

## Syriac Culture's Outlook on Life

“Those who sow ignorance reap misery... The more we invest in education,  
the richer our minds become.”

St. Jacob of Sarug (451-521)

Syriac culture, which is an extension of ancient Mesopotamian civilization, possesses an ancient wisdom in the life of our geography. As an autochthonous culture of the East, it aspires to live and let live in a healthy society, predicating on individual/inner peace, with an understanding that sees harmony with reality and responsibility as a virtue.<sup>1</sup> With its erudite foresights, it possesses vital functions that act as traffic signs on the road of life.

Though it has traces of ancient Mesopotamian civilization that formed throughout the centuries, with the dawn of Christianity it gained a new outlook on life and undergone a transformation unique in form and content. During the age of Christianity, its main source of reference became THE WORD / MELTHO, and thus it evolved into an ethos that imitates Christ and subsists on His teachings. Its focus became humans and their discipline; its philosophy became the wonder of living and coexisting.

In order for this truth to be revealed and truly understood, Syriac culture's style of creativity as well as its tangible/intangible legacy (intellectual, literary, spiritual, and artistic works) must be studied comprehensively. An objective study will unearth the ethos of this culture, its lifestyle and outlook on life.

At its core, Syriac culture, which sees God in humanity and the universe, aims to serve everyone's wellbeing with love and wisdom. While looking out for the interests of society in the use of material and spiritual resources, it puts in order the relationships between humans (brothers), as well as the relationship between humans and God. **By emphasizing reciprocity, with the vital knowledge it provides to the true self and to the perception of life, it also places equal importance on spiritual development and financial security. It associates this with high frequency constructive ideas and consistent actions.** It values the effort of

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<sup>1</sup> Syriac culture has a unique past in the history of civilization and humanity. During the historical periods of its activity, it has served as a major bridge in intercultural interaction. It has contributed to the development of East-West thought, civilization, philosophy and moralism. The breakthrough it made in the realm of thought has reached as far as the Arab world as well as Europe. It has had a great impact on the transfer of antiquity to the Islamic world. It gains prominence with its important contributions primarily to the Arabic language and Islamic philosophy.

conveying the inner world in a literary and aesthetic fashion. While letting us feel the moral significance of protecting life and the environment, of hard work and discipline, responsible actions, appreciation and sharing, all without labor exploitation or laziness, it teaches us to not act with negligence, and to be considerate of human issues. The approach here measures sincerity more than status; it considers whether actions (work and relationships) are done with love and goodwill.

In Syriac culture's way of life, the greatest worship is a moral and virtuous life. Because we find peace in the joy of restraining our passions and acting independently of them. Therefore, the Syriac concept of morality promotes a life not of words, but of deeds. It prioritizes a selfless, altruist morality built on mutual trust and closed off to exploitation and abuse. It gives the mind a legislative role and the heart an executive role. The main rule of this culture is adhering to material and spiritual development, respecting the spiritual world, respecting human rights and freedoms, and being fair and just. Therefore, it strengthens this rule through our mutual shortcomings, mutual flaws, interdependency, and mutual benefits, ensuring awareness of appreciation and building mutual trust. This rule is relevant in all fields that are fundamental to life, such as personal development, personal discipline, education, manners, morality, science, philosophy, literature, worship, fasting, music, folklore, nuptials, marriage, condolences, administration (church, society, politics), business, economics, commerce, agriculture, manufacturing, construction, art and other lines of work.

**According to Syriac culture, all of creation has visible and invisible differences that defy uniformity and advocate plurality and diversity.** These differences are expressions of life's uniqueness and richness. They were divinely designed so that we might rely on one another. **Respect for people demands seeing another person as another of yourself and respecting the basic rights rooted in the dignity that is part of that person's soul.** Thus, refusing to acknowledge differences is in conflict with nature and with God.

Syriac culture counsels us to look into the mirror of the self, and, as a principle, to exist for the existence of others and through the existence of others. It accepts people unconditionally and appreciates them for who they are, regardless of their gender, for the sake of their innate value and dignity. **“Humans are human when they act righteously toward God and truth, and morally toward creation.”** With this truth as its main foundation, **it does not see people as the means to an end, but the goal and the agent. It enhances their strong suits while reinforcing their weaknesses.**

When the main approach is the completeness of existence, the priorities set by Syriac culture are to free the inner world from the negative influence of carnal/animalistic feelings like lust, conceit/narcissism, envy/jealousy, gluttony, greed, laziness, and hate/anger, and, if possible, to purge the negative energy of these negative emotions/passions that are the root cause of all sins/destruction, to achieve unity, keep balance and moderation. These priorities are like credit cards without expiration dates in the bank of human values. It is essential to use these cards according to two benchmarks: **The first is morality: It protects and develops the inner world of a person. The second is reason: It protects and develops the external world of a person.** Morality teaches what we should not do; reason teaches us what we should do. It requires that the spirit flourish for a moral and rational life. It contributes to life and its betterment through complementary love. This situation is in society's favor and is a matter of consciousness and comprehension that lays the groundwork for development.

When the entire point is the maturation of existence, Syriac culture's main goal is to resolve peoples' inner conflict with horizontal and vertical love, to free them from the yoke of desires and lead them to peace, unity, harmony. Syriac culture aims for a dignified life that reckons with both the material and spiritual world, and willingly follows the golden rule of treating one's fellow man as one would wish to be treated. It employs didactic and pedagogic methods to promote brotherly love/philanthropy, uphold the sanctity of life, and prioritize the growth of the spiritual world. **"Those who serve humanity are closest to God,"** it reasons. This reasoning posits that any attitude whose intent, rhetoric, and actions are not good, is harmful. Its negative impact causes disorder and problems.

Existence itself finds meaning by being useful. One of the purposes of creation is a fully-fledged sense of sharing. The main thing is to turn from a desire for material gain, to a desire for meaningful giving. For to give and complete without showing off or expecting something in return is the essence of the spirit. Material things are a tool for spiritual maturity. Maturity requires that we stay in motion in the flow of life. Just as much as we need oxygen, it is equally vital for the sake of continuity to contribute positively to the flow of life, and to make the world a better place. **One way we can keep our conscience and the voice of our heart clear without abandoning the good that is within us and without resorting to wickedness, despite events and circumstances that compel us to do evil is to stick to an unwavering sense of justice and strong spirituality.** Otherwise, negative prejudices, apathy, and bigotry become potent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> St. Jacob of Sarug (451-521 A.D.) pointed to intellectual wealth as a means to stave this off: **"Those who sow ignorance reap misery. The more we invest in education, the richer our minds become."**

If the spirit takes constant charge of the maturation process, all will be easy, even in difficulty. Maturation means growth, development, progress. In other words, maturation is the process of deliverance from selfishness, jealousy, intolerance, greed, boasting, self-interest, egocentric and ethnocentric attitudes, poisonous thoughts, conditioning, negative prejudice, association fallacy, negative past judgements, and other conceptions of the human ego. This process is like an update to one's own intellectual software, like a typical computer. However, it is difficult to undergo this update or make progress toward maturity without becoming aware of the duality, or the ego<sup>3</sup> (darkness/evil) and the spirit (light/good). Because without this awareness, one's ability to establish sincere relationships is also impaired.

The key to all healing is remembering the divine truth, which at its core is love. As we come closer to this truth, we come closer to our innate ability, which protects our own dignity and watches out for others. It is impossible to successfully apply what is known and what is learned without knowing this truth. For truth is humanity's compass. Hence the words "**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free**"<sup>4</sup> Being free and knowing the truth depends on casting off the carnal fetters of the ego. The mirror of the soul must be clean and spotless. This is a prerequisite of enlightenment that enables us to stand firm and grow in our true selves.<sup>5</sup>

Syriac culture has no traces of anything morally evil or confrontational. Its fundamental characteristic is establishing the rule of the spirit in determining individual rights and limitations with the awareness of sight and hearing. It aims to reveal humanity's '**inner greatness**'. It hopes to dissuade us from everything that dims and dulls the spirit. It strives to link the side roads of the inner world to the main road of the divine system which leads to the truth, under the guidance of virtues. It appreciates our individuality and differences; its principle of '**appreciation and helpfulness**' sheds a positive light on the negative meanings associated with greatness and lowliness. It opposes the ego and its fixation on external, spiritless appearances by employing concepts that prioritize the soul. It aspires to preserve every person's individuality (uniqueness).

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<sup>3</sup> The ego is identified with owning and taking. It loves to be right. It is never satisfied. Whereas the spirit is identified with existing and giving. It is more concerned with serving the flow than with being right or wrong. In other words, the spirit is the source of light/goodness, or positive energy. Whereas the self/ego is the source of darkness/evil, or negative energy. Only the light of the spirit can dispel the darkness that obscures the mind. When the spirit is at work, spiritual intelligence is sparked, low frequency emotions, negative and toxic thoughts are swept away. The mind is relieved and applies itself, meanwhile, the person is closer to inner peace and more productive.

<sup>4</sup> John 8:31

<sup>5</sup> St. Isaac of Antioch (d. 491) says, "**Truth is superior to rank, effort is superior to authority. And justice is senior to rules and order.**"

It seeks to expand the circle of merciful awareness and compassion. In the struggle of evil and self-interest versus good and altruism, it intends to crown the latter as victor.

According to Syriac culture, with its own distinctive approaches to outreach, one cannot develop in the areas of mindfulness, morals, virtue, sincerity, honesty, justice consciousness, hard work consciousness, and human rights consciousness without striving for "**self-knowledge**". Knowing yourself means knowing your place. And this is the stem cell of all knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The womb. The more a person knows their own limits and liberties, the more they know themselves. **Self-knowledge** is a stage of maturity that is reached through **self-discovery, self-transcendence and reaching out to others**. It is overcoming the struggle with the flesh, getting rid of psychological complexes, being oneself and transcending oneself.<sup>7</sup> Those who know themselves have two inseparable goals: good morals and sincerity. Because they know that even if they have the car keys, they cannot drive without entering the vehicle first.

Syriac culture introduces us me to myself, you to yourself, and us to ourselves; it introduces people to people, essentially. In this introduction, the person is a spirit clad in a body. This spirit is of divine essence. **The spirit** is a divine energy that allows us to value not only ourselves but everything that exists. This energy is not subject to the law of the unity of opposites, which states that the existence of a thing depends on the co-existence of its opposite, that there can be no good without evil. Therefore, it teaches us to be in constant contact with that essence or spirit. To achieve this, it points to the two kinds of love on the cross.

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<sup>6</sup> This fundamental truth of intellectual history—the motto of '**know thyself**' is used in different tones. Saint Anthony (251-356) says, "**To know God, you must first know yourself.**"

St. Aphrem (306-373) takes this idea to the next level when he says, "**If you focus on yourself, you will not need the law. If you understand the universe, you will not need order.**"

**O human, know yourself!** The historical background of this idea belongs to an old philosophy that developed in ancient Mesopotamia. **O human, know yourself** ܕܢ ܢܗܘܐ ܚܘܫܐ ܕܢܗܘܐ ܚܘܫܐ ܕܢܗܘܐ ܚܘܫܐ was first said by a philosopher known as ܕܢ ܢܗܘܐ ܚܘܫܐ Babylonian Bar Havsho. This philosopher, who lived in the 430-450's B.C., wrote a great deal on the topic of philosophy and wisdom. He was a source of knowledge for philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato. He is known in the literature not by his Syriac name, but by his Greek name '**Biros**' or '**Birosso**'.

<sup>7</sup> To know oneself and to understand oneself are two different concepts. Knowing is more general, whereas understanding is personal. Moreover, one cannot know something one doesn't understand. One must first understand himself/herself, and then know that self. To know oneself and to be aware of one's own actions is to grow in a spirit of self-control that contains both enlightenment and mindfulness. Therefore, those who know and control their own thoughts, actions, prejudices, attitudes, and identity have taken responsibility for all their actions. This is a journey from conflict to wholeness, a change for the better on the road of balance.

The first love is a vertical or divine love. The second one is horizontal; it is a love for life. While emphasizing this fundamental principle, it teaches us to put others first (altruism) and not act selfishly (egocentrism). It exemplifies this with the first and greatest commandment of all: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself."**<sup>8</sup> It invites us to get in touch with our self-existence and with absolute truth, while being aware of our duality (polarity). The most fundamental relationship is the one we have deep inside us with the CREATOR. Without this relationship built on **"mutual understanding"**, the emptiness inside us cannot be filled, the inner cold cannot be warmed. Spiritual and mental renewal cannot happen. Though its source might be pure, even the clearest water can be affected by the unfavorable conditions of the canal or riverbed it flows through, by relation of causality.

This relationship, which requires that we wash off the dirt of the flesh for mental and spiritual renewal<sup>9</sup>, depends on our efforts to grow and develop and discipline ourselves inside and out. It all comes down to channeling the energy of divine truths into our lives without corrupting it. We must transcend the false self/ego, which is wading against the current, and we must face a more genuine existence—the real self (spirit). Without this awareness, the spirit's energy will filter through the dirty flesh, soiled and corrupted. And the negative energy from the dirty filters of the flesh produces the false self. If the energy of the inner being (spirit) comes out clean and permeates our life positively, the true self will emerge. **The true self sustains life and promotes growth.**<sup>10</sup>

Syriac culture looks to social justice for the arrangement of the relationships between society and social dynamics. Justice consciousness, human rights consciousness, and hard work consciousness are the foundation of moral consistency. And Syriac culture prioritizes them, placing equal importance on material and spiritual growth. Based on the inequality in society, it assigns everyone their rights and obligations as parts and members of the whole. It builds a framework for what needs to be done. It invites people to be good to themselves and good towards everyone and everything. **While making this invitation, it counsels us to approach everything with moderation, maintaining balance between talent (people) and production talent (labor). But when it comes to love and wisdom, it sets no restrictions.**

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 22:37-39 and Mark 12:30-31

<sup>9</sup> Bar Ebroyo (1226-1286) says, **"We cannot drink from the fountain without being cleansed of mud."**

<sup>10</sup> Two different systems in our inner world are in a constant state of conflict and struggle. The first is the divine system (the spirit's software). The other one is the world's system (the ego's software). The spirit's software must always be online, the divine system must be at work in us, growing in strength and success.

When viewed from this angle, Syriac culture is dialogical, not monological. It acknowledges social justice as the basis and driving force of a pluralist structure. It requires that we put the virtues that strengthen life's common denominators into practice in our lives. It demands that we are balanced in providing the basic needs of the material and spiritual world. Accordingly, governments and institutions exist to serve, just like the various organs of a single organism.<sup>11</sup> Humanity is also like one big family. Besides their unique functions, the organs complementing one another work together in seamless harmony for the longevity of the organism. Just as a disturbance in the smallest organ affects the entire organism, the harmony/discord between civil and public establishments affects common life as well. The many organs of this organism and the diverse members of this family ought to continually honor each other with a mutual understanding of dependency and fulfil the requirements of justice. Though there are different views, different impressions, and different lifestyles, if the motivation for social justice is within the bounds of equity, both humans and society can flourish and find peace. There's more to justice than just thinking, speaking, and doing what's right. Justice means that human actions are completely in agreement with human dignity. **Because equality among humans depends on protecting human dignity and the rights that derive from it, as well as the development of a meaningful whole that is consistent in this regard.**

In Syriac culture, executive matters are built on shared governance, love, and altruism. It is essential to serve with charitable motives and a spirit of empathy, fulfillment, and development, rather than with power-hungry and oppressive ambitions. In this context, not doing the things that need to be avoided is more important than doing what needs to be done. When it comes to love, it is not how we feel towards our subjects, but how they are treated. Authority, knowledge, duty, office, power, talent, ability, skill, money, and all such qualities known as "**kakro**" in Syriac, have been entrusted to us so we may serve. They are a divine contract. We only have the authority to use them.<sup>12</sup> If we misuse them, the contract is forfeited. Anything that is not properly or conscientiously utilized (authority, knowledge, duty, office, power, talent, ability, skill, money and other such qualities) becomes poisonous. Its antidote, which is pliability, is not a weakness.

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<sup>11</sup> This is how Saint Aphrem (303-373) highlights this issue: "**Just as every organ in the body serves the need of another organ, the people of this universe also serve global needs for the general benefit. In that case, let us be glad that we are in need of each other. For the harmony and accord between us is a result of this situation. It must be because people need each other that people of high rank switch over to humbleness without being ashamed of ordinary people. Thus, ordinary people turn to the people of rank without any fear. In fact, we see a similar thing in our relationships with animals, that our need for them makes it necessary that we approach them with care and caution.**"

<sup>12</sup> "**For who sees anything different in you? What did you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why did you boast as if you did not receive it?"** (1 Corinthians 4:7).

It is an advantage. Because rigid things break, while pliable things bend freely and carry on. Therefore, in the context of showing appreciation, we are reminded of the need to never forget the truth of the vines on the stick<sup>13</sup>. Once we comprehend that absolute ownership does not exist, our minds are opened to new initiatives and developments. However, the moment we say that it's *my vine, my talent, my knowledge, my skill, my power, my duty, my office, or my authority*, the poison seeps in and begins to weaken us. If this problem is not resolved through self-examination, that vine, office, power, skill, talent, etc. takes the offensive against the person. Instead, the negative energy of selfishness can be eliminated and its positive energy bolstered with a sincere acknowledgement that, **"I am not the vine, I'm only a branch. No power, talent, or quality that has been entrusted to me belongs to me. I will use them appropriately, for the benefit of everyone."**

Syriac culture does not abandon divine favors to seizure and subjugation by the flesh, nor does it condone arrogance, bragging, dominating humans for wicked purposes, oppressing them, exploiting them, abusing them, or subduing and bullying them. It categorically renounces condescension, pontification, and possessiveness. Instead, Syriac culture nurtures respect, honesty, sincerity, responsibility, loyalty, and consistency. It develops, strengthens, and promotes individuality with a holistic understanding of other fundamental truths<sup>14</sup>. It serves and contributes to these truths. Espousing the principle of **"individual differences"**, it counsels against the blunder of comparing vital human qualities like intelligence, talent, skill, etc. Like the **"principle of individual differentiation"** in developmental psychology, it emphasizes people's individuality and uniqueness, drawing attention to the downsides of comparison and rivalry.

In Syriac culture, which grounds itself on sustaining life, there is no place for high-handedness, ill will, disparagement, or wrongdoing, leading to grievances and discord between people. In fact, if someone is not living up to the post they occupy, like the good shepherd that means that they have surrendered to their ego and ambitions. In other words, a person needs positive development, freeing himself from selfishness, arrogance, pride, contrarianism, and opposition;

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<sup>13</sup> There are very subtle differences between ownership and appreciativeness. Appreciativeness is the approach of love. It has the energy of the spirit. Therefore, whatever we appreciate flourishes and is blessed. Ownership is the approach of fear. It is the lowest level of the ego. It has a negative energy. Therefore, ownership is more prevalent than appreciativeness.

<sup>14</sup> The other fundamental truths are as follows: Truth, justice, fairness, conscience, reason, moral norms, moderation, righteousness, discipline, humility, responsibility, altruism, self-control, transparency, solidarity, helping one another, loyalty, compassion, sincerity, faithfulness, balance, harmony, decency, etiquette, politeness, courtesy, artlessness, legitimacy, generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, trust, maturity, individuality, freedom, serenity, equality, hard work, and prudence.



he needs to have a big heart with no inner contradictions. He must ascend to the realm of true love—the creative productivity of truth and wisdom<sup>15</sup>.

Syriac culture teaches valid and legitimate methods for getting rid of the weeds and couch grass in our mental soil. It makes it imperative that we remain in a state of spiritual peace and individuality, in order not to deviate from the legitimate ways. Because valid and legitimate methods have positive energy, whereas illicit and illegitimate methods have negative energy, and they bring evil.

Exploitative and oppressive motives are the yeast of evil. Acting on these motives erases individuality and freedom. This is contrary to the essence of life and human dignity. It enslaves people to themselves and to others. Syriac culture draws attention to this grave contradiction, and replaces the mental residue of oppression with shumloyo reasoning and loving servitude. It prizes altruism over self-interest. It strives to transform negative energy (evil) into positive energy (good), and creates a balance between giving and receiving based on mutual needs<sup>16</sup>. It prioritizes facilitation. It associates a fulfilling life of development with being born again. **Even though being born again is a tiring and occasionally painful, arduous process that begins with breaking the mold, getting rid of inner veils and masks, full of internal and external conflicts, it sees this as a fundamental obligation.**

It waters the tree of life (individuality) in our inner world with the insights of this second birth, granting us spiritual stability. Thus, it exerts a positive control over the ego system while carrying the spiritual world to a metaphysical dimension. It invites us to the development of thought, strengthening of actions, and to help and solidarity. This invitation whispers the secrets of righteousness, goodness, and beauty into our ears as we travel through life. **"A human is defined not by his appearance but by his heart. His worth is measured by what he gives rather than receives."** With this approach, it draws attention to the cultural toxins that pollute life. In the journey of discovering our inner greatness, it deems it necessary for us to look inward, checking and illuminating our blind spots, moving from knowing to doing, and from doing to being.

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<sup>15</sup> St. Aphrem (303-373) says, **"Be genial towards everyone. Try to make people happy as best as you can."** This literary approach is the main moral discipline of a healthy and fulfilling life.

<sup>16</sup> On this subject, St. Baselius (+ 378 a.d.) is of the opinion that, **"None of us can fulfill their bodily needs by themselves. Far from it, each of us is in need of another in order to fulfill said needs, and therefore, we must be mindful of one another's concerns/benefits, which is impossible to do by isolating oneself and living alone."**

According to the compassionate spirit of Syriac culture, wheat kernels and seeds are spread after a certain ritual in our region. This "**crop ritual**", performed with the motto "**What does he/she need?**" rather than "**This is what I need**", and dismissive of selfish attitudes, perfectly expresses this point.

A farmer casts his seed with a generous heart and the following prayer: "**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...**"

Based on mutuality and continuity, here is Syriac culture's opinion regarding the impact of one's service: "**If you can be of benefit to a single person and win them over, you have gained a great treasure that will benefit you personally... If by some happenstance your service gives no result, think like the mother of a sick child. Would a mother neglect the treatment of her child when the doctors prove ineffective?**"

As you can see, in order to prevail in the struggle for existence, we must realize and grasp the truth. This is only possible if we reject mediocrity, avoid carnality, resist the temptations of the ego, defy our ego, subdue our ego, overcome obstacles, cast down modern-day idols, and are born again.

**Despite its unique contributions to the history of thought, the light of Syriac culture may be dimmed and blurred. But I think this light is like the present-day voice of a contemplation that spans centuries. A doleful VOICE that calls out to the afflicted mentality of our time. A VOICE that resists self-alienation. A VOICE that counsels us to look into the mirror of the self.**

When this voice was loud and clear, it was a breath of fresh air that made us comrades in mind and comrades in heart. It was a good breath of fresh air. At this stage, this voice could contribute positively to the shaping of the future, if only it could breathe freely in its own homeland.

**Let's not forget that no matter how strong we may be, none of us could bear the weight of a life in which breathing and being a breath of fresh air have lost their meaning.**

The philosopher Lucretius, who lived in the 95-55's B.C. says, "**Mortals live dependent one upon another. Some nations increase, others diminish, and in a short space the generations of living creatures are changed and like runners pass on the torch of life.**"

Best regards.

Yusuf Beğtaş

Source: [www.karyohliso.com](http://www.karyohliso.com)

**NOTE: This text is from a presentation I gave at the First International Turabdin Symposium in Midyat and Şırnak in May 1-6, 2023. This was my speech.**