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# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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## THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: III. "ECHOINGS OF UNIVERSAL HARMONIES" (PROPHETIC REVELATION, RELIGIOUS INSPIRATION, OCCULT PRACTICE) \*

Among the most important aspects of the traditional world-view of Muslim peoples is the idea that it is possible to establish contact with certain higher forces, with divinity. This concerns not only contact with God through prayers for help in the everyday affairs of "this life" and for the mitigation of retribution in the after-life. Such is the contact accessible to "mere mortals." But the prophets, the saints (*awlīyā'*), *Ṣūfī shaykhs* and Shi'ite *imāms* also establish contact with God, and this "contact" is of an entirely different nature. To this latter realm belong the ecstatic and occult practices which form an important part of popular Islamic belief.

An analysis of the corresponding ideas and behavioural stereotypes is, in our view, important if we are to understand and to interpret adequately the traditional principles underlying the cognition of reality, the particularities of a traditional world-model, and the interrelation of an ideal standard and actual religious practice.

Before turning to the sources of these ideas, the analysis of which is of great significance for understanding the problem as a whole, it is necessary to dwell at least briefly on how phenomena of this sort are treated by contemporary religious studies and a number of adjacent disciplines.

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Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in the problem of analysing and describing phenomena which are traditionally designated by terms such as trance, possession, ecstatic states or the somewhat more neutral phrase "altered states of consciousness" (ASC). Today this question attracts ethnographers as well as scholars of religion and psychologists. Aided by the methodological apparatuses of their fields, they are attempting to make sense of the phenomenon of ASC as such. In its current definition, it includes the socially and culturally determined possibility that a number of changes can take place in human consciousness, which have extremely serious consequences both for our particular interpretations of reality as well as for the character of our self-perception [1].

The rapid growth of interest in the problem of ecstatic states and the significant achievements in the understanding of the mental mechanisms through which they arise are linked with the tumultuous expansion and serious gains made by psychiatry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In analysing known descriptions of ecstatic states, specialists tried to discover in them as many features

of a pathological character as possible. Parallels with cases described in psychiatry were considered sufficient explanations for phenomena in question. Ecstatic states were most often linked to hysteria [2]. Nonetheless, E. Linderholm noted that the tendency toward ecstatic states was directly connected to the deepest layers of the human psyche, and that such states could arise spontaneously or be consciously triggered. A person's sense of space and time could vanish in such a state, although subconscious mental activity continued. He wrote about the key particularities common to such states among members of various cultures and religions (which are connected with the "switching off" of a number of aspects of "external culture" in the course of the trance) as well as about those characteristics undoubtedly influenced by cultural surroundings [3].

The role of psycho-physiological factors in conditioning ecstatic states was most fully investigated by E. Arbmänn in the third volume of his essential study. Nonetheless, he concluded that ecstatic states cannot be fully explained as hysterical trance, despite the obvious similarities in their basic manifestations [4].

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