

## Oriental Orthodoxy, Western Christianity and Culture

The homelands of the West are a place of ambiguity — full of great promise and peril, and the headwaters of a dynamic culture that is influencing societies everywhere. Its technological prowess drives the world's economic engines and military-industrial complexes. Yet the social orders in the West languish from the lack of a spiritual center leaving men and women only on the surface of a world replete with competition and consumerism as its philosophical and practical underpinnings.

At this juncture, Light from the Orient has reached its shores, and so it is that each is influencing the other. The freedoms of thought and social norm that are the West's hallmark and heritage have catalyzed an evolution in traditional religious thought and spiritual practice. For example, men and women now share equally and competently leadership in the responsibility for the transmission of wisdom. The West lays claim to certain freedoms of perspective and individuation that, with quickened hearts and minds, we bring to bear upon our Abrahamic roots and those qualities that lie in the innermost regions of the Christian orient.

Oriental wisdom is helping men and women everywhere to regain the stability of a spiritual center, and reestablish metaphysical foundations upon which the spiritual edifices of wisdom can be built. It is in this dynamic context that the Order works, taking up its mission to create a wisdom culture in a post-modern world of competitive individualism, radical indeterminacy and doubt, and the oppressive codification of a reductionist worldview. Here we labor for a new flowering of spirituality, the reconciliation of opposites and extremes, the reintegration of lost streams of perennial wisdom into modern thought, and a true union of the human and the divine that will become the seedbed for transformative change in the West. The women and men of the Order share these same values and objectives in solidarity with contemplatives of other faith traditions.

### The Human Condition and a Critique of the West

We live in the West, and we often hear it said that it is the best place on earth to be alive. It is further impressed upon us that America is the best country on the planet - American "exceptionalism" has now become a nationalist doctrine of sorts. Perhaps most of us would agree, if we are Americans. This powerful nation in the West is indeed the home of a very advanced technological civilization, after all, and many people around the world are trying desperately to come here to enjoy the fruits of that technology, and the supposedly higher standard of living it seems to provide. So what more can be said?

Many sophisticated critiques, of course, have been made about the West and western civilization. All of them are instructive, especially if we want to be able to stand back from the world to some degree, to see it in perspective, and begin to live in it in the way that wisdom encourages us to see it, in all of its relativity and ambiguity. There is, of course, no place on earth that is not without its difficulties and insufficiencies; nothing is perfect anywhere. But it may be that because so many here see their own culture's technological and geopolitical advance as "proof" of its superiority, that we westerners are more easily co-opted by its illusions; blind to its seductive nature.

Views of modern western civilization range from the most negative, which sees the West essentially as a “Beast” (to use the Biblical apocalyptic image) that holds all of its people in thrall and will not allow us to escape our blindness, to the most positive spin, which touts the West as a civilization on the edge of some great breakthrough into further enlightenment because we lead the world forward, not only technologically but culturally, and perhaps spiritually as well. This is the range of opinion, and you can make a cogent case for your position almost anywhere along this spectrum.

One world renowned critic takes a somewhat middle position in this spectrum of world views: Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees the modern western world’s positive developments but also perceives the loss of its traditional culture where the fundamental values of a sacred tradition have vanished from society, and thus it is left spiritually bereft, crippled by this loss and so cannot easily find its way forward. Nasr makes exactly this case in a critically acclaimed text excerpted from his prestigious Gifford Lectures given in 1981, entitled *Knowledge and the Sacred*. In a series of essays, Nasr critiques not only the loss of traditional knowledge, by which he means the metaphysical foundations that have grounded traditional cultures, but also the philosophical ideology of reductionism and scientism which are now endemic in the mindset of the West. This is what is called a “perennialist critique,” referring to the school of thought known as Perennial Philosophy, and is a critique which has been made by many other profound thinkers as well, such as Brian Appleyard, Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon, to name a few.

Regardless of how one feels about these critiques, the empirical evidence of a state of global crisis all around us is becoming more apparent: Something is seriously amiss and, in the end, the result may not only be the loss of a coherent and ordered society, but more importantly perhaps, the loss of the planet in ecological disaster. The ship of western civilization may be foundering on the rocks of materialist consumerism and a bankrupt economic system, and so we may be reaching a point of no return—some kind of “tipping point.” For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, however, this crisis in the West may also pinpoint a place of awakening: This bifurcation--or tipping point--may lead to a place where we could move collectively toward some new and greater wholeness or into complete disintegration. The choice is still, perhaps, even at this late hour, ours to make.