

# Christopher Dawson: The Seven Stages of European Culture (Part I)

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THE EXISTENCE of Europe is the basis of the historical development of the modern world, and it is only in relation to that fact that the development of each particular state can be understood. Nevertheless it is a submerged reality of which the majority of men are only half conscious. For the last century and more, the whole trend of education and politics and public opinion has tended to develop the consciousness of nationality and to stress the importance of the nation-state, while leaving Europe in the background as a vague abstraction or as nothing more than a geographical expression. The main reason for this is, of course, the cult of nationalism which, owing to its double appeal to political passion and to cultural idealism, exerts an exceptionally strong influence in the popular mind. But behind this there is a further cause which has not perhaps been sufficiently recognized. This is the tradition of education which has provided the framework of Western thought, and in this tradition the conception of Europe has never held a definite place. On the one hand, there was the history of the ancient world -of classical Greece and Rome- which was regarded as an essential part of education: on the other, and on a very much lower plane, there was the history of a man's own country and people, which every educated person was supposed to be familiar with but which did not possess the same prestige as classical history or humane letters or even natural science. A transition from one to the

other was provided by such works as Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and it was books of this kind, which were the nearest approach to a study of Europe that the old tradition of education provided. But they were obviously partial and unsatisfactory, so that the consciousness of Europe as an historical reality was something which somehow had to be picked up on the road that led from ancient Rome to modern England (or whatever one's country might be), and it was only an exceptionally enterprising mind which troubled to enquire where and how it made its first appearance and what was its essential character.

From this defect in our education all modern culture has suffered. In fact the bitter harvest we are reaping to-day was in large measure the fruit of this initial error.

To ignore Europe and to concentrate all our attention on the political community to which we belong, as though it were the whole social reality, leads in the last resort to the totalitarian state, and National Socialism itself was only this development carried out with Germanic thoroughness and Prussian ruthlessness.

The democratic states have, on their part, no doubt refused to accept the extreme consequences of the nationalist heresy. They have preserved some contact with the tradition of Natural Law and a real sense of international obligation. Yet they also have ignored the existence of Europe as a social reality and oscillated between the reality of the nation-state and the ideal of a cosmopolitan liberal world order which was theoretically co-extensive with the human race, but it was in practice dependent on the economic realities of international trade and finance. Yet apart from Europe, neither the one nor the other would have existed. For Europe is more than the sum of the nations and states of the European continent, and it is much more than a subdivision of the modern international society. In so far as a world society or a world civilization can be said to exist, it is the child of Europe, and if, as

many peoples believe to-day, this ideal of world civilization is being shipwrecked before it has achieved realization, then Europe remains the most highly developed form of society that humanity has yet known.

What then is Europe? Europe is a community of peoples who share in a common spiritual tradition that had its origins three thousand years ago in the Eastern Mediterranean and which has been transmitted from age to age and from people to people until it has come overshadow the world. The tradition as a whole cannot, therefore, be strictly identified with the European continent. It has come into Europe and has passed beyond it, and what we call "Europe" in the cultural sense is really only one phase of this wider development.

We can only understand Europe and its historical development by the study of Christian culture, for this forms the Centre of the whole process, and it was as Christendom that Europe first became conscious of itself as a society of peoples with common moral values and common spiritual aims.

Viewed from this Centre, the whole development of Western culture falls into three main stages -Christian, pre-Christian and post-Christian, each of which may in turn be divided into two or three subordinate phases.

There are first the two phases of classical Mediterranean culture: (1) Hellenism and (2) the Roman world. Next there are the three central periods of Christian history; (3) the formation of Western and Eastern Christendom; (4) Mediaeval Christendom, from the eleventh to the fifteenth century; and (5) the age of religious division and humanist culture, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Finally, we have (6) the age of Revolution -the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when European culture became secularized, and (7) the disintegration of Europe, which is both the cause and the result of the two World Wars in whose shadow we live to-day.

## 1. Hellenism

The first of these three stages is pre-Christian and even pre-European, since it originated in the Aegean and remained to the end a predominantly Mediterranean development. But it was emphatically Western, and all the later stages of European culture have looked back to it as the source of their intellectual and often of their social traditions.

For Western civilization was born when the Greeks first became conscious of their separation from the Asiatic world at the time of the Persian war, when they realized that they possessed a different way of life and a different standard of values from those which were embodied in the great archaic civilizations of the ancient East. These new ways of life and thought were already fully manifested in the great creative achievement of Hellenic culture during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., the age that saw the development of the city-state and its political institutions, the great colonial expansion of the Greeks round the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and the origins of the Greek scientific and philosophical movement. But during this earlier period the Ionians and the other Greeks of Asia Minor were the leaders of Hellenic culture, and European Greece held a relatively inferior position. The wars with Persia changed all that, not only by securing the European leadership of the Greek world, but still more by increasing the self-consciousness and unity of the whole Greek world against the oriental world empire that threatened its independence. For in spite of the jealous regionalist patriotism of the Greek city-states, they also acquired an intense loyalty to the wider unity of "Hellenism". so that the dualism of state and culture which was a characteristic feature of mediaeval and modern Europe already finds its prototype in the Greek world.

Thus the two poles of Greek civilization were the free city and the common culture. It was as "free men", as members of a self-governing community, that the Greeks felt themselves to

be different from other men, and it was as members of the wider society of Hellenism which embraced a hundred cities and was in contact with every part of the Mediterranean world that they developed their co-operative work of thought and rational enquiry which was the source of Western philosophy and science. In the same way, they developed their own distinctive system of education -Paideia- which was essentially different alike from the traditional learning of the oriental priest and from the warlike discipline of the barbarian tribesman and was the origin and pattern of the Western tradition of liberal education. In short, it was the Greeks who created the Western idea of Man and that conception of humanist culture which has become one of the formative elements in the European tradition.

But though the Greeks were the real creators of the Western tradition, they had little direct influence on continental Europe. The second great wave of Hellenic expansion and colonization which began in the fourth century was directed to the East, and during the Hellenistic period Western and Central Asia, from the Mediterranean to the Oxus and the Indus, was covered by a network of Greek cities under the protection of the Graeco-Macedonian dynasties, which regarded the extension of Hellenic culture as the basis and justification of their power. Thus Hellenism became a real world-wide civilization which influenced the culture of all the peoples of Asia as far east as North-West India and Turkestan. But this movement of imperial expansion in the East was accompanied by the decline of Greek power in Europe itself, and the same age that saw the conquest and Hellenization of the East by Alexander and his successors witnessed the rise of a new power in the West which was destined to act as a intermediary between the Hellenistic civilization of the East and the barbaric peoples of Western Europe.

## 2. The Roman World

This process forms the second phase in the history of Western culture. It covers a period of six or seven centuries -three hundred years from Alexander to Augustus and three hundred years from the death of Augustus to the conversion of Constantine. During those centuries Rome gradually grew from a peasant state in Central Italy to a world empire which embraced the whole Mediterranean world and extended from the Atlantic to the Euphrates and the Caucasus, and from the Rhine and the Danube to the Sahara and the Arabian desert. Thus for the first and last time in the history of Western culture the whole civilized world east of Persia and India was united in a single state ruled by one master, administered by a common law and defended by a uniform military system. At first sight there seems little in common between the Roman spirit and that of Hellenic culture. The Romans were a people of soldiers and organizers, lawyers and engineers, road-makers and land-surveyors, whose achievement is summed up in the lapidary sentence "Balbus built a wall". They had none of the genius for abstract speculation and the creative artistic imagination of the Greeks, and their vast empire, built up by harsh military discipline and ruthless political planning, seems as inferior to Periclean Athens as the Colosseum is inferior to Parthenon. Nevertheless their work was extraordinary enduring, and it served the cause of Western culture better than the more spectacular achievements of Alexander and his successors. While the latter were content to conquer the civilized East and cover it with a veneer of Hellenistic urban culture, the Romans drove their roads like a plough through the virgin soil of Western Europe and laid the foundation of new cities where none had stood before. Though they were not the creators of Western culture they diffused and defended it, and the walls that Balbus built on the Northumbrian moorland and round the posts in the Libyan desert were the shield which protected the westward advance of the classical Mediterranean culture. The Greeks themselves, like Polybius and Strabo, were the first to recognize the nature of the Roman achievement as the indispensable continuation and completion of the achievement

of Hellenism.

Thus the second phase of Western culture was in fact a co-operative effort which was common to the two great Mediterranean peoples. The Roman genius built the fabric of civilized society in Western Europe which still subsists today, at least in Italy and Gaul and Spain, in spite of the changes of later centuries. But this social order provided a channel for the transmission and diffusion of the Hellenic traditions. Latin literature and education as represented by Cicero and Livy, Horace and Quintilian, represent a simplified version of Hellenistic culture which was better suited to the needs of the new peoples of the West than the Greek original. Thus Latin endured as the common language of the educated world in the West for more than a thousand years after Greek ceased to be the common language of the civilized East. The strength of the Latin element in Western culture is no doubt due as much, or more, to the influence of the Catholic Church as to that of the Roman Empire. For the Church came to the Western barbarians with all the prestige of Latin culture and Roman authority. As Rome had acted as the intermediary between Hellenism and the West, so the Church acted as intermediary between the Latin West and the new peoples of Northern Europe. The last service which the Roman Empire performed in the development of Western culture was to provide the sociological and juridical basis for the organization of the new religious society with its ecclesiastical hierarchy and its Canon Law.

This task was only achieved by a long and costly struggle. Christianity is the one element in Western culture which is completely non-Western in origin, and which transplanted into the Roman-Hellenistic world a sacred tradition of immemorial antiquity, preserved intact by the one people that had held out indomitably against the pervasive influence of Hellenistic world culture.

Christianity came out of this unknown oriental world into the full light of Roman-Hellenistic culture with a new faith and a



new standard of spiritual values which aspired to change human life and inevitably aroused the opposition of Greek culture and the persecution of Roman state. In a single generation it spread from Syria through the cities of Asia Minor and Greece to Rome itself, and then proceeded, rapidly in the East and much more slowly in the West, to permeate the whole civilized world. For three centuries it had to fight for its existence, until it was finally recognized as the universal religion of the world empire. In the Eastern Mediterranean it maintained this position for more than a thousand years, but in the West it was hardly established before the Empire broke up under the pressure of the barbarians. Nevertheless the Western Church was strong enough not only to survive the fall of the Empire, but also to maintain the tradition of higher culture and to become a city of refuge for the conquered peoples.

[Part II](#) | [Part III](#)