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THE CHRISTIAN AND CULTURE

by Randle Manwaring

The Apostle Paul, writing, in the first place, to Christians living at Philippi, an outpost of Roman culture, gives us a timeless exhortation: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Phil.4:6). In this verse we have the most direct and positive injunction on the Christian's relation to culture, undoubtedly a most complex problem.

But, we may very well ask, what exactly is culture? There is a sense in which it is refinement, good taste, artistic sensibility; but how does this come about? As the great apostle indicates it is by thinking about all that is best in the world in which we live. Matthew Arnold has defined culture as "contact with the best that has been said and thought in the world." It may come as a surprise to some to realise that, in the world, there are so many things which are worthy of such attention by Christians, things, in fact, which are "really worthy of respect and even veneration, those whose grace attracts us, which have a high tone and have moral value worthy of our praise" (to give a paraphrase of the passage quoted above).

Christians are exhorted to fill their thoughts, as the springs of practice, with the excellent and to allow such things to shape their conduct as they reflect upon them. These matters are to be found in the world, the world which is, in the first place, God's creation and where man is to serve an apprenticeship as a moral being, looking forward to the fuller life of eternity. (Titus 2:12). It is in this world of created things that man has to learn to live, not by bread only but by the Word of God. It is the "ladder of created souls," it is the arena in which we learn to overcome the world (in the sense of its opposition to God), the flesh and the devil. It is the place where, as Edmund Burke said "He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our will. Our Antagonist is our Helper."

Christians in Society

The contemporary Christian cannot very well withdraw, as mediaeval Christians did, from the created world and the world of things and people. Rather, he should follow the example of his Master, who used the world as an opportunity for demonstrating to mankind the love of God in obedience to the Will of God. This he must do in society, not in a vacuum. But there are still those who feel that they should either find everything in a definitely Christian environment or not at all. Education, holidays, employment and social life, they say, should only be taken in a Christian context. This gives them little or no contact with the world in which they live and, of course, they can have very little direct influence on it.

In fact, they will largely have opted out of society, culture and the world. But they nevertheless cheerfully accept the amenities of life, such as the water supply, the telephone, even perhaps local education (for the younger children) and certainly the National Health Service. Such Christians have few problems to face in the world because they have actually withdrawn from it and consider it beyond redemption.

Of course, the world which sets itself up in opposition to God, to His Christ and to His Church is beyond redemption as such but the world of people and perhaps things can be saved from destruction by the Saviour of the World. Life, whether business life, professional life or social life are transient and the world of art, politics, philosophy and philanthropy are all passing away, but as the Christian finds himself involved in these things, without being entangled by them, he seeks to act as the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

In "The Twenty-Fifth Hour" by C. Virgil Gheorghin, Father Koruga, a priest, said: "The New Testament has always said that there would be an end, and that the end would be pretty rough, to put it mildly. For the New Testament, this world, societies, and indeed life itself are but temporary experience. Moreover, the success of the Christian Church and the validity of its faith does not depend, and never has depended, on its ability to save societies or prevent physical death."

"The Church did not save Roman Society, but it saved Romans who were in a doomed society.

"The Church did not save feudal society, but it saved men and women who were in feudal society.

"There is no guarantee that the Church can or will save modern society, but if it preaches its gospel it can save men and women caught in this society."

Father Koruga looked upon the Church as the actual vehicle of salvation but we know that Jesus Christ is our Refuge, our Hiding Place and our Ark of Salvation. From Him and in Him, the Christian moves out to earn his daily bread, to rub shoulders with his fellow men and to take his part as a member of the nation to which he belongs. He works in enemy-occupied territory, in a kind of underground movement yet, paradoxically, in the open, as an ambassador of Jesus Christ. As he lives in the world, not as he belongs to it, he remembers that his Lord prayed that he might simply be kept from the evil one in the world. (John 17:15).

Christian Contributions to Secular Life

A Christian thanks God for his natural talents and seeks to use them in the world. He does not belittle artistic or literary or musical ability, he uses it and allows his Lord to use it for His glory. He recalls that David the shepherd boy did not give up his music and his poetry

as things unnecessary for the life of looking after the sheep but kept it up as part of his culture and eventually God used it to give us the matchless Psalms of David. We must not despise our gifts but rather cultivate them. Similarly, we must not think lightly of influence or affluence, for both can be used to the glory of God.

One of the tragedies, as I see it, of Christianity today is that we have ceased to invade ordinary life with the Gospel. We keep to the touchlines, jeering and criticising, whilst the world goes to the devil. Happily for the world of our forefathers, it was not always so. Wilberforce and his friends campaigned for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire (it cost twenty million Victorian pounds!) Shaftesbury fought in Parliament for seventeen years before he saw his aims fulfilled in the passing of the Factory Act, safeguarding the health of women and children in factories and mines. Müller and Barnardo, through their children's homes, awakened the national conscience to the care of desolate children. Florence Nightingale fought her battles with the military authorities for the improvement of medical services in the army. Charrington gave up his vast fortune inherited from the sale of beer and set about holding back the tide of drunkenness and prostitution in London.

Like their Lord before them they "went about doing good." Such contributions to the well-being and enrichment of humanity form an eloquent testimony to the reality of Christian belief. With many Victorians, their faith had been born in revivalist fervour. William Wilberforce was a young man about town who, before his conversion, had won guineas off dukes at Boodles, the fashionable club and enjoyed Sunday suppers with the beautiful actress, Mrs. Siddons. Overnight, he became a Christian zealot, with new ideals and ambitions. It was said of him that he never became a prig; fashionable society, to which he belonged by birth, never wrote him off as a crank, and although it may have raised its eyebrows and smiled somewhat condescendingly, it never yawned. He was a positive, Christian reformer in public life. Have we such a man living today?

Our Lord was such a good mixer that He did not embarrass the loose-living woman by His goodness, and He so commended Himself to Matthew's worldly friends, following the party at Matthew's house, that, afterwards, "all the publicans and sinners drew near unto Him to hear Him." (Luke 15:1). He found it quite easy to talk to the nymphomaniac by the wellside with the result that she became both a believer and a soul-winner. As Christians we have to keep ourselves "unspotted from the world" (James 1:27) and yet, as the Lord Jesus did, to make our contributions towards its improvement in the lives of other men and women. But you cannot reach people at the end of a barge pole; only by meeting them at some meeting point on some common social, commercial, cultural or domestic ground. Christians who are members of the local council or in Civil Defence, or members of an orchestra or on the magistrates bench or in the special constabulary or members of the Round Table are called to exercise their Christian influence in their calling and according to their

ability. They are the salt of the earth; they are "a letter that has come from Christ" (2 Cor.3:3 N.E.B.). For this work they will need, above all, a Christlike character, a genuine reflection of His indwelling presence.

The Arts

In the realm of the Arts, we come across the very springs of life, where the Christian faith once had a most positive influence. In fact, it is interesting to recall that the ancient University foundations of Western Europe had their roots deep in the Christian faith, where scholars found their inspiration for academic and personal life. The present day position seems very different - Christianity has largely been elbowed out of the arts, science and culture to a degree unknown in earlier centuries. This accounts, to a large extent, for the bankruptcy and sordidness of much that goes under the name of culture. We live in an age of disintegration in which very largely we have debunked the old values and swept away the old landmarks but, as yet, there is no new dynamic and no rock to take their place. Evil as a cult is so assiduously portrayed in contemporary drama and fiction that, as one critic says, it is becoming as boring as the cloying sweetness of the Victorians.

Alex Stuart is a front-rank romantic novelist. In a recent edition of "John o' London's", she wrote:

"But the romantic novelist treads a lonely road these days. She is scorned as a do-gooder, derided as an out-of-date idealist. If she dares - as I have dared - to suggest that the public is becoming weary of the diet of seduction and rape served up to it as literary, television, film and theatrical entertainment, then she is accused - as I have been accused - of trying to smear her fellow writers; or of being 'unrealistic'..."

Modern fiction, which helps to shape our culture, overdraws the picture by writing about vice as if it were the norm - a commonplace and unavoidable experience. Admittedly, the novel should be a faithful representation of life but life should not be represented as being lived in the gutter of immorality. Virtue must be faithfully drawn for its part in normal human experience. The worst aspect of the cult of sexual depravity is that it sears the consciences of the young through the paper backs and the public libraries. Browning said, "Go practise, if you please, with men and women - leave a child alone, for Christ's particular love's sake."

Sir Walter Scott exercised a profound influence on British culture through his novels. He wrote:

"I have been, perhaps, the most voluminous author of any day; and it is a comfort to me to think that I have tried to unsettle no man's

faith, to corrupt no man's principle, and that I have written nothing which, on my death bed, I should wish blotted." He died in the knowledge that the Bible was the book of books. Asking his son-in-law, John Gibson Lockhart, to read to him, he was asked from what book? "Need you ask: there's but one," he replied. Lockhart read from the fourteenth chapter of St. John's Gospel. He listened and said: "That is a great comfort."

We must remember that faithfulness to life and artistic integrity are both important requirements in the life of the creative artist. You cannot ask a painter to paint pictures in the way you want them to appear; he must be true to his art.

Joseph Addison, who wrote the fine hymn "When all Thy mercies, O my God", is remembered in Westminster Abbey by the inscription "To the noblest purifier of our literature". "The Spectator" of his day wrote of him: "he intends to enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality."

A short while ago, I wrote to the Times Literary Supplement a "Letter to the Editor", complaining that there had been obscene and vulgar lines in poetry which the Editor had included. The lines were such that I would not care to include them in this article but although I received a polite acknowledgement of my letter, it was not published. However, I have noticed that no more poems of this offensive kind have since appeared. I hope I may have had some influence on the literary taste of the journal concerned. Poetry being my main cultural interest, I have sought, God helping me, to read and to endeavour to understand, most of the poetry being written today, but I confess that it is a lonely path, particularly when it comes to finding a journal which will publish a poem of mine with a Christian theme. The Christian weeklies fight shy of poetry, presumably because they think there is no taste for it amongst their readers and the literary weeklies and monthlies are not really interested in a minor Christian poet. Imagine, if you will, my thrill when one of the literary weeklies announced my second slim volume with the description "vivid representations of the Christian faith". But my slender success does not daunt me. For many reasons, I press on. Wordsworth mentioned one of these reasons when he wrote:

"If thou indeed derive thy light from Heaven,
Then, to the measure of that Heaven-born light,
Shine, Poet! in thy place, and be content:"

Secular Interests and Culture

It is most regrettable when a Christian becomes a person of so few earthly interests that he is unable to sustain a conversation on ordinary topics. In those circumstances, he will become extremely boring and boorish, unknown outside strictly Christian circles, without much culture and certainly exercising no influence on the culture of his time.

Such a person would do well to remember that Paul's mind was exercised in things sacred as well as spiritual. He had a good knowledge of the sports of his time and the Greek poets of his day. With these things he refreshed his soul and they enabled him to write with relevance of the faith which was his very life.

This is only one aspect, albeit a very important one, of the value of "secular" interests. They may equip us for the service of God, they should enable us to have points of contact with our fellow men and they ought to provide us with the necessary refreshment, the rest and change.

A story has come down to us from very early times which, even if un-canonical, serves as a telling illustration of the power for good there is in apparently trivial things. One day a visitor called on St. John, who at that time was busily at work, writing his sublime Gospel. Expecting to find the apostle engaged in deep meditation and in prayer, the stranger was amazed to find him enjoying himself with his pet parrot. When the visitor expressed his surprise, the disciple replied: "The bow that is always strung loses its strength." The story continues that John returned from his relaxation to write the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel. God had, in fact, a rested and a peaceful mind at His disposal for the writing of the truth of abiding in Christ. There is an ever-present need, in twentieth century life - sacred and secular - for relaxation of tension.

Although we must never limit the power of God by thinking that He is limited to working through what is good taste artistically, we ought to use our artistic ability in the service of God. He can work through shocking music, banal hymns and in ugly mission halls but that does not exonerate us from trying to influence architecture, music and poetry for the better. Good workmanship and good taste honour God (although He is outside it all, in one sense) and the Christian, whether as an informed critic or a creative artist, can be a potent force in the formation of national life and the Church's life, through culture. It is said that the best traditions produce the best revolutionaries and certainly the Christian Church, the best of all traditions, has produced, at least in earlier centuries, her share of progressive revolutionaries. It has been recorded that a saint like Thomas Aquinas had a transforming energy in society and in civilisation, because he was a revolutionary in the matter of culture.

Worldly Culture and the Nature of Worldliness

The Christian will find that much of the culture of the world will be deemed unsuitable for his attentions. In fact, any culture which rejects the claims of Christ outright cannot attract the affections of the believer. He can follow music, painting, philosophy etc. because in these things he is "allowed" to be a Christian and his conscience is not offended in the things which he allows. But pornographic literature and erotic art descriptions, for instance, deny the sovereignty of Christ.

True culture is experienced where thought-forms are brought into captivity to the mind of Christ and are made subject to the knowledge which we have of God. "The great aim of culture", wrote Matthew Arnold, "is....to ascertain what perfection is and to make it prevail."

The Christian is continually warned by his Lord of the danger of allowing things which he seeks and things which he possesses to cramp and even stifle the things of the spirit and, in particular, the word of God. There is the danger of anxiety about things required for sustaining our physical life and although, in our affluent society in the western world, we have largely forgotten the meaning of want, for thousands of Christians in other parts of the world there must be a strong temptation to be anxious over things to eat. (Matt.6:19-34). There is also the danger of "cares and wealth and the pleasures of life" causing people to "bring nothing to maturity" in the life of the spirit (Luke 8:14 N.E.B.) None of these things need necessarily be evil - generally they will be quite harmless in themselves but misused and luxuriated in they become fatal. The misuse of things and the over-dependence on things is part of the nature of "worldliness". There is nothing evil in wealth, only in craving after it, revelling in it, depending on it and being in a state of idolatry towards it.

Paul said "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake." (1 Cor.9:23). This involved the apostle in a life of identification with the people amongst whom he lived - the intellectuals, the military authorities, the philosophers and the religious zealots of his day. But he never diluted his witness to the world by becoming "worldly". In other words, his heart was never captured either by an inordinate desire to satisfy the appetites of his old nature (the lust of the flesh) or by the showy glamour of all that the Christless world thought splendid (the pride of life). Further, he was not swayed by appearances - he learned to judge things by their moral worth; he did not desire in the way that Samson desired Delilah (the lust of the eyes).

A negative conception of Christianity is foreign to the New Testament and there is no scriptural warrant - only danger - in drawing up a list of prohibitions. Where do you draw the line? Wherever you do so, you let off a good many people and you become dreadfully critical of other Christians, in sitting in judgment on them. "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mould." (Roms.12:2 - Phillips) is a better command to obey than the "traditions of men" which, regrettably, are taught by some as commandments. The root of the matter is the most important safeguard: "never give your hearts to this world or to any of the things in it." (1 John 2:15 - Phillips).