From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

The Veil of the Temple: A Study of Christian Initiation[1]

by

Marco Pallis

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983).
© World Wisdom, Inc.

> *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 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 both from 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 which 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 inexpressible, can only be symbolized "apophatically", by an emptying or divestment, as in the present case. Esoterically speaking, this knowledge can only refer to God in His suchness, the divine Selfhood transcending even Being.

---

[1] Editor's note: This version of the essay, which appeared in the 1983 Winter-Spring edition of *Studies*, is a shortened version from that which had appeared earlier in *Tomorrow*, Vol. 12, No. 2. (Spring, 1964). This earlier version can also be found at studiesincomparativereligion.com.

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 which 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 Muhammad 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", *sammō sambōdhi,* nevertheless remains the keynote of Buddhism in a sense not shared by other traditions. With Christianity it is *the* Incarnation which 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 esoterism 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 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 (*sharī'ah*) and the Esoterism (*tassawuf*) 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 non-existence 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", 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 mentality" 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.

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 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" which 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 which, here again, is charged with associations taken over from the esoteric side of the pre-Christian traditions 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 which serve to delineate the esoteric realm and to distinguish it from the exoteric—one might also have said: those which 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. 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 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", *Chen jen* of the Taoists; 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 term "christification" might well be used to express this supreme ideal.

* * *

With Hesychasm one finds oneself contemplating Christian initiation as such, both in theory and practice or, as Tibetans would put it, both its characteristic "wisdom" and "method". Not that this spiritual current of the Eastern Church exhausts the possibilities implied in the name by providing a single type to which all else can be referred. What it does is to provide 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 the Hermatic influences detectable in the medieval West or else expressly associated with certain vocational institutions like the guilds of Cathedral builders or knightly orders such as the Templars. All these things have existed in the Christian world during the Middle Ages, but none of them conform to conditions, in terms of finality, doctrine and method such as would allow one to identify them without further qualification with "Christian initiation" in an all-inclusive sense. Seeing that Hesychasm is the only extant example of something that satisfies the required conditions in a sufficient degree to answer our present purpose, we are left no other choice but to take this for our starting-point and to build afterwards from there.

The chief points to note about Hesychasm are as follows:

(i) Its basis in Scripture and the Fathers,

(ii) Its Invocative formula,

(iii) The position in it of the Geront (Slavonic *Staretz*),

(iv) Its declared goal, and lastly,

(v) The absence of any specifically initiatic rite.

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

(i) 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 this name until 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.

(ii) The short sentence known as "The Prayer of Jesus" 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 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.

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.

(iii) 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 towards 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 avataric function exclusively in his own person, is the only possible initiator—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.

(iv) As regards the ultimate purpose of spiritual endeavor, 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.

(v) Concerning the absence of any special initiatic rite in Hesychasm, and in Christianity as such, already commented on sufficiently both in previous sections and in the present section under headings (ii) and (iii), 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 for ever.

* * *

For those who feel attracted by the Hesychast way at any degree, their attention should again be drawn to the very important collection of texts known as the *Philokalia.* An abridged version was published some years ago in English, based upon a Russian nineteenth century translation. Now, however, a complete translation of the original Greek text has begun to appear, published by Faber & Faber Ltd. Two volumes have already come out, and another is due shortly, with two more to follow. This latest version has been the work of a triumvirate, namely Dr. Philip Sherrard, Father Kallistos Ware and Gerald Palmer. No one wishing to live the Christian life with intensity and insight can afford to be without this collection. It is hoped that the present essay on the veil of the Temple may prove a means of its diffusion both among Orthodox Christians and also among persons following other Christian persuasions. The well-known religious classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* by an unknown Russian author links on to the same spiritual current as the *Philokalia,* of which the chief center continues to be the Holy Mountain of Athos, but without excluding other possible centers in other parts of the Orthodox world and potentially also situated still further afield.