THE END OF AN AGE

By CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

FOR centuries a civilization will follow the same path, worshipping the same gods, cherishing the same ideals, acknowledging the same moral and intellectual standards. And then all at once a change will come, the springs of the old life run dry and men suddenly awake to a new world in which the ruling principles of the former age seem to lose their validity and to become inapplicable or meaningless. This is what occurred in the time of the Roman Empire, when the ancient world, which had lived for centuries on the inherited capital of the Hellenistic culture, seemed suddenly to come to the end of its resources and to realize its need of something entirely new. For four hundred years the civilized world had been reading the same books, admiring the same works of art, and cultivating the same types of social and personal expression. Then comes the change of the third and fourth centuries A.D., when the form of the Hellenistic culture suddenly lost their vitality and men turned to a new art, a new thought and a new way of life—from philosophy to theology, from the Greek statue to the Byzantine mosaic, from the gymnasium to the monastery.

This species of cultural discontinuity is not unknown in other civilizations—for example in China in the third and fourth centuries A.D., but it seems specially characteristic of the West. It took place once more in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries at the close of the Middle Ages, and we seem to be experiencing something of the kind in Europe to-day. During the last period of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth century a further phase of Western civilization came to an end. The old capital was exhausted and there was nothing to take its place. Liberalism

and Nationalism had won their long fight with the old order, but they had lost their own ideals. In Italy the Risorgimento had given place to the age of Crispi and the Triple Alliance, and in France the centenary of the Republic was being celebrated by the Panama scandals. It was a dark age—dark not as in the early Middle Ages with the honest night of barbarism, but with the close uneasy gloom which comes before a storm. In the past the periods of climax, as a rule, have been ages of material distress and economic decline, but the terrifying thing about that age was its prosperity, its confidence, its material success. 'There has never,' wrote Péguy, 'been an age in which money was to such a degree the only master and god. And never have the rich been so protected against the poor and the poor so unprotected against the rich.'

'And never has the temporal been so protected against the spiritual; and never has the spiritual been so unprotected against the temporal.'

The goal of the Liberal Enlightenment and Revolution had been reached and Europe at last possessed a completely secularized culture. The old religion had not been destroyed, in fact throughout Protestant Europe the churches still possessed a position of established privilege. But they held this position only on the condition that they did not interfere with the reign of Mammon. In reality they had been pushed aside into a backwater where they were free to stagnate in peace and to brood over the memory of dead controversies which had moved the mind of Europe three centuries before.

On the other hand the intellectuals who had contributed so much to the victory of the new order of things were in a very similar plight. They found themselves powerless to influence the movement of civilization which had cut itself free, not only from tradition, but also from art and thought. The spiritual leadership that was possessed by Voltaire and Rousseau, by Goethe and Fichte, was now a thing of the past. The men of letters were expected to follow society,

not to lead it. And this is what many of them did, whether with the professional servility of the journalist or with the disinterested fanaticism of the realist, who affirmed his artistic integrity by the creation of an imaginary world no less devoid of spiritual significance than was the social world in which he lived. But a large number, probably the majority, found neither of these alternatives satisfactory. They turned to literature and art as a means of escape from reality. That was the meaning to many of the catchword, 'Art for Art's sake.'[1] Symbolism and æstheticism, the Ivory Tower and the Celtic Twilight, Satanism and the cult of 'Evil', hashish and absinthe; all of them were ways by which the last survivors of Romanticism made their escape, leaving the enemy in possession of the field.

There was however, one exception, one man who refused to surrender.

Whatever his weaknesses Friedrich Nietzsche was neither a time-server nor a coward. He at least stood for the supremacy of spirit when so many of these whose office it was to defend it had fallen asleep or had gone over to the enemy. He remained faithful to the old ideals of the Renaissance culture, the ideals of creative genius and of the self-affirmation of the free personality, and he revolted against the blasphemies of an age which degraded the personality and denied the power of the spirit in the name of humanity and liberty.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche himself was far from being a humanist. Humanism is essentially a *via media*, and in the nineteenth century the *via media* had become identical with mediocrity. In Nietzche's eyes humanity had become something either ridiculous or shameful, and the attempt to pass beyond humanity led him to the negation of humanism and the destruction of his own personality; as he said, the way of the creator is to burn himself in his own fire. Yet, as Berdiaiev has insisted, the tragedy of Nietzsche

[1] Its true meaning, however, is to be found rather in the dilettantism of Oscar Wilde.

is the tragedy of the end of humanism, since it only reveals with exceptional clearness the ultimate consequences of the antinomy that was inherent in the humanist tradition from the beginning.

In spite of its ideal of a purely human perfection and its cult of classical form, there was in humanism something excessive, a kind of hubris which led it to destruction. We see this already in the brilliant culture of fifteenth century Italy where the unbridled individualism of princes and cities led to the loss of national independence. But that is only a superficial instance of the instability of the new order. It is not in any obvious material failure, but in its very triumphs and successes that the real weakness of the movement is to be found. For each fresh victory of the humanistic spirit undermined the foundations of its own vitality. The Renaissance has its beginning in the self-discovery, the self-realization and the self-exaltation of Man. Mediæval man had attempted to base his life on the supernatural. His ideal of knowledge was not the adventurous quest of the human mind exploring its own kingdom, it was an intuition of the eternal verities which is itself an emanation from the Divine Intellect—*irradiatio et participatio primae lucis*. The men of the Renaissance, on the other hand, turned away from the eternal and the absolute to the world of nature and human experience. They rejected their dependence on the supernatural and vindicated their independence and supremacy in the temporal order. But thereby they were gradually led by an internal process of logic to criticize the principles of their own knowledge and to lose confidence in their own freedom. As Berdiaiev has written, 'The man who affirms himself and denies everything that is above humanity, finally undermines the consciousness of his own powers.'[1] And he goes on to point out how this tendency shows itself in every department of modern thought. In philosophy, it leads from the dogmatic rationalism of Descartes and the dogmatic empiricism of

[1] *Der Sinn der Geschichte*, p. 223.

Locke to the radical scepticism of Hume and the subjectivism of later German thought. Reason is gradually stripped of its prerogatives until nothing is left to it but the bare 'As if' of Vaihinger.

In science, the growth of man's knowledge and his control over nature is accompanied by a growing sense of man's dependence on material forces. He gradually loses his position of exception and superiority and sinks back into nature. He becomes a subordinate part of the great mechanical system that his scientific genius has created. In the same way, the economic process, which led to the exploitation of the world by man and the vast increase of his material resources, ends in the subjection of man to the rule of the machine and the mechanization of human life. Finally, in the political and social sphere, the revolt against the mediæval principle of hierarchy and the reassertion of the rights of the secular power led to the absolutism of the modern material state. This again was followed by a second revolt—the assertion of the rights of man against secular authority which culminated in the French Revolution. But this second revolt also leads to disillusion. It caused on the one hand the disintegration of the organic principle in society into an individualistic atomism which leaves the individual isolated and helpless before the new economic forces, and on the other to the growth of the new bureaucratic state, that 'coldest of cold monsters', which exerts a more irresistible and far-reaching control over the individual life than was ever possessed by the absolute monarchies of the old régime.

So we have the paradox that at the beginning of the Renaissance, when the conquest of nature and the creation of modern science are still unrealized, man appears in godlike freedom with a sense of unbounded power and greatness; while at the end of the nineteenth century, when nature has been conquered and there seem no limits to the powers of science, man is once more conscious of his misery and weakness, as the slave of material circumstance

and physical appetite and death. Instead of the heroic exaltation of humanity which was characteristic of the naturalism of the Renaissance, we see the humiliation of humanity in the anti-human naturalism of Zola and de Maupassant. Man is stripped of his glory and freedom and left as a naked human animal shivering in an inhuman universe.

Thus humanism by its own inner development is eventually brought to deny itself and to pass away into its opposite. For Nietzsche, who refused to surrender the spiritual element in the Renaissance tradition, humanism is transcended in an effect to attain to the superhuman without abandoning the self-assertion and the rebellious freedom of the individual will—an attempt which inevitably ends in self-destruction. But modern civilization as a whole could not follow this path. It naturally chose to live as best it could, rather than to commit a spectacular suicide. And so, in order to adapt itself to the new conditions, it was forced to throw over the humanist tradition.

Hence the increasing acceptance of the mechanization of life which has characterized the last thirty years. Above all, in the period since the war there has been a growing tendency towards the de-intellectualization and exteriorization of European life. The old fixed careers of social and moral conduct have been abandoned and society has given itself up to the current of external change without any attempt towards self-direction or the preservation of spiritual continuity. But this acceptance of new conditions is in itself negative and possesses no creative quality. It points to the dying down and stagnation of culture rather than its renewal. Nor is this surprising. For centuries western civilization has received its impetus from the humanist tradition, and the dying-away of that tradition naturally involves the temporary cessation of cultural creativeness.

From this point of view it is very significant that almost the only original element in the thought of the new age

should be the work of Jews. In physical science the dominant figure is Einstein, in psychology it is Freud, in economics and sociology it is Marx, and each of them has exerted influence on the thought of the age which far transcends the limits of his particular subject. And it is easy to understand the reasons of this. The Jewish mind alone in the west has its own sources of life which are independent of the Hellenic and the Renaissance traditions. It has seen too many civilizations rise and fall to be discouraged by the failure of humanism. On the contrary it thrives in an atmosphere of determinism and historical destiny which seems fatal to the humanist spirit. This holds good especially of the Marxian attitude, which is characteristic of the new conditions, although it originated at a time when liberalism and romanticism were still flourishing. But Marx addressed himself to those elements in the modern world which were already deprived of any share in the heritage of humanist culture. He found the proletariat enslaved to the machine, and he sought, not to destroy this servitude, but to equalize and rationalize it by extending it to the whole social organism. Thus, in Marx, the cult of equality and social justice led to the sacrifice of human freedom and spiritual creativeness to an inhuman economic whole. He condemned the whole humanistic morality and culture as bourgeois and accepted the machine, not only as the basis of economic activity, but as the explanation of the mystery of life itself. The mechanical processes of economic life are the ultimate realities of history and human life. Everything else—religion, art, philosophy, spiritual life—stands on a lower plane of reality, they are a dream world of shadows cast on the sleeping mind by the physical processes of the real world of matter and mechanism. Hence Berdiaiev takes Marxism as the culminating point of the modern tendency to explain that which is specifically human in terms of something else. In fact, the Marxian interpretation of history is nothing but an explaining away of history. It

professes to guide us to the heart of the problem and it merely unveils a void. And thus, according to Berdiaiev, the essential importance of Marxism is to be found, not in its constructive proposals, but in its negations, its sweeping away of the half ideological constructions of nineteenth-century thought. It aims at a sharp formulation of the dilemma which these systems had tended to hide. 'Man must either incorporate himself in this mystery of Not-being and sink in the abyss of Not-being, or he must return to the inner mystery of human destiny and unite himself once again with the sacred traditions ' which are the true basis of the historical process[1]

The western observer will probably question the metaphysical importance which Berdiaiev attributes to the Marxian doctrine. It is, however, impossible to deny the connection between communism and historical materialism, and the former actually derives much of its moral driving force from a quasi-religious devotion to the materialistic theory. There is no mistaking the note of sombre religious enthusiasm which, for example, characterizes Lenin's attitude to the metaphysical side of the Marxian creed. When he attacks Mach for having 'betrayed materialism with a kiss,' he is not speaking in jest. He is condemning what he regards as an act of spiritual apostacy.

But this attitude finds a much more congenial atmosphere in Russia, where the religious impulse has always had a tendency towards Nihilism, than in the west. In Western Europe the decadence of the humanist tradition has left the European mind so weak that it is no longer capable of any metaphysical conviction. The greatest danger here is not that we should actively adopt the Bolshevik cult of Marxian materialism, but rather that we should yield ourselves passively to a practical materialization of culture after the American pattern. The Communists may have defied mechanism in theory, but it is the Americans who have realized it in practise. They have adapted themselves to

[1] *Berdiaiev, op. cit.*, p.p. 34-5.

the conditions of the new age earlier and more completely than the peoples of the Old World, partly because the external circumstances of American life were more favourable, but most of all because they were more spiritually independent of the humanist tradition. The Renaissance culture which had its centre in the courts and capitals of Europe left America almost untouched. The American tradition is founded on Calvinism, which governed the social life of the northern states down to the nineteenth century, and which possessed almost a complete monopoly of higher education; while in the new lands outside the old colonial territory, the churches, whether Calvinist or Baptist or Methodist, were still all-important and the humanist education, which was still so powerful in Europe, was practically non-existent.

Now the social effect of Calvinism and of American Protestantism in general is to create an immensely strong moral motive for action without any corresponding intellectual ideal. It is a culture of the will rather than of the understanding—a purely ethical discipline which neglects intellectual and æsthetic values. This attitude remains characteristic of American civilization even in its secular development. Thus the ideals of humanist democracy, which were received from France in the revolutionary period, were stripped of their intellectual element and moralized as a justification for the unregulated activity of the ordinary man. This led, on the one hand, to the individualistic cult of material success and, on the other, to a humanitarian idealism, which is in reality nothing else but the same ideal in a socialized form. No doubt these ideals still preserved some of the moral inspiration that derives from the Puritan tradition, just as European liberalism retained something of the humanist tradition. But when this religious inspiration has evaporated, American civilization without Calvinism, like modern European civilization without humanism, becomes a body without a soul. And it is this dead civilization which is apotheosized

in the mythology of Hollywood and which is invading the Old World with all the prestige of its vast material achievement. It possesses a kind of pseudo-humanist appeal since its offers the ordinary man and woman the vision of a wider and richer life. The new machine-made civilization may be destructive of the finer pleasures in life, but under the old conditions there were only accessible to a small number. The ordinary man gets more satisfaction from his cinema and his daily paper than from grand opera or classical literature. If modern civilization is able to pay its way, if it is not upset by some unexpected economic or military catastrophe, we have no reason to suppose that it will be undermined by any movement of popular dissatisfaction. On the contrary, the whole tendency of democratic politics and social reform and economic progress is to extend the sway of this standardized industrial mass civilization. Nor can education improve matters, since if the teacher himself is without a humanist tradition or spiritual discipline he cannot impart them to others. And science is equally unhelpful, since, when it is once separated from the humanist tradition, it becomes as utilitarian and materialistic as industrialism. The ordinary man knows and cares nothing for it, and the leader of industry and the politician value it only as the servant of the machine. The only remedy is to be found in man himself—in the renewal of the human image which was once impressed so clearly on our western civilization, but which has now become disfigured and effaced.

To-day there is a general realization of this need. The last generation—the generation of Mr Wells and Bernard Shaw—was still prepared to idealize the machine and to place its hopes in a mechanized utopia. The present generation has lost this confidence, its attitude—whether it is expressed in the violent revolt of Mr. D. H. Lawrence, or in the scepticism of Mr. Aldous Huxley, or in the robust criticism of Mr. Wyndham Lewis—is definitely hostile to the ideals of mechanicism and standardized democratic culture. But

this reaction is almost entirely negative and in the case of Mr. Lawrence, at any rate, it ends in an apocalyptic denial of civilization and humanity.

> 'Our epoch is over,
> A cycle of evolution has finished,
> Our activity has lost its meaning,
> We are ghosts, we are seed;
> For our world is dead
> And we know not how to live worldless.'

> 'All we can know at this moment is the fulfilment of nothingness,
> Lo, I am nothing.'

There are, however, some who still keep their faith in the ideals of humanism, and who believe that our civilization can yet be saved by a return to the humanist tradition. But it is not easy to see how this recovery is to be effected. A literary cult of humanism in the abstract is certainly not sufficient. This is the weakness of Mr. Clive Bell's plea for civilization. He seems to think that an admiration for the aristocratic culture of eighteenth-century France or of fifteenth-century Florence is sufficient to create a new civilization of the same type. But of what use are the ideals of an eighteenth-century salon in a twentieth-century factory? We must either get out of the factory or find some ideal which can live in such an environment. The reign of the machine cannot be broken by a mere aspiration towards something different. It is a strong man armed who keeps his house until a stronger than he comes. It can only be conquered by the spiritual power which is the creative element in every culture. This is so even in the case of the humanist culture, in spite of its apparent naturalism. The more one studies the origins of humanism, the more one is brought to recognize the importance of an element which is not only spiritual but definitely Christian. The old conception of the Renaissance as a revival of Paganism—an idea which was popularized by nineteenth-century writers such as Burckhardt and J. A. Symonds—is to-day rejected not only by philosophers like Berdiaiev, but by historians and critics, such as Karl Burdach and Giuseppe Toffanin. The Renaissance had its origin, not only in the recovery of classical antiquity, but in the mystical humanism of St. Francis and Dante. This element survives in the later Renaissance in such representative figures as Francesco Pico and Marsilio Ficino, Botticelli and Michelangelo, Sadoleto and Tasso, and it finds an extraordinary clear expression in the poems of Campanella, above all in his great canzone, 'Della possanza dell 'vomo', in which the purely humanist ideal of man's power and glory is united with the Christian conception of the Divine Humanity.

It may be said that this is only one aspect, and that not the most important, of the humanist movement. But as Berdiaiev points out, even the purely naturalistic achievements of the Renaissance were dependent on its Christian antecedents. Humanism was, it is true, a return to nature, the rediscovery of man and the natural world, but the author of the discovery, the active principle in the change, was not the natural man. It was Christian man, the human type which had been produced by the centuries of ascetic discipline and intensive cultivation of the inner life. The great men of the Renaissance were spiritual men, even when they were most deeply immersed in the temporal order. It was from the accumulated resources of their Christian past that they acquired the spiritual energy to conquer the material world and to create the new secular culture. It is true that the disparity between the source and the object of their activity tended to produce a sense of strain and spiritual tension which is perceptible in the work of typical Renaissance geniuses such as Shakespeare and Cervantes, as well as in definitely religious characters like those of Michelangelo or Campanella. But at least in catholic Europe, the two elements had attained to a relatively stable equilibrium by the end of the sixteenth century and had an equal share in the development of the later Renaissance

culture. The spirit of Christian humanism dominated the whole of the seventeenth century and manifested itself alike in the baroque art of Spain and Italy and Central Europe, in the Jacobean and Caroline literature of England, and in the classical culture of France. This religious current which runs through seventeenth-century culture cannot be set aside as a reactionary or negative phenomenon, for it lies at the heart of the higher civilization of the time and is responsible for some of its greatest achievements. Indeed, when in the eighteenth-century this equilibrium was destroyed by the final victory of the naturalistic and rationalist tendencies, it involved the fall of the Renaissance culture itself. The new humanism of the Enlightenment was lacking in the vitality and spirited depth of the earlier type. The one-sided rationalism of the Encyclopædists provoked the one-sided subjective emotionalism of Rousseau and the Romantics.

And though both rationalism and romanticism were in a sense the heirs of the Renaissance tradition, neither of them was the true representative of the earlier humanism. Rationalism had lost its spiritual inspiration and romanticism lacked its intellectual order and its sense of form.

Thus the disappearance of the Christian element in humanism has involved the loss of its vital quality. If we attempt to resuscitate it in a purely naturalistic foundation, we may get something like the humanism of Anatole France, but we shall certainly not recover the creative humanism of the Renaissance period. This is admitted by the protagonist of the new humanism, Professor Babbitt, who fully realizes that every culture is a spiritual order and that humanism is only possible if we throw over naturalism and return to spiritual principles. But while he recognizes that the very survival of western civilization depends 'on the appearance of leaders who have rediscovered in some form the truths of the inner life and repudiated the errors of naturalism,' he is unwilling to make the complete return to metaphysical and religious foundations. He prefers a kind of spiritual positivism based on the accumulated moral wisdom of the great historic traditions—Greek, Buddhist and Confucian. His desire to be 'modern and individualistic and critical' causes him to shrink from committing himself absolutely to that which is eternal and universal.

Yet without such an affirmation, no true spiritual order is possible. Each of the great spiritual traditions to which he appeals rested on a metaphysical foundation, and if this is removed their moral order falls with it. Even Epicurus himself had to pass beyond the 'flammantia moenia mundi' before he could bring peace to the minds of his disciples. By his insistence on the critical and individualistic attitude, Professor Babbitt is taking his stand on the weakest point in his position. The tradition of critical individualism still survives, indeed the modern intellectual has carried it to its extreme limits. But this excess is a last desperate reaction against the all-pervading pressure of a collectivist civilization. In the days of Voltaire the critic was leading a victorious advance against the routed forces of the old order, to-day he is fighting for his very existence against the ruling tendencies of the age. It is easier to restore a spiritual purpose to civilization than to reverse its tendency towards collectivism and solidarity. To a critic like Babbitt Christianity is inacceptable on account of its weakness, during the last two centuries, against the dissolvent forces of rationalist criticism, but this type of criticism is already losing its power. The modern criticism of organized religion is in part the survival, on a lower cultural plane, of the rationalist thought of a past age, and is in part a reaction against the romantic and individualist forms of religion which were characteristic of the nineteenth century or, at least, of the post-Reformation period. But Christianity in itself is in no way bound up with the individualist culture that is passing away. It was in origin a religion of order and solidarity which throve in an atmosphere of anonymity and collectivism.

It was not itself responsible for the dying-down of classical culture, the loss of civic liberty and the inauguration of the régime of compulsion and state socialism, which were, on the contrary, the necessary consequences of the inherent inconsistencies and weakness of the later classical culture itself. But it was able to accommodate itself to these conditions, in which a purely secular type of individual culture must inevitably perish. And it seems possible that Christianity may survive modern humanism in the same way that it survived ancient Hellenism. However seriously Christianity is threatened by the materialism and mechanicism of modern civilization, it is in a much stronger position than the tradition of critical intellectualism, which can find neither a material nor a spiritual basis in the new conditions of life. The latter belongs essentially to the culture of a leisured class—not the new plutocracy of millionaires and leaders of industry, but the privileged classes of the old Europe, whether bourgeois or aristocratic, who stood outside the economic arena. This class has already practically disappeared, and its civilization and ideals of life are forced to disappear in like manner. The choice that is actually before us is not between an individualistic humanism and some form of collectivism, but between a collectivism which is purely mechanistic and one which is spiritual. Spiritual individualism is incapable of standing out against the collectivism and standardization of modern life, It is only by a return to spiritual solidarity that modern civilization can recover the spiritual principle of which it stands so greatly in need. This return from criticism and individualism to an organic spiritual order is what Berdiaiev means by his New Middle Ages, but it does not necessarily involve a retrogression of culture. The collapse of ancient civilization was material as well as moral. Christianity could revive the spiritual life of the ancient world, but it could not bring back the vanished prosperity or restore the material foundations that had been ruined. The return to an organic type of society and the recovery of a spiritual principle in

social life need not imply the coming of an age of obscurantism or of material squalor and decay. On the contrary, it may well give a new lease of life to Western civilization and restore the creative power which the secularization of modern culture has destroyed.