

HINDIYYA ANNE ‘AJAYMI AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: THE ESSENTIAL LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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ABSTRACT

This is a preliminary study of aspects of the spiritual development of Hindiyya Anne ‘Ajaymi, a Syro-Lebanese religious woman who lived from 1727–98. There is an analysis of the record of her major mystical experiences which, although the exact dates are not yet established, occurred between her adolescence and middle age. The record was written in Arabic and portions are here translated into English. This is followed by a translated excerpt from her Counsels that were composed later for the edification of the religious in her care.

1. INTRODUCTION

- [1] Hindiyya Anne ‘Ajaymi was an eighteenth century Syro-Lebanese nun and mystic; a substantial body of writings attributed to her survives in Arabic, but these have not received sufficient scholarly attention. In her we see someone who sustained lightness of heart despite tremendous upheavals in mind and body. Hindiyya seems

to move through them all with remarkable peace and sanguinity. She reminds one of the spiritual journeying described by Robert Murray in his article published in a recent volume of *Hugoye* where he says that in Ephrem “free will and authority are both essential aspects of God’s image in humankind.”¹ We shall see these qualities well illustrated in the life of Hindiyya and it was these characteristics, especially when manifested in a young woman, which were bewildering to the beholders of her time. In 1999 I visited the monastery in which she lived out her final years in obscurity after the congregation of which she was the founder was formally disbanded. There I gained many more insights into the nature of her commitment by seeing the place for myself and by listening to the oral tradition of the sisters who live there. According to them Hindiyya lived the life of an ordinary monastic woman of the time, and spoke little of those who had persecuted her other than to say “May God forgive them.”

2. OUTLINE OF HER LIFE

[2] The outer framework of her life was in three distinct places, Aleppo, parts of Kisrawān not too far from the Lebanese coast, and finally high in the mountains above the village of Dlepta. In Aleppo she lived the usual life of a young lady born into comfortable circumstances; in Bkirki she struggled to found a religious congregation and in the process became a public figure; in the monastery of Dair Sayyidat al Haqleh, she lived the austere life of the Syriac monastic.

[3] Hindiyya, whose baptismal name was Hanna (Anne), was born in Aleppo, on August 6th, 1727, to a Maronite family of means.² In

¹ Robert Murray S.J., “The Ephremic Tradition and the Theology of the Environment,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2.1 (1999): para. 5 online: *Munir Wahiba al-Khazjin, al-rāhibah hindiyya ‘aghrab ‘imra’ab fi al-tārikh* (Kisrawān, Lebanon, 1977).

² Pierre Dib, *A History of the Maronite Church*, translated by Mgr. Seely Beggiani, S.T.D. (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1970). Yves Moubarac, editor and commentator “Dossier Hindiye” in *Pentalogie antiochienne/ domaine maronite*, tome I, Livre d’histoire — écrits fondateurs et textes à l’appui, Vol. 1, Les maronites entre l’Orient syrien et l’Occident latin (Beirut: Youakim Moubarac et Cenacle Libanais, 1984). Avril Mary Makhlouf, “Hindiye Anne Ajeymi in her Ecclesiastical and Political

Kisrawān she was the protégée of bishops and of the al-Khāzin family and became the confidant of at least one patriarch. In Dlepta she lived and died in obscurity.

- [4] Sometime during the central portion of Hindiyya's life her portrait was painted. Although I did not succeed in seeing this first hand I did see a photographic reproduction. It shows the face of a young religious woman with striking eyes denoting a gentle clearness of vision.

2.1 First stage: Aleppo

- [5] In cosmopolitan Aleppo there were, in addition to the Maronite and other indigenous Churches, a number of European religious orders, notably the Jesuits, Carmelites and Franciscans, actively engaged in the work of the spiritual care of the Christian youth. The novel confraternities with rules of life for young people which they introduced had long-lasting effects on the life of Aleppo. The existence of these distinctly Latin-rite groups were generally welcomed by the more traditional local clergy.³

- [6] Hindiyya's religious practices, which began at a tender age, consisted of assiduous attention to the usual oral prayer forms and to the reception of the sacraments of penance and communion. In addition to these she began fasting and various other ascetic disciplines at an early age. Her mother demurred, but her spiritual

Situation" (Actes du 3e congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes, Louvain-la-Neuve, septembre, 1988) published in *Parole de l'Orient* 16 (1990–1). Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme Catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVII^e–XVIII^e siècles)* (Collection Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 284; Rome: Palais Farnèse, 1994). Paul Abboud, *Relazione della nazione maronita colla Santa Sede nel secolo XVIII ossia documenti inediti riguardanti la storia di Mons. Giuseppe de Stefanis, patriarcha dei Maroniti*, two volumes (Beyrouth, 1909).

³ Bernard Heyberger, "Un nouveau modèle de conscience individuelle et de comportement social: les confréries d'Alep (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)," *Parole de l'Orient* 21 (Actes du Ium Symposium Syro-Arabicum, Kaslik, 1995) (1996): 271–84.

director, the Jesuit père Venturi, generally endorsed these activities.⁴

- [7] Hindiyya from the age of three began to be unusually susceptible to the religious imagery of the time. She especially remembered two pictures in her room, Mary with the Infant Jesus and one of Christ being whipped while tied to a pillar. These images had a profound effect on Hindiyya and indeed they remained important throughout her life. Certainly at three she saw these pictures in slow motion and felt herself part of the action portrayed therein. She reacted to this in word and simple gestures. Throughout her adult life she grew in her conviction that she could share intimately in the life of Christ.

- [8] Later there were added to these the symbols of the crucified Jesus and of his Sacred Heart. She also learned of certain saints, especially of the doings of St. Clare and of St. Teresa of Avila. Angels were important beings to Hindiyya. When one takes all these cumulative influences into consideration, it is not surprising that she began to see herself as espoused to Christ in a unique way. This will be discussed later in more detail.

2.2 Second stage—Kisrawān

- [9] For almost twenty years Hindiyya remained in the bosom of her devout family. She had long quietly understood that she was destined for the monastic life rather than for marriage. What was alarming for those around her was that she announced her conviction that she was called to found a specifically Maronite congregation devoted to the Sacred Heart.⁵

- [10] This news was not welcome to her Jesuit spiritual director; he was very willing to find her a convent, which on the face of it was the right place for this pious young woman, one situated in Aintoura in Lebanon. This religious house belonged to the

⁴ Dib, *A History of the Maronite Church*, op. cit. Makhlouf, "Hindiyye Anne Ajeymi in her Ecclesiastical Situation" op.cit.; *Pentalogie antiochienne/ domaine Maronite*, Yves Moubarac, ed. op. cit.

⁵ See references in note 4, also Makhlouf, "Hindiyyah 'Ujaymi and the Monastic Life: the Rule of Life for the Congregation of the Sacred Heart attributed to Hindiyyah 'Ujaymi" (Acts of the 4th International Congress of Christian Arabic Studies, Cambridge, U.K., September, 1992), *Parole de l'Orient* 18 (1993): 283–302.

Visitandine order (Sisters of the Visitation) which had been established by Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal. In Lebanon the oversight of this convent was the responsibility of the Jesuits. At the time this made sense since both orders were interested in promoting a devotion of long tradition in the Latin Church, namely devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

- [11] While Hindiyya was willing to visit this convent she did not waver in her determination to follow what she saw as her calling to found a new congregation. This did not sit well with père Venturi. However, no doubt hoping that her mind would be changed in Lebanon, he arranged for her journey to Aintoura in 1747. She actually stayed there eight months. During this period the order made every effort either by inducements or by threats to secure Hindiyya's agreement to formally join the Visitation order. She began to suffer from a fever that prevented her from a possible return to Aleppo. After a last attempt to make her change her mind Hindiyya was dismissed and not allowed to enter another convent that she had hoped would prove a refuge. To his great credit père Venturi came to Lebanon and saw to it that she was admitted on a less stringent basis by another religious house in Kisrawān, at Hrasheh. This convent was of the Melkite rite and here Hindiyya found peace and care.

- [12] By now her determination had become widely known and finally Hindiyya found a new confessor and spiritual director in Jirmanus Saqr, the Maronite bishop of Tripoli. He became convinced of the validity of her calling, and under his auspices she was helped to found her own congregation in Bkirki around 1750. Hindiyya and her Order were now officially accepted by the Maronite authorities and she was no longer in any sense under the tutelage of the Jesuits.

- [13] To recapitulate, Hindiyya was now far from her parents, living in a yet under-developed mountainous area. Her status depended upon ecclesiastical favor and while she did not lack for episcopal protection and that of the al-Khāzin family who held the waqf, (a form of religious endowment specific to the Middle East), of her initial foundation, she remained in a vulnerable situation. For a time she received great popular support for reasons described elsewhere but this proved fickle.⁶ Hindiyya had to make good on

⁶ See references in note 4.

her claim to be inspired to found a new order of nuns. At the same time the locutions and visions, which she had experienced from childhood, increased in intensity for some time. We shall look at her record of these and also at how she was able to integrate her spiritual insights into her new role as foundress and mother superior of a group of monastic women. Patriarch Sam`ān `Awwad approved her rule in 1753 in compliance with the provisions of the Synod Mt Lebanon of 1736. By 1753 her first convent was established with a majority of the sisters being from Aleppo. Eventually the number of her monasteries increased to four.

2.3 Third stage—Dair Sayyidat al-Haqleh in Dlepta

- [14] Hindiyya's order was eventually disbanded in 1779–80. The causes and reasons for this have been discussed elsewhere.⁷ Here it suffices to state that the form of monasticism she introduced was not the reason. The problem consisted of two issues, one, the question of the degree of Hindiyya's personal responsibility for a scandalous incident involving the ill-treatment and death of one of her novices in the charge of a Sister Catherine who seems to have functioned as a prioress to Hindiyya's main convent, and two, a mistrust by a number of powerful ecclesiastical leaders both in Lebanon and in Rome of her growing popularity as the unwilling figurehead of popular resistance to the application to the Maronite Church of certain prescriptions of the Council of Trent. Hindiyya spent her last years as a member of the community of a remote double monastery where according to the tradition of the nuns she lived an exemplary life until her death in 1798.

3. HER WRITINGS

- [15] Both the aspects of Hindiyya's character mentioned in the introduction, namely her exercise of "free will and authority," are seen in writings attributed to her and it is at these that we shall now look briefly. Sadly, many of her writings have disappeared, either

⁷ Makhlouf, "Hindiye Anne Ajeymi in her Ecclesiastical and Political Situation." On the subject of harsh treatment deemed suitable to be meted out to enclosed religious of both sexes in Spain as late as the 16th century see Cathleen Medwick Teresa of Avila, *the Progress of a Soul Image* (New York: Books Doubleday, 1999); consider also Hindiyya's own sufferings in the convent of Aintoura.

destroyed under ecclesiastical orders by her own hand or by those of others when her fortunes waned. In 1999, I spent some weeks in Lebanon and was fortunately able to secure access to newly discovered important material which dates from her lifetime and which elaborates many aspects of her thoughts on the monastic life.

- [16] Not all of the extant manuscripts attributed to Hindiyya have been edited. Among those available is the *Rule of Life* for her nuns. This is of considerable interest but has been studied in depth elsewhere.⁸ Other important edited works are the *sirr al-ittihād* (The Mystery of the Union),⁹ and the *aqwāl al-rāhiba hindiyya ‘ajaymi al-balabiyya*, edited by Butros Fahed. The work similar in style and content to previously mentioned *sirr al-ittihād*.¹⁰ There is also *al-durar al-saniyyah fi-naṣā’ih al-umm hindiyyah* (The shining pearls of Umm Hindiyya’s Counsels),¹¹ which contains her counsels for her nuns. It is this work which has recently been discovered.

- [17] It is the first and last of these writings which will be looked at here.

3.1 *sirr al-ittihād*

- [18] The *sirr al-ittihād* is an account of her central mystical experience and *al-durar al-saniyyah fi-naṣā’ih al-umm hindiyyah* shows Hindiyya in her later and mature years. Attention will accordingly now first be devoted to the central contents of the *sirr al-ittihād*.

⁸ Michel Hayek, “al-rāhiba Hindiyyah, 1720–1794,” *al-Mashriq* 59 (1965): 570–734. Makhlouf, “Hindiyyah ‘Ujaymi and the Monastic Life: the rule of Life attributed to Hindiyyah ‘Ujaymi.”

⁹ “Dossier Hindiye” Pentalogie antiochiënne/domaine maronite, op.cit. Avril M. Makhlouf, “Hindiyyah Anne Ajaymi and the Sacred Heart—Occasion for a Comparison of Cosmologies,” paper given at Syriac Symposium II, The Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C., [June, 1995]).

¹⁰ Butros, *Fahed aqwāl al-rāhiba hindiyya al-‘ajami al-balabiyyah* (Jounieh, Lebanon, 1972).

¹¹ Fr. Toni Houry, *al-durar al-saniyyah fi-naṣā’ih al-umm hindiyyah*, Master thesis, University of Kaslik; Lebanon, 1999. (This is an unpublished study of the manuscript; the manuscript is in the archives of the Maronite Patriarchate at Bkirki.)

- [19] In this work Hindiyya states that from an early age she received visions of a beautiful and majestic person. After some time she noticed that his body had the marks of five wounds. When she questioned him as to who he was she was told, "I am your Lord and your God." He hinted at a special gift from him that would be different from mystical gifts given to others before her. The visions slowly strengthened in her the sense that this was her Creator, a giver of knowledge and insight, that she would receive the special gift of a detestation of sin, that he was light and that the knowledge and insights would be not only for her own benefit but for all humankind.
- [20] Now Hindiyya was reluctant to receive this gift; nevertheless she remained very aware of the bodily presence of this visitor especially of his wounds, which she saw as lips offering joy and lightness of heart. However she did realize that he had suffered and had an immense desire for the salvation of human beings.
- [21] Hindiyya also came to understand that this person was her betrothed spouse and that she must confide in her spiritual director all that was happening, because something different, not in common experience, was also being asked of her.
- [22] Needless to say her spiritual director was somewhat out of his depth when Hindiyya informed him that she was to receive in her own body a spiritual sensation of this person's body even though she had been assured that this was not to be an erotic experience. He was of course aware of the special grace of a sense of spousal union with Christ given by God to those who had been through an arduous spiritual journey, but probably nothing in the literature of Christian mysticism would have prepared him for the physicality of this experience.
- [23] Finally the person in her visions gave her an ultimatum: her salvation depended on her giving an assent to this experience. It would not be forced upon Hindiyya; her own will must merge with that of his; she was not to be afraid; her spiritual director would come to support her. This indeed eventually happened. The spiritual director told Hindiyya to obey the person, that now he believed that the vision was indeed of Jesus the Nazarene, and that he would take responsibility for any error of judgment.
- [24] Here are translated excerpts of the words that Hindiyya recounted as being said to her:

"I am Jesus the Nazarene, the crucified one; in my love I have willed, by raising your mind, to have you understand my holy humanity in the union of my divinity.

"Look at the wound in my side. May your understanding extend as I will this, into the interior, into the attributes of my sacred heart and into the perfections of its holy image."

[25] Hindiyya saw a heart with all its vessels but she also saw

"Something great, high, incomprehensible. The substance of the love of this divinized human heart stayed totally within the divine love.... at the very center there is yet an enormous, unlimited extension, incomprehensible beyond all place, above all height... a great movement, which sent forth from his wounds incomprehensible rays of glory."

There she saw: She particularly notices one part of his body, "under the form of a little finger."

"Immeasurable extension which human understanding is incapable of comprehending. I saw numerous images, varied as to forms and essences, attributes, natures. I saw the watery abyss, the extent of the firmament, the starry space and more... It was impossible to comprehend this immense movement where all the creatures were visible."

[26] Hindiyya now agreed to submit to the sensation of the divine body. She was told to bring this about in the following manner: "My daughter Hindiyya, by my infinite generosity and good nature, I will that you kiss my most holy body." When Hindiyya did so she experienced a love that she began to be able to put into words while at the same time her whole being accepted the sensation of the divine body. This happened in such a manner that she felt a total penetration which can perhaps best be described as interpenetration, seeing and feeling both herself and Christ in another mode or manner than before.

[27] This intense experience culminated for Hindiyya when she was told that the one she is espoused to is the eternal Wisdom, who triumphs by his will; he asked her to call him her crown and diadem.

3.2 The Body of Christ—a Christocentric Cosmology

[28] It is now appropriate to examine those elements in these mystical experiences that seem to indicate not primarily a state of spousal union in the individual sense but rather a sense of identification with the Mystical Body of Christ seen as the destiny of all creation, of the cosmos. In what follows comments and comparisons with selected ideas and images from the works of Ephrem and Maximus and Teilhard de Chardin will be interspersed. The hope is not that the selections exhaust the wealth of material but rather that the imaginations of others will be sparked and moved to bring more of these into relief. But before moving into this discussion let me share a recollection of a story written by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin describing an experience of a young seminarian during World War I.¹² During a lull in the bombardment he found himself in a bombed-out village church. Exhausted, but desiring to pray, he looked for something on which to focus his attention. The only religious object left was a colored rendition of one of the early 20th century attempts to portray Christ with his bleeding heart exposed. As the young man began to gaze at this picture he found himself experiencing as in a waking dream the cosmic Christ. It seemed that the nervous and blood distribution systems of Christ's body began to extend from the heart into the biological systems of this earth and beyond. The heart's pulse caused all things to flow in and out of Christ. Although the narrative is fiction, it seems that Teilhard de Chardin's friends were convinced that the story was autobiographical. The content is certainly consonant with what he conceived as his life's work in theology and the physical sciences.¹³

[29] The resemblance of this event to similar experiences of Hindiyya prompted a closer look at the cosmological implications

¹² The reference is to a short story written by Teilhard de Chardin which appeared in an English anthology of writings by various authors which I read in Scotland some years ago. Efforts to locate this work in the United States have proved so far fruitless. The account has nevertheless been left in this article because it has a ring of truth in that it is in harmony with de Chardin's writings.

¹³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, new edition and translation of his *Le Phénomène Humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber (Sussex Academic Press, 1999).

of an important series of her visions and auditions. At the same time it seemed appropriate to look at elements in her religious heritage that consciously or unconsciously might have predisposed her to harbor such visions and auditions. Two obvious persons came to mind, St. Ephrem and St. Maximus the Confessor. Another is St. John of the Cross.

[30] The aim here is not to suggest that Hindiyya had any first or even second-hand knowledge of the work of these persons; it is to point out some coincidences; cosmological ideas or themes developed poetically by Ephrem in the fourth century, theologically by Maximus in the seventh century and philosophically by Teilhard de Chardin in the modern era occur in the mind of an intelligent woman of the 18th century who would not have received a formal education in theology or philosophy.¹⁴

[31] It seems simplest to approach the Christocentric cosmological issue by looking at key symbols in the *sirr al-ittihād*; heart, lips, kiss, crown, finger and a set of symbols implied rather than stated in the text and which are best known as “clothing metaphors.” These latter act as a bridge to certain theological concepts, namely union or incarnation, abasement, will, interpenetration, understanding or gnosis through faith and love, co-incidence of *chronos* and *kairos*, grace received through and in human interaction; by the naming of Christ as Wisdom: above all by seeing Hindiyya and perhaps her whole life as symbol. I find myself looking at her in the sense expressed by Professor Brock in his work on the theology and symbolism of St. Ephrem entitled *The Luminous Eye*.¹⁵ I quote: “Types and symbols, then, are the means by which the inter-

¹⁴ It should be noted that images of the Sacred Heart of Christ and of other sacred persons in a Western style were part of the religious furnishings of Hindiyyah’s childhood home. Also, it is not impossible that the works of Ephrem, Maximus and of Western Roman Catholic scholars were present in the ecclesiastical libraries of Aleppo. Original and translated religious works were already available in printed Arabic versions in Hindiyyah’s childhood. Thus it is not impossible that in some direct or more likely, indirect, manner, that she may have become aware of the content of some of these works.

¹⁵ Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye—the world vision of St. Ephrem* (Placid Rome Lectures, 1984, in C.I.I.S. 1985) 40; also his “Clothing Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Syriac Tradition,” *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Variorum XL; 1992).

connectedness of everything can be seen, the means by which meaning can be infused in everything. It is a dynamic and exciting way of looking at the world—and one that is profoundly ecological.” To look at a human being as a symbol is not to depreciate that person’s value, it is simply a means of expressing as best we can how that person brings light into this world of shadows.

[32] To begin with that image of Christ’s finger in which Hindiyya saw the whole universe, one can say that the finger, when used as a symbol of God, has at the same time both a revelatory and a creative impact. One also remembers Jesus tracing words on the ground in the story of the woman taken in adultery;¹⁶ if this is not enough one may recall the finger of God beautifully portrayed in Michelangelo’s painting of Adam’s creation.

[33] To continue with the image of heart, one can say that it is of great importance in Syriac religious symbolism, though with a different, more Scriptural, emphasis than that of the Western Christian tradition to which Hindiyya most certainly was exposed in the form of the 17th century Latin imagery and theology of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.¹⁷ For our purposes which are the cosmological aspects it seems that in Hindiyya’s text we have Christ’s heart not only as the focus of the God who above all other terms is best described by the verb “to love,” it is also seen as the living center of the universe.

[34] The description given earlier of Christ’s wounds as “lips showing forth joy and light-heartedness” seems to make a vivid connection between the heart and its life-giving blood and the intimacy, respect and, I venture to suggest, equality implied by the kiss. My authority for the last remark is that doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, who while commenting on The Canticle of Canticles 8:1 wrote that the bride wanted to say: “who will give You to me, my brother, that I might find You alone, outside nursing at the breasts of my mother so that (with the mouth of my

¹⁶ John 8:6.

¹⁷ J. Bainvel “Dévotion au Coeur Sacré de Jésus,” *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* 3.1 (1938): cols. 271–351.

soul) I might kiss you and no one might despise me (nor attack me).¹⁸

[35] According to St. John, this kiss is the union of which we speak, in which the soul is made equal to God through love. In commenting on *Cantic of Canticles* 8:2 he says:

“...the bride says that the intellect drinks wisdom, when in desiring to attain this kiss of union and seeking it from the bridegroom she said: There you will teach me (wisdom and knowledge and love), and I shall give You a drink of spiced wine (my love spiced with Yours, transformed in Yours).¹⁹

[36] The issue of Christ as the Wisdom of God can be only addressed briefly here. It seems that in relation to Hindiyyah’s experience there are two important points to be emphasized; one, the kiss demanded of her by the person with those implications discussed above, and two, his referring to himself as Wisdom.

[37] It is in this area of symbolism that spirituality and cosmology begin if not to converge, at least to touch. I refer here to the work of Sr. Constance FitzGerald on St. John’s three “cosmological” milieus of prayer, namely the self, the natural world and finally other human beings.²⁰ The implied message I draw from these varied sources is that without a profound intellectual apprehension and volitional acceptance of the sheer physicality of Christ and some would say of God we miss a dimension of prayer which leaves it shall we say, anaemic, maybe anorexic.

[38] To conclude this brief study of the individual symbols as experienced by Hindiyya let us look at that of crown that is associated with Christ’s naming himself Eternal Wisdom. Hindiyya is invited to call Christ her crown, in the context of Syriac spirituality and ecclesiology a symbol of marriage, of a new equality.

¹⁸ The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., ICS Publications (Washington, DC, 1979) see “The Dark Night,” p. 386.

¹⁹ Ibid. “The Spiritual Cantic,” 512.

²⁰ Constance Fitzgerald, O.C.D., a series of lectures entitled “The ‘Spiritual Cantic’ of John of the Cross’ as the story of desire: its development, education, purification, and transformation” (Alba House Cassettes, 1985).

[39] Now we come to the set of symbols best referred to as the “clothing metaphors.” These are implied by the account of the interpenetration by Christ of Hindiyya’s body and soul. It might be objected that clothing is something that has to be seen as external to the person were it not for two factors, one, that clothing, especially of the kind that speaks of an office or state undoubtedly interpenetrates the entire personality; and two, that in the explicit Syriac Christian context the “robe of glory” given us by grace and conferring on us the status of a new creation is frequently associated with baptism. Christ is said to have left this robe in the waters of baptism and it is there that we receive it and are presumably transformed by it into Christ. There is also the connection of the “robe of glory” with Christ’s Transfiguration.²¹

[40] It is no wonder that Hindiyya though intelligent and strong was overwhelmed by these experiences. We are now in the presence of profound theological statements being made in a very human mind and body.

[41] It is interesting that the Maximus scholar Lars Thunberg saw a connection in anthropological thought between Teilhard de Chardin and Maximus which parallels the similarity between Hindiyya’s visionary experiences and those of Teilhard de

²¹ Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: the Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985); on pp. 76–77 he quotes from St. Maximus’ Ambigua:

“...Ambigua 10, where Maximus teaches that the shining vestments of the transfigured Christ symbolize the fact that when God, the Sun of Righteousness, reveals Himself to the human soul, then all the logoi of things intelligible and sensible in Scripture and nature appear as if they were with Him.”

See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie Cosmique — Maxime le Confesseur, Aubier, éditions Mouton* (Paris, 1947). Irénée-Henri Dalmais, O.P., “L’héritage évagrien dans la synthèse de saint Maxime le Confesseur,” *Studia Patristica* 8 (1966): 56–362. Dalmais, “La manifestation du Logos dans l’homme et dans l’Eglise. Typologie anthropologique et typologie ecclésiale d’après Qu. Thal. 60 et la Mystagogie,” in *Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur* (Fribourg, 1980) 13–35. Also pertinent is Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Byzantine Gospel—Maximus in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1993).

Chardin.²² Perhaps the phenomenon of Hindiyya should be looked at in the context of the organic Church as someone whose life sheds light both upon her great predecessors in faith and upon those who came later.

3.3 *al-durar al-saniyyah fi-naṣā'ih al-umm hindiyyah* (The shining pearls of Umm Hindiyya's Counsels)

[42] This work, which is a manuscript in very good condition, contains counsels for her nuns composed and personally delivered between 1767 and 1775. (These dates are approximate as not all of the 100 counsels are dated with the day of presentation.) It consists of over 400 pages and its existence and authorship are attested as belonging to the library of the fore-mentioned Bishop Jirmanus Saqr. It was recently discovered in the Maronite Patriarchal archives and has been the subject of a master's thesis.²³ It consists of 100 counsels most of which have dates attached to them and which cover the major themes of religious life.

[43] The work has not been fully studied; so far I have listed the main topics and checked the frequent Scriptural references. For the purpose of introducing the *Counsels* to a wider audience, it seems more interesting to give a taste in translation of that counsel which shows her ability to draw moral and spiritual conclusions and which also sheds light on Hindiyya's own spiritual development when she had apparently made the transition from being the recipient of profound visions to the busy life of a mother superior of several convents.

²² Lars Thunberg, *ibid.*, 137 where he writes:

“The speculations of a Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin on the evolution of the world toward the Omega point also seem to have a certain affinity to those of Maximus. This is the case not least in regard to their common positive evaluation of movement as a creative force, although Teilhard, of course, sees things in a more definitely historical and evolutionary perspective.”

²³ See note 11.

The 61st Counsel

The human heart's love of God: its effects and benefits

[44] May God's love of humanity be glorified; He who showed infinite condescension, and called on humans to be His children saying "My son, give Me your heart." This is the call by which He honored humans with infinite honor beyond our understanding. Compare man with God if you wish to understand the great honor that God has bestowed by calling him His son and giving him His Heart. And if a man does not give back his heart to God, he is not in reality His son even though he were a believer. In truth, if man does not offer his heart to God by repenting truly and altering his conduct, and by recoiling from any occasion that would prevent him from giving his heart to God, he is not truly a son. For our Creator and God showed love beyond our understanding when in His compassion He asked that man devote his heart to Him—may He be glorified. When our God said in the words of the wise: "My son, give Me your heart," He showed infinite condescension that man should offer his heart freely and willingly to his Creator.

[45] O the ignorance of man who, in his corrupt delusion, gives his heart to the fallacies of the world. He allows his self love to take hold of his feelings, and limits his inclinations to that which can be seen and felt. This failure obstructs man's heart and prevents man from being saved. He does not spare even a few hours for the worship and love of God. O you lost man, learn from Him who is seeking your heart, and wants it to be dedicated to Him, He who created you and formed your heart, endowing it with various feelings and inclining it to that which is spiritual. In the union of soul and body, He endowed your heart with great attributes and unique traits; even without the body, for the heart is the core of love and hate, joy and sorrow, meekness and courage, compassion and anger, and so forth. These attributes leave their mark on the earthly body. So that if you prevented your heart from the love of Almighty and Glorious God, and allowed it to cling to iniquity, you and your heart and your soul are culpable. For He -may His Name be glorified—made your heart to feel that which is spiritual and godly, independently of the rest of your body. He willed that your whole heart should be His. He did not make your heart inclined to love, O man, that it may love that which is worthless, unholy, or iniquitous, or to be filled with vain self-love, but to love that which is holy. He endowed your heart with loathing, not of virtue, but of

sin and all that which contradicts His Majesty and Glory, and diverts you from the road to salvation. He did not make your heart feel sorrow because of the conflicts that occur in your person (bi-
 <uqnʻmak), or contradictions of your views or denial of your will and its inclinations, but so that your heart lament the time wasted without worshiping your God, and in the pursuit of futility, adulation and vain pride, and in dereliction of His worship and praise. It is for this that your heart should lament, O hardened soul, not for all the vain and harmful things that it mourns. O soul, God did not make your heart meek so that you would appear affable, considerate, and benevolent when your self-interest is concerned. This is not the way it is, O hardened soul. God endowed your heart with meekness, so that when you exercise your will, it is virtue not vice that appears. As I, a sinner, have said, if your meekness is tainted by wickedness, it is not virtuous but perverted. But when you willingly choose patience and humility of heart, it is then that true meekness manifests itself. For when events break your willfulness and contradict your self-importance, and afflict you in various ways, and yet your heart remains submissive, then that is what God has made your heart to be, virtuous not vicious. For it is known that he whose heart is full of pride and self-love, appears meek when events go his way. But when he is contradicted or obstructed he behaves like a savage beast, and is full of worry and anxiety, and so forth.

[46] I ask you my sisters, how does man come by such hardheartedness (callousness), that he does not give all his heart to God, but divides it into pieces, thinking falsely that it is enough for him to dedicate only a part to God—may His Dominion be praised. One wonders about the callousness and stinginess of humans towards their God, when they withhold from God that which is His. I ask you, how can man claim that what is in him—his understanding, his intelligence, his will, his heart— is his own outside God? Could man have been a sentient being, if God had not formed his body and created his soul in His image and made his heart to be His alone? O soul, God did not create your heart for self-love or harmful vanities, or to harbor feelings that do not please His Divine Majesty, but for it to be the center of His love, attached to Him with all its feelings and focused on Him with its will and heart.

[47] How pitiful is the sentient, intelligent soul that would accept that its heart be empty of God's love. Do not think, O soul, that you could love the Almighty without your being truly repentant, and without giving up all habits that prevent you from virtuous conduct. You ask for bodily repose; but you cannot feel God's love within you and be free of uncertainty without giving yourself and obeying God's commandments, by keeping your vows, and subjecting your own will to your superiors in faith and without doubt. Without that, your hope is futile, and your heart is divided and has not been given to God your Creator.

[48] Alas for the delusion of humans who prefer what is finite and harmful to that which is permanent, eternal, and without limit. I say to each one of you my sisters, human nature after becoming tainted by original sin lost its ability to discern; humans though intelligent became misguided. It is obvious that each one of you loves what is great and beautiful. None of you can say that our nature is weak. For God, may He be praised did not leave it without help. My sister, do not say that you are weak because of original sin. True, your nature has been weakened, but God has given you relief and comfort provided you admit your weakness, submit to Him, and live in His grace. My sister, if you were faithful to your God, then you would be able to discern well and detect the delusions of your heart and its attachment to vanities and the desires of your heart, and you would not abandon Him who alone, in heaven or on earth, is great. He alone is powerful and invincible, and His will prevails over that of all creatures. He is the source of beauty, and is rich in divine, infinite and eternal attributes. All bodily and spiritual comfort comes from Him, for He is true comfort and the giver of comfort to all who love Him. Only His love is ever faithful, constant, pure, and unchanging. O sisters, you should know that the love of God is not ephemeral or for temporal gain, and cannot be achieved by our own power. The love of God earns for us God Himself. O sisters, who are lost and confused, why is it that you prefer that which is vain, corrupt and finite, and can only lead to loss, to the love of God that can only bring you spiritual gain. For whenever, O sister, you love Jesus our God with a pure love, without blemish or taint, you gain through His merits. You may not perceive it now, but you will come to know it when you consider the infinite merits of our God, for you gain God Himself.

Your loss can only be great for every minute you spend away from the love of God.

[49] God Almighty has dedicated your heart to Him, but in your perverse will you give it away to that which is passing. He says to you, Give me your heart to love me, and in return I give you my kingdom. For I have called every person to me by saying Give me your heart, so that he who gives me his heart and submits to my divine omnipotence, should inherit a place in the kingdom I have prepared for those who open themselves to my grace. God has created us and knows our disposition more than we possibly can. He who gives his heart to vanities distances greatly his heart from anything that is truly spiritual and pertains to God. His heart becomes indolent and tepid, hard and unyielding, and focused on its own pain; an empty heart that scorns all things spiritual. His heart becomes anxious and filled with all earthly matters. But if his heart were to return (to God), he becomes able to obey and be patient within his heart, and to love his neighbor with brotherly love. He will constrain himself within his heart, and this constraint is not merely in speech, but in carrying the cross despite its weight and by subjecting his heart. For he who gives his heart to God—may He be glorified—is a true son of God, in whom God is well pleased. But he who gives his heart in whatever manner to anything but God, distances himself from salvation and comes rapidly close to perdition.

[50] My sister nun, it is not possible for your heart to stop from attaching itself to some kind of love. And when your heart attaches itself to its Creator, you will achieve peace of mind and come to desire solitude. You will hold your tongue in silence because your mind is occupied with God, may He be praised. You will disdain what is vain, however great or lofty in the eyes of the world. You will fear God, and that will prevent you from returning to sin. But if your heart is diverted to the love of creatures, whatever they may be, who can give you peace of mind, and who can stop your tongue from being preoccupied with many concerns; and who can prevent you from insisting on your dignity and your rights, and on your love of conviviality.

[51] Loving God with all our soul, our heart, and our strength concentrates understanding and illuminates the intellect, and strengthens our memory in rectitude; it fortifies our will and endows it with an ardent desire to possess true good. It rectifies

our choices and justifies the soul and binds it to God its Creator in true fellowship, and in hatred of sin. It endows the faculties of the soul with a powerful yearning to honor and exalt God, to submit to Him, and keep His commandments. Love within the soul nullifies the power of demons and prevails over their schemes to tempt the soul imbued with the grace of God and His love. The love of our Lord Jesus Christ, our God and Savior, purifies the heart, cleanses the body, and moderates the senses. The love of God strengthens our aversion to worldly and detrimental things, and hinders the inclination of our body to their charms which hinder us from fearing God and having faith in Him. For it is the sacred presence of God that gives to a human whose heart is full of love, calm, peace and tranquility, a clear conscience, a desire for solitude, and contemplation of the Almighty in His divine attributes and the genuineness of His sacred gifts. True love, whereby the heart attaches itself to its Creator, impels humans to follow the road to salvation with courage, without vacillation or inclination to base, sensuous or harmful things that block the road to salvation. Love, in the heart and soul that possess it, strengthens faith and hope in heavenly bliss. Love strengthens faith in the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ to obtain great grace by conforming to the will of God. To love God with all our heart and soul renews us in Christian perfection and ties our souls with strong bonds to our Creator; it unites us to Him in a love that fills the heart with purity and justifies the body with repentance, infusing the senses with modesty and offering a good example. As long as we recall the infinite merits of our Lord Jesus Christ and strive in grace and with diligence to pursue true virtue and avoid sin, then our Lord Jesus Christ will grant us, by the merits of His glorious Heart, the love of this Divine Heart which is ever inclined to look with clemency and compassion on human beings, by the intercession of His ever Virgin Mother, Amen.

4. SOME POINTS OF COMPARISON OF THE 61ST COUNSEL WITH THE SIRR AL-ITTIHĀD

- [52] In the light of Hindiyah's visions described in the *sirr al-ittihād* perhaps the most salient point of comparison with the 61st Counsel is the centrality in both of works of the heart. In the Syriac tradition heart signifies the kernel of what it is to be human. It is in the spiritual growth and moral development of this kernel that the

individual human being attains full growth into Christ. One is ultimately whom and what one loves. It is this point that Hindiyyah's stresses over and over again. Why waste this tremendous power of love on ephemeral things? As she says: (God) says to you, Give me your heart to love me, and in return I give you my kingdom. Hindiyya stresses that if we persevere with trust in grace to pursue virtue and avoid sin, we shall love with Christ's own divine and human love both God and all human beings and be filled with compassion and mercy. Love is both the journey and the goal. The moment we embark on this journey we become in some measure conformed to Christ and therefore co-heirs of the kingdom with him.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

- [53] I content myself with drawing attention to what I see as the distinctive characteristic of Umm Hindiyya's spiritual journey which began in her childhood and ended in her isolation from family and former friends in the mountains of Lebanon. Even her enemies did not deny that throughout she showed a remarkable lightness of heart combined with an equally remarkable matter-of-factness of bearing. Despite all her vicissitudes Umm Hindiyya maintained a calm detachment and trust in God that in the end his will unfailingly would be done and that his kingdom would inevitably come. As Christ said "My yoke is light and my burden is sweet."

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