

## **Reality and Ways of Tryout**

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### **Abstract**

The current paper aims to discuss the ways for approaching of what we call `reality`: the mystic's experience and the scientist's experiment. The mystic experience is, somehow, closer to what is proper to the scientific experiment: both are ways of tryout. This also means that both are privileged ways to reach a deeper understanding of reality.

**Keywords:** Reality, Experiment, Tryout

Our age is dominated by the need of quantification, as an element that grants the sufficiency of any investigation. This imperative, which governs modern science, has been enforcing a distant attitude towards the discourse of spirituality, which was deemed ineffective because it does not quantify. The recent mutations in understanding the nature of reality made possible accepting the validity of religious experience and of the value of the discourse of spiritual tradition as specific ways of investigating the inner levels of reality. The crucial question is if these alternative ways to evaluate can somehow meet the current need for rigour, and preciseness. Therefore, we can argue that it is important to prove that the spirituality discourse provides rigour in the description of reality, that in this case there is also a certain understanding of precision and exactness, which is totally functional at a practical level as well. But, science and spirituality are, on their specific paths, somehow similar ways for approaching what we call `reality`? The mystic's experience and the scientist's experiment are both ways of tryout? Is the mystic's experience, somehow, closer to what is proper to the scientific experiment? I'll try to argue that such affirmations are sustainable.

André Scrima, in *The Spiritual Experience and its Languages* offers some reasons why the spiritual experience may be considered a research object. Firstly, the spiritual experience is the manifestation and the sign of a possibility, of a fundamental aspect for human condition. The human being is a being of experience. As Scrima indicates, the term "experience" derives from Greek, from *peira*, that means "tryout". Experience would be then what comes out of tryout, knowledge by tryout. That's why Scrima states that the spiritual experience must also represent a study object. It is possible because any experience of this kind is creative, founding values, bearing a vision of the world, therefore a way of founding a cultural tradition. Eventually, to approach spiritual experience means to approach a different actualization than the current one<sup>1</sup>. Among the aspects that are considered relevant by Scrima in order to support the necessity of the study on spiritual experience, the one that interests us most is the significance given to the term *experience*. It turns out that experience, understood as tryout, represents the central aspect of any spirituality. But at the same time experience, in its valence of experiment, is the essential component of science. One can not speak about science as long as there is not an experimental frame, without unfolding some experiments. But precisely in this double reference to a form of tryout I consider that there exists an area of a real rapprochement between the one who performs a spiritual experience and the scientist. It is a rapprochement of *essence*, as both put reality to tryout, one way or another. But *in fact*, this rapprochement is more difficult and represents a commonplace, due to the reasons mentioned above and these reasons may be, from a point of view, subsumed to language difficulties. This is why, those who reached the intuition of the common ground that this *tryout* of reality takes place on (in a full acceptance of what we call reality, including the one that is called *ultimate reality*) were those who could understand the limitations that human language introduces inevitably in a certain historical period. They were exceptional people

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<sup>1</sup> André Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei*, Humanitas, București, 2008, pp. 198-199.

because they did not fall in the traps of a more or less specialized language that a period or historical moment may impose: being able to understand the authentic ways in which such a complex reality may be experienced and passing over the imaginary and the ideology of their time. The authentic access to reality proves, out of these reasons, an act not to be facile, because it depends on the *tryout* quality that addresses to this reality. Rather an exception, the *tryout* authenticity has as a sign a special situation of language, a “special” usage of words that may perplex or vex.

I will invoke a situation of overcoming a language context and of the way in which reality was understood on millennium ago. This situation belongs to the spiritual experience that is proper to the Christian East, being about a type of writing unusual for this spiritual horizon that belongs to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, a Byzantine author from the turn of the first millennium. Trying an analysis, an interpretation or even a simple presentation of the writings of Saint Symeon, called the New Theologian, is not by far a facile thing. A sign in itself of this unusual situation is the relative scarcity of secondary literature, of works to deal with the Byzantine author in a critical-exegetical way. Is it our modern horizon, with the cultural canons brought in by Enlightenment, rationalism and positivism? This interpretation can easily find arguments to support it. But there is something more and deeper regarding this difficulty. No doubt, Saint Symeon was one of the biggest mystics of Christianity. But this was admitted by modernity only pretty recently. Those who have dealt with the recent publication of the Symeonian writings and their translation in widely used modern languages, such as the English editions, have noticed that ignoring these texts is a lack comparable to leaving in limbo the writings of Saint John of the Cross<sup>2</sup>. The Symeonian texts, even when recovered from recent exegesis, have received a problematic reception, one that still requires re-evaluations.

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<sup>2</sup> John, McGuckin, *Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine Eros: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Volume 5, Number 2, 2005, p. 182.

The Symeonian writings prove to be exceptional not only through their type of discourse that dominated the Christian East, but also through the way the text is built. Because when still very young, he had a mystical experience of uncreated light, a vision of God, that will repeat after a number of years and will become a common fact later on, Symeon encountered a special situation when he started writing. This is because when he intended to interpret things in a theological way, he had, on one hand, to make use of the language that the Byzantine Tradition had put its mark on, and, on the other hand, could not leave his direct and full experience, up to pain and self oblivion that he had had on a second place. Of course, this dilemma led him to an exceptional solution, as Symeon's sensitivity and way of being were according to himself. In the context of the time he lived in, the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second, his writings raised important reactions, because there were doubts regarding its framing into the spirit of Tradition. Today it is becoming clearer that the stake of the dispute that went around the teachings and the writings of Saint Symeon was the significance under which The Tradition of the Parents must be understood<sup>3</sup>. Paradoxically, Symeon is at the same time very personal and innovative as well as extremely conservative. It was clearly an act of courage to write in a style that expresses the personal feelings openly, that describes a total experience (where the body participation is widely described, and this with the intention of considering them landmarks in structuring the theological discourse<sup>4</sup>. We know that many of the authors of the important Christian Eastern tradition avoided mentioning their concrete experience with the divine. Not speaking about yourself and your own was usually considered a sign of humbleness, of a true spiritual experience. It is a serious reason why the Symeonian text was viewed with suspicion from the beginning.

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<sup>3</sup> Hilarion, Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 , p.271.

<sup>4</sup> Fernández Francisco María, Jiménez, *El humanismo bizantino en San Simeón el Nuevo Teólogo: la renovación de la mística bizantina*, Nueva Roma, vol.8, Estudio Teológico San Ildefonso de Toledo, 2000, p. 268.

Phenomenologically speaking, the Byzantine spirituality could not “stabilize” itself in a series of statements and formulations with a closed character as any discussion about an “essence” was rejected from the very beginning, the only accepted one being the admittance of the personal character of divinity and man. If there were dogmatic statements, they had a negative form, not containing definitions, the dogmatic construct not searching for a thorough usage of the possible statements about a particular aspect, but avoiding following a wrong direction. If freedom is proper to the personal dimension, then it is obvious that an understanding of this dimension should be abandoned in favour of the recognition of principal spontaneity and unpredictable novelty. Therefore, is the recognition of an exceptional manifestation. But, what is gathered in a temporal interval as effects of these manifestations will become the primer for an image that will be configured, an image of what reflects *the other’s reality*. It is the natural attitude of consciousness to confer *rationality* to the sum of events of whose witness it is, especially to those that come from other persons. And it is precisely here where the risk appears. Because, inevitably, this act of giving a sense to those that take place sets itself in a projection, in a kind of estimation of what could be in the future. Imaginary has got as its major source these mind movements. So, less attention to what is proper to manifestation in favour of confidence in the projection given by imaginary regarding the possible future leads to a confidence in the veracity of one’s own estimations. The importance given to concrete and to what is proper to phenomenality decreases and the quasi-calculating possibility of estimation increases. In the case of spiritual practice such a route may have dramatic consequences. Most big spiritual horizons registered this difficulty, but it was really dramatic in its implications in the Christian East, because here there was played a central stake around the idea of tradition. If letter did not represent the key element in providing veracity for Byzantines, this role was taken by *tradition*. Tradition was always invoked as the true modality of having access to the true teaching of Christ, but the appeal to tradition has its

paradox. Recommencing this appeal in different epochs supposes the comparison with what was gained meanwhile, so it is not aimed at the same content and one may say that it is not aimed at a proper content, but at a modality, at an attitude. Referring to tradition in the 11<sup>th</sup> century does not imply the same contents that such a reference would have meant seven centuries before. And there is a massive risk of considering tradition infallible, especially through a kind of anticipation of what could be possible in the future, of thinking that tradition means certitude of spiritual solutions that can no longer receive corrections. It is the route to an imaginary-anticipative construct that replaces the original meaning of tradition from a Byzantine perspective. It is the return through the back door of whatever was purposely avoided: formalism, imprisoning letter. Referring to a spiritual tradition, as well as the attempt to follow a spiritual way, cannot be a pure act that would imply a direct reference to transcendence exclusively, but it takes place in the historical frames proper to the cultural way of being in the world. A certain epoch has its own cultural frames that remain the unavoidable horizon for the way the human experience can be structured, regardless of the underlying intentionality. The epoch change brings together with itself a difficulty in the access to the meaning of the statements that had belonged to the previous epoch textuality, or even a difficulty in understanding the people who, by their formation, do not belong to their contemporaries' epoch. The change of cultural configuration goes very far, the risk numerous generations went through along history was projecting their own understanding canons on the previous cultural products. Especially in the case of intervals when the main intellectual concern was the synthesis of the data inherited from the past. It was also the situation in the epoch of Symeon: the project that would dominate the Byzantine intellectual activity (and not only) was ordering and levelling the tradition textualization.

Maybe the one thousand year history of Byzantium is exceptional, among other reasons, because for many times the collective imaginary that one generation or another started to have about what Orthodoxy means was replaced with what we call the Christian way. These corrections, that often had the

form of paradox, always drew attention on the difference between dogma and preconceived ideas, and on life being the measure of how dogma is to be understood. It may be said that if in an epoch as the one we have previously described one states something like: "Your beauty got me out of me and filled me with love, o, Trinity, o my God!", that someone represented a correction of the epoch at an exceptional degree. The major risk that would appear in the Byzantine society at the dawns of the second millennium was the legalist-moralist formalism, and the discourse of Saint Symeon opposed this tendency for sure. This is why we can tell that the difficulty a text like *The Hymns of Divine Love* brought to Symeon's contemporaries was the impossibility of framing it in the convenience of the formalist discourse. The way Symeon spoke about God and man's experience of God can be fully called atypical to the things to be found in the discursive canons of the epoch at the beginning of the second millennium. How comes that such a thing could happen? Beyond the other reasons that we could invoke, especially the divine one, Symeon, when very young, had such a radical and decisive experience that he definitely couldn't express it in any of the forms imposed by his time. It is a special situation of writing emerging from a special way in which the author admits, or better said, refuses to admit to his position of an author. Saint Symeon insists on this message not being an exceptional one and not addressing to exceptional people, but draws attention on it being something handy for everybody and that should be searched by everybody. This is why the label of a mystic author applied to Saint Symeon, as well as the statement that his texts would contain a mystic message are wrong as they induce us the presupposition of exceptionality regarding both the possibility of reception and the chances of considering it a landmark for one's concrete experience. Symeon wanted to transmit to his contemporaries that they could also reach in their times what they considered possible only once. A sudden transforming experience that does not come as a result of one's waiting, but whose result is a deep inner change<sup>5</sup>. If the possibility of recovering the

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Bouyer, *Byzantine Spirituality*, in Louis Bouyer ed., "A

meaning of Tradition depended decisively on re-specifying in front of the inevitable changes of cultural horizon, this recovery was always made possible through what we call “exceptional event”, the phenomenon of discontinuity brought by unusual spiritual experiences that started by producing bewilderment or even scandal. Such experiences have different marks in each epoch, depending on the context they happened in. More exactly, on the spiritual unauthenticity that had started to gain ground in the epoch. The extraordinary experiences such as those of the Stylites or the fools for Christ came to draw the contemporaries’ attention on the lost of the authentic meaning of Tradition, on the fall in a collective imaginary that had removed from the consciousness of personal communion with the Ultimate Personal Reality. Each time, these extraordinary experiences warned about some other type of removal, and Symeon’s time showed clear signs of such a risk, which was the result of having tried to establish a uniformity of the spiritual expression, of both the one accumulated in the textual tradition and in the liturgical and the canonical one. What characterizes Symeon’s experience is an exceptional „exposure” in front of reality that was for him a *Personal Reality*. If we are to follow Scrima, telling that experience means knowledge by tryout, the type of tryout was a double one for Symeon, because the tryout from the extraordinary presence of a totally different Reality from what means daily experience was doubled by a tryout in itself, by the need of leaving aside everything that could represent an inner obstacle in exposing oneself to this experience. So, one can speak about a more authentic exposure in front of reality, less attenuated or impied by the cultural-ideological “slag” that accumulates in a certain epoch.

Up to a certain degree, we can find a similar situation that marked the Physics at the beginning of the last century. The conflict with the classical explanatory model of Physics that experimentality in Quantum Physics would impose evidently, led to a situation somehow comparable with the context Symeon wrote in a millennium before. But this time

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History of Christian Spirituality”, vol. II, The Seabury Press, New York, 1968, p.568.

the explanatory difficulty was felt by a scientific community, more precisely by those scientists who tried to formulate a coherent explanation regarding what goes on at a microphysical level. There was a collision between two explanatory models, between the one named the Matrix Mechanics and the one called Wave Mechanics. Without getting into details related to the formalisms that backed these two explanatory versions, what made the debate so vivid was the common belief that there is not a single correct interpretation of Quantum Physics. There was also the desire of finding linking bridges and coherence with the explanatory model that dominated Physics at a macro scale. The Physics of the twentieth century registered a peculiar situation of "exposure" at a level of reality, showing a crisis in explanation. This explanatory crisis meant both an implication and a conflict of the explanatory models that pretended to be complete and truthful. In imposing an epistemological model there prevailed rather a subjective need that proves that the experience that researchers have in investigating the microphysical reality is complex and bewildering, and only some rather external needs impose the call for a certain formal language. It is a gain when it comes about communicating among researchers, but at the same time a loss, because the investigated reality is more complex than formalization or an epistemological model. The risk is that an explanatory model will limit the way research can investigate reality. Fact is that the period invoked above meant a new opening to an unanticipated reality towards a reality that proved a challenge to formalism and the epistemological model at stake.

Even if the solutions and the decisions are different in Symeon's case and in the one of the debate around the epistemological model that explains the quantum reality, the two of them have in common an exceptional opening towards reality that goes up to putting in brackets a functional language or to suspending a type of explanation. These aspects lead to the affirmation that the specific of the Eastern Christian spirituality is obviously closer to a certain direction of science than to the moralism that have sometimes characterized the Western theological speech. Specific to the Orthodox spiritual

practice is what we, under certain limits, could call an *experience*. Even if the solutions and the decisions are different, this two paths of reality's investigation have in common the most effective access towards what exists in ultimate instance.

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