

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

Pro Europa

Philosophy & History

<https://www.pro-europa.eu/europe/478/christopher-dawson-the-seven-stages-of-european-culture-part-iii/>

From Understanding Europe; published by Image Books, New York, 1960. By permission of Christina Scott, Literary Executor for the late Christopher Dawson.

6. The Age of Revolution

This highly stylized aristocratic civilization of post-Renaissance Europe, which reached its full development in the age of Louis XIV, differed from the earlier phases of European development in its lack of religious foundations.

The stronger became the culture of the courts, the weaker became the culture of the Churches, so that by the eighteenth century European society began to undergo a process of rapid secularization which changed the whole character of Western culture. The alliance of the courts with the humanist culture and with the scientific movement which was still predominantly humanist in spirit generated the new ideas of enlightened despotism and of the rationalization of human life by the diffusion of scientific knowledge. The movement was strongest in France, where it possessed a consciously anti-Christian character and carried on a crusade of enlightenment against the dark forces of fanaticism and superstition which it saw embodied in the Church and the religious orders. From France the movement spread with extraordinary rapidity throughout continental Europe, using the courts and the aristocratic salons as its channels of diffusion, and extending even as far as Russia and Portugal.

Only in the England did the movement take a different form.

Here alone in Europe the court culture was relatively unimportant and the center of power had passed to the great landowners who ruled the country through parliamentary institutions and were practically emancipated from royal and ecclesiastical authority. Under their rule, English society also underwent a process of secularization, but it was less complete and far less revolutionary than that of the Continent. The main energies of English society were directed to practical ends -to commercial and industrial expansion and to the revolution of economic life by capitalism and scientific invention. There was no sudden breach with religious tradition. Indeed in England, unlike the Continent, the eighteenth century witnessed a popular movement of religious revival which had a deep effect on the common people and the middle classes of English society. Thus in England the movement towards the secularization of culture followed a very uneven and irregular course. There was no sharp conflict between religious tradition and the scientific enlightenment, but a number of dissident sectarian or party movements which broke up the traditional unity of religion and culture and created their own separate creeds and ideologies. Some of these movements, like the Unitarians, were in close sympathy with the Enlightenment and were led by philosophers and scientists like Joseph Priestley; others, like the Wesleyans, were inspired by the ideal of personal sanctity and evangelical simplicity. But they all acted, consciously or unconsciously, as a ferment of social change, and prepared the way for the reforming movements of the following century.

On the Continent, and especially in France, where these intermediate sectarian groups did not exist, the secularization of culture was far more complete, and the conflict between the movement of Enlightenment and the forces of tradition was far more acute. By degrees the Enlightenment became transformed into a kind of counter-religion, and the spiritual forces which were denied their traditional religious expression found their outlet in the new revolutionary cult

which was embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and was inspired by an irrational faith in Reason and by boundless hopes for the progress of humanity when liberated from the age-long oppression of priests and kings. Political democracy and economic liberalism were the practical corollaries of these beliefs, and the attempt to realize them by a drastic breach with the past and the introduction of new rational institutions led to the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror and the Caesarean imperialism Of Napoleon.

The Napoleonic Empire was a bold attempt to re-establish the unity of Europe on new foundations, and for a moment it seemed as though a new Caesar had arisen, capable of transforming the ramshackle edifice of the ancien regime into an ordered unity by his military genius and his powers of organization. But the classical symmetry of the style empire was little more than a plaster facade which hardly concealed the heterogeneous character of the underlying structure. There was an inherent contradiction between the military authoritarianism of the Empire and the liberal idealism of the Revolution, and the stubborn resistance of the two most independent Western peoples, the British and the Spaniards, ultimately aroused the dormant forces of European nationality and caused the downfall of Napoleon and the dissolution of his Empire. Nevertheless the revolutionary quarter-century from 1789 to 1814 had changed the face of Europe and the character of Western Christendom -the Holy Roman Empire, the territorial power of the Church with its ecclesiastical principalities and endowments. the hierarchical order of society and the sacred of kingship. The ancient regime had suffered such a fall that all the powers of the Holy Alliance and all the statesmen of the Congress of Vienna were unable to put it together again.

In spite of all this, the work of the statesmen of Vienna was infinitely superior to that of their successors at Versailles in 1919 or at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco in 1944-45. For they faced the problem of European unity in a sane

constructive spirit, without utopian illusions or nationalist prejudices. Their attempt to transform the old antagonistic principle of the Balance of Power into a practical system of international co-operation which was embodied in the Law of Treaties and the Concert of Europe was fundamentally sound, and it gave Europe a longer period of peace than it has ever known before or since. Its failure was due not to any inherent defect, but to the lack of any common spiritual principle strong enough to overcome the centrifugal forces in European culture. The revolutionary idealism which found expression in the secret societies and in national liberalism and democratic socialism was too strong to be restrained by the rigid conservatism of the restored monarchies. There was a glaring contrast between the repressive traditionalism of the minor German and Italian states and the immense progress of wealth and population and scientific technique that was taking place in the Atlantic world. Thus the new world of America became the promised land of the European peasant and artisan; and the balance between the two worlds was held by England, the workshop and bank of the world, the ruler of the seas and the home of parliamentary institutions. This world-wide economic and colonial expansion of Western culture, which was mainly the work of the two English-speaking peoples, provided a safety valve for the frustrated and repressed elements in Europe, like the political refugees of 1848 and the far more numerous victims of famine and industrial depression. But at the same time it strengthened the centrifugal tendencies in nineteenth-century culture, so that the expansion of Europe was also a flight from Europe. In spite of the genuinely pacific aims of the Vienna settlement and the Concert of Europe, the Holy Alliance was everywhere regarded by liberals and democrats as a conspiracy of kings against peoples and of despotism against liberty.

Consequently at the very time when the external prestige of European culture was at its highest and the world was being conquered and transformed by European science and wealth and

power, Europe itself was being torn asunder by the increasing violence of its internal conflicts. In England the bloodless victory of constitutional reform in 1832 inaugurated a long period of social peace and economic progress inspired by the ideology of Victorian Liberalism. But on the Continent the conflicting forces were too extreme and too evenly matched to admit of such a compromise. The traditions of revolutionary liberalism, nationalism, and social revolution all helped to undermine the restoration settlement and to destroy the Holy Alliance, but they were incapable of combining to create a new European order. The ultimate victor in the struggle was the centralized and militarized national state, like the new German Empire which represented an alliance between the old tradition of Prussian militarism and the new ideology of German nationalism. But neither of those elements was favorable to the ideal of European unity, and the Bismarckian era witnessed a spiritual decline of European culture which was in sharp contrast to the increasing economic power and military efficiency of the European state.

7. The Disintegration of Europe

In the last period of our survey, from 1914 to 1950, this internal disintegration of European culture manifested itself in the new phase of war and revolution which has destroyed the European society of peoples and has deprived Europe of its world leadership.

During this period the threat of German military imperialism united the rest of the world against her and forced first Britain and then United States to abandon their traditional isolation from continental Europe and to convert their economic and financial power to military ends. The result of the First World War was to destroy the three great military empires of Central and Eastern Europe and thus to clear the ground for a new social and political system. But the attempt of the Western powers to reorganize Europe and the world on liberal democratic principles did not succeed in meeting the

needs of the situation or controlling the revolutionary forces that had been released. On the ruins of the military empires there arose the new totalitarian states of Soviet Russia and National Socialist Germany, which alike by their conflict and their collaboration destroyed the emergent democratic national states of Eastern Europe and precipitated a Second World War.

This second war was even more disastrous in its effects on European culture than the first. Europe has been not only economically ruined and morally weakened; it has been cut in two by the new frontier between Western Europe and the Communist-controlled East. This frontier, which passes through the heart of Central Europe, is not merely a political boundary; it is a line of division between two alien worlds which excludes the possibility of social intercourse and cultural communication, so that the man who wishes to pass from one part of Europe to the other is forced to abandon his citizenship and become a fugitive and an exile. Thus the old European society of states, which even fifty years ago was still the focus of world power and the leader of world civilization, has become a truncated fragment too small and too weak to exist without the military protection and economic aid of America.

Must we conclude from all this that Europe no longer exists and that the problem of European unity is no longer relevant to the present situation? Not necessarily so, since the present division of Europe is so recent and so artificial that it is difficult to believe in its final character. But in any case it is impossible to exaggerate the seriousness of the present crisis both for Europe itself and for the world. The division and impoverishment of Europe must inevitably lead to the division and impoverishment of the world, for Western Europe has played and still plays such an important part in world commerce and industry, and still more in science and thought, that its decay would inflict a more serious blow to world civilization than the fall of the Roman Empire or any

other of the historic catastrophes which have caused the decline of some particular Centre of higher culture. The very suddenness of the decline of Europe suggests that it may be a temporary crisis rather than a final catastrophe, since the fall of cultures in the past has usually been preceded, as in the case of the Roman Empire, by a slow process of decline and sterility lasting for centuries, whereas the present crisis of European culture took place when the social and economic activity of Western culture was at its highest pitch of development. It is due not to any decline of physical or social vitality, but to the internal division of Europe by an intensive process of revolutionary criticism which affected every aspect of Western culture. This process did not consciously aim at the destruction of European unity. At each successive stage it was inspired by a belief in social progress and the hope of a new European order. In fact the European revolutionary movement as a whole was not a symptom of social decadence, but an expression of the energy and optimism of an age of social and economic expansion. But the revolutionary ideal of a new European order was frustrated by the conflicting aims of the different revolutionary movements -liberal, socialist and nationalist- so that the revolutionary movement became destructive of European unity and hostile to European culture itself. In the bitter intensive struggle of parties and ideologies the deeper spiritual foundations of Western culture were forgotten or rejected until the movement which had begun with the worship of liberty and the Declaration of the Rights of Man ended in the concentration camps of the totalitarian state and the mass suicide of total war.

The process of European revolution has thus reached an absolute conclusion. There is no going forward on this path. If the peoples of Europe desire to survive, they must seek a new way. The age of revolution was also an age of world expansion when Europe was threatened by no external enemies, so that each of the great powers was a law to itself. During

the last forty years this situation has been completely reversed and the peoples of Western Europe find themselves in a position of relative inferiority as a minority group exposed to the pressure of stronger and more united non-European world powers.

This catastrophic change must inevitably have a powerful effect on the immediate future of the peoples of Europe. But it may operate in two opposite directions. It may lead to discouragement, pessimism and despair, or alternatively it may make the European peoples realize their common interests and the need to restore the broken unity of European culture. If world expansion has led to cultural disintegration, then we might expect that external pressure would promote internal unity. But the essential problem is not the political issue of European federation or the practical question of European economic organization. The vital question is how to preserve the spiritual inheritance of Europe and restore a common purpose to Western civilization. The great world civilizations of the East were based on a sacred law of immemorial antiquity embodied in an unchanging pattern of institutions and customs. But Western culture has always owed its strength to the persistence of a dynamic purpose which has enabled it to change the world, to widen the frontiers of human knowledge and extend the range of human activity, without losing the continuity of its spiritual tradition and the community of its moral values. If this dynamic purpose can be restored, the spirit of Europe will survive and the unity of Western culture will survive and the unity of Western culture will reassert itself in some new form. For these fundamental issues belong to the plane of religion rather than to that of politics or economics, and these planes do not coincide. An age of material prosperity may often be an age of spiritual decline, while a dark age of material destruction and economic decline may see the birth of new spiritual forces.

