

THE SALT OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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RECENT events have made our western world acutely self-conscious. The tension set up by conflicting elements within its borders heralds, it is said, a process of disintegration similar to that which overtook Europe in the early centuries of our era. The gravity of the crisis is such that, in the opinion of men not given to alarmist statements, our traditional civilization is fighting for its very existence. Not unnaturally the danger has provoked a fierce reaction. This manifests itself chiefly in a wave of anti-Semitism, and in the sustained hostility on the part of certain Latin nations to Russian Communism as an alien importation originating among a people of Asiatic origin and destructive of our institutions. The Counter-Revolution, as we may call it, is not content to maintain the right of the western world to perpetuate its own traditions; it claims that the civilization of the West is not merely a civilization entitled to a place alongside other types of society, but is Civilization in the most universal sense of the term, and is destined therefore to dominate the whole earth. The white races have, indeed, long assumed this right. It is their custom to estimate the status of other races according as these approximate to their own standards. When, for instance, we speak of culture, we mean the culture that was cradled on the shores of the Mediterranean. It never occurs to us that Asia, much less Africa, might put forth rival claims deserving of attention. But though this attitude is nothing new, it has received fresh emphasis. The confidence with which it is maintained suggests that it is due to something more than sectional egotism. The very need of enforcing some one standard upon the world as a basis of unity pleads for it. So long as there are differing systems and a jealous continuance of separate traditions, so long, it is asserted, will there be strife. The unification of the world can be effected only by the adoption of a common outlook. Nevertheless, the tone of arrogant exclusiveness in which this is sometimes urged arouses just resentment, and it is probable that such resentment will grow. Asia, at least, is not likely to allow the claim to go unchallenged.

The solution of the difficulty is easier than might seem. It consists in the fact that what we call "western civilization" is in truth a synthesis of East and West. It is not a simple native product, the value of which is due to the superiority of the European soil, but a complex thing which has laid under tribute both Occident and Orient, and may be considered therefore as broadly human. If that assertion should prove to be correct, we can, without any fear of exhibiting western egotism, unhesitatingly put forth the claim to universal domination. In so doing we are but asking the East to subscribe to a régime in the creation of which it has had no small share. We may go even further and, paradoxical as it sounds, declare that "western" civilization owes its most valuable features to the East!

It seems to have been forgotten by some of those who champion European tradition against alien influences that the Roman Empire, to which those traditions are traced back, was far from being confined to one continent. That it extended into Asia and took in the whole of the north Africa littoral might have but little bearing on the question under discussion but for one fact. The policy of Rome towards those it had conquered, as is well known, was singularly tolerant of native traditions. This feature distinguishes its rule both from the despotic oriental empires it superseded and from the brutal repression characteristic of certain modern states. In religious and cultural matters, the Empire showed a remarkably generous hospitality. The syncretism which enabled foreign cults to flourish in the capital included the mystery religions of Asia Minor, the Egyptian worship of Isis, the Syrian cult of Adonis and the ancient astral theology of Babylon. The hospitality shown in this sphere had its parallels in other realms. The Roman was the architect and builder, but the material came from the four points of the compass. It was on that comprehensive basis, to which the Orient made important contributions, that our "western" civilization was originally built.

We may pass over, for the time being, the most fruitful of all these contributions from the East—that of Christianity—and confine ourselves to later importations from other sources.

Outstanding among these was the influence due to the emergence and subsequent advance over Europe of Islam. Mr. Christopher Dawson has summarized the effect of this so well in his work, *The Making of Europe*, that I cannot do better than quote his words. "We are so accustomed", he says, "to regard our culture as essentially that of the West that it

is difficult for us to realize that there was an age when the most civilized region of Western Europe was the province of an alien culture, and when the Mediterranean, the cradle of our civilisation, was in danger of becoming an Arabic sea. It is, in fact, hardly accurate to identify Christendom with the West and Islam with the East, at a time when Asia Minor was still a Christian land, and Spain and Portugal and Sicily were the home of a flourishing Moslem culture. This, however, was the situation in the tenth century, and it had a profound effect on the development of the medieval world. Western culture grew up under the shadow of the more advanced civilization of Islam, and it was from the latter rather than from the Byzantine world that medieval Christendom recovered its share in the inheritance of Greek science and philosophy. It was not until the thirteenth century, after the age of the Crusades and the great catastrophe of the Mongol invasions, that the civilization of Western Christendom began to attain a position of relative equality with that of Islam, and even then it remained permeated with oriental influences."

It would be impossible in the space at our disposal to indicate even briefly all the ways in which these influences operated. But there is one item which, because it is generally supposed to be a native and characteristic product of the European spirit in the Middle Ages, is worth mentioning. If there is one thing more than another which we associate with medievalism, it is the cult of chivalry and the romantic poetry to which this gave rise and which was specially identified with Provence. The writer whom I have just quoted, however, has challenged the exclusiveness of the European claim both to knight-errantry and to troubadour poetry. Dealing with "The Origins of the Romantic Tradition", he has said: "Of course, if we assume that the ideals of chivalry and courtesy which ultimately became so characteristic of medieval society were of purely native growth, then there is no difficulty in ascribing a similar origin to the rise of the new Provençal literature. But it is just this assumption which is open to criticism. In the tenth century the higher culture of Christian Europe was Latin and ecclesiastical, while the feudal society was still almost barbarian. In Moslem Spain, on the other hand, there existed a rich and brilliant society which had already developed a characteristic type of chivalry. . . . While the nobility of feudal Europe was almost illiterate and the profession of the *jongleur* or minstrel was a despised and plebeian occupation, in Islam poetry was a

noble art which even princes were not ashamed to cultivate. And thus it is in Moslem Spain rather than in Northern Europe that we must look for the prototype of the knightly troubadour . . . When the author of *Don Quixote* satirized the follies into which the romantic and chivalric cult had led his countrymen, he was reasserting the realism of the West against an oriental idealism."

Perhaps more important even than this powerful Moslem factor was that supplied by exiled Jewry. It was not that the Jew made any positive Semitic contribution to European life. It was rather that he acted as intermediary between the different nations and races of the Continent. This rôle was dictated by the very conditions under which he existed. His internationalism made him useful in linking up the interests of peoples who otherwise would have remained apart, ignorant of each other and unable to co-operate. It is curious to reflect that to no small extent the unity of the western world was brought about by one who did not himself belong to that world.

The Jew's services as go-between were shown in various ways. Obviously he occupies an important place in the development of European commerce and finance. His adaptability, linguistic acquirements and possession of abilities trained by long experience made him, in this sphere, invaluable. It is not so well known, however, that he contributed not a little to geographical discovery, and played no small part in the events leading up to Columbus's discovery of America. As it is easy to understand his interest in travel, so is it understandable how he came to be valued as a translator.

What Dr. Cecil Roth has to say on this point in *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* is of more than common interest. In the present connection it is of particular importance. "The Mediterranean world at this time," he writes, "was divided culturally and politically, it may be said, into three portions. There were the Greeks, possessing the treasures of antiquity, yet hardly aware of their value: the Arabs studying them in vernacular versions in their schools, particularly in Southern Spain: and the Latins, painfully conscious of their inferiority, yet for linguistic reasons unable to obtain access to the sources for which they thirsted. All these three sections were cut off from one another by differences of language, religion and tradition. The gulf would have been unbridgeable, but for one element which was to be found in all. From the truly catholic point of view, the Jews were the only real Europeans, whose

purview extended beyond the boundaries of the Latin world to the Greek on the one hand and the Arab on the other; who possessed a common language—Hebrew—which was understood, in certain circles at least, the whole world over, and could thus form a medium of intercourse; who were so endowed with linguistic knowledge that they could travel from land to land without great difficulty, and could generally find some co-religionist who could read and speak the most recondite foreign language.”

It is natural that the Jew should become associated, for both good and evil, with international activities. Yet this is not the only way in which he becomes prominent. The detachment which makes him successful as a citizen of the world enables him also to serve national causes. No statesman of modern times played a larger part in the creation of the British Empire than Benjamin Disraeli, and this he was able to do because he stood apart and took an objective and realist view of the political situation.

But of course the greatest contribution which the Semitic genius has made to civilization is that which is mediated by Christianity. In approaching this subject it is necessary at the outset to clear up one misunderstanding. The fact that Christianity encountered at the beginning of its career the opposition of Judaism does not mean that it abandoned its Hebrew tradition in favour of a cosmopolitan universalism. The point has been well put by an Anglican writer, Rev. H. F. Hamilton, D.D., of Bishop's College, Lennoxville, Canada. “It is evident then,” he wrote in *The People of God*, “that the transition from the nationalism of Judaism to the universalism of Christianity was carried through in the name of the Jewish religion, by devoted adherents of the Jewish religion, as the long-intended issue, the fulfilment of its being, and the realization of its promises. It was not affected by any considerations, however liberal and enlightened, impinging upon it from without. It was a reorganization of the Jewish religion from within, not an entirely new beginning from the outside.” Similar testimony was borne by Pius XI when he declared: “Spiritually we are Semites.”

Obviously the subject cannot be treated here at the length for which its importance calls. It must suffice to assume the truth of Dr. Hamilton's statement, and pass on to a consideration of the effect on our civilization of this factor. Yet to do even this adequately would involve retelling the story of the

recreation of European civilization when that civilization had become decadent and was on the point of relapsing into chaos. The very foundations of the new order which came into being during the first centuries of our era were laid by the Christian Church. The new value it gave to personality, the greater dignity it attached to manual labour and the respect it showed for womanhood transformed social institutions. In all this it was but making operative the ideals of Hebrew prophets as mediated by the Messiah. It was through the same channel that the ancient culture, purified and adapted, was re-introduced to live again under Christian auspices. St. Thomas Aquinas gave Aristotle a new lease of life, and Vergil was reborn in Dante's *Commedia*. The very corruption of the medieval Church bears witness to the value of the Semitic element, since it was when this element was submerged by the pagan revival known as the Renaissance that Christendom saw the decline of its spiritual and moral life. Guided by a true instinct, the Reformers appealed to the Hebrew scriptures and thus tapped once more the life-giving sources of western civilization. What the Bible has meant for the West needs no telling. We can trace to its influence all that is best in the social and cultural life of our times. The anti-Semitic attack on it will only deepen attachment to it. Well did Cardinal Faulhaber, preaching in Munich Cathedral, say: "A storm is brewing in this country to-day, a hurricane which would sweep the Sacred Scriptures out of Germany, because they are Jewish books. It is my conviction that its effect on the contrary will be to enkindle in men of all creeds a new and holy enthusiasm for the sacred books."

If the position taken up in the foregoing is accepted, we reach the paradoxical conclusion, suggested at the beginning of this article, that the very salt of what is called "western" civilization—that which has preserved it from corruption—comes to us from the East. We may speak of a synthesis of East and West, but if we do so, it should be remembered that it is the East which supplies the more essential factor. This it was which made a rebirth of Europe possible when, to all appearances, it was dying. The supposition that the northern barbarians would unaided, in course of time, have regenerated the Empire has no justification, and we are therefore driven to the conclusion that the traditions of the West owe their very continuance to the Orient.

It is this fact which robs of arrogance the claim set up on behalf of those traditions to dominate the world. Justification

for the civilizing mission which the West has undertaken in all parts of the earth is, however, conditioned by willingness to acknowledge its indebtedness to the East. Once we eliminate or even minimize the Semitic contribution, our own order will crumble, and we shall lose whatever right would be ours to regard our ideals as of universal validity. The anti-Semitism of Germany, by breaking up the European synthesis and discarding its most valuable factor, deprives those responsible of any moral authority to participate in the movement whereby the blessings of western civilization are extended to the rest of the world. They cannot have it both ways. If their social and cultural life is but the native product of their own soil, then, to their own soil will it be confined. If anti-Semitism succeeds in cutting the Occident off from its oriental sources, it will succumb to an infertile provincialism. If we refuse to accept, we shall lose the power to give.