

Light on the Ancient Worlds

by
Frithjof Schuon

This essay first appeared in the journal Études Traditionnelles (janvier-février et mars-avril, 1964), then, as “The Ancient Worlds in Perspective” in translation in the journal Tomorrow (Spring, 1964). It appeared as a chapter in the book Light on the Ancient Worlds (World Wisdom, 1965, 1984, and 2006). The version below is the expanded and re-translated chapter that was included in the most recent edition of that book. © World Wisdom, Inc.

The whole existence of the peoples of antiquity, and of traditional peoples in general, is dominated by two key ideas, the idea of Center and the idea of Origin. In the spatial world where we live, every value is related in some way to a sacred Center, which is the place where Heaven has touched the earth; in every human world there is a place where God has manifested Himself in order to pour forth His grace. And it is the same for the Origin, which is the quasi-timeless moment when Heaven was near and terrestrial things were still half-celestial; but in the case of civilizations having a historical founder, it is also the period when God spoke, thus renewing the primordial covenant for the branch of humanity concerned. To conform to tradition is to remain faithful to the Origin, and for this very reason it is also to place oneself at the Center; it is to dwell in the primordial Purity and the universal Norm. Everything in the behavior of ancient and traditional peoples can be explained, directly or indirectly, by reference to these two ideas, which are like landmarks in the measureless and perilous world of forms and change.

It is this kind of mythological subjectivity, if one may so express it, which makes it possible to understand the imperialism of ancient civilizations, for example, for it is not enough here to invoke the “law of the jungle”, even though this law may be biologically inevitable and to that extent legitimate; one must also take account of the fact, even giving it precedence since human beings are concerned, that each ancient civilization can be said to live on a remembrance of the lost Paradise and that it presents itself—insofar as it is the vehicle of an immemorial tradition or a Revelation that restores the “lost word”—as the most direct branch of the “age of the Gods”. It is therefore in every case “our people” and no other who perpetuate primordial humanity from

the point of view of both wisdom and the virtues; and it must be recognized that this perspective is neither more nor less false than the exclusivism of religions or, on the purely natural plane, the empirical unicity of every ego. There are many peoples who do not call themselves by the name given them by others; they call themselves simply “the people” or “men”; other tribes are not “faithful”, having separated themselves from the main stem; this is *grosso modo* the point of view of the Roman Empire as well as the Confederation of the Iroquois.

The purpose of ancient imperialism was to spread an “order”, a state of equilibrium and stability which conforms to a divine model and which is in any case reflected in nature, notably in the planetary world; the Roman emperor, like the monarch of the “Celestial Middle Kingdom”, wields his power thanks to a “mandate from Heaven”. Julius Caesar, holder of this mandate and “divine man” (*divus*),¹ was conscious of the providential range of his mission; as far as he was concerned, nothing had the right to oppose it, Vercingetorix having been for him a sort of heretic. If the non-Roman peoples were considered “barbarians”, it is above all because they were outside the “order”; from the point of view of the *Pax Romana*, they manifested disequilibrium, instability, chaos, perpetual menace. In Christianity (*corpus mysticum*) and Islam (*dâr al-islâm*) the theocratic essence of the imperial idea is clearly apparent; without theocracy there could be no civilization worthy of the name; so true is this that the Roman emperors, in the midst of the pagan breakup and from the time of Diocletian, felt the need to divinize themselves or allow themselves to be divinized while improperly claiming for themselves the position of conqueror of the Gauls descended from Venus. The modern idea of “civilization” is not without a connection, historically speaking, to the traditional idea of “empire”; but the “order” has become purely human and entirely profane, as is proven in any case by the notion of “progress”, which is the very negation of any celestial origin; in fact “civilization” is merely an urban refinement within the framework of a worldly and mercantile outlook, and this explains its hostility to virgin nature as well as to religion. According to the criteria of “civilization”, the contemplative hermit—who represents human spirituality and at the same time the sanctity of virgin nature—can only be a sort of “savage”, whereas in reality he is the earthly witness of Heaven.

These considerations allow us to make a few remarks here concerning the complexity of authority in Western Christianity. The emperor, in contrast to the pope, incarnates temporal power; but more than that he also represents, by virtue of his pre-Christian but nonetheless celestial origin,² an aspect of universality whereas the pope is identified by his function with the

¹ “See the man, see him of whose promised coming thou hast so often heard, Caesar Augustus, son of a God, who will found anew the Golden Age in the fields where Saturn reigned of old, and who will extend his empire even over the Garamantes and the Indians” (*Aeneid* 6:791-95). Caesar prepared a world for the reign of Christ. Note that Dante placed the murderers of Caesar in the deepest hell, together with Judas. Cf. “Divus Julius Caesar” by Adrian Paterson (*Études Traditionnelles*, June, 1940).

² Dante has no hesitation in citing this superhuman origin in support of his doctrine of imperial monarchy.

Christian religion alone. The Muslims in Spain were not persecuted until the clergy had become too powerful in comparison with the temporal power; this power, which belongs to the emperor, represents in this case universality or “realism”, and therefore “tolerance”, and thus also by the nature of things a certain element of wisdom. This ambiguity in the imperial function—of which the emperors were conscious to one degree or another³—explains in part what may be called the traditional disequilibrium of Christianity; and it may be said that the pope recognized this ambiguity—or this aspect of superiority paradoxically accompanying an inferiority—by prostrating himself before Charlemagne after his coronation.⁴

Imperialism can come either from Heaven or simply from the earth, or again from hell; be that as it may, what is certain is that humanity cannot remain divided into a scattering of independent tribes; the bad would inevitably hurl themselves upon the good, and the result would be a humanity oppressed by the bad and hence the worst of all imperialisms. What may be called the imperialism of the good constitutes therefore a sort of inevitable and providential preventive war; without it no great civilization is conceivable.⁵ It may be argued that all this does not take us away from human imperfection, and we agree; far from advocating an illusory angelism, we acknowledge the fact that man remains always man whenever collectivities with their interests and passions are involved; the leaders of men are obliged to take account of this fact, unpleasant though it may be to those “idealists” who judge that the “purity” of a religion consists in committing suicide. And this leads us to a truth all too often lost sight of by believers themselves: namely, that religion, to the extent it is manifested collectively, necessarily relies upon something to support it in one way or another, though without losing anything of its

³ The position is clear beyond doubt in the case of Constantine as well as Charlemagne.

⁴ There is a curious relationship—it may be mentioned in passing—between the imperial function and the part played by the court jester, and this relationship seems to be associated with the fact that the costume of jesters, like that of certain emperors, was adorned with little bells, following the example of the sacred robe of the High Priest; the role of the jester was originally that of saying in public what no one else could allow himself to say, thus introducing an element of truth into a world constrained by unavoidable conventions; now this function, whether one wishes it or not, is reminiscent of sapience or esoterism, for in its own way it shatters “forms” in the name of “the spirit that bloweth where it listeth”. But folly alone can allow itself to enunciate cruel truths and to challenge idols precisely because it stands apart from a particular human system and this proves that in that world of facades which is society the pure and simple truth is madness. This is doubtless why the function of the court jester succumbed in the end to the world of formalism and hypocrisy: the intelligent fool ended by giving way to the buffoon, who very soon became tedious and disappeared.

⁵ It might seem that the spiritual decadence of the Romans must have been prejudicial to an imperial mission, but this is not so since the Romans possessed those qualities of strength and generosity—or tolerance—which are necessary for this providential function. Rome persecuted the Christians because they threatened everything which, in the eyes of the ancients, made Rome what it was; if Diocletian could have foreseen the edict of Theodosius abolishing the Roman religion, he would still not have acted otherwise than he did.

doctrinal and sacramental content or the impartiality resulting from them; for the Church is one thing as a social organism and another as a divine repository, which remains by definition outside the entanglements and constraints of human nature, whether individual or collective. To wish to modify the terrestrial roots of the Church—roots for which the phenomenon of sanctity amply compensates—is to end by debasing religion in its very essentials, in conformity with the “idealist” prescription whereby the surest way of healing the patient is to kill him; in our day, having failed to raise human society to the level of the religious ideal, one lowers religion to a level which is humanly accessible and rationally realizable, but which is nothing from the point of view of our integral intelligence and our possibilities of immortality. The exclusively human, far from being able to keep itself in equilibrium, always ends in the infra-human.

* * *

For traditional worlds, to be situated in space and time is to be situated respectively in a cosmology and an eschatology; time has a meaning only through the perfection of an origin that is to be maintained and in view of a final disintegration that casts us almost without transition at the feet of God. If there are sometimes developments in time which may seem progressive when isolated from the whole—in the formulation of doctrine, for example, or especially in art, which needs time and experience to ripen—this is not because tradition can be regarded as having become different or better, but on the contrary because it seeks to remain wholly itself or “to become what it is”; in other words, it is because traditional humanity seeks to manifest or externalize on a certain plane something it carries within itself and is in danger of losing, a danger that increases as the cycle unfolds, the cycle inevitably ending in decline and Judgment. It is therefore our increasing weakness, and with it the risk of forgetfulness and betrayal, which more than anything obliges us to externalize or make explicit what at the beginning was included in an inward and implicit perfection; Saint Paul needed neither Thomism nor cathedrals, for all profundities and splendors were in himself and all around him in the sanctity of the early community. And this, far from supporting iconoclasts of all kinds, refutes them completely; more or less late epochs—the Middle Ages, for example—have an imperious need for externalizations and developments, just as water from a spring, if it is not to be lost on its way, needs a channel made by nature or the hand of man; and just as the channel does not transform the water and is not meant to do so—for no water is better than spring water—so the externalizations and developments of a spiritual patrimony are there not to change that patrimony, but to transmit it as fully and effectively as possible.

An ethnic genius may prefer to emphasize one aspect or another—with every right to do so and all the more freely inasmuch as every ethnic genius comes from Heaven—but its function cannot be to falsify the primordial intentions; on the contrary, the vocation of this genius consists in making those intentions as transparent as possible to the mentality the genius represents. On the one hand there is symbolism, which is as rigorous as the laws of nature and no less diverse, and on the other hand there is creative genius, which in itself is free as the wind, but which is

nothing without the language of Truth and providential symbols and which is never hurried or arbitrary; this is why it is absurd to declare, as is so often done in our day, that the Gothic style, for example, expresses its “times” and that for Christians of “today” it constitutes an “anachronism”, that to “follow the Gothic” is “plagiarism” or “pastiche”, and that we must create a style that conforms to “our times”, and so on. This is to ignore the fact that Gothic art is situated in space before becoming the retrospective incarnation of an epoch; in order to depart from the specifically Gothic idiom, the Renaissance should have begun by understanding it, and understanding it would have implied grasping its intrinsic nature and timeless character; and if the Renaissance had understood the Gothic, there would have been no reason to depart from it, for it goes without saying that the abandonment of an artistic language must have a motive other than incomprehension and lack of spirituality. A style expresses at once a spirituality and an ethnic genius, and these two factors cannot be improvised; a collectivity can pass from one formal language to another insofar as an ethnic predominance or a flowering of spirituality demands it, but it can in no case wish to change its style on the pretext of giving expression to a “period”, hence to relativity, and therefore to the very thing that calls into question the value of absoluteness, which is the sufficient reason of every tradition. The predominance of Germanic influence, or the rise of the creative consciousness of Germanic peoples, together with a predominance of the emotional side of Christianity, spontaneously gave rise to the formal language that later came to be referred to as “Gothic”; the French who created the cathedral did so as Franks and not as Latins, though this in no way prevented them from manifesting their Latin quality on other planes, even within the framework of their Germanness, nor must it be forgotten that, spiritually speaking, like all Christians they were Semites and that it is this mixture—with the addition of a Celtic contribution—which produced the genius of the mediaeval West. Nothing in our time justifies the desire for a new style; if men have become “different”, they have done so in an illegitimate manner and through the operation of negative factors, by way of a series of Promethean betrayals such as the Renaissance; the illegitimate and the anti-Christian obviously cannot produce a Christian style, nor can they make a positive contribution to such a style. It could be argued that our epoch is so important a fact that it is impossible to ignore it, in the sense that one is obliged to take unavoidable situations into account; this is true, but the only conclusion to be drawn from it is that we ought to return to the most sober and severe of mediaeval forms, the poorest in a certain sense, so as to conform to the spiritual distress of our epoch; we should leave our anti-religious “times” and reintegrate ourselves into a religious “space”. An art that does not express the unchanging and does not want to be unchanging itself is not a sacred art; the builders of cathedrals did not wish to create a new style—had they wanted to they could not have done so—but they wished without any “research” to impart to the changelessness of the Romanesque a look that seemed to them more ample and sublime or more explicit; they wanted to crown and not abolish. Romanesque art is more static and more intellectual than Gothic art, and the Gothic is more dynamic and more emotional than

the Romanesque; but each style expresses spontaneously and without Promethean affectations the changelessly Christian.⁶

*

*

*

In speaking about ancient or traditional peoples it is important not to confuse healthy and integral civilizations with the great paganisms—for the term is justified here—of the Mediterranean and the Near East, of which Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar have become the classic incarnations and conventional images. What strikes one first in these “petrified” traditions of the Biblical world is a cult of the massive and gigantic, as well as a cosmology often accompanied by bloody or orgiastic rites, not forgetting an excessive development of magic and the arts of divination; in civilizations of this kind the supernatural is replaced by the magical, and the here-below is divinized while nothing is offered for the hereafter—at least in the exoterism, which in fact overwhelms everything else; a sort of marmoreal divinization of the human is combined with a passionate humanization of the divine; potentates are demigods, and the gods preside over all the passions.⁷

A question that might arise here is the following: why did these old religions deviate into paganism and then become extinct, whereas a similar destiny seems to be excluded in the case of the great traditions that are alive today in both the West and the East? The answer is that traditions having a prehistoric origin are, symbolically speaking, made for “space” and not for “time”; that is, they saw the light in a primordial epoch when time was still but a rhythm in a spatial and static beatitude and when space or simultaneity still predominated over the experience of duration and change; historical traditions on the contrary must take the experience of “time” into account and must foresee instability and decadence, since they were born at periods when time had become like a fast-flowing and ever more devouring river and when the

⁶ The so-called “avant-garde” architecture of our epoch lays claim to being “functional”, but it is so only in part and in a wholly exterior and superficial way, since it ignores functions that are not material or practical; it excludes two elements essential to human art, namely symbolism, which is as strict as truth, and a joy at once contemplative and creative, which is as gratuitous as grace. A purely utilitarian “functionalism” is perfectly inhuman in both its premises and its results, for man is not an exclusively greedy and cunning creature: he is not meant to be comfortable inside the mechanism of a clock; so true is this that functionalism itself feels the need to dress itself up in new fantasies, which are most paradoxically justified by the shameless assertion that they are part of the “style”.

⁷ The cases of Greece and Egypt were much less unfavorable than those of post-Sumerian Mesopotamia or Canaan; the Greeks, like the Egyptians, possessed a complete eschatology and a relatively influential esoterism. The Biblical Pharaoh seems to represent an isolated case rather than a type; according to Clement of Alexandria, Plato owed much to the sages of Egypt. The least unfavorable case among the pre-monotheistic civilizations of the Near East was doubtless that of Persia, whose ancient tradition still survives today in India in the form of Parseeism. Muslims have a special respect for Cyrus as well as for Alexander the Great, and they venerate the wife of Pharaoh as a saint.

spiritual outlook had to be centered on the end of the world. The position of Hinduism is intermediate in the sense that it has a capacity, exceptional in a tradition of the primordial type, for rejuvenation and adaptation; it is thus at once prehistoric and historic and realizes in its own way the miracle of a synthesis between the gods of Egypt and the God of Israel.

But to return to the Babylonians: the stonelike character of this type of civilization cannot be explained solely by a tendency to excess; it is also explained by a sense of the immutable, as if one had seen primordial beatitude beginning to vanish and had therefore wished to build a fortress to stand against time, or as if one had sought to transform the whole tradition into a fortress, with the result that the spirit was stifled instead of being protected; seen from this angle the marmoreal and inhuman side of these paganisms looks like a titanic re action of space against time. In this perspective the implacability of the stars is paradoxically combined with the passion of bodies; the stellar vault is always present, divine and crushing, whereas an overflowing life serves as a terrestrial divinity. From another point of view, many of the characteristics of the civilizations of antiquity are explained by the fact that in the beginning the celestial Law was of an adamantine hardness while at the same time life still retained something of the celestial; Babylon lived falsely on this sort of recollection, and yet at the very heart of the cruelest paganisms there were mitigations that can be accounted for by changes in the cyclical atmosphere. The celestial Law becomes less demanding as we approach the end of our cycle; Clemency increases as man becomes weaker. Christ's acquittal of the adulterous woman has this significance—apart from other equally possible meanings—as does the intervention of the angel in the sacrifice of Abraham.

* * *

No one would think of complaining about the mitigation of moral laws, and yet it is nonetheless proper to consider it, not in isolation but in its context, for it is the context that reveals its intention, its scope, and its value. In reality the mitigation of moral laws—to the extent it is not illusory—can represent an intrinsic superiority only on two conditions: first, that it confers a concrete advantage on society; and second, that it is not obtained at the cost of what gives meaning to life; respect for the human person must not open the door to a dictatorship of error and baseness, to the crushing of quality by quantity, to general corruption and the loss of cultural values, for if it does so it is, in relation to the ancient tyrannies, merely an opposite extreme and not the norm. When humanitarianism is no more than the expression of an over-valuation of the human at the expense of what is divine or the crude fact at the expense of truth, it cannot possibly be counted as a positive acquisition; it is easy to criticize the “fanaticism” of our ancestors when one has lost the very notion of saving truth, or to be “tolerant” when one derides religion.

Whatever the morality of the Babylonians⁸ may have been, it must not be forgotten that certain kinds of behavior depend largely on circumstances and that collective man always remains a sort of wild animal, at least in the “Iron Age”: the conquerors of Peru and Mexico were no better than Nebuchadnezzar, Cambyses, or Antiochus Epiphanus, and one could find analogous examples in the most recent history. Religions can reform the individual man with his consent—and it is never the function of religion to make up for the absence of this consent—but no one can bring about a fundamental change in that “thousand-headed hydra” which is collective man, and this is why nothing of the kind has ever been the aim of any religion; all that a revealed Law can do is curb the egoism and ferocity of society by channeling its tendencies more or less effectively. The goal of religion is to transmit to man a symbolic, yet adequate, image of the reality that concerns him, according to his real needs and ultimate interests, and to provide him with the means of surpassing himself and realizing his highest destiny; this destiny can never be of this world, given the nature of our spirit. The secondary goal of religion—with a view to the principal goal—is to make possible a sufficient equilibrium in the life of the collectivity or to safeguard within the framework of the natural malice of men a maximum of spiritual opportunities; if society must be protected against the individual, the individual for his part must be protected against society. There is endless talk about “human dignity”, but it is rather too often forgotten that “*noblesse oblige*”; dignity is invoked in a world that is doing everything to empty it of its content and thus to abolish it. In the name of an indeterminate and unconditional “human dignity”, unlimited rights are conceded to the basest of men, including the right to destroy everything that goes to make our real dignity, that is to say, everything on every plane that attaches us in one way or another to the Absolute. Of course truth obliges us to condemn the excesses of the aristocracy, but we can see no reason at all why it should not also confer a right to judge contrary excesses.

* * *

In those ancient times so much decried in our days, the rigors of earthly existence, including the wickedness of men, were on the whole accepted as an inexorable fatality, and their abolition was with good reason believed to be impossible; in the midst of the trials of life, those of the hereafter were not forgotten, and it was admitted moreover that man needs suffering as well as pleasure here below and that a collectivity cannot maintain itself in the fear of God and in piety by contact with nothing but the agreeable;⁹ such was the thinking of the elite at all levels of

⁸ Their name is used here as a symbol because of the associations of ideas evoked by the very word “Babylon”, and not in order to make out that they were necessarily the worst of all men or the only bad ones.

⁹ In speaking of society Mencius did not hesitate to say, “Grief and trouble bring life, whereas prosperity and pleasure bring death.” This is the quasi-biological law of rhythms or the law of the pruning of trees and bushes expressed in lapidary terms. This was also the great argument of the American Indians when faced with the temptations and constraints of white civilization.

society. Miseries, whose deep-seated cause is always the violation of a celestial norm as well as indifference toward Heaven and our final ends, are there to restrain the greedy illusions of men, rather in the same way as the carnivores are there to prevent the herbivores from degenerating or multiplying to excess, all this by virtue of universal equilibrium and the homogeneity of the world; to be aware of this is part of the fear of God. In light of this elementary wisdom, a progress conditioned by spiritual indifference and an idolatry of well-being taken as an end in itself cannot constitute a real advantage, that is, an advantage proportioned to our total nature and our immortal kernel; this is evident enough, but even in the most “believing” environments, people go so far as to claim that technical progress is an indisputable good and that it is thus a blessing even from the point of view of faith. In reality modern civilization gives in order to take: it gives the world but takes away God; and it is this that compromises even its gift of the world.¹⁰

In our day there is a stronger tendency than ever to reduce happiness to the level of economic well-being—which is moreover insatiable in the face of an indefinite creation of artificial needs and a base mystique of envy—but what is completely lost sight of when this outlook is projected into the past is that a traditional craft and a contact with nature and natural things are factors essential to human happiness. Now these are just the factors that disappear in industry, which demands all too often, if not always, an inhuman environment and “quasi-abstract” manipulations, gestures with no intelligibility and no soul, all in an atmosphere of frigid cunning; we have arrived beyond all possibility of argument at the antipodes of what the Gospel means when it enjoins us to “become as little children” and to “take no thought for the morrow”. The machine transposes the need for happiness onto a purely quantitative plane, having no relation to the spiritual quality of work; it takes away from the world its homogeneity and transparency and cuts men off from the meaning of life. More and more we attempt to reduce our intelligence to what the machine demands and our capacity for happiness to what it offers; since we cannot humanize the machine, we are obliged, by a certain logic at least, to mechanize man; having lost contact with the human, we stipulate what man is and what happiness is.

A barren argument, some will say; this gives us the opportunity, at the risk of becoming involved in one more digression, to denounce a misuse of language or thought which is encountered almost everywhere and which is quite typical of contemporary “dynamism”. An

¹⁰ Let us recall this passage, curiously overlooked in our times, from the New Testament: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). Saint Francis of Sales addresses the human soul in these words: “God did not put you in this world for any need He had of you, who are wholly useless to Him, but only in order to exercise in you His goodness, giving you His grace and His glory. For this He gave you the understanding to know Him, the memory to remember Him.... Since you have been created and put in the world with this intention, all actions contrary to this must be rejected and avoided, and those which serve for nothing to this end must be scorned, as vain and superfluous. Consider the misfortune of the world which never thinks of this, but lives as though it believed it was only created to build houses, plant trees, amass riches, and indulge in idle talk” (*Introduction à la vie dévote*, Ch. 10).

argument is not “barren” or “fruitful”; it is true or false. If it is true, it is all it should be, and it could not then in any case be “barren” in itself; if it is false, the question of its possible “fruitfulness” does not arise, for error cannot be otherwise than harmful or indifferent, according to the domains and proportions involved. One must react against this tiresome tendency to substitute a utilitarian and subjective choice—or a moral choice—for an intellectual and hence objective alternative and to put the “constructive” in place of the true, as if truth were not positive by its nature and as if anything useful could be done without it.¹¹

An analogous misuse is commonly made of the notion of “charity”; according to a new orientation, it seems that Catholics should “understand” their opponents out of “charity” instead of judging them with “egoism” and regarding them as adversaries; here again there is a confusion between totally unrelated domains. In reality the situation is very simple: faced by a common danger, oppositions among those who are threatened by it are in practice diminished; to say that the danger is common means that the opposition between the aggressor and the victims is eminently greater than the oppositions dividing the victims from one another; but in the absence of an aggressor or his threat, the original oppositions retain all their virulence or at least their urgency. In other words an “outward” opposition becomes “inward” for the opponents in relation to a third opponent who sets himself against what they hold in common; this is a logical or “physical” fact, free from any sentimentality. From a certain point of view the contradiction between Catholicism and Protestantism is essential and irreducible; from another point of view Catholics and Protestants believe in God, in Christ, and in the future life; now to say that Protestants are in no way adversaries of Catholics, or conversely, is just as illogical as to pretend they have no ideas or interests in common. For centuries practically the only denominational antagonism at the heart of Western Europe was the one produced by the Reformation, Protestantism being opposed from its birth and by definition to the ideas and interests of the Roman Church; they were what is called “enemies”, even when no animosity between individuals is presumed¹² and however displeased the partisans of the new “charity” may be; but in our day the situation has changed, and rather abruptly, in the sense that the common interests and ideas of all Christians—and even of all religious believers, whoever they might be—find themselves threatened by a new power, a materialistic and atheistic scientism, whether of the “left” or the “right”. It is evident that in such circumstances not only does what unites prevail in certain respects over what divides, but also that the dangers one denomination represents for

¹¹ A truth can be inopportune in regard to circumstances or in regard to the insufficiency of a particular subject or category of subjects, or it can be situated at an insignificant level and have no impact; but it goes without saying that what we have in view here are normal possibilities and logical relationships.

¹² As for the unbelievers, they were not sufficiently dangerous to the Protestants, or even to the Catholics, to be the cause of a sentimental reconciliation between the two denominations.

another—or one religion for another¹³—become less or disappear; to lay claim all at once, and loudly, to a “charity” the Church is alleged to have lost sight of for a thousand years or more and to contrast it with the “narrowness” or the “egoism” of a “past age” is a very bad joke on the part of Catholics; in any case it is unconscious hypocrisy, like other sentimentalities of the same order, all the more because this so-called “charity” is fostered by a certain scorn of theology and a desire to dull or “neutralize” every doctrinal, hence intellectual, element. In the past an agreement was an agreement, and a disagreement was a disagreement; but in our day one pretends to “love” all that one is unable to suppress, and one feigns to believe that our fathers were neither intelligent enough nor charitable enough to be able to distinguish between ideas and men nor capable of loving immortal souls independently of the errors that affect them. To the objection that the masses were and are incapable of grasping these subtleties, we would say that the same applies the other way round: if too many subtleties are thrust upon them the result will be confusion of ideas and indifference; the average man is so made, as is easy to see. Be that as it may, to preach to a denominational adversary is to try to save his soul, hence to love him in a certain way; and to fight an adversary is to protect the saving message of God. Our times, so concerned with “understanding” and “charity”—though these words too often serve to mask unintelligence, complacency, calculation—excel beyond all question in not understanding, and in not wanting to understand, what the men of earlier times thought and did, men who were in many cases a hundred times better than their detractors.

But let us return after these digressions to matters that are more retrospective and in some respects less “up to date”.

* * *

The knight of former days was faced finally with this sole alternative: the risk of death or the renunciation of the world; the greatness of the responsibility, the hazard, or the sacrifice coincides with the quality of “nobility”; to live nobly is to live in company with death, whether physical or spiritual. The knight had no right to lose sight of the fissures in existence; obliged to view things from an eminence, he could never be far from their nothingness. Furthermore, if one is to be able to rule others, one must know how to rule oneself; inward discipline is the essential qualification for the functions of chief, judge, or warrior. True nobility, which cannot in any case

¹³ It is thus with good logic that Pius XII was able to say that the crusades were “family quarrels”. If the Muslim menace was not a factor of union for Christians divided by schisms and heresies, it is because the menace was external and not internal as is the case with scientism: under Arab or Turkish domination, Christians remained Christians, whereas scientism empties the churches even in Christian countries. In the nineteenth century, the first lay government of a liberated Greece could find nothing better to do than to close several hundred convents, which had been untouched by the Muslims.

be the monopoly of an office, implies a penetrating consciousness of the nature of things and at the same time a generous giving of oneself, thus excluding idle fancies no less than baseness.¹⁴

The courts of princes must reflect the quality of a center, a hub, a summit, but they should not degenerate—as happened all too often—into a false paradise; the shimmering dream of Versailles was already a betrayal, fireworks without purpose and without greatness. Courts are normally centers for science, art, and magnificence; it is evident that they must not exclude austerity of habits—quite the contrary—for asceticism is not opposed to elegance any more than virtue is opposed to beauty, or conversely. Royal splendor and ceremonies are legitimate—or tolerable—by virtue of their spiritual symbolism and their political and cultural radiation and by virtue of the “divine right” of Caesar; the pageantry of the court is the “liturgy” of an authority conferred by the “mandate of Heaven”; but all that is nothing—let it be repeated once more—if the princes, or the nobles generally, do not in all respects teach by their example, beginning with the fear of God, without which no one has the right to demand respect and obedience. This is one of the principal functions of those who hold authority and power; the fact that in too many cases they have not been faithful to this function is what has brought about their fall; having forgotten Heaven, they have been forgotten by it.

But there is still something more to be said: all manifestations of princely splendor, whatever their symbolism and artistic value—and whether they are necessary or not—always carry within themselves the metaphysical seeds of their own ruin. Strictly speaking, only the hermit is absolutely legitimate, for man was created alone and dies alone; we mention the hermit because he represents a principle and is therefore a symbol, but without confusing an outward isolation with holy solitude, which for its part can and must find a place in all human situations. Social virtues are nothing without this solitude and by themselves engender nothing lasting, for before acting one must be; it is this quality of being that is so sorely lacking in people today. It is forgetfulness of our solitude in God—of this terrestrial communion with celestial dimensions—which brings in its wake all human failings as well as all earthly calamities.

We could also express ourselves in the following way: in a traditional climate men live as if they are suspended from an ideal and invisible prototype, with which they are seeking to be reunited as their particular situations permit and according to their sincerity and vocation. Now every man should be a contemplative and live among men like a hermit as far as vocation is concerned; “worldliness” is an anomaly, strictly speaking; it has become illusorily normal only on account of the fall—or the successive falls—of man or a particular group of men. We are made for the Absolute, which embraces all things and from which none can escape, and this is

¹⁴ Nothing is more false than the conventional opposition between “idealism” and “realism”, which amounts to insinuating that the “ideal” is not “real”, and conversely, as if an ideal situated outside reality had the smallest value and as if reality were always situated on a lower level than what may be called an “ideal”; to believe this is to think in a quantitative, not a qualitative, mode. We have in mind here the current meaning of the terms and not their specifically philosophical significance.

marvelously expressed by the monotheistic alternative between the two “eternities” beyond the grave; whatever the metaphysical limitation of this concept, it nonetheless provokes in the soul of the believer an adequate presentiment of what the human condition is beyond the terrestrial matrix and in the face of the Infinite. The alternative may be insufficient from the point of view of total Truth, but it is psychologically realistic and mystically efficacious; many lives are squandered and lost for the single reason that a belief in hell and Paradise is lacking.

The monk or hermit—and every contemplative, even a king— lives as if in an antechamber of Heaven;¹⁵ on this very earth and within his mortal body he has attached himself to Heaven and enclosed himself in a prolongation of those crystallizations of Light which are the celestial states. This being so, one understands how monks or nuns can see in the monastic life their “Paradise on earth”; all things considered, they are at rest in the divine Will and wait for nothing in this world below except death, and in this way they have already passed through death; they live here below in keeping with Eternity. The days as they succeed one another do nothing but repeat the same day of God; time stops in a unique and blessed day and is thus joined once again to the Origin, which is also the Center. And it is this Elysian simultaneity that the ancient worlds have always had in view, at least in principle and in their nostalgia; a civilization is a “mystical body”: as far as possible it is a collective contemplative.

* * *

These considerations lead us to the crucial problem of obedience, so essential in normal civilizations and so little understood in modern ones, which nevertheless have no trouble admitting it when it is a question of collective discipline, though it is sometimes to the detriment of the most elementary spiritual rights. Obedience in itself is a means of inward perfection, on condition that it is wholly supported by religion, as is the case in all traditional worlds: within this framework, a man must in any case obey someone or something, if only the sacred Law and his own conscience if he is a prince or pontiff; nothing and no one is independent of God. The subordination of women, children, inferiors, and servants falls into place quite normally in the system of multiple obediences that makes up a religious society; dependence with respect to another may be a hard fate, but it always has a religious meaning, as does poverty, which—no less than dependence—includes a similar significance in its very nature. From the point of view of religion, the rich and the independent are by no means by definition the happy ones; ease and freedom may indeed be elements of happiness in such a society, but from the point of view of religion they are so only in connection with piety and as a result of it, which brings us back to the adage that “*noblesse oblige*”; when piety exists apart from material well-being and impiety is on the contrary allied to it, true happiness is attributed to pious poverty, not impious wealth; and it is

¹⁵ It is in an analogous sense, but one superior as to the degree of existence, that the Paradise *Sukhâvatî* is represented as surrounded by a golden thread; it is as if it were suspended from *Nirvâna*, and it is thus a joyful prison, which is cut off from suffering and is open only toward total Freedom.

pure calumny to claim that religion as such, or through its institutions, has always been on the side of the rich. On the one hand religion is there to transform those human beings who are willing to allow themselves to be transformed, but on the other hand religion must take men as they are, with all their natural rights and their collectively ineradicable faults, or else it cannot survive in the world of men.

In the same line of thought, one more observation must be made, whether agreeable or not: a society as such, or by virtue of the mere fact of its existence, represents nothing of value; this implies that social virtues are nothing in themselves and apart from the spiritual context that orients them toward our final goal; to say otherwise is to falsify the very definition of man and of the human. The supreme Law is the perfect love of God—a love that must engage our whole being, as the Scripture says—and the second Law, that concerning love of the neighbor, is “like unto” the first; now “like unto” does not mean “equivalent to”, and still less “superior to”, but “of the same spirit”; Christ means that the love of God manifests itself extrinsically by love of the neighbor, wherever there is a neighbor, which is to say that we cannot love God while hating our fellow men. In conformity with our full human nature, love of the neighbor is nothing without love of God, from which it draws all its content and without which it has no meaning; of course loving the creature is also a way of loving the Creator, but on the express condition that its foundation is the direct love of God, for otherwise the second Law would not be the second but the first; now it is not said that the first law is “like unto” or “equal to” the second, but that the second is “like unto” the first, which means that the love of God is the necessary foundation and *conditio sine qua non* of all other charity. This relationship shines through—sometimes imperfectly but always recognizably with respect to its principle—in all traditional civilizations.

No world is perfect, but every human world should possess the means to perfection. A world has value and legitimacy because of what it does for the love of God and for nothing else; and by “love of God” we mean above all the choice of Truth and then the direction of the will: the Truth that makes us conscious of an absolute and transcendent Reality—at once personal and supra-personal—and the will that attaches itself to it and recognizes in it its own supernatural essence and final end.

The tablet contains a map of the Mesopotamian world, with Babylon in the center. It contains carefully etched images and cuneiform writing. Babylon is surrounded by two concentric circles that represent the ocean, named "bitter water" or the "salt sea." The 18 mythological beasts mentioned in the writing on the map allude to the Babylonian Epic of Creation where the new world was created after the mythological animals were expelled to the "Heavenly Ocean." Others say that the Babylonians engaged in cartography to assist in their exporting of agricultural surpluses. While the Babylonians were well-aware of other peoples, such as the Persians and Egyptians, the map creators specifically excluded those peoples from the map. Ancient Light is a 2012 novel by John Banville. First published on 7 July 2012, the novel concludes a trilogy concerning Alexander Cleave and his daughter, Cass. Eclipse (2000) and Shroud (2002) were Ancient Light's literary predecessors in the Banville canon. Banville dedicated Ancient Light to the literary editor Caroline Walsh, whose recent sudden death had left him devastated.