

The Fundamental Characteristic of Syriac Culture

Shaped by the input of Ancient Mesopotamian culture, Syriac culture has gone through a transformation unique in form and content by passing through a new melting pot of understanding as a result of the fermentation of elements that came about with the birth of Christianity. Thus, the main source of reference has evolved into a feeling and sensitivity for the Word of the Lord and moral norms.

By historically experiencing and comprehending the truth that, "**Humans are human when they act righteously toward God and truth, and morally toward creation,**" the masters of pen and word of this culture have left the world a rich literature and unlimited inheritance, and with spiritual awareness, they have served the development of social thought.

In other words, morals and virtue form the backbone of Syriac culture, which conveys the spirit of the ancient world and ages to present day. For this culture imparts a positive outlook on the negative meanings of smallness and greatness with the principle of "**being appreciative and helpful**" while uplifting human dignity, encouraging originality and differences, and enabling no evil.

Its primary purpose is to contribute to the fullness of life and social continuity, like in the relationship of the grapevine and the stick. The main deal of this culture is the refinement of existence. Thus, its principle goal is to attain wholeness, unity and harmony in a conflict-free inner world. This culture teaches us to look into the mirror of the self in order not to lose balance. It predicates on existing for creation and creating to exist. Due to its self-value and honor, it unconditionally accepts and appreciates "the other" for who he/she is. Never mind harming someone, on the contrary, it has a restorative and facilitative effect. It sees people as ends and persons rather than means and objects. It prioritizes an altruistic morality that is based on mutual trust and is built on special care. Thereby, it designates the mind to the role of legislator, and the heart to executive. Just like the blood in the body, it flows through the veins of life and all the organs of the body. With regards to its content, it is associated with all of life's fields of occupation such as personal development, personal discipline, education, manners, morals, science, philosophy, literature, worship, marriage, management (church, civil society, politics), business, commerce, agriculture, art, and aesthetics. Within the social flow, it structures the relationship between man and God, man and fellow man, and man and the ecosystem. With the vital knowledge it provides to the perception of self and life, it acts with the reflex of protecting human dignity, whose source is the divine. It

praises material comfort and spiritual progress equally. A pioneer that prioritizes a sense of justice, human rights, and hard work as the foundations of moral consistency, it considers material and spiritual nourishment to be equally important. **It invites people to be kinder to themselves, to everyone and everything. At the same time, it teaches moderation in all things. But it instills a desire for endless love and knowledge.** When viewed from this aspect, it is dialogical rather than monological. With interactions that predicate on this, it teaches us integrity and legitimacy. It necessitates a steady mode of spiritual tranquility and individuality in order to stay committed to integrity and legitimacy. Because integrity and legitimacy create positive energy, they are a force for good; whereas iniquity and illegitimacy bring about negative energy -a force for evil. This culture maintains balance between giving and receiving by turning negative energy (evil) into positive energy (good) on the basis of mutual need. It firstly seeks to alleviate. According to this culture, a noble life intent on progress begins when one is born again. **The second birth, or being born again; to step out of one's comfort zone and be free of internal veils and masks begins with awareness and involves internal and external conflicts. But although this is a tiring and occasionally painful process, it is seen as a fundamental obligation¹.** For a noble life, it counsels commitment to moral norms and humane qualities, to build mutual trust by observing mutual flaws, mutual inadequacy, interdependency, and mutual benefit, all while showing appreciation. Within a culture and reality of solidarity, it expresses its disciplinary methods with humanistic approaches. There is no trace of moral evil or opposition in its makeup and humanist values.² **Its fundamental characteristic is that it authorizes the spirit in matters of justice, with awareness of sight and hearing. With its outreaching and sharing character, it avoids everything that dampens life's energy. By connecting the secondary roads of the inner world to the main road of the divine system, or absolute truth, it activates the virtues that are missing from life. This culture imparts a positive outlook on the negative meanings of smallness and greatness with the principle of "being appreciative and helpful" while uplifting human dignity, encouraging**

¹ Here is how famous scientist Albert Einstein described the feeling of witnessing the beauty of the infinite in motion: **"There are moments when one feels free from one's own identification with human limitations and inadequacies. At such moments, one imagines that one stands on some spot of a small planet, gazing in amazement at the cold yet profoundly moving beauty of the eternal, the unfathomable: life and death flow into one, and there is neither evolution nor destiny; only being."**

² Although it never promoted a mentality of opposition, the negative results experienced in Syriac culture's own country are questioned from time to time.

originality and differences, and enabling no evil. It updates the meanings that prioritize the soul against the attitudes of the ego. By encouraging individuality (uniqueness) in the person, it preserves their visible and invisible differences. It expands merciful awareness and the circle of compassion so as to embrace all humans, creatures, and nature in all their beauty. In the struggle of good and altruism against evil and selfishness, it crowns altruism with the crown of victory. It reveals humanity's 'inner greatness' in all areas of life based on spiritual reality. With this characteristic, it waters the tree of life (individuality) in human beings and binds them to life. Thus, it uplifts the human spirit and grants it stability. With this elevation and stability, it teaches how to positively command the ego system. Through this command, the spiritual world gains metaphysical dimensions. It contributes to the development of thought, strengthening of actions, help and solidarity, and the world of knowledge and wisdom. These contributions which provide harmony and order between the worlds of spirit-meaning and body-matter, whisper the secrets of righteousness, goodness, and beauty to us, the travelers on the road of life. **"People cannot be judged by their outward appearance, but by their hearts. Their worth is not determined by what they take, but by what they give."** This principle draws attention to the cultural toxins that pollute life. On the journey from knowing to doing, then from doing to being, people must turn inward, observe themselves in the mirror of the self, see their blind spots, illuminate their blind spots, ask the right questions in this regard, and while doing these, use the correct methods in the process of discovering their inner greatness. Because the masterful writers of this culture believed that inner greatness could only be discovered through a rich culture that put spirituality first. These kindred spirits of Syriac culture had realized this well in advance. And in the toils of leaving behind a tree of good that the passing years could not wear out, they persisted in this goal, doing what was necessary in all areas of life through the powerful expressiveness of literary activities. They left us enduring knowledge through their works that shed light on our current-day situation³. **"The meaning we assign to life takes shape in our actions."** With this adage, they expressed that it is much more meaningful to question what life's expectations from us are, rather than vice versa. When we act in accordance with this idea, our preferences become more acceptable and our actions and level of awareness will deepen.

³ Syriac culture is like a lost storehouse full of things. If researched from a scientific point of view, it will be discovered that this lost storehouse contains knowledge that could be fundamental for current-day sociopsychological research.

Life inevitably loses its flavor when values lose all value, meaning becomes meaningless and the truth evaporates. In fact, life desiccates. In modern circumstances, when such things are happening, a paradigm shift is imperative. This need must be met with a paradigm shift that revolves around knowledge and moral values which could change the general perception of life and the private perception of self. We must put away our self-importance and learn, teach, comprehend, and introduce the wisdom in the ideas of those kindred spirit Syriac masters, those connoisseurs of "**existence**" whose more original contributions to the universal culture stress the need for creation-oriented existence. Then the desired paradigm shift will be underway.

Syriac culture, which takes care that divine gifts are not left to the free reign of the ego, has no place for conceit, boasting, using humans for malicious intents, repression, exploitation, abuse, or subjection. It has no place for condescension, pontification, or appropriation. It encourages love, respect, sincerity, responsibility, loyalty, and consistency. With a holistic approach, it embraces the development and growth of individuality, encouraging, empowering, and liberating it. Syriac culture serves and contributes to these aims. For this culture's main point of reference is primarily the word of the Lord and its moral tenets. Therefore, it follows the principle of "**individual differences**" and dissuades people from comparing essential human qualities like intelligence, talent, skill, etc. Just as in the "**principle of individual differences**" in developmental psychology, it emphasizes the individuality and uniqueness of each person and draws attention to the wrong aspects of comparison and competition.

Syriac culture, which takes care to sustain all areas of life as well as one-on-one relationships, has no place for gratuitous living that creates injustice and victimization, and sows discord between people, or for intentions, speech, and actions that provoke enmity. On no account does this culture promote such things. According to the core values of this culture, all stations, ranks, and statuses exist for the benefit of humanity. The best way to worship God is to live a life that benefits humanity. A person who cannot live up to his station (with the sentiment of the good shepherd) has surrendered to his ego and ambitions. In other words, one of the fundamental purposes (indeed the most important one) of Syriac culture, which has important didactic methods and meanings that change one's perception of life and self, is the internal revolution that disciplines the ego. And by contributing to this, it strives to thaw the pathological problem of the mind with the stable and therapeutic thoughts

of the spirit, thus reconciling the heart and mind. It strives to transform this problem with therapeutic methods and disciplines into social capacities. It strives to cleanse the human mind of selfishness, arrogance, pride, contrarianism, and opposition. It strives to elevate the senses, thoughts, the subconscious and the conscious to the maturity, creative productivity of divine truth and wisdom; in other words, to the realm of true love. It strives to form strong bonds with this frame of mind and elevate it to a vast unity of hearts wherein lies no trace of inner conflict.

If the area's sociocultural philosophical background were to be scrutinized from an objective, scientific standpoint, this would prove to be true. In its golden age (the 3rd and 10th centuries), Syriac culture was like the salt of life. It was the shining beacon of the region. For example, Saint Mor Aphrem (303-373) said **"Be cordial towards everyone. Try to make people as happy as you can."** This literary approach is the fundamental moral discipline of a scientifically healthy and fulfilling life.

According to the holistic outlook and compassion-based attitudes of Syriac culture, on the plains of Mesopotamia, wheat kernels and seeds were spread after a certain ritual, as an act of love. This **"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. The generous-hearted Syriac farmer casts his seed and prays, **"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, all those in need, the birds, the eagles, and all the animals have a share in it..."**⁴

This is what the kindred spirits of Syriac culture have to say regarding the impact of continuously serving: **"Even if you have been helpful to a single person, you have gained a treasure that will benefit you personally... If by some chance your service does not pay off, think like a mother. Would a mother neglect her son's treatment if she saw that the doctors were incapable of doing so?"**

⁴ I was very surprised when I heard about the *crop ritual*, a ritual bearing all the meanings of active altruism and passed down from tongue to tongue and generation to generation. I first heard this prayer from the lips of the headman of Hassana Village, Elişa Beğtaş. Subsequently, I learned that other Syriac villages in the region prayed this prayer as well.

As you can see, when all of these things are grasped, the existence struggle ought to be crowned with victory. Because according to Syriac culture, existence is a stage of maturity attained at the end of self-knowledge, self-discovery, self-transcendence and reaching another. Existence is a journey of personal victory over the self and over all complexes, great or small. It is a journey of recovery and self-transcendence. It is a journey through the mirror into the self.

In order to gain victory over one's complexes, one must find strength in these words: "**In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world**" (John 16:33) and one must resist the worldly temptations of the ego on the journey of "**existence**". This is only possible by overcoming barriers and being born again; resisting the ego/world and bringing it under control. On the journey of existence, those who do not look through the mirror of the self and those who surrender to the ego will not get far. They will not even set off. Even if they do set off, they will have an accident. Those who surrender to the ego can never be on the road that guides the truth. They can never break new ground.

Yusuf Beğtaş