

# THE NEAR WEST

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RENÉ GUÉNON SYMBOLICALLY divides the world into “Orient” and “Occident,” not so much from a geographical point of view, as from a traditional perspective, calling the profane and modern world “Occident,” and the still living traditional societies, “Orient.” The “Orient,” says Guénon, contains three major regions: the Far East, with China and Indochina (where the Taoism flourished), the Middle East represented by India (the Hindu tradition), and the Near East considered by him identical to the Islamic tradition. In this classification, North America becomes the Far West. That is nothing new actually. Guénon followed the terminology in use during his times; the Far West, for example, being a well-known American emblem, and so the Far East being for China. Only the Middle East, which he identifies as India, is now, due to an excessive obsession for shortness, the common designation for the region containing all the countries from Egypt to Iran, a region that includes what was in the past called the Near East; and the Near East has shifted to the west, almost becoming for the Western world a label for Eastern Europe.

In fact, Eastern Europe is more likely the Near West, and we can complete Guénon’s classification by adding the Middle West as representing Catholic and Protestant Europe, and the Near West as designating the Orthodox Christian countries. Considering the whole picture, it is interesting to note the similarity between the Near West and Near East, the two regions occupying a central position, which empowers them with a special function.

The Near East and Near West have been at one point in the past, the bridge or, using an Islamic term, the isthmus (*barzakh*),<sup>1</sup> which, more than separating the Occident and Orient, has operated as a mediator, facilitating not only the traders’ voyages and the exchange of various merchandises, but especially making possible the communication of ideas, information and knowledge. Despite the opinion, erroneously established, that the West is a direct inheritor of Greek and Roman civilizations, this isthmus has been, in fact, the fundamental agent, which transmitted to Europe the Greco-Roman learning,

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<sup>1</sup> About the meaning of *barzakh* see Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect*, State Univ. of New York Press, 1987, p. 193 ff.

the ancient sciences and philosophy, influencing in an essential manner the constitution of the medieval traditional society, without diminishing, of course, the contribution of the West-European populations. In one of his articles, written at the end of his life, René Guénon says<sup>2</sup>:

Most of the Europeans haven't properly evaluated the importance of the contribution they have received from the Islamic civilization.... It is important to note that the European universities don't show in their teachings in history this influence.... It is very weird to see the Europeans considering themselves the direct inheritors of the Hellenistic civilization, when the facts invalidate this claim. The historical reality has established without doubt that the Greek science and philosophy have been transmitted to the Europeans through Muslims. Indeed, browsing the history textbooks and reviewing the main facts, it is easy to see the fundamental role played by the Near East in the birth and development of the Occidental civilization, culminating with the Middle Ages when the Christian traditional society became mature and powerful. The Near West played the same role, even stronger.

In his article, René Guénon stresses the influence of Islam; but, before its emergence, the Christian religion starts its growth precisely in that part of the world. The first bishoprics are founded there, in the Near East and Near West, excepting Rome, which had a privileged position as capital of the Roman Empire. After the first council of Constantinople, in AD 381, the same isthmus shelters the four great patriarchies: Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Constantinople. This is a normal development, hence in those centers early Christian communities prospered. Despite Rome's claims to supremacy, based on the evangelical statement, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:19), the Gospels also affirm that Christ's first disciple was Peter's brother, Andrew, the apostle who preached in the Near West, covering Thrace and Scythia. "One of these two who became followers of Jesus after hearing what John had said was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' – which means the Christ (the Anointed)" (John 1:40-1). Andrew's testimony is essential and appears as a revelation; he is the first, after John the Baptist, to declare explicitly that Jesus is not "a messiah," or another prophet, but the Messiah.

Yet this special region is not only the preaching area of Jesus' first disciple; it is also the source of the main Christian vocabulary. Here, for the first time, appears the appellative "Christian": "It was at Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'" (Acts 11:26). The word "church" (like the German

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<sup>2</sup> René Guénon, *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le Taoïsme*, Gallimard, 1978, pp. 76-7.

*Kirche*) derives from the Greek *Kyriakon*, “the House of God,” and the French *église* (and Italian *chiesa*) comes from another Greek word, *ekklesia*, which means “assembly.”<sup>3</sup> Without diminishing the authentic importance of Rome as a primeval bishopric in the history of Christianity, it has to be stressed, though, that an extraordinary effervescence develops in the Near West and Near East during the first Christian synods, under the reign of the Byzantine Empire (the Western Roman Empire being historically in agony). This spiritual tumult is maintained, in spite of deviations and erroneous sects, by esoteric Christian currents, some of which are banished as heresies, others going into hiding, yet all of them leaving visible and invisible traces. The Armenian Church, the Coptic Church, and the Ethiopian one, are good examples of some visible traces. The influence played by the Monophysites and Nestorians is less visible on an esoteric level. Both heresies, preserving elements of the primitive Christianity, have successfully flourished in the Near West and Near East. The Nestorians and the Armenian and Coptic Monophysitism become mediators between Orient and Occident, having a subtle influence, still not clearly deciphered, upon the Western Crusaders. During the Crusades, in the city of Nicosia, for example, coexist an Armenian cathedral, a Maronite church, a Coptic church and a Nestorian one; in Famagusta, Coptic monasteries and Nestorian churches prosper together. Monophysite Armenia is a transmitter of the Chivalry rites and Masonic arts, which come, despite the opposition of the Byzantine official religion, to enrich the content of the Crusades; at the beginning of the Armenian Christianity, the fourth-century Armenian apostle, St. Gregory the Illuminator, wanders the country with a square in his hand, praising the “Grand Architect of Heaven and Earth,” and being the patron of Armenian masons. At the same time, the Nestorians spread from the Near East and Near West to the Middle and Far East, covering Egypt, Syria, North Africa, Mesopotamia, Persia, Mongolia, India, and China, functioning as counselors and secret advisers, in exoteric and esoteric domains; in these positions, they bring a subtle contribution to the birth of Islam, and later they are among the Christian physicians, astronomers and philosophers that lived at the Islamic royal courts, as in the time of Harun al-Rashid.<sup>4</sup>

This succinct journey into the early Christian history highlights a significant aspect: if the West-European world is not the direct inheritor of the Hellenistic civilization, neither is the Islam. The Arabs, Moors or Saracens, received the various information and knowledge through the diverse Christian

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<sup>3</sup> In the same way, Andrew’s name is Greek (*andros*, “man”). Peter’s name, even if apparently a Latin word, meaning “the rock,” originates from the Greek *petra*.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis on Nestorians and Monophysitism, from an esoteric perspective, see Jean Tourniac, *Lumière d’Orient*, Dervy-Livres, 1979.

currents developed inside the Byzantine Empire, and we could say that the only successor, *de jure* and *de facto*, of the Greco-Roman civilization, has to be considered the Christian Byzantine Empire, including without reservation the heresies, too.

Early Christianity in the Near East and Near West assimilated the Greek sciences, Alexandria being a very good example. St. Paul stressed from the start that “the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1:22), the Greeks’ *philo – sophia*, “the love for wisdom,” being the most appreciated, as Clement of Alexandria and other Fathers of the Church confirm, Clement considering the Greek philosophy a preparatory science for Christian theology.

The Byzantine Empire is uncontestedly the direct continuator of the Greco-Roman civilization; here, in the Near West, the union of Hellenism and Latinism takes place, and only here is it truly acceptable to use the hyphen in the expression “Greco-Roman.”<sup>5</sup> Byzantium, as Eastern Roman Empire, is the sole valid inheritor of Rome, and during the reign of the famous emperor Justinian the official documents were still written in Latin; only later, Latin was completely replaced by Greek, the first *basileus* of Greek language being Maurice, at the end of the Sixth Century. The Byzantines are the “Romans,” and the Saracens and Turks always called them “Rumi.” The Byzantine Empire becomes, after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the only genuine “Romania,” for a long time the Greek language being known as “the Romaic language” and the emperor bearing the title *basileus ton Romaion*, “the emperor of the Romans.”<sup>6</sup>

It is essential to understand, though, that the Byzantine Empire is not an ordinary successor of the Greco-Roman culture and structures; Byzantium is primarily a Christian Empire, the first Christian temporary power ever established, the Orthodoxy being the cement that unified the various populations (which now would be considered different nations), fastening them into one – the traditional society of the Orthodox Christians, governed by the emperor who is the vicar of God on Earth. Hence, the appellation “Rumi” became for Muslims the equivalent for “Christians.”

If the Orthodox religion is the force that consolidates and unites the Empire, it also causes, with its increasing intransigency and rigidity, the flight of valuable spiritual and intellectual elements. This is the tragedy of the traditional societies. The foundation of a regular traditional kingdom or city

<sup>5</sup> Byzantium is Roman in its customs, Hellenic in its culture, and Oriental in its methods of government. See Louis Bréhier, *Vie et mort de Byzance*, Albin Michel, 1969, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Introductions* in Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium*, Prentice Hall, 1998 and in Charles Delvoye, *L’art byzantin*, Arthaud, 1967.

implies a sacrifice, that is, a sacred “cutting.” In Latin, we find an Indo-European word *seco*, “to cut”; its root provided the words *sacer*, “saint, sacred,” *sica*, “dagger” and the English *scythe*. The related Latin word *sacrificium*, “sacrifice, immolation,” means “to render sacred” and from there “to perform a sacred rite.” The kingdom’s border or the city’s wall represents the sacred “cutting”; what is inside the wall (or border) designates the “order” (in Greek *cosmos*) and the sacred; what is outside is the “chaos,” the profane and the “darkness.” For a specific traditional society, its capital-city symbolizes the Center of the World, an image of the Supreme Center, the Pole. At the beginning of present humankind there was one and only spiritual Center; together with the evolvement of our cycle, from the Golden Age to the Iron Age, the primordial and only Tradition has multiplied into secondary traditions, all valid, and the unique Center has generated secondary spiritual centers. A paradoxical situation appeared: the different traditional centers started to fight against each other in the name of the absolute Truth, each one considering itself the possessor of the real Tradition and the only sacred heart of the World, while the others were the “chaos” and the profane. In the same way, the Orthodox Byzantine Church, in order to consolidate its structure, started to persecute all the other Christian factions, labeling them as “heresies” and forcing them to find shelter in the neighborhood. The Near East (Islam) became the first beneficiary from this action, the fugitives spreading the Greco-Roman sciences among the Muslims.

The first academic school is founded at Constantinople in year 330, under the high patronage of the emperor Constantine the Great; in 425, under the emperor Theodosius II, it becomes the University of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> Other pagan universities, converted to Christianity, continue to function at Antioch, Alexandria, Beirut, Gaza, and Athens, teaching, among other subjects, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, Music, Natural Sciences, and Medicine. Yet the emperor Justinian closes the University of Athens for its Neoplatonic tendencies, and after that, the *magisters* are recruited from among the Orthodox Christians exclusively; as a result, valuable teachers migrate to Gundeshapur, in Persia, which becomes a famous Islamic learning center. The same thing happened some decades earlier, when the emperor Zeno closed the School of Edessa, in 489, the Nestorians who were teaching there being forced to relocate to the Orient.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Sherrard, *Byzantium*, Time-Life Books, 1966, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> See René Taton (editor), *Histoire générale des sciences*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1966, tome I, part III, chap. II (the Arabic Science).

During the birth of Islam, the Orthodox Christian Church is already shaken by the diverse “heresies.” The new Islamic religion is seen as no more than a new Christian “heresy,” which comes to enhance the dangerous influence of others upon the stability and unity of the Byzantine Christian Church. As a defensive reaction, Byzantium has to banish the pagan sciences taught at the universities, and Byzantine education becomes completely controlled by the Church. This is the historical moment when Greco-Roman learning starts to migrate from the Near West to the Near East, i. e., from Orthodox Christianity to Islam. Moreover, the expansion of the Islamic power causes the universities at Alexandria, Beirut and Antioch to fall under Muslim domination.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously enough, for a long time, despite the divergences between the Byzantines and Muslims, the Near East and Near West are very close; in comparison, a fissure separates the Middle West and Near West, a fissure that will become a precipice full of intolerance and adversity. For that reason, the Islam will be the main beneficiary of the Greco-Roman heritage. During the Umayyad dynasty and then, the Abbasid dynasty, Byzantine artists and scholars, together with the Persian ones, have an important role in organizing the Islamic empire. The official documents of the Saracens are written in Greek; the Arabic coins are similar to the Byzantine ones; the Byzantine architects and masons build mosques; soldiers, deserting the Byzantine army, become generals of the Muslims; Byzantine women become mothers of caliphs. The famous St. John of Damascus is a high dignitary at the Umayyad court, and Nestorians and Monophysites enjoy complete religious freedom in the Islamic territories, a freedom they cannot have in Byzantium.

The Byzantine learning will join the Persian and Hindu contributions, everything being melted and remolded into a new shape, specifically Islamic; the Islam, assimilating this rich heritage, will elaborate its own Muslim sciences, in this form the knowledge being transmitted, particularly during the Crusades, to the Middle West. The Arabic scientific *corpus* is significantly indebted, despite the importance of Persian and Hindu influences, to Byzantine scholarship; in his *Tabaqât al-Umam*, Sa'îd al-Andalusî says that India is “the source of wisdom, law and political art,” the master in the science of numbers, geometry, astronomy and medicine, yet after that, he names the ancient Greeks

<sup>9</sup> We must not, though, simplify too much the Byzantine religious history. The times of the synods are very troubled and hazy times. Of course, to stabilize the Orthodox religion, the emperor and the heads of the Church had to fight against the pagans (Bréhier 28), and condemned the Christian deviations, like the doctrines of Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, and of Arius. The Arian heresy had spread among the Goths and other Teutonic tribes, so when emperor Justin, in 524, banished the Arians, the Empire lost the Germanic support (Bréhier 31). For that reason, the intransigency was alternated with tolerance, strong attempts being made to convert the Monophysites to the official Orthodox dogma, and for many years the Monophysitism heresy was allowed at Constantinople, even if censured in Syria and Egypt, in hope of a chimerical conciliation (Bréhier 33, 53).

as “the men of the highest rank, the most respected scholars” (Taton, *ibid.*). The first translations from Greek to Arabic take place during the Umayyad dynasty, at the end of seventh century, when – says Ibn al-Adim – the caliph Khalid called from Egypt some Greek philosophers who could speak Arabic perfectly, and asked them to translate, from Greek and Coptic, some books of Alchemy.<sup>10</sup> An important role in spreading the Near Western learning, through translations, is played by the two famous intellectual centers, Nisibis and Gundeshapur. In the Assyrian city of Nisibis, a Byzantine Christian school was founded at the beginning of the fourth century, and St. Ephraem Syrus was in charge of it; when the Persians conquered Nisibis, the school moved to Edessa, and later, when the emperor Zeno closed it, moved back to Nisibis. The school became a great Nestorian university, and contributed to the translation in Syriac of Greek treatises. Gundeshapur, the academic Neoplatonic center, also initiated numerous translations from Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates, Euclid and others. The learning and the teachers will migrate in time to the Arabian Peninsula and to Baghdad. The Arabs themselves will hunt for the Greek manuscripts from the Byzantine Empire, and sometimes they will ask for books for war compensation (Clot, *Ibid.*).

The Arabic learning *corpus*, in this way consolidated, will radiate together with the Islamic expansion to the Middle West, first to Spain, Sicily and south of Italy, and then to Charlemagne’s empire, being translated into Latin. Even today we are able to see vivid evidence of the Islamic influence just considering the terminology we use in our Western sciences.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the Byzantine civilization also had a direct influence upon Western Europe. Nicholas of Cusa is an eminent example of this influence. In the spring of 1437, the Pope sent Nicholas to Constantinople as an official envoy; thus, he had a chance not only to learn directly about the Byzantine culture, but also to discover the Orthodox spirituality, visiting the sacred Mount Athos and reviewing the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. Cusanus confesses that, when he was on the ship returning from Constantinople, he received the divine grace and light.

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<sup>10</sup> André Clot, *Haroun al-Rachid et le temps des Mille et Une Nuits*, Fayard, 1986, chap. IX.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the following sciences: Alchemy and Chemistry (even the word “alchemy” has an Arabic origin; besides, we mention: alcohol – *al-koh'l*, alembic – *al-anbiq*, alkali – *al-qali*); Astronomy and Navigation (azimuth – *as-sumūt*, nadir, zenith, Algol – *al-ghūl*, Aldebaran – *al-dabarān*, admiral – *amir*); Mathematics (algebra, algorithm); and so on. The Arabic influence in Mathematics is very strong. In the time of Charlemagne, the Middle West assimilates the abacus, the astrolabe and the Arabic figures or “ciphers” (in French, *chiffre*), of Hindu origin, where the word “cipher” derives from Arabic *al-sifr* = void, zero. The great Arab mathematician Ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, teacher at the “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad, a university that followed the model of Alexandria, introduces the decimal system and elaborates the first book of Algebra (Arabic *al-djabar*); the word algorithm comes as an alteration of the name al-Khwarizmi. For the Arabic contribution to Mathematics see Carl B. Boyer, *A History of Mathematics*, John Wiley & Sons, 1991, p. 225 ff.

The Palatine Chapel, *Capella Palatina*, built in the center of Charlemagne's capital-city, Aix-la-Chapelle, is another exquisite example. The Chapel's architecture imitates the Byzantine church of San Vitale of Ravenna, which, in its turn, copies the basilica of Hagia Sophia of Constantinople. When Constantinople became the new center of the Roman Empire, it was called "the New Rome" (Sherrard 31) or "the second Rome" (Mathews 19). Constantinople is, like Rome, a sacred center, the city being founded on seven hills (Sherrard 33), obeying the laws of the sacred geography and symbolizing the seven *dwipas* of the Hindu tradition.<sup>12</sup> Aix-la-Chapelle (or Aachen) was also called by Charlemagne's contemporaries, "the second Rome" or even "the New Jerusalem," which means an implicit admittance of the Near Western influence, especially when Alcuin calls Aachen "the New Athens," considering Charlemagne's educational program.<sup>13</sup>

There is a fundamental difference, though, between Rome and Constantinople: "the New Rome" is a Christian capital, the first Christian official center, having the church built at the heart of the city, while in Rome the Christian temples were located on the outskirts (Mathews 20, Sherrard 34). In this respect, Constantinople is not an imitation of Rome, while Aix-la-Chapelle is a reflection of Constantinople; in fact, a superb illustration of the fundamental meaning of Tradition is unveiling before us. The essential difference between a profane and a sacred society is that the profane one has cut its ties with the Principle; on the contrary, in a traditional society, every gesture, every activity is a sacred one, imitating what the gods did *in illo tempore*, at the beginning of the world.<sup>14</sup> A traditional person knows that mankind, at the moment of birth, was blessed with a holy lore, the Tradition descended from Heaven, which continued to live in all the day-to-day activities. For the profane person, this descent is just a legend. Etymologically, the word "tradition" describes this uninterrupted transmission of the divine lore and principles from the beginning of our human cycle; any break in this chain of transmission causes the fatal fall from sacred to profane. For that reason, Rome has considered itself the direct continuator of Troy, and Troy – it is well known – is the symbol of the spiritual center, a projection of the supreme Center. Aeneas carried to Italy the Palladium – the sacred statue of Pallas Athena, which had descended from Heaven as a divine token of Troy; this story symbolizes the transmission of the sacred lore from Troy to Rome,

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<sup>12</sup> René Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, Gallimard, 1981, pp. 57-8.

<sup>13</sup> Richard E. Sullivan, *Aix-la-Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne*, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1963, pp. 31-2, 150.

<sup>14</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Gallimard, 1979, p. 34.

the Palladium, like the Holy Grail, being a symbol of the Tradition itself. In the same way, Constantinople becomes the continuator of Rome, Constantine the Great bringing the Palladium from Rome to the new capital (Sherrard 33), a gesture that reveals the unbroken transmission of the sacred Tradition, even if Rome is a “pagan” society and Constantinople represents a Christian one.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Aix-la-Chapelle lacks this continuity, and its epithet of “second Rome,” like Charlemagne’s title of “Roman emperor,” is just an imitation.

Constantine the Great is the patron of many churches, the most important ones being Hagia Sophia, in the center of the city, and the Church of the Holy Apostles (Sherrard 34)<sup>16</sup>; in 532, the emperor Justinian rebuilds the famous *basilica*, Hagia Sophia, as it is known today. The name of the *basilica* deserves attention.<sup>17</sup> The Near West proves to be not only the inheritor of the Greco-Roman civilization, not only the dwelling of the first Christian empire, but also a “kingdom of wisdom.” The marriage between the Orthodox religion and Sophia, illustrated exoterically by the name of the most important church, suggests the existence of an esoteric kernel and of an intellectual tradition. And we are not talking about the outside appearance of the Byzantine monasticism.

The Orthodox monastic life is an important coordinate of the Near West. The sacred Mount Athos with its inaccessible monasteries is famous. The Orthodox monks secluded in caves or in the desert are well known. Monasteries built like fortresses are legendary and could represent a fine illustration of the Orthodox spiritual path.<sup>18</sup> In contrast with Islam or Catholicism, the Orthodoxism, after the chimerical attempt to attract the

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<sup>15</sup> Note the same continuity in the case of the sacred temples. The Christian churches are built over the ruins of the pagan temples.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the basilica of St. Mark in Venice is a replica of the Holy Apostles church. The famous icon of Blessed Virgin of Nikopoia, placed on St. Mark’s altar of the north transept, carried by the Venetians into battles at the head of the army, is, in fact, a Byzantine icon abducted from Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade.

<sup>17</sup> The churches in Thessaloniki, Edessa, Ohrid, Nicaea, and the Kiev’s cathedral are also called Hagia Sophia (Mathews 9, 164, and John Meyendorff, Byzantine Hesychasm, Variorum Reprints, London, 1974, p. 259). Moreover, the capital-city of Bulgaria is Sophia, Bulgaria belonging to the posterity of Byzantium.

<sup>18</sup> Monasticism flourished in the Byzantine Empire; in the six-century, there were 85 monasteries in Constantinople alone; books about the lives of great monks became best sellers in Byzantium (Sherrard 27). At the same time, the Near West, and especially Constantinople, is a huge reliquary (Sherrard 34). Many valorous Christian relics form a holy web, the infrastructure for the activity of the divine blessing, proving that Constantinople is a “New Jerusalem,” an image of Heaven (Sherrard 96), the relics being the support for Heaven’s spiritual influences. Constantinople, as a genuine spiritual center and image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, was girdled with formidable walls, the sacred “cutting,” which protected and separated the holy city from the exterior darkness and chaos. In a fifth-century ivory plaque (Sherrard 15), the “New Rome” is represented as an empress wearing a crown symbolizing the walls of Constantinople.

Monophysites and others, never promoted an aggressive proselytism. On the contrary, the Orthodox monks, like the Hindu seers or other genuine initiates, try to hide and escape the curiosity of the external world, answering questions very reluctantly, and often playing the role of the ignorant, the same way the Tibetans did when asked about the Lord of the World.<sup>19</sup>

The Orthodox seers built a strong wall around their inner spirituality, similar to the ramparts of the monasteries: it is the sacred “cutting,” separating the light from darkness, the wisdom from ignorance. The supreme Sophia reigns inside this wall of silence, the churches’ name being just an external reflection. If the monks, and not the official clergy, are the main athletes of the spiritual domain (Sherrard 99), the monastic life is also just a robe for something much more profound, the divine and everlasting wisdom.

It is interesting to compare the name of the Near Western and Middle Western churches. In Western Europe, the cathedrals are usually called “The Church of Our Lady,” or in French, *Notre Dame*. Orthodoxy praised the Virgin equally, calling her “the Mother of God,” the Orthodox icons with the Mother of God being famous. There are also churches bearing the name “Mother of God,” yet the most important church is called Hagia Sophia. Obviously, “the Holy Wisdom” is the equivalent of *Notre Dame*, of the Virgin. In the Middle Ages, in Western Europe, the Virgin is a symbol for esoteric spirituality, she is *Madonna Intelligenza*. Much earlier, in the Near West, the divine Sophia became part of the Christian tradition, expression of an esoteric core. Yet only secondary “the Holy Wisdom” is in the Near West an equivalent for the Mother of God; in the first place, it represents Jesus himself, as *Logos* (Meyendorff 259 ff.). “Wisdom has built herself a house, she has erected her seven pillars” (Proverbs 9:1)<sup>20</sup>; in the same way, Constantinople on its seven hills is the “city of wisdom” and the Orthodox Church is the house of God’s Wisdom. The Holy Sophia came down as Jesus, the first earthly “house of wisdom” being the Mother of God, the Virgin, the holy womb of the *Logos*. An old Syriac manuscript presents an icon of the Mother of God carrying Jesus inside an oval form (the Word’s Egg), the Virgin having king Solomon at her right and the Holy Wisdom at her left (Meyendorff 263). Solomon himself is an emblem of Wisdom, being considered the wisest king and the builder of the Temple. And his name is related to Peace.

When Constantine the Great laid the foundations of Hagia Sophia, he also built another church, which became the first cathedral of the “New Rome,”

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<sup>19</sup> Marco Pallis’ critics regarding Guénon’s “Le Roi du Monde” and its lack of historical reality are a result and an example of this tactic of dissimulation. See René Guénon, *Le Dossiers H, L’Age d’Homme*, 1997, p. 145 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Note the Masonic symbolism.

and was called Hagia Eirene, “Holy Peace” (Mathews 21). Sophia, the wisdom, is strongly related to Peace. In different traditions, Sophia and Peace are the ingredients of the Heart, when the spiritual realization or Liberation (Hindu *moksha*) is completed. In Hindu tradition, the greatest spiritual master, Sankarâchârya, wears a name related to “quietness” and “peace” (Sanskrit *santi*).<sup>21</sup> In Chinese tradition, the legendary *Huang-ti*, the Yellow Emperor, is also called “Peace.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Melchisedek is “the king of Salem,” i. e., the “king of Peace”; also Solomon means “the peacemaker.”<sup>22</sup>

René Guénon, explaining the Tradition, calls “non-manifestation” what the Hindu tradition refers to as *Turiya*, “the Fourth,” the supreme state of *Ātmâ* (Mândûkya Up. I.7). For our rational mind it is almost impossible to describe the non-manifestation, the domain of *Brahma nirguna* and of Meister Eckhart’s Godhead. There are, though, some characteristics that can suggest this supreme state, such as: silence, void, non-action (the Chinese *wu-wei*) and complete quietness. Sophia and Peace belong to this state too, and the fact that the first important churches of the Near West were named Hagia Sophia and Hagia Eirene makes us wonder. Yet it is no secret that the Orthodoxy covers a sacred kernel, which is known in the outside world as Hesychasm, a name derived from Greek *hesychia*, “quietness, peace.”

In our modern times, the profane world and what Guénon would have called “the counter-initiation forces” tried to undermine the genuine traditional doctrines by adopting them in a blasphemous way. One after another, Yoga, Zen and Sufism, became popularized in the West, numerous dubious books and articles being written on this subject, these very orthodox spiritual paths being altered and contaminated with modernism and scientism, and presented to the large public as a kind of “psycho-physical experience.” Fortunately, even if there were some attempts, the Hesychasm escaped these attacks, and there are reasons to believe that it still shelters a hidden and unaltered initiatory kernel of the Holy Sophia. Discussing the initiatory possibilities in the West, Guénon says that

On the part of the Orthodox Church, there is the Hesychasm, which apparently has preserved all the characteristics of a real initiation, but, in fact, this one is almost inaccessible, being extremely difficult to find a qualified guide; for that, you have to go to Mount Athos, which is its

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<sup>21</sup> His name means “the peacemaker.” See Paul Martin-Dubost, Çankara, Seuil, 1973, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, in any tradition, the most important role of a ruler was to establish and maintain peace. We may add that, for example, in the mythology of the Norsemen, Frey, the god of peace, came down on earth again and again, impersonating kings of Sweden and Denmark. His son, Frodi, ruled Denmark in the time of Jesus, and he was called “Peace.” See H. A. Guerber, Myths of the Norsemen, Dover Publ., 1992, p. 128.

center, and be admitted to live there for a time, and gain the monks' trust to obtain from one of them the transmission and the technical instructions. (Le Dossiers H, p. 293)

Hesychasm, like any other esoteric path, cannot be restricted by chronology or geography, and it is safe to assume that it appeared at the same time with the Christian tradition, even if the modern scholars consider Hesychasm a mystical movement developed mainly on Mount Athos and promoted in the fourteen-century by St. Gregory Palamas. It is true that St. Gregory Palamas, in his controversy with Barlaam, unveiled the theoretical essence of Hesychasm, yet the effective realization and spiritual initiation remained further hidden and protected.

The Hesychastic doctrine is in full accordance with all the other great world traditions and has as a goal the Supreme Identity, the Liberation, expressed as a direct and immediate vision of the Superluminous Night, that is, of the non-manifestation or of *Brahma nirguna*. The Hesychastic initiate is a seer who follows *jñāna-mārga*, "the way of knowledge," a knowledge identical with the divine vision of the "tenebrous light."<sup>23</sup> And not the physical eye is the instrument of this vision, but the "eye of the heart," like in Sufism. "The Prayer of the Heart" plays a major role in the Hesychasm, indicating the siege of the Holy Sophia and of the divine Eye.<sup>24</sup> Even if the *apophatic* theology, similar to the Hindu doctrine of *neti, neti*, "not this, not this," is more appropriate as a way of spiritual knowledge, and high above the "affirmative theology," the light of the negative theology is ultimately also a discursive reasoning in which the mind develops its thinking, negating all the attributes assigned improperly to God. The only adequate way for directly seeing the Divine Light is above and beyond the mind and individuality, is the Intellectual vision obtained by quieting (*hesychia*) the mind and the soul, and realizing the Superluminous Night within the Heart. This Superintelligible Light, perceived during the enduring Prayer of the Heart, and seen in an unseen way and known in an unknown way, unveils not God but Super-God (*hyper-theos*), identical to Meister Eckhart's Godhead.<sup>25</sup> It is the Light of transfiguration: Jesus' "face shone like the sun and his clothes became as

<sup>23</sup> The root *vid* means at the same time "to see" (Latin *videre*) and "knowledge" (Sanskrit *vidyā*).

<sup>24</sup> There is another reason why king Solomon was so appreciated, besides his connection with Sophia and Peace, and the building of the Temple. "The Lord gave Solomon immense wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sand of the seashore. The wisdom of Solomon surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 5:29). "The Lord said, 'I give you a heart wise and shrewd as none before you has had and none will have after you'" (1 Kings 3:12). Solomon is wise and peaceful because he has a divine and infinite heart in which Sophia and Hesychia found shelter.

<sup>25</sup> See *Filocalia*, Ed. Institut. Biblic, Bucuresti, 1977, vol. 7, p. 266 ff.

white as the light" (Matthew 17:2); it is, with respect to the teaching of the Psalms, the vision of God, "clothed in majesty and glory, wrapped in a robe of light" (Ps. 104:2); it is the absolute Light, without alteration or shadow of a change (James 1:17).

The Vision of Light within the Heart, in Hesychasm, is identical with the Supreme Identity of Sufism, and St. Gregory Palamas stresses that the vision of the Superintelligible Light implies union with God. The spiritual realization means, in Hesychasm, a "unifying perfection" and the "deific sharing of One" as a spiritual vision with the inner pastoral Eye, that is, with the Eye of the Heart.<sup>26</sup> In Hindu or Islamic tradition, the liberating Knowledge signifies the absolute identity between the knower, the known and the act of knowledge. In the same way, the Hesychast who surpasses individuality, reaching the Superluminous Night and realizing the inconceivable union with God – says St. Gregory Palamas – is himself light and sees the light with light. If the Hesychastic initiate looks at himself (as subject) he sees light; if he looks at the object of his vision, he sees light again; and the means of seeing it, is the light. That is the perfect union and vision (Meyendorff 202).

This sacred kernel, which is still hiding in the Near West, was so essential and fundamental for the Orthodox Christianity, that in the six-century, when Hagia Sophia became the heart of Constantinople, Byzantine iconography insisted on presenting a symbolical scene called "Healing of the Blind." Jesus applies a finger to one eye of a blind man (Mathews 100-4), a gesture that illustrates the opening of the inner Eye. Moreover, the legend says that the first founder of Constantinople was Byzas who asked the Delphic Oracle where to establish a new city, and the Oracle told him: "Opposite the blind" (Sherrard 31). The Delphic Oracle was right again: Constantinople, the spiritual center of the Near West, unifying the Holy Sophia, the Peace and the Prayer of the Heart, became precisely the "opposite of the blind." And even if today the modern civilization has taken over, the Near West hides somewhere, in its depths, the ever-young Sophia.

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<sup>26</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, who had connections with the Hesychasm, wrote a famous book "The Vision of God" in which he says that we perceive God "not with the fleshly eyes, but with the eyes of the mind and understanding" (Nicholas of Cusa, The Vision of God, The Book Tree, 1999, p. 23).