Grigori S. Pomerantz

THEORY OF SUBECUMENICS:

ORIGINALITY OF EASTERN CULTURES

Our thinking is still the captive of the dichotomy "national/international." The reaction to nationalism takes the form of an abstract internationalism, and reaction to internationalism leads to the rebirth of nationalism. However, this dichotomy was only true (and that relatively) in 19th century Europe, or at the latest, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when subnational cultures seemed on the way to disappearing, and everything European was considered "universal" [1] (two hypotheses that the facts prove to be untrue). As H. Frey observes, "Today, the decline or decadence of the West is part of the contemporary view of the world, like the electron or the dinosaur." [2] The linear

Translated from the French by Jeanne Ferguson.

[1] Ossip Mandelstam's poem, "Nostalgia for a World Culture," shows no interest in India, China and Japan. The nostalgia in question concerned only European culture. Inversely, Indian historians speak of "European civil wars" referring to the First and Second World Wars. For them Europe is not the universe.

[2] H. Frey, " 'The Decline of the West' by Oswald Spengler," *Daedalus*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, Vol. 103, No. 1, p. 7.

1

outline of progress, with Europe at the head, did not withstand the test of the First World War. The year 1918 marked the beginning of the end of Europeanism. Since then, we have begun to speak of "areas of civilization" (Splengler), "civilizations" (Toynbee), "cultural coalitions" (Lévi-Strauss).[3] The existence of "areas of civilization" (regions) is commonly admitted today; it has entered journalistic language and even the structure of regional commissions and agencies of the United Nations (Europe, Near East, Southern Asia, South-east Asia, and the Far East). New communities have inserted themselves between nations and humanity. What do they represent? Are they something unique, or are they divided into a certain number of types in opposition to each other because of some characteristic? And in what way have they modified our view of universal history?

Spengler, categorical as are all men who come upon a new idea, was of the opinion that universal history is an illusion created by rationalism. He believed that "areas of civilization" appear and disappear without transmitting anything to each other except for odds and ends with no common connection or meaning. However, this contradicts two particularly stable ideas, established on the one hand by religion and on the other by European science; namely, that the New Testament was erected on ground prepared by the Old Testament and that what the New Testament contributed that was new (grace) was superior to the former principle (law). Secondly, the evolutionary process creates differentiated forms from primitive forms, and that *Homo sapiens* is superior to *Homo habilis.*

If we look at the facts, we see that the process of the accumulation of knowledge transmitted from civilization to civilization is hard to deny. Our disposition to understand what is foreign to us (not only in bits and pieces but in entirety) is shown by Spengler himself, in writing clearly and knowingly on a dozen vanished cultures. It seems that Pythagoras understood the Egyptians and al-Biruni understood India. Antiquity linked Christianity to the Middle Ages. This cannot, of course, be called

---

[3] T.S. Eliot also had very interesting comments to make with respect to the interdependence of subnational, national and supranational cultures, in *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, London, 1948.

2

progress: we may admit that progress is not absolute and is accompanied by irreparable losses, that Europe has, in effect, lost its hegemony. However, universal history has not reached its end, for all that, and Toynbee endeavored to throw new light on it. In the intellectual atmosphere of crisis, in which progress had been put into question, and of faith in spite of the crisis, he felt compelled to compare civilizations, with their ineluctable cycle of birth, decline and death, to a circular saw that, turning, goes continually deeper into the substance of the tree getting ever nearer its heart—superior spiritual values. The wisdom acquired at the price of suffering is transmitted to the heirs. Other models have been constructed thanks to which the historian can see more or less clearly the cyclic movements as well as the great unique river of history, advancing, by means of parallel branches, toward a common outlet.

The problem becomes complicated when we try to state precisely the ideas of "area of civilization," "cultural coalition" and "civilization." These three expressions, almost synonymous, apply to a great number of phenomena that we would prefer to differentiate. The term "civilization" is particularly vague and deprived of any taxonomic precision. We may speak of Athenian, Hellenic, Mediterranean or human civilization. What Toynbee is talking about is, to all intents and purposes, a large and solid coalition of cultures, but he never gives a clear definition of "civilization." The number of civilizations in the English historian's outline is not constant, and the problem of countries at the crossroads of several civilizations is never clearly presented. Initially, Russia receives the status of "civilization," after which it is divided between the Byzantine and Western worlds. Lack of precision and contradictions of this sort are numerous.

II

Thus, so as to at least avoid certain misunderstandings, we are obliged to introduce a series of new terms, which may seem disconcerting—subecumenic knot, subecumenic, bi-subecumenic —to designate different types of "cultural regions of the world" or "cultural coalitions."

3

The suggested terms may be completely clarified only in context, but to start off we give the following brief definitions.

1. A subecumenic knot is a group of countris united by a certain common culture, *more* or *less* universal ("supra-ethnic"). One example is the first archaic nuclei of civilization from which spread ideas of unification that reached neighboring peoples. Such was the case with Byzantium and the Slavic and Caucasian peoples converted to orthodoxy; with Tibet versus Mongolia; with Iran with regard to countries under Persian influence. Certain present-day "blocs" could be considered subecumenic knots.

2. The subecumenic is the result of an attempt at supra-ethnic culture having succeeded in detaching its own philosophy (or world religion, based on different philosophical traditions). There are only three autonomous philosophical traditions: Mediterranean, Indian and Chinese. We will consider four, however, in order to take into account the differentiation that has arisen in the Mediterranean tradition between the West and the Near East.

3. The bi-(sub)ecumenic [4] is the close union that has developed between two subecumenic knots during the historic process, subsequently giving rise to two subecumenics. The only example is that of the Mediterranean basin. However, some elements of bi-ecumenic unity exist in the relations between India and the Near East and, likewise, in the relations between India and China. It would be more to the point here to mention the bi-ecumenic knots that at times form, at times dissolve.

Without being a historical bi-ecumenic, founded on a common cultural inheritance, India and China may be regarded from one point of view as a *typological* sub-ecumenic. In other words, for certain essential characteristics they are in opposition to Europe and the Near East. Therefore, while the Mediterranean basin appears as the homeland of monotheistic religions, the development of the "religions of salvation" (Buddhism and Taoism) followed a completely different road in India and China. This is also true for architectural forms that, in India as in China, are modeled on nature (tree or hill) while in the Mediter-

---

[4] Throughout the remainder of the text we will use the more euphonic term "bi-ecumenic."

4

ranean world they assume geometrical forms (pyramids, rectangles or cylinders). The contrast between the two styles is particularly striking in India, where Indian architecture is confronted with the superb geometry of the mosques. Less spectacular, but essential, is the fact that in India as in China it was considered more honorable to possess knowledge (especially sacred knowledge) than to wear a sword. Herzen remarked that all the emperos of the world wore military dress *with the exception of the Emperor of China...*

Each subecumenic and bi-ecumenic may be considered as a social organism, being differentiated by the particularities of its social stratification, by the form and hierarchy of its symbols of reality, and so on. In our opinion, Marx confronted this problem clearly when he spoke (in the plural) of Asiatic *means* of production. Not being an economist, we do not undertake here the analysis of the changing socio-economic structure of certain great civilizations. Nonetheless, we shall try to give some examples that illustrate the tie between "the oriental Heaven" and "the oriental land."

III

The first voyage around the world was made in the 16th century. Conditions permitting this encircling of the globe were not established or regular and certain until much later (around the 19th century). The unity of world culture coming from these conditions still belongs to the future.

Yet from the fourth millennium before our era monarchs gave themselves the title of emperor of the four corners of the world, and one thousand years before our era universal religions appeared, addressing themselves to all men without distinction of race or origin. In fact, terrestrial empires and heavenly empires did not go beyond the "region of the world" (at the most, two neighboring regions, closely linked, such as in the Mediterranean basin). Nevertheless, the idea of a *universal* civilization haunted the conscience of prophets, thinkers and lawmakers, and the China of Confucius, the India of Asoka, ancient Judea, Greece and Rome effectively produced symbols, principles and politico-

5

juridical systems on which could be based a worldwide communication. To sum up, when the Mediterranean basin split up into the Christian world and the Islamic world, four variants appeared, four projects for the "unified human community," four ways of submitting the tribal and national to human universality, four "subecumenics," universal and supra-ethnic in actuality, superimposed on national cultural differences, subordinating them and at the same time being distinct from each other as so many original cultures.

As we have said, each subecumenic is a social organism in which the symbols of duty and the relationships existing (family, political and economical) are bound together and reciprocally support each other, up to a certain point. The disappearance of Buddhism in India and its extension into China (during the second millennium of our era) may be explained by the fact that Buddhism was not able to change the existing forms of the family, rural community or caste, nor could it adapt to these forms as did the rival religions, Confucianism and Vishnuism. The triumphant religions were those directly centered on the ethic of the large family, those that obtained the support of the rural communities, where the village and the large family were vital for production.[5] Sometimes the direct link between the value system of a subecumenic and its economic practices are quite obvious. It is clear, for example, that the relative consideration in which working on the land was held in China has something to do with the periodic redistribution of land to those who worked it—at the moment of a "mandate from Heaven" or at those of the great reforms. In India, on the other hand, the one who was legally responsible for paying land taxes did not himself work the land. All the attempts of the Moslem, and later, English, administrators ran up against the value system of Hinduism, that forbade "dirty" work. As a general rule, the ties between principle and practice are incomparably more complex, but in any case they weave an extremely resistant web that is almost impossible to break. For example, the fact that Islamic truth is

[5] See our article, "The Decline of Buddhism in Medieval India," *Diogenes,* No. 96, pp. 38-66.

6

conceived in terms of law—the word given by Allah (Koran) [6]—
is explained by the politico-judicial structure of the caliphate.
Schisms that occurred at the heart of Islam were mainly brought
about by disagreements over the interpretations of state laws
(for example, the transmission of the caliph's power) and laws of
a more private nature. On the contrary, in Christianity grace is
above the law and complete truth is expressed only in the person
of Christ. This explains why divergences in canon law have never
led to the formation of sects. Christians have anathematized
each other for other reasons, especially for the manner in which
the divine being should be understood. Byzantium preferred to
perish rather than admit that the Holy Spirit emanated from the
Son and not just from the Father. Compared with that, Islam
seems rational. However, the personal principle of Christianity
preserved in a modified form the traditions of ancient liberty,
and it is on that terrain that the individual liberty of modern
times took its first steps, while Islam's legalism has maintained
a centralized theocracy.

The Mediterranean world is also in opposition to the Far
East inasmuch as it is a culture of revealed truth, whereas in
the Far East the truth is unrevealed and basically unexpressible.
Although the ways of the Lord are unfathomable, the Koran
for the Moslems, and Christ for the Christians, are revealed
absolutes. Buddha, on the contrary, keeps a "noble silence" with
regard to the great mysteries of Being and Lao Tzu exclaims:
"Oh Obscure! Oh Nebulous!" Hindu India with its balance
between expressed and unexpressed, personal and impersonal
sacred forms seems to occupy an intermediary position. In some
ways it is close to the Mediterranean and in others to the Far
East.

The lack of precision of the symbols of the absolute is not
without a relationship to the laconism of the artitic language
of the Far East, that prefers allusion to a developed pro-
nouncement, nor to the absence of erotic metaphors in the sacred
books.[7] Tao in this regard is so impersonal that it is impossible

---

[6] In the history of Islam the Koran progressively takes a place greatly
resembling the second hypostasis in the Trinity: it is co-eternal with Allah
and precedes Heaven and Earth.

[7] Yin and Yang—the two principles of Being in Chinese metaphysics—

7

to love it as the Shulamite loved Solomon or the Sufi loved Allah. The allegorical representation of Tao is rather a landscape, and landscape as an autonomous genre developed much earlier in the Far East than in Europe, its function being completely different: Sung landscapes are in their way icons of the mist.[8]

The absence of erotic metaphors in the great works of the culture is, in a way, connected with the structure of the Chinese family and has profoundly marked affective life in reality. No sacred book authorizes a Chinese to forsake his father and mother and become of one flesh with his wife. Love is not associated with liberty (in the choice of a partner) but with duty (towards parents, brothers and sisters). Under no circumstances does the Chinese have the right to abandon his father and his mother. The culture, in any case, would not sanction such behavior. In China there is no *Song of Songs* nor *Gitagovinda*; there is no limitless kingdom of amorous imagination in which the individual finds compensation for the real restrictions to which the family subjects him. The delirium of love has not been placed on a pedestal by poetry. It has not been weighed against the empire of reason and has not conquered in real life the vast domain of the forbidden, such as the sin of Francesca da Rimini. Woman, humbled in daily life, is not identified with divinity in poetry, and no Chinese emperor ever built a Taj Mahal. Poets preferred to sing about friendship (the only area in human relationships where the Chinese enjoyed some liberty) and white-haired old age, which permitted retirement from an active life. Because of this, there has been no encouragement to go from a large family to a small one, and still today extended family ties are an obstacle to modern development.

The imprecise nature of symbols of the absolute has hindered, in China and India, the development of the conflict between religion and philosophy, a conflict that in the Mediterranean world was aggravated by the difference in ethnical origin of the doctrines— Semite for religious doctrines, Greek for philosophy and Roman

---

correspond to the masculine and the feminine. There is sexual, but not erotic, attraction—in other words, not individualized love such as exists between Cupid and Psyche.

[8] See the works of E.V. Zavadskaia, "V.M. Alekseev o filosofskoesteticheskom areale slova," in *Literatura i Kultura Kitaia*, Moscow, 1972.

8

for law. In India and China there is not even a difference in terminology for expressing the ideas of "philosophy" and "theology." A "refutation of philosophy" (al-Ghazzali) is inconceivable, but neither can a "refutation of the refutation" (Averroes) be found. Philosophy has not been lowered to the rank of "servant of theology" (Thomas Aquinas) nor has it rebelled against its own role. In the undeveloped unity of the culture science did not suffer pogroms, but its chances of detaching itself from its symbiosis with religion and transforming itself into an independent social force were incomparably less.

At the same time, there is a relationship between representations of the supreme truth and the nature of supreme governmental authority. The caliph who attained power became the spiritual leader, the *imam*, but on the condition of professing and defending what was written in the Koran. On the contrary, the Emperor of China, who had a direct mandate from Heaven, unlimited and having prevalence over all written word, could support whatever doctrine he liked. He could, at his pleasure, put to death tens of thousands of Buddhist monks without being condemned to flagellation, as was Henry II Plantagenet.

For its part, the West has been characterized by a trait that is found nowhere else: the separation of supreme authorities and the struggle between Pope and Emperor. The only analogy to be found in the Orient (and it is approximate) is the *shogun,* who opposed the emperor in Japan. The discord that developed historically between Pope and Emperor was based on the thesis of the "two cities" sustained by St. Augustine, and it was of great help to the actual medieval cities in their struggle for independence from the feudal lords. The thesis favored the appearance of the first forms of the new society: the *bourgeoisie.*

There is also a link between the value system of a subecumenic and the structure of the relationships that are established between the subecumenic and the ethnic communities it encompasses. These relationships are in every case specific and not repeated. The means used by the Chinese to organize the Celestial Empire were to permit ethnic differences to slowly dissolve within the masses while the educated elite formed a distinct body bound together by the same hieroglyphic culture, independent of the living language. In this particular case, the

9

ethnic was considered barbarous and of no value. In return the method used in India was to consider ethnic differences as sub-ethnic phenomena, as so many aspects of a single system based on caste and religion, rejecting nothing but subjecting everything to its complicated hierarchy.[9] For its part, medieval Islam at first intended to impose not only one sole organization that was religious, judiciary and political at the same time, but also the Arabization of populations. However, the Iranians were able to break away from that organization, and the Turks did not submit to it. On the ruins of the caliphate appeared rival poly-ethnic empires, each making claims to orthodoxy and universality. As for the Christian West of the Middle Ages, it held to the religious bond and the language of the Church, abandoning the ethnic to history from which emerged, on the eve of the modern era, the nations of today, bound together by a common secular culture, the traditions of the Renaissance, Classicism and the Age of Enlightenment, while still preserving their individual language, State and patriotism.

All these subecumenics have a common characteristic: the aptitude to take into the system no matter what group, provided it accepts the values and fundamental symbols of that system and submits to the "rules of admission," i.e., rejection of paganism, for the Christian and Islamic worlds; recognition of the hierarchy of castes, in India; and Confucian wisdom in the Far East.

IV

A people could always adopt a foreigner and, in a way, ancient Egypt adopted Joseph. However, the diffusion of culture was difficult in a tribal or proto-historic society. In fact, a certain closing-off was indispensable to the survival of the tribe. In the pre-liberate way of life there was no model for behavior separated from the behavior itself. There were no principles consigned to a book that protected them from man's instability. The spirit of the tribe could only be grasped by participation in the life of the

---

[9] As various inquiries have shown, modern Indians still confuse nationality (Bengali, for example) and *djati* (caste).

10

latter, by becoming a member of it, by gradually becoming initiated into all the rites whose goal was to transmit the wisdom of the ancients and arouse the appropriate reverent attitude to that wisdom. This is why it was impossible to admit strangers into the tribe except on an individual level or in small groups. And it is also why it was absolutely impossible to admit the uninitiated into the sanctuary The exchange of information *between* tribes, even close neighbors, was *necessarily* limited to the secular level with the "ideology" of the tribe remaining untouchable. What was new came in through the back door, so to speak, and only little by little left its mark on the values and norms of the group.

But for established civilizations this resistance to penetration ceased to be a necessity. Their wisdom was written down and detached itself from society itself to be inscribed in books, to acquire from this fact a universal and logical form, capable of convincing without the aid of the tom-tom—and of convincing everyone. Naturally, this universal form was not developed all at once, and the fear inspired by the uninitiated lasted for a long time. To this we must add a condescending scorn for the barbarians, considered as too inferior to be worthwhile initiating and instructing. The enormous gulf that separated the earliest civilizations from the tribes around them exacerbated "ethnocentrism" even in comparison with the tribal level. On the one hand, there was the ethnocentrism of the tribes, with complex feelings about the civilizations, composed of a sense of inferiority (faced with the material superiority of "the whore of Babylon") and a repugnance for the customs of the civilization in question and the breaking up of tribal solidarity into a society of classes (it is from this complex that *barbarism*, the desire to destroy a corrupt civilization—vandalism—was born); and on the other hand, the ethnocentrism of those who were "developed" and the consciousness they had of their immeasurable superiority, going almost so far as to refuse to recognize the barbarians as belonging to the human race. It took thousands of years for the idea of the civilizing mission of a culture to appear. Ancient Egyptians, who thought of their neighbors as descendants of demons, were unaware of it (at least until the New Empire). It also probably did not exist in the China of the Yin period. But

11

it is found in Confucian China, where it appears in the diplomatic language of the Son of Heaven, who ordered his vassals to govern with respect for the principles of humanity.

Finally, very late, the idea was formed (especially among the ancient barbarians) that it was no sin to learn and that the willingness of a civilization to welcome what was foreign to it was proof of dignity and not a fault. Mencius did not understand it (he could not, given the distance that separated China from the Mediterranean basin, the most important center of cultural exchange, and the geographical isolation of the Celestial Empire): "It may happen," he wrote, "that barbarians learn something from civilized men but not that civilized men learn anything from barbarians."

This ethnic condescension does not belong exclusively to ancient history. It is still found in Byzantium in the Middle Ages and even in Europe in modern times (Spain). Jansen and Stone have compared Japan and England in this regard, and the comparison is not to the advantage of the latter.[10] This malady has each time led to stagnation and often to death. Scornful ethnocentrism was one of the main reasons for the disappearance of the earliest civilizations.

How may we explain that Indian and Chinese civilizations did not suffer this fate? The principal reason is apparently that historical China and historical India were, to tell the truth, filial civilizations (although very ancient). They rested on the experience of *two* confronting traditions: Yin ("bad Heaven") and Chu ("good Heaven") for China, and proto-Indian and Aryan traditions for India. These "differences in ethnic potentials," although less important than in the ancient Mediterranean world, nevertheless permitted them to accumulate the indispensable stock of stereotypes of which Lévi-Strauss speaks [11] and to create

[10] N.B. Jansen and L. Stone, "Education and Modernization in Japan and England," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, The Hague, Vol. 9, No. 2.

[11] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Dynamique culturelle et valeurs," *Approches de la science du développement socio-économique*, Paris, 1971, pp. 282-284. "Europe at the beginning of the Renaissance was a place of encounter and fusion of the most varied influences. On the contrary, cultural contacts in pre-Columbian America were very limited. As a consequence, it accumulated fewer 'behavior models,' '*Lacunae*' were produced in its development, and because of this it was unable to respond to the challenge of the Spanish invaders. The disposition to

12

universal philosophico-religious principles. The civilization of India and that of China were relatively homogeneous and autochtonous, if they are compared with the West, but not if they are compared with ancient Egypt. However, they proved to be sufficiently universal to furnish the religious, philosophical and esthetic bases for a subecumenic.

Subecumenics may be more or less universal, more or less open to what is foreign to them, but they have the particular characteristic of subjugating barbarian invaders and making them bearers of their principles and values. Thus the Huns who erupted into Europe became a Western people; the Mongols and Turks who invaded Asia Minor became Moslem, propagators of the faith of Islam; the numerous tribes that penetrated China became Chinese; and those that penetrated India formed new *Indian* castes.

The universality of a culture may be the principle of self-preservation not only of the subecumenics but also of various nations. Let us take as an example the Iranians. Conquered, subjugated and Islamized by the Arabs, they were at first obliged to learn Arabic and could only become distinguished as Arab poets and scholars. Later, a neo-Persian poetry appeared that reached a cultural hegemony in a large part of the Orient. Finally, the Turkish Kysylbash confederation, founded on religious and tribal ties, appropriated Iran and made the Persian language official. In this way, sovereignty was in the end reestablished without the *Iranians* winning a single battle while southern Azerbaijan, from whence the Kysylbash came, became an Iranian province. The traditions of its high Persian culture constituted, in this particular case, the system that the "passion" [12] of the

progress is ordered by the 'form of community' (the 'way of being together'). 'Cumulative history... is the historical form characteristic of those social super-organisms that make up social groups, while stationary history... is the sign of the inferior type of life that is that of solitary societies."

[12] The expression is that of L.N. Gumilev. According to him, the movements that caused history to advance are the doing of impassioned natures, *passionarii*. Men who follow them group themselves into *consortii* (as in marriages for love). In time, passion is extinguished, and the *consortii* are transformed into *convixii*, which are maintained only through inertia—until the next flare up of passion. This concept is well applied to the birth and decadence of tribal unions or to the expeditions of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, but it does not explain why the barbarian *passionarii* succumbed to the passionless world of the subecumenical

13

Kysylbash had only to put into motion, as water moves a mill-wheel. This is similar, but not identical, to Sino-Manchu relations.

One of the particularities that characterize subecumenics is that there is not a total coincidence between subecumenical and *popular* cultures. The cultural level of the subecumenic is the supra-national level, if we may say this, the one inscribed in the hieroglyphs, the Latin of the Middle Ages or, in the Near East, in the Arab-Persian literature that formed the mind of the cultivated Turk. This cultural level was based on the philosophical thought of the sages and the religious inspiration of the prophets. It happens that it was almost without influence on events, as was the case at the moment of the conquests of Genghis Khan. No one could prevent him from conquering half the world, but the future allied itself with the past, 'and the grandsons of Tamerlane became Buddhists in China and Moslems in the Near East. Conquests that do not bring new symbols of unity (such as Islam) give birth to ephemeral empires and, for their part, the Chinese considered that the true founder of the Chu dynasty was not Wu Wang, who conquered the Yin Empire, but his father Wen Wang, the legendary founder of Chu *culture*. The great Chinese thinkers always believed that the essential bond was the spiritual bond, while the political bond was only an auxiliary of the unity and prosperity of the Celestial Empire.

Let us view the example of Iran from this angle. Compared with Islam, Iran represented an autonomous subecumenical knot, in rivalry with the Eastern Roman Empire for the right to become the center of the subecumenic. The carriers of Iranian culture were not enclosed within the limits of a province, as in Syria or Egypt, and Islam found worthy rivals in them. Superficially, they succumbed to Islam, but internally they did not submit and found a new expression in Islamic terms themselves, that they fashioned to their own liking. The Syrians and Copts shut up within the framework of religion (initially desiring to be universal but around the 7th century already completely provincial) retreated step by step before the impetuous world sweep

cultures. See L.N. Gumilev, "Etnognez i etnosfera," *Priroda*, Moscow, 1970, Nos. 1 and 2; M.I. Zand, *Chest Viekov Slavy*, Moscow, 1968.

14

of Islam and finished by becoming Arabized. The Iranians, on the contrary, who "took the plunge" into Islam "emerged" with Shiism (rejected by most Arabs) and Persian culture. The sub-ecumenical level of thought and feeling, expressed in Arabic Islam, could only have been counterbalanced by the ability to live and think in forms and on a scale that in their universal import ceded nothing to those of Islam. Conquerors who have made themselves masters of the world have always been able to crush and destroy a local culture, molded around a local cult, but subecumenic culture has almost always proved to be the strongest.

V

The principal steps leading from subecumenical knots to sub-ecumenics and bi-ecumenics can go back to three phrases (of the type of slogan or motto):

1. We do not want to teach others nor learn, although we learn just the same, without wanting to:

$$\text{Civilization} \longrightarrow \text{Barbarians}$$

2. We would like to teach others, but there is no one from whom we can learn anything:

$$\text{Filial civilizations} \longleftarrow \text{Civilization} \longrightarrow \text{Barbarians}$$

3. We would like to teach others and we would like to learn ourselves:

$$\text{Civilization} \rightleftarrows \text{Civilization}$$

Indian and Chinese subecumenics developed following the second model. The Mediterranean bi-ecumenic developed following the third model, particularly in the western part, the ancient and medieval West.

In India, as in China, the kernel of the subecumenic was the civilization that arose on the debris of the preceding civilization. Not encountering a powerful spiritual rival, it gradually expanded over an immense territory (the Indian sub-continent, the Huang Ho and Yang Tze Valleys). In these two cases the ethnic and

15

the universal remained associated. The dominant ethnos coincided with the kernel of the subecumenic. The filial cultures, autonomous and not assimilated, spread over the peninsulas and islands (as in the Mediterranean basin), but their specific weight, compared to the physically and spiritually gigantic nucleus, was not great. They were dispersed and did not merge into a single world, comparable to the Mediterranean West. The gigantic single nucleus dominated the periphery, and the monism of the system was emphasized by the weakness of the bi-ecumenical ties (the only example of a contrary process is the expansion of Buddhism from India to China). The dynamic possibilities of the filial cultures (as with Japan) were ignored until modern times.

On the contrary, in the Mediterranean basin, the formation of a bi-ecumenic quickly overtook the formation of subecumenics, passed it and imposed its own dynamism. The great civilizations of archaic antiquity were close neighbors (in the territory between the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia) and, in spite of ethnocentrism, a common area and periphery were established. When outside populations penetrated into the field of *one* of these civilizations, they were easily overcome and assimilated. On the other hand, entering the common field they were in the crossfire of several currents of symbols and then tended, not to assimilation, but to the formation of autonomous new civilizations. The Phoenician and Greek city-states colonized the Western and Northern Mediterranean, spurred the development of the local populations (Rome) and created a new subecumenic, the western subecumenic, which had an important advantage, that of liberty with regard to archaic survivals (a liberty as important as that of the United States with respect to the residues of feudalism). All the civilizations that were part of the *ancient "New World"* (Phoenician, Greek and Roman) were pupils who knew of the existence of their older masters and for this reason were less withdrawn into their own ethnocentrism (compare, for example, China and Japan, India and Indonesia).[13] Dialogue was relatively easily established among them.

---

[13] It happens, however, that filial civilizations *forget* their cultural affiliation, as was the case with the Aryans in India, with the Chinese and with the Byzantines.

16

Dialogue begins in *all* filial civilizations as an *internal* conversation between the original cultural principles (or those adopted long before) and more recently acquired cultural principles. A permanent interest in that which is foreign is shown (as we can see in Japan), an interest to which the "deep-seated" current is opposed. It is in the "new" ancient Mediterranean that for the first time the conditions are realized for a passage to an *external* dialogue, to a reciprocal comparison of civilizations. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* was read as willingly by the Greeks as by the Romans. Traditional China knew nothing like that any more than did India (or at least not until Akbar's time). It is therefore in the Mediterranean world that the multilateral dialogue becomes installed:

Occident ⇄ Near East
|
Romans ⇄ Greeks
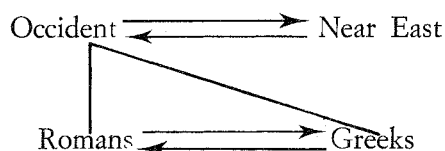
The "polyphony" was reinforced by two new and specifically Mediterranean phenomena: the diasporas (Hebrew, Armenian and Nestorian) and the churches. The diaspora established a bond between the Christian and Islamic worlds, as well as between the Near East, the steppes of Central Asia and China (Nestorians). It acted as intermediary in exchanges of merchandise and ideas—the role of interpreter. As for the Church, it was in its genre the first *international institution*, opposing itself to all states. It offered a framework for independent and, at the same time, interdependent development of local cultures. In this very differentiated *milieu*, open to what was foreign and new, first appeared the culture of the city-states (Florence and Venice, among others) and when this foundered, the culture of the *bourgeois* nations.

Thus a new multinational form of "coalition of cultures" was set up. We will not attempt to give a complete definition of "nation," but we should hope all the same to draw attention to the fact that a nation is unthinkable outside a *system* of nations. An isolated culture (Tibet) or a culture that absorbs its neighbors (China) is not a nation. A nation is a particular knot of

17

relationships at the center of the international system of the multinational community. And the formation of nations is inconceivable without the concomitant formation of the system of their inter-relations (a process that may be observed in the present-day Afro-Asiatic world).

The birth of a system of nations has exempted the West from the stagnation that froze the great civilizations of the past for many centuries. Individually, European nations could have fallen into decadence (Spain, Germany and Italy, in the 17th and 18th centuries), but the development of Europe, that progressed along several parallel paths, was never interrupted. This process, that began in the 17th century, was given the name of "modernization." It has come about through the passage from ancient and archaic forms, a "coalition of cultures," to a new, contemporary form of national life and international community.

However, this passage comes up against one enormous difficulty. The peculiarity of the developing ("new") nations of Asia and Africa is closely linked to the old form of relations between ethnic unities—the pre-national. The complete dismantlement of the old "world regions" and the entrance into a world community as a distinct nation are a unilateral Western decision: the great majority of Afro-Asian nations reject this solution. In order to develop their local traditions and for these to be transformed into national traditions, they need to keep, restore and cultivate certain subecumenical, "pan-religious" and "pan-national" traits. This is why the idea of a regional consolidation to fight against the West is so attractive to the contemporary Afro-Asiatic world, just as pan-Slavism was so attractive to the Russian Slavophiles.[14]

It would be a mistake to see a simple step backward in this attitude. Certainly, the tendency to form regional cultural communities is largely arbitrary, reflecting a desire to cling to archaic ways of life eroded by modernization. However, it also has its rational aspect. In fact, what we today call world culture is more a prospect than a reality. As a project it is hardly more than a wave of impersonal substitutes intended for mass

---

[14] This complex is visible in today's Japan and is expressed in its relations with China.

18

consumption. In relationship to that, the struggle for a local and regional culture is a struggle for culture itself. Now, to the extent to which world culture is a true culture, it is a *Western,* European culture, and we cannot expect the Indians, Chinese or Near Eastern peoples to adopt it without reservations, at least as long as Western culture does not broaden and take into its orbit the principal culture values of the East.

The West [15] has more than once been to school to the East. and many typically "Western" characteristics come from the East, beginning with Christianity and the Indian system of numeration, among athers. It may be that the contemporary culture of modernized countries can still assimilate other manifestations of Eastern culture, after having given them a "universal" and global form. That would be a natural prolongment of Hellenic tradition, that more than once absorbed the knowledge of Egypt and Babylon, not to mention other, similar episodes in the history of the Mediterranean basin.

Some progress in the right direction has already been made. but it is altogether insignificant with regard to the enormity of the task. The advances have been drowned by the uproar of pseudo-cultural stereotypes diffused by the press, radio and television. The problem is still with us, and no great nation can ignore it. The hermeticism and rigidity of Eastern cultures (or to be more precise, the kernels of the old subecumenics [16]) is not merely "their" problem, it is perhaps also and *especially* ours, that of our own "hermeticism" toward the Orient. We ourselves must make the overture and break out of our ethnocentrism, showing ourselves to be more attentive to, and aware of, the values of non-Western subecumenics.

True world culture is still to be created; it will need more time than needed for the admission of new members to the United Nations. This world culture is unthinkable without a prolonged and multilateral dialogue between the regions of the world, without a mutual fertilization of Eastern and Western values, without the elaboration of a common language. The future of world culture depends to a large extent on the rapidity with which this language can be formed.

[15] Here we include Russia.
[16] Japan, Vïet-Nam and Korea are quite dynamic.

19

VI

To conclude, we will say a few words about the relationships between pan-national, pan-religious and subecumenic communities, as well as about the typology of the cultures that have developed at the crossroads of several subecumenics.

A. Pan-national groupings are by nature closer to the nation than to the subecumenic. Expressions such as "the Arab nation," "the great African nation," and so on, are not simple rhetorical forms. Pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism are not addressed to just any man—only to the Arab and the Black. The dispute that opposed pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism was one of the reasons for World War I, that divided Europe; pan-Turkism and pan-Arabism destroyed the unity of the Near East.

The "post-modern" period in the West has become one of general crisis for subecumenics. Their high spiritual values underwent invasions during the centuries of the Middle Ages, but the colonial expansion of Europe spread scientific civilization to the four corners of the world. Its influence had a devastating effect, if not on faith at least on the hegemonic claims of religion. Faith in the absolute truth of traditional symbols and classifications was shaken, and the subecumenics disintegrated into pan-national groups. We may assume that the second tendency will end in nothing, as was the case in Europe with pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism. Nevertheless, at the moment it is a political reality: Iran and Afghanistan themselves have gone over, the first to Southern Asia, the second to South-east Asia, while Turkey has become reattached to Europe. The subecumenical cultural patrimony that these countries had in common with the Arabs has revealed itself to be less important than national and pan-national differences.

In turn, pan-religious regroupings come closer to the subecumenics, though there is not complete coincidence. For example, we cannot attach Christian Ethiopia to the West. Likewise, the marginal cultures south and east of the Byzantine world remained marginal with respect to the new subecumenic created by Islam. The subecumenics of Southern Asia and the Far East are amalgams of several religious systems. One is particularly distinguished for Confucianism, the other for Hinduism (or from

20

cults deriving from it), but Buddhism, part of the composition of these two amalgams, is the link that unites them to form the Eastern bi-ecumenic.

Subecumenical and pan-religious communities at times facilitate and even orient the formation of a new nation created by emigration. Such was the case with America, developed from the European subecumenical community, and also with Israel. In both cases, immigrants coming from Asia and Africa were integrated with great difficulty. The creation of a new nation from Muslim groups of Hindustan has also been attempted; the attempt is now going on in Pakistan (in the former West Pakistan).

B. An entire category of cultures exists that developed at the crossroads of several subecumenics. This group is particularly interesting from two points of view. First, because it constitutes a sort of laboratory in which historians may observe the process of synthesis of cultural principles and the creation of new subecumenical knots. Secondly, because we find in it the prototype of the situation in which all the Orient and all of Africa find themselves today, in which Westernization is superimposed on traditions.

The analysis of the laws of development of "crossed cultures" could be efficacious for understanding the general perspectives of history; but these "crossed cultures"—those of Indonesia, Tibet, Japan and Russia—are so different from each other that it is difficult to compare them. We cannot, therefore, suggest a principle of comparison except with many conditions and in setting aside the extraordinarily numerous individual peculiarities. The comparison should allow us to see, first, the predominance of stability (up to stagnation); second, the predominance of dynamism (up to instability); and third, the balance between stability and dynamism, openness and isolation.

Tibet is an example of a culture that has succeeded in achieving a stable synthesis of its elements—autochtonous, Indian and Chinese—and has closed itself up in its shell. Bali tends toward this same pattern. Java, on the contrary, has always been open to the religio-cultural movements that shook India: it abandoned Buddhism for Shivaism and Shivaism for Islam, as one would change the scenes in a theater. Japan has at times

21

been very open and at ather times quite closed. The swift
expansion of Christianity into the principalities of the south in
the 16th century recalls for its rapidity the expansion of Islam
into Indonesia, but afterward came the Todygawa regime. Two
and a half centuries later the central power, that had closed
the country, just as resolutely opened it, when the restoration of
the Meiji occurred. Something similar took place in Russian
history (the closing off of the Muscovite kingdom, later reforms
by Peter the Great). During these closed periods, autocracy
achieved a religio-cultural unity, and when the country was again
opened, it entered into the international community as an in-
divisible entity. Nevertheless, any resemblance between Japan
and Russia is undoubtedly limited to that. In the same way,
at the beginning of the Middle Ages, Japan would at times absorb
what was foreign to it, at times closing in on it and assimilating
it (like the sea-anemone, to which Japan has been compared).
Its insular position, defended by the "divine wind" [17] and its
proximity to a major cultural center [18] permitted it to keep the
initiative in the process of acculturation. Japan's history is a
biography unfolding according to its own interior logic. On the
contrary, the history of Russia, with its frontiers open to the
west, south and east, is more that of a destiny breaking barely-
formed cultural ties and replacing them brutally with others that
also did not last very long. In the decisive centuries of its for-
mation, Russia lost its principal teacher Byzantium, and the
idea of a Third Rome was born, but Russia did not have the
cultural resources necessary for its realization. We must not
see Peter the Great's decision to join Russia to Europe as a
despot's whim, but the methods he used were frightful, and the
traumas he caused proved to be no less enduring than the bene-
ficial consequences of the new cultural contacts (that in literature
in the 19th century inspired one of the greatest attempts at
universal synthesis). The situation of Russia at the crossroads of
all the subecumenics, to speak in the abstract, is extraordinarily
favorable, as Chaadayev observed, but in various periods Russia

[17] It dispersed the Mongol fleet.
[18] From which may be inferred both Chinese wisdom and Indo-Buddhist
wisdom.

22

entered into direct contact rather more with the far-off peripheries of the cultural worlds—not with Byzantium but with the Balkans; not with Baghdad but with Sarai; not with the West but with the German *faubourg* of Moscow. The relative tact of Meiji reforms, compared with the reforms of Peter the Great, may be explained by the fact that at the eve of the Meiji era forty to fifty per cent of Japanese men could read and write, and village schools had developed a spirit of emulation among the people. In Russia, the people were illiterate and showed an obstinate mistrust for the all-powerful State. They accepted it only as the organizer of defense and war. Peter the Great did not create a tradition when he obliged his energetic administrator to "write his decrees with a whip" (Pushkin); instead, he only followed this tradition.

In spite of all these differences (and many others), Russia and Japan are the two non-Western countries that early on surmounted the obstacle of underdevelopment. Many Asian and African statesmen are inspired by these two examples: that of Japan, like Iran, or that of Russia. It is clear that the disposition to associate "Westernism" and "local authenticity" (traditionalism), opening and closing off, is one of the main conditions for a cumulative history of culture. The forms of the historical process, whether they are relatively moderate or almost unbearably brutal, depend on many factors and are determined by a unique complex of the circumstances of time and place.

Science can bring only one thing to this complex: its understanding of the structure of the historical process.