

The Case for the Study of Christian Culture by Christopher Dawson

At first sight it may seem surprising that there is any need for the discussion of Christian culture study, at least among Catholic educationalists, for one would have expected that the whole question would have been thrashed out years ago and there was no longer room for any difference of opinion. But as a matter of fact this is far from being the case, and the more one looks into the subject, the more one is struck by the vagueness and uncertainty of educated opinion in this matter and the lack of any accepted doctrine or educational policy.

No doubt the situation in all the English-speaking countries differs essentially from that of Catholic Europe, where the Church has either preserved a privileged position in educational matters or, more frequently, has been forced to resist the hostile pressure of an anti-clerical or “laicist” regime. The Catholics of the English-speaking countries, in England as well as in America and in Australia, have not had the need to face the continental type of political anti-clericalism, but on the other hand, they have no privileged position and no publicly established educational institutions of their own. They have had to build their whole educational system from the bottom upwards with their own scanty resources. And so the main problem of Catholic education in the English-speaking countries has been the problem of the primary school—how to secure the necessary minimum of religious instruction for their children.

The urgency of this issue has relegated all the problems of higher education to the second place. Catholics have felt that if they can save the schools, the universities can look after themselves. And in fact they have done so, up to a point. Catholics have managed to adapt themselves fairly successfully to the English and American systems of higher education. Nevertheless it has been a question of adaptation to an external system, and there has been little opportunity to decide what the nature of higher education should be or to create their own curriculum of studies. All this is comparatively simple. But it is much more difficult to explain the situation in the past, when the Church dominated the whole educational system—schools, colleges and universities—and determined the whole course of higher studies. Surely one would have expected that the study of Christian culture would have formed the basis for the higher studies and that the foundations of an educational tradition would have been laid which would have dominated Christian education ever since. But what actually happened was that for centuries higher education has been so identified with the study of one particular historic culture—that of ancient Greece and Rome—that there was no room left for anything else. Even the study of our own particular national culture, including both history and literature, did not obtain full recognition until the nineteenth century, while the concept of Christian culture as an object of study has never been recognized at all.

The great obstacle to this study has not been religious or secularist prejudices but strictly cultural. It had its origins in the idealization of classical antiquity by the humanist scholars and artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And it followed from this conception that the period that intervened between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance offered the historian, as Voltaire says, “the barren prospect of a thousand years of stupidity and barbarism.” They were “middle ages” in the original sense of the word—that is, a kind of cultural vacuum between two ages of cultural achievement which (to continue the same quotation) “vindicate the greatness of the human spirit.”

This view, which necessarily ignores the achievements and even the existence of Christian culture, was passed on almost unchanged from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century Enlightenment and from the latter to the modern secularist ideologies. And though today every instructed person recognizes that it is based on a completely erroneous view of history and very largely on a sheer ignorance of history, it still continues to exert an immense influence, both consciously and unconsciously, on modern education and on our attitude to the past.

It is therefore necessary for educators to make a positive effort to exorcise the ghost of this ancient error and to give the study of Christian culture the place it deserves in modern education. We cannot leave this to the medievalists alone, for they are to some extent themselves tied to the error by the limitations of their specialism. Christian culture is not the same thing as medieval culture. It existed before the Middle Ages began and it continued to exist after they had ended. We cannot understand medieval culture unless we study its foundations in the age of the Fathers and the Christian Empire, and we cannot understand the classical vernacular literatures of post-Renaissance Europe unless we study their roots in medieval culture. Even the Renaissance itself, as Conrad Burdach and E. R. Curtius have shown, is not intelligible unless it is studied as part of a movement which had its origins deep in the Middle Ages.

Moreover, it seems that the time is ripe for a new approach to the subject, since our educational system—and not in one country alone, but throughout the Western world—is passing through a period of rapid and fundamental change. The old domination of classical humanism has passed away, and nothing has taken its place except the scientific specialisms which do not provide a complete intellectual education, and rather tend to disintegrate into technologies. Every educator recognizes that this is unsatisfactory. A scientific specialist or a technologist is not an educated person. He tends to become merely an instrument of the industrialist or the bureaucrat, a worker ant in an insect society, and the same is true of the literary specialist, though his social function is less obvious.

But even the totalitarians do not accept this solution; on the contrary, they insist most strongly on the importance of the cultural element in education whether their ideal of culture is nationalist and racial, as with the Nazis, or cosmopolitan and proletarian, as with the Communists. No doubt from our point of view this totalitarian culture means the forcible indoctrination of scientist and worker alike with the same narrow party ideology, but at least it does provide a simple remedy for the disintegrating effects of modern specialization and gives the whole educational system a unifying purpose.

Heaven forbid that we should try to solve our educational problems in this way by imposing a compulsory political ideology on the teacher and the scientist! But we cannot avoid this evil by sitting back and allowing higher education to degenerate into a chaos of competing specialisms without any guidance for the student except the urgent practical necessity of finding a job and making a living as soon as his education is finished. This combination of utilitarianism and specialism is not only fatal to the idea of a liberal education, it is also one of the main causes of the intellectual disintegration of modern Western culture under the aggressive threat of totalitarian nationalism and Communism.

Some cultural education is necessary if Western culture is to survive, but we can no longer rely exclusively on the traditional discipline of classical humanism, though this is the source of all that was best in the tradition of Western liberalism and Western science. For we cannot ignore the realities of the situation—the progressive decline of the great tradition of Western humanism, the dwindling number of classical scholars and the development of a vast nation-wide system of professional education which has nothing in common with the old classical culture.

Nevertheless the decline of classical studies does not necessarily involve the decline of liberal education itself. In America the liberal arts college still maintains its prestige and American educationalists have continued to advocate the ideals of liberal education. But there is still no general agreement on how the lost unity of humanist education can be recovered. The liberal arts college itself tends to disintegrate under the growing number of subjects until it becomes an amorphous collection of alternative courses. It is to remedy this state of things that American educationalists have introduced or proposed a general integrative study of our culture which would provide a common intellectual background for the students of the liberal arts.

The problem for Catholics is a somewhat different one. They have never altogether lost sight of the medieval ideal of an order and hierarchy of knowledge and the integration of studies from above by a higher spiritual principle. In other words Catholics have a common theology and a common philosophy—the unitive disciplines which the modern secular system of higher education lacks. Yet in spite of this enormous advantage it cannot be claimed that the Catholic university has solved the problem of modern higher education or that it stands out as a brilliant exception from the educational chaos of the rest of the world. For the Catholic liberal arts college suffers from very much the same weaknesses as the secular ones. It is losing ground externally in relation to the other schools within the university, and internally it is becoming disintegrated by the multiplicities of different studies and courses. And the reason for this is that Catholic education has suffered no less—perhaps even more—than secular education from the decline of classical studies and the loss of the old humanist culture. This was the keystone of the whole educational structure, and when it was removed the higher studies of theology and philosophy became separated from the world of specialist and vocational studies which inevitably absorb the greater part of the time and money and personnel of the modern university.

It is therefore of vital importance to maintain the key position of the liberal arts college in the university and to save the liberal arts course from further disintegration. And it is with these ends in view that I have made my suggestions for the study of Christian culture as a means of integration and unity. Its function would be very similar to that of the general courses in contemporary civilization, Western civilization, or American culture which are actually in operation in some of the non-Catholic universities. Indeed it is the same thing adapted to the needs of Catholic higher studies. For if we study Western culture in the light of Catholic theology and philosophy, we are in fact studying Christian culture or one aspect of it. I believe that the study of Christian culture is the missing link which it is essential to supply if the tradition of Western education and Western culture is to survive, for it is only through this study that we can understand how Western culture came to exist and what are the essential values for which it stands.

I see no reason to suppose, as some have argued, that such a study would have a narrowing and cramping effect on the mind of the student. On the contrary, it is eminently a liberal and liberalizing study, since it shows us how to relate our own contemporary social experience to the wider perspectives of universal history. For, after all, Christian culture is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no narrow sectarian tradition. It is one of the four great historic civilizations on which the modern world is founded. If modern education fails to communicate some understanding of this great tradition, it has failed in one of its most essential tasks. For the educated person cannot play his full part in modern life unless he has a clear sense of the nature and achievements of Christian culture: how Western civilization became Christian and how far it is Christian today and in what ways it has ceased to be Christian: in short, a knowledge of our Christian roots and of the abiding Christian elements in Western culture.

When I speak of Western culture I am not using the word in the limited sense in which it was used by Matthew Arnold and the humanists, who were concerned only with the highest level of cultivated intelligence, but in the sense of the anthropologists and social historians, who have widened it out to cover the whole pattern of human life and thought in a living society. In this sense of the word, a culture is a definite historical unity, but as Dr. Toynbee explains so clearly in the Introduction to his *Study of History*, it has a much wider expansion in space and time than any purely political unit, and it alone constitutes an intelligible field of historical study, since no part of it can be properly understood except in relation to the whole.

Behind the existing unity of Western culture we have the older unity of Christian culture which is the historic basis of our civilization. For more than a thousand years from the conversion of the Roman Empire down to the Reformation the peoples of Europe were fully conscious of their membership in the great Christian society and accepted the Christian faith and the Christian moral law as the ultimate bond of social unity and the spiritual basis of their way of life. Even after the unity of Christendom had been broken by the Reformation, the tradition of Christian culture still survived in the culture and institutions of the different European peoples, and in some cases exists even in the midst of our secularized culture, as we see so strikingly in the English monarch's coronation rite.

Consequently anyone who wishes to understand our own culture as it exists today cannot dispense with the study of Christian culture, whether he is a Christian or not. Indeed in some ways this study is more necessary for the secularist than for the Christian, because he lacks that ideological key to the understanding of the past which every Christian ought to possess.

The subject is a vast one which could occupy the lifetime of an advanced scholar. But the same may be said of the study of Western civilization in the secular universities, or indeed of the study of classical culture in the past. Nevertheless it can also provide the ordinary student who is going out into the world to earn his living in professional life with a glimpse of the intellectual and spiritual riches to which he is heir and to which he can return in later years for light and refreshment.

If the college or university can only inspire its students with a sense of the value of this inheritance and a desire to know more about it, it will have taken the first and most essential step. No doubt higher education is not unaware of this need and has made some attempt to satisfy it both in the liberal arts college and in the graduate school. But it has done so hitherto in a somewhat haphazard and piecemeal fashion. The student can study any number of subjects which have a bearing on the subject of Christian culture or form part of it; but none of these will give him any comprehensive view of the whole. What is needed, so it seems to me, is a study of Christian culture as a social reality—its origins, development and achievements—for this would provide a background of framework that would integrate the liberal studies which at present are apt to disintegrate into unrelated specialisms.

This kind of program is not simply a study of the Christian classics; nor is it primarily a literary study. It is a cultural study in the sociological and historical sense, and it would devote more attention to the social institutions and the moral values of Christian culture than to its literary and artistic achievements. Christian culture has indeed flowered again and again in literature and art, and these successive flowerings are well worthy of our study. But obviously it is out of the question to make the average arts student study all of them. Such a proposal, which one critic of Christian culture study assumes to be my intention, is to misunderstand the nature of the problem. What we need is not an encyclopaedic knowledge of all the products of Christian culture, but a study of the culture-process itself from its spiritual and theological roots, through its organic historical growth to its cultural fruits. It is this organic relation between theology, history and culture which provides the integrative principle in Catholic higher education, and the only one that is capable of taking the place of the old classical humanism which is disappearing or has already disappeared.

Moreover, if we desire to promote religious and intellectual understanding among the different religious groups within American society, surely the best way to do this is to understand and appreciate our own culture in all its depth and breadth. Without this full cultural awareness it is impossible either to interpret one's culture to others or to understand the problems of intercultural relations, problems which are of such incalculable importance for the future of the modern world.

I do not deny that there are great practical obstacles in the way of this study. The secularist is naturally afraid that it might be used as an instrument of religious propaganda, and he is consequently anxious to minimize the importance of the Christian element in our culture and exaggerate the gulf between modern civilization and the Christian culture of the past.

The Christian, on the other hand, is often afraid lest the historical study of Christian culture should lead to an identification of Christianity with a culture and a social system which belong to the dead past. But for the Christian the past can never be dead, as it often seems to the secularist, since we believe the past and the present are united in the one Body of the Church and that the Christians of the past are still present as witnesses and helpers in the life of the Church today.

No doubt it would be an error to apply this principle to the particular forms of Christian culture which are conditioned by material factors and limited by the change of historical circumstances. But as there is an organic relation between the Christian faith and the Christian life, so also there is a relation between Christian life and Christian culture. The relation between faith and life is completely realized only in the life of the saint. But there has never been a temporal society of saints, and the attempt to create one, as in Puritan England or Massachusetts, represents a sectarian perversion of Christian culture. Nevertheless it is the very nature of the Christian faith and the Christian life to penetrate and change the social environment in which they exist, and there is no aspect of human life which is closed to this leavening and transforming process. Thus Christian culture is the periphery of the circle which has its center in the Incarnation and the faith of the Church and the lives of the saints.

All this is to be seen in history. Christianity did actually come into the historical world and did actually transform the societies with which it came into contact: first, the Hellenistic-Oriental society of the Eastern Roman Empire, and secondly, the Latin and barbarian societies of Western Europe. From this two new cultures were born—the Byzantine culture of the East and Western Christendom, both of which, in spite of their ultimate separation, share a large number of common characteristics.

Both of these cultures have now been secularized, but the process of secularization is so recent and even incomplete that it is absolutely impossible to understand them in their secularized form unless we have studied their Christian past.

Unfortunately it is nobody's business to study or to teach this subject, and it is extremely difficult under existing conditions for anyone to acquire the necessary knowledge, even if he can spare the time and energy to do so. Nevertheless the very reasons which make the study of the subject so difficult are also reasons in its favor from the educational point of view. They are due to the fact that it is an integrative subject involving the cooperation of a number of different specialized studies, in the same way as the study of *litterae humaniores* in the Greats School at Oxford involves the co-operation of philosophers and historians as well as philologists and literary critics. A curriculum in Christian culture would thus embrace a co-operative study of Christian philosophy, Christian literature and Christian history.

What are the principles upon which such a study should be based? We must recognize that Christian culture can be studied in two ways: externally, as an objective historical study of Christendom as one of the four great world civilizations on which the modern world is founded; and from within, as the study of the history of the Christian people—a study of the ways in which Christianity has expressed itself in human thought and life and institutions through the ages.

The first is necessary for every historian, since it is an essential aspect of the study of world civilization. The second is necessary to the Christian, since it deals with his own spiritual history and with the successive stages of Christian life and thought.

For educational purposes, both these studies should be combined. The student should be given a general knowledge of the external development of Christian civilization from the beginning to the present day, and this should be accompanied by a more detailed study of Christian life and thought and institutions during some one particular period.

The development of Christian culture has passed through six successive phases or periods, each with its distinctive form of culture:

1. Primitive Christianity, from the first to the beginning of the fourth century. This is the age which saw the birth of the Church: the subterranean expansion of the Christian way of life beneath the surface of a pagan civilization and the development of an autonomous Christian society widely distributed through the great cities of the Roman Empire, above all in the Eastern Mediterranean.
2. Patristic Christianity, from the fourth to the sixth centuries: the age of the conversion of the Roman-Hellenistic world and the establishment of Christian-Roman or Byzantine culture.
3. The Formation of Western Christendom, from the sixth to the eleventh centuries: the age of the conversion of Northern Europe and the formation of Western Christendom through the gradual permeation of the barbarian cultures—Celtic, Germanic, and Slavonic—by Christian influence. At the same time a large part of the old Christian world was lost by the rise of Islam and the development of a new non-Christian culture there.
4. Medieval Christendom, from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. This is the age in which Western Christian culture attained full development and cultural consciousness and created new social institutions and new forms of artistic and literary expression.
5. Divided Christendom, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries: the age of the development of the national European cultures. In spite of the internal religious strife which characterized the period, it was also an age of expansion, so that Christian culture gradually came to incorporate the whole of the New World. It also saw a great, though unsuccessful, effort to spread Christianity from Europe to India, China and Japan.
6. Secularized Christendom, from the eighteenth century to the present. During this period Western culture achieved a position of world hegemony, but at the same time it ceased to be Christian, and the old institutional framework of Christian culture was swept away by revolutionary movements.

Nevertheless Christianity survived and Western culture still retains considerable traces of its Christian origins. Moreover the world expansion of Western culture has been accompanied by a new expansion of Christian missionary influence, especially in Africa and Australia.

Each of these periods has its own specific character, which can be studied in art and philosophy, in literature and in social institutions. Most important and characteristic of all are the successive forms of the religious life itself which have manifested themselves in each of the different periods.

This study covers much the same ground chronologically as the general courses in the history of Western civilization, but it has an internal principle of organic unity which they do not possess, and every period and every aspect of a particular period has an organic relation to the whole. It is especially valuable as a coordinating study which will help us to understand the resemblances and differences of the different national and regional cultures by explaining the common factors that have influenced them all. Institutions that are common to the whole of Christendom such as monasticism and the university, or even constitutional monarchy and the representative system of government, are none of them entirely explicable within the framework of national history, within which they are usually studied. They can only be understood as parts of a common international heritage of Christian culture. In the same way the spiritual archetypes which formed the character

and inspired the life of Western man are of Christian origin, and however imperfectly they were realized in practice, it is impossible to understand his pattern of behavior unless we take account of them.

We study political ideas in relation to history, although we know that the majority of men are never governed by purely ideological motives. How much more then should we study the religious element in culture, for this affected the majority of men from the cradle to the grave and has been a continuous influence on western culture for more than twelve centuries. It was not studied in the past, because men took it for granted like the air they breathed. But now that our civilization is becoming predominantly and increasingly secular, it is necessary to make an express study of it, if we are to understand our past and the nature of the culture that we have inherited.

Chapter X in *The Crisis of Western Education*, New York Sheed & Ward, 1961, 129-144.