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Educating the Subnormal: The Crisis of Western Education

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Book Reviews

EDUCATING THE SUBNORMAL

THE CRISIS OF WESTERN EDUCATION. By Christopher Dawson.
New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961, vi, 246 pp.

In this panoramic survey of Western education, of its part in forming Western culture, and of its function in revivifying that culture, Christopher Dawson brings us from the origins of Western tradition in Greek thought to its present precarious survival in a technological society that has lost its soul—its moral values and a unifying spiritual vision. The religious indifference that affects enormous numbers of men in these days comes, we are told, not primarily from anti-religious feeling. It is a consequence of the sub-religious, sub-human condition in which modern man subsists. The problem of changing the attitude of this sub-religious mass resembles that of educating the subnormal. Submission to the discipline of the machine he operates, the impossibility of finding emotional expression in his work, the uniformity imposed by universal military service and universal education—all have tended to an ever accelerated dehumanization of mankind within the past century and a half. But modern society still seeks a spiritual bond to replace its loss of living faith in historic Christendom. Some look for it in the democratic ideal of a natural society possessing a common mind and will, others in the nationalistic cult of a racial community, others in blind faith in the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. All these substitutes for religion make for "the existence of a completely secularized culture and the sub-human type of humanity which rest on the assumption that religious knowledge is no knowledge and that the only real knowledge is concerned with material things."

Catholics too are caught up in this surge toward secularism. They in particular are the victims of a theory of separation of Church and State increasingly interpreted so as to ban Christianity from edu-

cation and deny recognition to the Church as a corporate entity. In the New-Testament view Christians, though scattered throughout different places, are yet one people in the full sociological sense. But many today think otherwise. Instead of being Christians who happen to live in England or America, they are English or Americans who happen to attend a church on Sundays. Their national cultures become the only cultures they have and their Christian faith has to exist on a sectarian, sub-cultural, secularistic level. The dictum that Church and State are perfect societies is true only juridically, not psychologically or morally. "The Church is socially incomplete unless there is a Christian society and the State is morally incomplete without some spiritual bond other than the law and the power of the sword."

But there is still hope of reversing the current that is carrying humanity to an amoral secularistic society dominated by a selfish lust for power. It lies in "introducing the study of Christian culture as an objective historical reality" into higher learning. It is now commonly agreed that nationality provides too narrow a foundation for the study of history. The true unit of history is the civilization, but a prerequisite for an understanding of Western civilization is a knowledge of Christian culture. Such a study, to accomplish its purpose, should attend more to social institutions and moral values than to literary and artistic achievements, and more to the cultural process in its spiritual and theological aspects than to the products of culture. Opposed to this study is the parasitism of the modern mind which is willing to accept a cultural inheritance but unwilling to submit to the social and intellectual discipline through which that inheritance has been gained. But it is a study that is essential if today's nominal Christian is to recover a moral sense and a knowledge of the spiritual tradition of Western civilization. With this moral sense and spiritual vision technology will cease to threaten spiritual freedom and even human existence. Freed from the rule of individual self-interest and the cult of power, it will become a providential instrument in the creation of a new spiritual order. And when man becomes aware of a spiritual world as real as the tangible world of sense, he is put on the path that leads to acceptance of the Christian faith.

The book is a masterpiece of close and coherent thought powerfully expressed. It leaves no doubt of the eventual bankruptcy that faces modern civilization unless the alliance between religion and culture is restored. Mr. Dawson in delineating the history of Christianity in the West reviews its association with Greco-Roman culture and with the edifice raised on this foundation by medieval thought. Since his solution is practical, he does not undertake a discussion of the necessity of this linkage. Only through Christ's teaching can our

technological order of the present and the future obtain its spiritual fulfilment. This is certain. But must it pass through the cultural channels that conveyed it in the past?

THOMAS J. O'SHAUGHNESSY

THE FRENCH ENLIGHTENMENT

AN AGE OF CRISIS: MAN AND WORLD IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT. By Lester G. Crocker. The Goucher College Series. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1959. 496 pp.

Men and women familiar with the history of speculative thought in the Philippines should be aware of the strong and lasting influence of the French Enlightenment here. The ideas developed in eighteenth-century France formed the theoretical background for the Revolution, and they are still felt in the philosophical and literary output of certain of our universities.

Although the French philosophers of the eighteenth century—in contrast with certain English philosophers of the same century and with Descartes of the seventeenth century—cannot be considered first-rate, still their influence on present-day thinking has been very strong, as Professor Crocker repeatedly points out. Some of them stand as a bridge between the pessimists of the late Renaissance and our twentieth-century pessimistic philosophers, by questioning man's relation to the rest of nature and the basis for morality—if indeed they hold man is under any obligation at all.

The book is the first of a projected trilogy designed primarily to present ideas current in eighteenth-century France. Crocker makes it a point to include the opinions of the less known authors, in addition to the more famous—Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, Marquis de Sade, Condillac, Fontenelle, Helvetius, La Mettrie and Montesquieu, to whom, of course, he accords the main treatment.

Among these authors the defenders of human freedom tried to save the basis of ethical living, while the materialists of the early part of the century logically deprived men of moral responsibility. According to the latter, behavior was to be determined not by obligation, but by social pressure, habit and pleasure. It is because of this that "the age of reason" is an incorrect designation for the eighteenth century, at least in France. As Crocker says, "men, despite their possession of reason, do not live like reasonable beings; instead of following their reason in some objective way, they prostitute it to