

The Meaning and Importance of Spiritual Rituals in Syriac Culture

In Syriac culture, the spiritual rituals performed with music-especially in churches-have a deep, multifaceted philosophy. The main purpose of these rituals of didactic character and educational meaning is to counter and affiliate the pathological problems of the mind with the warmth of the stable and therapeutic thoughts of the spirit. Their main purpose is to transform this problem into social capacities. Thanks to these rituals, the human mind, senses, and thoughts are elevated along with the faculties of the undersense and the consciousness to the maturity of divine truth/wisdom and creative productivity, in other words the realm of love. And thanks to this, humans are purified of selfishness, pride, difference, contrarianism, detachment, opposition, and conflict. They are directed towards a vast unity of hearts and raised to such a station by strongly bonding with a frame of mind that contains no contradictions.

Thus, this mystical condition and psyche has been expressed with the following impetus for caution: **"At this moment our mind, consciousness, and heart should be at that lofty position where Christ sits at right hand of God the Father/ حَنَّ**
"أَيْهَا، وَمَعْبُودٌ مُلْكٌ مَعِ عِيسَى، إِذَا تَوَهَّوْهُ، هَوَّيْهِ مَعْتَبَرِكُمْ وَحَقَّقَا، حُجَّةَا هُوَا،

This is a token and reference to that spiritual station indicated above. This is the reason why the rituals we are speaking of have very important educational qualities for spiritual development and maturation. By focusing more on what is right, it opens the road that leads from mind/intellect to spirit/heart. It enhances the perception of divine values. It gives divine meaning and temper to acquired knowledge. It does everyone an eternal good that comes into contact with it. It spreads the energy of divine essence, renders the spirit functional, and empowers people spiritually. It grants them social capacities, where taming the flesh through the human body is essential. **This taming of the flesh is when humanity shapes itself up at the command of the spirit for the sake of perpetuating and strengthening of life. It is when a person builds a home of peace and stability in their own inner world.** This is not an act of incapacitating the self, to the contrary, it is to enhance it. It is an attempt at removing borders and permeating all existence. We can then say that all rituals have characteristics that enable divine contact and point to inner darkness through the taming of the flesh. This insight lies at the root of all spiritual teachings

that predicate on the truth that **"Humans are enlightened to the degree that they know their inner darkness."** This is a matter of demeanor and heart. This insight prevents people's enslavement by their possessions (office, authority, power, wealth, knowledge, rank, talent, skill, etc.) and teaches them to be the master of their possessions. Those who have shown the courage to master the aforementioned qualities and successfully carry this out have risen to the highest rank in life. Because those who seek the truth and the light are those who can feel and love the feeling of divine love even in their remotest cells.

In the flow of life, we can sometimes get carried away by the illusions of the ego and once in a while we might consciously or unconsciously put ourselves in a difficult bind by abusing our free will. These spiritual rituals that develop methods of escaping from life's difficult binds serve as a discipline that perpetuates an altruist and collective spirit. The reason why these spiritual rituals exist is to perpetuate this spirit. It is to strive to keep this spirit alive and dominant by aspiring after virtuous meanings and purposes. It means working hard and being productive with a high responsibility formed by inner discipline. The main insight that lies in the intellectual background of the kindred spirits/masters who developed the discipline of spiritual rituals at church can be briefly expressed thus: **"A person unaware of his own inner darkness is the biggest threat to himself and to his circle. Humans are enlightened to the degree that they know their inner darkness. Hence, tough bouts of exercise necessitated by periods of education/worship originating from a discipline that strengthens the spirit of self-control create strong men at first. And strong people create easy times. However, do not be deceived by these easy times because easy times create weak men, and weak men create hard times..."**

Actually, the meaning that these spiritual rituals encompass is directed towards dispelling people's inner darkness and filling their inner void. Because true divine love is possible by discovering one's inner world. Unfortunately, without discovering that world and illuminating it with the light of that love, without meeting its requirements in the outside world, spirituality will not replace a person's material values like their inner vanity, pride, conceit, and bragging. For this reason, the spiritual rituals performed with a grasp of the meaning of ancient Syriac's positively energetic and formative/transformative concepts rather than those performed by

rote leave a singular impression on people and give them a very distinct pleasure. Of course, this is not a matter of language. It is more a matter of feeling the meaning loaded with those concepts that prompt and motivate humans. Do not expect a purely visual ritual performed at church to give the desired pleasure and impression. Rituals performed without being internalized are nothing more than bodily movement. If the simple act of greeting has a new meaning and pleasure when one knows what it means, it is not possible to describe the endless pleasure and the impression it leaves in a person when spiritual rituals are performed with an awareness of their associations and meaning, and by feeling them in one's heart/spirit. The door to divine contact is opened at that moment of pleasure. With the following example, this can be understood in a more tangible way. If we were to compare a human to a computer, this contact could be pictured as users connecting to a host computer. When connected to a host computer, a person who goes beyond the limited information in his own small computer is exposed to universal information as well. At that moment he is connected to the divine hub and is receiving a feed. The more love and sincerity feeds into moments of connection/contact, the greater the power of the divine feed. People gain such spiritual benefits that they experience growth, and their lives become proportionately more meaningful and fulfilling. People enter such a positive state of mind that the things everyone else always sees in a different way, they see in a positively different way and act accordingly.

In the mystical approach of Syriac culture, the human mind is God's altar, and **"Defiling the altar"** means filling it with thoughts that bear no love. If the mind is filled with love and goodness, this reflects in the person's words and actions too. In the absence of love, though, wisdom is undermined. People act more ill-tempered and ill at ease. Just as this poisons life, it also has a negative effect on the process and flow. And this is where the meaning and importance of spiritual rituals is revealed. For, **"According to the purpose of rituals, every person has a particular duty to fulfil in life. That is, to find the road that leads to himself. On that road, to mature as a person and connect the small roads in his inner world to the big ones."** Here, the primary purpose is to tie the secondary roads in one's inner world to the main roads that lead to absolute truth, and to contribute to personal enlightenment with the values of divine love. The inner visions and benefits offered by the spiritual eye which opens with these contributions are very decisive. The opening of the heart's eye, another expression of enlightenment, is the inner key to a nonjudgmental/pure

outlook that transcends every kind of fragility and irritableness. This key opens the door to purity, naivete, maturity, humility, love, affection, and a state of merciful awareness.

Without the personal and executive spirituality acquired from spiritual rituals, the meaning and purpose of life unfortunately goes out of focus or is sometimes even lost in the highs and lows of life and the current of real time. For without the spiritual dimension, it is evident that life does not possess a reality on its own. Life is built on the visible (material/body/physics) and invisible (meaning/spirit/metaphysics) world. The material and spiritual move in equivalence in the functioning system of the universe. As one gains understanding of the realities (meaning) of the invisible spiritual world and as the positive power of this world increases, the material world prospers. In other words, contrary to what is believed, spirituality, which concerns young and old alike, is the essence of life. By restraining the false self and carnality, it upholds humanity and the true self. When the spirit is at work, it becomes easier to swim in life's choppy waters with the attitudes of a flexible will. We must surrender the reins and direction of the body to the spirit. The collective or individual worship, rituals, ceremonies or other disciplines performed at church based on certain methods and principles are a recurrent reminder to not wander away from the essence/spirit. This recurrent cycle which feeds the spirit teaches how to disperse inner shadows and how to fold away and even get rid of one's problems, rather than to put up with them. Therefore, the purpose of all the worship/discipline and rituals in the church is to keep people in the positive cycle and flow of life. It is to serve people's spiritual development (maturation) and self-control. It is to aid in finding the source of true wisdom. It is to bring closer to their essence/spirit. It is to try and comprehend the divine software and program of that essence/spirit. In this context, it is to create high awareness and responsibility. For in this world full of unknowns, humanity is a creature that is constantly striving to part the veil of mystery and fathom the secrets of the unknown. This is actually the search for meaning of those who have detached from the divine light/truth. The day a human being is born, it detaches from the substantial compassion/comfort of the womb/essence. This detachment is the beginning of all humanity's woes. In the same way also, people who detach from the divine essence lose the substantial meaning/comfort of life. Since the CREATOR is the spirit of love and home, to love means to become one with Him. Home is a return to the essence. Selfishness, ostracism, marginalization, intolerance,

envy, grudge, pride, and similar derivatives of hate represent an estrangement from the essence/home. Very few people are able to return to that home before their death. The purpose of various spiritual disciplines and rituals is to provide the formulae for returning/transforming into that essence. They endow people with those formulae. With those return/transformation formulae, they realize the desired maturation and union. They cultivate and raise a basic awareness of the divine light/love. They are a source of inspiration on the road that leads to this purpose. Based upon inner vision, this state equips people with various enriching social characteristics/virtues. For people are reminded of their humanity by their virtues and they exceed their limits with their virtues. People can only move forward on the wings of virtue. When a person forgets virtue, his worldview becomes bleak, his hope is lost, and his spirit is suffocated. An unvirtuous life leads one into the darkness of despair and languishment. In other words, virtue breathes an exhilarating breath into life and beautifies it. A person that loses his virtue, loses his humanity. And just like that, he turns his life into a desert. As is known, there are blind and dark zones inside people, which are self-deceptive and inclined to egotism/cheating/craftiness, and which hold their desires above all else. The associations and meanings in spiritual rituals remind people of the ideal. They help to illuminate the blind and dark zones with new lights/descriptions. They vitiate said characteristics that trick and drag people into error. They even transform these characteristics into a positive thing and fortify people with a high moral responsibility. They develop social empathy. In social life, this urges them to understand people's situation, sorrows, and sadness; it leads to sharing one another's troubles and activates beneficial behaviors based on helping each other. This attitude, being the very essence of spirituality, thrives off the following reasoning: **"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."** **"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"** **"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"** (Matthew 25:34-40)

The Impact of Spiritual Rituals

Scientific evidence shows that social empathy, which expands the scope of altruism, has a very important place in life. It is evident that even a small favor brings a certain peace and joy to the person's heart, and leaves positive impressions both on the person doing the favor and the one receiving it. Essentially, without the impact/reflection/discipline of spiritual rituals, it is not easy amending our harmful secret tendencies, opening the eye of our hearts, keeping it constantly open, or seeing the manifestation/reflection of the divine in everything and everywhere. If we could internalize the associations emphasized in spiritual rituals and expand our consciousness by turning these associations into a piece of ourselves, we could live out our spirituality in this worldly flesh garment to our heart's desire and take firm steps upward on the road of maturation. This will open the door for the growth and diversification of our spiritual world. For the eye of the heart which conveys the truth to the spirit, allows us to see the background invisible to the physical eye. Those who possess this sight view life with true divine love, love for creation, and a holistic awareness. It is impossible for someone who has successfully opened the eye of their heart and viewed the world through that open eye to discriminate between other people, men and women, to categorize life, classify, seduce, misguide, deceive, manipulate, exploit, or otherwise abuse people. **Because the heart is the meeting place of divine truths and life truths. A person with a blind heart, lacking spiritual eyes, is a person with a single eye, single ear, and single world. Such a person cannot see, hear, or experience anything in its entirety. For a physical eye that views life as a commodity has neither heart nor feeling.**

Upon objective evaluation, we will see that the various rituals of Bethnahrin/Mesopotamia, the cradle of Syriac culture, which have enriched life with meaning since time immemorial, come to the fore with their mystical properties. Bethnahrin's history, with its highs and lows, has cultivated the mystical roots of these cultural rituals in the hearts of Syriac culture dispersed all over the world, like lichen among ancient rocks. Thus, the characteristics/reflections of these mystical roots still live and are kept alive in various countries in the East and West. Despite all, Syriac Churches¹ originating in Antioch, the mainline of Eastern/Syriac Christianity, still continue these mystical rituals in the form of daily/weekly prayer and worship.

¹ The churches that constitute the mainline of Eastern Christianity and still use Syriac as the language of liturgy are as follows: The Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Maronite

The foremost of these mystical reflections/characteristics were the spiritual rituals performed at church during collective worship. These were repeated at certain intervals, in the same fashion, using the same methods, even at the same times, in order to facilitate the development of humanity, transform stereotypical judgements/thoughts, build a morally good character and moral maturity, cultivate personal integrity/consistency, and intensify the divine bond, making it strong and lasting. This is not just a performance. Rituals are indispensable for learning and making habits. This method is widely used in all education systems and in all ventures which precede personal development and transformation. For a person can only learn the information he commits to memory by keeping it there for a long period of time. In this regard, repetition is very important. With repetition, short-term memory information is moved to long-term memory. Repetition enables the permanence of information stored in one's memory.

The main purpose of performing spiritual rituals is to teach people the things they ought to learn and do, first from the outside in, then from the inside out. The purpose is to enable them, in the light of what they learned, to smooth out their wrong motives, to become morally good and morally mature. The purpose is to contribute to the implementation of the things they learned internally by integrating them with their unique personality. For one's inside world is projected on the outside. For this reason, it is just as important to find harmony in one's inner world as it is in the outside world. Even though this is an initiative process, thanks to spiritual rituals, people can put the things they have learned/know to the test in real life; they can apply this knowledge to their lives. It reaches a point where, thanks to this knowledge, the application becomes effortless. This means that they are versed in the

Church (with the local language) use the western dialect of Syriac; the Eastern Apostolic Assyrian Church, the Chaldean Church, and the Ancient Church of the East (with the local language) use the eastern dialect of Syriac. The Melkite (Greek Orthodox and Catholic) Church completely severed its organic connection to Syriac after the 7th century and gravitated to Arabic.

The main source of the spiritual rituals performed in the churches mentioned above is the fluidity and clarity of the seasoned spirit that took hold of the 3rd and 5th centuries. In particular, it was an inspiration for the works of Mor Aphrem's precursors and successors, precious figures who had studied in the academies of Nusaybin and Urfa.

discipline and instruction grounded on the performance of rituals. In this way, every outward aspect of a person is crowned with the light that overflows from within them. But just as it varies from person to person, another variable is the measure of inner awakening and spiritual awareness.

In Syriac culture, much importance is attached to worship and rituals that come from a sincere heart/spirit. This is because the impact of worshipping with a coordinated mind, body, and heart is great. If a person devotes oneself to worship, and if they are spiritually present within that feed, they are in contact with the divine. However, if their state of mind is not appropriate, they will miss the purpose, the correct application, and the correct stage. Because for the feeling of existence to form, it is crucial that one is present in the moment (and not distracted, absent). Basically, in all that one does, it is important and of first priority to be mentally prepared and present in the moment. There is no other way to experience the joy of existence hidden away in the moment. The spirit cannot receive the healing it needs. Indeed, the idea of meditation, which originates in far eastern culture and has had important effects on western culture as well, essentially teaches people nothing more than to exist in the moment.

This is how Mor Ishok of Nineneveh (613-700) expresses the situation: **"Pure prayer is not knowledge and words. It is the emptying of the mind calmed and soothed by agreeable emotions and actions."**

On the same topic, John of Dalyatha (690-780) ordains that, **"He who wishes to taste of Christ's sweetness should be diligent in the act of prayer. For prayer brings closer to God than any action. The mind ascends to God through prayer. It takes on the image of the Creator. It accepts His rewards. It learns His secrets. Through prayer, the person unlocks the door to God's treasures. He becomes the treasurer. He distributes God's treasures. Through prayer, he attains the honor of seeing God's glory and entering the spiritual realm in silence and the hazy light of divine greatness. Such that he cuts down on his actions in amazement. He is stupefied by the brightness of the multiplex light dawning upon him. Prayer is the life and pleasure of the spiritual realm."**

This is what modern author Albert Pauchard (1878-1934) has to say in this context: **"Prayer is an effective power. It has a power that most of you do not know. But**

be careful! There is real prayer and there is false prayer. A true appeal is not a string of words, but an effervescence that springs from the heart, a talent of the spirit. Would it surprise you that the best prayer has no words? Prayers that do not come from the heart, only memorized from books and mouthed have no effect whatsoever. True prayer is a thought. Without thought behind it, words are empty and meaningless sounds, that is all. Inasmuch as every thought is a vibration, then so is prayer. The power that allows for a prayer to be accepted lies in this vibration. In that case, acceptance is within the prayer itself, regardless of the request being made. This is the entire secret – he who prays and believes in the power of his prayer has won the case. A prayer without faith is null and void..."

According to church fathers, if the mind and spirit are elsewhere during worship, it is impossible to understand and receive the love of CHRIST, the keeper of divine secrets and the embodiment of all positive energy, knowledge, wisdom, and fullness. What matters is understanding the spiritual knowledge imparted in this secret and applying it in social life. The aim of imperfect, incomplete, and weak humanity in its fleeting existence is to feel and absorb the spiritual knowledge imparted through this secret, to understand the experience of incompleteness that is part of oneself and to improve this understanding. For without understanding that spiritual knowledge, without benefiting from that energy, wisdom, and fullness, it is impossible to fill the hole inside humanity; it is impossible for humanity to find peace, to discover and know itself, its nature, to love, respect, and value itself, to know its place, to experience transcending beyond the visible or into the invisible.

Indeed, every good deed done as a contribution to life and for its continuity is a form of worship. As long as it is not purely formal, and does not remain so. If everything we see is a manifestation of the invisible, then we must try to get a grasp on the spiritual meaning of the form and we must do this joyfully and with love. Then the mind will be silent, spiritual intelligence will step in and the mind and body will become the instrument of the heart/spirit. And that is when the door of divine truth will crack open. The radiance of that truth will strike the heart and fill it with love. A loving heart will illuminate the mind. Such a unison of heart and mind will turn every action into a matchless delight.

However, it should be known that to be aware of these things, one must have love and knowledge. To demand this awareness, one must be daring and courageous. For it is not easy to face this awareness. Because the knowledge that comes with this awareness and the cognizance taken with it pushes one out of their comfort zone. It breaks the mold. It transforms fixed opinions. And this requires great responsibility. For this reason, most people shy away from this awareness. They prefer to remain without peace in their subjective comfort zone. According to scientific studies, the pineal gland² in the human organism excretes a very small amount of hormones at sea level, and more at higher elevations. Therefore in history, places of worship (churches/monasteries) in Bethnahrin/Mesopotamia have been built as high up as possible. Though there are other reasons that underlie this fact, the primary reason why historical places of worship were built up high was to enable greater contact with the higher levels of consciousness of the human spirit by the agency of happiness hormones secreted from the pineal gland. This opens up the human brain and enables it to better perceive intrinsic secrets/truth.³

Hence, the places of worship (churches and monasteries) built in ancient times in Bethnahrin have whispered to me the secrets of eternal wisdom for as long as I've known. Those places are a reminder never to harm people or the universe, God's living temple; in other words, to love, to cherish. And against the spiritual drought of current-day life conditions, it presents the reasoning of "**Şumloyo/Completion**" as a life formula for vigilant minds. It loudly proclaims "**the principle of diligence, responsibility and harmlessness,**" the essence of our human nature.

² Sources contain a wealth of information on the pineal gland. The pineal gland, known as the link between the spirit and the body, is also described as the third eye. The pineal gland is a small gland located at the very geometric center of the brain and it has an important effect on human lives. This piece of tissue, whose main task in the brain is to execute and regulate the secretion of serotonin and melatonin, cannot be seen as a simple part of our body. There are countless reports showing that the origin of the pineal gland goes all the way back to ancient times. All kinds of information can be found at relevant internet platforms.

³ Maybe this is the reason why the distinguished writers of Syriac literature produced works that shed light on our own times, in monasteries built into the mountains of Urfa and Malatya, and in Kaşiyâri, which means "**The Mountain of Hard Workers**", in Turabdin, Gabar, and Kardû (Cudi), as well as other mountains in the region.

It should be known that no matter what one's position or rank, each person is equally responsible for their own self-discipline and spiritual development. This principle which must be fulfilled with awareness of incompleteness/incapacity concerns people of all ages. Because spiritual living, too important to neglect with regard to a moral/healthy and eternal life, is an effective phenomenon spreading to all areas of social life. Those who grasp this fundamental phenomenon become a gift both for themselves and for life. They are a unique addition to life. For life's sole purpose is not to save the day, but to elevate life. It is to protect human dignity. Life's purpose is humanity taking the place it has been given in the flow since creation. To prioritize one's own interests while doing so would be an attitude that undermines the viability of life.

According to the holistic outlook and compassion-based traditions of Syriac culture, on the plains of Mesopotamia, wheat kernels and seeds were spread after a certain ritual, as an act of love. This marvelous **"crop ritual"**, performed with the motto **"What does he/she need?"** rather than **"This is what I need"**, and dismissive of today's selfish attitudes, perfectly expresses the point I wish to make. Very recently, I heard tell of said crop ritual/prayer in the Hassana (Kösrali) village.⁴ They cast their seeds into the field with the following heartfelt prayer: **"My God! May you have the first share in this seed I cast. Next, may the neighbors, the fatherless, the orphans, the outcasts, the widows, the destitute, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the physically handicapped, may all those in need, birds, eagles, and all animals have a share in it..."**

It should not be forgotten that in Syriac culture, spiritual rituals which open the doors of compassion, mercy, and spiritual brotherhood are extremely important. Those who cannot understand the meaning of those rituals, or who forget despite understanding, unfortunately lose their minds as well. For a mind that cannot make sense of them with a consistent attitude is a lost mind. Such a mind does not or cannot reward and crown its prideful thoughts with the true joy and lasting zest for life of existence. It

⁴ We visited Hassana Village in 31 August 2021 with dear Fr. Petrus Gülçe, who was serving in Istanbul. I heard about the **"crop ritual"** from village headman Elişa Beğtaş during this visit, a ritual bearing all the meanings of active altruism and passed down from tongue to tongue and generation to generation. I was surprised when I first heard about it. In my subsequent research, I learned other villages in the region had this crop ritual too.

abandons them to an intellectual desiccation. As a result, it cannot see, hear, or experience anything clearly. **It has ears but cannot hear. It has eyes but cannot see. For there is no one deafer than someone who does not wish to hear, and no one more blind than someone who does not wish to see.**

Who knows, perhaps this is what Mor Ishok of Antioch (d. 491) was feeling when he bequeathed us in all their aesthetics the words, "**Truth is superior to rank, effort is superior to authority. And justice is superior to rules and rituals**/ جے یَزُلَا مُنْزِلًا وَجَبْلًا حَقٌّ، اَوْ طَائِفَةً لَا يَفْتَحُهَا سِوَى نَجْوَاهَا"

Never forget, what truly endures is self-discovery. What truly endures is freeing ourselves from the ego⁵ all of its hurtful and poisonous intents and actions. For the most important transformation is cleansing the thoughts from artificial boundaries. The greatest triumph is freeing the mind from stereotypes. The most important revolution is reforming the inner world. Once this revolution, this journey of self-discovery and self-knowledge begins, there is no stopping it. This is the main purpose of our existence. Everything else is simply a tool on this journey.

We cannot understand the general state of humankind by viewing it as a commodity/object. And we can understand neither humanity nor ourselves without realizing that a commodity has no soul. For understanding is accepting life holistically, transforming, and becoming a moral person. If understanding is a transformation, then according to our current reality, our ego/mind should be transformed with the spirit of Christ. Otherwise, if it does not transform or become moral, this means that we have not understood Christ. **For the true purpose of**

⁵ On 21 October 2014, Nil Gün, one of Turkey's distinguished authors, wrote the following about the ego on her Facebook page: **"Saying and doing things out of a need to be right is an effort to restore the hurt pride of the neurotic ego and to whitewash the feeling of guilt caused by a wrong/unjust deed. For this reason, even if we try to appear right to others, this feeling of accomplishment (!) is not enough to relieve the feeling of uneasiness inside us. No matter how much the neurotic ego might swell with pride, it is powerless to erase that feeling of worthlessness, insignificance, or fraudulence deep down inside. The neurotic ego deems it a weakness to see the error of one's ways, a healthy ego knows how to apologize for making a mistake. The neurotic ego cuts ties, a healthy ego makes contact."**
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10154605290379727&id=683934726

rituals is to shed our old nature and put on Christ, resemble Christ, and begin our inner transformation with His spirit.

As the saying goes, **"A constant scoffer has no common sense. A mind in a noisy setting has no song."**

Yusuf Beğtaş