
The Church as Culture

Robert Louis Wilken

Last spring on a trip to Erfurt, the medieval university town in Germany famous for its Augustinian cloister in which Martin Luther was ordained to the priesthood, I learned that only 20 percent of its population today professes adherence to Christianity. In fact, when the topic of religion came up in a conversation with a young woman in a hotel lounge, and I asked her if she was a member of a church, she replied without hesitation: *Ich bin Heide*—"I am a heathen."

It is hardly surprising to discover pagans in the heart of Western Europe where Christianity once flourished: a steep decline in the number of Christians has been underway for generations, even centuries. What surprised me was the absence of embarrassment in her use of the term "heathen." She did not say that she no longer went to church or that she was not a believer. For her, Christianity, no doubt the religion of her grandparents if not her parents, was simply not on the horizon. I remembered that two days earlier my train had stopped at Fulda, where St. Boniface, the apostle to the Germans, is buried. Boniface had gone to Germany to *convert* the heathen, and in a spectacular and courageous gesture he felled the sacred oak at Geismar. The astonished onlookers soon hearkened to Boniface's preaching and received baptism. It would seem that if Christianity is ever to flourish again in the land between the Rhine and the Elbe, a new Boniface will have to appear to fell the sacred oaks of European secularism.

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Yet what made an even deeper impression on me in Europe was the debate over the preface to the new constitution of the European Union. I was living in Italy at the time and had been following the discussion in the Italian press. All the nations of the EU are historically Christian, and the very idea of Europe was the work of Christian civilization. The Carolingians, Christian kings, first brought together the peoples west and the east of the Rhine to form a political alliance, with the blessing of the bishop of Rome. The story of Europe is a spiritual drama impelled by religious convictions, not by geography, economics, or technology. Yet the framers of the EU constitution refuse even to mention the name of Christianity in its preface. While readily acknowledging the inheritance of pagan Greece and Rome, and even the Enlightenment, Europe's political-bureaucratic elites have chosen to excise any mention of Christianity from Europe's history. Not only have they excluded Christianity from a role in Europe's future; they have banished it from Europe's past. One wonders whether the new Europe, uprooted from its Christian soil, will continue to promote the spiritual values that have made Western Civilization unique.

Talking to the young woman in Erfurt and listening in on the debate about the EU constitution I found myself musing on the future of Christian culture. In my lifetime we have witnessed the collapse of Christian civilization. At first the process of disintegration was slow, a gradual and persistent attrition, but today it has moved into overdrive, and what is more troubling, it has become deliberate and intentional, not only promoted by the cultured despisers of Christianity but often aided and abetted by Christians themselves.

Take, for example, the calendar. I am not thinking primarily of Santa displacing the Christ child or the

Easter Bunny replacing the Resurrection; nor do I mean the transfer of festivals that fall in midweek (e.g., Epiphany or Pentecost or All Saints) to the nearest Sunday. I mean the dramatic, wholesale evacuation of Sunday as a holy day. At eleven o'clock on Sunday morning at Home Depot or Lowe's the lines of folks with cans of paint, two-by-fours, and joint cement stretch almost as far as they do on a Saturday morning. The only lingering difference between Sunday and other days of the week is that the malls open later and close earlier. The churches, particularly the bishops of the Catholic Church, were complicit in the desacralization of Sunday as a holy day when they introduced late Saturday afternoon liturgies, called Vigil Masses. A more fitting name would be McMasses. The faithful can fulfill their obligation by slipping into church for a half hour or so on Saturday afternoon and then have Sunday to themselves without the pesky inconvenience of getting the family up for Mass.

Of course, one might retort that in the United States (unlike in Europe) the churches are flourishing and the number of Christians is growing. Yes, there are many Christians in the U.S., but can we still claim to be a Christian society? If one uses any measure other than individual adherence (what people say if asked) or even church attendance, it is undeniable that the influence of Christianity on the life and mores of our society is on the wane. And the decline is likely to continue. Which leads to a question: Can Christian faith—no matter how enthusiastically proclaimed by evangelists, how ably expounded by theologians and philosophers, or how cleverly translated into the patois of the intellectual class by apologists—be sustained for long without the support of a nurturing Christian culture? By culture, I do not mean high culture (Bach's B-Minor Mass, Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew*); I mean the "total harvest of thinking and feeling," to use T. S. Eliot's phrase—the pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities encoded in rituals, law, language, practices, and stories that can order, inspire, and guide the behavior, thoughts, and affections of a Christian people.

When one understands culture in this way, the classical distinction between Christ and culture, popularized in H. Richard Niebuhr's 1950s book by that title, gives us little help. Some have observed, accurately in my view, that one difficulty with his analysis is that "culture" is really another term for "world," the unredeemed territory in which human beings live. For Niebuhr the question is how the gospel, Christ, can penetrate the world, culture, without losing its distinctive character.

It seems to me, however, that the deficiency with the Christ-and-Culture scheme lies not in Niebuhr's

understanding of culture but in his view of Christ. For Niebuhr, Christ is a theological idea, and most of his book is taken up by an analysis of Christian thinkers who illustrate five basic types of the relation between this theological idea and culture. Niebuhr is largely silent about the actual historical experience of the Church, about culture on the ground, about institutions such as the episcopacy and the papacy (there is no mention of Gregory VII and the investiture controversy), monasticism, civil and canon law, calendar, and the ordering of civic space (the church standing on the central city square). But Christ entered history as a community, a society, not simply as a message, and the form taken by the community's life *is* Christ within society. The Church is a culture in its own right. Christ does not simply infiltrate a culture; Christ creates culture by forming another city, another sovereignty with its own social and political life.

With these admittedly sketchy observations in mind, let me turn to three moments in the Church's history to illustrate how Christ becomes culture and endures as culture.

By the middle of the second century, Christians were beginning to be known in the Roman world, but they did not bear the marks usually associated with a distinctive community. In the oft-cited passage from the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus* (it is really an apology), Christians are distinguished from others not by nationality, language, or by custom. They do not have their own cities, and their way of life is inconspicuous. It was known that Christians honored Christ as God, refused to venerate the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome, and gathered regularly for a ritual meal. Yet there was little else to identify them. They met in the homes of the wealthier members; they used in their worship the language of the city in which they dwelled; they owned no land; they had no temples (in fact, no buildings at all), no cemeteries of their own, and no religious calendar. The bishop was not a public personage and the Church, as a social entity, was invisible.

Take, for example, the earliest Christian art. If a Christian living in 200 A.D. wished to have an object in his home that gave artistic expression to Christian belief, what might it be? He would go to a craftsman and select a lamp stamped with a conventional symbol that could yield a Christian interpretation: a dove, a fish, a ship, an anchor, or a shepherd carrying a lamb. When placed in a Christian home, a symbol which had one meaning to the Romans was invested with a Christian meaning: the dove for gentleness; the fish for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior; the shepherd for *philanthropia* or Christ the good shepherd. In buying

and displaying objects such as lamps or rings or seals, Christians created the first Christian art (of which we have knowledge), but what the symbols represented lay in the eyes of the beholder, not in the object. As far as Roman society was concerned Christianity was invisible.

At the beginning of the third century, however, Christians in Rome took a bold stride. They pooled their resources to purchase a plot of land on the Via Appia Antica outside the city; there they constructed an underground burial chamber and commissioned artists to decorate the walls and ceilings with frescoes. A Roman Christian by the name of Callistus, who later became bishop of Rome, oversaw the construction, which today is known as the Catacomb of St. Callistus. Only a few of the paintings have survived, but the catacomb itself is largely intact. It is not simply a few burial niches, but a vast underground cemetery with chapels, ceiling and wall decorations, and paintings that depict persons and stories from the Bible. Its construction represents an organized effort (diggers, designers, plasterers, painters) on the part of the Christian community in Rome to create a distinctively Christian space. The catacombs were not hide-outs during persecution; they were burial grounds and places of worship, and their location was not secret. When Christians buried their dead or went to the catacomb to celebrate the Eucharist their activities were evident to their fellow citizens.

The construction of a Christian catacomb required planning and money to choose the layout and décor and to pay the workmen. Most of the rooms are square, allowing for a symmetrical design to be imprinted on a ceiling of white plaster. The ceiling generally has a painted medallion at the apex to highlight a prominent image. In some rooms the figure of a young shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders occupies this central medallion. Other images portray the figure of Orpheus (understood as Christ) holding his lyre and surrounded by animals (Christ, unlike Orpheus, tames even the wildest of beasts, the human being, said Clement of Alexandria), Daniel as a heroic nude, and Jonah being cast overboard. The form of the images is familiar from Roman art, but by putting them together with wall paintings—Abraham with Isaac, Moses striking the rock in the desert, Daniel in the lion's den, and Jesus being baptized in the Jordan—these Roman Christians created a uniquely Christian sanctuary.

What the Christians undertook on the Via Appia Antica was being done by other Christian communities at about the same time. As the art historian Corby Finney has observed, "A cultural event of some importance was taking place," and we can see here a

"transition from models of accommodation and adaptation that were materially invisible to a new level of Christian identity that was palpable and visible." For the first time Christians were beginning to create a "material culture," something that is tangible, occupies space, is public (though underground), and is distinctively Christian.

The Christians who planned and built this catacomb had given as much thought to their undertaking as bishops and philosophers had invested in defending the faith, expounding the Scriptures, or meeting the arguments of critics. Significantly, Christian culture first takes material shape in connection with caring for and remembering the dead. Memory, especially of the faithful departed, is a defining mark of Christian identity. The living joined their prayers with the saints' prayers, which, according to the book of Revelation, were "golden bowls full of incense." In organizing the community to construct a burial place and in decorating it with pictures depicting biblical stories, Christians were fashioning a communal public identity that would endure over the generations. As the Apostles' Creed has it (in its earliest meaning), "I believe in communion with the saints." Their aim was not to communicate the gospel to an alien culture but to nurture the Church's inner life.

A second moment at which we see Christ becoming culture comes from a later period, and here the idiom is not space but time, the creation of a Christian calendar. Theologians and biblical scholars have made much of the New Testament understanding of *kairos*, the time when something decisive is to happen, an extraordinary moment long awaited. "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15). But there is another kind of time, the marking of days and seasons. For the earliest Christians there was only one day, the day of the resurrection celebrated each time the community gathered, normally on Sunday. Already in the book of Revelation there is mention of the "Lord's Day," the *Kyriake Hemera* (Revelation 1:10) and in the *Didache* we hear of the "Day of the Lord" (*Didache* 14). By the middle of the second century, Christians had begun to celebrate a yearly festival, the Paschal Feast (death and resurrection of Christ) that began with a vigil on Saturday evening and continued through the night until the morning.

Over time other feasts were added. Christmas had begun to be observed in Rome in the middle of the fourth century. The *Chronograph of Rome*, a kind of calendar compiled for Roman Christians around the same time, lists Roman holidays, burial dates of

Roman bishops and martyrs, and the birth of Christ, all in calendrical, not historical, order. "On the eighth day of the calends of January Christ was born in Bethlehem in Judea." Christmas was soon complemented by the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, forty days after his birth. Ascension and Pentecost became fixed days. The Christian year was organized into two major cycles, one centered on Christ's birth, the other on his suffering, death, and resurrection. Like the earliest (and later) Christian art, the liturgical year (as we now call it) had a narrative shape drawn from the Scriptures, particularly the Gospels. Through ritual it imprinted the biblical narrative on the minds and hearts of the faithful, not simply as a matter of private devotion but as a fully public act setting the rhythm of communal life.

At the beginning of the third century, Christians were less than one percent of the Roman empire's population of some sixty million. By 300 A.D., there may have been six million Christians in the empire, but by mid-century the number had risen to over thirty million, about half of the total population. This rapid growth, with the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity and his vigorous program of building churches, changed public practice. Significantly, the Christian calendar became a civic calendar. In 321 Constantine made Sunday a public holiday. It is shallow and petulant to rail against the political aspects of Constantinianism while ignoring the efforts of Christians of ancient times to stamp the face of Christ upon their society, in the ordering of time, in architecture, and in law (e.g., prohibiting the exposure of infants, a traditional form of "birth control"). The purpose of making Sunday into a holy day was to provide time for Christians to attend public worship, but it had the secondary effect of making Sunday a day of leisure, thereby laying the groundwork for a Christian Sabbath.

It should also be remembered that the success of Christianity also altered the marking of historical time. Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk in the sixth century, was the first to date events "from the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Anno Domini*, A.D.). His scheme was adopted in the seventh century in England at the Synod of Whitby and was used by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

To the calendrical framework of Christmas, Presentation, Pasch, Ascension, and Pentecost were added special days remembering the martyrs and saints. Over time, the turning points in the year—the changing of seasons, the planting and harvesting of crops, the slaughtering of animals—took place on days named for saints or for events in the life of Christ.

The liturgical calendar makes religious remembrance habitual and familiar. The repetition of saints' days and festivals of the Lord is a kind of spiritual metronome helping communal life to move in concord with the mysteries of the faith.

We should not underestimate the cultural significance of the calendar and its indispensability for a mature spiritual life. Religious rituals carry a resonance of human feeling accumulated over the centuries. They cannot easily be created and are hard to recover once left to languish. They touch us more deeply than national commemorations, such as the Fourth of July or Memorial Day. The season of Advent, for example, is a predictable reminder that the Church lives by another time, marked in the home by a simple ritual, the lighting of a violet Advent candle set in an evergreen wreath on a dark evening in early December.

Because feast days and sacred seasons run at right angles to the conventional calendar they offer a regular and fixed cessation of activity and, thus, the gift of leisure (a *sine qua non* of culture, as Josef Pieper has taught us). Feast days become times of reflection and contemplation that open us to mystery and transcendence. How soon, wrote W. H. Auden, "must we reenter, when lenient days are done, the world of work and money and minding our p's and q's."

A third mode in which Christianity formed its own culture is language. In his magisterial *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, historian Henri Marrou describes the grammatical and rhetorical milieu in which Augustine was educated in the Roman Empire of the late fourth century; he reports that in Augustine's day educated Christians were the beneficiaries of an educational system that had been in place for hundreds of years. When Augustine wrote his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* (an essay on interpreting and expounding the Scriptures), he could assume that his readers knew Latin grammar and the standard rhetorical techniques.

But a hundred years later such knowledge could no longer be taken for granted. Few cities could any longer meet the expense of paying teachers and maintaining schools. Beginning in the sixth century a number of distinguished educators emerged in the Church, persons such as Boethius, Cassiodorus, Benedict of Nursia, Isidore of Seville, and the Venerable Bede. Their task was not, as Augustine's had been, to transform what had been received; it was, rather, to preserve and transmit what was being forgotten or to translate what could no longer be read. Christianity now assumed responsibility for managing the mechanisms of the Latin language.

Cassiodorus was born in 485 to a southern Italian senatorial family. During his middle years he served in the court of the Ostrogothic kings of Italy, putting his literary talents to work compiling edicts and official letters and recording notable events. When he was seventy years old he returned home and founded a monastery at Squillace on the southernmost coast of Italy. There he moved his library and gathered a company of scholars to make copies of the Scriptures and the classics of Latin Christian literature, to translate Greek works, and to write a compendium of Christian and secular learning.

Cassiodorus' compendium is markedly different from the writings of Augustine, Ambrose, or Jerome. Its chief purpose was to provide his readers with elementary instruction in "divine letters." So Cassiodorus begins with a listing of the books of the Bible, the order and division of the books, how they are to be interpreted, and brief comments on Christian teachers, such as Hilary, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Jerome. But then one comes upon a chapter entitled, "On Scribes and the Remembering of Correct Spelling." In the second part of the book, on "secular letters," he devotes a section to grammar, which he calls "the foundation of liberal studies." His aim was to transmit the basic skills of grammar and rhetoric for the purpose of copying the Scriptures accurately, because "every word of the Lord written by the scribe is a wound inflicted on Satan." When Cassiodorus was ninety years old he wrote *On Orthography*, a spelling handbook for his copyists. (The Latin letters v and b were particularly troublesome to copyists who worked by ear.)

Another writer known almost wholly for his grammatical, linguistic, and encyclopedic studies is the Spanish bishop Isidore of Seville. Though not a thinker of the first rank, he is comfortably seated in the second. (Dante places him in the fourth heaven, along with the Venerable Bede and Richard of St. Victor.) Born into the landed gentry of Cartagena, he was educated in a monastic school in Seville under the supervision of his brother Leander, who was the bishop of Seville. In 600 he succeeded his brother as bishop and subsequently had a profound influence on the liturgy and laws of the Spanish Church.

Isidore's *Etymologies* is an immense encyclopedia, an attempt to summarize all knowledge by drawing on the vast reservoir of classical writers, and his *Liber differentiarum sive de proprietate sermonum* deals with the meanings of words and the distinctions one must make to use them correctly (something like a Fowler's *Modern English Usage*).

Isidore recognized that grammar, "the science of expressing oneself correctly," is crucial not only for reading, writing, and speaking, but also for thinking and understanding. Grammar is knowledge of the way language works and of the rules that govern the relation of words and concepts. Without grammar there can be no transmission of the text of the Scriptures and no understanding of its content; hence, no grammar, no Christian culture.

Culture lives by language, and the sentiments, thoughts, and feelings of a Christian culture are formed and carried by the language of the Scriptures. St. Augustine, for instance, believed that there was a distinctively Christian language, what he called the Church's way of speaking (*ecclesiastica loquendi consuetudo*). He considered the term "martyr" (witness) to be a word sanctioned by the Bible (notably in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles) and hallowed by early Christian usage. It would be "contrary to the usage of the Church," said Augustine, to replace it with the conventional Latin term for hero, *vir. Salvator* (savior) is also a biblical word with pronounced Christian overtones: *natus est vobis hodie Salvator, qui est Christus Dominus*. In conventional Latin *salus* meant health, not salvation. Christians, however, coined the words *salvare* (to save) and *salvator* (savior); in doing so they began to create a Christian language formed by the Scriptures.

There are some words and phrases in Christian culture that are simply irreplaceable. Words and phrases such as "obedience," "grace," "long-suffering" (the biblical form of patience), "image of God," "suffering servant," "adoption," "will of God"—when used again and again—form our imagination and channel our affections. The recitation of the psalms day after day, week after week, transforms the words of the psalmists from texts to be interpreted into words we use to praise, beseech, confess, thank, and adore God—as well as words by which we know ourselves before God, "O Lord, Thou has searched me and known me! . . . Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether."

If there is a distinctly Christian language, we must be wary of translation. We cannot hand on to the next generation what the words signify if we do not hold fast to the words. Jerusalem cannot become Paris or Moscow or New York without losing its rootedness in the biblical narrative. Certain words must be used as they have been received in Christian speech, e.g., "Father," "Son," "Holy Spirit," "Lord" (as in "Lord, have mercy"), "glory" (as used in the Gospel of John for Christ's passion), "sin" ("against thee only have I sinned"), "emptied" (as in "emptied himself taking the form of a servant"), "resurrection" (as in "raised

from the dead on the third day”), “flesh” (as in “works of the flesh,” i.e., mental acts such as idolatry and jealousy, not only sins of the body, such as fornication), even “self” (as in the parable of the elder brother—“he came to himself”). It will not do to erase the term “self” and put in its place “came to his senses,” as the current Catholic lectionary has it; nor will it do to reword, out of ignorance and ideology, the first verse of Psalm 1, turning “blessed is the man,” into “blessed are those who” (as the New Revised Standard Version does), thereby excluding the ancient christological reading of the psalm.

Material culture and with it art, calendar and with it ritual, grammar and with it language, particularly the language of the Bible—these are only three of many examples (monasticism would be another) that could be brought forth to exemplify the thick texture of Christian culture, the fullness of life in the community that is Christ’s form in the world.

Nothing is more needful today than the survival of Christian culture, because in recent generations this culture has become dangerously thin. At this moment in the Church’s history in this country (and in the West more generally) it is less urgent to convince the alternative culture in which we live of the truth of Christ than it is for the Church to tell itself its own story and to nurture its own life, the culture of the city of God, the Christian republic. This is not going to happen without a rebirth of moral and spiritual discipline and a resolute effort on the part of Christians to comprehend and to defend the remnants of Christian culture. The unhappy fact is that the society in which we live is no longer neutral about Christianity. The United States would be a much less hospitable environment for the practice of the faith if all the marks of Christian culture were stripped from our public life and Christian behavior were tolerated only in restricted situations.

If Christian culture is to be renewed, habits are more vital than revivals, rituals more edifying than spiritual highs, the creed more penetrating than theological insight, and the celebration of saints’ days more uplifting than the observance of Mother’s Day. There is great wisdom in the maligned phrase *ex opere*

operato, the effect is in the doing. Intention is like a reed blowing in the wind. It is the doing that counts, and if we do something for God, in the doing God does something for us.

The poet Dana Gioia, the current director of the National Endowment for the Arts, puts it nicely in the poem “Autumn Inaugural”:

There will always be those who reject ceremony,
who claim that resolution requires no fanfare,
those who demand the spirit stay fixed
like a desert saint, fed only on faith,
to worship in no temple but the weather.

Gioia acknowledges the point:

Symbols betray us.
They are always more or less than what
is really meant.

Then:

But shall there be no
processions by torchlight because we are weak?

Praise to the rituals that celebrate change,
old robes worn for new beginnings,
solemn protocol where the mutable soul,
surrounded by ancient experience,
grows young in the imagination’s white dress.

Because it is not the rituals we honor
but our trust in what they signify, these rites
that honor us as witnesses—whether to watch
lovers swear loyalty in a careless world
or a newborn washed with water and oil.

If Christ is culture, let the sidewalks be lit with fire on Easter Eve, let traffic stop for a column of Christians waving palm branches on a spring morning, let streets be blocked off as the faithful gather for a Corpus Christi procession. Then will others know that there is another city in their midst, another commonwealth, one that has its face, like the faces of angels, turned toward the face of God. FT