

Herman Dooyeweerd: "Christianity, Humanism and the European Future"

Since 1926 professor of law at the Free University in Amsterdam, Dr Dooyeweerd (born 1894) is founder of the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea, and as such a major force in modern Calvinist thought. Among his writings in English are Transcendental Problems of Philosophical Thought (1948) and the four volume New Critique of Theoretical Thought (1936-1955).

The way the editors of *Delta* have framed their question could give rise to various comments. The term 'cultural area', for instance, has never been properly defined. Must it be taken to indicate a certain unity in cultural history? Or should it be understood in the sense given it by American cultural anthropologists - that of an area that is an entity only in the geographic sense?

In the latter case it would be better to speak not of Western European but of Western culture (for the Western cultural area). Moreover, it remains a difficult question to what extent reference can be made to common features of this culture, and to what extent it is still possible in today's world, to draw a dividing line between peoples who do and who do not belong to this cultural area. Should the Slavic nations, for example, be counted in it? The difficulty is implicit in the very lack of a definition of the customary concept of culture, which has become a kind of collective label for all that can be regarded as an outcome of unfettered human productivity, as opposed to the products of 'nature'. In this collective sense culture has frequently been given substance and regarded as a kind of 'spiritual organism' with a historical development and a unity that is to be sought in a collective 'cultural spirit' or 'soul'. This personification, originating in Romantic cultural philosophy, can contribute very little to a clearer view of 'Western culture'.

If in spite of its manifold aspects this culture shows a certain unity in its historical development, this unity will have to be sought in the first place in the main incentives which have given direction to such development, and which in themselves cannot be explained in cultural historical terms.

The central influence on Western culture emanated no doubt from Christian religion and, since the Italian Renaissance, from modern humanism, which transformed the basic principles of Christianity into a religion of the autonomous human personality. Western culture bears the undeniable imprint of these two movements. They have also provided the decisive incentives for the development of Western culture, to which were transferred the classical elements of ancient civilization, first by the Church and later also by humanism.

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These movements, however, were directed not to a limited section of humanity but to the whole of mankind. And since they gave the central impetus to the development of Western culture, they also opened up for it some essential perspectives of world history, thus preventing it from stagnating and excluding other cultures. Thereby Western culture indisputably attained a leading rôle in the process of integrating the civilization of mankind.

In the meantime, the secularization of social life, which has been proceeding at full pace since the nineteenth century, has brought about a fundamental crisis in this culture. Christianity began more and more to lose its central hold on Western society, and humanism, which from the eighteenth century onwards had in many ways taken over the lead in the development of Western culture, fell into a spiritual crisis which undermined its former belief in human reason. As a result of this weakening of the central religious impetus, symptoms of spiritual uprootedness began to manifest themselves everywhere and, since the two catastrophic world wars, have taken on vast proportions. The nihilism that gained ground became personified in the 'mass-man'. This spiritual disintegration of Western culture is reflected in present-day philosophy and art. The prodigious development of Western science and technology cannot make good the loss of spiritual concentration and integration, and may even, if the religious uprootedness progresses yet further, prove to be fatal to it.

The uprootedness has also found expression in the cultural philosophy of the twentieth century, in which a radical historicism and relativism have come to predominate. Western culture has been denied any claim to a central rôle in world history. Put on a parallel footing with other cultures, it has been regarded as an 'organism' enclosed in its own life cycle and subject to a developmental process of ripening, maturity and adolescence, old age and death. According to this view, which found its most imposing expression in Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Western culture has irrevocably reached the phase of old age, in which there is no longer any possibility of renewal in content or in form, and no escape from its fate.

This fatalistic view of the future of the West, which has also strongly influenced Arnold Toynbee's ideas, must in my opinion be rejected on principle. It fails to appreciate the fundamental difference between primitive cultures whose development has come to an end and an open culture belonging to the mainstream of world history, which will never cease to flow until the final judgement. The course of development of (p.41)

Western culture cannot be conceived as analogous to the organic process of development of a living individual.

Its present inner disintegration is a challenge to the two spiritual forces which have dominated it in the course of its development. Whether Western culture will prove strong enough to continue renewing itself in the future, in both form and content, depends primarily on whether it will be capable of achieving a new spiritual integration of its extremely differentiated spheres of culture - an integration (and this I should like to emphasize) which does not hinder this process of differentiation.

This spiritual integration can in my opinion no longer be expected to be forthcoming from humanism; that has been cut off too completely from its religious roots. The totalitarian ideology of communism strives after an integration designed to suppress the independence of the various spheres of culture by spiritual regimentation. Only Christianity is capable of exercising an integrating influence which makes full allowance for the true inner nature and independence of the differentiated cultural spheres. However, it will no longer be able to exert this integrating influence by the mediaeval principle of ecclesiastical tutelage, but only by means of its basic oecumenical principle, which is an inexhaustible source of spiritual energy that continually stimulates man to a renewal of life. There are encouraging signs that Christianity is about to regain, along this oecumenical road, its central influence on the future development of Western culture. But to predict the future of the West is beyond the power of man.