

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

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3. The Formation of Western and Eastern Christendom

The formation of Western Christendom by the conversion of the barbarians and the transmission to them of the tradition of Mediterranean culture by the Church marks a new stage in the Western development and the birth of the new European society of nations. It was a slow process, since it was interrupted in the ninth century by a fresh wave of barbarian invasion from the north and the east and by the Moslem conquest of Spain and the Western Mediterranean, so that it was not completed until the Vikings of Scandinavia and the Magyars of Hungary had been converted and brought into the society of Christian Europe. But during these five or six centuries the foundations of a new Christian society were firmly laid by the co-operation between the Catholic Church and the barbarian kingdoms and by the missionary activity of the Irish and Anglo-Saxons monks, whose foundations were the centers of Christian culture and education in lands where no city had ever existed.

The focus of the new European development during these centuries was the Frankish kingdom, which included the greater part of France, Belgium and Western and Central Germany. This was the formative Centre towards which the living forces of Western culture converged and in which the first deliberate attempt was made to realize the social unity of Western Christendom. This unity was based on the alliance of the new

Frankish dynasty of the Carolingians with the Papacy, an alliance which was consummated and consecrated by the coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor at Rome on Christmas Day, A.D. 800. But it was primarily the work of the reforming party in the Church, as represented above all by Anglo-Saxon missionaries and scholars like St. Boniface and Alcuin. It was their ideals which inspired the new Carolingian legislation and the far-reaching programme for the revival and reform of learning, liturgy and script. All these activities were dominated by the conception of Christendom as an all-embracing unity which was both Church and state and in which the ruler had a sacred character as the anointed leader of the Christian people.

This conception survived the political collapse of the Carolingian Empire, which broke down under the stress of the Viking and Magyar invasions. It was inherited by the new society which grew up from its ruins; -the new Empire that was founded by the Saxon Kings of Germany in the tenth century, the feudal states that made up the Kingdom of France, and even by the the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of England which was founded by King Alfred and his successors. Medieval Christendom was in a real sense an extension and fulfillment of the Carolingian Empire and culture.

4. Mediaeval Christendom

During these formative centuries, Western Europe had remained a relatively backward area on the extreme frontier of the civilized world. It occupied less than a third of the European continent and was by no means the richest or the most civilized part. But in the eleventh century Western culture began to expand from its Carolingian nucleus in all directions, and during the next three or four centuries it transformed Europe from a barbarian hinterland into a Centre of world culture which equaled the older oriental civilizations in power and wealth and surpassed them in creative energy. These centuries saw the rise of the European

city and the European state; they created a new art, a new poetry, a new philosophy, as well as a new social, cultural and religious institutions: the order of chivalry, the estates of parliament, the religious orders and the universities.

All this cultural activity was inspired by the Carolingian conception of Christendom as a social unity, the society of the Christian people, which included and transcended the lesser unities of nation and kingdom and city. But this conception now found its primary expression, not in a universal empire but in the universal order of the Church as reorganized by the reforming movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Pope took the place of the Emperor as the head of the international society of Christendom and the ruler of the Christian people.

It is true that the Carolingian ideal of a universal Christian empire still survived, and even in the fourteenth century it was strong enough to inspire the work of the greatest of mediaeval poets -Dante. But by this time it was little more than a utopian ideal, whereas the international authority of the Papacy was a reality embodied in the law and institutions of Christendom and enforced by an effective system of centralized control. Thus mediaeval Christendom during its central period, from the time of Gregory VII to that of Boniface VIII (c. 1075-1300), was a kind of theocracy in which the whole social hierarchy of Christendom was dominated by the authority of the spiritual power.

This theocratic internationalism manifests itself in almost every aspect of mediaeval culture -in the crusades which were, at least in theory, international enterprises against the common enemies of Christendom; in the religious and military orders which were the international organs of Christendom; in the universities, like Paris and Bologna, which were international centers of higher studies for the whole of Western Europe. Moreover, the unity of European culture was reinforced by the use of Latin as the sacred language of the

liturgy and the common language of learning, by the symbolism and imagery of a common religious art, and by the common ideals and conventions of aristocratic behavior embodied in the cult of chivalry.

All these influences extended far beyond the frontiers of the Latin South and the Carolingian West. For it was during these centuries that Central and Eastern Europe as far as Poland and Lithuania and Hungary were brought into the society of Western Christendom.

But while this development was taking place in the West, the old centers of civilization in the East were beginning to decline under the pressure of new warrior peoples from the steppes. The Mongols destroyed the Baghdad Khalifate and conquered China, Persia and Russia, while the Ottoman Turks established themselves in Asia Minor and the Balkans and ultimately destroyed the Byzantine Empire. As a result of these changes, the axis of world culture gradually shifted westward, and the East began to lose its position of cultural leadership. Italy took the place of Greece as the most advanced country in Europe in art and learning and economic development. Indeed the city-states of Italy in the later Middle Ages rivaled those of sixth-century Greece in the intensity of their social and intellectual life.

5. The Age of Religious Division and Humanist Culture

At the same time, the progress of Western culture during the later Middle Ages was unfavorable to the unity of mediaeval Carolingian culture which was based on the alliance of the Papacy with the movement of ecclesiastical reform in France and Germany and with the ruling classes in the North which supported it and which also provided the driving force of the crusading movement. The renaissance of Mediterranean culture separated these elements, so that the reforming spirit which was still strong in the North became the enemy instead of the ally of the Papacy, while the latter became increasingly

Italianized and was the leading patron of the new humanist culture. The theocratic unity of mediaeval Christendom was destroyed, and Europe became a society of sovereign states in which the temporal power of the prince either abolished or severely limited the spiritual power of the universal Church.

From the religious point of view this loss of Christian unity was a tragedy from which Christendom has never recovered. But it did not destroy the unity of European culture, since the influence of the new humanist culture which spread from Italy to the rest of Europe in the later fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries provided a bond of intellectual and artistic unity between the sovereign states and nations of Europe.

Thus, although Latin had ceased to be the common sacred language of liturgy and religion, it was more than ever the common language of education and learning. Moreover, the importance of the classical tradition in European culture was now reinforced and extended by the recovery of the Hellenic tradition, which from the fifteenth century onwards had an increasing influence on Western education and Western thought. The re-Hellenization of Western culture had its origins far back in the Middle Ages with the recovery of Greek science and philosophy from the Arabs by the translators of the twelfth century, and with the Aristotelian revival which had such a profound influence on Western thought in the later Middle Ages. But it was not until the Renaissance had restored a direct contact with Hellenic culture that the movement bore fruit in the great advance of scientific thought inaugurated by Copernicus and Kepler and Galileo. From the sixteenth century onwards Europe was to surpass the Greeks in the originality and boldness of its cosmological speculation. Every generation extended the boundaries of science, and Western man began to acquire a knowledge and control of nature which seemed to open unlimited possibilities of progress for mankind.

Meanwhile the external relations of European culture had

already been profoundly changed. Before Western science had discovered the new world of knowledge, Western man had discovered and conquered a new geographical world. The defeat of the last crusades by the Turks at Nicopolis and Varna, and their control of the great historic trade routes to Asia and Africa, compelled Europe to seek new fields for expansion and new channels for trade. The maritime discoveries of the Portuguese in Africa which opened the new oceanic route to India and the Far East, and the discovery and conquest of the new world of America by the Spaniards, involved a general reorientation of Europe from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and from the old continental trade routes to the new oceanic sea ways. The resultant development of economic activity and the oceanic expansion of European trade and colonization prepared the way for the world hegemony of Western civilization in the following age, but it also intensified the political rivalry of the European powers which was characteristic of this age and which was complicated by the religious conflicts of the post-Reformation period. The attempt to prevent this struggle for power from destroying the European state system led to the elaboration of the system of the Balance of Power, which was the product of Renaissance statecraft and reflects the tension of conflicting forces within the limits of a common culture. While the struggle for power was a revolutionary and destructive force, its agents were the most traditional and formal institutions in Europe - the courts of the great powers- which all tended to share in the same humanist culture and imitate the same patterns of social behavior. Thus in spite of the disruptive effects of national rivalries, European war and diplomacy themselves produced an international society of a limited kind, so that Western statesmen and diplomats and generals during this period belonged to the same world and shared the same ways of thought and the same style of conversation and manners and dress.

