

## *Toward An Understanding of Culture*

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### *Culture*

Culture in the sense in which it is used in this essay is not restricted to the social usages which mark good taste in a given society. There is a much deeper dimension. On this deeper level, culture means the pattern of values by which communities define the meaning of their existence. This means their tastes, their beliefs, their commitments, their definitions of what is good. It is thus a secondary environment which man superimposes upon the natural order. Culture is what man does with nature as he transforms it in terms of the values he espouses. Culture is a constellation of values. The actualization of these values issues in civilization. From this point of view, civilization is the outward expression of the inward values of a community. Civilization is the "body" of which culture is the "soul."

Christopher Dawson has said that "a common way of life involves a common view of life, common standards of behavior, and common standards of value; consequently culture is a spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought . . . ."<sup>1</sup> Until the modern period, ushered in by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, man tended to look upon his life as deeply dependent upon forces lying outside his own control. "No man" said an Indian hunter, "can succeed in life alone, and he cannot get the help he needs from men."<sup>2</sup> Thus from the earliest formation of culture until the modern period religious faith has been a major determinant in the rise and development of culture. It was believed that the supernatural order impinged upon and shaped the social order and that out of this interrelationship culture emerged. Thus religion has been the great unifying force in culture. "Religion is the substance of culture," says Paul Tillich, "[and] culture is the expression of religion."<sup>3</sup> In the sweep of history, the widespread secularization of life, as a result of which culture is conceived as a self-sufficient phenomenon, is a relatively recent development. When the values which shape a society are conceived on a largely horizontal level and covenants are merely social contracts, the dynamics of culture have become secular.

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1. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948), pp. 48-49.

2. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 49.

3. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, translated by James Luther Adams, (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. xvii.

*Religion and Culture*

A basic issue involved in the inter-relationship of religion and culture is the question of the cultural conditioning of religion itself. There are those who hold that religion is itself simply a product of culture. However, the alternative view that culture is shaped by religion cannot be so easily dismissed. The world of divine power and mystery impinges upon culture even when it is explicitly excluded. In addition to this, the coming of Jesus Christ has effected a permanent revolution in human history and particularly in the culture of the West. Redemptive power, which confronts creatively the restrictive egoisms and chaotic absurdities of the human condition, has been released. The culture of the West should be approached not only against the background of the religious dimension in general but also of the Christian faith in particular.

Religion, whether in general or specific terms, exercises both a conservative and liberating effect upon culture. In the extent to which it is believed that a given pattern of culture has the sanction of religion it will resist change. On the other hand, when a cultural pattern seems to stand in contradiction to "another source which claims superhuman authority"<sup>4</sup> then the culture will undergo transformation.

The culture of the modern period tends to be scientific and rationalistic and thus centered in man. Such a culture, which majors upon size, shape, and speed, gives rise to a technological civilization in which the major values are measureable. One example of this is the Communist culture, and its consequence is the Russian and Red Chinese civilizations and their satellites. Another expression of secularized culture is the autonomous individualism which has plagued Western man since the Renaissance. In theological terms, modern culture tends to oscillate between the self idolatries of autonomous individualism and the totalitarian idolatries of the Communist world. The result in both instances is a relativism which empties culture of its spiritual content and confines it to a single level of reality. "It is an immense complex of techniques and specialisms without a guiding spirit," says Mr. Dawson, "with no basis of common moral values, with no unifying spiritual aim."<sup>5</sup> The tendency of such a culture and the civilization it actuates is to make subhuman values primary. This poses a threat to culture itself. When technology becomes an idolatry it becomes an enemy of humanity. This is evident

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4. Christopher Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

5. *Ibid* p. 214.

in the manner in which recent scientific discoveries have been turned against the very culture which made the discoveries possible. Without spiritual order, moral control becomes increasingly less significant. A fact amply verified by recent history is that culture becomes unstable when it is detached from the authority of a prior spiritual order. Modern man cannot have the fruits of a creative and liberating culture without its roots. A humane life cannot persist indefinitely on the basis of purely secular values.

#### *Christian Culture*

This raises the question of the possible relationships of Christianity and culture. The tendency of sectarianism is to isolate Christianity from cultural concern and thus to preserve the alleged purity of sectarian beliefs. Christian culture tends to be identified with the hallowed beliefs and practices of the group and functions over against the general culture in which it is set. The relationship between the church and culture is a negative one. Another possible relationship between the church and culture is to relate the church to its surrounding culture to the extent that the uniqueness of what the church stands for is dissolved in the general culture which impinges upon it. The effort to make Christian culture relevant can result in its dissolution. In this instance, the relation between Christian culture and the culture in which it is set is positive. However, when relevance issues in a corroding relativism, as is sometimes the case, the Christian culture loses its power and uniqueness and is finally merely a sanctifying adjunct to the general values of the community. A third alternative is an effort to integrate various Christian traditions to make of them a center of power in the world. This is an effort to fuse the varying Christian subcultures into a dominant Christian culture and then seek to establish this in the world as an agent for the transformation of culture. This poses both possibilities and dangers. Surely there are merits to the effort to discover, explore, and exploit the great congruences which manifest themselves in Christian culture. The dangers lie at the point of assuming that the struggle of Christian culture in a pagan culture is a quantitative matter. Sectarian isolation, secular relevance, and ecumenical strategy do not appear to me to deal with the deepest issues.

It is not difficult to define the ideal relationship between a Christian and a pagan culture. The relationship should be positive and relevant and at the same time should sustain the uniqueness of the Christian witness. This would seem to require a blending of what are often regarded as antagonistic elements in our Christian past. Is it not possible to combine the sectarian concern for Christian

truth as something "given" which must be preserved at any cost with an openness to culture and a concern for greater Christian unity? In an encounter of this kind Christian culture can be transmuted in a transforming sense and also be subject to the criticisms which flow from secular and ecumenical perspectives. What is sometimes glibly labeled as a "Christian culture" needs both historical perspective and the tools of critical scholarship. Otherwise, what is called "Christian culture" can easily become the premature finalities of sectarianism or merely involve a superficial baptism of secular perspectives by Christian faith.

The argument of this essay is succinctly summarized by a passage in T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society*, written prior to the outbreak of World War II: "As political philosophy derives its distinction from ethics, and ethics from the truth of religion, it is only by returning to the eternal source of truth that we can hope for any social organization which will not, to its ultimate destruction, ignore some essential aspect of reality. The term democracy does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you dislike—it can easily be transformed by them. If you will not have God . . . you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin."<sup>6</sup> The "social organization" of which Mr. Eliot speaks is the consequence of a prior culture. A creative and liberating culture is rooted in religion. The movement of thought is from culture to ethics to religion. Religion is the source of ethics, ethics is the source of creative culture. There are, of course, demonic religions. We have seen several in recent decades. A demonic religion dissolves the humane ethic of the western world and issues in a demonic culture. If the thesis maintained in this study is correct, the significance of the Christian faith for a culture worth having is clear. You cannot have one without the other.

### *Cultural Unity*

The task before us is the formation of a new Christian culture or the acceptance of a pagan one. A "Christian culture" is, of course, an impossible ideal and yet it is a goal which we must pursue with dedication and vigor. Such a pilgrimage, however far it may miss the mark in our generation, is the only alternative to paganism. We simply cannot settle for that. We must recover the cultural heritage of the Christian faith and communicate it to a sub-religious and neo-pagan world. This does not mean a revival of medieval perspectives

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6. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), p. 63.

as a basis for culture as Christopher Dawson implies; it means a penetration of the secular individualism and collectivism of our age with a Christian culture rooted in the Biblical faith. Mr. Dawson looks longingly to what he calls "the Christian world of the past," which, he says, "embodied religious truth in visible and palpable forms: art and architecture, music and poetry and drama, philosophy and history were all used as channels for communication of religious truth."<sup>7</sup> The norm which underlies his vision of culture at its best is the medieval synthesis with its Roman Catholic hegemony. Thus the authority of the Gospel over all human culture is transmuted into the authority of a human institution and "a god is found who is not really God."<sup>8</sup> He idealizes the past, identifies a conditioned church as the bearer of "religious truth" embodied in a "Christian world of the past," and points us backward to a coerced and authoritarian unity.

The way out is not to some idealized past but into a new Christian culture responsive to the issues of our time. This means a Christian faith "powerful enough religiously to introduce the affirmations of faith into the field of a free culture; and . . . resourceful enough intellectually to relate that faith to all aspects and facets of the culture."<sup>9</sup> This requires a Christian leadership deeply devoted to both freedom of inquiry and the affirmations of faith. One without the other will not do. Freedom without faith means cultural anarchy. Faith without freedom means cultural tyranny.

A distinguished American author has said: "As we examine the cultural disaster which has overwhelmed our age, its most destructive action seems to be the undermining, the eating away, of the principle of reasonableness in human relations. The demand that men be reasonable, rather than arbitrary or selfish, has been the corner stone of our civilization . . . Human beings should learn to reason together, should practice friendliness of mind. Violence . . . is savagery. To be civilized is to be reasonable."<sup>10</sup> A Christian culture, of course, involves more than this. Nevertheless, its values stand over against "arbitrary" and "selfish" perspectives. It does foster "friendliness of mind" because it insists upon the dignity of the individual made in the

7. Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 90.

8. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1941), Vol. II, p. 209.

9. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Cultural Unity* (Hazen Pamphlets, 1945). p. 17.

10. Robert M. Hutchins, *The Power of Reason*. (Santa Barbara, California: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1963), p. 6.

divine image and recognizes tendencies toward self-interest in all human enterprises. The Christian gospel is concerned, of course, with matters which go beyond the limitations of human culture. Nevertheless, it is concerned with culture and therefore is opposed to what is arbitrary and selfish and supports friendliness of mind. The Christian faith deals with the individual in his solitude and is concerned with what is ultimate. It will not settle for purely cultural concerns. Nevertheless, its significance for culture had better not be discounted in this time of cultural disarray. A humane world, a world of decency, depends upon nothing quite so much as this.

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