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Christianity and Culture: The Historic Reality of Christian Culture

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COURTESY

A CHRISTIAN GENTLEMAN. By the Committee on Politeness of De la Salle College. Manila, 1960. 44p.

This booklet is intended to help De la Salle students develop those external qualities which should be the mark of every educated Christian gentleman. But it is equally helpful for students of other Colleges, for it gives basic rules on courtesy and politeness in situations where a student generally finds himself—on campus and off campus. Its format is readable and its table of contents is an easy guide to the rules applicable to each particular situation. Though good common sense dictates how a student should behave in any given set of circumstances, still these definite rules, when followed, give him an assurance that he is acting as a gentleman.

However, if general motivations were mentioned before every topic treated in the booklet, a student would be trained better to act from proper Christian motives rather than by mere rules on gentlemanly conduct. The purely natural values set forth in the beginning of the booklet are not enough to form a *Christian gentleman*. Teachers, it is true, can preface each topic with a few remarks on motives; but one would be more likely to remember these important remarks if they were also put down in print.

The rules are generally easy to remember as they are subdivided by captions in bold print. However, the more the rules emphasize what students should do rather than what they should not do, the more readily will such rules be welcomed by them. Still, 'don't' rules are unavoidable. The Committee that worked on this booklet has rendered a good service to all students. Perhaps a little rephrasing of some of the rules and a much clearer emphasis on Christian motives would make this booklet even more valuable.

BENIGNO MAYO

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

THE HISTORIC REALITY OF CHRISTIAN CULTURE. *A Way to the Renewal of Human Life.* By Christopher Dawson. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1960. 124 pp.

"The events of the last few years", writes Mr. Dawson in his **RELIGION AND CULTURE**, "portend either the end of human history or

a turning point in it." Here is expressed the gravity of the problem with which Mr. Dawson has concerned himself in a number of earlier books and in the present one under review. The gravity of the crisis staggers the human mind: the survival or death of modern civilization itself.

I shall attempt to summarize the terms of the problem as seen by the author and the necessary conditions for a solution. Briefly stated, the problem is this: Modern technological civilization is essentially self-liquidating. The seed of its dissolution lies in its secularization. Modern civilization has torn itself away from its religious foundation; the vast secular machine, having rejected the keystone, is at present crumbling under its own unsupported weight.

As Mr. Dawson says, "a secular civilization that has no end beyond its own satisfaction is a monstrosity—a cancerous growth which will ultimately destroy itself." And although the rejection of the Church did not immediately betray the inner contradiction within modern civilization, "as soon as this minority culture [precariously maintained by Christian humanism] gave way to the rule of the masses, with the coming of universal education and universal suffrage and universal mechanization, the new secular culture proved unable to control the sub-rational forces which are always present below the surface of culture. During the present century these forces have manifested themselves in a succession of revolutions and wars which have steadily increased in violence and destructiveness until they endanger the existence of Western civilization itself. The true cause of this phenomenon is neither political nor economic, but psychological. It is the direct result of the one-sided rationalization of modern culture and of the starvation and frustration of man's spiritual nature. . . . Where unifying spiritual vision is lost—where it is no longer transmitted to the community as a whole—the civilization decays. 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.'"

This idea of "religion-culture"—that culture or civilization is necessarily bound up with religion, nay that religion is the creator of common spiritual aims and common moral values—is alien to the mentality of modern man. For the most part the average man of today has known no culture other than the present secularized one. Consequently he has never questioned the validity of a civilization which has cut itself from its religious moorings and which has forgotten its common spiritual vision. There are many of us who perhaps too readily welcome anything that is labelled "modern". Here is where history should come in as a corrective. Dawson writes: "If we look back and out over the world and across the centuries, we shall see how exceptional and abnormal [modern civilization] is. It is hardly too much to say that all civilizations have been religious—and not only

civilization but barbarian and primitive societies also." And he adds that "in the past man's social life has never been regarded as something that existed in its own right as a law to itself. It was seen as dependent on another more permanent world, so that all human institutions were firmly anchored by faith and law to the realities of this higher world."

Mr. Dawson traces the process whereby our civilization progressively moved farther and farther from its unifying bond, Christianity, until it reached the present crisis. But this historical exposition is done only summarily and discloses only his general conclusions; probably because he has discussed the same problem in greater detail in at least two other books, *RELIGION AND CULTURE* and *UNDERSTANDING EUROPE*. Nevertheless the lucidity even of these brief summations is worth sampling:

"To state the problem in a simplified form, if one century has destroyed the unity of Christendom by religious divisions, and a second century has confined the Christian way of life to the sphere of individual conduct and allowed the outer world of society and politics to go its own way, then a third century will find that the average man will accept the external social world as the objective standard of reality and regard the inner world of faith and religion as subjective, unreal and illusory." The root-cause of secularization is therefore "the loss of social interest in the world of faith. It begins the moment men feel that religion is irrelevant to the common way of life and that society as such has nothing to do with the truths of faith."

Mr. Dawson describes the process of secularization in the field of education thus: "First the liberal arts were separated from theology by the secularization and religious divisions of culture. The Reformation rebuilt the Jewish temple and the Renaissance replanted the groves of *Academos*. Secondly the science of nature took the place of theology as the queen of the sciences or rather as Science in the absolute sense... [But] science itself was destined to be dethroned not by a revival of humanism but by the emergence of political ideology as the final authority in the sphere of education and culture. The new totalitarian ideologies have nothing in common with either the Christian or the humanist traditions but they are also no less opposed to that disinterested pursuit of knowledge and truth which inspired the scientific movement of the past three centuries. They regard education as a general technique for influencing human behavior, and science as a series of special techniques which must be strictly subordinated to the economic and military plans of the State." And the disintegration of education is reaching its logical term: higher education is reduced to a "jungle of competing specialisms". And for

this confusion the State as well as the modern educator—both having estranged themselves from the salutary tradition of Christian civilization—are responsible.

But this sad state of affairs is further aggravated by the emergence of a new power complex. Since a civilization must somehow be unified in order to survive, and since the normal unifying element which is religion has been rejected, a violent reaction against the instability of civilization has taken place. Communism may be seen as the desperate attempt of spiritually starved peoples to anchor civilization to a secure and stable foundation. "First in Russia and then in Western Europe and in Eastern Asia, we have seen a series of attempts to unite the new forces of technology and scientific control with political absolutism and ideological orthodoxy... [Now] when a revolutionary ideology is transformed from a minority protest into an official orthodoxy, it changes its nature and acquires many of the psychological characteristics of a religion... Seen from this point of view its real *raison d'être* is not to carry on the process of secularization [although this is incidentally thoroughly achieved] but to provide a substitute for religion, to stop modern civilization from drifting aimlessly and to anchor it again to absolute immutable principles which are beyond the reach of criticism."

Thus if Christianity is torn away from its rightful place as the keystone of civilization men will create a substitute for it: the result is the totalitarian State. And the author makes a frighteningly accurate observation. The contemporary crisis tends to produce only one kind of state: either the overt totalitarian state such as the Communist, or the disguised totalitarian state which still claims the title of "democratic" or "free" but is fast becoming totalitarian, at least in its general policies.

For the modern state, whether it is democratic as in the United States, or communistic as in the U.S.S.R., or Fascist as in pre-war Italy and Germany, or nationalistic as in the new states of Asia and Africa, is no longer content to confine itself to certain limited functions like the liberal state of the nineteenth century. In fact all modern states are totalitarian in so far as they seek to embrace the spheres of economics and culture, as well as politics in the strict sense of the word. They are concerned not merely with the maintenance of public order and the defense of the people against its external enemies. They have taken on responsibility for all the different forms of communal activity which were formerly left to the individual or to independent social organizations such as the churches, and they watch over the welfare of their citizens from the cradle to the grave.

Thus the modern democratic state even in America is something quite different from the form of state envisaged by the men who formed the American Constitution. Generally speaking one can say that they were the enemies of state intervention and aimed at creating a system which would leave the community and the individual free to lead their own lives and frame their own cultural institutions. But the modern democratic state partakes of the nature of the Church. It is the educator and spiritual guide of its citizens and any influence which withdraws the citizen and especially the citizen's children from this universal guidance is felt to be undesirable, if not positively disloyal.

It will be noted how relevant Mr. Dawson's warning is to the present educational situation in the Philippines. In this country the hand

of the state lies heavy not only on state-supported schools but on all private schools as well.

It can be objected (and often is) that if the state does not regulate education, who will? The Church? The Church is just another form of totalitarianism! Mr. Dawson's reply is to the point:

Of course, if it is totalitarian to claim authority over the whole of human life, then Christianity is totalitarian and so are all the other world religions. But this is a misuse of terms for totalitarian is essentially a political concept and implies a totalitarian state, whereas the fundamental distinction which Christians make between Church and State and spiritual and temporal authority is the opposite of totalitarian and is perhaps the only ultimate defense of man's spiritual freedom against the totalitarian challenge and the growing pressure of the secular state.... For in claiming the right to maintain separate schools and to teach its own principles to its own people, the Church is the champion of freedom in the most vital matter, and even the liberal democratic state is becoming totalitarian when it asserts the principle of the single school and claims a universal monopoly of teaching.

Such a situation is pregnant with disasters for Christianity. "Since the whole population of every civilized country is subjected to an intensive process of schooling during the most impressionable years of their lives, it is the school and not the church that forms men's minds, and if the school finds no place for religion, there will be no room left for religion elsewhere. It is no accident that the introduction of universal compulsory education has coincided in time and place with the secularization of modern culture."

The non-Christian may object that this is a limited problem affecting Christians alone. Mr. Dawson's contention is that the rejection of religion (and in the present context, Christianity) ultimately means the rejection of civilization. Neither science nor the state, whether liberal or totalitarian, nor any man-made institution for that matter, has ever succeeded in providing the common moral values, common ways of thought, the common spiritual vision which alone can unify a people or different peoples in a spiritual community which is the essence of culture. Mr. Dawson does not claim automatic success for Christianity. What he does affirm is that the one necessary condition for survival is a return to the Christian key-stone. Undernourished modern culture must once more partake of the spiritual and intellectual food of Christian tradition. The way of the secular state is an abortive experiment leading nowhere.

Mr. Dawson also discusses the conditions for a solution, and this is where the present book goes beyond his earlier works. The way in which Christians may assist contemporary society to rediscover Christian culture is sketched out. First of all, it cannot be by a return to any church-dominated state. What Dawson advocates is not any narrowing of culture horizons by mere external means such as "moral rigorism", or "alcoholic prohibition", or "censorship of books", etc., but just the reverse: "the recovery of that spiritual dimension of social life the lack of which has cramped and darkened the culture of the modern

world". It is in other words a return to the Christian spiritual unity, to the unifying spiritual vision of the Church which alone is creative or rather regenerative of cultures. To do this we must look back to the *historic reality of Christian culture* which explains the title of the book.

In describing the historic reality of Christian culture, Mr. Dawson touches on the following topics: (1) What is culture? Culture is essentially a spiritual unity. Here he merely presents the conclusions from a longer study, RELIGION AND CULTURE. (2) What is Christian culture? Christian culture should not be confused with a vague and sentimental humanitarianism. "The only true criterion is the degree in which the social way of life is based on the Christian faith." Equally valuable is the observation that "a Christian civilization is certainly not a perfect civilization, but it is a civilization which accepts the Christian way of life as normal and frames its institutions as organs of a Christian order." (3) After describing Christian civilization in general, Mr. Dawson considers (ch. 3) "the six ages of the church". These are six different cultural manifestations of one and the same Church in history. Different challenges and crises, the conversion of different peoples, distinct historical situations tend to produce a distinct Christian culture which is proper to the particular conditions of a given age. "In spite of the unity and continuity of the Christian tradition, each of the successive ages of the Church's history possesses its own distinctive character, and in each of them we can study a different facet of Christian life and culture." Mr. Dawson also explains why he dissents from the current threefold division of Church history as ancient, medieval and modern. "It is apt to make us lose sight of the multiplicity and variety of the life of the Church, and of the inexhaustible fecundity with which . . . God continually calls new peoples into the divine society, multiplying the Church by the vocation of the Gentiles." (4) How was Christianity in contact with the people? Mr. Dawson devotes a chapter to "Institutional Forms of Christian Culture" where he describes the various religious institutions by which Christianity was able to establish and maintain intimate contact with the social life of the people. The primary social bond was religious; the primary cultural activity was the act of worship; the centre of culture was a tradition of sacred learning: a divine Scripture, a sacred law, a sacred history and a sacred oral tradition. There was a tradition of secular learning but this was secondary and supplementary. "In Christianity . . . the liturgy was the centre of a rich tradition of religious poetry and music and artistic symbolism . . . The church itself — the liturgical edifice — was at the same time the organ of both the higher and the lower culture, and consequently a great instrument of social integration." Finally there is one great religious institution which has had a great and direct influence on the formation of Christian culture: monasticism.

(5) Where should Christians begin this process of de-secularization? In the mind. Men must first be intellectually convinced that culture needs to be renewed by religion; Christians must learn how to think in order that their Faith, if it be genuine, may shed its light and lend its vitality to modern culture. And in the face of difficulties in education brought on by the totalitarian state, there is an added practical reason for starting at the level of ideas. "The only part of Leviathan that is vulnerable is its brain, which is small in comparison with its vast and armored bulk. If we could develop Christian education to a point at which it meets the attention of the average educated man in every field of thought and life, the situation would be radically changed."

In the concrete, this process must start in the university and with the study of Christian culture. Dawson's two chapters on the "Six Ages of the Church" and the "Institutional Forms of Christian culture" will be valuable as guides in preparing an integrated study of the Christian cultural tradition.

Discussing the practical objection that the amount of material might prove too vast to permit intelligible management, Mr. Dawson reminds us that through the patient cooperation of the masters in the field, an integrated study of the vast resources of humanist tradition was made possible. "It is no more difficult in principle to conceive of a unified study of Christian culture which would include Christian philosophy, Christian literature and Christian history, studied in close relation with one another. In both cases the field of study comprises three successive cultural epochs: first the period of formation — the Homeric Age of Greece and the Patristic period of Christian culture; secondly the classical Age—the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D.; and thirdly the age of transmission and diffusion — the Roman Hellenistic period in the ancient world and the age of the formation of the vernacular literatures and cultures in Western Europe." There are still many practical difficulties which prevent the actual introduction of a new basic integrative study of this kind. "Nevertheless we can at least hold it in mind as a goal for the future and attempt to direct and co-ordinate our studies in this direction."

(6) The greatest obstacle, however, is not any insurmountable difficulty on the part of the non-Christian world, but the refusal of Christians to act. Matthew Arnold's accusation holds true: religious people refuse to think. "It is the intellectual and social inertia of Christians that is the real obstacle to a restoration of Christian culture. For if it is true that more than half the population [of America] are church members, Christians can hardly say that they are powerless to influence society. It is the will, not the power, that is lacking." The applicability of this to our "Christian" Philippines is obvious.

There is a final chapter, "Is the Church too Western?", which answers the difficulties of the non-Westerner, whether Asian or African, in accepting Christian influences since Christianity appears to be essentially a Western thing and there is at present a nationalist reaction against anything Western. Christianity is a universal religion which has assimilated in its culture Oriental as well as Western institutions.

The Church as a divine society possesses an internal principle of life which is capable of assimilating the most diverse materials and imprinting her own image upon them. Inevitably in the course of history there are times when this spiritual energy is temporarily weakened or obscured, and then the Church tends to be judged as a human organization and identified with the faults and limitations of its members. But always the time comes when she renews her strength and once more puts forth her inherent divine energy in the conversion of new peoples and the transformation of old cultures. At no time can we expect this work to be unopposed, for the very fact that the Church represents something entirely different—the intervention of a supernatural principle and the coming of a divine Kingdom—must inevitably arouse the fierce opposition of all those human societies and powers which claim absolute power over man and refuse to admit a superior or rival. One of the strongest and most aggressive of these forces in the modern world is nationalism and here Christians cannot expect to avoid a conflict. But the conflict is not really one between East and West: it is the old conflict between the spiritual and temporal powers, which was formerly confined largely to the Western world and has now emerged as a burning question in the East, largely owing to the introduction of the political ideologies of the West into Asia and Africa. But East or West it is basically the same conflict, and alike in East and West the Church stands neither for East nor West but for the universal spiritual society which is destined to embrace them both: "And the nations shall walk in the light of it; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honour into it" (Apoc. 22:24).

This book is immensely valuable for its penetrating insight into the nature of the modern crisis and the arduous way to salvation if modern man should choose to be saved. Clarity of vision is imaged in a lucidity of expression which makes even so serious a book a delight to read. One may not agree with all the details of his thesis, but his general conclusions are a challenge which even the most thoroughgoing secularist must take into account.

ROLANDO N. QUINTOS

CATHOLIC AMERICA

ESSAYS IN THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC TRADITION. Edited by P. Albert Duhamel. New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1960. xiii, 271p.

People, without giving the idea much thought, accept the statement that the United States is founded upon a Protestant tradition. It is not "hair splitting" to question this theory because in actuality only twelve of the thirteen colonies forming the nucleus of the early republic were actually Protestant in tradition. The Mississippi area, the area of the Louisiana Purchase and the Spanish South West, had all received the influence of Western civilization from Catholic explo-