

The stages of spiritual life in the East Syriac tradition

Authors, writings, contextualisation and actualisation

Abstract

One can easily observe in the contemporary so-called postmodern time a great interest towards spirituality, in terms of free accessibility to a personal set of religious values and a less institutional religious belonging. From a certain angle, this new orientation advocates a return to the practical kerygma of the first centuries Church, indicating a mystic component described in terms of personal meeting with God the risen One. Christian spirituality is always dogmatic, ascetic and ecclesiastic, and yet it is validated in its mystic dimension, aspect essential in any dialogue with the contemporary paradigm.

Thus, looking towards spirituality in its mystic form might be always fashionable and useful within the academic theological work, prolonged, further on, in the social milieu, occasionally responding to people current exigencies regarding religion and its practices. In this perspective, spirituality indicates an ecumenical way of coming together, all united by the inner hope of experiencing the sense of divine.

In this large frame, further on I will refer to my particular preoccupation on Syriac spirituality and, especially, on East Syriac branch in a very prolific period (7-8th centuries). This so-called 'third tradition' may offer a particular lesson to the contemporary human by the means of its specificities which I would synthesise in two - the strong connection with the Hebrew biblical tradition and its poetic methodology, while approaching the divine mystery and expressing its theological content. In the last century there was a tendency of recovering this forgotten tradition and making known it to the people by the means of translations, studies and other different publications. In particular in the Romanian academic area there were up to nowadays scarce presence of the Syriac authors, excepting very less writings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Saint Isaac the Syrian. In the last decade, there were done some important translations and discussed some doctoral theses, among which mine, dedicated to the epistemology of Saint Isaac, was the first. In the same time, one may observe also interest in the Syriac language in organising faculty courses, as myself I have delivered for some years up to the present time, or some summer courses.

By the text I propose, I argue, firstly, the necessity of considering Syriac spirituality next to the Byzantine or Latin ones, as part of Christian tradition, in general, with its specificities in matter of Bible, Patristics, Liturgy, Monasticism, Literature, language and culture. My entire academic itinerary is very connected with this first general scope. In this line, my interest goes to more specific area of spiritual life and, in particular, Mystics. Thus, the very aim of my research and consequent publications is to familiarise the reader with the most important East Syriac mystical authors, less known within Christian academic theology and almost unknown in the Romanian theological space. It is about John the Solitary, Simon

Tabuteh, Dadisho Qatraya, Joseph Hazzaya and John Dalyatha, next to Ephrem and Isaac the Syrian, authors better known. So, I dedicated many papers either to ascetical life - stages, lifestyle, ascetic practices, ascetic theology, or to mystical life - divine knowledge, divine vision or divine perception, prayer, contemplation, spiritual senses, mystical concepts, language, all these in connection or within Christian ascetical, respectively mystical tradition, Byzantine or Latin.

This present text goes even into a more specific area that is the structure of spiritual itinerary described in terms of stages - two, three or more, depending on the author, within a specific tradition and in charismatic succession, expressing the dynamic of Church life. The theme may be considered essential as represents the starting point for any synthesis regarding spiritual life. The text is divided into two large sections, the first one dedicated to the authors - biography, writings, bibliography, their place and the role they played in the Church life, and the second one, dedicated to the spiritual stages as appear at each of the considered authors - vision, language, sources, practices, convergences and divergences.

The present study will be developed along with the rapport one may establish between the official theology of a specific Christian community and a particular spiritual vision and practises, within the more general frame of Christian theology. At this point becomes important to keep in mind that the East Syriac community was regularly considered in history heretic since the Council of Ephesus (431). Consequently, one specific thesis may be expressed in this way - one has to consider spiritual life as means for expressing a theological vision. An so, considering orthopraxy as a way towards orthodoxy becomes a very ecumenical endeavour which goes along with the well-known post Vatican II concept - 'spiritual ecumenism'.

Finally, this research will be ended with some particular conclusions regarding the topic in reference to the initial terms announced at the beginning, but also some general ideas pertaining to East Syriac spirituality and, consequently, East Syriac Theology and East Syriac Church life.

As indicated in the title, the final scope, beyond authors and writings, is to contextualise their own visions in the middle of specific geographies and histories, but even more to bring them close to our time and space, that is to connect them with our present reality in the sense of actualisation, in terms of what they can offer to us in matter of spirituality in contemporary times.

The two doctoral theses defended in Cluj-Napoca, respectively Padua, my studies around and the strong personal connections with great some Syriac scholars as Sebastian Brock, Paolo Bettiolo, Sabino Chialà, enabled me personally to familiarise with this theological and cultural area. This first moment was followed by an intense participation to different international thematic conferences and symposiums, and by a jointly publication activity of numerous texts in collective books or academic journals and some occasional translations. My personal training in the area, further on, contributed to encourage new directions of researches and academic preoccupations, to participate in organising academic events dedicated to

Syriac spirituality or even language courses, as I did myself for the first time as part of academic curricula in the Faculty of Theology at Cluj-Napoca.

Finally, the arguments I highlighted above would intend to put into practice my competences so that to open a new area of research within the Romanian academic theological space, that is Syriac spirituality, assisting young well prepared researchers to familiarise with this domain and, consequently, to create a group of students interested in it, enlarging the classic domains of research, that will, occasionally, bring to our university, as well as to the theological school, in general, an academic plus.

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