

The Sacred and the Post-Modern: An Impossible Convergence

By Patrick Laude

“**L**e sacré est la projection du Centre céleste dans la périphérie cosmique”: “The sacred is the projection of the celestial Center into the cosmic periphery.”¹ These words by Frithjof Schuon beautifully suggest what the sacred has represented for mankind throughout the ages, and across traditional civilizations. They remind us, first of all, that the world of the sacred is a centered world. The concept of “center,” which is so profoundly at odds with contemporary trends and sensibilities, must be taken herein more symbolically than literally. This symbolic understanding does not, however, weaken in the least the significance of the term, quite the contrary, since the symbol, in the traditional view, is not essentially different from that which it symbolizes; in other words, the literal center of geometry is indeed a symbol of the metaphysical Center. Geometrically, the notion of center refers to the middle point of a circle, or a sphere, that is equidistant to all points of its periphery. It refers also, by extension, to the point of origin and direction of an action, a thinking process or a volitional impulse, or to its focal point. All of these definitions apply *a fortiori* to the capitalized Center of the universe. Thus, the Divine or Dharmic Center is evidently the origin, metaphysically and cosmologically, of the whole, and it is also, spiritually, the focus of concentration of human inner and outer endeavors in the great civilizations of the sacred. When referring to the Origin, the latter must not, moreover, be understood primarily in temporal terms, but also and above all metaphysically, in the sense that everything proceeds from the Source, in the beginning and at all times since the beginning is at all

¹ From the *Divine to the Human*, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2013, p.87.

times. As for the Principle as Center of attention of human endeavors it is the goal and ultimate meaning of existence, and the object of the highest aspirations of traditional mankind. The geometric meaning of the center as equidistant to the all points of the periphery provides us, in addition, with an intimation that the Principle of the universe is at the middle point of universal existence, and therefore as close to any existent as to another. As the middle point of manifestation it is the real *axis mundi*, since everything proceeds from it; but it is also "equidistant" to all points of the periphery of existence in the sense that its presence permeates everything, and is indeed the very essence of everything. Meister Eckhart has a most suggestive way to put this when he writes, in conclusion to one of his sermons: "Let us pray to God... that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly and the soul are equal."² This "there" is the metaphysical Center where everything is unified and equalized.

It follows from our previous considerations that inasmuch as it is a projection of the Center the sacred does participate in the Center; while insofar as this projection lies within the periphery, it is an integrating part of the latter. Thus, the sacred is akin to what Islamic gnosis calls a *barzakh*, a point of contact between two domains of reality that it both connects and differentiates from each other. In other words, the sacred is immanent while highlighting transcendence and partaking mysteriously in the latter; it is, in Gilbert Durand's suggestive words, akin to the symbol as the "epiphany of a mystery," being thereby awesome and arresting. Like Moses' burning bush it implies the kind of tremendous qualitative difference that Mircea Eliade has convincingly explored through his study of sacred space and sacred time in his classic *The Sacred and the Profane*. The sacred is a threshold of transcendence.³

As the major ideological underpinning of modernity, scientism ignores or rejects the very notions of an ontological center and an ontological

² Meister Eckhart, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1981, p. 200.

³ "For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. "Draw not nigh hither," says the Lord to Moses; "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Exodus, 3, 5). There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous." Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1959, p. 20.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

www.sacredweb.com