PART TWO:

The Ascendancy of the East
THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE
AND THE RISE OF THE
BYZANTINE CULTURE

While the Latin West was gradually sinking into chaos and barbarism, in the East the Empire not only survived but became the centre of a new movement of culture. The history of this development has suffered more from depreciation and neglect than that of any other phase of European culture. The modern study of history has taken its departure from two points—from the history of classical antiquity and from that of the modern European nationalities—and anything which failed to fit into this scheme was disregarded or misunderstood. Even the greatest of our historians of the Eastern Empire—Edward Gibbon—shows a complete lack of sympathy for its culture; to him it is simply an appendix to Roman history, while his Victorian successor, Finlay, regards it mainly as an introduction to the history of modern Greece. In reality, the Byzantine culture is not merely a decadent survival from the classical past; it is a new creation, which forms the background of the whole development of medieval culture, and to some extent, even of that of Islam. It is true that the greatness of Byzantine culture lies rather in the sphere of religion and art than in its political and social achievements. The great awakening of interest in Byzantine history during recent years is due almost entirely to the new appreciation of Byzantine art, for if we admire the art of a people, we cannot utterly despise its culture. Nevertheless, the very durability of the Eastern Empire shows
that it must also have possessed elements of political and social strength.

But if we are to understand Byzantine culture and appreciate its true achievement, it is useless to judge it by the standards of modern Europe or even by those of classical Greece and Rome. We must view it rather in relation to the oriental world and place it in its proper setting side by side with the great contemporary civilisations of the East, such as those of Sassanian Persia and the Khalifate of Damascus or Bagdad.

In the third and fourth centuries after Christ, the ancient oriental civilisations seem to renew their youth and once more show signs of an intense cultural activity. In India it was the period of Samudragupta and Chandragupta II, the classical age of Hindu art and literature. In China, in spite of the political disintegration of the Empire, it was the beginning of a new period in art and religion, owing to the rise of Buddhism, which had a profound effect on Chinese civilisation.

Above all, in Persia, it was an age of political and religious revival—the age of the great Sassanian kings who restored the national tradition of Iranian monarchy and made Zoroastrianism the official religion of the new state. For the new Persian monarchy, like that of ancient Egypt and Babylonia, was a sacred monarchy, based on religious conceptions. Its spirit is well shown in the great rock carvings of Shapur and Nakshi Rustam. Here we see Aura Mazda bestowing the emblems of majesty on the King of Kings, each of them seated on a great war-horse and wearing the same dress and royal ornaments, while another relief shows the Emperor Valerian kneeling before his conqueror Sapor, in token of the humbling of the pride of Rome before the triumphant East.

This victorious wave of Oriental influence did not, indeed, destroy the Roman Empire, but it changed its character. Already in the third century Aurelian, the restorer of the Empire, had brought back from his Syrian campaign the oriental ideal of sacred monarchy and had established a kind of solar monotheism—the worship of the Unconquered Sun—as the official cult of the restored Empire. This solar theism was the religion of Constantine's house and prepared the way for his own acceptance of Christianity. The new Christian Empire of Byzantium is a parallel phenomenon to the new Zoroastrian Kingdom of Sassanian Persia. It also was a sacred monarchy, based on the new world religion of Christianity. The Holy Roman Empire—sancta respublica romana—was the creation,
not of Charlemagne, but of Constantine and Theodosius. By the fifth century it had become a veritable church-state, and the emperor was a kind of priest-king whose rule was regarded as the earthly counterpart and representative of the sovereignty of the Divine Word. Consequently the power of the emperor is no longer disguised, as it had been during the early Empire, under the constitutional forms of republican magistracy: it is surrounded with all the religious prestige and the ceremonial pomp of oriental despotism. The ruler is the Orthodox and Apostolic Emperor. His court is the Sacred Palace; his property is the Divine Household; his edicts are "the celestial commands"; even the annual assessment of the taxes is known as "the Divine Delegation."

The whole government and administration of the Empire was transformed in accordance with this ideal. There was no longer any room for the Senate as an independent constitutional authority collateral with that of the Emperor, as it had been in the days of Augustus, nor for the existence of the city state, as the centre of an autonomous local administration. All authority was in and from the Emperor. He was the apex of a vast official hierarchy which enveloped the whole life of the Empire in its tentacles. Every social and economic activity was subjected to the closest scrutiny and regulation, and every citizen, every slave, every head of cattle and plot of land, was recorded in duplicate or triplicate in the official registers.

The civil service was, apart from the army and the Church, the one path to social advancement. Its higher ranks formed the new aristocracy and the Senate itself was no more than a council of ex-officials. The system centred in the central departments of the five great ministers—the Praetorian Prefect, the Master of the Offices, the Count of the Sacred Largesses, the Count of the Private Estate and the Quaestor of the Sacred Palace—and their departments (officia), staffed with hundreds of clerks and notaries, exerted an absolute control over the minutest details of administration in the remotest provinces. This bureaucratic system is the characteristic feature of the later Empire from the fourth to the seventh centuries, and distinguishes it alike from the early Empire, with its unpaid civic magistracies, and from the semi-feudal society of the Sassanian Kingdom. It was not, however, like the theocratic ideal of royalty and court ceremonial, a result of new Oriental influences, but an inheritance from the imperial civil service of the Antonine age and from the bureaucratic organisation of the
Hellenistic monarchies. Ultimately, no doubt, as Professor Rostovtzeff has shown, it has its roots in the administrative traditions of the great oriental monarchies of Persia and Egypt, but if it was oriental in origin, it had been rationalised and systematised by the Western mind. Consequently, in spite of its faults—and they were many—it possessed something of the political spirit of Western civilisation which was lost alike by the feudal barbarism of the Germanic kingdoms and by the theocratic despotism of the East. The Byzantine empire was exposed to both these influences: on the one hand, the great landowners and tenants of the crown were tending to assert their independence and to combine political functions and privileges with the ownership of the land; while, on the other, the imperial authority was in danger of being regarded as the irresponsible sat of a divinised monarch. Owing to the existence of the civil service, however, neither of these tendencies was completely realised, and the Western conceptions of the State and of a reign of law survived. Indeed, it is to the Byzantine civil service that we owe not only the preservation of Roman law, but also the completion of its development. The study of the Roman law was the regular training of civil servants, and it was as a text-book for them that the Institutes of Justinian were compiled. It is to the bureaucracy of Theodosius II and Justinian that we owe the great codes through which the inheritance of Roman jurisprudence was handed on to the mediaeval and modern worlds.

In the same way, the social life of the Eastern Empire, however coloured by Oriental influences, still possessed something of the Hellenistic tradition. Although the institutions of the classical city-state had lost all their vitality and survived only as an empty husk, the city itself did not disappear, as it was destined to do in Western Europe. It remained the centre of social and economic life and imprinted an urban character on Byzantine civilisation. The Byzantine city was not, like the Roman municipality, a community of landowners and rentiers. It derived its importance mainly from trade and industry. Throughout the age of destruction and economic retrogression which accompanied the fall of the Empire in the West, the Eastern provinces retained a large measure of economic prosperity. The workshops of Alexandria and Northern Syria were still flourishing and their products were exported in every direction. Colonies of Byzantine merchants, usually Syrians, were established in every important centre in the West, not only in
Italy and Spain, but throughout Gaul, even as far north as Paris, where a Syrian merchant was actually elected bishop in 591. Eastwards an active trade was carried on with Abyssinia and India, by way of the Red Sea; and with China and Central Asia through Persia, and afterwards by way of the Black Sea and the Caspian. Cherson retained its importance as an entrepôt for the trade with Russia in furs and slaves, and the corn-ships of Alexandria sailed northward to the Bosphorus and westward to Spain.

All this network of trade routes had its centre in Constantinople, which, unlike Rome, was the economic as well as the political capital of the Empire. This was one of the chief causes of the prosperity and stability of the Byzantine state. While Western Europe in the early Middle Ages was almost lacking in city life, and powerful states, like the Empire of Charles the Great, possessed no fixed capital, the centre of the Eastern Empire remained a brilliant and populous metropolis. The greatness of its walls and buildings, the splendour of its court and the wealth of its citizens, made an even greater impression on the surrounding peoples than the military power of the Empire.

But it is not possible to understand the Byzantine culture if we look at it only from the economic or the political point of view. For, to a greater extent than that of any other European society, its culture was a religious one and found its essential expression in religious forms; and even today it survives to a great extent in the tradition of the Eastern Church. The modern European is accustomed to look on society as essentially concerned with the present life, and with material needs, and on religion as an influence on the moral life of the individual. But to the Byzantine, and indeed to mediaeval man in general, the primary society was the religious one, and economic and secular affairs were a secondary consideration. The greater part of a man's life, especially a poor man's, was lived in a world of religious hopes and fears, and the supernatural figures of this religious world were just as real to him as the authorities of the Empire. This "otherworldly" spirit goes back, of course, to the early centuries of Christianity, but after the adoption of the new religion as the official cult of the Empire, it took on new forms which became characteristic of the Byzantine culture. Above all, there was the institution of monasticism, which arose in Egypt early in the fourth century, and spread with extraordinary rapidity both in the East and the
West. The monks of the desert represented in its most extreme form the victory of the Oriental religious spirit over the civilisation of the classical world. They had cut themselves off utterly from the life of the city and all its material culture. They recognised no political obligation, they neither paid taxes, nor fought, nor reared children. Their whole activity was centred in the spiritual world, and their life was a superhuman effort to transcend the limitations of earthly existence. Nevertheless, these naked fasting ascetics became the popular heroes and ideal types for the whole Byzantine world. Ruflius Nama- tianus might compare them to Circe's swine, "except that Circe changed only men's bodies, these the soul itself." But Nama- tian was one of the last survivors of the old guard of Roman conservatism. In the East all orders of society from the emperor downwards vied with one another in honouring the monks. Even great men of the court, like Arsenius, the tutor of Arcadius, gave up their position and their wealth to go into the desert. And even when it was not realised in practice, the monastic ideal became the standard of the religious life of the Empire. The monk was the superman, the ordinary cleric and layman followed the same ideal at a distance. They all accepted the subordination of secular activities to the purely religious life. To them the real forces that ruled the world were not finance and war and politics, but the powers of the spiritual world, the celestial hierarchy of angelic Virtues and Intelligences. And this invisible hierarchy had its counterpart and manifestation in the visible order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and in the sacramental order of the Divine Mysteries. It was not hard for a Byzantine to believe in the miraculous interposition of Providence in his daily life, for he saw enacted before his eyes in the liturgy the continual miracle of the Divine Theophany.

This vision of spiritual reality and mystery was the common possession of the Byzantine world. The educated man reached it through the mystical philosophy of the Greek Fathers, above all Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor, while the uneducated saw it through the many-coloured imagery of art and legend. But there was no conflict between the two views, since the symbolism of art and the abstractions of thought found their common ground in the liturgy and dogma of the Church.

And so, while the people took no share in the politics of the Empire and the affairs of the secular government, they fol-
allowed with passionate interest the affairs of the Church and the religious controversies of the age. It is difficult for us to understand an age in which the clauses of the Athanasian Creed were matters of passionate debate at street corners, and abstruse theological terms, like “consubstantial” and “unconsubstantial,” became the battle-cry of rival monks. No less an authority than St. Gregory Nazianzen has described how, if you went into a shop in Constantinople to buy a loaf, “the baker, instead of telling you the price, will argue that the Father is greater than the Son. The money-changer will talk about the Begotten and the Unbegotten, instead of giving you your money, and if you want a bath the bath-keeper assures you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing.”

In such a world it was obviously of the greatest importance that the relations between State and Church should be close; for if the Empire lost the allegiance of the latter, half its power would be gone, and it would have not only an ecclesiastical organisation, but the whole force of popular feeling arrayed against it. Hence the unity of the Church was one of the leading considerations of the imperial policy, and from the time when Constantine called together the council of Nicaea the Emperors did all in their power to preserve ecclesiastical unity and to enforce conformity on the recalcitrant minorities. The true founder of the state church of the Eastern Empire was Constantius II, who was typically Byzantine alike in his passionate interest in theological controversy and in his belief in his imperial prerogative as the defender of the faith and the supreme arbitrator in ecclesiastical disputes. His ecclesiastical policy was carried out through the court bishops headed by Ursacius and Valens, who formed a kind of Holy Synod in close relations with the Emperor, and through the general councils convoked and guided by imperial authority. This system met with vehement opposition from two quarters: from Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria, and from the West, where the doctrine of the independence of the Church was uncompromisingly maintained, above all by St. Hilary and Hosius, the famous bishop of Cordova.

Hence there arose the long schism between the West and the state church of the Eastern Empire, which was not terminated until the faith of Nicaea was re-established by an Emperor from the West. At the beginning of his reign Theodosius attempted to restore unity by enforcing the Western standard of authority. “We will,” he wrote, “that all our sub-
jects should hold the faith which the Divine Apostle Peter delivered to the Romans . . . and which is followed by Pope Damasus and Bishop Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity." This decree, however, was not sufficient of itself to secure a settlement, and Theodosius had resort to the traditional Eastern method of holding a general council. But though the council—held at Constantinople in 381—marks the victory of Nicene orthodoxy, it was strongly oriental in feeling and sought to secure the independence of the Eastern churches against all interference from without. It decreed that the ecclesiastical organisation was henceforth to follow the lines of the secular dioceses, and that the bishop of Constantinople should have the primacy of honour after the bishop of Rome, "because that city is the New Rome."

Thus the primacy of the new Patriarchate was explicitly based on its connection with the imperial government, as against the principle of apostolic tradition, on which the three great sees of Rome, Antioch and Alexandria founded their authority. And its subsequent evolution was conditioned by the same principles. It developed as the centre of the state church and the instrument of imperial ecclesiastical policy. While Rome and Alexandria each possessed a distinct and continuous theological tradition, the teaching of Constantinople fluctuated with the vicissitudes of imperial politics. Its tradition was in fact diplomatic rather than theological, since in every dogmatic crisis the primary interest of the government was to preserve the religious unity of the Empire, and the Patriarchate became the instrument of its compromises. The typical representative of the Byzantine ecclesiastical tradition was Eusebius of Nicomedia, the great court prelate of the Constantinian house, who himself occupied the see of Constantinople before his death. And as the state church had been semi-Arian in the days of Constantius and Eusebius, so it was semi-Monophysite with Zeno and Acacius, and Monothelite with Heraclius and Sergius.

It is true that this policy of comprehension by compromise failed to attain its object and led to the alienation both of the East and the West. By degrees the church of the Empire itself became a national church, and the Patriarch of Constantinople the spiritual head of the Greek people. But this was a later development: the Christian Empire from the fourth to the sixth centuries was still Roman and international. Latin was still the official language, and the emperors, with the
exception of the Spanish Theodosius and Zeno the Isaurian, were all of them natives of the Balkan provinces—Pannonia, Thrace and Illyria—regions which were still largely Latin in culture. The great emperor who, more than anyone else, is the embodiment for us of this tradition and the typical representative of the Byzantine theocratic ideal of a state church and a church state—Justinian—was himself an Illyrian of Latin tongue who regarded himself as the representative and the upholder of the imperial tradition of Rome, and who devoted his life to the task of restoring the lost unity of the Roman Empire.

During the fifth century the forces of disintegration were everywhere victorious, and the Empire seemed about to dissolve itself into a number of separate entities. In the West the Goths were building up independent kingdoms in the Roman provinces, and the Vandals controlled the Mediterranean. In the East the subject oriental peoples were beginning to re-assert their nationality under religious forms, and the Empire itself was rapidly becoming orientalised, especially after Zeno the Isaurian had attempted to re-unite the Monophysites to the imperial church, at the cost of schism with Rome. It seemed as though the Eastern Empire would lose all contact with the West and become a purely oriental power, Graeco-Syrian in culture and Monophysite in religion.

This development was, however, checked by the reign of Justinian, and the sixth century witnessed a general revival of Western influences. The first acts of the new dynasty were to restore the communion with Rome which had been interrupted for thirty-five years and to put an end to the Syrian influences which had dominated the court of Anastasius. And this was the prelude to the work of imperial reorganisation and expansion which was the great achievement of Justinian's reign. One by one Africa, Italy and South-Eastern Spain were recovered by the imperial armies, and the Roman Empire once more dominated the Mediterranean world. These victories were indeed purchased by an expenditure of blood and treasure which the Empire could ill afford, and which seriously overstrained the resources of the Byzantine state. It may even be argued that the conquests of Justinian were fatal to the existence of the Empire, since his military adventures in the West led to the neglect of the essential defences on which the safety of the realm depended—the frontiers of the Danube and the Euphrates. But at least the Christian Empire enjoyed
a last hour of triumph before the darkness of the following centuries, and its victorious expansion was accompanied by a remarkable revival of cultural activity, which made the sixth century the classical age of Byzantine culture.

It is true that the creative genius of the age is to be seen only in its architecture and art. In literature and thought it is not an age of new beginnings, but a last autumnal flowering of the old classical tradition. Yet this intellectual conservatism is itself an essential element in Byzantine culture. As the political revival of the sixth century was a return to the tradition of the Roman state and as its legislative achievement was the final culmination of the development of Roman jurisprudence, so the literature of the period is the last expression of twelve centuries of Hellenic culture. For it is a remarkable fact, and one that has never been fully recognised by historians, that in spite of the religious and theocratic spirit which appears to dominate Byzantine civilisation, the literary development of the sixth century shows a reaction towards secular and even pagan standards. Procopius of Caesarea, writer of the theological disputes of his age with the cynical detachment of a cultivated sceptic, and in Egypt a whole school of poets was composing elaborate epics on the old themes of heathen mythology. The great age of Greek Christian literature ends in the fifth century with Cyril and Theodoret. In the following age theological literature holds a very subordinate position. The leaders of culture were rhetoricians like Procopius of Gaza and Choricius, who prided themselves on the Attie purity of their style, historians like Agathias and Procopius of Caesarea, whose minds were steeped in Hellenic traditions, and Neoplatonic philosophers and men of science like Damascus and Simplicius. It is true that Justinian closed the schools of Athens and forced the philosophers to take refuge for a time in Persia, but his repressive policy was not altogether harmful, since it induced the philosophers to devote their energies to scientific criticism in place of the theosophy and magic which had influenced Neoplatonism since the days of Iamblichus. There was no attempt on the part of the government to suppress secular learning or the pagan literary and scientific tradition. While infuriated fanatics were hunting the patriarch through the streets of Alexandria, the professors of the university still lectured in the halls of the Museum on physics and mathematics, and as Pierre Duhem has shown, their learning was by no means so sterile and lacking in originality as
is usually supposed. It has a permanent importance in the history of human thought, since it was not only the conclusion of the scientific development of the ancient world, but also the foundation of that of the new. It is the source from which the science of the Islamic East, and through it that of the Christian West, has its origin.

This survival of secular culture which distinguishes the culture of the Eastern Empire from that of the West was due in great measure to the influence of the civil service. The Byzantine Empire, at least in the sixth century, was ruled neither by ecclesiastics nor unlettered soldiers, like the West, but after the manner of the Chinese, by an official class of litterati who prided themselves on their learning and scholarship. This literary tradition, like that of the Chinese mandarin, sometimes took the form of a pedantic antiquarianism, as we see in John Laurentius, the Lydian, whose writings show a curious mixture of misplaced erudition and bureaucratic traditionalism. But it was also responsible for historical work of genuine value and for the last flowering of Hellenic poetry. The last important contribution to the Greek anthology was made by a group of lawyers and officials who held high office in the reigns of Justinian and Justin II—Agathias the historian and Paul the Sylentius, Julian the Ex-prefect, Macedonius the Consul, Rufinus the Domesticus, and seven or eight others. No doubt it was an artificial hot-house growth, but the graceful love poems of Agathias and Paul are not unworthy of the tradition of Meleager, and even their verses to the extinct divinities of Hellas, Pan, Poseidon and Priapus, are not without a certain charm.

There is nothing in this poetry to remind us of the change which had passed over the ancient world: it belongs altogether to the past, to the purest traditions of the Hellenistic age. If we wish for a literature which expresses the mind of the new age, we must look for it in the rhythmic liturgical poetry of Romanus of Emesa, or in the chronicle of John Malalas of Antioch, who lives in a world of miracle and legend, and who had so completely lost touch with the old culture that he regards Cicero as a Roman poet and Herodotus as a successor of Polybius. Yet it is Malalas rather than Procopius who is the source of the mediaeval Byzantine historical tradition and who became the model of the earliest Slavonic and Armenian chroniclers.

But this popular tradition never gave birth to a new Byzan-
time literature of high quality. The classical tradition continued to dominate the higher levels of culture, and each revival of Byzantine civilisation is accompanied by a renaissance of classical studies and a return to the ancient models. The loyalty of the Byzantines to the Hellenic inheritance did not admit of the possibility of new creative activity.

In art, however, this was not the case, for the age of the Christian Empire witnessed an artistic revolution of the most far-reaching kind. The decline of the ancient city-state and its religion was accompanied by the decline of its art—the great Hellenic tradition of the portrayal of the human form and of representative naturalism in sculpture and painting. In its place came the non-representational religious and decorative art of the East, with its love of arabesque and its subordination of plant and animal forms to schemes of decoration. So, too, the Greek temple and the civic architecture of the ancients, which looks outwards to the frieze and the peristyle, was replaced by the oriental vaulted and domed architectures, originating in the brick buildings of Mesopotamia and Persia, which concentrates itself on the richness of its internal decoration and the construction of a lofty and spacious interior. The great brick buildings of later Rome, the thermae and the basilica of Constantine and perhaps even the Pantheon, already show the influence of the new spirit. This spirit found its fullest expression in the art of Sassanian Persia, which in this, as well as in its conceptions of monarchy and government, exercised a most powerful influence on the Byzantine culture. Indeed some modern writers regard the new art as a hybrid growth arising from the intermingling of the tradition of imperial Rome with that of Sassanian Persia. But we must not forget that Northern Syria and Asia Minor itself possessed deep-lying native artistic and cultural traditions, and that these provinces were the most active and living members of the New Empire.

Syria was the meeting-place of the two currents of artistic influence, those of the Hellenistic West and the Persian East, and it contributed an element of its own—the use of art for the purpose of religious instruction by the means of figures and scenes which are depicted with a simple emotional realism quite unlike the classical naturalism of Hellenic art. This new religious art, which developed in Syria by the fourth century, was gradually diffused throughout the Empire by monastic influence and also, no doubt, through the colonies of Syrian
merchants which were to be found in all the principal ports. But in the great centres of culture, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople, the Hellenistic tradition still survived and continued to dominate secular art and decoration. Even in religious art this tradition was still supreme at Rome and Constantinople during the fourth century, and long after the introduction of the new Syrian style it continued to coexist as a constituent element in the mature religious art of the Christian Empire.

Thus Byzantine art is a composite creation, due to the blending of many different influences. It is oriental in its use of ornament and symbolism, in its reliance on colour and light instead of plastic form, in its development of the vault and the dome and in the bareness and simplicity of the exterior of its churches. On the other hand it preserved the Roman-Hellenistic type of the basilica with its range of columns and its porticoes; it carried on to a certain extent the Hellenistic ornamental motifs; and it did not entirely banish the human, naturalistic, and representational element which had been the essence of the classical tradition. Indeed, the use of the image, carved in relief, painted, and above all, inlaid in mosaic, is one of the most characteristic features both of Byzantine art and of Byzantine religion.

By the sixth century the Eastern Empire had evolved its own artistic tradition, in which Eastern and Western elements were brought into organic union with one another. The noblest creation of this art was the Church of the Holy Wisdom at Constantinople, which was the work of architects from Ionia, the motherland of Hellenic culture, but which at the same time grew up under the direct inspiration and supervision of Justinian himself. It is the greatest domed church in the world, the perfect union of oriental plan and decoration with Greek organic structure, and though it has lost something of the splendour of its polychrome decoration, it is possible to supplement this from the contemporary art of the churches of Ravenna, so that we can form a complete idea of the Byzantine art in its greatest age. In the octagonal domed church of San Vitale at Ravenna, we have a perfect example of Byzantine mosaic decoration. In the apse sits the figure of Christ Pantocrator, not the terrific judge of later Byzantine art, but almost Hellenic in youth and beauty. He is aureoled with light, throne on the orb of the world with the four rivers of Paradise at his feet, and saints and angels on either hand,
and he holds forth the diadem of celestial monarchy, like the figure of Aura Mazda on the Sassanian rock reliefs. Below on either side are two solemn lines of figures: the Emperor Justinian with the clergy and the officials of the Sacred Palace, and the Empress Theodora with the ladies of her court. It is the Panathenaic procession of the new civilisation, and if it lacks the naturalism and triumphant humanism of the Parthenon frieze, it is unsurpassed in its impression of solemn majesty. And when we look at the Byzantine church as a whole, with its polychrome adornment of mosaic and coloured marbles, its antique columns, its carved capitals, oriental in richness and variety, yet Hellenic in proportion and grace, above all the crowning miracle of the dome of St. Sophia, in which architecture transcends its limitations and becomes impalpable and immaterial as the vault of the sky itself, we must admit that never has man succeeded more perfectly in moulding matter to become the vehicle and expression of spirit.

And this concentration on interior splendour in the Byzantine church was intimately related to its function in the life of the people. The Greek temple, like the Indian temple to-day, was the dwelling-place of the god, and its dimly lighted cela was entered only by his priests and servants. The Byzantine church was the home of the Christian people, and it was the theatre of the great year-long drama of the liturgical cycle. For the liturgy summed up the art and music and literature of the Byzantine people. Here, as in architecture, the Eastern and the Western spirits met on a common ground. Liturgical poetry was the creation of Christian Syria, and the greatest Byzantine hymnographer, Romanus of Emesa, carried over into the Greek language the poetical and rhythmical forms of the Syriac Madrasa and Sogtih; but at the same time it was a dramatic mystery in which every external act had a symbolic significance, and the splendour of its ceremonial was the artistic expression of a theological idea. Here also, as in painting and architecture, the Hellenic tendency to externalise—to clothe thought in the vesture of matter—found a new religious expression.

But the perfect synthesis of the different elements in Byzantine culture which was achieved in the art of the sixth century was not realised elsewhere. In religion, above all, the opposition between East and West still endangered the unity of the Empire and of its civilisation. Although at the beginning of his reign Justinian had done all in his power to coa-
ciliate the Papacy and to strengthen the union between Constantineople and the West, the attraction of the East gradually reasserted itself. It was represented in the palace and in his own life by Theodora, the dark and subtle woman who fascinated and subdued the simpler and more hesitant mind of her Illyrian husband. She was a Monophysite both by conviction and policy, and under her protection the palace itself became a refuge for the Monophysite leaders and a centre for their intrigues. It was through her influence that Justinian returned to the old Byzantine policy of reunion by compromise, to which he continued faithful even after her death. In spite of the unexpected resistance of Theodora’s protégé, Pope Vigilius, Justinian succeeded in getting his solution endorsed by a General Council in 553 and in imposing his will on the Papacy. But, as on so many other occasions, a compromise imposed by force afforded no real solution. It gave rise to a new schism in the West, which endured long after Justinian’s death, and it failed to conciliate the Monophysites, who from this time develop an organised existence outside the Church of the Empire. The tendency towards religious disunion which had been growing since the fifth century had become realised in the permanent alienation of the Eastern provinces from the state church and the religion of the Empire. And this religious disaffection was the symptom of the great social and spiritual changes which were taking place in the oriental world and from which a new civilisation of world-wide importance was soon to emerge.
THE AWAKENING OF THE EAST
AND THE REVOLT OF THE
SUBJECT NATIONALITIES

The coming of Islam is the great fact which dominates the history of the seventh and eighth centuries and affects the whole subsequent development of mediaeval civilisation, in the West as well as in the East. To the mind which regards history from an exclusively secular and occidental standpoint the appearance of Islam must always remain an inexplicable problem, since it seems to mark a complete breach in historical development and to have no relation with anything that has gone before. It is only when we look under the surface of political history and study the subterranean activity of the oriental underworld that the existence of the new forces which were to determine the future of oriental culture becomes visible.

For the ecclesiastical and theological disputes of the fifth century, which have so little meaning for the ordinary secular historian, involve a crisis in the life of the Eastern Empire that was no less far-reaching in its results than the barbarian invasions in the West. They imply the revival of the subject nationalities and the passing of the Hellenistic culture which had dominated the Levant since the age of Alexander. It is true that this culture had been practically confined to the cities, and the great mass of the peasant population had remained unaffected by it. But throughout the Hellenistic and imperial age the citizen class was the ruling element in culture, and the native population had passively accepted its domi-