

**AESTHETIC APPROACH OF BYZANTINE ART.
BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST**

A lot has been written about the interaction between the ancient world and the Christian one, and still there are conflicting opinions concerning the question of synthesis or opposition of these two cultures in the domains of philosophy, literature and art. In this presentation we will especially refer to the interaction of the two cultures in the domain of art, examining on one hand the influences of ancient Greek and Roman art and on the other hand the influences of Oriental art on the Byzantine one. The Byzantine Empire, throughout its history, from May the 11th, 330 AD, when Constantine the Great inaugurated the new capital, Constantinople, to May the 29th, 1453, when it succumbed to the Ottomans, has always been predominantly Greek in character regarding philosophy, literature and art, mainly because of the use of the Greek language; nevertheless, it differed from ancient Greece inasmuch as it accepted the new religion, Christianity, and integrated various elements, both occidental and oriental, in all aspects of material and spiritual life.

i. Ancient temples become progressively deserted and new edifices are erected from the ruins, offering new content to the Byzantine Greek subject, who forsakes the pagan world to embrace a new faith, the Christian one. This transition is initially marked by martyrdom and then becomes a real triumph. Let us begin with a brief chronological record of the various stages and vicissitudes of the issue concerning ancient sanctuaries and Christian cult. Up to the times of Constantine the Great (324-337) the monuments are property of the pagans. Constantius II (337-361) declares that ancient temples are monuments of the past, and in 356 orders the closing of ancient temples and forbids idolatry. During the 4th century AD, on a very limited scale, some sanctuaries were destroyed by the mobs, because of the widespread popular belief that this was the only way to annihilate the demons residing in them. During the brief interval of the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363), there were instances of retaliation, i.e. destructions of Christian churches, some of them newly built. Nevertheless, the reign of Theodosius the Great (408-450) marks the definitive severance of the last link between the Empire and pagan religion. In 391, all forms of pagan sacrifice were banned and even the entry to the temples was prohibited. Later, in the West, there have been edicts forbidding the destruction of ancient

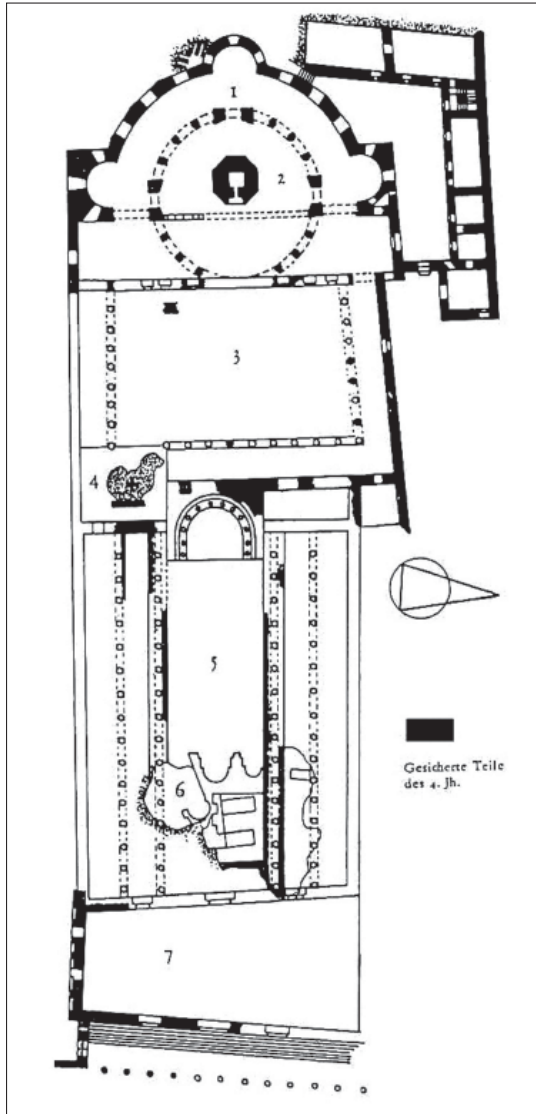


Fig. 1. Basilica of the Resurrection and Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem (Ground plan)

Сл. 1. Базилика Васкрсења и Светог гроба, Јерусалим (нацрт основе)

monuments. In the East, in the year 400, a law permitted the usage of ancient temples by the Church for liturgical purposes. Thenceforth begins a systematic and widespread use of ancient temples and shrines which, after being inaugurated, are transformed into Christian holies. Ancient edifices used for Christian cult are consecrated by marking their walls and columns with the symbol of the cross.

The Church of the first Christian centuries initially used the language of the symbols as a means of expression, bestowing new content and purpose to the ancient pagan symbols. These symbols are found in the paintings of the Catacombs, in the mosaic floors of paleo-Christian basilicas, in the representations in relief which decorate the parapets of the presbyteries or the sarcophagi. Besides, Christianity, then a new religion, borrowed all known forms of expression and did not reject any kind of art. Only sculpture was limited to a mere decorative function, because of the circumspect attitude of Christians toward pagan statues.

After the ceasing of the persecutions, Christians were

no longer afraid. They approached the ancient shrines, transforming and consecrating them. The first example is mentioned by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Life of Constantine* (III, 26-29). During the reign of Constantine the Great and under the supervision of his mother, St Helena, the Holy Sepulcher

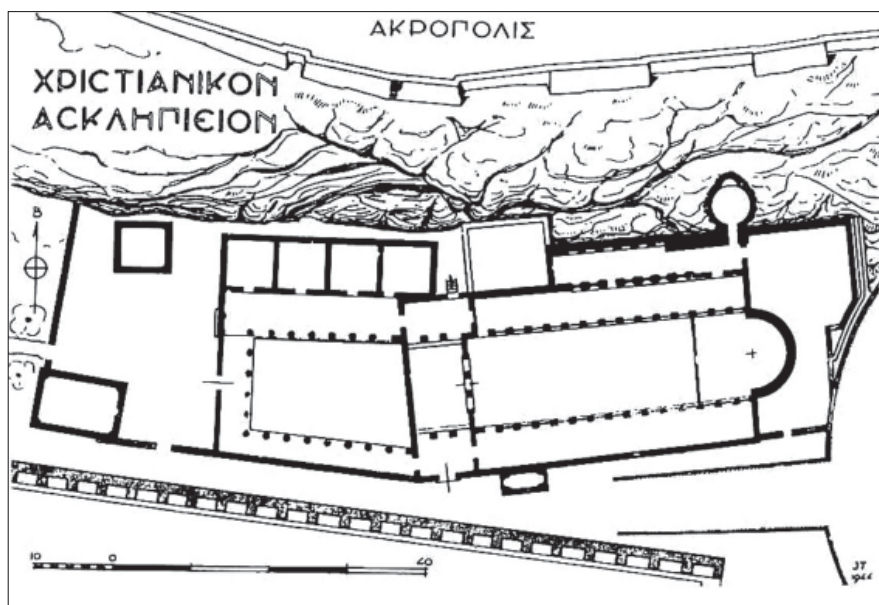


Fig. 2. Basilica of the Aesculapeum, Athens, mid-5th century AD (Ground plan)

Сл. 2. Базилика Ескулапа, Атина, средина V века н.е. (нацрт основе)

was erected in Jerusalem on the ruins of the temple of Aphrodite (fig. 1). This is the first case where, in the place of an ancient sanctuary, a Christian edifice was constructed, which is indeed the most important and the holiest monument of Christianity.

In the regions of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, as well as in the eastern hinterland of Asia Minor, it was very rare for a pagan temple to be transformed into a Christian one, mainly because of the strong reaction of the monks, whose movement was dominant in those parts. On the contrary, in the coastal areas of Asia Minor as well as in Greece and Italy, both insular and continental, where classical tradition was prevailing, the transformation and use of ancient monuments for the purposes of Christian cult was a current phenomenon. In Athens, due to the prevailing respect for ancient monuments, their transformation into Christian cult places did not occur before the 5th century AD.

In the middle of the 6th century AD, the sanctuary of Asclepius in Athens was demolished and with its building materials was erected, on the same location, the palaeo-Christian basilica with three aisles, narthex and atrium. The ancient fountain was probably converted into a baptistery and the church was devoted to Christ Savior, and later to the saints Cosmas and Damian, thus ensuring a continuation of sorts, since the two saints were known for their healing powers (fig. 2).

In the 5th century AD, the Parthenon, the monument of monuments, was internally remodeled into a basilica with three aisles, a wide narthex and galleries (fig. 3). Thus Athena, the virgin goddess, was replaced by Virgin Mary,

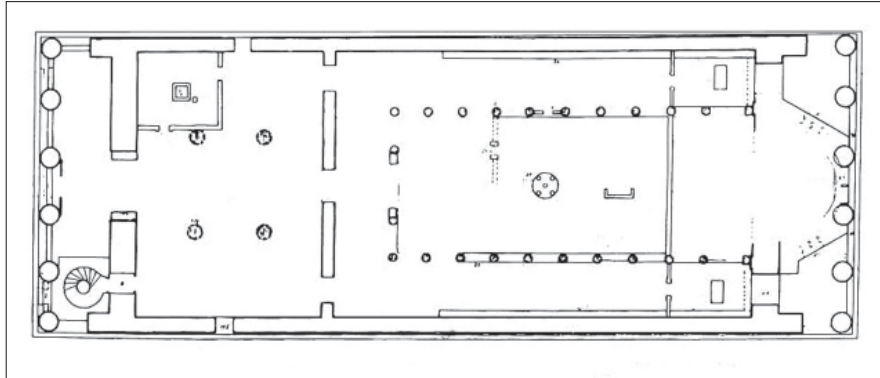


Fig. 3. Basilica of the Parthenon, Athens, 5th century AD (Ground plan)
 Сл. 3. Базилика на Партегону, Атина, V век н.е. (нацрт основе)

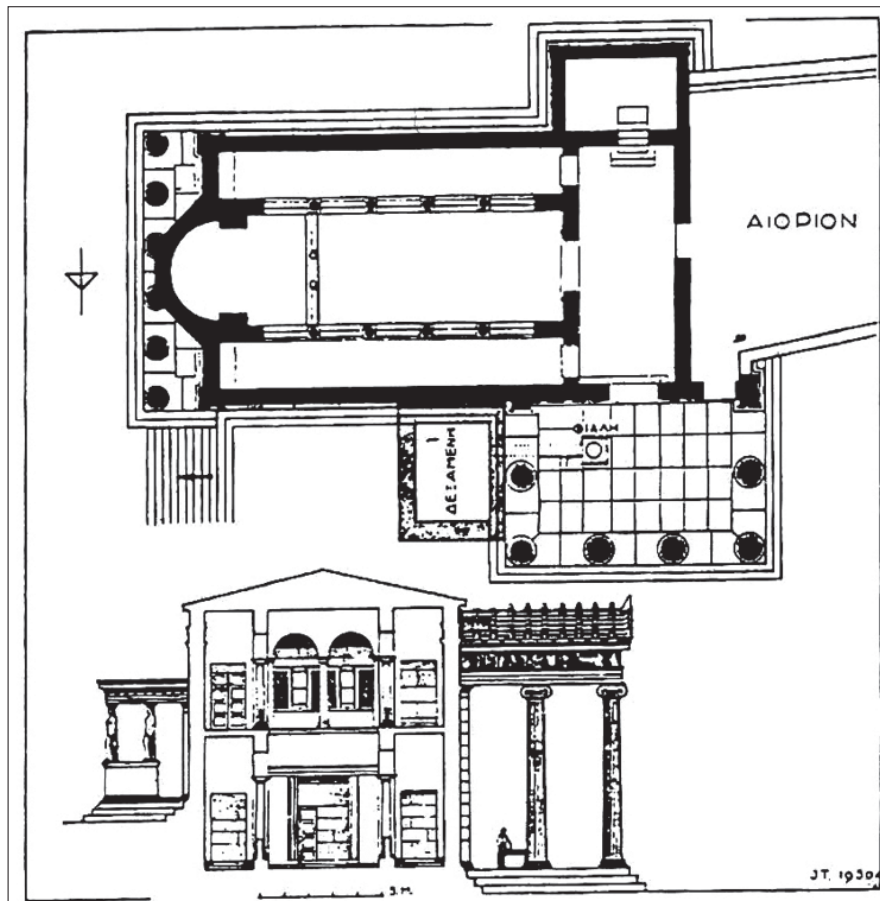


Fig. 4. Basilica of the Erechtheum, Athens, 6th century AD (Ground plan)
 Сл. 4. Базилика у Ерехтеуму, Атина, VI век н.е. (нацрт основе)

whom the Athenian Christians called “Our Lady of Athens” (“Panaghia Athinotissa”). Such was the importance of Our Lady of Athens in the Byzantine period, that the Emperor Basil II, surnamed the Slayer of Bulgars (926-1025), made the trip to Athens especially to go up to the Acropolis as a pilgrim to Her Grace.

In the 6th century AD, the Erechtheum on the Acropolis was transformed into a three-aisled basilica with apses and narthex to the east, atrium and fountain to the west (fig. 4, 5). At the same period, the temple of Hephaestus, also known as the Theseum, was converted into a centralized church with a five-sided apse to the east, dedicated to St George.

It is quite impressive that the most important sanctuaries of the Acropolis were transformed into



Fig. 5. Interior of the Erechtheum (Ruins of Christian times)

Сл. 5. Унутрашњост Ерехтеума (рушевине из хришћанског доба)



Fig. 6. St. Eleutherios (Panaghia Gorgoepikoos – “Our Lady the All-hearing”) or Little Cathedral, Athens

Сл. 6. Св. Елефтериос (Богородица - “Panaghia Gorgoepikoos”) или Мала катедра, Атина



Fig. 7. The atelier of sculptor Phidias in ancient Olympia

Сл. 7. Атеље вајара Фидије у античкој Олимпији

Christian churches. The purpose of this move was not only to trumpet the triumph of the Church and the domination of the new faith, but also to cover liturgical needs.

Church-building was developed following two distinct patterns. According to the first one, the Christian church was constructed on the ruins of an ancient temple, with building materials provided by those very ruins, as it occurred with the churches erected in Athens (fig. 6), Delphi, Epidaurus, Brauron, Acrocorinthus and elsewhere. The second option was to remodel internally the pagan cult places and use them as Christian churches, as it occurred in ancient Olympia, where the atelier of the famous sculptor Phidias was preserved up to the 5th century AD. Then the Christians of that region transformed the atelier from an artist's workshop into a house of God. In the very place where formerly were sculpted the statues of Zeus and Athena, now the sacraments of Christianity were performed (fig. 7).

It is also noteworthy that in great and crowded cities, such as Philippi in Macedonia (fig. 8) or Nicopolis in Epirus, huge churches were erected, often in great numbers and very close to each other, despite the fact that the Christians were still a minority. Why did this occur? Certainly the notions of grandeur and monumentality, together with the rich mosaic decoration of splendid edifices, are associated with triumphal success. The conquering Church displays its strength, symbolically underlining its overwhelming victory over the ancient world. One must bear in mind that a fraction of the population was still attached to paganism and the conflict between the two faiths remained intense.

Let us now examine briefly the oriental elements in Byzantine art. The domes (fig. 9, 10, 20), according to some scholars, come from the East, from



Fig. 8. Basilica B, Philippi

Сл. 8. Базилика Б, Филипи

Persia to be more precise. The aureole of the holy persons, which does not appear neither in the paintings of the catacombs nor in Christian art in general until the end of the 3rd century AD, was used to mark distinguished persons in India, China and other Eastern regions. Incense is an oriental element as well, but also an ancient Greek one, since it was used in sacrifices. It is also known that in some Byzantine churches, from the 10th century onwards, there are various arabesques and decorative motifs with Koranic inscriptions and other Islamic mottoes, e.g. in the Soteira of Lycodemus in Athens or in the vault of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Sicily (fig. 11). These arabesques are the work of Arab, Persian and Mauritanian artisans who had migrated to the Christian world due to various upheavals in their respective countries.

II. In the domain of iconography, the first Christian hagiographers could not ignore the wonderful artistic tradition of their pagan predecessors. Born and bred in their own place and time, they used all previous pictorial tradition of both Hellenistic (harmony, measure, grace, rhythm, elegance) and Orientalizing art that flourished in Syria and in Palestine (frontal positions, wide eyes staring out at the beholder). They did not, however, remain slavishly attached to traditional forms. Armed with the new faith and their great talent, they moved on, creating the Early Christian and later the Byzantine iconographic tradition.

As a proof of the above, suffice it to mention the wax-molded icon of Christ Pantocrator in Sinai, which is the earliest extant representation of the figure of the Lord (fig. 12). The great anonymous artist (first half of the 6th cen-



Fig. 9. Church of St. George (Rotunda),
Salonica, mid-5th century AD

Сл. 9. Црква св. Ђорђа (Ротонда), Солун,
средиња V века н.е.



Fig. 10. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople.
External view

Сл. 10. Аја Софија, Константинопољ,
спољашњи изглед

ture), knowing well the art of portraiture of the Hellenistic period, as expressed in the Fayyum portraits, as well as the technique of encaustic painting, created in a masterly way the figure of Christ, full of beauty and spirituality, with an ambiguous expression in the eyes.

Besides, it is known that during the first centuries, Christian artists used ancient Greek models to represent Jesus Christ, e.g. the model of Apollo, “god of light” (see the mosaics of the 3rd century AD decorating the Tomb of the Julii in the necropolis of Vatican or the churches in Ravenna, where Jesus is portrayed as a young, virile and beardless Apollo), or the figure of Christ as a Good Shepard, with idealized Greek traits (see the marvelous mosaic in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, fig. 13). As for the representation of Virgin Mary with the hands raised in prayer (see fresco in San Callisto Catacomb, Rome, 4th century AD), it is a loan from a pagan model, already attested in prehistoric times with the figure of the Minoan goddess. This model inspired first the representation of the praying soul (orans) in the catacombs, and then the portraying of Virgin Mary in prayer, later known as *Platytera* (“Wider than Heaven”).

For the same purpose, Christian artists used well known symbols of the ancient world (fig. 14). In order to make the teaching of the early Church accessible to the pagans, who did not understand the biblical symbols, such as the lamb, the arch, etc., the Christians did not hesitate to adopt pagan symbols and motifs of Greco-Roman mythology, investing them from the very beginning with Christian meaning. Thus they used themes familiar to the pagans, such as the representation of the myth of Love (Eros) and the Soul (Psyche): as the



Fig. 11. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. Internal view
Сл. 11. Аја Софија, Константинопољ, унутрашњост



Fig. 12 Jesus Christ. Icon from the Monastery of St. Catherina, Mount Sinai (700 AD)

Сл. 12 Исус Христ.
Икона из Манастира св.
Катарине, Синај (700.
г.н.е.)

Psyche is united with Eros in Heaven –according to the narration of Apuleius in his famous novel–, so the bride soul is united with the bridegroom Christ (see fresco of the Domitilla’s Catacomb, Rome, ca. 200 AD). Other characteristic examples of Christian appropriation of pagan themes are the myth of Orpheus (as the mythical Orpheus, according to Flavius Philostratus, enchanted with the music of his lyre the trees and the rocks and tamed wild beasts, so Jesus Christ with His words attracts the souls of the faithful and tames the forces of nature; see the Orpheus complex, in relief, Byzantine Museum of Athens, fig. 15) as well as the personification of the Seasons of the year, one of the most widespread funerary themes of Antiquity, since they symbolized life and death, or life springing from death, and therefore immortality (see the ceiling of the crypt of St Januarius in the St Praetextatus Catacomb, 2nd century AD).

Here, we would like to note that regarding the influence of oriental elements on Byzantine painting, in addition to the frontal position of the figures,



Fig. 13. The Good Shepard. Mosaic from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna (424-450 AD)

Сл. 13. Добри пастир. Мозаик из Маузолеја Гале Плацидије, Равена (424-450. г.н.е.)

other common points between Christian hagiography and Buddhist painting are: a) the resemblance of the figures of both Buddha and Jesus to that of Apollo, and b) the aureole, probably of Iranian (Persian) origin, which in Buddhism



Fig. 14. Funerary plaque (3th century AD) from Domitilla's Catacomb in Rome, with Early Christian symbols

Сл. 14. Надгробна плоча (III век н.е.) из Домитилине катакомбе у Риму, са рано-хришћанским симболима

symbolizes the light of Buddha and the splendor of Truth, whilst in Christianity it represents holiness. The aureole in Christian art appears in the 3rd century AD and later its use is generalized, so in the Catacombs the holy figures are depicted without aureole.

III. In sculpture and the other decorative arts, the examples of influences from the Greek world and the East are fewer than in Byzantine painting, because of the well known aversion of the Christians for sculpted representations of the Divine. Nevertheless, there are some relevant themes: the winged angels and arch-angels are reminiscent of the winged little Cupids, of the wing-bearing Victories or of Hermes. Some representations of Adam and Eve on either side of the Tree of Knowledge, with the serpent coiling itself round the latter's trunk, remind us of Ladon, son of Echidna, who guards the golden apples of the Hesperides coiled round an apple tree, on either

side of which are represented Jason and Medea. A representation of Hercules pulling Cerberus off the Underworld in order to free Alcestis was the source of inspiration for the imagery of Christ's descent into Hell: Jesus is represented in a similar manner, liberating Adam and Eve from Hades. In some epistyles of the 5th century, decorated with acanthus leaves, the dominant Christian symbol $\text{APX}\Omega$ is integrated (fig. 16). On a relief marble plaque from Naxos, the flight into Egypt is represented by means of classical motifs (fig. 17). On an illuminated manuscript containing Homilies of Saint Gregory the Theologian, appears



Fig. 15 Orpheust-Christ. Relief. Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens

Сл. 15 Орфеј-Христ. Рељеф. Византијско-хришћански музеј у Атини



Fig. 16. Epistyle (5th century AD) with acanthus leaves and Christian symbols. Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens

Сл. 16. Архитрав (V век н.е.) са листовима аканта и хришћанским симболима. Византијско-хришћански музеј у Атини



Fig. 17. Marble plaque (4th century AD) from Naxos, with scenes from the flight into Egypt. Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens

Сл. 17. Мермерна плоча (IV век н.е.) са Наксосу, са сценама бега у Египат. Византијско-хришћански музеј у Атини



Fig. 18. Orpheus playing his lyre like King David. Illuminated manuscript containing Homilies of St. Gregory the Theologian

Сл. 18. Орфеј који свира на својој лири као краљ Давид. Илустровани рукопис са проповедима св. Григорија Теолога

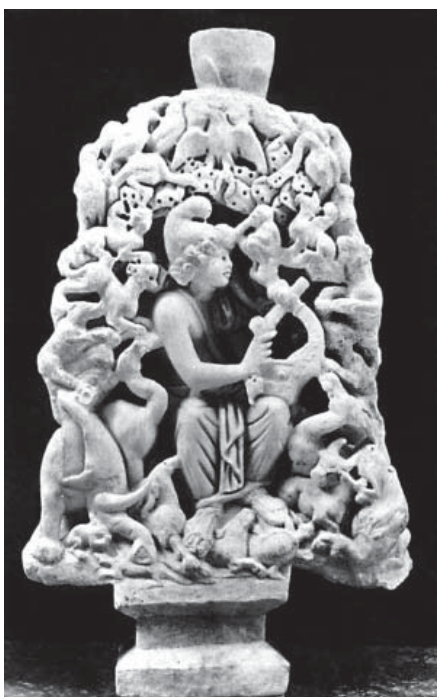


Fig. 19. Orpheus taming *instead of* Orpheus taming the beasts. Relief (3rd century AD). Archaeological Museum of Sabratha

Сл. 19. Орфеј кроти звери. Релјеф (III век н.е.). Археолошки музеј у Сабрати

Orpheus with an aureole playing his lyre like King David (fig. 18, 19). In the specialized books on Byzantine art, one can find numerous examples of such representations.

After these remarks, it is possible to reach some conclusions:

1) The attitude of Christians toward the ancient world of paganism and idolatry is, with the exception of some extreme cases in periods of tension and upheavals, a very friendly and understanding one. During the first three centuries, the same individuals lived a part of their lives as pagans and the next one as Christians. The ancient places, the shrines and the temples, the oracles and the sanctuaries of Asclepios, the theaters and the stadiums, the altars and the statues, and all things related to ancient religion, society, art, philosophy and literature were familiar and often dear to them.

2. In the light of these facts, Christians in the Byzantine Empire had no problem whatsoever to use ancient shrines for the purposes of their own cult. Beside the fact that, in this way, there was a continuity of religious practice, with a new meaning of course, since ancient gods were dead for good, the transformation of pagan sanctuaries into Christian churches was also dictated by financial reasons. Minor Christian communities had not always the resources to carry the burden of a new and demanding construction, so they preferred to use existing edifices, after having them consecrated. Besides, the Church borrowed from the ancient Greeks (in the East) and the Romans (in the West) the language, the method, the philosophical systems, the manners of expression, and left no conceptual or technical medium unexploited and unused in order to serve and highlight its purposes.

3. With the same ease that the Christian Church welcomed elements from the Greco-Roman world, it also accepted elements from the East, since in the fringes of the Empire, at different times, lived various people – Slavs, Syrians, Armenians, Georgians, Copts, Persians, Arabs. Especially after the 7th century, when the contact took place –not peacefully, of course– between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab and Islamic world, many elements of the art of these people were assimilated creatively by the Byzantines, as we have already mentioned.

It is an undisputed fact that every people and every nation shapes its own civilization and culture. This process is based on its origins as well as on the contacts with its neighbors. In that way the mixture of human civilizations is created, and everyone has the duty to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. This duty is even more imperative nowadays, when some powers, leaning on the right of the stronger, want to unilaterally impose their will upon the international community, shaping their own “universal” civilization and subjugating the weaker. Let us all understand that such a civilization is neither accepted by the people universally nor blessed by God.

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Дионизиос Каламакис

ЕСТЕТСКИ ПРИСТУП У ВИЗАНТИЈСКОЈ УМЕТНОСТИ.
ИЗМЕЂУ ИСТОКА И ЗАПАДА

У току прва три хришћанска века, стари храмови и светилишта, пророчишта и лечилишта, позоришта и стадиони, жртвеници, статуе и све оно што има везе са старом религијом, уметношћу, филозофијом и книжевношћу били су блиски и вољени од стране Хришћана, сем неких крајњих примера фанатизма који се опајају у периодима затегнутости и комешања. Хришћани византијске империје често користе места старе религије за своје циљеве, односно ритуале обожавања, дајући им, наравно, нови смисао хришћанске поруке. Штавише, црква је позајмила од Грка (на истоку) и Римљана (на западу) језик, метод и филозофске системе, док је паралелно прихватила и утицај многих народа са истока који су живели у империји. Тако византијска уметност представља поље сусретања и осмозе уметничких, идеолошких и духовних струја грчко-римских древних времена и источног света, што јој управо даје посебан и јединствен карактер и чини је мостом између Истока и Запада.

