THE CHURCH AND CULTURE

'Still unfulfilled is the dream of some little, old house with its garden and tennis-court in the quiet English country, which now recedes before me like the mirages (of the desert) among which I used to picture it for so many years. So much the more must I cling to that highest which need not and must not be resigned while strength is left to perceive it . . . in that particular manifestation of immortal power by which each individual spirit is most deeply moved. I believe, and proclaim my faith, that this solace will proceed increasingly from the great classics of the world; both from their own splendour and from their contrast with the limitations of modern life.'[1]

THE rather long quotation with which this paper opens comes from the pen of a man whose life has been spent in the harassing work of administration in the near East during the troubled years that followed the last war. The point I wish to fasten on is this: in the thorny and arid task of trying to reconcile Arab and Zionist claims in Palestine he turned again and again for solace to literature, music and architecture. For him, as for so many of us, Science, the achievement of man to-day, can bring some measure of bodily comfort, but no comfort of spirit; and I am afraid, in moments of depression, it may occasion a feeling of acute fear, for the part it seems destined to play in the destruction of our civilization. Science, as we know it, hardly comes to enrich the spirit of man; for comfort of spirit man must perforce look elsewhere. Some will find it in a firmly held Faith. Others, common in these agnostic days, will find it in the works of human culture, pagan or Christian. For all of us to-day, what we may call culture serves, not as principle of inspiration, but as an escape from present troubles and from the unhappy anticipations of the near future.

---

[1] *Orientations*, by Sir Ronald Storrs, page 610.

Before going further let us briefly examine the two terms in the title of this essay: 'The Church and Culture.' Taking the first, the Church; that is not hard to define, at any rate for those of us who live within the visible unity of the Catholic Church; for us it is that living historic organism which claims in the persons of the Bishops, clergy and faithful, with the Pope at their head, to establish by unbroken tradition an identity with the Apostolic Church founded by Christ.

When treating of the word culture definition is not so easy. For many it is a frightening word; it suggests the ethereal pursuits of men and women with little red blood in their veins, arty-crafty stuff, intellectual snobbery, something esoteric and peculiar which common people cannot understand and must not share in. The cultured accent of an announcer at B.B.C. House can give the word so deadly a significance, that thousands of listeners will immediately turn to Radio Luxemburg for more congenial entertainment.

Culture is not that. Nor is it something decorative added to our ordinary humdrum life, a refinement or an adornment, like a tasteful piece of trimming on a plain dress, or the crockets—some call them 'brussel-sprouts'—that are freely peppered round the pinnacles of Victorian-gothic buildings and church furniture. There is nothing decorative or 'dilettante' about culture, for it affects the very substance of human life. In direct opposition to it is barbarism, the spirit of the man who is not simply uninstructed, but is so immersed in material considerations as to be the slave of them. It is the spirit of barbarism that hates and would destroy what it can neither understand nor appreciate: it is the spirit of the Goths who burned the literary and architectural treasures of ancient Greece, of the Danes who sacked the Anglo-Saxon Monasteries in the ninth century, men of whom Chesterton wrote these words:

The Northmen came about our land,
A Christless chivalry:
Who knew not of the arch or pen,
Great beautiful half-witted men
From the sunrise and the sea.
The world turned empty where they trod,
They took the kindly Cross of God
And cut it up for wood.
Their souls were drifting as the sea,
And all good towns and lands
They only saw with heavy eyes,
And broke with heavy hands.

(The Ballad of the White Horse).

Culture is a spirit far deeper than that of individual good taste. It is the spirit bred of a fruitful civilization, a spirit which leads man to exert and exercise his latent power to create, and to impress with his creative energy the material world in which he lives. Culture springs from man's indomitable search for Beauty, as manifest both in the world of nature and in the work of man. 'Man is,' in the words of Robert Bridges, the late Poet Laureate, 'a spiritual being, and the proper work of his mind is to interpret the world according to his higher nature, and to conquer the material aspects of the world so as to bring them into subjection to the spirit' (*The Spirit of Man,* Preface).

Culture is the free expression and exercise of man's creative power in the world we live in. I use the word free, because freedom in the moral order is as much the indispensable condition of culture as it is of civilization. There can be no true civilization or culture where religious or civil authority imposes a way of life that does substantial violence to man as an intelligent and free being.

At this point someone may wish to interject with the question: 'What about slavery in the ancient civilizations? Surely slavery did violence to man's freedom?' Yes, in a measure it did; but only in so far as it touched the slave element alone in the body politic. The slave was there to give the free man greater leisure for creative pursuits.

In this there is all the difference between the ancient world and the modern world, in which Totalitarianism seems likely to impress upon the mass of its subjects a far worse slavery, the slavery of the mind, which must absorb standardized opinions and never exercise its critical faculty through fear of the concentration camp.

Culture is the free expression and exercise of man's creative power in the world we live in. How does it express itself? Generally by making things in the visible world, material things; in the world of the spoken word, things we listen to; in the world of the imagination, things we read. In the first case, architecture, sculpture, painting, and drawing: in the second and third, song and story, dancing and drama. However, that is not the whole story: this creative spirit will find an almost innumerable variety of outlet outside the fine arts—or what we call art to-day. Clothing, furniture, cooking, eating, drinking, social intercourse, recreation, good manners, and so on. Some of the latter manifestations are, I admit, subject to the vagaries of fashion, but none the less we may apply to them the more enduring canons of human culture. The quality and colour of a fabric is in its way quite as important as its cut: the shape of a chair or table can have about it an inherent grace that in no way detracts from its practical purpose. Beauty of design in these things is a fair guide to level of culture both on the part of designer and user.

This creative spirit from which culture springs is to be found in all of us in greater or less degree. In later life it may have become overlaid with the interests of professional or domestic duties—or of education of a kind! But if we look back to our childhood—or if memory will not carry us back so far, if we look at our own children—surely that creative spirit was active enough there. The vivid power of a child's imagination forces it to creative expression. Give the child a bundle of rag and it will become a King or a Queen. I do not know whether the child in Central or South-Eastern Europe would make it into Adolf

Hitler. He may share the doubtful privilege with the old-fashioned Bogeyman of being the nurse's prerogative at bedtime. What splendid creations spring from the small fingers that clutch a pencil or paint-brush or a piece of plasticine! Unfortunately we are generally too preoccupied with the state of the carpet or the paint to notice what the child has achieved. Then, too, the games of make-believe and the stories and the sagas of childhood. Here is the song which accompanied the dance of a very small American child obsessed imaginatively with the thought of God and death after losing her father:

> 'God will come in all the midnight,
> Get yourself runnng to heaven for God.
> He'll come and He'll come.
> Then all the midnight you have to watch out for God,
> All the midnight
> All the red night.'

It has all the life of a negro spiritual; and the child sees in prayer more than an exercise of the mind. The whole child prays, body and soul: 'Get yourself running to heaven for God.'

What is true of the child is also true of peoples in the rising phase of their corporate development. In some respect or other they will manifest a high degree of creative capacity, in song or dance or drama, especially when these are inspired by their religion. If we take a historical conspectus of pre-Christian times, we find that successive human civilizations and cultures carry us far behind 4004 B.C., the year of the Creation arrived at by Archbishop Ussher. Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish, Cretan, and Greek, quite apart from Chinese and India, civilizations have all left us memorials of a very high degree of human culture, of which the archaeologists are learning more year by year. One has only to mention Sir Leonard Woolley's fascinating *Ur of the Chaldees* and *Digging Up the Past,* both published in the sixpenny Pelican Editions, to see something of these ancient cultures, or to recall the

achievements of ancient Greece in architecture, sculpture, drama and poetry to realize that mankind had already reached a level of culture before the coming of Christ that has hardly been surpassed since. The Parthenon, the statues of Pheidias and Praxiteles, the works of Homer and the Greek Dramatists are expressions of human genius to which men will always return for consolation and inspiration. Greek civilization reached its full flower more than four centuries before the coming of Christ.

What attitude is Christianity to take towards pagan culture? Are the two mutually compatible or incompatible? Must the Christian make a 'bonfire of the vanities,' as Savonarola did in Florence, and destroy all the literary heritage of pagan Greece and Rome? Are all the temples to be burnt, and all the old Feast-days to be suppressed?

As we know, Christianity, once it was firmly established, destroyed what was definitely evil and directly pagan. What could be adopted to Christian use, the Church incorporated. Men could still read and enjoy the poetry and literature of Greece and Rome, seeing it now in a new light, the light of fulfilment. Of the temples, too, not all were destroyed. Some like the Parthenon in the centre of Rome were dedicated to Christian worship. Pagan worship and its evil associations were still too vivid to allow of this as a general practice; and for the most part the Church took as its model for building the civic halls found in every Roman city. These had the name of Basilica, which has for us to-day a purely Christian connotation.

This point of worship introduces another factor which helps to throw light upon the Church's attitude towards the culture within which she developed her apostolate. She had to do more than give an answer to the question whether the Christian could still continue to enjoy the fruits of pagan culture. Once out of the catacombs she was faced with the immediate necessity of building up an adequate ritual pattern for Christian Sacrifice and Prayer. This called for the adoption of almost every form of human

art and craft; for from the beginning the worship of the Church has been framed in conformity with man's nature. His prayer must be expressed through bodily activity as a stimulus to the spirit. A worship that takes little account of the body, as in the extremer forms of Puritanism, would be gravely incomplete from the traditional Christian point of view. Everything to do with the Church must reflect and apply the central fact of the Incarnation: 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us'—God became man —and for that reason her worship must be sacramental, and must incorporate the use of material things to symbolize, and in the case of the sacraments to convey, spiritual life to creatures that are themselves compounded of spirit and matter.

This involved the use of a building—not any building once Christianity was free to develop unmolested, but a building splendid enough to be worthy of her worship, properly designed and suitably furnished. If man was to give of his best, he had to call in sculptors and artists as well as architects, such men as have left for our delight the Basilicas and mosaics of Rome, Constantinople and Ravenna. Then, too, there were the liturgical garments to be thought of—that meant fine needlework—chalices, crucifixes and precious metalwork from the hands of the gold and silversmiths. For her prayer the Church inherited the best that Judaism could give, in particular the Psalms, together with the writings of the Apostles. To these she added the collects, prefaces, and other prayers which still form the substance of our Roman Liturgy. Practically everything in our Missals to-day is identical with the worship of the fifth and sixth centuries.

As regards the material elements of her worship it was impossible to make something entirely new and untried, for if men worship a God, true or false, they will have to carry out that worship with the same sort of things and in the same sort of way, whether it is carried out in a Buddhist Temple or in the Church of a Christian monastery. Sac-

rifice, altar, vestments, images, liturgical prayer and music will be found in both. What is true of Buddhism was equally true of the Paganism which Christianity replaced. Christianity called upon the same hands and brains to beautify her basilicas and worship as had formerly worked in the temples of Jupiter and Minerva. Doubtless the very silversmiths at Ephesus who aroused so fierce a tumult against St. Paul for fear of losing their business were soon making images of the Cross.

One more point before we pass on; the music of the Church. Singing has from the beginning formed an essential feature of Christian worship. The traditional music of the Church, Plainsong, comes to us almost unaltered from the fifth and sixth centuries, some of it taken over from the Jewish Temple and synagogue worship, some incorporated from other sources, and the rest composed in the musical idiom then current among the people. This is no place to discuss its merits; it is sufficient here to say that the Church has never renounced its use for the most solemn parts of the Liturgical Sacrifice, and has recently instituted a vigorous movement for its general restoration in the Liturgy.

We find, therefore, the Church incorporating and using the best that man could offer from the traditional culture of Greece, Rome and Jerusalem to give adequate expression to her worship. For evidence of this one can simply point to the living Liturgy of the Roman Church, especially in Lent and Passiontide. It bears with it the order, dignity and simplicity that was characteristic of Roman civilization, just as the Eastern Rites manifest in their poesy something of Greek genius.

ÆLWIN TINDAL-ATKINSON, O.P.

(To be concluded)