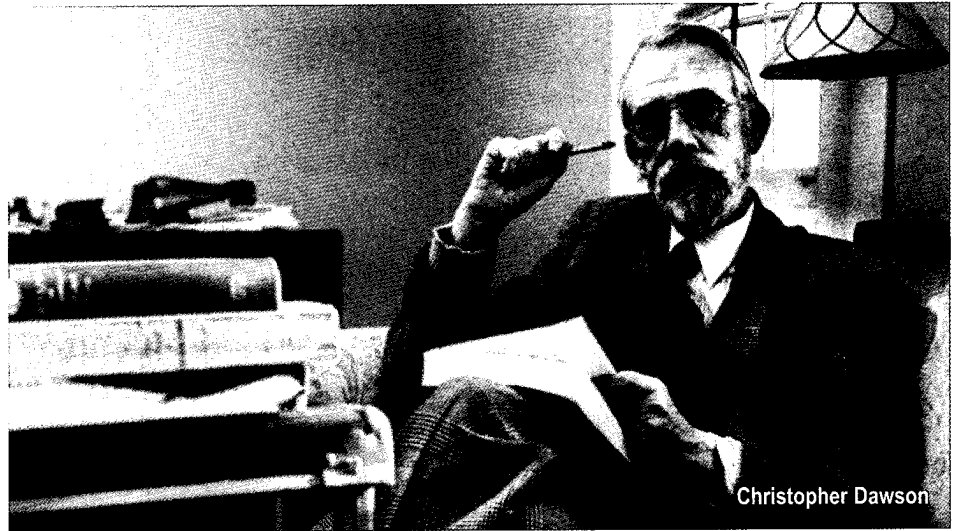


Catholicism as Cult and as Culture

By Thomas Storck

The concept of *culture*, understood as a common way of life of a particular people, has proven to be a valuable concept for Catholics seeking to understand and to evangelize the world we live in. This anthropological use of the word originated only in the nineteenth century and stands in contrast to the meaning of culture as restricted to the fine arts, classical music and the like. Among those who have employed the word in the anthropological sense were a number of important Christian writers. They include the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, who made the study of religion and culture his life work, and whose writings constitute a primer for any understanding not only of Catholic culture but of the connections between religion and culture and the interaction of one culture upon another. Another important Catholic writer who made use of *culture* in this sense as an analytic tool was the historian, apologist, social theorist, poet and novelist, Hilaire Belloc, who employed it in many of his works, including *The Crisis of Civilization*, *Europe and the Faith*, *Survivals and New Arrivals*, and especially in several of the essays in his volume, *Essays of a Catholic*, and in a little-known but valuable work, *An Essay on the Nature of Contemporary England*. The poet and Anglican convert, T. S. Eliot, also contributed to this literature, especially with his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*.

We may begin our discussion of culture with another significant Catholic thinker, however, the late Pope John Paul II. In his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* John Paul wrote,



Christopher Dawson

At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.¹

Fundamentally, then, a culture is a way of life organized around certain theological or metaphysical ideas. Though certainly the physical environment helps to shape a culture, it is ideas which are most important. If North Africa, for example, had remained Catholic instead of succumbing to the Muhammadan conquest in the seventh century, undoubtedly the face of society there would be very different from what it in fact is, even though the physical surroundings would be the same. Or if we recall Willa Cather's novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she portrays the ways of life of three cultures, Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo, all in the same physical environ-

ment, but all using or shaping that environment differently because of the varying ideals at the heart of each culture.

The most important aspect of a culture, then, is its beliefs about God and his relations with mankind. Because of this, although there is a multitude of cultures in the world, the crucial dividing point for humanity is between Catholic culture and the various other cultures of the world. Despite their differences all Catholic cultures share common traits. "There is a known certain atmosphere and quality about all that is or has lately been within the Roman communion," writes Belloc, "a certain savour in the culture proceeding ultimately from [the Catholic] religion; it is the cultural savour of Belgian, French, Irish, Italian, Spanish life."² In Western Europe and the Americas this is most clearly seen in the divide between Catholic and Protestant cultures. Belloc presented this fundamental point as follows.

There is a Protestant culture and a Catholic culture. The difference between these two is the main difference dividing one sort of European from another. The boundary between the Catholic and Protestant cultures is the great line of cleavage, compared with which all others are secondary.³

If every culture was originally formed by some theological ideal, what are we to say of those peoples today who have largely cast off their traditional religion? Belloc made the extremely important point that even if a culture has lost its original theological focus, the ghost, as it were, of the ideas that originally shaped it still exercises a determining influence over that culture:

Those doctrines may have lost their original vitality. A nation once Calvinist in Creed may have ceased for the most part (as Scotland has) to believe in Predestination or to trouble about Conversion and the Reprobate sense; but it will continue for generations, and probably until a new set of doctrines shall be taught it, to think (therefore, to act) in the Calvinist manner. It will incline to the Calvinist attitude toward wealth and the acquirement thereof. It will take for granted an inexorable process of cause and effect.

It will concentrate upon the responsibility of the individual to himself, the isolation of soul, and a consequent cultivation of what it will call "Character".⁴

This is a crucial point which allows us to understand contemporary cultures, most of which, at least in the West, are no longer really Catholic or Protestant, but which continue to be profoundly shaped by those creeds. We will never understand our own country, the United States, unless we realize the profoundly Protestant character of its culture, and furthermore, what little effect the numerous Catholic immigrant groups have had upon the American mind.⁵ Rather

the contrary was true, and most Catholic immigrants were all too eager to be assimilated into American society, not realizing that at the same time they were being assimilated in important respects into Protestant culture and ways of thinking. Until discipline began to break down within the Church toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, most American Catholics held more or less to orthodox doctrine, and this helped to obscure the fact that in many ways they had imbibed Protestant ways of thinking. Now however, it is all too clear that neither Catholic liberals nor Catholic conservatives make much of an effort to preserve a distinctive Catholic intellectual approach but rather have largely embraced one or another of the dominant Lockean and Protestant ways of thinking.

The fact that a nation or people can con-

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tinue to be shaped by a creed that they no longer accept helps explain some other facts. The first is the curious truth that many inhabitants of once Catholic nations may exhibit, together with ideas incompatible or even hostile to the Faith, other ideas which ultimately have their origin in Catholic cultural norms. Again Belloc: "A nation like the French may largely lose the doctrine of the Incarnation and of the Immortality of the soul . . . but even those who have lost the whole Catholic scheme of doctrine still continue the Catholic habit."⁶ A strong feeling for family life, including the extended family, characterizes, or did till very recently, much of southern Europe and Latin America, a feeling deriving from the Catholic faith. This feeling can be found in individuals who consciously reject that Faith and perhaps even hate it or think

they do. And as I noted above, Catholics who were formed in Protestant cultures and have unknowingly imbibed many Protestant cultural norms, may be perfectly orthodox in holding to the doctrines of the Faith, but exhibit numerous Protestant cultural traits nevertheless.

What are these Protestant cultural traits? Some are silly and to a Catholic amusing; others more serious. One of the former, the amusing kind, that Belloc notes is the "almost universal element of Puritanism . . . still prominent . . . notably in the consumption of fermented liquor."⁷ Catholics will recall with a smile the discussion of "sin taxes" in the early 1990s, meaning taxes on alcohol and tobacco. The fact that such a term was widely used in the press with apparently no objection shows the ubiquity of this Protestant cultural trait. Others involve or did until recently petty Protestant taboos against card playing or the theater or dancing.

But Protestant culture is also marked by more serious deformations of virtue and humanity. One that Belloc mentions frequently in his writings is the Protestant attitude toward wealth and economic activity in general, the attitude that led to the development of our capitalist and commercial civilization. As he put it in another essay in his collection, *Essays of a Catholic*, "Industrial Capitalism . . . came into existence through Calvinism, which was the vital principle informing all the revolt against the Faith at the origin of modern times."⁸ This connection has of course been highlighted by such famous works as Richard Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Amintore Fanfani's *Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism*.

Above I stated that the idea of culture had proven useful for the work of evangelization. How is this so? In the first place, it has given Catholics the intellectual tools with which to disentangle the many threads of modern history and to understand what has happened with the secularization of the modern world and what, if anything, can be

done to reverse it. Any approach to the re-christianization of Europe, or of any other continent, must focus on evangelization of culture, for culture is the context in which we all live our lives and nearly everyone is shaped by his culture more than he realizes. It is true that individuals must freely assent to the Faith one by one, but a strategy of evangelization that treats each person in isolation will likely not produce much fruit in the way of conversions. Pope Paul VI, in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), pointed out the link between evangelization of individuals and of cultures.

[E]vangelization is to be achieved, not from without as though by adding some decoration or applying a coat of colour, but in depth, going to the very centre and roots of life. The gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of man . . .

The rift between the gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it has been in other eras. Accordingly we must devote all our resources and all our efforts to the sedulous evangelization of human culture, or rather of the various human cultures. They must be regenerated through contact with the gospel.⁹

Since culture is the framework or matrix which gives meaning to our lives, if that framework is rigorously secular and excludes any effective knowledge of God or the supernatural, those who inhabit such a culture can only with difficulty even consider the claims of the Church. So true is this, that in the past evangelization took place not so much by an appeal to individuals, but by the conversion of whole nations, that is, entire cultures. Christopher Dawson reminds us of the actual process used to convert much of Europe in the first millennium of the Church.

The great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century was everywhere



based on the principle of individual conversion. . . . There is a fundamental contrast between this approach and the collective or communal form of expression which had dominated the Christian world for upwards of a thousand years. Western Christendom was not built up by the method of individual conversions. It was a way of life which the people accepted as a whole,

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often by the decision of their rulers, and which when accepted affected the whole life of society by the change of their institutions and laws . . .

Moreover it may well be claimed that the missionary Churches of the Dark Ages produced a richer harvest even in the sphere of culture than anything that the modern missionary movement can show. There is little in the new non-occidental Christianity

that can be compared with Bede and Boniface, with the religious art of Northumbria or with the new vernacular Christian literature. For in the case of Anglo-Saxon England, the mass conversion of the people meant the rebirth of culture . . .¹⁰

It goes without saying that forced conversion is always wrong, but even if sometimes that regrettably did occur, still the principle of the evangelization and conversion of culture is valid. It was not wrong for kings and other rulers, with the aid of missionary bishops and monks, to begin the process of changing a pagan into a Catholic culture, so long as individuals were not forced to conform to the new faith. It is true that many would perforce seek baptism in the light of the new understanding of God and man that these cultural vistas opened up to them. But that is simply the way human nature works, for one can hardly expect everyone to approach the Faith with the philosophical detachment of an Aquinas.

This is likewise true with regard to the preservation of the faith of Catholics. Cardinal Ratzinger, in his *Introduction to Christianity*, spoke of the "oppressive power of unbelief in the midst of [a believer's] own will to believe".¹¹ The tremendous network of Catholic institutions which was built up in the United States, roughly in the first half of the twentieth century, had as its aim the creation of a Catholic cultural or sub-cultural world designed to counteract that "oppressive power of unbelief". Today this is often derided as a Catholic ghetto. But the alternative approach ignores the reality of human nature, and posits as a model something like the lone individual holding to his opinions divorced from any community. This is not the way that the Faith has been maintained anywhere, even in the liberal cultures of modernity. The attempt to throw Catholics, as it were, with little help from the Church or a Catholic community, into the maelstrom of contemporary life has proved a disaster in preserving the Faith, so that the Church has been experiencing

gigantic losses in membership, especially for the past forty-five years, precisely when the so-called ghetto began to be dismantled. Anyone who cares about the health of the Church or the salvation of individual Catholics can hardly be content with the current situation.

The necessity for more than an individualistic approach shows itself most clearly within the family. Any faithful and sensible Catholic who is responsible for a family will try to establish that family, not simply as a collection of individual believing Catholics, but as a community bound together by numerous religious practices and customs which reflect those beliefs. And those practices and customs ought to include a generous sample of the "festival, pilgrimage, dance, and song" which the International Theological Commission noted as proper parts of popular piety in their 1988 document, *Faith and Inculturation*.¹²

Although Belloc made the acute observation that a basic social outlook originally formed by a religion would usually continue even after the precise theological ideals were mostly decayed, this does not mean that in such a post-Christian society it is necessarily easy to maintain one's faith.

If a Christian society is de-christianized, this means in fact that many Christians lose their faith. They lose it long before they are conscious of it: that is, when the Christian faith that permeates all the institutions and is present in all the important moments of life, while still being an omnipresent landscape in the culture, has ceased being the factor that determines human experience. More and more aspects of human experience and activity are being left at the margins of faith, determined by other factors, so that the Christian faith is being turned into a forgotten language, to a great extent incomprehensible and, therefore, irrelevant for real life.¹³

Just as the baptism of a barbarian king would usually mean the conversion of his

entire people, even without direct compulsion, so the apostasy of a culture, its gradual secularization, too often means the loss of faith on the part of many or most people. This seems to be what has happened in Europe and appears to be happening in many parts of Latin America now.¹⁴ Thus Paul VI's concern for the evangelization of culture was entirely appropriate, and is indeed perhaps the key part of that re-evangelization of Europe which is so dear to Benedict XVI's heart. Of course this does not mean that the Church aims at a mere formal adherence to outward form of practice.

Certainly a living faith, hope and charity in individual hearts is a *sine qua non* of a solid Christian culture. Evangelization of

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the culture must accompany various strategies of personal evangelization directed at various types of human beings. But no personal evangelical efforts can afford to prescind from the cultural milieu if they are to have hope of lasting success. We can take our cue from the missionaries and kings of the early Middle Ages. Try to change the culture at the same time as we address individuals, and different strata of individuals, within the culture. That is the best and probably the only strategy that might offer some success. For as Pope John Paul II said, "A faith that does not become culture would be a faith not fully received, not entirely thought out, and not faithfully lived."¹⁵

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social teaching, Catholic culture and other philosophical and theological subjects. His latest book is *Christendom and the West: Essays on Culture, Society and History*.

References

1. No. 24.
2. Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Nature of Contemporary England* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), p. 48.
3. Hilaire Belloc, "The Two Cultures of the West," in *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1992), p. 239.
4. *Ibid.* p. 240.
5. But the American mind has also been shaped by a strong secular influence stemming for the most part from the thought of John Locke, which has mingled with the Protestant culture in complex ways.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *An Essay on the Nature of Contemporary England*, p. 50.
8. "The Faith and Industrial Capitalism," in *Essays of a Catholic*, p. 217.
9. No. 20.
10. *Christianity in East & West* (La Salle, IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1981), p. 99-100.
11. New York: Seabury, 1979, p. 17. See the entire discussion on pp. 15-21.
12. As contained in David Schindler, ed., *Catholicism and Secularization in America* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1990), pp. 226-27.
13. Francisco Javier Martínez, "To Speak of God or to Show the Redemption of Christ?" *Communio, International Catholic Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, winter 1994, p. 689.
14. The case of the United State is complex. It is not accurate to say that the U.S. simply represents a counter example in which religious faith has largely held its own. Space prevents an adequate discussion of this here, but for a good introduction to the entire question, see Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: an Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, rev. ed., 1960).
15. Quoted in Luigi Giussani, "Religious Awareness in Modern Man," *Communio*, vol. 25, no. 1, spring 1998, p. 138.