The Smith Lecture under the auspices of the History Department, University of Saint Thomas

America and the Secularization of Modern Culture

Christopher Dawson

University of Saint Thomas
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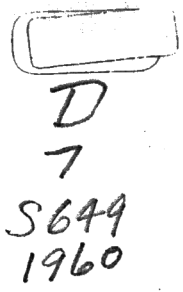


INTRODUCTION

The History Department of the University of Saint Thomas takes increasing pleasure with each passing year in welcoming you to the annual Smith Lecture in History. This series has become something of an institution, and this year it reaches a high water mark in quality.

It is through the kindness of the family of the late Benjamin Kopper Smith that this annual Lecture is made possible. They have conferred on the University a great blessing, and it accordingly becomes the History Department's obligation to maintain the high standard that has prevailed by bringing to our campus historians of unusual caliber.

The scholar that we have with us tonight is of such great stature that his reputation and influence reach across many seas and find their way even into numerous non-English speaking areas. Christopher Dawson belongs to that small group of great minds whose work it is to interpret the historic processes. He examines the causal forces at work beneath the surface of events and finds the meaning of passing phenomena. Where lesser historians chronicle, he interprets. Where they merely record, he analyzes. That is why Professor Dawson has been a guide and a light by his magazine contributions and his books for the last thirty-five or forty years.

To begin with his latest volume I may mention his *Historic Reality of Christian Culture* published

just this year and *The Movement of World Revolution,* which appeared last year. A collection of some of his best essays stretching over the past four decades were gathered together and published in one volume in 1956 under the title, *The Dynamics of World History.* Whether he deals with the religion of ancient Egypt or the industrialism of the last century, whether he writes of fourteenth century literature or the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx, Professor Dawson always speaks with genuine authority, with unmistakable clarity, and with deep wisdom. Contact with his mind is a rich experience and leaves a lasting impression.

Allow me to indicate the fundamental role that Professor Dawson allots to religion in the shaping of any historic culture. The achievements of any society are determined by the vitality of its religious tradition. What is the fate, then, of a society whose outstanding feature is secularism, a *this*-worldly as opposed to an *other*-worldly attitude? This is the question that Professor Dawson takes up this evening when he speaks to us on *America and the Secularization of Modern Culture.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is with undisguised pleasure that I present to you the present occupant of the Stillman Chair in Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard University, Professor Christopher Dawson.

R. E. LAMB, C.S.B.,

Chairman, History Department

AMERICA AND THE SECULARIZATION OF MODERN CULTURE

The secularization of modern culture is a world wide phenomenon and in the most advanced societies it permeates the whole social structure and affects the life of the masses no less than the ruling element. But it is not a uniform movement. It takes at least two forms. In the East, in Russia and China, it is linked with the aggressive intolerant ideology of Communism which is imposed by force and spread by organized propaganda. In the West it is associated with democracy and the ideals of political and intellectual liberty. No one is forced to be a secularist. He is free — more or less free in the various countries — to follow his own religion or to adopt a purely secular philosophy of life. Here there is no official ideology — at least in theory — although in practice, as we shall see, this is not altogether the case.

Nevertheless it was in the West that the process of secularization began and Western civilization was the creator of that technological order which is now the real basis of secular culture. Indeed the Eastern development is due to a great extent to the imitation of Western technological culture and its violence and intolerance is partly due to its desire to "catch up with" the West and carry through in a generation the changes which took a century or more to develop in the West.

Where does America stand in this development? America is the most Western of Western countries, and it is in America that the technological order has achieved its greatest triumphs. In Europe the influence of the past is still strong and one is everywhere conscious of the existence of the pre-technological order, even though culture may seem to be completely secularized. It is not until we come to America that we realize visually and experimentally what the technological civilization means in terms

of human life. No one from the Old World can land at New York without being immediately impressed by this spectacle of gigantic material power, and if one sees the city at night from the air, outlined in lights, it is almost more impressive. There is nothing like it in Europe or I think anywhere else. It seems to mark the coming of a new age and a new civilization.

Yet at the same time we cannot help being struck by a certain disproportion between means and ends. For when one asks what is the real end for which all this majestic array of power exists, the answer is a disappointing one. The towers and temples of Manhatten are just business offices, and the language of illuminated signs which make the nights of New York so brilliant only proclaim the quality of some commercial product. This is so familiar to us that we take it for granted as the normal way of life. But viewed in the perspective of history it is a very strange and surprising thing. The ancient Egyptians built

pyramids that were even greater than the skyscrapers of New York, in terms of human effort expended, but they were for the tombs of God-Kings. The relatively poverty stricken peoples of medieval Europe erected vast cathedrals and abbeys, but these were the expression of their common faith and their hopes for eternity. But to-day we build temples greater than the Egyptian pyramids or the Gothic Cathedrals and they are dedicated to toothpaste or chewing gum or anything that anyone wants, so long as enough people want it.

There is no denying that this is an impressive witness to the democratic character of the American way of life, but it is also a sign of the secular and materialistic values that dominate the new civilization. We may congratulate ourselves that this expression of power is not subservient to the power of an autocrat or the absolute will of a totalitarian state, but to the service of the Common Man, but we cannot congratulate ourselves that the recognition of the

Common Man has left no place for spiritual values or that all this power is devoted to our own material satisfaction and not to the glory of God.

But is it right to identify this glorification of material values with the American way of life and to conclude that the civilization of modern America is essentially secularist? There is surely something to be said for the other side. It is true that the secularization of American culture is more obvious because it finds such a striking expression in the new technological forms while the inheritance of the past is not so easy to discover at first sight. But American culture possesses a historical tradition of its own just as European culture does, and this tradition is also a Christian one. It is certain that the founders of America had no intention of creating a secularist culture. All of them — Catholics in Maryland, Anglicans in Virginia, Puritans in New England, and Quakers in Pennsylvania — were at one in their desire to create a Christian commonwealth.

Some came to escape persecution, some to find freedom for the social expression of their religious ideals, some just to find a better way of life for themselves and their families. But whatever they left behind them in the Old World, it was not their religion. They were conscious — sometimes too conscious — that they were planting a new Christendom in the New World, and even though we may regard some of them as narrow minded sectarians, we must admit that they valued their religion — which they regarded as the true Christian faith — beyond all earthly things, and made it the center of their lives.

And the same thing is true of the other colonial movements that contributed to the settlement of what is now the United States. If the Spaniards came in search of gold, they also had a very genuine missionary or crusading ideal of extending the knowledge of the faith and the Kingdom of Christ, and if the French opened up the West from Canada in pursuit of the fur trade and the struggle

for empire, they also were devoted Catholics who carried their religion with them wherever they went and spread the faith far and wide in the Western wilderness.

Thus everywhere throughout North America the influence of religion on society was strong and the New World was indeed a new Christendom. But it was a Christendom without unity, which reproduced all the differences and divisions that existed in the churches and sects of Europe. There was, however, one important difference, in Europe these sects were regarded as Dissenters or Nonconformists — i.e., departers from an established norm — whereas in America, they were the norm and each of them claimed full rights of citizenship in the societies that they helped to found. Consequently, when the states achieved their independence and their federal union, there could be no question of any common religious establishment. The freedom of religion and the strict abstention of the federal authority from

any interference with the churches was an essential condition of the American political system and the American way of life. This did not mean that religion was neglected. In New England and Pennsylvania the church of the religious congregation was the center of the life of the community, and in the settlement of the West, the churches were the chief, and often the only, organs of culture.

But at the same time the new forms of religion that were characteristic of America in the early days of the 19th century had little direct influence on the new American civilization which was being built up then. They represented an extremely individualistic type of Protestantism that was concerned, above all, with the individual conscience and the private experience of religious conversion. Indeed, the religious history of this time is that of a series of great waves of religious emotion that were kindled by some new religious leader or some local revivalist movement and then died down again as quickly as they had arisen.

Thus American religion was detached from the objective world which was the domain of business and politics and focused on the subjective world of religious feeling — above all the intense experience of religious conversion. This, I believe, has left a permanent mark on the American mind, so that, as several Americans have remarked to me, they find some difficulty in relating the two concepts of religion and civilization since these seem to belong to two quite distinct orders of existence. And hence the problem of the secularization of culture has not really been felt as an urgent one, since the two worlds of private religion and public social order do not touch one another. This was a possible situation in the 19th century which was an age of individualism in which the family functioned as an independent social organism and where the function of the state was strictly confined to its own limited field, but with the coming of industrialism and the new technological order, it has gradually ceased to corres-

pond with realities. Our modern technological society has become so highly organized that it absorbs almost the whole life of the individual and controls his activities and even his thoughts. It is becoming almost impossible for the individual to stand out against the mass pressure which makes for conformity.

We see the results of this most clearly in the totalitarian states, like Russia and China, where the organization of the mass society is deliberately planned from above, and where there is no room for liberty of the individual or any kind of spiritual freedom. But the same forces are at work in the modern democratic state, though their action is milder and more benevolent. For it is in the very nature of the technological order that there is no room for independent centers of action: everything has to be geared to one all-embracing system. Education and science and technology, industry and business and government, all are coordinated with one another in a closed organization from which there is no escape.

Thus modern American civilization is faced with a dilemma. It has gone further than any other Western society — in some ways, further even than the Eastern totalitarian states — in the creation of the technological order, so that there is nowhere in the world where a man has to conform more rigidly to a pattern of behavior imposed on him by impersonal mechanical forces than in a great American city. To take a small example, consider the problem of parking and the way in which so much of the work of the police consists in serving tickets on delinquent citizens. It is hard to realize that 150 years ago there were no police in London or, I suppose, in New York either. And this increase of governmental regulation and decrease of individual freedom is to be found everywhere in small nations and in great ones.

But how is this tendency to be reconciled with the principle of individual liberty which is deeply embedded in American institutions and traditions?

This was the ruling principle which dominated every other consideration in the Declaration of Independence and the forming of the Constitution. It was with this principal in mind that they separated the executive and legislative powers and set the judiciary above them both. It was for this that they divided sovereignty itself between Federal and State governments. Everywhere they tried to reduce government to a minimum and to leave the individual American free to carry on his own life in his own way. Nothing was further from their minds than the creation of a vast centralized state like the U.S.A. in which the states are no more than provinces and the individual is no more than a subject, submitted to restrictions and regulations from the cradle to the grave.

No doubt this growth of centralized political power would have occurred in any case and has its own roots in American political history, but the fact that it has coincided with the growth of the technological order has brought them together into the same orbit and each has reinforced the other in the pressure that they exert on the life of the individual. In either field the individual is powerless to resist the steady advance of organized power, which has nothing to do with men's political opinions or their legal rights but is the necessary result of the growing complexity and specialization of the techniques themselves.

Modern Western man is like Frankenstein who created a mechanical monster which he became unable to control so that it came to threaten his life. In the same way Western man has created the technological order, but he has not discovered how to control it. It is beginning to control him; but if it does, there seems no way of preventing it from destroying him.

Our dilemma is most obvious in the new techniques of warfare. These have become so efficient that they make the path to self destruction, mass destruction, and even world destruction, a short and easy one. Yet the technological order

offers us no techniques of international relations by which this might be avoided.

In the field of diplomacy and peace and international law, we still have to depend on the older humanistic techniques which are based on the assumption that man is a reasonable being, and consequently they are techniques that can only be applied in exceptionally favorable circumstances. It is as though we were in a ship that was guaranteed to go ten times faster than any other, but which can only be navigated safely in a dead calm.

To-day the international waters are as calm as they are ever likely to be. Yet there is a kind of war existing between Israel and the Arab Republic and between China and Formosa, and nearer home there is only the fragile protection of Senor Castro's sanity standing in the way of a war between Cuba and the U.S.A.

We all realize in our rational moments that the world has become one com-

munity, yet all over the world the forces which make the strongest appeal are those racialist and nationalist movements that deny this principle and which would gladly sacrifice the rest of the world to the interests and passions of their paranoic group-consciousness. And this applies also to the political ideologies that are non-racial, like Communism, at least in its Stalinist form. Indeed one cannot find a more extreme example of this group paranoia than the extraordinary *History of the Communist Party* for which Stalin was personally responsible.

No doubt it will be said that these things are exceptional and that there is enough sanity in the world to master them, as it mastered Hitler's paranoia — though at what a cost! Unfortunately there seems reason to believe that this disorder permeats the whole modern civilization and that it exists under the surface (or near the surface) on our society and in every society. The more the technological order advances, and the

greater the pressure it exerts on the individual, the stronger is the emotional reaction by which the forces that have been supressed find release. In the pre-technological order, the craftsman or the manual laborer tended to release their psychic tensions in the exercise of their work. But in the technological order this is not so, the man who drives a truck or minds a machine has to subordinate himself to the discipline of the machine. His emotions find no expression in his work, or if they do he is a bad workman. They must find an outlet outside his work — in his free time—occasionally by violent action, but more usually by the contemplation of the patterns of violent action that are provided by the mechanized industries that cater to this need. But this is not a real solution. It is only a temporary palliative, and the fundamental emotional needs remain unsatisfied.

But this problem is not only one for the manual worker. It also affects the intellectuals and the specialists without whom the technological order could not

be maintained. They also suffer from a sense of frustration and take a gloomy view of the prospects of civilization. But there is no need to develop this point, as you can study it for yourselves in current literature.

The fact is that a technological civilization which is devoted to purely secular and material ends inevitably tends to reduce man to an automaton by subjecting him to the dominion of vast impersonal forces. Thus it contradicts not only the doctrines of personal liberty which inspired the creative period of American culture but also the more universal spiritual principles which are common to Western civilization as a whole.

This is clear enough to us when it is a case of a totalitarian state like the USSR, but in a democratic society it is much less obvious, since we are not the servants of an all powerful state, but are more or less free to choose our own jobs and to get a fair share of the increasing wealth that the technological order brings. Consequently we hardly

otice that the system is continually en-
roaching on our freedom and our lei-
ure, so that eventually there may be no
oom for them at all.

But coming from Europe where the
echnological development is more back-
ard, one is very conscious of the grow-
ng pressure that the system exerts on
uman nature. It is true that in theory
he system will provide an ever increas-
ng margin of leisure. But in practice
he finds that this leisure is also sub-
itted to technical organization so that
he individual is made to conform to
egulated patterns of leisure. Moreover,
hough the technological order frees
an from the old forms of manual lab-
ur, it exacts a much higher toll from his
ervous energies. The same process is
work all through the technological
stem — in the higher ranks of business
anagement as well as lower down —
verywhere the system exacts more and
ore from its human instruments. And
hat is the use of even the highest fi-
ncial rewards, if the recipient dies of

over tension when he is in his '50's, and never attains the goal of leisured retirement?

And what is the end of it all? In the totalitarian world the answer is clear — the state gains what the individual loses. But in the democratic world the technological order is its own end — it is increasing all the time in scale and power but there is no final purpose which justifies this vast expenditure of energy. Hence even on the lowest ground, it seems that there is an urgent need to protect the human personality against the pressure of these impersonal forces that threaten to enslave it.

But that is only the first step. If democratic society is to survive the pressure of the technological order and the challenege of Communism and the other totalitarian ideologies, it is essential that Western civilization should recover a sense of spiritual purpose or spiritual order. The technological order can only be made tolerable to human nature by being subordinated to some principle

which is higher than individual profit or mass power. But is this conceivable? Does any such principle exist?

It certainly existed in the past. For every great civilization that has ever existed recognized the existence of an objective spiritual order to which both the appetites of the individual and the power of the community or the state were subject. This was true of Western civilization as a whole — of America no less than of Europe, for as I have pointed out earlier the American principle of the separation of Church and State in no sense implied a denial of the place of religion in American culture, but was designed to protect the freedom of religion from state interference or control.

But during the last hundred years this universal acceptance of a higher law or transcendent spiritual principle has gradually been fading out of the public consciousness. As the Protestant bishop of North West Germany, Dr. Lilje, was saying the other day at New York at the

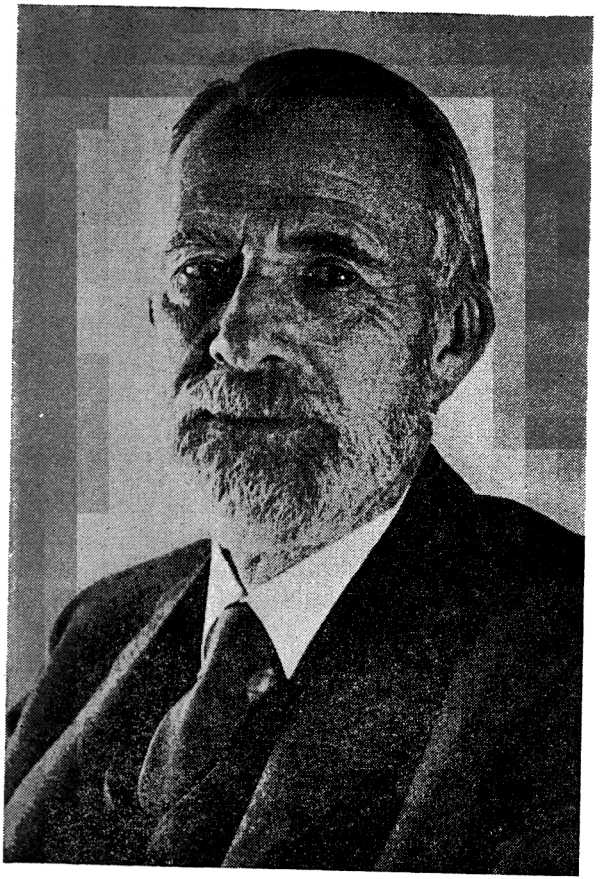
Union Theological Seminary, "the scenery for Christianity has changed in our times more deeply and more fundamentally than most church people realize". We do live, for all practical purposes, in a non-Christian world. The term should be used in its precise meaning. It is not an anti-Christian age — we live in a *non*-Christian period. "The mentality of modern man is colored by an all pervading atheism — not anti-theism but non-theism. There is just no more room for the concept of God and therefore none for the Christian faith".

This is the ultimate issue for modern civilization — a question of life or death. For I believe that it is only by the recovery of this lost spiritual element in our culture that we can make it strong enough to withstand the disintegrating and dehumanizing influences of technology. And this alone can provide a principle of coordination which will preserve the balance between the liberty of the human personality and the impersonal regulation of the technological order.

No doubt there are many who will say that it is impossible to recover this lost spiritual dimension of culture—that the progress of science which created the technological order has at the same time made the conception of a spiritual order inconceivable. But this is a fallacy which was plausible enough in the 19th century, but which was then based on a philosophy which is no longer accepted. The secularization of culture that actually occurred was due to the one sided character of modern culture — to the fact that modern man has concentrated his attention on and directed his energy to the discovery and exploitation of a new world — the world of science and technology and has turned his face away from the spiritual world. But as soon as he comes to realize — as he is doing today — that this onesided development of culture has become a threat to its survival and is contrary to the real interests of man and society, there is nothing except habit and prejudice to prevent a return to the spiritual order.

No doubt it will require serious thought and continuous effort and the reeducation of public opinion. But these are problems for the future. At the present moment the important thing is to make people realize the predicament in which our modern civilization stands and the danger of allowing it to drift, leaving the mighty forces of technology undirected and uncontrolled.

In the past our civilization — and indeed every civilization that is known to us in history — has recognized the existence of a moral order which is derived not from conflicting individual interests or from the collective will of the state but from a higher spiritual order. This great and ancient truth, as Edmund Burke wrote, is the ultimate foundation of human society, and no society which denies it or loses sight of it, can endure.



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CHRISTOPHER DAWSON