

# DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

## The Syriac Tradition: St Ephrem I

PERHAPS NO greater contrast can be found in the history of man's response to the divine call after the coming of Christ than that between the prayer of Islam<sup>1</sup> and the syriac tradition, particularly as exemplified in the theological and spiritual writings of St Ephrem, described by his contemporaries as 'the Harp of the Spirit', and more recently as 'the greatest poet of the patristic age, and perhaps the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante'.<sup>2</sup> Both traditions, it is true, have their origins in the Middle East. Ephrem himself was born in Nisibis in Mesopotamia (c. A.D. 306), as Sozomen, the great ecclesiastical historian, informs us.<sup>3</sup> Islam is above all monotheistic, social, but also far more aggressive in the imagery it uses to fashion the response of the creature — indeed of the whole of creation — to its maker. As we have seen, one has to dig deep to find the parity of the muslim experience of the divine immanence and transcendence and the corresponding virtuous life — the relation to the neighbour — which such experience dictates.

Though Ephrem, writing three centuries before the Qu'ran, God's revelation to Muhammad, shares the same anthropological *point de départ* with the prophet, God's face revealed to man in the creation of man's world, 'the book of nature', he is in another world from the fiercely monotheistic islamic culture. He sees God from first to last in the Trinitarian context. In all his contemplative reflections on the Godhead, Ephrem looks backwards from the mystery of the Incarnation, and forwards to its gradual unfolding in the mystery of the resurrection. So, in his *Homily on the Nativity*, he writes:

He who measures the heavens with the span of his hand  
lies in a manger a span's breadth;  
He whose cupped hands contain the sea is born in a cave.  
His glory fills the heavens  
and the manger is filled with his splendour.  
Moses wished to see his glory, but was unable to see him as he wished.  
Let us come and see him today  
as he lies in the manger in swaddling clothes.

<sup>1</sup> Cf *The Way*, vol 20, nos 1 and 2 (January and April, 1980), pp 67-76, 148-57.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Robert Murray s.j., Ephrem Syrus, St., in *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, vol II, eds Francis Davis, et al. (London, 1967), p 221.

<sup>3</sup> Cf *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 3, 16: PG 67, 1085-93.

Formerly there was none who dared to see God and still live;  
but today all who have seen him are saved from second death.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that for Ephrem the distinction between faith and natural knowledge is hardly relevant, given that the mystery of Incarnation has happened, in which alone God deigns to reveal himself to and communicate directly with his creature. It is true that the natural world bears witness to God, as does the OT. But both point the way to the New Covenant: the Torah prepares the Jews, the 'book of nature' the gentiles, for the coming of the Lord of Scripture and of nature:

Look and see how Nature and Scripture  
are yoked together for the Husbandman . . .  
Once Nature and Scripture had cleansed the land  
they sowed in it new commandments — in the land of the heart —  
so that it might bear fruit.  
Praise for the Lord of nature, glory for the Lord of Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

It is only through God's dynamic presence that we can know his existence. Faith and prayer stand between God and man, so that we may believe the truth and adore the Godhead. 'It was thus that "praise", says Sebastian Brock, 'was for Ephrem, an essential — one might almost say, prime — element in the life of a Christian'.<sup>6</sup>

Faith, love and prayer. These are the elements in the christian life which distinguish it from the arbitrary choice made by man, 'drest in a little brief authority', relying on his powers of rational investigation and speculation — in Ephrem's context, the heretical Arians. So Robert Murray summarizes for us Ephrem's *dicta* on the right and wrong human approaches to God:

#### Wrong (Arians)

1. Mistaken confidence in reason as all-competent *presumption*.
2. Literalism and positivism; failure to distinguish the levels of thought and find meaning between the equivocal and univocal, tending towards limited concepts of God and Christ: *determinism*.

#### Right

1. Acknowledgement of the inadequacy of reason and of all concepts and symbols: *humility*.
2. Preferring the use of symbols, not only metaphor but especially *Realsymbole*, because of their power to encourage heuristic experience in which *free will is in play*.

<sup>4</sup> From the *Homily on the Nativity*, in Sebastian Brock, *Harp of the Spirit* (London, 1975), p 64.

<sup>5</sup> From *Hymns against heresies*, 28, 11; Brock, p 10.

<sup>6</sup> From *Hymns on faith*, 14; Brock, Introduction, p 18.

3. Claim to control everything by rational examination and argument; *quarrels and schisms*.
3. Preferring contemplation of the mystery of God, seeking inner harmony and stillness: *preservation of charity*.<sup>7</sup>

And love wins the argument against intellect in the dialectic of the human response:

Despite my weakness, when I draw near to God, Love makes me want to praise him.

But my intellect warned me of the danger of presumption; it is safer, and sufficient to praise God in silence.

Love spoke against silence: example of St John the Evangelist.

Intellect argued against the human mind:

in the womb, after death, in sleep, even in prayer.

Love argued for boldness, by the example of Moses (Exod 33-34).

Intellect (countered by) the example of Daniel,

who was reduced to speechlessness by his vision (Dan 10, 8). . . .

Between these two voices I was reduced to total perplexity.

But Love began to win by this argument:

the supreme commandment is that of love. How can it be fulfilled except by obeying, when love urges us to speak?

God himself in his love has spoken and listened to us. . . .

Intellect: before the infinite depth and greatness of God, man can only adore in silence

Love: examples of David, Moses, the prophets and the Apostles, none of whom kept silent about God.

Intellect: before a human king, all keep silent;

How much more before the King of Kings? . . .

Love has the last word: Jesus accepted the kisses of the sinner woman (Lk 7), the anointing by Mary (Jn 12), Judas's kiss, the blow by a servant, mocking by the priests.

If he submitted to all this, how much more to rightly-offered praise?<sup>8</sup>

Further, faith is not only the contemplation of Christ. It is Christ himself. 'In his hymns on faith, Ephrem uses the image of a pearl, which he turns over and contemplates in his hand, as the starting point for an extended series of meditations on the Incarnation, and a symbol eminently suitable for Christ'.<sup>9</sup> Here are a few stanzas from the five hymns Ephrem dedicates to the symbol of the Pearl:

<sup>7</sup> Robert Murray S.J., 'The theory of symbolism in St Ephrem's Theology', in *Parole de l'Orient*, vols 6 and 7 (Paris, 1975-76), pp 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, 'St Ephrem's dialogue on reason and love', in *Sobornost/EGR* (1980).

<sup>9</sup> *Hymns on Faith*, 82; Brock, Introduction, p 31.

You of all gems are the only one  
 whose begetting resembles that of the Word the Most High. . . .  
 Our Lord has brothers — and yet he has none,  
 For he is the Only-Begotten. O solitary Pearl,  
 great is the mystery, for your symbol  
 stands all alone, yet on the royal crown  
 you have brothers and sisters. . . .

When you came up from the depths of the sea  
 — the living grave — you acquired this glorious  
 band of brethren, relatives and kinsmen . . .

. . . even though a man pierce it,  
 takes it and hangs it on his ear,  
 as it were on Golgotha, all the more does it throw out  
 its bright rays on those who behold it.

In your beauty is the Son's beauty depicted:  
 — the Son who clothed himself in suffering, nails went through him.  
 Through you the awl passed, you too did they pierce  
 as they did his hands. But because he suffered he reigns  
 — just as your beauty is increased through your suffering.<sup>10</sup>

Faith finds the truth revealed: it is discovered by and discovers the truth. So Ephrem says of the good thief: 'he received faith, and faith, receiving him, led him into paradise. Faith is like a second soul; it is a life coming from God. For truth flows from the Father through the Son, and gives life to all through the Spirit'.<sup>11</sup> And if faith is man's vital link with Christ, it is synonymous with love:

For it is in our Lord that the root of our faith is grafted;  
 Though far off, he is still close to us in the fusion of love.  
 Let the roots of our love be bound up in him,  
 Let the full extent of his compassion be fused in us.

O Lord, may the body be a temple for him who built it,  
 May the soul be a palace full of praise for its architect.  
 Let not our body become a hollow cavity,  
 Let our souls not be a harbour of loss.<sup>12</sup>

Truth or faith — they are synonymous for Ephrem — cannot exist without love. Neither can 'take flight' without the other.<sup>13</sup> He is never sure which takes precedence. At the same time, following the pauline distinction of body,

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, stanzas 3, 5, 7, 11, 12; Brock, pp 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> Cf E. Beck, *Ephrem le Syrien*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité (Dsp.)*, vol IV, 792.

<sup>12</sup> From *Nisibene Hymns*, 50, stanzas 6 and 7; Brock, p 58.

<sup>13</sup> Cf *Dsp.*, *art. cit.*, 793.

soul and spirit, he emphasizes that truth/faith finds its home in the human heart of flesh, hope in the soul, and love in the spirit. Here again, symbol and reality run together: faith itself is threefold in man's response to the triune God known in Christ crucified: the bird whose 'wings' are truth and love:

Faith, too, grows up in three stages:  
Once the apostles believed in Father, Son and Spirit,  
Then the gospel message flew to the four corners of the globe  
by the power of the Cross. . . .

If the spirit suffers, it is entirely imprinted by the Father;  
If the soul suffers, it is wholly mingled with the Son;  
And if the body is burnt in martyrdom,  
Then its communion with the Holy Spirit is complete.<sup>14</sup>

Love is at once the desire of God and his treasure; but its source is always the divine Treasurer. It overcomes the fear of the Divine Majesty, of Father and Son alike: whether this is seen in the audacity of the blind man of Jericho (Lk 18, 35-43) or of Moses in his desire to behold God's face.<sup>15</sup> In fine, love of God and the neighbour is the great commandment: 'Blessed is he who has loved us and whom we have loved. He has spoken to us and has heard us as we spoke to him'.<sup>16</sup>

Faith and love, as we might guess, can find their human expression only in prayer. The Creator has made a path for his creatures, so that they might come to his door and knock with the offerings of their prayer:<sup>17</sup>

Without a gift from that very greatness  
no tongue could bring forth anything from his store;  
for only with his key can those treasures of his  
be opened to the treasurers.

Without the gift of the word no tongue can tell  
What the Word is like and how great he is:  
It is by the same word that man is able  
to speak in his own defence; it becomes his advocate. . . .

Lord, how can your servant cease from praising you?  
How can my tongue hold back from thanking you?  
How can I stem the delicious flood  
which you send surging through my mind as it thirsts for you. . . .

To you, Lord, I bring my faith as my offering.  
Naked I bring it, without good works.

<sup>14</sup> Murray, cf footnote 8, *supra*.

<sup>15</sup> Cf Dsp., *art. cit.*, 794.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Let it become rich, Lord, from yourself,  
And I from it, the needy from me! . . .<sup>18</sup>

Prayer, then, involves the despoilment of self, that purification from all self-regard which is the essence of loving one's neighbour. In fact, to pray for one's neighbour is to pray for oneself; whilst the very savour of such prayer is 'the love of the Lord your God'.<sup>19</sup> All prayer seems for Ephrem the prayer of petition. And vocal prayer is of inestimable value, since it brings together the offering of body and soul alike. Yet there is a prayer purer still, which can be conceived and brought to birth within a man in silence, without words. It is prayer which gathers the self within the self, in the tranquillity of a mind at rest, and purifies the dissipated and scattered vagaries of the mind, to the point at which it becomes as it were a mirror in which Christ himself is reflected:

Let my prayer be a mirror before your face, Lord. Let it reflect your beauty in all its clarity. Let your every expression be reflected in it, so that it is filled with your beauty.<sup>20</sup>

All that we have said so far of the foundation and expression of Ephrem's response to God is offered to the whole christian community. The tradition for which he stands is marked by a predilection for the monastic life and for the asceticism belonging to it: one that in the syriac tradition finds its fullest achievement in the virginity of eremitical and monastic dedication. We hope to consider its elements, and the prayer to which it leads, in a further consideration of the syriac tradition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Murray, p 18.

<sup>19</sup> Cf Dsp., *art. cit.*, 794.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 795.

<sup>21</sup> This compilation is the Editor's, from the fruits of Fr Robert Murray's erudite research, and the superb translations of Sebastian Brock's *Harb of the Spirit*. We are indebted to both for their gracious permission to use their material.