

## OUTLINES FROM THE PAST

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**U**RING the last century and especially since the last fifty years our western civilization seemed to be reaching a new era of achievements on many fronts. No limit could be assigned to our progress, scientific and social; no lofty ideal seemed impossible of attainment. The age of enlightenment had dawned; liberty, humanitarianism, education, democracy were the social heritage of all. Science had advanced by startling bounds. It was even hailed as the arbiter of man's destiny. It would answer all the problems of life, religious, philosophical and social; it would give the key to all the doors of earthly happiness. War of course would be abolished, all men would work for the betterment of the human family.

The swift events of the last twenty-five years have cast a new shadow upon the earth and have quenched the enthusiasm of the believers in inevitable progress. Men began to ask themselves the reason for this terrific smash-up of all their old dreams. The Great War which failed, the strife and squabbles which followed, the rise of Communism, the industrial and economic crisis needed explanation. A new and more critical perspective was demanded. The ideals of the nineteenth century Rationalists had crashed, war was not abolished, the greatest massacre of modern times split our civilization, science had shown itself only as an instrument subject to the good or evil purpose of the ruling force. The scientists themselves lost faith in their dogmatism and began to be fearful and more cautious as new horizons were revealed by their investigations. Science had not replaced religion but had become entangled in a hopeless confusion.

This breakdown of the idealism of the nineteenth century was blamed by hostile writers on the failure of Christianity. The influence of the Christian epoch had finished its cycle, it had run its course and now was doomed to sink into the mellowed twilight of history even as the ancient eras of culture and progress. This attitude challenged the very foundations of

western civilization and of course the divine mission of the Church. Catholic writers leaped to the challenge and attempted to trace the outlines of our period to their sources. To recall some of their ideas is the only purpose of this short paper which can treat these great problems only in the broadest outlines. If our civilization is to endure it is imperative that the great mass of people grasp the issue and build up an ideological bulwark against the assaults of a dogmatic and fanatical enemy.

## I

When the Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became man—there was the beginning of our civilization. The kingdom of God appeared upon the earth. A supernatural life, a close union of God and creature which was unknown in any previous age bound men's hearts in new cords of religion with God. An organic body, the Church, was the Mystical Body of Christ. Love of God and of neighbor because he was the image of God and a member of the mystical Body possessed the early Christians and began to be diffused by the heralds of the Gospel. This new leaven in due time and according to various circumstances worked through the mass of European peoples. It was inevitable that these religious ideas should have a practical influence on social life and upon social institutions. True democracy as well as legitimate temporal and spiritual authority became the conscious or subconscious possession of every follower of Christ. How these ideas gradually permeated European civilization is a matter of history; the debt to Christianity for these ideals of democracy, authority and humanitarianism can not be overestimated. The Gospel contains the most perfect, purest and loftiest humanitarian ideals. Once the depth and beauty of the Christian religion with its altruism, its love of the poor, its love of all men in God and for God, its compassion for the downtrodden had captured the hearts of men, it followed that all the prominent social movements of the nineteenth century should result, even though these movements received impetus and support from non-Christian sources. A religion with a doctrine divinely revealed, a dogma so clear cut as Catholicism, with such a universal outlook, such a common philosophy of life built up a tradition and a dynamic idealism which bore fruit when education and other agencies had spread these ideals over the face of Europe.

## II

The extended use of science as a weapon against religion has partly obscured the important part which the Church played in the scientific development. In its philosophic aspect, the metaphysical basis which makes scientific progress at all possible must be considered. The Christian outlook on reality, the belief in a personal God Who infinitely transcends the universe, Who, although present everywhere, yet does not enter into composition with any part of it, the belief in Divine Providence, the belief in the order and harmony of the universe are important concepts in the formation of a body of scientific doctrines. At the same time nature and the material world are not spurned nor depreciated. The spiritual is placed first but does not eclipse the material. In the Eastern religions this fundamental outlook is not present. God was either considered as part of the world or the spiritual was so completely emphasized as to belittle the material order. This dualism of the Gnostics, the antagonism of spirit and matter permeated Eastern religious philosophy generally. The whole material world was considered either as a delusion of the senses, to be escaped in Nirvana, or as a trap of some inexorable fate, deliverance from which could be gained in mystical ecstasy or metempsychosis. This false spiritualism is responsible in great part for the little scientific advancement in the East. The Church on the other hand, because of the Incarnation was forced to counterbalance this dualism of matter and spirit. Matter, coming from an infinitely good God is not evil, man is not a purely spiritual being but the lowest in the spiritual scale and the crown of the material universe. Man is one substantial composite of matter and spirit, the image of God, the link between the material and the spiritual worlds. God Who transcends the world is the Creator of all things and all things are good as they come from Him. No fatalism or passive compliance blunted men's activity. The kingdom of God had to be attained by struggle. All things had to play their part in bringing about the renewal of the face of the earth. Thus the eternal quest to reduce the pluralism of the universe to unity was accomplished without falling into the extremes of Pantheism or Monism. God is the first, ultimate cause and all things participate His being, each is singular, finite. This attempt at order results in the classification of beings, discoveries of laws, order and harmony. This flowering of the seeds of Christian doctrine

reached its maturity in the thirteenth century, especially in the gigantic efforts of Saint Thomas.

His struggle to supplant Neoplatonic idealism and spiritism by Aristotelian realism finally vanquished the Patristic and early Scholastic tradition. The old Neoplatonism with its overemphasis on the spiritual side of man to the disparagement of the material side was finally conquered. Saint Thomas clarified the relations and boundaries of nature and grace, faith and reason. He restored nature to a higher plane than the Fathers or early Scholastics were willing to concede. Faith did not contradict reason, it was above it. Reason in its own house was absolute mistress but when at the service of Revelation it was guided and protected. Man used his five senses as windows through which he contacted with certitude the outside world and thus built up his knowledge by ascending from the lowest to the highest step in intellectual knowledge. In all branches of Philosophy Saint Thomas restored the rights of nature and reason. As Christopher Dawson so aptly expresses it:

Thus the Incarnation does not destroy or supersede nature. It is analogous and complementary to it, since it restores and extends man's natural function as the bond of union between the material and the spiritual worlds. This is the fundamental principle of the synthesis of St. Thomas. His whole work is governed by the desire to show the concordance in difference of the two orders. Alike in his epistemology, his ethics and his politics, St. Thomas emphasizes the rights and the autonomous character of natural activity, the province of Reason as distinct from that of Faith, the moral law of Nature as distinct from that of Grace, the rights of the State as distinct from those of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

This better appreciation of nature introduced a new era. Investigation of the material order, of philosophy, law, politics, medicine and the physical sciences received a powerful stimulus. Although the Middle Ages are not remembered as a period of startling scientific discoveries on a large scale when compared to our own, when seen in their proper setting, they did produce original scientists and experimentors although these are few in comparison to the number of philosophers and theologians. The thirteenth century was a time of reconstruction and synthesis. The ancient wisdom had to be coördinated and supplemented by the new streams of Arabic and Aristotelian thought. The Scholastics' gigantic task of building harmonious and unified systems absorbed most of their energy so that scientific investigations had to await their proper share of attention. Nevertheless the

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<sup>1</sup> Progress and Religion, p. 175.

influence of the Scholastics was radiated throughout the centers of culture and learning of Europe and so penetrated the masses in its spirit. No age tried harder to rid the people of superstition and magic. By insisting on the rights of reason, by training the bulk of students in logic and formal disputation and by introducing them to the body of philosophic culture from Greek and Arabian as well as Christian sources the people learned to think and reason, to inquire for reasons, to seek explanations. When this spirit was applied to the physical sciences the beginnings of our modern era of science took root. We are accustomed to accredit our great inventors with too much credit, at the same time forgetting the foundations laid by other hands in other times. Our science as the most impartial investigators acclaim began in a special manner during the thirteenth century and it was due to the spirit of this epoch which made it possible for our modern scientists to achieve such splendid results.

The important rôle the Christian virtues play in the development of science should not be forgotten. Scientists must be men of sacrifice, men with an ideal of humanitarianism, ready to spend themselves in their work. They must spend long, patient hours in work and study and must deny themselves other interests. They must disregard their personal interests as they labor for the welfare of posterity. This ideal of patience, selflessness and generosity sprang from the Christian tradition even though in later days it has been divorced from Christianity. In the earlier periods this notion of service to man was always linked with service to God and had a religious motivation but in more recent times men forgot the religious motivation although they kept the ideal of service. In fact the first great scientists of our modern era were not agnostics nor atheists but men of deep religious convictions, either devout Catholics or men who retained many of the elements of the Christian Revelation.

### III

The Christian religion was the driving power which shaped the institutions and destiny of Europe. Although Europe was not a political unity at all times it had at least a common spiritual ideal embodied in the spiritual authority of the Church. In the sixteenth century this unity received the decisive blow which shattered it and which has caused so much misery to our own



day. Three main currents can be distinguished as the causes of the disruption of spiritual forces: the Reformation, the Renaissance and the new development of science and industry.

The Reformation was primarily a revolt against authority. By refusing to submit to the authority of the teaching Church and by appealing to the principle of private interpretation and belief it unloosed a force which has not ceased to divide and destroy. The dogmatic unity of Christendom was torn asunder. New sects sprang up immediately, which, because of their inherent instability and lack of unitive power broke from each other and wandered farther from the deposit of faith. At the time they did not discard the moral precepts of Christianity nor the Christian social ideals but the confusion and discord today brings out in clearer relief the real damage of the Reformation. These religious differences estranged men's hearts and minds. They pushed religion farther away from the paths of daily life. Little by little the economic interest began to supersede the religious so that today we find millions of people with very little religious belief, practical pagans who seek only the good things of this life. The secularization of culture, the dethronement of religion owes much of its success to the Reformation even though such a result was the last thing the Reformers desired.

The Renaissance also helped to take the interest of the people from the primary religious outlook. Because it scoffed at Medieval barbaric latinity without seeing the treasure hidden under the inartistic covering, it lost that most invaluable synthesis which the Medieval Scholastics spent so much labor to accomplish. No longer was Metaphysics the queen of philosophy, but the classics, style, romanticism and mathematics captured the first places in the interest of scholars. Man and nature were given a new interpretation. The asceticism of the Middle Ages was replaced by an esthetic ideal of life. Life was looked at not so much as a trial and preparation for the real, future life, but as a chance to enjoy artistic and cultural refinements. The Middle Ages had succeeded in giving nature a larger share in the economy of the religious outlook but the Renaissance stripped this appreciation of its religious fundament. The Renaissance was a reawakening but it was also a revolt against Scholasticism and Aristotelianism and thereby lost its chance of surpassing previous ages. The later Scholastics are rightly scored for hair-splitting and neglect of the new developments in science but the criminal abandonment of the Scholastic

tradition by the Renaissance can hardly be forgiven. The philosophers of the Renaissance did preserve the metaphysical and mathematical bases of science from the Greco-Latin culture but they blundered horribly by ignoring the best work of the Scholastics. The greatest tragedy of the Renaissance was the loss of that wholeness of view which was the peculiar achievement of the golden age of scholastic philosophy. Man began to lose his divine character and was in danger of being mechanized along with the development of the mathematical and material universe. The new physics and mathematics, being separated from scholastic metaphysics usurped the rôle of philosophy. The particular sciences revolted against the domination of philosophy and began to assume an autonomous character. This led to the splitting up of all the sciences. As each one revolted a fresh disorder arose. Specialization in a narrow field cut off the universal outlook and as a result each small field tried to solve all the problems of reality by appeal to its method and discoveries. Psychology in the hands of narrow, unphilosophical men was reduced to biology, biology was reduced to chemistry and physics and these were hailed as the mechanical foundations of all reality. This disposition produced the materialism of the later nineteenth century when determinism reached its greatest popularity. When the evolutionists attacked religion the disorder of the scientific debacle reached its lowest depths. Scientists tried to supplant religion, the Bible was assailed, Revelation spurned by appeal to science, the very existence of the spiritual was denied. As these ideas seeped down into the masses, vast numbers fell into Agnosticism or complete Atheism. If the later Scholastics had awakened to the new spirit instead of entrenching themselves behind great names perhaps the philosophical chaos could have been avoided. As it turned out it is impossible to estimate the damage caused by this revolt in philosophy and science. All modern philosophy is entangled in the confusion. In the Medieval synthesis matter and spirit were nicely harmonized; the new science and the new philosophy built on the dualism of matter and spirit.

The confusion of the new philosophy and science was extended to the fields of politics and economics as the Industrialization of the Western countries grew. Science contributed the technical knowledge; a Protestant sect contributed the new religion of economic advancement. Because these men were imbued with a different ideal of life—work and thrift, the duty of taking ad-

vantage of every opportunity for amassing wealth, the obligation of fulfilling divine providence by increasing their material possessions—the machine age and the industrial revolution were speeded on their way. Industrialization effectively reduced the influence of religion still more. It is not difficult to trace the effects of all these forces on our present situation. Economic greed in a Capitalistic system not controlled or checked by religious balance was bound to lead to the exploitation of the masses. The confusion and scepticism of our universities have robbed many of their religious faith and have spread a damaging outlook on life. The Catholics have been trying to preserve themselves against their numerous enemies but their influence is not strong enough in philosophy, economics and international affairs to swing the balance. The social unrest of the last few years has awakened men to the serious defects somewhere in our scheme of life. Communism is at least an attempt to correct economic abuses even if it does use a naive materialism and discards the triumph of Western progress by denying personality and liberty.

#### IV

The recent economic crisis has driven home the fact that we have progressed materially at the expense of the spiritual. Man has a more profound control over matter and the forces of nature today but he has lost the spiritual mastery. If society is not to be killed by the creations of its own genius it must find a new synthesis of science, philosophy and religion. We have forgotten that all culture and progress have their ultimate basis in the soul. Religion is the highest culture and the surest guarantee of real progress. Unless the spiritual be fostered and nurtured and given predominance over the other lesser values our plan of life will be deranged. Science, intellectual knowledge, skilled technique, scholarly research have been the chief concerns of the men of the last century. They have plunged us into an abyss because they neglected character, morality, the religious element in life. Once the spiritual is placed over the material, then, and then only can order and harmony exist between different fields of activity.

If philosophy has suffered from the dualism of matter and spirit, in the scholastic system it has maintained its true position as queen of the natural sciences, the guide and interpreter of the more specialized sciences, the coördinator of the two orders in a ra-



tional synthesis. Science under scholastic philosophy can reach new heights; it will not be an enemy of religion but a magnifier of the works of God. No longer will the separate sciences war one upon the other in endless confusion but they will acquire that clear ideal, that common meetingpoint, that broad basis which can direct them to more fruitful efforts. The Philosophy of Saint Thomas can give this universal basis; its principles are broad enough to embrace every field of reality in a large and unified system. It is not a question of going back to the Middle Ages. We are in a position to begin where they left off. We can complete their ideal by uniting all fields of knowledge in a firmer, more complete and more universal union.

Despite the efforts of the last four centuries to rob the people of their religious inheritance, despite the secularization of society, Christianity is still the backbone of our civilization. Our most cherished institutions and ideals are due to her evangelization directly or indirectly. The Church can solve the modern dilemma. She can offer the solution to our vital problems. In her can be ordered all the half-truths of modern research, all the conflicting theories, all the best elements in a new hierarchy of values. The Church can present to men sufficient motives and can help them to sacrifice for the common good. By bringing men to Christ and joining him to his fellowman in bonds of eternal charity men can find that true happiness which comes only in doing the will of God in peace of conscience. Modern man needs religion; even the scientists have striven to satisfy this need by various abortive and artificial methods.

The most serious obstacles to Christ and His Revelation has been the pride and independence of modern man. Now he realizes his insufficiency and is groaning for a savior. The Church by uniting the hearts and minds of the people can solve the social, political and philosophical problems of our time. Communism or Eastern Mysticism would annihilate the progress so laboriously achieved throughout the last two thousand years. The Catholic Church is above any age or time; she alone can give men the true doctrine of eternal life and earthly happiness. No one can predict with certainty the final direction our period will take but at least the Christianization of the world, the diffusion of the religious ideal of social justice, peace, the spread of truth is an ideal worthy of the best efforts. By entering into the Christian life as far as possible, by our labors in whatever sphere we may be in let us work for the kingdom of God on earth.