

# The Veil of the Temple: A Study of Christian Initiation\*

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“Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.... And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom....” (Matt. 27:50, 61). This occurrence, which is attested by the three Synoptic Gospels, marks the

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end of Christ's human ministry, in the ordinary sense of the word, since all that follows, from the Resurrection till his final Ascension, is of a miraculous order. Like all sacred events, the portent at the moment of Christ's death on the cross can be regarded from both a historical and a symbolical angle, since the two views do not exclude one another; in the present case it is the symbolism of the occurrence that will chiefly be considered.

It is important to be reminded of what the veil of the temple of Jerusalem served to mark, namely the boundary between the main portion of the sacred building, where all Jews were admitted and which contained the seven-branched candlestick and the altar of sacrifice, and the Holy of Holies, which was quite empty and into which only the officiating priest could enter. When he did so, the priest had to divest himself of his clothes. Voidness of the place and nakedness of the man are both highly significant indications of what the Holy of Holies stood for in the Jewish tradition, namely "the mysteries" or, in other words, *that* of which the knowledge, formless and in-

expressible, can be symbolized only “apophatically,” by an emptying or divestment, as in the present case. Esoterically speaking, this knowledge can refer only to God in His suchness, the divine Selfhood transcending even being.

Whatever lay on the hither side of the veil, on the other hand, represented the tradition in its more exoteric aspects, which are multiple and formally expressible in various ways.

All three evangelists stress the fact that the veil parted “from the top to the bottom,” as if to indicate that the parting was complete and irremediable and that henceforth no definable boundary would exist between the “religious” side of the tradition and the mysterious or, if one so prefers, between the exoteric and esoteric domains. As far as the human eye was able to discern they were to be merged—which does not mean, of course, that their interpenetration would in any way detract from the reality of each domain in its own order, but that any formal expression of their separation was precluded once and for all. For this to be true, it would mean, among other things,

that the central rites of the tradition must be such as to serve this comprehensive purpose and that, with any spiritual “support,” its context alone, and not its form, would provide the clue as to which domain it pertained to in given circumstances.

This gives the key to Christian spirituality as such; it starts from there. Moreover, it can be seen that if the unicity of revelation has needed to be given increasingly diversified expression parallel with the downward march of a cosmic cycle, each traditional form deriving from this necessity must affirm itself, above all, in those particularities that distinguish it from other comparable forms. Thus Islam remains the prophetic tradition par excellence; though the prophetic function itself is universal and though in other cases one may speak of such and such a prophet or prophets, whenever one refers to the Prophet without epithet, one means Mohammed and no one else. Similarly, if one speaks of Enlightenment with a capital E, it is of the Buddha one is thinking; which does not mean, however, that enlightenment does not belong to every avataric founder of a religion—

obviously this function will always imply the supreme knowledge—but its presentation under the form of “supreme awakening,” *samma sambodhi*, nevertheless remains the keynote of Buddhism in a sense not shared by other traditions. With Christianity it is the Incarnation that provides its specific note; in all other cases, one can only speak of such and such an incarnation; emphasis on the word will be relatively more diffuse. The particularity of the Christian tradition, namely its eso-exoteric structure, is closely bound up with this all-absorbing role of Christ as the Incarnate Word, in whom all essential functions are synthesized without distinction of levels.

Apart from this special character attaching to Christianity, it is evident that an authentic and integral tradition could at no time be equated solely with its collective and exoteric aspects. Whatever the nature of the formal framework, the presence (latent or explicit) of the esoteric element is necessary; otherwise the tradition in question would be—to use a common Tibetan expression—“without a heart.” Similarly, a tradition is never reducible to an esoter-

ism alone: hence the need to be firmly anchored in an orthodox exoterism, speaking its scriptural language and making use of such ritual and symbolical supports as it provides; an esoterism trying to function minus its normal exoteric framework would be like a heart without a body, to use the same comparison as before. Belief in the possibility of a quasi-abstract and wholly subjective spiritual life, one in which tradition and the formal expressions of revealed truth do not count, is a typical error of various neo-Vedantist and other kindred movements that have seen the light of day in India and elsewhere in recent times.

Different ways in which the relationship “mysteries-religion” or “esoteric-exoteric” can be given effect to may be profitably studied by comparing some of the principal traditions in this respect. For instance, in the Islamic tradition, where the two domains are defined with particular clarity, “the veil of the temple” has been present from the origins and remains intact to this day; both the law (*shariah*) and the esoterism (*tasawwuf*) are traceable back to the Prophet himself. This is why the Islamic

arrangements have so often been quoted as a model when this subject has come up for consideration.

With Christianity, as we have seen, a rending of the veil previously extant in Judaism marks the final affirmation of the New Covenant in the face of the Old and, with it, the birth of a wholly independent tradition. In the case of Buddhism, on the other hand, the nonexistence of any such veil is laid down from the start. The Buddha's saying that "I have kept nothing back in my closed fist" means that in his tradition the purely spiritual interest alone really counts. Although in Buddhism, as elsewhere, an exoteric organization becomes unavoidable from the moment that the number of adherents begins to increase, the fact itself will always remain, from the Buddhist point of view, a matter for regret—something to be accepted *contre coeur*, under compulsion of events, but never in principle.

Something similar can also be said of Christianity: If Christ's kingdom, by his own definition, is "not of

this world”<sup>1</sup> and if the penalty of casting the pearl of great price before swine is that they “will turn and rend you,” then one of the consequences of the removal of the veil between the Holy of Holies and the more accessible part of the temple (to return to our original symbolism) has been a certain blurring of the distinction between the two domains even where it really applies—the shadow, as it were, of an overwhelming grace. This confusion has expressed itself in the life of the Christian church under the twofold form of a minimizing of what, in spirituality, is most interior and of an excessive focusing of attention on the more exterior and peripheral manifestations of the tradition, and especially on the collective interest treated almost as an end in itself. Carried to extremes, this tendency amply accounts for the fact that it was within the Christian world, and not elsewhere, that the great profanation known as “the modern mental-

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<sup>1</sup> Islam says this in its own way, when it declares that Jesus was the bringer of an esoterism (*baqiqah*) only, whereas the Prophet Mohammed endowed his followers both with the things of this world and with the things of the other world.



ity” first took shape and became, as time went on, the vehicle of “scandal” among all the rest of mankind. If this happening, like everything else of a disastrous kind moreover, comprises its providential aspect, as bringing nearer the dark ending of one cycle and the bright dawning of another, it nevertheless does not escape—by force of *karma* as Buddhists would say—the curse laid by Christ Himself on all “those by whom scandal cometh.” The pain of the cross, in which all must be involved, is there, in anticipation of its triumph.

To return to our original thesis: The special attention called by the evangelists to the fact that the temple veil was split “from top to bottom” shows that this feature of the great portent was an essential one; the veil once torn asunder can *never* be sewn together again. To attempt to do so, on any plea whatsoever, would amount to an arbitrary proceeding, one deserving the epithet “heretical” in the strictest sense of the word. The condemnation by the church of

“gnosticism” has no other meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the fact that the Christian revelation was, before all else, a laying bare of the mysteries had been widely recognized even by theologians having no pretensions to a particularly inward view of things. We have known an ordinary Greek priest say to his congregation that “the entire liturgy is a mystagogy,” using a word belonging to the vocabulary of the ancient Hellenic mysteries and also figuring in the text of the liturgy itself, which does not mean, however, that the man himself will have possessed clear notions of what it really stands for; nevertheless

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<sup>2</sup> It is probable that even in the early days of the church the label “gnostic” was sometimes applied to things not really meriting the intended reproach but appearing to do so by reason of superficial similarities that belied their true nature. In our time the accusation of new-fangled gnosticism has provided an all too convenient weapon against those who have suggested that the gift of intelligence is a vocational qualification for the fullest understanding of the Christian dogmas. This gratuitous confusing of intellectuality with “pride” marks a suicidal tendency of which the concordant reaction is the association, in the profane mind, of the word “religion” with an attitude of perfunctory conformism and credulity.

even such a passing reference is in its way significant. Nor is it devoid of interest to point out in the same connection that the Eastern Church, by comparison with the Latin Church, has preserved both in its rituals and in its usual mode of expression a certain "archaism" that anyone who has attended a celebration of the liturgy in a Greek or Russian church could hardly fail to notice; it is not surprising, then, that in the Eastern rite the sacraments are referred to as "the mysteries," a word that, here again, is charged with associations taken over from the esoteric side of the pre-Christian tradition in the ancient world.

For the sake of greater precision it will perhaps be useful at this point to refresh one's mind as to the characteristics that serve to delineate the esoteric realm and to distinguish it from the exoteric. One might also have said: those that delineate the initiatic realm, since in principle the two things make but one; this second term, however, represents a somewhat more particularized aspect of the same reality, since it is concerned with the methodic realization

of what the esoterism represents in the realm of theory.<sup>3</sup>

In seeking an adequate definition one can safely turn to René Guénon when he said that whereas an exoteric view of things concerns itself with the individual human interest in the largest sense of the word but stops short there, an esoteric view reaches beyond the individuality in order to embrace all the superior states of the being and even aspires to the supreme state—if what really transcends all possibilities of comparison may be so described, by an unavoidable concession to the insufficiency of human language.

If we accept the above definition, then the touchstone of discernment, in the present case, is the *finality* respectively envisaged, whether individual and

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<sup>3</sup> According to its primitive meaning, the Greek word θεωρία (*theoria*) should be rendered as “contemplation”; but today this use of the word hardly survives outside the ranks of those following the Hesychast way. In modern Greek, as in other European languages, “theory” has become a sadly impoverished term, with purely mental associations and opposable, as such, to “practice” with a bias in favor of the latter; and as for “contemplation,” this is well-nigh untranslatable into current speech.

limited, that is to say, or else universal and unlimited by any condition whatsoever. In other words, the finality of a religious exoterism will be the realization (or “recovery,” if one takes into account the Adamic doctrine of the Fall) of the state of “true man,” *Zhen-ren* of the Taoists;<sup>4</sup> whereas esoterism, for its part, will envisage as its ultimate aspiration the realizing of “transcendent man,” goal of the Taoist way, or Universal Man, if one prefers the more familiar term taken from Sufism. It is noteworthy that the realization of the Two Natures, which is the goal of Christian endeavor, to be truly complete would have to include both of the above finalities after the model of Christ Himself, who was “true man” or “second Adam” at the same time as “true God”; the

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<sup>4</sup> In practice, a point of view that a priori limits its own scope to a human finality is unlikely to realize the perfection of the human order itself, for a habit of taking the short view tends to restrict a man’s horizon within ever narrower limits; the end of this road is an out-and-out profane mentality. The esoterist, on the other hand, through focusing his aim beyond all limitations, is able to take the finality of religious exoterism “in his stride,” as it were, and this is the surest way to realize it.

term “christification” might well be used to express this supreme ideal.

When it comes to “initiatic method,” designed to foster spiritual realization at all its degrees, it is important not to lose sight of the very wide range of variation in initiatic practice, as between different traditions. In this field, no less than in others, each tradition exhibits its own peculiarities, a fact that does not affect the general principles governing initiatic life but that nevertheless forbids one to drive analogy, as from one to another, too far; and still less does it encourage one to systematize a given pattern of initiation to the point of making of that pattern an absolute test of authenticity or otherwise. Provided one does not exceed the limits of fair comparison, however, there is undoubted profit to be derived from a parallel study of initiatic procedure as found in different traditions; when doing so we shall chiefly be concerned with those features that have a direct or indirect bearing on the question of Christian initiation to which we have gradually been leading up.

Turning first to the Buddhist world: In Tibet it

can be said that practically every spiritual activity, down to the smallest detail, is geared to an initiatic purpose, either directly or else indirectly as in the case of “scholastic” studies in the Gelugpa Order, for instance, to which the Dalai Lama belongs. Anything directly relating to *method*, however, will involve an initiatic act of some kind; even to open a book concerned with method requires its initiatory *lung* or ritual authorization imparted by a lama of the spiritual family to which the prospective initiate intends to be attached, and each subsequent stage in the process will likewise be marked by its appropriate *lung*. In Tibet everything is calculated to foster and facilitate the initiatic life for those who aspire to it; the supremacy of this ideal is recognized by all, from the head of the government down to the beggar at the street corner.

Over and above the normal initiatic arrangements, which in essentials do not differ from what is to be found in India or other places, Tibetan spirituality includes a large number of special initiations known as *wang-kur* (from *wang* = power and *kur*-

*wa* = to confer), each of which gives access to one particular form of methodic meditation focused on a *mandala* or symbolical diagram disposed around a central divinity, a combination of sacred geometry and traditional iconography of forms, colors, gestures, letters, and the like. Visualization of such a *mandala*, under the direction of one's guru, is one of the common features of tantric technique; it is not everyone, however, who, after receiving the *wang* empowering him to meditate on such and such a *mandala*, actively puts this into effect. Many try to amass such *wangs* simply as a means of stimulating their own pious fervor; such a "quantitative" attitude to the acquisition of *wangs*, though not contrary to the letter of the traditional rules, does evidently depart from the spirit of the institution, and for this reason it is condemned by informed opinion both on the score of "spiritual diffuseness" and also as liable to produce, in extreme cases, dissonances of an unpredictable order.

In any case, this shows that in Tibet, as elsewhere, a sharp distinction has to be made between



the *mutabarrik* (to borrow a convenient Sufi term meaning “blessed”), the man who receives initiation from mixed motives not fully in tune with its intrinsic purpose, and the *salik* (traveler), namely the man who proceeds with full intent, keeping the end of the road in view. All one can say is that in Tibet prior to the Chinese Communist irruption the number of *salikun* was relatively high as compared with most other places; there was little sign of decadence in this respect.

Returning to the *mutabarrik* type as commonly found in the Tibetan world, an important thing to be noted is that the initiatic act, though clearly recognized as such and though its virtuality always remains what it is in an objective sense, is nevertheless envisaged subjectively in a *quasi-exoteric* sense and with a view to benefits that do not exceed the individual sphere—such as piety in this life and a “happy rebirth” in the next—a fact that by definition forbids one to apply the epithet “esoteric” to the religious manifestation in question. Yet the initiatic possibility is undeniably there, if unexploited.

This discrepancy of attitude is carried to its furthest point in the great mass *wang-kurs* that take place from time to time. At these gatherings, which thousands may attend, the initiating lama goes through the motion of conferring the wang and preaches the appropriate doctrine before the crowd, though few of the participants will be known to him personally either before or after the event; no question of “qualification” can possibly arise under these circumstances. A case in point was the conferring, by the Dalai Lama when he was staying close to the Indian border in 1950, of the “initiation of the Great Compassionate,” an eleven-faced form of Avalokitesvara, whose *mandala* is specially associated with the Gelugpa, the “Yellow-Hat” Order of Monks. Vast numbers of people from all the country round and from both sides of the border journeyed to Dung-kar (White Conch) Monastery, where the sacred sovereign was staying, in order to receive the wang in question; I myself would gladly have accompanied them, but by that time the political obstacles had become insurmountable. The fervor aroused among

the people was tremendous, and to this extent it was no small spiritual occasion. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that those who received the initiation were, almost without exception, simple *mutabarrikun*; if an odd *salik* was to be found among them, his presence could not have been detected by any recognizable sign.

But even so, the initiation itself was perfectly regular according to all traditional canons; it was open to any of those who, on that occasion, received the *wang* of the Great Compassionate to present himself then or at any subsequent period to a competent lama in order to put into effect the method pertaining to that particular *mandala*. No question of validity could possibly arise in this connection, nor was even the humblest *mutabarrik* in the crowd unaware of the fact that this was an initiation and not something else and that the possibility existed of its being someday turned more fully to account. We have described this happening at considerable length, as shedding a certain light on the ambivalent use of an undoubtedly initiatic act and therefore also on certain aspects of

the Christian tradition.

We must next consider one or two features of Japanese Buddhism that are of special interest from the point of view that concerns us here; but first we must notice a fact of a general nature, namely that in Japan, despite the obviously initiatic character of so much to be found there, it is only the tantric sects,<sup>5</sup> of which Shingon and Tendai are the chief, that administer an initiation under the form most familiar to us, specifiable, that is to say, in terms of time and occasion, of “before initiation” and “after.” As regards method, Shingon is closely akin to Tibetan spiritual practice, a common feature being the use of *mandalas* composed of divine portraiture, Sanskrit letters, and other symbols also found in Tibet. Apart from the cases just mentioned, the remaining Japanese sects

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<sup>5</sup> For much of the information to be found in this article we have to thank Miss Carmen Blacker, lecturer in Japanese at Cambridge and herself a Buddhist; through her kind help we were able to obtain directly from Japan authoritative answers to a number of questions that otherwise would have remained in doubt.

do not confer a formal initiation when attaching a new disciple to the line or subsequently; a spiritual master may admit or reject a prospective disciple, and he may also terminate his discipleship at any time if dissatisfied with his progress. Otherwise the disciple, once accepted, will be swept, as it were, into the spiritual current more or less quickly and completely but without this fact having to be confirmed by a set ritual act of any kind. It is the process as a whole that constitutes initiatic participation, the rest depending upon the aptitude of the disciple and the grace of his master, in which respect Japanese practice does not differ from that of other traditions.

Coming now to the best-known (and least understood by Europeans) of the Japanese sects, namely Zen, we find there a method in which an extreme stringency of discipline and the use of apparently senseless conundrums (*koans*) are combined for the purpose of ridding the mind of the habit of conceptualism, thus allowing the intuitive faculty to be released. That a spiritual training carried out on these lines constitutes an initiatic process, in the most rig-

orous sense of the word, will have become plainly apparent to anyone who has read, for instance, Herzigel's account of his own training in archery under a Zen master.<sup>6</sup>

The same applies to other forms of Zen training, as described in various books; they one and all display a character that by no stretch could be described as “exoteric,” but without this entailing a rite of access of the kind that would be deemed indispensable elsewhere—unless one is to regard acceptance by the master and the administering by him to the disciple of his first *koan* as tantamount to “initiation” as we know it; this, however, was not the view of my informant. Rather would it seem as if the whole process is to be described as “initiatic,” without any particu-

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<sup>6</sup> One can contrast with this the initiatic practice in the Corporation of Archers in ancient Turkey. There initiation took a perfectly normal form according to the Sufi model, with the shaykh of the corporation whispering the Name in the ear of the disciple while at the same time placing his fingers on the “grip” of the bow, where the two halves from which the Tartar type of bow (including the Japanese) is constructed are “unified”; the symbolism needs no explaining!

lar incident in the course of it being singled out as being more essential than others. In a sense this absence of a specific initiation goes with the attitude of *jiriki* (own power) extremism apparent in Zen.<sup>7</sup>

Though the spiritual master and the method he imparts are everything in fact, the theoretical emphasis remains always on the personal effort of the pupil—hence the abysmal misunderstandings to which Zen so readily lends itself in the minds of Occidentals with their habitually individualistic bias. Privileged are those few who have found the way to becoming naturalized in Japanese wisdom to the point of overcoming their own congenital self-obsession as well as the ratiocinative habit that Zen in particular sets out to eradicate. We are not among those who believe that “Zen for the West” corresponds to a widespread possibility. Attempts to publicize Zen methods, by Westernized Japanese,

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<sup>7</sup> For the *jiriki* (own power) and *tariki* (other power) types of Japanese spirituality to which Zen and Jodo respectively belong see the appendix of my book *The Way and the Mountain* (London: Peter Owen, 1960).

have only resulted, in most cases, in an increase of the existing intellectual disorder in the West; while a number of earnest souls, lured into the pursuit of a, by them, unrealizable ideal, have been deterred thereby from seeking other ways, in Buddhism or in traditions nearer home, better suited to their own temperamental needs.

We must now consider the case of another Japanese sect that has still more to tell us than Zen in relation to the subject of the present article. We are referring to Jodo (Pure Land) and its associated sects, in which Invocation of the Buddha of Light, Amitabha (Japanese *Amida*) is the principal, and indeed the only essential, support used. Here again there is no formal initiation, though one would have expected that a conferring of the formula to be invoked, known as *nembutsu* and enshrining the Name of Amida, would be just the occasion for such an initiatic rite. In point of fact, however, any person may invoke with this formula at will whether he be resorting for instruction to a guru of the line or not. On the doctrinal side, it is noteworthy that Jodo and



its sister sect Jodo Shinshu (Pure Land true religion) of which Shinran was the Patriarch, have often been compared to Christianity because of their devotional character and because of the role of Savior attributed to Amida thanks to whose “vow” and by whose grace alone the disciple hopes to enter the Pure Land after his earthly life is over. Painted scrolls showing the Buddha Amida and his heavenly attendants on their way down to welcome his devotee into paradise rank among the most deeply moving examples of Japanese art.

Despite the fact that the Pure Land schools display this strongly devotional character, it would nevertheless be a mistake to label them without more ado as a way of *bhakti* (to use a well-known Hindu term), not only because all branches of Buddhism, whatever may be their outward form, remain in principle ways of knowledge, as laid down in the beginning but also because the Pure Land teachings, if one looks at them more closely, represent a synthesis of devotional and sapiential elements that fully satisfies the needs of a

spirituality having an intellectual goal in view.<sup>8</sup>

The Pure Land itself, symbolizing the goal, admits of interpretation at two levels: In a more outward sense it is the Western Paradise of Amitabha, sojourn in which both is blissful and does not entail further wandering in the Round of Existence, *samsara*; what it envisages is a “deferred liberation” comparable to the *krama-mukti* of Hinduism. But the very name “Pure Land” and the fact that this was substituted for the more usual form “Western Paradise” shows

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<sup>8</sup> We have it on the authority of a distinguished priest of Jodo Shin, the Venerable Shojun Bando, that in Shin Buddhism the *guru-chela* relationship has been strongly upheld in the case of those who wish to proceed far along that road. For our benefit he quoted Rennyō, a saint of the fifteenth century, as saying: “Your faith is not consummated without the guru’s guidance,” and also, “Five factors are required for your rebirth in the Pure Land, namely anterior (good) *karma*, guru, light, faith, and Name.” All the evidence, positive and negative, goes to show that in this branch of the Buddhist tradition the line of demarcation between a fully esoteric and initiatic and a *bhaktic* and even a frankly exoteric participation remains pretty indefinite; nevertheless, in any given case it would be easy to say to which category a man’s spiritual activity really belongs.

that something more lies behind this first interpretation, for where total purity is to be found, there is *selfhood*—the two things are really identical. It is admixture with its resulting internal stresses that necessitates *samsaric* existence. On this showing, the Pure Land can only mean Nirvana—anything less is excluded by the very form of the name.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise put, one can say that the Western Paradise represents a relative purity, which from the point of view of the impurity of the world appears quasi-absolute, whereas the Pure Land as such is pure in an unqualified sense.

This dual interpretation implicit in the name “Pure Land” inevitably evokes a similar possibility

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<sup>9</sup> A single telling quotation from the Patriarch Shinran himself will suffice to clinch the point: “Rebirth (in the Pure Land]... is complete unsurpassed enlightenment.” We have it on good authority that in Japan nowadays the intellectual level among Shin followers is, on an average, rather low; little more than worldly benefits is envisaged in many cases. Nevertheless, the highest possibility is there for the seeking; but men must have eyes to see and ears to hear or this ever-present opportunity will pass them by.

of transposition as applying to the Christian term “salvation,” since this too is habitually described as a passage to paradise; this state beyond all suffering and in “proximity” to the Divine corresponds very closely to the Western Paradise of the Buddhists. Nevertheless, in the Christian case, as in the other and with equal logic, the “salvation” that is offered admits of two interpretations, the one indicating a state that is more or less conditioned (depending on which paradise the soul that has been “saved” is called upon to occupy) and the other referring to an entirely unconditional realization, one where it is no longer possible to think of an individual being at all, but only selfhood in the transcendent sense; this has been pointed out before by other writers. Admittedly, the word “salvation” for practically everyone nowadays, and probably for the majority even in primitive times, does carry a more or less restricted meaning in fact, but this does not authorize one to conclude that it does so in principle. It must be remembered that “salvation” is the term Christians have always used; its authority goes back to the Scrip-

tures and to Christ Himself. It would be surprising indeed if it implied any restriction of finality in an absolute sense. There is really nothing to astonish us in the equivocal usage to which the idea of "salvation" has given rise, seeing that this agrees with the bivalency of the Christian spiritual language under all its forms consequent upon the rending of the temple veil.

We have referred to primitive times, but even in later times can one imagine a Meister Eckhart using the word "salvation" with any thought but its transcendent meaning? For such as he, a paradise would indeed be "the sage's prison," as the Sufis say. Those who have seen as far as Eckhart may have been comparatively few, but their mere existence is enough to prove the case. All one need say really, in this connection, is that for those for whom the veil is truly parted "from top to bottom" salvation will bear the sense of total deliverance, while for those (the many) whose more or less obscured minds still cause them to imagine a veil where none really is, the same word "salvation" will evidently bear the limited connotation

we have become accustomed to take for granted as the only possible one—somewhat abusively, however, both because this restricts scriptural and traditional usage and also because we have thereby been led into systematizing what by rights should remain undefined, instead of allowing the context to tell us which meaning is the one intended. Spiritually this opportunity for discernment is beneficial by reason of the greater “mindfulness” it fosters (to use a favorite Buddhist term) by comparison with a more cut-and-dried solution.

With Hesychasm we find ourselves at last over the threshold of Christian initiation as such, by which we mean, not that this form exhausts the possibilities implied in the name to the extent of providing a single type to which all else can be referred, but that this spiritual current of the Eastern Church represents a perfectly normal “specification” of initiatic activity according to the Christian idiom, one that is neither the result of absorbing elements of foreign origin, as in the case of Hermetism for instance, nor confined to some exceptionally enclosed organiz-

ation like the Fede Santa and certain other medieval initiations, nor yet the appanage of a vocational institution like the guilds of cathedral builders or the knightly orders. All these things have existed in the Christian world, but none of them conforms to conditions, in terms of finality, doctrine, and method, such as would allow one to identify it without further qualification with “Christian initiation” in an all-inclusive sense. Seeing that Hesychasm is the only extant example of something satisfying the required conditions in a sufficient degree to answer our present purpose, we are left no choice but to take this for our starting point and afterward to build from there.

The chief points to note about Hesychasm are as follows: (1) its basis in Scripture and the Fathers, (2) its invocative formula, (3) the position in it of the “*geront*” (Slavonic *staretz*), (4) its declared goal, and (5) the absence of any specifically initiatic rite.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This and other facts relating to Hesychasm have been carefully checked in consultation with a follower of this way who has spent much time on Mount Athos and been in touch with some

Let us take these headings in order and enlarge, where necessary, on various points of technical detail.

1. Scriptural and patristic authority: This has always been strictly maintained, thus providing all that was needed by way of theoretical foundation for the practices of Hesychasm from the earliest times of its existence under that name till nowadays. In the eighteenth century an anthology of extracts from the Greek Fathers was compiled, known as the *Philokalia*, and this is regarded as containing all the essential doctrinal material required by a follower of this way. This collection exists in both Greek and Russian.<sup>11</sup>

2. The short sentence known as the Jesus Prayer here provides the one and only formula to be invoked, though there is much to be said regarding the manner of its use. It runs as follows: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.” It will be immediately apparent that these words, as far as their rational

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notable gerontes belonging to the Greek islands.

<sup>11</sup> A selection from the *Philokalia* in two volumes, excellently translated into English by E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, has been published by Faber and Faber (London).



understanding takes one, are the common property of all Christians without distinction; no ritual authorization is required, and it would indeed be surprising if such were the case. A precisely comparable case is the *nembutsu* in “Pure Land” Buddhism which also never has become an object of ritual communication to the disciple.

When it comes to a use of the Jesus Prayer as *mantram* in virtue of the presence in it of the Holy Name, its rational connotation, though still evident, takes second place. In Hesychasm, as in other traditions where the inherent power of a name becomes the operative factor in a method, the novice is warned from the outset against using the formula except under direction of a qualified master. To find his spiritual master is therefore, for him, an urgent task. If, however, after persistent searching he is unable to discover such a master, the would-be disciple is permitted to apply the prescribed method as best he can with the aid of books while casting himself on the mercy of Christ as the one unfailing source of instruction. The whole method is closely akin to the

Hindu *japa-yoga* or the Sufi *dhikr*; if some Orthodox apologists, out of a quite uncalled-for desire to safeguard a Christian originality no one threatens, have tried to deny this analogy, this only serves to show into what contradictory positions a perverted sense of loyalty is able to lead otherwise quite intelligent people.

3. The Hesychast “*geront*” (*staretz*) when found will discharge all the normal functions of a guru according to the Indian conception of the word. In Hinduism one’s spiritual master is acknowledged as the direct representative of the supreme *Sad-guru*, the Divine Self. In Buddhism the same holds. The present writer was repeatedly told, in Tibet, that he should look on his lama as if he were “the Buddha himself.” Hesychasm says the same: The disciple should behave toward his “*geront*” as if he were in the presence of Christ. One function only the “*geront*” will not assume—that of “initiator.” According to the Christian spiritual economy, Christ, as synthesizing the avatic function exclusively in his own person,

is the only possible initiator[12]<sup>12</sup>—hence the sacraments Christ instituted are the only conceivable supports in the initiatic, as well as the exoteric, path from its inception until the goal is reached. A man may envisage these supports with greater or lesser understanding—he may use the opportunity they provide to the full or only by halves—but in principle they remain objectively all-sufficing and indivisible at the level of form, and no subjective qualification or its absence can modify the fact. Hence a human teacher, though representing Christ in a certain way, will always efface himself in principle by stressing the indirect character of the function he exercises.

4. As regards the ultimate purpose of spiritual en-

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<sup>12</sup> An exception, more apparent than real, might be made in the case of the Latin rosary, if this were ever taken as the support of a fully initiatic way, which it certainly could be by one endowed with the proper understanding and dispositions; in that case, it would be logical for the Holy Virgin, as original communicator of the rosary to Saint Dominic, to appear in the role of initiator, a privilege due to her in her capacity of Coredemptrix, and which no other creaturely figure can possibly share. Evidently, there is no departure from Christian principle here.

deavor, Hesychasm makes use of a word found in the Fathers—namely, “deification.” Plainly, this term stands for something far exceeding the individual realm and its possibilities; one is in undoubtedly esoteric country here. It must not be supposed, however, that deification is opposable in principle to the more usual word “salvation,” for reasons already fully explained; rather should it be taken as throwing light on the highest possibilities that salvation intrinsically comprises.

5. Concerning the absence of any special initiatic rite in Hesychasm, and in Christianity as such, we have already commented sufficiently, both in previous sections and in the present section under headings (2) and (3). All one can add to the above is to say that those who have searched for an initiatic rite supposed to operate over and above the sacraments have been losing their time. So far as Christianity is concerned, the hour that saw the veil of the temple rent in twain saw the end of any such

possibility forever.<sup>13</sup> To complete the present survey, a brief discussion concerning the nature of the Christian sacraments is called for, regarded from the initiatic point of view.

Two of them, baptism and confirmation (called Chrismation in the Eastern rite), can conveniently be grouped together in this context,<sup>14</sup> if only for the reason that they are the ones that most evidently display the character of initiatic rites. In baptism there are two aspects to be noted, the first of which is essential and the second accessory. The essential purpose of baptism is to give back to “fallen” man the virtuality of “true man,” or of Adam when still in Eden. This finality can hardly be accounted a purely exoteric

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<sup>13</sup> In the course of the present study of Christian initiation a number of unacknowledged references have been made to the work of Frithjof Schuon, several of whose books treat of the same subject in more extended form. I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to this source.

<sup>14</sup> In the Eastern rite both sacraments are given together, one after the other, by the priest; the postponing of confirmation to a later age and its conferring by a bishop belongs to the Latin rite. Evidently, no doctrinal implication attaches to this difference.

interest, though treated thus in practice and even though admittedly it does not look beyond the plenitude of the individual possibility as represented by the state of Adamic innocence, which, moreover, corresponds to the human nature of Christ, the second Adam. The accessory aspect of baptism, which might also be called its “aggregatory” aspect, is its effect of making a man into a member of the Christian community, a plainly exoteric purpose when regarded in isolation from the higher possibility that goes with it.

Chrismation, on the other hand, the Pentecostal grace, though it includes the general purpose of confirming a man in all the functions pertaining to Christian life (questions of special vocation apart), is more predominantly turned in the direction of supra-individual aims; the gift of the Holy Ghost could not in principle envisage an individual realization only, even if it be treated perfunctorily in most cases, as a means of increasing piety and no more. If Chrismation can be said to “amplify” the grace already received in baptism, it would be still more

true to say that it transposes that grace in the sense of “exaltation”; in other words, its normal finality, despite exoteric shortsightedness, cannot but be the state of “transcendent man” or “deification,” to give it its Christian label. Thus the two natures of Christ are covered, in intention, by the two sacraments jointly; the Eucharist is there to render operative this double fulfillment.

At this point it is advisable to answer a possible objection: In view of the fact that baptism has long been imparted to all without distinction and even imposed on them in infancy whether they wish it or not, it might be asked whether this is not *per se* contrary to the initiatic principle, since this normally will imply “qualification” in the recipient, therefore also a selective character to the imparting itself; the same objection would apply to Chrismation.

We think, however, that enough has already been said to show why this objection does not apply in the present case, because of the bivalent character attaching by definition to all essential elements in the Christian tradition as from the very outset. A

baptized person may remain unaware of the fact that the rite he went through had more than an aggregatory meaning; the teaching he receives on the subject of baptism's power to neutralize "original sin" may mean to him little more than a quasi-moral benefit, in which case—this is the case of the majority—his participation in the fruits of baptism will necessarily remain exoteric and largely passive. Let, however, an awareness of the greater possibilities likewise comprised in the sacrament he has received but dawn on his mind and that man will be able, from that moment, to view his own baptism and confirmation retrospectively as having opened the gate to a realization far exceeding the exoteric domain. No one will have compelled him to do so, nor is there any presumption as to how many others will or will not follow suit, so that distinctions of qualification, as mentioned above, will not have been disregarded in any essential way, nor will the condition of intellectual aptitude for such a path have been disregarded either. The theoretical position should be clear enough; as for an effective realization of all



that baptism and Chrismation offer between them, that is another matter, and it is that which constitutes initiatic life in the Christian sense.

Three of the remaining sacraments, matrimony, ordination, and unction, need not long detain us. In fact the only one of these three that might concern us here is unction, to which the Latin Church adds the epithet “extreme,” since the other two explain themselves sufficiently by their form. The nature of unction, on the other hand, seems rather difficult to define from our present standpoint. Inasmuch as it is designed as an instrument of divine healing, it might be placed in a class of its own. In Eastern Christianity not only sick people but also all the faithful are able (but not obliged) to partake of this sacrament. This happens once a year, on the Wednesday in Holy Week, when all who so wish come to receive this medicine for their souls.

This brings us to the remaining two sacraments, penance, or confession, and the Eucharist; like baptism and Chrismation, they belong together, the one being a preparation for the other. The only descrip-

tion that seems to fit the sacrament of penance is by calling it a rite of psychic purification, in the highest sense of the word, and this is doubtless how a Hindu, for instance, would classify it. The Eucharist, on the other hand, would count for him as a sacrificial rite (*yajña*), which it is in the first instance, but it is many other things besides—every aspect of Christian spirituality finds its focus here, so that the Eucharist can justly be called “the axial mystery,” the one that synthesizes all that the other mysteries have to offer. That it is not “an exoteric rite” (however human ignorance may treat it on occasion) is surely obvious—could anything conceivably be more “inward” than the body and blood of the avatara? Its partaking is, for a Christian, what the Tibetans describe as *lamai nendjor* (spelled *blamai rnalbyor*) = union (*yoga*) with the “guru,” a sense that the word “communion” is also intended to convey.

The two elements, bread and wine, figuring in the rite correspond, as many are aware, to the two great “dimensions” of spiritual life, “the exterior”

and “the interior,”<sup>15</sup> and therefore also to the two natures of Christ, human and divine, the realization of which the Eucharist is above all designed to bring about. When the bread is broken, the sacrifice is accomplished. When the elements are mingled in the chalice, exterior and interior become merged in a single overflowing of the divine compassion—fused but not confused, to quote Meister Eckhart’s pregnant saying. The symbolical message is exactly the same as that of the temple veil and its parting, which the mixing of the consecrated elements reproduces here. That is why the Eucharist is food and drink unto salvation, taking this word not merely in its usual restricted sense but also in that unqualified sense that all authentic traditions give to whatever word they use to indicate the ultimate goal of man’s spiritual voyage.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The two names of God corresponding, in Islam, to these dimensions are *al-Zahir* and *al-Batin*.

<sup>16</sup> The withdrawing of the chalice from the laity in the Latin Church at a certain time in the Middle Ages, though it does not destroy the sacrament in a technical sense (each consecrated ele-

This completes our attempted recapitulation of the evidence relating to “Christian initiation” within that “eso-exoteric” structure that the Christian form of tradition characteristically displays. The ambiguities that have revealed themselves in the course of Christian history are to a large extent traceable to this ambivalence of structure; this fact should not, however, be taken for a mere reproach, since it also translates a positive value in that “bursting of all bounds” by the mysteries, which the descent of Christ into the world marked from the outset. Its negative effects are also apparent enough, in the extreme exteriorization that took place later; for if the Holy of Holies, with the parting of the curtain, overflowed into the outer portion of the temple, the reverse was also true. It is a price that had to be paid in practice but which can still be neutralized by spir-

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ment implying the other as with the two natures of Christ), does in a certain symbolical sense appear to restrict man’s spiritual finality to the “exterior”; it foreshadows the general exoterization that took place in practice. We are not the first to have pointed out this analogy.

itual realization and by that alone.

One final message must be addressed to the Christian aspirant who, even when fortified with the assurance that his tradition has (human obtuseness notwithstanding) conserved the virtuality of its inner life, will yet not find his own spiritual problem solved overnight—indeed far from it. The Christian way, under today's conditions, is beset with difficulties for those who are not content to accept whatever an exoteric participation offers them and no more; not the least of these difficulties is an apparently total absence of qualified spiritual instruction—able, that is to say, to harness whatever resources are provided by the tradition to the service of an initiatic method. In a monotonously general picture of spiritual indigence, Hesychasm marks the one noteworthy exception, but this source of guidance too might one day dry up (God forbid it!) as a result of the increasing alienation from the contemplative ideal that has gone with the spread of modern secularism in the Orthodox

countries themselves, especially among the young.<sup>17</sup>

In the Catholic West, despite the relative popularity of monastic institutions, the situation is, if anything, still more difficult, since what passes nowadays for a “contemplative life” would hardly earn that epi-

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<sup>17</sup> The eight hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Athonite community was to be marked, so we have read, by the construction of a motorable road onto the peninsula in order to render it more accessible to visitors wishing to attend the celebration. It is to this well-worn tune that the first big inroad into the privacy of the great monastic fastness is being inaugurated, a privacy that the Muslim Turks, in the days of their mastery, never failed to respect. All over Asia road making, by opening a way for hurried, thoughtless visiting by all and sundry, has been the means of depriving places of pilgrimage of their traditional *raison d'être*; the argument of facility is everywhere the same—*facilis descensus Averni!* If Christians only knew their own interest, the whole Christian world would be up in arms to defend the inviolability of Athos. According to a more recent report, the authorities of the Holy Mountain, alarmed by the fact that so many young tourists are coming there simply for the sake of a cheap holiday in romantic surroundings, have requested the Greek government to tighten the regulations for issuing permits of entry. A timely precaution, some will say; but then what becomes of the age-long freedom of pilgrimage itself?

thet from the mouth of, say, an average Tibetan lama or Hindu *sannyasin*. We say this, not in order to discourage the devotee bent on getting his Christian virtuality turned into a reality—indeed the opposite is our purpose—but because when once a man is committed in intention to the “unseen warfare” under any form, for him to underrate the extent of the opposing forces is itself a danger. One has to size up a challenging situation accurately, but without dismay. This is a prior condition to any spiritual victory.

Without venturing on any slick solution to this vexed question of spiritual method and its adequate communication within the Christian world, one can at least say one thing (Hesychasm apart and without allowing for any as yet unverified possibilities in the Western tradition itself), namely that a Christian aspirant enjoys one particular advantage inasmuch as he is able to profit by any unexpected opportunity of spiritual guidance without needing to be provided, even when entering on the most inward quest, with any spiritual “support” beyond the ones he already possesses by right. One is thinking always of Chris-

tianity under its still traditional form and not of various residues of its fragmentation where the indispensable means of grace are evidently lacking. If on the one hand a Christian has a number of special difficulties to contend with—and no religious form can be wholly free from such—on the other hand he can confidently claim for himself this unexpected fruit ripened from the original parting of the temple veil, a strange paradox in its way—but then spiritual life is full of paradoxical happenings. There is really nothing to be surprised at here.



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