

CULTURE AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE¹

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IF we wished to try and show how culture leads up to, and finds perhaps its finest expression in the ideal of the contemplative, or monastic, life, it would be essential at the outset to dispel from our minds the unfortunate overtones of affected superiority which have become associated with this word 'culture'. Let us, then, bring the whole thing right down to earth, literally, and explain what we understand by 'culture'. The English word comes from the Latin verb *colo* (I cultivate, tend, look after), which was originally used in connection with farming. Agriculture means 'looking after fields'. But, of course, 'the unconquerable mind of man' is not limited to the consideration of material objects only: it strives ever upwards towards the immaterial and, ultimately, the divine. So it came about that the simple, essentially earthy, word of the farmer was used to express the care man had for the spiritual in himself, and his reverence for the gods.

Culture, then, is the quintessence of all those qualities which, while belonging to man, lie beyond the immediate sphere of his material needs. They are not necessarily practical, but they belong to a truly human life: man could not do without them. Pope John XXIII recently emphasized this when he was stressing the importance of the humanism of classical studies. In his address to the International Conference of Students of Cicero on April 8,² quoting the *Pro Archia*, he said that 'such studies nourish youth and delight old age, ornament prosperity, provide refuge and solace in adversity, are a pastime at home, are no burden abroad, never abandon us, and even at night follow us, on our travels and into the country. Unfortunately', the Pope went on, 'there are quite a few who, over-impressed by the extraordinary progress of the sciences, would devote themselves entirely to those techniques whereby they may become the builders of this new age. But, if such an aim is to be reached, it must be reached by quite a different road. In fact, once what is most worthy of human nature

1 A talk given to the Swansea Circle of the Newman Association on May 5, 1959. *The Tablet* of May 16 (p. 466) suggested that the writer of an article in *The Howardian* would be inclined to agree with some at least of the conclusions of this talk.

2 *The Tablet*, April 18, p. 380.

has been impressed upon the soul, it will perforce seek more ardently after that which ennobles and adorns it, so that mortal man will not become wretchedly cold and heartless like the machines he builds. Through the providential arrangements of God, the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Latins was often the first blush of dawn heralding the Gospel of Christ which is the light and the sun shining from on high.'

Cardinal Newman³ said that the man who possesses these qualities 'has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm'. And he goes on: 'The art which tends to make a man all this is, in the object which it pursues, as useful as the art of wealth or the art of health, though it is less susceptible of method, and less tangible, less certain, less complete in its result.' That art is what we call education, or the process of handing on culture.

Culture, for the ancients, meant care for the things of the spirit; care, ultimately, for the things of God. Culture, in the sense we use the word now, was only possible, therefore, when it had a lasting, and, consequently, living, link with *cultus*, with divine worship. The old philosophers saw clearly that the round of the duties of citizenship did not exhaust the life of the individual. With them the highest life was one of cultured leisure, in which the energies were mainly concentrated on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Culture depended for its very existence on leisure. In the last resort pure theory, philosophical *theoria*, entirely free from practical considerations and interference—and that is what theory is—can only be preserved and realized within the sphere of leisure. Now, *theoria* is a Greek word which means a vision or sight, and the Latin word which corresponds to it is *contemplatio*. One may say, then, that the contemplative life is one of pure theory, of vision, and that one must be leisured in order to live it. There is, however, a current misunderstanding of the nature of leisure which is consequent upon the current misunderstanding of the nature of culture, and so the original conception of leisure, as it arose in the civilized world of Greece, has become almost unrecognizable in this modern age of total labour. Leisure has become, as we know, almost synonymous with laziness,

³ *On the Scope and Nature of University Education*, Discourse VI. (Everyman edition, 1955, p. 153.)

idleness, or sloth. Whereas for the scholastics, either of antiquity or the middle ages, sloth and the incapacity to enjoy leisure were closely connected; laziness was held to be the source of restlessness. In the old sense of the word, idleness, so far from being synonymous with leisure, is its very opposite. Leisure is only possible when a man is at one with himself, when he acquiesces in his own being, whereas the essence of idleness is the refusal to acquiesce in one's own being. St Thomas Aquinas regards *acedia* or idleness as a sin against the third commandment whereby, he says, we are called upon to have the peace of the mind in God—*quies mentis in Deo*.⁴

Leisure then, in the traditional sense of that word, is a *mental* and spiritual *attitude* of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence: only the silent hear. I underline *mental attitude*, for it is a question of this rather than of lying flat on one's back. 'When we really let our minds rest contemplatively on a rose in bud, on a child at play, on a divine mystery, we are rested and quickened as though by a dreamless sleep', so writes the German philosopher Josef Pieper.⁵ And the Book of Wisdom⁶ thus describes the Incarnation of the Word of God within the womb of the silent, listening virgin of Nazareth: 'There was a hush of silence all around, and night had but finished half her swift journey, when from thy heavenly throne, Lord, down leaped thy word omnipotent.'

The Breconshire poet, Henry Vaughan, writes in similar vein:

'Dear Night! this world's defeat;
The stop to busy fools; care's check and curb;
The day of spirits; my soul's calm retreat
Which none disturb!
Christ's progress, and his prayer time;
The hours to which high heaven doth chime.'⁷

The Greek word for this attitude of mind is *scholē*, in Latin *schola*—which we translate in English as 'school'. So it came about that the word used to designate the place where we educate and teach is derived from a word which means leisure. A 'school' is, properly speaking, a place at a distance from the trees to which we retire in order to contemplate the wood. This was surely how it was understood by the author of the Monastic Rule when he

⁴ *Summa Theologica* II-II, 35, 3 ad 1.

⁷ *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, p. 53.

⁵ XVIII, 14-15.

⁶ 'The Night.' John III, 2.

defined a monastery as 'a school of divine worship'—*Constituenda est ergo a nobis dominici schola servitii*⁸—'we have therefore to establish a school of the Lord's service'. And it was 'schools' of this kind that flourished throughout the middle ages as settings for the life of contemplation.

Now, the craving for a union of soul with the Deity already in this world and a desire for an ever greater purifying of that soul by a renunciation of things lawful in themselves, may well be said to be general instincts of humanity, because, though not always called into activity, they are always liable to be evoked, and in all ages, and among all races, they frequently have asserted themselves. Monasticism therefore, in so far as it is an attempt to develop and regulate these instincts, is not a creation of Christianity: it is much older, and we know that, even before the Christian era, a highly organized monasticism existed, for example, in India. At any early date, however, in the life of the Christian Church the practice of the monastic ideal became common, and by the sixth century we find a permanently working adaptation of this ideal to the requirements and conditions of life in Western Europe.

The monk, determined to follow Christ wholeheartedly and exclusively, places himself in an environment which will help, not hinder, the force and effectiveness of his aspirations, and that environment is one already foreshadowed in the teachings of the ancient philosophers on the necessity of leisure for culture.

'I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.'⁹

With regard to the customary three vows of the religious life it may be claimed that, although ever the vocation of the few, the way of poverty, chastity and obedience has a special significance in Christianity, for it is the voluntarily poor who emphasize the

⁸ *Prologus in Regulam Monasteriorum.*

⁹ G. M. Hopkins, 'Heaven-Haven. A nun takes the veil.'

true worth of property, the chaste who uphold the sacredness and beauty of marriage, and those who choose obedience who defend most ardently the value of freedom. It is only in understanding the true nature of property, married life and social freedom, that it can clearly be seen that the renunciation of these, when undertaken in submission to the divine will, far from leading to a curtailment of human personality, rather brings about a more perfect self-fulfilment.

The monastic life is essentially contemplative or theoretic, and to see God, to live in union of mind and will with him is the aim of the monk. As an illuminating example of what this implies it may be noted that down to the end of the twelfth century, during the period, that is, when the monastic order was the only one, the term *theologia*, instead of connoting a scientifically intellectual exercise, was understood as the state of the soul in prayer, her contemplation of the divine mysteries reflected in wonderment and praise.¹⁰

Even those, however, who are not monks, nor perhaps likely to be, should see that there is an essential link between culture and cult: the worship of God: and that now, as in the distant past, it is this which is the primary source of man's freedom, independence and immunity within society. Suppress that last sphere of freedom, and freedom itself, and all our liberties, will in the end vanish into thin air. But, further, it may be suggested to those concerned in the business of culture, whether at the imparting or at the receiving end, that something of the spirit of monasticism is a valuable asset, always remembering that the monastery is primarily a school of the Lord's service. Would it be saying too much if we maintained that a Christian University, beyond its preoccupation with equipping technologists for industry, that a Christian School, beyond its preoccupation with obtaining the school certificate or passing the eleven-plus examination, should also be schools of the Lord's service—places of leisure for culture—and that, if they were not, then, in the end, they would cease to be human institutions at all?

Newman, whose view of liberal knowledge was quoted earlier, said, in his *Essay on the Benedictine Order*, that he considered it as a typical product of ancient Christianity, just as the Dominican

¹⁰ Those interested may find further examples in an article entitled 'Medieval Values' published in *BLACKFRIARS*, June 1948.

Order was typical of the medieval, or the Jesuit Order of the modern Church. And when he wished to sum up in one word what was characteristic of the Benedictine Order he chose the word 'Poetry'. 'Causa autem', says Aquinas in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*,¹¹ 'quare philosophus comparatur poëtae est ista, quia uterque circa miranda versatur.' I found it almost impossible to choose a suitable English word to translate 'miranda' ('the admirable' was too pedestrian; 'the marvellous' or 'the mysterious' too suggestive of *The Magic Circle*), until a *confère* came to my aid by drawing my attention to a line of Gerard Manley Hopkins. So I can now translate, and conclude: 'The reason why the philosopher may be likened to the poet is this: that both are concerned with what fans fresh our wits with wonder.'

11 I, iii, 55.