

THE BIBLE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVILIZATION

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THE following discussion seeks to suggest an interpretation of civilization which distinctly falls within the Biblical perspective without falling outside of what non-Biblical analyses would recognize as valid. As so often happens when the world of the Bible and the world outside the Bible are juxtaposed, St. Augustine makes available a promising formulation of the issue. In the sixteenth book of the *City of God*, at chapter seventeen, he is discussing what might be called the "pre-Biblical world," e.g., the state of affairs before the main line, so to speak, of the Biblical view of things was drawn. St. Augustine's chronology is, of course, obsolete. He apparently adopts the reckoning in the "Chronicles" of Eusebius that between the promise of God to Abraham and the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai, 430 years had elapsed (cf. close of ch. 16); and then he goes on to remark that "during the same period there were three famous kingdoms of the nations, in which the city of the earth-born, that is the society of men living according to man under the domination of the fallen angels, chiefly flourished, namely, the three kingdoms of Sicyon, Egypt, and Assyria."

To be sure, this is a very Graeco-Roman formulation. "The city of the earth-born" is a phrase that, except to a poet, would scarcely suggest itself to anyone not brought up in the tradition of the Athenian *polis*. And Augustine is not writing poetry. Again, the "kingdoms of the nations," although it might possibly occur to a man reporting at Lake Success, would, if it did, have a more metaphorical connotation than would be given by a citizen of the Roman empire, especially at a time when the propaganda line was that the instability of the greatest among "the kingdoms of the nations" was attributable to the ideas and behavior of those who took the Biblical view of things. But when "the city of the earth-born" is indicated as the shorter form for "the society of men living according to man under the domination of the fallen angels," we begin to sense that

not only past times but future times including our very own present, are being drawn into the circle of reference. A non-Biblical analysis doubtless would find "the domination of the fallen angels" a superfluous Biblical allusion. But such an analysis would not really balk, I think, at "the society of men living according to man." And in our time especially, such a non-Biblical analysis would scarcely overlook its own version of the fallen angels. The Un-American Activities Committee of the House of Representatives has one view of these disturbers of the "city of the earth-born." Cicero had another, which was closer to Augustine's. And it begins to look as though democracy in America is once again going to have to contend for the First Amendment and to insist upon a more sober view of what should go on in "the society of men living according to man." In short, whether we substitute for the "domination of the fallen angels," the domination of the managers (James Burnham) or the demagogues, or, more anonymously still, of the crisis, we are within the Biblically inspired Augustinian context. *Civilization*, whatever may be said about its other and more desirable aspects and possibilities, is surely always *actual* as "the society of men living according to man under the domination of the fallen angels."

Here is an understanding of *civilization* which is at once accurate, all-inclusive, and realistic. And what divides the Biblical from the non-Biblical view of the matter is not any important difference over the range or the phenomenology of the term but rather over how "the society of men living according to man under the domination of the fallen angels" is going to get on, seeing that it is in fact and cannot be otherwise than *a society*, and seeing also that it is always under the point of being something other than a society, that is, of self-destruction.

It will have been noted that the pursuit of this Augustinian suggestion has brought forward two decisive components of *civilization*, namely, *society* and *sovereignty*. Society is the complex of human relatedness (Augustine would probably have found the word "wholeness" more congenial) which expresses itself in recognizable patterns of thought and life, patterns which make for the meaningful unity of the whole while simultaneously threatened by disunity. Sovereignty is the authentic point of order in society, the point around which the basic patterns of thought and life are organized and sustained and at which the issue between meaningful unity and mean-

ingless disunity is resolved. Accordingly, there can be no society either in the actual or the meaningful sense of the term without an adequate ground and exercise of sovereignty. And conversely, there can be no sovereignty either in the actual or the meaningful sense of the term without an adequate social base and aim. Nazism, for example, was possible because a bid for sovereignty achieved a sufficient social ground but it failed because that ground proved to be inadequate. Similarly a reorganization not only of German but of European society was called for, which Nazism inaugurated but was unable to maintain because its sovereignty was disruptive but not unitive.

Now the basic question as regards the Bible and the significance of civilization is this: Is there in the Bible an analysis of society and of sovereignty, and of their interrelation in terms of which a meaningful interpretation and solution may be found of the tension between unity and disunity in "the city of the earth-born, the society of men living according to man under the domination of the fallen angels"? If so, it may be said that there is a Biblical doctrine of civilization and the Church may be charged with the responsibility for so reflecting and acting upon the Biblical basis of its own existence as to make that doctrine plain and persuasive in its own age. If not, there is no Biblical authority according to which the Church can have any message for the political and social situation of our own or any day and the Church stands before the dismal dilemma of being true to itself and helpless in the world or relevant in the world and false to itself. *Tertium non datur.*

In my judgment it is the first of these alternatives which is required by the Bible. Bearing in mind what the other articles in this symposium have suggested with regard to a reading of the Old and the New Testaments for light upon this problem, let me take up what seem to me to be the central elements of the Biblical doctrine of civilization. It may, perhaps, then be possible and within the space available to hint at how, in the light of the Biblical doctrine, the present form of the problem of society and sovereignty, the present problem of civilization, may be attacked.

Professor Minear has stressed the importance, for any view of civilization that can be called "Biblical," of the New Testament doctrine of the *Kingdom of Christ*. Christians are those whom God had "delivered . . . out of the power of darkness and translated . . . into

the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1: 13). It is this doctrine of the Kingdom of Christ, with its Old Testament presuppositions and its post-apostolic problems, that constitutes the framework of the Biblical outlook upon civilization. What, then, must we take into account if we are rightly to understand this doctrine, and in the light of it, rightly to appraise the significance of civilization?

The first point that must be emphasized is what Professor Wright has called the "revealed order." According to the Old Testament civilization, like nature, is simply *there*. Neither civilization nor nature are the points of departure for any attempt to give significance to anything. It is therefore quite correct, as has already been remarked, that no "given order" (e.g., whatever can be regarded as being "there" prior to, or in distinction from, the revealed order) can be taken for granted or ever justified in terms of itself. On the other hand, the starting point and the direction of Old Testament life and thought are from the revealed order in the midst of and toward the transformation of the given order. It is, in my judgment, of the greatest significance, especially for the problem of civilization, that *the initiation and the structure of the revealed order are seen in the Old Testament in the covenant relation between Yahweh and Israel*. Not even the Torah, which may have a longer primeval span and a certain edge of sanctity about it, is self-authenticating and the ultimate point of reference for delineating the relations between the revealed and the given order. The Torah is what it is because it is the expressed will of Yahweh to whom the people are responsible because he has made a covenant with them and they with him. The covenant, moreover, is a socio-historical event. This means that the clue to the nature and activity of God is to be found neither in the processes of nature, nor in the recesses of the spirit, nor in any divine or human privacy, but in the fact and the fortunes of a people, of the "society of men living according to man"—not yet all men to be sure; and never completely "living according to man," but certainly a society, and one engaged in the task and the duty of ordering its life in accordance with its occasion and its destiny. It cannot be overemphasized, I think, especially in our day, that the Old Testament begins and pivots around the fact that the life of a people is the sphere and the structure of the revealed order.

But the people of Israel are not, on that account, a sacred people. This is the difference between the Sinaitic and all totemic covenants; between Mosaic monotheism (henotheism, if you prefer) and the surrounding polytheisms. The people of Israel are not a sacred people but a political people. That is to say they are a society grounded and fulfilled in an unambiguous and irrefutable sovereignty. The people of the covenant are not immune to temptation. Indeed, they play the harlot as every people does; and they ought not have a king, but they both get a king and choose one. Polytheism, not animism, is the real threat to the chosen people because the question of sovereignty is involved; and the real objection to the king is that he is superfluous because Yahweh is king. It may be suggested, therefore, that the basis of the Old Testament suspicion of civilization is not a pure negation of the patterns of life and thought in which society, any society, expresses itself. The *goim* are to be avoided because they operate under a defective sovereignty. And since it is difficult to keep the fruits of that sovereignty *in civilization* distinct from the falsity of that sovereignty *in itself*, there is in the Old Testament a repudiation of the organized life of polytheistic peoples and a deeply ingrained aversion to civilization.

The covenant, then, is the first element of the Biblical doctrine of civilization. *The figure of the Messianic king* is the second. The Messianic king is unthinkable outside the context of society and sovereignty. He can be found in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue and in the "Admonitions of Ipuwer," an Egyptian Messianic tract.¹ He can be found also in the Old Testament prophets, where he is gentle despite his power and uniquely combines justice with mercy. "He shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears; but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth" (Is. 11: 3-4). But, he is a king, and more and more inevitably in the Davidic line. Hebraic Messianism was able to transmute the symbol of the shepherd-king from a mythological and fleeting expression of occasional and utopian hopes into a symbol of the inner meaning of the people's life and destiny because the contradiction between experience and destiny could be referred neither to blood nor to dynasty but to the covenant. The Messiah is the agent of the God of the covenant who will straighten out the ambiguous loyalties and sovereignties in

¹ Cf. J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York, 1933), p. 198.

the life of the people and rule over them for God himself. The meaning of this Messianic discovery of Israel's prophets is that the prophets were primarily charged with the task of clarifying and affirming the only sovereignty which could sustain society and that in the discharge of this task the prophets discovered that the enigma of history is the enigma of power. Henceforth, the problem is this: the organized life of peoples is continually dependent upon and threatened by the exercise of power. Can there be a resolution of this tension within history itself?

Here, as Reinhold Niebuhr has effectively pointed out,² was the great impasse and the great unresolved problem of Hebraic Messianism. It could find no way to a meaningful interpretation of sovereignty upon which the life of society depended, without surrendering the life of society itself. The covenant God would indeed overcome the contradiction in history between the hopes and the circumstances of his chosen people. The suffering of his people did not deprive them of significance but rather gave to them a redemptive vocation. With the Second Isaiah, the covenant God is clearly the Creator God and the God of all the nations. But the fruits of this redemption were more and more deferred; and the redemptive remnant of the people was more and more reduced. The saints of the Most High will receive their reward when the Son of Man descends upon the clouds of heaven.

If the New Testament had taken this trans-historical line in its interpretation of the Kingdom of the Messiah, it would have oversimplified the logic of Old Testament messianism and lodged in a similar repudiation of the "society of men living according to man, under the dominion of the fallen angels." But the New Testament, no more than the main line of the Old Testament, negates civilization. Instead, it begins by heightening the significance of the advent and ends by adjusting its sights to the delay of the Parousia. The beacon is provided by *the ascension of our Lord*. This is the third element in the Biblical doctrine of civilization.

The opening chapter of the Book of Acts is perhaps the *textus classicus* in the context of our problem. "When they therefore were come together, they asked of him saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the

² Cf. The Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. II (New York, 1943), chapter 1.

Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and in Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1: 6-9). It will be noted that the Christian religion, staggering under the blow of the crucifixion, and dazed by the ambiguities of the frontier between earth and heaven, time and eternity, occasioned by the resurrection, recovers its *πρὸς στῶ* in the context of the kingdom of Israel. And while the apostolic preaching faithfully adhered to the witness to these great events: "this Jesus whom ye crucified, God hath raised up and made both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2: 32), the apostolic logic, especially under the unparalleled mind of the Apostle Paul, worked out the framework of this preaching in terms of a re-interpretation of the Kingdom. More than ever, it is this world and not the next that is the direction of the "power of the resurrection." More than ever, the risen Lord—who will certainly come again—is here and now a present power in the exercise of his kingly rule. We are back at Colossians 1: 13-18. And therewith, we come upon the final element in the Biblical doctrine of civilization. *The ruling Christ* is "the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1: 18).

I think that I can be most concise about what is involved here if I venture to talk about the Church in connection with a point alluded to above. I suggested that I would try to sketch the central elements of the Biblical doctrine of civilization and then try to indicate how, in the light of the Biblical doctrine, the present form of the problem of society and sovereignty, the present problem of civilization, might be attacked. This may now be attempted by referring to the way in which the New Testament Church is related to us.

It seems to me that if the relation between the Church of the New Testament and the Church at the ecumenical council in Amsterdam is more than traditional, is more than ecclesiastical, it must be a relation that has the same context. The context is this: the people of God are the society of men, living according to man, under the domination of the fallen angels. But the domination of the fallen angels is broken. The ascended Christ has started the attack and he is the one fixed point of sovereignty in society. He is, to be sure, on location, in the Church. But the Church does not rule in his

name, he rules the Church and by his rule in and over the Church the Church bears witness in the society of men, in civilization to the fact and the way to redemptive sovereignty. This witness of the Church is a two-fold witness: by its preaching it provides men with nourished faith and hope and with quickened consciences; by its challenge to all vain sovereignties and by its championing of all victims of vain sovereignties, it embodies the kingly sway of the Lord both over the Church and over civilization. In my judgment, the inexhaustible resources of preaching are the Biblical witness to the advent and the ascension with all that is required to comprehend it; *and* the trinitarian theology of the Church by which that witness becomes effective for the patterns of thought in society.⁸ The inexhaustible resources of the political struggle are the suffering with Christ that we may also be raised with him and the light that comes to the eye of the blind, the sound that comes to the ear of the deaf, and the joy that breaks forth from the captives when they are released. If, in the course of the self-reflection forced upon the Church by the Lord of the Church, the Church in this day can recover the elements of the Biblical doctrine of civilization, it is certain to be more unmistakably the body of Christ, for by truly remembering him, the Church will show forth his death till he come.

⁸ For a brilliant and comprehensive analysis of the bearing of the doctrine of the trinity upon the problems of sovereignty and society, the problem of power, cf. Charles N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Oxford, 1940.

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