

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND EDUCATION

BY
M. O'LEARY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

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OF
ARTHUR CARDINAL HINSLY
IN GRATITUDE
FOR
LEADERSHIP AND INSPIRATION

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INTRODUCTION

THE history of civilisation in the past is inseparable from the history of a few great traditions and systems of education which formed the intellectual mould in which the thought and expression of the different world societies were cast. Such was the Confucian tradition in China, the tradition of the Brahmins in India and the Rabbinic tradition among the Jews. Such also was the tradition of the Christian schools. For centuries the mind of our civilisation was formed in this mould and everything that European men have thought and written bears the imprint of their tradition. The mediaeval "clerk," like the Brahmin and the Confucian scholar, was set apart as a member of an order which was the bearer and guardian of this tradition and by virtue of this initiation he was emancipated from the limitations of his local territorial society and admitted into the international community of Christian culture. Nevertheless the European tradition of education differs from the other examples we have mentioned in one essential characteristic.

It is not a native tradition, its sources lie elsewhere—outside the limits of Western Christendom in the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean—and it was only gradually assimilated by us after a long process of transplantation and acclimatisation. Moreover it is not a simple uniform self-contained tradition like the other great educational systems. It consists of two essentially diverse elements—the Greek and the Jewish—Athens and Jerusalem—the classics and the Scriptures—which were united by the genius of Catholic culture which tended to diverge and separate from one another when the power that united them had been removed.

The tradition of Western education is essentially that of Christian humanism, and though it is only too easy to divorce Christianity from humanism and to set one against the other, the result proves in the event fatal to both of them. Christianity divorced from humanism ceases to influence the educational system, so that the Church is separated from university and school, while humanism without Christianity becomes a sterile literary culture without power to move the will and to form the character.

And thus we find in the modern world the tendency for a new type of education to develop, which is neither Christian nor humanist and which substitutes technology for humanity and politics for religion.

At first the revolutionary consequences of this change were not realised, for Western culture was so permeated by humanist traditions that their survival was taken for granted. It is only since the rise of the new political systems during the last thirty years that we have begun to understand the results of an education that is neither Christian nor humanist, but which treats youth as a great source of natural power to be controlled and directed by the State or rather the dominant party in the State for its own ends. At the best this means that the individual personality is treated as an instrument and not as an end. But in practice it comes to mean something far worse than this; for where the ends of the State are predatory and aggressive, the spirit of youth is used as an engine of destruction and education becomes a training in barbarity.

The events of the last few years have shown that this progress to the abyss is not a nightmare of the imagination but a real evil that threatens the existence of Western man. It cannot be overcome either by vague ethical idealism or by the utilitarian standpoint of economic welfare, for the former lacks the dynamic appeal of the revolutionary ideologies and the latter shares the same fundamental error of the subordination of ends to means. Materialistic humanism has had a

great fall, and all the tanks and aeroplanes of the United Nations cannot put Humpty Dumpty together again. But in so far as men remain Christian, they retain the spiritual foundation on which a truly human way of life and a living personal culture can be built.

There is consequently a greater need than ever before for Christian educationists to reconsider and restate their principles as applied to the present situation. If they had done so in the past, in the age when the whole educational system was nominally Christian and when the Church was the acknowledged leader of European culture, this situation would never have arisen. We must therefore not be afraid to study the mistakes and failures of Christian education in the past, for unless we do this, we shall not be able to convince others of the enduring greatness of our tradition.

Yet when we consider the greatness of that tradition and the height of the ideal towards which Christian education is directed, we cannot be surprised that past ages have so often failed to do justice to them. For the sins of Christian education are both higher and wider than anything the world has known. As the late Pope Pius XI has said,¹ "the proper and immediate end of Christian education is to co-operate with divine grace . . . and takes in the whole aggregate of human life, physical and spiritual, intellectual and moral, individual, domestic and social, not with a view of reducing it in any way, but in order to elevate, regulate and perfect it, in accordance with the example and teaching of Christ." It opens the door to a wider life and a more universal society than that of the State or even of the world. As humanism initiates man into the community of culture and opens to him the treasures of the thought of the past, so Christianity introduces man to the society of the Spirit, the City of God, and opens to him the divine promise of the future.

¹ *Divini Illius Magistri*, December 1920. C.T.S. Trans., New Edition, 1943.

When we compare these tremendous claims with the slender resources and modest achievement of Christian education to-day, we cannot be surprised at the opposition and the lack of appreciation of the latter by secular society. Even when the Church was the leader of Western culture and geniuses like St. Thomas and Dante created a Catholic unity of faith and science and imagination, the gap between the Christian vision and the educational achievement was still enormous. And how much more so to-day when religion has long ceased to be the leader of culture and is forced to follow the camp of modern civilisation, picking up the stragglers, looking after the casualties and providing the troops with occasional spiritual comforts. Yet this, after all, was the position of the Church when she started her world mission, and the first and not the worst Christian education was that which was given by a party of itinerant Jews, with little culture and no money and no schools, men who were regarded, as one of the greatest of them said, as "the refuse of this world" and who nevertheless became fathers and founders of a new world. Behind all the great tradition of Christian thought and culture there lies this new education and the apostolic teaching—this propaganda of the spirit—which changed men's minds as no revolutionary doctrine has ever done and which to-day after nineteen centuries still remains the light of the world.

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON