

# A Religion of Black and White\*

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What I aim to do today is to shed light on some aspects of the spiritual or mystical symbolism of black and white which seem to me to be important. It is in the nature of such things that my approach is selective; but it is not, I believe, arbitrary. In any case, there is a compelling consistency to the instances which I discuss. They tell a story of a journey to the centre of the cosmos and to our centre. They hint too at what may lie beyond this journey's end.

It will be understood, then, that, despite my selective approach to it, this remains an extensive subject, and some passages in the works of the great Traditionalist René Guénon have been especially helpful in navigating its thickets of chiaroscuro. Guénon's books *Symbols of Sacred Science* and *The King of the World* both contain brief discussions of the symbolic meaning of black and white which I have found to be particularly fruitful.<sup>1</sup> I do not follow Guénon slavishly, however, and this talk is informed by many other thinkers as well as by my own experience.

At first glance white and black—and the related categories light and darkness—appear to possess a fairly straightforward symbolism. They designate apparently irreconcilable opposites, a by no means exhaustive list of which would include such dichotomies as good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, hope and despair, spirit and matter, the presence of God and His absence, heaven and earth, prelapsarian innocence and our fallen condition.<sup>2</sup>

The following words, attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, may serve to exemplify these meanings:

\* This is the text of a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 3 October 2011.

1. René Guénon, *Symbols of Sacred Science*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004); and *idem*, *The King of the World*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

2. Perhaps alchemists would like to add *albedo* and *nigredo* to this list. While it is true that they represent different stages in the alchemical process, they may also be understood as designating opposing states of being.

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Bright and luminous as you are, O Soul, by your own nature, you went to the world of darkness and engaged in combat with it; and the world of darkness obscured your light, and encompassed you with darkness, and blinded you, and made you lose sight of all that you had seen, and forget all that you had known; and in the end, you were captured and held prisoner.<sup>3</sup>

Similar examples are to be found in the writings of many cultures; thus Frithjof Schuon has referred to

the wide usage made by the most diverse languages, and especially by the sacred Scriptures, of the symbolism of light and sight on the one hand, and of darkness and blindness on the other.<sup>4</sup>

He might also have added that the same applies to the symbolism of white and black.

If we are able to keep an alert eye on the white light, it seems, and avoid the inky black shadows, we may preserve our immortal spirit from all danger.

Across many different sacred traditions, however, sources also speak of a black which shines bright, brighter than any material sun, or of a mystical light which shines black and shines white simultaneously. This black which dazzles, or this metaphysical sun which sheds light which is so black it is white and so white it is black, seem indeed to be associated with the highest spiritual experiences, beyond any of the oppositions mentioned previously. One inevitably thinks of Dionysius the Areopagite who, in the fifth or possibly sixth century, apostrophised the mystery of the Trinity thus:

Trinity!! Higher than any being,  
Any divinity, any goodness!  
Guide of Christians  
in the wisdom of heaven!  
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,

3. Cited in Whittall N. Perry, ed., *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (Varanasi: Indica Books, 1998), p. 69.

4. Frithjof Schuon, *The Eye of the Heart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1997), p. 4.

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up to the farthest, highest peak  
of mystic scripture,  
where the mysteries of God's Word  
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable  
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.<sup>5</sup>

Dionysius has been enormously influential. These or similar lines undoubtedly inspired the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan, for instance, who wrote in his poem *The Night* 'There is in God (some say)/A deep, but dazzling darkness . . .'.<sup>6</sup> Milton's description of God the Father in *Paradise Lost* belongs, perhaps, to the same tradition: 'Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear'.<sup>7</sup>

The same imagery is also to be found in the Sufi mystics of medieval Iran. As Henry Corbin has written, they perceived a black beyond black, 'the Night of light, luminous Blackness, black Light'.<sup>8</sup>

A famous passage from Apuleius perhaps describes a similar experience. Lucius, on being initiated into the Mysteries of Isis, reports that: 'At dead of night I saw the sun flashing with bright effulgence'.<sup>9</sup> We have here, too, the idea of a brightness like the sun which is somehow inseparable from the blackness of night. Henry Vaughan, at least, employed both the imagery of brilliant darkness and that of the midnight sun together in the same work. In *The Night*, whose lines referring to the dazzling darkness of God we have already quoted, he describes Nicodemus' encounter with Christ thus:

Most blest believer he!  
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes  
Thy long expected healing wings could see,  
When thou didst rise,  
And what can never more be done,  
Did at mid-night speak with the Sun!<sup>10</sup>

5. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 135.

6. Reprinted in *TAR* 11 (2008) 160–61: p. 161, lines 49–50.

7. *Paradise Lost* III.380.

8. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994), p. 6.

9. Apuleius of Madauros, *The Isis Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)*, ed. and trans. J. Gwyn Griffiths (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 98–9.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. 160, lines 7–12.

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If we are tempted to regard Apuleius' or Vaughan's words as mere literary conceits, Dionysius the Areopagite and Corbin remind us that this white blackness, this dazzling darkness can actually be experienced, actually seen. Though not, perhaps, with our physical eyes.

The very history of the words 'black' and 'white' seems to take us deep into this mystery. Now, I am well aware that there are lies, damned lies and etymology, but in this case the proposed origins of the terms 'black' and 'white' seem to shed some light on the matter, however darkly. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that 'white' is a very ancient word indeed, with deep Indo-European roots, which make it related, for example, to the Lithuanian words for 'bright' and 'to be bright', the Latvian word for 'to dawn', and the Old Church Slavonic words for 'light' and 'to dawn'. This means, for instance, that 'white' has the same root as the modern Czech word for light, *světlo*. Finally, the *OED's* primary definition of 'white' is 'fully luminous'.

White gleams, illuminates, it banishes the night and enlightens the world. Its radiance tolerates no shadow. The ultimate Indo-European base for the word, we read in the *Encarta World English Dictionary*, means 'to shine'.<sup>11</sup> There can, it seems, be no black in the presence of white.

If, however, we step out of the reassuringly bright mid-day clarity of 'white' into the troubling obscurity of 'black', our noontide confidence is adumbrated. Not so much by unwelcome shadows as by a new type of light, which blackly shines.

The *OED* complains that 'black' is 'a word of difficult history.' It derives from the Old English *blæc* or *blac*, which, even at the time of its origins, was confused with *blác*, meaning 'shining' or 'white'. This confusion excites in the etymologists what could be described as lofty peevishness: they note that 'in M[iddle] E[nglish] the two words are often distinguishable only by the context, and sometimes not by that.'

We are tempted to say that the Oxford editors take the ancient users of the word to task for their confusing of two obvious opposites: blackness and shining white. They speculate that 'black' may be the past participle of a verb meaning 'to burn', giving a possible original meaning of 'burnt, scorched.' This gesture, however, remains only a guess, a fiction, whose purpose is to save them from admitting that the

11. See further Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: A. Francke, 1959), p. 629.

original users of the word knew very well that black shines, and can even shine white.<sup>12</sup>

At some point, some shining origin, then, it seems difficult, even impossible to distinguish between black and white. Perhaps it is a question of the quality of the light, of different types of light. If our eyes are truly open, perhaps we can make out at least three types of light shining. There is the light of our material cosmos, shed for us by the sun, in which black is not so much the absence of light as a sign of denial, of resistance. Black is blockage, an obstruction or a refusal to emit light.

Beyond these physical facts of our universe, there is a higher realm, in which a bright white sun shines without cease, an eternal presence which leaves no shadow. It shines on Eden, which is not so much a place as a state.

Beyond this domain, however, there is a third realm, that of the Transcendent, the Absolute, God. From the human point of view this sphere—if that is the right word—can only ever be black—the black not, however, of denial but of non-manifestation, of that which is beyond form and colour. A black which is pregnant with the pure white of pristine Creation, this is a black which possesses the luminosity of white, and shines. It represents a step beyond the human into the divine.

It is my intention today to try to elucidate these whites and these blacks, these white-blacks and black-whites.

It must be borne in mind, however, that my subject is not a falling into relativity, an assertion that there is no black and no white, or that there is no essential difference between their levels of meaning. That would leave only a murky grey in which we blunder around without orientation, no longer able, in the words of Henry Corbin, 'to distinguish between heaven and hell, angel and devil, light and shadow, unconsciousness and transconsciousness'.<sup>13</sup>

12. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 124–5. As an interesting and relevant aside: if we look up the word 'blake' in the *OED*, we find that it is described as an obsolete northern dialect word meaning 'pale', 'colourless', 'dead white', but possibly also 'black.' So the name of Kathleen Raine's guiding poet takes us to the heart of today's matter.

13. Corbin, *The Man of Light*, p. 3. It is equally essential to acknowledge the ontological differences between the different whites and the different blacks, from the lowest to the highest. Failure to do this results in conflating their meanings and consequences. Such confusion is unfortunately characteristic of the writings of C. G. Jung and his followers. In the words of Tom Cheetham, it results from their 'failure to differentiate

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These, however, are largely the conditions under which we live in the twenty-first century. It is a confused state of restless turmoil, clamour and some desperation, without orientation and without centre. Lacking a polar point, there can be no possibility of structure or order. As Mircea Eliade has written, 'the Creation itself took place from a centre'.<sup>14</sup> For our orientation this evening, then, we could do worse than to start there, at the centre.

The centre is, traditionally, the beginning point of all manifestation, itself prior to all space and all time.<sup>15</sup> In the words of René Guénon:

The central point is the Principle, it is pure Being, and the space which it fills by its radiation and which exists only by that same radiation (the *Fiat Lux* of Genesis), without which it would be only 'privation' and nothingness, is the World in the widest sense of the word, the totality of all beings and all states of existence constituting universal manifestation.<sup>16</sup>

The centre is the place—which is no specific place—of the *Fiat Lux* of Genesis, the perfect divine presence in the cosmos, without which there would be only formlessness, emptiness, nothingness. Nothing would be present, would be manifest, without the centre: the central light holds present within it all things and all things are unified within it. The radiation of the light brings into being the cosmos and all its

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clearly between levels of being in the "unconscious" (*Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World* [Albany: State University of New Press, 2005], p. 48). More specifically, it results from their refusal to acknowledge the realm of the spirit and their consequent reduction of everything to soul. This lack of what Corbin calls 'a vertical dimension' (*ibid.*) characterises, for example, Stanton Marlan's study of the symbolism of the Black Sun—the Sol Niger—in which the author explicitly rejects what he calls the 'spiritualizing and developmental tendency': Stanton Marlan, *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2005), p. 190. By conflating the higher symbolism of black, for example, with its lower meanings, such writers risk opening the psyche to an uncontrolled breaking-in of unconscious and even demonic elements rather than preparing it for ascent to spiritual realms.

14. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 18.

15. 'Traditional cosmology . . . develop[s] from a central point': John Michell, *How the World is Made: The Story of Creation According to Sacred Geometry* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2009), p. 6.

16. René Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 58.

phenomena. As the beginning, the indivisible point of origin, this 'true light' (John 1: 9) of the centre is also, of course, the Word.<sup>17</sup>

This light-filled centre is humanity's point of orientation in that, almost universally, we long to return to it. It marks, we instinctively know, not north or east, not south or west, but our and the cosmos' spiritual centre.<sup>18</sup> The arduous journey to that centre, as Henry Corbin writes, 'is the ascent out of cartographical dimensions, the discovery of the inner world which secretes its own light, which *is* the world of light . . .'.<sup>19</sup> The luminous centre, the eternal pole star, is, then, 'the beginning and the end of all things . . . it is the *alpha* and the *omega*.'<sup>20</sup>

The universal symbol for these ideas, as Guénon has written, is the circle with the point at its centre.<sup>21</sup> It is not by chance that this is also the traditional symbol of the sun.

But the spiritual centre symbolised by this figure is not the physical sun of our planetary system. That follows the path of the circle's circumference as it journeys, apparently at least, through the days and the years. It is subject to time, subject to change, subject to what the Duke in *As You Like It* calls 'the penalty of Adam/The seasons' difference . . .' (II.i.5–6). The material sun is itself only an imperfect symbol of the true sun, the true centre, the timeless and changeless point radiating order, love, wisdom. That point, the Word, the alpha and omega, is fixed at the centre of the circumference. It is a polar sun, a solar pole, a sun which is the Pole Star. It shines without ceasing day and night: a midday sun, a midnight sun. It shines outwardly and it shines inwardly. In the words of St Simeon the New Theologian, describing what he calls 'the sun of the intellect,' it

shines always, totally and immaterially contained in everything . . .  
The whole of it is in the visible and the whole of it is in the invisible: it is totally present everywhere and yet exclusively present nowhere.<sup>22</sup>

Shining inwardly and outwardly, the omnipresent central point casts no shadows. Emanating from within and from without, its light renders

17. See, for example, Guénon, *Symbols*, pp. 9–11, 67. 18. Cf. Guénon, *ibid.*, p. 67.

19. *Op. cit.*, p. 5. 20. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 67. 21. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

22. Cited in Perry, *A Treasury*, pp. 833–4, from E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer, trans., *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 134.

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all utterly diaphanous and luminous.<sup>23</sup> In its glow phenomena appear as they truly are—shining. Tom Cheetham reminds us that the word ‘phenomenon’, at its root, means both ‘to appear’ and ‘to shine’.<sup>24</sup> As the principal white light of the centre radiates, so the cosmos appears. That light constitutes the true nature of the entire world. The wise and the blessed of all generations know that the appearance of phenomena is a shining. This truth is revealed even more clearly in the German word for phenomenon or appearance: *Erscheinung*.

And the centre sheds a special light, a pure white light. White, because, as the centre contains all possibilities within it, white contains all colours.<sup>25</sup>

The celestial white light of the higher sun radiating from the centre, this theophanic light, is the light of the very moment of Creation. It shone once and still shines on Eden.

The Fall, however, swathed the light in darkness, in blackness, extinguishing it in the eyes of many. Jakob Boehme, for example, writes vividly of how, after the Fall, our body became subject to crude materiality, to the merely physical laws of heat and cold, disease and death.<sup>26</sup> Similarly our soul came to be ruled by the forces of its physical and social environment.<sup>27</sup> Rather than being in and of the light we have become subject to conditioning by the merely elemental, weighed down by the primitive facts of the world. Our body and soul—our entire universe—have formed a hard and sooty husk, a seemingly impenetrable carapace, which effectively blocks the higher light. We only perceive the light of the material sun, which does not illuminate us but traps us in the confusion of what Boehme called ‘the dark world’ (*die finstre Welt*).<sup>28</sup>

This fall into the dark world can be imagined as a drifting away from the centre, from the white sun, a fall into shading. As we move away from the centre material reality appears as a consequence darker, denser, heavier, and can even block out the true light. We have come

23. This is the *lumen naturae*, the radiant light of pristine unfallen nature which alchemy aimed at releasing and which so fascinated Paracelsus. See Marlan, *The Black Sun*, pp. 97, 102.

24. Cheetham, *Green Man*, p. 101. 25. Cf. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 338.

26. See, for example, Jakob Böhme, *Christosophia: Ein christlicher Einweihungsweg*, ed. Gerhard Wehr (Freiburg im Breisgau: Auum Verlag, 1975), pp. 118, 186.

27. See Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom's Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 207ff..

28. See Böhme, *Christosophia*, p. 118.

to rely on the material light of the sensible sun, a light which, when mistaken for the only light, can only produce black.

The higher, polar sun of white light, however, remains. It is eternal and absolute. Its rays may be obscured by the physical and the psychic world, but they are still present, fanning out like a peacock's tail from the centre.<sup>29</sup>

Retracing these rays to return to the heart of Creation is a passage from the visible sun to the higher sun, from one sort of light to another. It is a journey out of black, spotted if we are lucky with some murky hints of white, which leads us to the purest white.

And at the centre, at the whitest moment, we reach the land of Albion.

All sacred and sanctified lands were traditionally held to represent the primordial centre.<sup>30</sup> And, of course, all lands were once sacred and sanctified: there was no other way of living in them. As a representation of the centre on earth, such sacred lands were often associated with the colour white and were symbolically bathed in a constant white light. René Guénon has written of the numerous lands across the globe designated as a 'white isle' or centred on a 'white mountain.' He refers to 'the names of places, countries, and cities that likewise express the idea of whiteness'.<sup>31</sup>

Albion, its name derived from an ancient root meaning 'white,' is one such land. Albion, of course, was the traditional name of Britain, before, as Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us, Brutus the Trojan named the island after himself.<sup>32</sup> Albion is the white isle, a vision of a primordial pristine Britain. An island in the North, rising out of the seas of darkness, of non-manifestation, it symbolised the first place, the place of Creation, the centre from which all order emanated. The

29. The alchemists, too, knew that we can retrace these beams, these peacock colours. The appearance of the peacock's tail was, for them, a sure sign that the deathly black of *nigredo* was passed and the swan-whiteness of the *albedo* was almost in sight. See, for example, Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 141–2.

30. See Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 80. 31. Guénon, *The King of the World*, pp. 64–5.

32. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 72. *Albion* does in fact seem to be the oldest attested name for the island of Britain: a derivative of it figures in a passage cited by Avienus in his *Ora maritima* (line 112) from the lost *Massaliote Periplus*, a work assigned to the sixth century BC. For a concise discussion, with references to further scholarship, see the article 'Albion, Albiones' in John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 5 vols (Santa Barbara/Denver/Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2006), i:38–9.

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inhabitants of Albion were saturated with white light from a higher sun which shed no shadow.

We find the ever-present white light recreated in ancient Britain's gleaming sacred sites. Many stone circles, for example, employ stones which are partly or entirely of white quartz crystal, so that they shone and continue to shine with a light from within.<sup>33</sup> Duloe, a circle in Cornwall, is made up entirely of blocks of white quartz. Chalk or gypsum was often used for a similar effect. Silbury Hill near Avebury in Wiltshire, being made of chalk, was once a white mountain. The three henges at Thornborough in Yorkshire shone white with gypsum. I am also reminded of the ancient Celtic name for Glastonbury: Ynys-witrin, or the Isle of Glass. Perhaps Glastonbury too was a crystal, glowing and transparent. The holy places of Britain gleamed from all directions like Albion, illuminating permanently.

Such shadowless light was common to all spiritual centres. Writing of a visit to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, for instance, a twelfth-century traveller exclaimed: 'The Centre of the World is there; there, on the day of the summer solstice, the light of the Sun falls perpendicularly from Heaven.'<sup>34</sup> John Michell refers to the shadowless solstitial sun at centres in China, India 'and other countries'.<sup>35</sup>

What ultimately shines in and through Albion is, of course, the presence of the one true light of Creation, the Word, the Alpha and Omega. The inhabitants of the white isle live permanently in the joy of almost total presence, of almost total revelation. They are able to see through to the origin and nature of Creation, the inner truth of the cosmos. We can imagine that their language, bodying forth their joy and knowledge, is the purest poetry, the light shining through every word.

Albion, as the true home of humanity, is neither limited to a particular time nor a particular place. It has been visited, however briefly, by sacred men and women throughout history. In 1600, famously, Jakob Boehme

33. See Paul Devereux, *The Sacred Place: The Ancient Origins of Holy and Mystical Sites* (London: Cassell & Co., 2000), pp. 128ff. Perhaps the best known example of the use of quartz at an ancient site in the British Isles is Newgrange in Ireland.

34. Cited in Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, 1987), p. 40. For a similar claim by Adomnán of Iona (late seventh century), see Denis Meehan, ed. and trans., *Adamnan's De Locis Sanctis* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), pp. 56–7.

35. John Michell, *At the Centre of the World: Polar Symbolism Discovered in Celtic, Norse and Other Ritualized Landscapes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 12.

was startled by a gleam of light from a pewter dish, and saw into the centrum naturae, so that wandering outdoors, the whole of nature was transformed into luminous meaning, while he was filled with love as if resurrected from death into life eternal.<sup>36</sup>

Bede Griffiths underwent a remarkably similar experience some 330 years later. 'I had come through the darkness into a world of light,' he writes, and continues:

It was as though I had been given a new power of vision. Everything seemed to lose its hardness and rigidity and become alive . . . . When I went outside I found that the world about me no longer oppressed me as it had done. The hard casing of exterior reality seemed to have been broken through, and everything disclosed its inner being. The buses in the street seemed to have lost their solidity and to be glowing with light.<sup>37</sup>

Albion can be Bede Griffiths's twentieth-century London or Jakob Boehme's seventeenth-century Görlitz. Or it can be Scotland, one of whose traditional names is Alba or Albany (itself derived from earlier *Albion*). Or it can be Albania, or Alba Longa, 'the mother city of Rome.'<sup>38</sup> Or it is Munt Salvasch, the onyx mountain on whose gleaming summit Titurel constructs the Grail Temple. Being a representative of the ultimate centre, Albion can be everywhere and every time. It is, indeed, the entire shining cosmos.

But before we are blinded by its white glory, we have to recall one very strange fact: the centre is also symbolically black. Guénon refers us to China, the 'Middle Kingdom', or to Egypt, 'which was likened by its inhabitants to the "Heart of the World."<sup>39</sup> The people or the land of each of these places was characterised by the word 'black.' The ancient Chinese designated themselves as 'the black people.'<sup>40</sup> Ancient Egypt

36. Versluis, *Wisdom's Children*, p. 4. 37. Bruno Barnhart, ed., *The One Light: Bede Griffiths' Principal Writings* (Springfield: Templegate Publishers, 2001), p. 77.

38. Guénon, *The King of the World*, p. 65. 39. *Idem*, *Symbols*, p. 112.

40. Thus Guénon writes: 'In very ancient times the Chinese designated themselves as the 'black people' (*li-min*), this expression being found in particular in the *Chou-ching* (reign of the Emperor *Chou-en*, 2317–2208 BC)' (*ibid.*, p. 110) The phrase, as far as I am aware, dates back to the very earliest times of Chinese civilisation, and I have even seen assertions that it refers to the black African founders of Chinese culture—although this interpretation seems improbable and not a little over-literal.

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was called Kemi, the black land.<sup>41</sup> Guénon points out that these names should not be understood only naturalistically, as they do not effectively distinguish the peoples or their lands from other nearby peoples or lands.<sup>42</sup>

Then there are the sacred black stones, which function as *omphaloi*, marking cosmic centres. The black stone contained by the Ka'ba, the House of God, in Mecca is possibly the most famous example. Guénon also mentions the black stone of Cybele and Rome's *lapis niger*.<sup>43</sup> There are other examples, such as the black stone that was housed in the Temple of Aphrodite on Cyprus.

Black could symbolise the centre, the land or place otherwise bathed in the light of the higher sun, because, as the point of origin of the cosmos, the centre is as it were in immediate proximity to the non-manifest, the divine Reality beyond manifestation. The centre is the point where manifestation and non-manifestation touch. If one may express it in such terms, it is in direct contact with the suprahuman transcendent reality which is the thought of which the Word is the spoken manifestation.<sup>44</sup> This Reality is beyond human ken.

If black is the symbol of the denial of light, on another level it is also, as Guénon points out, entirely appropriate as a symbol of this transcendent, non-manifest realm which, from the human point of view, can only ever remain unknown.<sup>45</sup> This black represents the purity of non-manifestation, a purity which transcends that of the white light of the pristine cosmos. It is, in fact, the absolute purity of black which gives birth to the shining white world of phenomena. We can perhaps understand some of the symbolism of Black Madonnas in this context.

Whether the centre is black or white is a matter of perspective, of where we stand in this liminal place. As Albion the centre is luminously white. But if it is possible to approach the centre of the centre itself, the *omphalos* at the very mid-point of Albion, we may glimpse the pure black of Egypt.

And should we somehow be able to *remain* standing right there at the centre of the centre, then it would be as if we and everything

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 110. Guénon's third example is, however, perhaps less convincing. He cites the Ethiopians, whose 'name . . . signifies, literally, "burnt faces" . . . and consequently "black faces"' (*ibid.*, p. 110). It seems highly likely that this designation, derived from a Greek compound and thus of European devising, should indeed be understood naturalistically.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 167. 44. *Ibid.*, p. 9. 45. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

around us were flickering black and white, white and black, so fast that black shines white and white shines black. Black there is white and white is black, not because of some notion of relativity but because of the proximity of the Source of all.

The inhabitants of Albion, where all is rendered transparent by the light of the higher sun, need in fact to approach the *omphalos* at the centre's centre, they need the black of the Absolute. Without glimpsing this black, their very joy and their knowledge could lead them to believe in their own omniscience and run the risk of mistaking themselves for God or at least the All-Seeing Eye of God. The black of the Transcendent prevents the Adamic world and all the creatures in it from disappearing in the apparently omniscient searchlight gaze of the dwellers at the centre. It preserves the transcendent unknowability of the heart of hearts, and so protects Albion from the hubris which would otherwise deny Ultimate Reality and thus obscure the pristine world once more.

Awareness of the black centre of the white centre, then, guarantees that the blessed souls can continue to live in Albion.

Now we know the secret shining in the word 'white' and in the word 'black'. These terms are *Urwörter*: they are, that is, primal words, primordial words, principial words, primeval, original words. *Urwörter* is a term used by the great thinker Jean Gebser in *Ursprung und Gegenwart* (a title translated into English as *The Ever-Present Origin*). Here Gebser describes how the changes in human consciousness throughout history—mutations he calls them—have left traces in the strata and substrata of words. The implication is that, properly understood, language can reveal to us the whole history of human consciousness. For Gebser some words can take us right back to Adam, and even before, to Adam's birthplace, as it were, to the centre from which all Creation radiates.<sup>46</sup> They can take us, that is, to the threshold between the centre of the cosmos and the Absolute, the centre of the centre. Gebser calls such words *Urwörter*; and although he prefers the term 'origin' to 'centre', in essence they connect us to the same timeless moment and placeless place, the ever-present Eden.<sup>47</sup> For those who are capable of perceiving it, the centre—or the origin—shines through the *Urwörter*, irradiating all the different meanings or usages of the

46. Jean Gebser, *Ursprung und Gegenwart* (Schaffhausen: Novalis Verlag, 2003), pp. 183–4.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 15ff..

words, freeing them from space and time. Those who can be transparent to the radiance of these principal words can themselves glimpse the centre, to be momentarily illuminated by the higher sun.

Typically, *Urwörter* hint at the singularity prior to all structures.<sup>48</sup> Writing in German, Gebser argues, for example, that *Tat* and *tot* are two such primal words and that they share the same origin. *Tat* means 'act' or 'deed,' while *tot*, of course, means 'dead.' Deed and dead, act and utter inaction, are reconciled in the centre shining through them.<sup>49</sup> In the midst of life we are in death; and in the midst of death we are in life. Indeed, from the perspective of beings who exist on a higher level than ours, what we know as death is life while life is death. Both perspectives, meanwhile, are present in God.

Through the *Urwörter*, then, there shines the centre, which contains, like the colour white, all possible phenomena, including the possibility of its own denial. The centre or the origin shines through all languages. Or, to put it another way, through all languages there echoes the Word. All languages have a sacred core because they contain traces of the plenitude of the Word.<sup>50</sup>

'Black' and 'white' are not cited by Gebser as *Urwörter*. But as we have seen, the centre shines through these words. Perhaps, indeed, they are the ultimate primal words, more than hinting at the transcendent reality beyond the centre's centre. The words 'black' and 'white' record the flash of the first light itself; and they lead us to the black *omphalos* at the very centre of the luminous white. When we gaze closely at them we see their stroboscopic flicker, so rapid that one inhabits the other; and we seem to stand at the centre of the centre, where the Word was first uttered. In this white and black light we are no longer subject to the travails of post-lapsarian existence, to the unresting wheel of time. We are eternally free. The words 'black'

48. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 191. Gebser's view here contrasts with the consensus of Indo-European scholarship, which derives these words from distinct roots (thus Pokorny, *op. cit.*, pp 235–9, 260–61). For Gebser's own arguments, cf. Jean Gebser, *Ursprung und Gegenwart: Kommentarband* (Schaffhausen: Novalis Verlag, 1999), p. 231.

50. This is not to say that languages are in their totality divine. As humans have become ever more distant from the centre, so their languages have come correspondingly to express merely human thoughts and emotions, which are generally structured by pairs of opposites such as black and white or sacred and profane. This has opened language to structuralist and post-structuralist analysis, which is only true as far it goes.

and 'white' communicate a moment of illumination in which the transcendent, non-manifest can almost be experienced. It is almost there: in Albion; in Egypt.

One may reasonably enquire how we can embark for the land which is, at its centre, simultaneously Albion and Egypt. Perhaps we can start by contemplating the *Urwörter*, so that their light begins to shine in us and on us. That may mean paying close attention to words, especially in great poetry, where language is at its richest and words seem at their most primal, as if the poet were standing at the centre of Creation. Poetry can be understood as letters from Albion, an echo of the Adamic language or of the Word itself. It can console and inspire us as religious traditions weaken or are undermined.

Great art, however, no matter how consoling or inspiring, cannot for long take the place of a living and lived spiritual tradition, and I would argue that it is only by following such a tradition that one can re-establish the link to the centre. Henry Vaughan evokes such a connection in the poem which I have already quoted twice. When he speaks of Nicodemus, he is alluding to his nocturnal encounter with Christ, as recounted in the Gospel of St John, when Christ taught the Pharisee the mystery of spiritual rebirth: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God . . . Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God' (John 3: 2, 5). Vaughan describes Nicodemus' experience as an encounter with the midnight sun, the higher, ever-shining light which is the Word. The immediate effect of this meeting is that Nicodemus himself undergoes spiritual rebirth: he sees through the cosmic veil of material reality to the eternal white light itself, the radiant light which eternally shines in phenomena, in which it is always noontide:

Through that pure *Virgin-shrine*,  
That sacred veil drawn o'er thy glorious noon  
That men might look and live as glow-worms shine,  
And face the moon:  
Wise *Nicodemus* saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.<sup>51</sup>

51. *The Night*, lines 1–6; *TAR* 11.160.

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Nicodemus' eyes are cleansed by the healing brilliance of the higher sun, whose fire washes like baptismal water. The result of his re-birth is that he sees the presence of the Word shining through all Creation. Nicodemus, like Boehme and Bede Griffiths much later, is in Albion.

Vaughan describes Nicodemus' experience, then, as a baptism by Christ Himself into a new revelation of divine Reality. The re-birth, granted immediately by the very bearer of divine revelation, is a kind of initiation, in the sense in which the word was used by Guénon, namely the 'transmission of a spiritual influence' which has the power to transform the self and its relation to the Ultimate.<sup>52</sup> Such initiation is made necessary by our distance from the primal centre. As was the case for Nicodemus, it shatters the blackened shell of material conditioning, to let the light in, and can draw one back to the light-filled origin. In the words of Guénon, initiation

opens to the being a world other than that in which the activity of its corporeal modality is exercised . . . [It] re-establishes for this being the prerogatives that were natural and normal in the first ages of humanity, when man had not yet fallen away from his original spirituality, as he would do in later ages, to sink ever deeper into materiality, and . . . it will lead to the restoration in him of the 'primordial state', which is the fullness and perfection of human individuality lying at the unique and invariable centre . . .<sup>53</sup>

For Nicodemus this all occurs in a revelatory flash. He was, after all, initiated by the Light of the World Himself. Most of us are not vouchsafed this experience, and might not be able to bear it if we were. Initiation means for us initiation into a tradition, generally a religion, which is a vehicle for spiritual realities. Under the aegis of the institution we may begin slowly to retrace the rays of light which fan out from the centre to the circumference. Masters may leave behind the circumference to reach Eden, the white centre itself. Perhaps they will be able to glimpse the black *omphalos* at the centre's centre and stand on the blissful threshold where black and white flicker eternally.

The in-breaking of spiritual influence may be necessary to show us the white light, to point us in the right direction as it were, but it is of

52. René Guénon, *Perspectives on Initiation*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 194.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

course not sufficient in itself. Spiritual practices are necessary to draw us further along the bridge of light radiating from the centre. Most traditions, for example, stress the paramount importance of work in ritual and in contemplation with the symbols which give form to a particular tradition. I am thinking here of a symbol in Hugh of Saint-Victor's definition, as 'a gathering together of visible forms in order to "demonstrate" invisible ones.'<sup>54</sup> By 'invisible' Hugh means, in the end, transcendent realities not visible to the physical eye.

The revelation offered by symbols is, as I have remarked, generally not granted to us in a flash. Symbols such as the cross, the Grail or the All-Seeing Eye, the wheel, the rainbow, or the lotus blossom, the sword, the rose, or the cave, the sun, the moon or a bird, the World Tree, the narrow door or the Flaming Heart and so on, only gradually reveal their light. They themselves flicker black and white. They too are like veils that can reveal the light and also conceal it. The light shines through the symbol, but if we take the symbol itself to be the final truth, then it blocks illumination. That would be akin to idolatry. Symbols indeed have multiple layers of meaning, and contemplating them resembles the seemingly endless oscillation between black and white, ignorance and enlightenment, as the light is revealed but then concealed again, and we realise that our comprehension is only partial, until a further higher meaning reveals itself to the intellect.

Most of us, then, need both initiation into the light<sup>55</sup> and guidance through the profundities of divine symbols. The question of where both may best be found is of course a controversial one. René Guénon, for instance, whom I have so often cited, doubted that the sacraments of the Western Church were capable any more of transforming the believer, at least in any of that Church's 'official' manifestations.<sup>56</sup> Frithjof Schuon, in many ways the greatest Perennialist after Guénon,

54. 'Symbolum est collatio formarum visibilium ad invisibilium demonstrationem.' Cited in Grover A Zinn, Jr., 'Suger, Theology, and the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition,' in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 33-40: p. 34, from Hugh's *Commentarii in Hierarchiam coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*, book 2, edited in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia latina* 175.941B.

55. Only in rare cases may that occur spontaneously, as was possibly the case for Boehme.

56. René Guénon, *Insights into Christian Esoterism*, trans Henry D: Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), pp. 5-19.

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disagreed with him.<sup>57</sup> While it is not my intention to be drawn too far into that particular debate, I think it worth mentioning that Henry Vaughan, too, contrasts the presence of Christ experienced by Nicodemus with His presence in the modern era. Nicodemus' conversation with Christ, the sun at midnight, Vaughan writes, is something that 'can never more be done'. Vaughan's world exists on the circumference 'where the sun/Doth all things wake', and is governed by that merely physical sun's 'ill-guiding light'.<sup>58</sup>

One could of course say that Vaughan merely means to contrast the Pharisee's immediate experience of Christ with ours, which is perhaps inevitably less intense. Vaughan's statement that speaking with the Sun 'can never more be done' is, however, unequivocal. Vaughan's poem is, indeed, shot through with a sadness that true initiation, the initiation that could renew and transform us through contact with the Light of the World, was no longer available in the Church (or indeed, at all).<sup>59</sup> We may agree with Rowan Williams's view of Vaughan's poetry. In an address to the Temenos Academy, the Archbishop of Canterbury offered the following epitome of Vaughan's works:

We have lost our habitual vision of the eternal; what we see, in ourselves, in the natural order, even in the practice of our religion, is a corrupted image or a hollow surface. To use one of Vaughan's favourite metaphors, the sky is clouded over.<sup>60</sup>

The Church, it seems, is no longer a vehicle for spiritual influence; not only is it no longer capable of re-establishing a link to the primordial state, it may even divorce us from it further.<sup>61</sup>

57. See Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 29–30.

58. *Op. cit.*, lines 11, 43–4, 47.

59. Vaughan had undergone a kind of initiation through the works of Herbert, which awakened him spiritually and creatively after a painful period of spiritual and physical sickness. He subsequently adopted the motto *Moriendo, revixi* ('By dying I gain new life'). He does not seem to have found in the Anglican Church the nurturing that his reborn self needed.

60. Rowan Williams, 'The Mystical Tradition in Anglicanism: Thoughts on Herbert and Vaughan,' *TAR* 11 (2008) 141–54: p. 148.

61. This seems to be true of both Catholic and Protestant Churches. I have already referred to the transformation wrought in both the Lutheran Jakob Boehme and the Catholic Bede Griffiths by their visions of the central light. Neither of these two men had a simple relation to their respective confessions. Böhme regarded the merely out-

It would be more than presumptuous of me to attempt to make any definitive comment on this matter. But it does seem that authorities much greater than myself have had their doubts about the practices and doctrines of the Western Churches as vehicles for spiritual realities. Guénon himself believed that, for those of us living in the West, there were possibly only two sources of true initiation: the Compagnonnage and Freemasonry.<sup>62</sup> The former, as far as I am aware, is restricted to France, making the latter, in Guénon's view, the most generally available occidental source of initiation. Whether or not one accepts Guénon's claim, Freemasonry remains interesting for us. It indeed exemplifies the symbolic use of black and white in an initiatic context.

The Masonic Lodge at the moment of a candidate's initiation stands symbolically at the centre of the cosmos. It is light-filled Albion. Each Mason learns that his initiation took place when the sun was at its meridian, or, in the words of the 1727 Wilkinson Manuscript, at 'High Twelve'.<sup>63</sup> The Lodge is bathed in the light of a higher sun, shining directly from above, leaving no shadows.

Given that fact, it is at first sight a little strange that the Lodge is dominated by black and white. The brethren wear black and white (black suits, black shoes, white shirts, ties which are generally black or white, white gloves, and aprons which are also largely white). The floor is chequered black and white, or at least it should be. On one level these colours are a necessary reminder that a Mason is not enlightened in a flash, for all time, but that the shadows of the fallen man are as much a part of his life as the light. They may also be taken as a symbol of the flickering of white and black as wisdom alternately reveals itself to and conceals itself from him on his journey to the luminous centre.

As Guénon has pointed out, however, the black in this chequered flooring can be understood in its higher and metaphysical meaning,

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ward Church—the 'stone Church' as he called it—as a confusing and centreless Babel of opinions which served only to divorce believers from Christ and thus block out the light (see for example Boehme, *Christosophia*, pp 77, 128, 134ff). As for Bede Griffiths, although he eventually became a Benedictine monk, he too found the Western Church dominated by a one-sided rationalism. Only in India did he find a nurturing home for contemplation (thus Barnhart, *The One Light*, pp. 178ff.).

62. Guénon, *Perspectives*, p. 34 n. 6.

63. Cited in Alfried Lehner, *Das wunderbare Wissen vom Wesen der Welt: Ein Ritualkunde für Freimaurermeister* (Bonn: Die Bauhütte, 1993), p. 81.

too, as symbolizing non-manifestation or the transcendent.<sup>64</sup> The floor, the garb of the brethren, indeed the whole Lodge, would then represent the centre of the centre, the limit where the white of the higher sun touches the Absolute, which can only be black to human eyes, and where black and white flicker, one within the other, as if one were rapidly running one's eyes over the squares on the floor.

The Lodge, then, is the white centre; it is also the heart of the centre; it is the circumference, the shadow-world of matter; and it is the path to the centre; it is all possible stations on that path. But its symbolism is not arbitrarily chameleon-like: it should not merely reflect back to each of those in it the state of his soul. The shifting symbolism of black and white is dynamic and its changing aspects serve as a counter-balance to all the tendencies in modernity which envelop one ever more inextricably in the dark world. They draw the Mason towards the very centre of the centre, where he is most truly himself and most truly deserves the appellation 'free.'

So far this talk has not gone beyond that point, beyond our first home. We have not left the white light utterly behind, to plunge into the black beyond manifestation. Yet, like the physical sun, the higher sun is a threshold, and Guénon maintains that it is possible to step through and beyond it, into what he calls the greater mysteries of initiation.<sup>65</sup> These, he writes,

concern the realization of the supra-human states: taking the being at the point where the 'lesser mysteries' have left it, that is, the centre of the domain of human individuality, they lead it beyond this domain, through the supra-individual states that are still conditional, to the unconditioned state that alone is the true goal of all initiation . . .<sup>66</sup>

To pass through and beyond the higher sun is to pass through the eye of the needle. It is perhaps best conceived of as a passage from the Earthly Paradise to the Celestial Paradise.<sup>67</sup> He who achieves this feat actually passes into the black of the Absolute, which so engulfs him that he leaves all white behind. In the words of the first verse of Psalm

64. Guénon, *Symbols*, p. 295. 65. *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 334.

66. Guénon, *Perspectives*, pp. 244–5.

67. See Graham Rooth, *Prophet for a Dark Age: A Companion to the Works of René Guénon* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), p. 161.

91, '[h]e that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty'. There is no white here and no flickering of black and white, no matter how rapid.

This is the transcendent state described by Dionysius the Areopagite, in the words I have already quoted:

Trinity!! Higher than any being,  
 Any divinity, any goodness!  
 Guide of Christians  
 in the wisdom of heaven!  
 Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,  
 up to the farthest, highest peak  
 of mystic scripture,  
 where the mysteries of God's Word  
 lie simple, absolute and unchangeable  
 in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.

'By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything,' Dionysius goes on, 'shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is'.<sup>68</sup> Uniting with the black, one leaves the human state wholly behind to become a completely spiritual being. Dionysius calls it 'initiation into the divine'.<sup>69</sup>

This is also the condition longed for, but not realised, in the final verse of *The Night*, where Vaughan moves beyond the ever-shining sun of the Logos to the possibility of participation in God Himself:

There is in God (some say)  
 A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here  
 Say it is late and dusky, because they  
 See not all clear;  
 O for that night! Where I in him  
 Might live invisible and dim.<sup>70</sup>

As Dionysius the Areopagite affirms, this is not a state available to all.<sup>71</sup> It is indeed far beyond the capacity of the vast majority of us. Those

68. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, p. 135. 69. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

70. Lines 49–54; *TAR* 11.161. 71. *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

who have achieved it, because they are one with God Himself, are no longer identifiable as humans. They have effectively transcended the very capacity of ordinary mortals to perceive them: they are, in the words of Vaughan, 'invisible and dim'. They may be lost to the eyes of humans, but to their own eyes, which are no longer conditioned by physical facts, the darkness is brilliant. It is dark because it is beyond form; but it shines everywhere with the absolute and immediate presence of God. That is to say, those who have achieved this state see transcendent Reality and see it with God's eyes.

It will be no surprise that Freemasonry neither aspires to nor can aspire to this state. It *can* potentially lead to what Guénon calls 'the restoration of the primordial state', but no further.<sup>72</sup> I could also say that if Freemasonry did in fact lead to complete transformation, I would not be aware of it as any Masonic brethren thus transmuted would be invisible to me. All black, and no white.

The entity who has risen through the various qualities of light and shading which I have described, who has thus ascended through diverse blacks and diverse whites, being beyond all form is also beyond all words. He or she, or he/she, or it, or he/she/it is beyond the grasp of poetry. Phrases such as brilliant darkness, dazzling darkness, luminous black or black light are attempts to communicate in the form of language that which is beyond form. In fact these beings are not black and not white and not not black and not not white. They do not dazzle, are not brilliant, and do not not dazzle, are not not brilliant.

The line between this state and the Edenic state is perhaps one of the most important lines along which Temenos dances, stepping at times more in one direction, at other times more in the other. The journey to the centre is, in part at least, a journey of the imagination, to the *mundus imaginalis*, which is flooded with white light. We learn from Dionysius the Areopagite, from Guénon, from Corbin and from many others that it can be experienced in this life, can be talked about and can be written about. But beyond lies the highest spiritual Reality, and about that one can only remain silent. Even ways of talking about it are ways of staying silent. 'There is no speaking of it,' writes Dionysius, for instance, and continues 'nor name nor knowledge of it.

72. René Guénon, *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, Cecil Bethell, Michael Allen (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 27.

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Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial.<sup>73</sup>

Spiritual traditions, then, in their hidden heart, go beyond the well-springs of the imagination. They take us beyond black and beyond white and beyond any combination of the two. And there only silence reigns.

73. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, p. 141.