

CULTURE AND NATIONAL DEFENSE

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THE American nation is experiencing a period of intensive national defense. Herculean efforts are being made to prepare our economic and military establishment against an enemy who is considered to be progressively threatening our national well-being. The work of defense of the nation is affecting more and more phases of civilian life. All agencies of government and public service have been organized to influence the citizen to lend his aid and cooperation in this all-important endeavor. The reason given, the incentive offered by responsible authorities is that grave and imminent perils are facing the country and unless the American people arouse themselves wholeheartedly, the enemy who is becoming more powerful will find easy access within our gates, as he has in the case of other countries. Paralleling these warnings and exhortations there has been a remarkable lack of detail evinced with regard to these national issues. The public has been left in ignorance of anything concrete. People are sufficiently aware that there are serious dangers today, but they have not been enlightened specifically about them. The answers to the thousand and one questions which the man in the street is asking have been systematically withheld. This attitude finds its echo in the confusion (and consequent indifference) in the minds of the greater number of Americans. It is not the purpose here to write a polemic on national or international affairs. However, since in this total war we are told that the duty of the American people is total defense, it is worth while to seek some clarification of the elements included in total defense. Covering the generality of national life these elements will naturally be of varied importance both in themselves and from the viewpoint in which they are considered. Analysis reveals that there is one phase of defense which is of basic necessity and which in any eventuality is the condition of the success of all other efforts. That is the part which cultural defense must play in the whole scheme.

Out of the maze of statements and facts, one point literally strikes home. When it is declared that our very way of life is being attacked, the average person has a vague understanding of what that means. Our way of life simply means our culture; it is the general outlook we have upon life and the meaning of life, which penetrates

our activity. The intimacy of this thing is appreciated but it is to be doubted if the political orators or their listeners have plumbed very deeply the fullness of meaning of this culture which is so worth defending.

That the word culture in a variety of senses is patent to the person of ordinary reading knowledge. Yet, in its root meaning, coming from the Latin verb *colere*, it signifies cultivation or development. The word originally pertained to agriculture. Thus a man was said to cultivate, care for, and develop his fields. Gradually the purely sensible character of the term was lost and the meaning was transferred to include those things most proper to man—his physical and spiritual faculties. A man was then said to cultivate himself, to develop himself. Finally, in its noblest meaning, culture came to signify worship (*cultus*).¹

Culture in its proper sense means the state of development of the integral man, the more and more perfect realization in this life of his capabilities for good. Simply speaking, culture is human perfection in this life. Its foundation lies deep in the natural desire in every man for the full development of his personality, for perfection. Immediately one senses the air of relativity which the notion of culture implies. Development signifies a perfecting, perfection implies progress. There can be progress only if there is some definite goal which attracts and which is its end. The character of culture will thus depend upon the nature of the goal man has in life. Briefly, the goals of all cultural achievement can be reduced to two—the Christian and the non-Christian. This division is being especially borne out in our own day. Men and societies are influenced predominantly either by the Christian ideals of other-worldliness and progress in perfection according to the Christian mould, i.e., a fuller realization in this life of the image of God, or place their destiny in the attractions of a materialistic and personalistic world. "A group of human beings which believes, in general and firmly, that good or evil-doing in this life are followed by corresponding consequences after death, that the individual soul is immortal, that God is one and the omnipotent Father of all, will behave in one way and a group which denies all reality in ideas of the sort will behave in another. . . . The whole of a human

¹ *Summa Th.* II-II. Q. 81, Al ad 4.

" . . . also some things which are subject to us are said to be cultivated (*coli*) by us, just as farmers (*agri-colae*) are so called because they cultivate (*colunt*) the fields and dwellers (*incolae*) are so named because they cultivate (*colunt*) the places which they inhabit. Because a special honor is due to God as the first principle of all things, a special worship (*cultus*) is also due to Him. . . ."

group is given its savor and character by the spirit which inhabits it; and that spirit may justly be called in every case a religion . . . If such and such things are held in awe, others in abhorrence, and others again presumed indifferent, such and such is the result upon Society as a whole. Change the elements, regard with abhorrence what was formerly thought of with indifference, with indifference what was formerly held sacred, and the whole character of your polity is transformed."² In other words, the outlook on life of the common run of men will establish their cultural status.

Whether it is called philosophy of life or by some other term, the grasp which man has on his final goal is secured by his religion. Culture being the integral development of man, it must necessarily include his religious nature. The importance which this part of human life plays in the progress of culture has never been more consciously recognized than in Christian thought. Culture being something essentially relative, it is the element of religion which gives it its hold on the absolute. Religion is its principal part, the condition without which the other parts cannot rightly and securely evolve. Anything which would hinder the perfection of man as guided by the direction of religion must be rejected as not belonging to true culture. It is a fact that under the impetus of the Christian religion the highest stages in the history of culture have been reached.

Covering the manifold aspects of human life, culture naturally implies a graduation of importance in its parts. There are certain things which are essential to culture, without which man, a unit composed of matter and spirit, cannot truly perfect himself in the attainment of his final goal. These can be reduced to three: true religion, the observance of the precepts of the moral law, and a sufficiency for the necessities of bodily life. These are the absolutely necessary requirements for all times and places. Everything else is non-essential, accidental, necessary only for the bettering and flowering of culture.

We must conclude that there is a twofold measure of culture: the measure of essential or absolute culture and that of accidental or relative culture. For example, a society which supports and fosters religion, enforces the moral code, provides for a just economic life and a fair political life of its citizenry has this basic culture. If the same society in addition produces notable achievements in the arts and sciences, in the superfluities of life, in short, in the things that make for happier living, its cultural level is far higher. However, this latter pursuit without the presence of the former is meaningless and without value, since it has lost its support and purpose. It is rather

² Hilaire Belloc, *The Crisis of Civilization*, p. 14.

a state of what is called hyperculture wherein too much of the goods of accidental culture impede the acquisition of the essential. This has always been a human failing, to be busy about many other things and forget those which are essential. Christ called men to the proper order of things when He said: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice: and all these things shall be added unto you."³

In applying the twofold measure to any cultural group, certain historical coefficients must be taken into consideration. Recognition should be made of the influence which race, history, mentality, climatic and topographical conditions, etc., play in the make-up of individuals and nations. They have a very great and decisive value in the background of accidental culture in particular. Yet, they must not be exaggerated so as to excuse or explain away the lack of the essential elements. Any attempt to exaggerate them out of their proper sphere is ultimately an attack upon the nature of man.

The remarks here about the nature of culture are admittedly sketchy. Nevertheless, they do sufficiently manifest its essential constitution to enable us to take quick stock of what we have today. It is obvious that our cultural status is far below the level of that of past ages. They did not have our modern sanitation, recreational facilities, means of communication and transportation, but they gained great comfort from their sense of unity of purpose and their striving to practice the Christian virtues. Though our defects and failures stand out, it is a more hopeful point of view to consider our assets. Our day has added to human knowledge marvellous advances in the sciences, technology, efficiency, and organization. We can be justly proud of the gains we have made in the progress of accidental culture. Perilous as the condition of our essential culture may be (being but a remnant of the past), the ground is still fertile for another harvest; it needs careful and laborious tilling. The great number of people for whom the dictates of religion and morality still have a practical value must be the mustard seed from which the tree of true culture will spring.

It is in recognition of these facts that the defense of any society ultimately lies. If offense is the best defense, here is the place where we must start. Our entire national trust should not be put in island outposts as if they were our sole first line of defense. The spirit of man must be first strengthened by sound ideas and habits. True defense is in our safeguarding of the nature of man and society and in using all our ability to secure at home and abroad a civilized order founded upon the essential prerequisites of happiness and perfection.

³ St. Luke XII, 31.