλήσσαντο).

– Mk. 1:22 The people were *amazed* at His teaching (Gr. ἐξεπλήσσαντο).

– Mk. 16:5 (Women) were *alarmed* (Gr. ἐξεθαμβήθησαν).

– Lk. 1:21 People were waiting for Zechariah and *wondering* why... (Gr. ἐθαύμαζον).

– Lk. 2:33 (Joseph and Mary) *marvelled* at what (Simeon) said (Gr. θαυμάζοντες).

may also be used of a wider scale of emotional states, as can be seen from the fact that at least once it appears in a context where both the original Greek word and the contextual intention indicate great confusion and frustration.⁴⁸

The passive participle *temhā* is used in the sense of ‘marvellous sign’, and hence ‘wonderful thing’.⁴⁹ The verb *tehar* is used synonymously with *temah*, but it appears together with *temah* only sporadically.⁵⁰

(c) *Temhā* and *tehrā* in the writings⁵¹ of Ephrem

Ephrem employs the root *TMH* as the verb *temah* and as the noun *temhā*. When analysed in the light of the context, the verb consistently has the ordinary sense ‘to wonder’, ‘to be amazed’. The root *THR* is used by Ephrem as a verb in all three conjugations (*tehar*, *tahher*, *athar*) and as the noun *tahrā*. Due to its derived functions, *THR* is the more common of the two roots. Both verbs may occur either independently or as a pair. It seems to be impossible to detect any clear difference between their meanings or any noteworthy contrast in their usage.

The nouns *tahrā* and *temhā* are also closely connected: *temhā* actually seldom occurs without *tahrā*. Especially in Ephrem's poetry these two words are often used along parallel lines and with similar functions. Even though there may be no clear difference between the usages of *tahrā* and *temhā*, both words themselves seem to function with several different types of nuances when analysed in relation to their textual context. Unlike in the Bible, *tahrā* is used more frequently than *temhā*, so its usage is explored here more carefully. Contextual analysis shows six different nuances, the first two being very closely connected.

(1.) ‘Wonder’ as something incomprehensible. This is applied to the divine nature of Christ and some of its paradoxical consequences. For example, on the subject of the divine nature of Christ announced by the star and his human nature announced by John the Baptist, Ephrem declares: “Great wonder (*tahrā*),

– Lk. 2:47 Everyone who heard Him was *amazed* (Gr. ἐξίσταντο).

– Lk. 8:56 Her parents (i.e. of the girl who was raised from the dead) were astonished (Gr. ἐξέστησαν).

– Lk. 24:4 (Women did not find the body:) they were *wondering* (Gr. ἀπορέισθαί).

– Lk. 24:22 ...women *amazed* us. (Af.)

– Acts 8:13 (Simeon) was *astonished* (*tāmah*) by the great signs and miracles. (Gr. ἐξίστατο).

– Acts 13:41 Look, ...*wonder* and perish! [Cit. Hab. 1:5] (Gr. θαυμάσατε).

⁴⁷ Mk. 15:44 “Pilate was surprised.”

⁴⁸ Gal. 4:20: “I am perplexed about you” (Gr. ἀπορούμαι, from the verb ἀπορέω).

⁴⁹ Rev. 15:1 “Great and marvellous sign”, Lk 13:17 “wonderful things” (done by Jesus).

⁵⁰ Mt. 21:20 Disciples were amazed (seeing the fig tree); Mt. 13:54 “(People in the synagogue) were amazed”; Acts 4:13 “People were astonished” (at the courage of Peter and John); Acts 3:11 “People were astonished” (act. prt. vocalised *tahrā*!).

⁵¹ The analysis is based on Ephrem's Hymns on Paradise, Virginity, and the Nativity and selections from his Commentary on Genesis, his Homily on our Lord and his Hymns on Faith.

that His divinity, and His humanity were declared by them.”⁵² Accordingly, the pre-existence of Christ causes Ephrem to ask, “Who indeed has seen the Babe who is more ancient than his bearer?” and to respond apophatically: “a great wonder!” (*tahrā rabbā*).⁵³ The paradoxical mystery of the Incarnation also means that the Lord entered a woman’s womb and was borne by her: “A wonder is your mother!”⁵⁴

(2.) ‘Wonder’ as something secret, something hidden. The most unequivocal example is that of the mystery of the Trinity, three as one, which causes Ephrem to utter: “Great paradox, an open *tahrā*.”⁵⁵ The mystery of the Trinity is like the sun, its light and warmth, manifested in its rays: the undivided and mixed are bound and loosed: “a great *mystery*.”⁵⁶ Ephrem’s meditative approach also sees hidden mysteries behind earthly actions. When John the Baptist bows down before Christ, Ephrem parallels the bowing with John’s movement in the womb: “a great wonder (*tahrā rabbā*) that here he bows down, and there he leaps (for joy)”.⁵⁷ Most of these apophatic usages of *tahrā* deserve the title “seal of paradox”.

(3.) ‘Wonder’ as something that causes a person to wonder in a general sense, a miraculous thing. This case can be understood in terms of either of the nuances in cases 1 or 2, ‘incomprehensible miracle’ or ‘hidden cause of wonder’, yet it may be syntactically slightly different.

The sun is *tahrā* in its route, and *tahrā* in its sublimity (*šelyūtāh*).

What did you show to the Magi? You showed a *tahrā*, for they rendered You homage although You were poor.⁵⁸

The tripartite division made above is not the only possible one. The first two cases may seem to constitute one consistent meaning, the semantic fields largely overlapping. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of them as three variations by dividing the examples into the categories of (i) incomprehensibility, (ii) hiddenness, and (iii) mysteriousness (which in turn could be taken as a combination of the first two: hiddenness + incomprehensibility = mysteriousness). The ultimate criterion of such differentiations is functionality. Moreover, all divisions should be made according to the semantic structure of the Syriac *parole*, not according to the set of words available in English.

⁵² ܕܘܘܠܕܝܢܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 6:10.

⁵³ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 12:1.

⁵⁴ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 11:6. ܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

⁵⁵ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Fide*, 73:3. ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ

⁵⁶ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ ܕܡܫܝܚܐ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Fide*, 73:8.

⁵⁷ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 6:18.

⁵⁸ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Nativitate*, 19:11.

rabbōtā).⁶⁵

(6.) And finally, if we proceed to the logical end, we may distinguish the occurrence of ‘wonder’ as a mental state caused by God, or considered as given by Him, as being the final perspective where the categories of approaching or abiding seem to be no longer relevant. (The soul) “pastures on His beauties, full of *tahrā* at His treasures.”⁶⁶ Some characteristics of the state may be found in the following context of the verbs *temah* and *tehar*:

Scripture brought me to the gate of Paradise, and the mind, which is spiritual, stood in amazement and wonder (*temah we-tehar*) as it entered; the intellect grew dizzy and weak as the senses were no longer able to contain its treasures.⁶⁷

We may conclude that in the writings of Ephrem the noun *tahrā*, and its counterpart *temhā*, gained several theological connotations, and hence somewhat technical usages, whereas an ordinary case of astonishment is usually expressed by the corresponding verbs. The ultimate usages function in contexts of mystical experience.

In this way we have wandered through semantic fields and discovered a route from ‘surprise’ to the gates of ‘ecstasy in God’ (*tahrā dab-allāhā*). The variation in the use of the concept is well in line with the fact that the transition from wonder to ecstasy is stepless in the mental reality, too. This may be illustrated by the following diagram, where the axes represent the mental phenomena, the emotional development from a sense of surprise, via astonishment and the state of wondering, to ecstasy and still further towards trance. The circles represent the semantic fields of the roots *DMR*, *TMH* and *THR* in (post-OT) Classical Syriac. The first one is used in the area of “normal” emotional phenomena, but the other two for some more unusual states in addition. They are almost identical, and they also share more usages outside this particular mental process (i.e. under the horizontal axis).

⁶⁵ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9:17. Another example: “The Watchers of fire and spirit stood in wonder (*teharū*) at Elijah, seeing hidden within him the sweet treasure; in wonder at one formed of earth... his virginity caused wonder (*w-atherat*) to those above.” Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 6:24; translated in Brock: *Hymns on Paradise*, 117-118.

⁶⁶ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 9:18. (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ) Another example might be taken from *Hymnen de Fide* 42:7, where Ephrem compares the warmth of the sun to the effect of the experience of the Son.

⁶⁷ Ephrem: *Hymnen de Paradiso*, 6:2. Translated in Brock: *Hymns on Paradise*, 109. Another example in *ibid.*, 6:15 “If the beauty of Paradise strikes us with astonishment (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ), how much more should we be astonished (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ) at the beauty of the mind.” (ܐܘܪܘܚܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ).

