Roots of Our Civilization

Russel Kirk

In *The Revolt Of the Masses*, Jose Ortega Y Gasset observed that American civilization could not long endure, were it severed from European civilization. Ortega's opinion, however, is not shared by certain American writers, among whom—especially in this century—there exists a tendency to arrogate to America cultural achievements that really are the product of four or five thousand years of civil social order. Mr. Roger Burlingame, for instance, in a book called *The American Conscience*, implies that conscience itself first appeared along the Atlantic seaboard in the 17th Century. Mr. Burlingame, by the way, is hot against American political "isolationists;" but I need scarcely remark that he himself is an isolationist of the mind.

For Ortega was right: American culture, and the American civil-social order, share with modern European civilization a common patrimony. The principal articles in that patrimony are the Christian faith, the Roman concept of law, and the great body of Western literature. From this inheritance grow certain beliefs concerning the nature of man and the nature of society which remain common—however much weakened in our century—to both Europe and America.

This patrimony is a legacy of convictions, not a legacy of blood. So far as race and nationality are concerned, the continuity between Europe and America is confused and imperfect. Take, for instance, my own little village of Mecosta, in the pine barrens of central Michigan, a place founded by my great-grandfather and his uncle, and having nowadays a population of some two hundred souls. (Eighty years ago, Mecosta had two thousand inhabitants, but rural depopulation goes on at an increasing rate in much of the United States.) The original population of the region—of whom a very few descendants survive to this day—was composed of Pottawattomies and Chippewas. The first civilized folk to establish themselves in the region were not white people, but Negroes (escaped and emancipated slaves, most of whom had fled the Southern states across the Ohio river and north to Canada, and then had entered Michigan from Canada, after

Lincoln's proclamation). The descendants of those colored people are in Mecosta and its hinterland still, now mixed in blood with Indians and whites, but still forming a distinct community, centered around their own church.

To this same region of Mecosta, in the great days of Michigan lumbering, came New Englanders and New Yorkers of old Puritan stock like my great-grandfather, who laid out the town itself. There came also, about the same time or a little earlier, numbers of Bavarian peasants, whose church of St. Michael remains their bond of union. These Catholics were joined, presently, by Irish settlers. In recent years, Mecosta has gained a new element of population, principally Polish and Ukranian, filtering from the 20th Century industrial cities of Michigan into the countryside. All in all, my little Mecosta is a microcosm of America, curiously diverse in ancestry and cultural origins. What link is there between a village and a nation such as this, and the ancient communities of Europe?

European civilization, Edmund Burke said nearly a hundred and seventy years ago, is sustained by the spirit of religion, and the spirit of a gentleman. And so—despite the outward triumph of technology—is American civilization. What joins the cultures on either side of the Atlantic is a complex of religious and moral and social convictions, given expression in a body of literature, that Europe and America have received from common spiritual and intellectual ancestors. If this inheritance should be much diminished, all the elaborate fabric of our material civilization could not long survive, either side of the ocean, the collapse of this subtle inner order. For order in private character and order in society are possible, as Gabriel Marcel suggests, only in an atmosphere of "diffused gratitude," a society which is aware of the debt—what Burke called "the contract of eternal society"—that the present generations owes to the generations that are yet unborn. *And the real element of sympathy and common interest between Europe and America is not material, nor military, nor racial, but rather spiritual and intellectual.*

The first principal article in this common patrimony, I have said, is the Christian faith. All the important aspects of any civilization arise from its religion, even the economic system of that civilization. As one of the most important American thinkers and critics of this century—Irving Babitt—wrote a generation ago, economics trends upwards into politics, politics into ethics, and ethics into theology. This is no less true in the United States of America than in Egypt or India. And America is a Christian Nation, the opinion of Thomas Jefferson as expressed to the Bey of Tunis notwithstanding. In terms of church-attendance, indeed, America is the most Christian of nations. It may be true that a good deal of the high rate of church-attendance in this country reflects—as some critics argue—not so much religious conviction as mere religiosity. But that always has been true of all church-attendance everywhere. What matters, so far as the civil-social order is concerned, is that the great bulk of the American people voluntarily subscribe to that venerable body of convictions that we call Christianity. In the things which most nearly concern the private life, they draw their moral and intellectual sustenance from the old religion of Europe and the Levant. The prophets of Israel, the words of Christ and his disciples, the writings of the fathers of the church, the dissertations of Reformers and Counter-reformers: these are the springs of American metaphysics and American morality, as they are of European metaphysics and morality. And in American Christianity, as in the European, there are blended with Christian doctrine the elaborate elements of classical philosophy.

In its immediate influence upon culture, perhaps the most important aspect of Christianity is its view of the human personality: the doctrine of the immortal soul, the unique character of every soul, the concept of human dignity, the nature of rights and duties, the obligation to exercise Christian charity, the insistence upon private responsibility.

Both European and American civilizations have been erected upon the grand foundation

of the dignity of man: upon the assumption that man is made for eternity, and that he possesses dignity because he has some share in an essence more than human. The earliest enduring European settlements in America were founded expressly upon Christian principles. As John Winthrop preached to his Puritan company on the deck of the Arabella, as they sailed for New England: *We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: "The Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.*

If the American people have not invariably conducted themselves with the virtue which John Winthrop enjoined, nevertheless Christianity has remained an immense moving force among them, and is little diminished today. The student of civilization who endeavors to ignore the role of Christianity in European and American culture is as foolish as a physician would be if he endeavored to ignore the function of the heart. Even the most virulent secular movements of our age—the totalist ideologies—are inspired by a misunderstanding of Christianity or a reaction against it; they cannot break altogther with traditional religion. It was an American, Orestes Brownson, who first described communism—in the fateful year of 1848—as a heresy from Christianity and a caricature of Christian doctrine.

The second article in our common patrimony is what I have called the Roman concept of law. In America there prevails a system of legal theories and institutions directly descended from the laws of Europe. For the most part, Americans have learned their law through the medium of English jurisprudence and English prescription, just as they have learned their Christianity, for the most part, through the King James Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. But they also acquainted themselves, from colonial days, with the great general source of European legal and political theory—the classical writers, and particularly Cicero. The doctrines of Natural law; the models for a commonwealth; the ideal of a government of laws, not of men; the realization that justice means "to each his own;" the whole complex of reverence for the reign of law: these passed directly from Europe into American theory and establishment.

The founders of the American Republic had for their guiding lights both the long political experience of England and their knowledge of the Roman Republic. The chief works of American political philosophy of that fateful time—the *Federalist*

Papers and John Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*—are suffused with an apprehension of European political and juridicial institutions. John Adams, for instance, in his bulky work on the Constitutions, considers in detail the history and politics of several Swiss cantons. As Friedrich Gentz pointed out at the end of the 18th Century, the American republicans—in contrast with the French revolutionaries—were devoted to tradition and precedent.

Thus America has in common with Europe a well-understood legacy of justice and order and freedom, a balancing of things public and things private, derived in considerable part from the Roman law and further secured by the Christian idea of personal freedom and personal responsibility. The principle of effectual restraints upon political power, for instance, is eminent in the political theory and practice of both Western Europe and the United States. It has been so since the beginning of American society. John Cotton, for instance, declared in Massachusetts in the third decade of the 17th Century, "Let all the world learn to give mortal men no greater power than they are content they shall use—for use it they will . . .

"This is one of the strains of nature: it affects boundless liberty, and to run to the utmost extent. Whatever power he hath received, he hath a corrupt nature that will improve it in one thing or other; if he have liberty, he will think why may he not use it . . . There is a strain in a man's heart that will sometime or other run out to excess, unless the Lord restrain it; but it is not good to venture it."

I suggested that the third principal article our common patrimony is the corpus of literature of our European-American civilization. The great works of imagination and reason make us all kin. They do far more than all the endeavors of the United Nations organization to transcend the barriers of nationalism. Homer and Hesiod; Herodotus and Thucydides; Plato and Aristotle; Virgil and Horace; Livy and Tacitus; Cicero and Seneca; Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; Dante, Petrarch, Erasmus, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Goethe—and all the rest—these have formed the mind and character of Americans as well as Europeans. The best of American letters is part and parcel of the accomplishment of European literature. Romancers like Hawthorne, and historians like Henry Adams, though exhibiting certain casts of mind and habits of style distinctly American, nevertheless participate in the grand tradition of our common literature. Their view of human nature is one with that of their intellectual ancestors; their merits of style and method are derived, in part, from the bank and capital of a civilization that transcends nationality.

It was Fulbert of Chartres, I believe, who declared that we moderns are dwarfs standing upon the shoulders of giants—able to see so far only because we are elevated upon the immense stature of our ancestors. This is as true in the 20th Century as it was in the 14th Century.

In all essential respects, Europe and America have a common faith, a common history, a common system of politics and law, and a common body of great literature. They make one civilization. Thus a native of Bulgaria and a citizen of the state of Alaska, let us say, ordinarily will have much more in common than will two Indian villagers—one a Moslem, one a Hindu.—living within a few rods of one another. Their general assumptions concerning the nature of divine being, of man, and of society are, in essence, much the same.

Yet, all this said, I must add some words of misgiving. A civilization cannot continue to subsist solely by virtue of its patrimony. As the human body sloughs off old tissue and takes on new, so a civilization that cannot refresh itself regularly must decline into caducity. The means of its renewal is the means of its conservation. Without continuity, a civilization must perish; but without change, too, a civilization must perish. I am by no means certain our common civilization now displays the vitality and the awareness of the contract of immortal society which are indispensable to any enduring culture. Perhaps some of you may know much more than I do about the vitality of Continental civilization; my own

close observations are confined, for the greater part, to America and Britain. I propose therefore to point out briefly certain ominous symptoms of American neglect of its patrimony. In our age, probably more than in most eras, there are many persons in rebellion against the wisdom of our ancestors. To such, the spiritual and intellectual patrimony of our civilization seems a burden, rather than a foundation. I do not know that there are more of these rebels against our civilization in America than in Europe, but I am more uncomfortably aware of their activities in this country. So far as our Christian heritage is concerned, there is not the slightest danger that Christianity may cease to be popular in America. The peril, rather, is that the Christian religion may become altogether too popular for its own good. Tocqueville remarked upon the tendency of the American democracy to refashion religion on a democratic pattern, to abolish all intermediary powers between God and man, and to emphasize the social aspects of religious faith at the expense of the supernatural. Atheism, agnosticism, and anti-clericalism, even at the height of the 19th Century vogue, never exercised any real influence in America. In the United States, positivism—old style or new style—is confined almost wholly to certain members of university and college faculties—those disgruntled persons whom the Irish call "sp'iled praists" and the Scots call "stickit ministers." Financially, at least, the American churches are in a most healthy state.

Yet the quality of that religious faith is another matter. The American protestant clergy—and, to a lesser extent, even the Roman Catholic clergy—tend markedly toward what is called the "social gospel," the sentimental and humanitarian application of religious doctrines to the reform of mundane society, at the expense of supernatural elements in religion and the personal element in morality. There also exists a tendency toward making the church into a club and a means of communal self-gratulation. Christian hope and Christian resignation both suffer under this domination of materialism and democracy in the church.

Yet there is some excuse for cheerfulness: the social-gospel movement is less powerful than it was a generation ago, while the sterner theology and discipline or orthodoxy has undergone some considerable revival in the seminaries. America never will build her equivalent of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, nor ever will the American churches be so much the center of all life as were the medieval churches. But Christian theology and Christian morals are not going to yield much ground before a 20th Century nihilism.

When we turn, however, to our inheritance of the reign of law, I have in mind the growing ignorance of the first principles of justice and jurisprudence, even among judges and lawyers; and the tendency toward concentration of power in the executive branch of the federal government in general. The cause of this drift is to be found, in part, in the gradual substitution of utilitarian and pragmatic standards for the tenets of natural law, in jurisprudence and in political theory. One may perceive the triumph, in fine, of what Professor Eric Voegelin calls "theoretical illiteracy." This affliction exists at every level of American society, from top to bottom, and the ascendancy of the educational notions of the late John Dewey and other pragmatists has something to do with the trouble. Certain journals of opinion long very friendly toward the present Supreme Court of the United States now are manifesting alarm at the grounds on which the court has based recent important decisions. The majority of that Court now seem to give social expediency and utility pride of place over authority and precedent.

Here I venture only to suggest that this concentration of decision-power in a court of nine members is not wholly consonant with the principles of established constitutional democracy. And the degree of legal scholarship possessed by justices recently appointed to the Supreme Court is markedly inferior to the knowledge of law usually possessed by Supreme Court justices in the past.

One may see the same decay of understanding of the reign of law in obscure quarters. A university student of considerable

natural intelligence and some decent training recently inquired of me why all the American checks upon power were desirable. Why could we not simply train up an elite of governmental administrators, he asked, and trust to their good will and ability, and let them manage all the concerns of the nation—diplomatic, domestic, and economic? Such naivete, which amounts to an ignorance of the whole tradition of European and American political theory and history, actually is often encouraged by the schools of "administration" and "governmental research" at American universities. It also reflects a profound ignorance of human nature and the ways of great states. It is the attitude which Lord Percy of Newcastle calls "totalist democracy"—a foolish trust in an abstraction called the People, combined with an unquestioning faith in the positivistic specialist. It amounts to the negation of some thousands of years of history and political philosophy.

This theoretical illiteracy in politics and jurisprudence, produced in part by the failure of the 20th Century American schooling, is parallelled by a decline in the United States of the understanding of humane letters. Here, too, the schools are at fault—and the spirit of the age. Fifty years ago, in his book *Literature and the American College*, Irving Babbitt described the marked decay of humane learning. Sentimentalism and a rootless aestheticism on the one hand, arid and pedantic specialization on the other, even then were weakening the humane disciplines in the United States. The recent "Great Books" movement, let alone the amorphous "survey of humanities" and "survey of civilization" courses in American colleges and universities, has not succeeded in reversing this current.

The study of great literature, in our Western World, has pursued an ethical end through an intellectual means. The improvement of the private human reason for the private person's own sake, and the incidental improvement of the society thereby, was the object of true literary humanism. Both the aim and the discipline itself are badly neglected in 20th Century America. An obsessive vocationalism has done much mischief to the higher learning—and, for that matter, even to primary and secondary schooling; while the "progressive" aims and methods of John Dewey and his pedagogical disciples injured the old disciplines in other ways. Such slogans as "education for living," "learning by doing," "schooling for social reconstruction," "adjustment to the group," and "schools to serve the community," have been employed for a generation as weapons against any genuine training of the imagination and the reason. Among the consequences has been the steady reduction of moral and intellectual leadership in the United States. The founders of the American republic learned the first principles of human nature and society from the Bible, Plutarch, Cicero, and Shakespeare. But the present generation of American schoolboys is expected, instead, to take a lively interest in tours of the municipal sewage-processing plant, and in vague textbooks on "social studies" written in a primitive English that ought to be intelligible to the natives of New Guinea.

Change is the means of our preservation, as Edmund Burke said; but he meant that change which is consonant with the historic vitality of a civilization and a nation. In our time, we run no risk of experiencing too little change: whether we like it or not, we are experiencing vast alterations in the public order. To give this change direction, and to insure that generation may link with generation, the energies of men and women with imagination now should be directed to a work of recovery and consolidation. In that high labor, perhaps the most pressing task is the reinvigoration of our religious understanding, our heritage of justice, and our body of humane letters.