



Christianity and Culture

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April 1990

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We must begin with some clarification of terms. The word 'culture' is used in a variety of ways. My dictionary lists eleven distinct meanings. The first is 'the quality in a person or society that arises from an interest in and acquaintance with what is generally regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits etc. In this sense the word 'culture' has elitist overtones. It is concerned with excellence of a certain kind. But of course the word is also used by sociologists and anthropologists in a quite different sense. To quote my dictionary again (No 4): 'The sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another'. This has nothing to do with excellence. No value judgements are involved. It is simply human behaviour in its corporate aspect. For the purposes of this paper I shall begin with the broader aspect, which has – I think – become the more common usage. I shall return to the narrower use later.

If we take this broader definition we may begin by asking: Why is there a problem of Christianity and Culture? Why has this question become important enough to be chosen as the theme of this conference? I have not, in recent years, been asked to read a paper on Christianity and personal behaviour. Why has the relation of Christianity to corporate behaviour become a problem in the way in which its relation to personal behaviour has not? The answering of that question will lead us into the heart of the matter, for I shall suggest that if we are looking at culture in this broader definition, it is the most distinctive feature of our culture that we make a sharp dichotomy between personal behaviour and corporate public behaviour. This is a dichotomy not known, I think, in the more ancient cultures of the world. I am referring to the dichotomy which is characteristic of the culture which we share with what we call 'developed' societies, between a public world of what are called facts and a private world of what are called values. The former are regarded as matters of knowledge, the latter are matters of belief. The former provide the material of public education; the latter are matters of individual choice. But before looking at this feature of our culture more closely I must make one fundamental theological point.

Whether we are speaking of culture in its narrower or its broader definition, and whether – within this broad definition – we are speaking of personal behaviour or of corporate behaviour, there is one basic affirmation to be made. If the starting point of our enquiry is – as it must be – the revelation of God given in the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

then we have to make a double statement: all human culture is judged as falling short of God's will in the presence of the cross; but human culture is affirmed and given a new possibility of flourishing by the fact of the resurrection. If we consider all the elements of human culture that were ranged against Jesus – law, religion, state, national sentiment – we find them judged and condemned. They are not manifestations of the divine will but embodiments of human rebellion against the divine will. But in the light of the resurrection, of the sending of the Spirit, and of the commission to the disciples to go into all the world with the message of God's victory over sin and death, we can affirm that God graciously sustains human culture, human being, corporate and personal, in order to be the sphere in which the glory of his grace may be manifested. So we have to take towards all human culture the double attitude that is expressed in the words judgement and grace. All human culture is under God's judgement. Culture can never be treated as an absolute. Alain Finkielkraut in his brilliant little book 'La Defait de la Pensee' has traced the way in which, in reaction to the universal claims of reason as expressed in the 18th Century Enlightenment, the Romantic movement put forward the claims of culture as having an authority not subject to the proud claims of rationality, and how this movement has continued to empower the revolt of Third World countries against the dominance of the nations which called themselves enlightened and developed. In relation to this revolt we have to say that human cultures are to be respected but not absolutized. They are all under the judgement not of western rationality but of the crucified and risen Christ. On the other hand, in the light of the Gospel we have to of firm the 'yes' to human life which was pronounced in the resurrection. This 'yes' is spoken to human culture both in its broad sense which covers all the decencies of good family and civic life and all the excellencies of human achievement in the creation of beauty and order and in the searching out of the works of God in nature. It is the reaffirmation of the word pronounced by the Creator at the beginning, who saw everything that he had made and saw that it was good. The goodness has been spoiled by human sin but, in raising Jesus from the dead, God has restored the broken order and has given us the pledge that all shall be good in the new creation of which the resurrection is the dawn.

Having made these three preliminary points I return to look at our culture in its broadest sense – the whole way of living and thinking which we in this country share with those that regard themselves as modern developed nations, among whom we have – of course – to include much more than Europe and North America. I have referred to what I think is the most distinctive feature of this culture, namely the split between a public world of what are called 'facts' which educated people are expected to know, and a private world of what are called 'values' in which some people believe and which are a matter of personal choice. That split is manifest on this, as on every university campus, between the part which is labelled 'science' and the part which is labelled 'arts and humanities'. In the former it is believed (or was until very recently) that it is possible to obtain knowledge of the real world which is reliable though never complete. Here the progress of knowledge is cumulative. Each new generation of scientists builds on the work of predecessors. New recruits to scientific study have to master the work of their predecessors thoroughly before they can be regarded as qualified to add to or amend their findings. The enterprise is conducted in freedom, and could not flourish otherwise. But freedom is not understood to mean the freedom to say anything that comes into the young scientist's head. It is not freedom to produce any kind of nonsense. It is the freedom which comes from mastery of the tradition, a freedom defined not simply as absence of limits, but freedom defined in the relation to the reality beyond the self which has to be explored. On the other hand, there are the areas of study called arts and humanities. Here there is no such cumulative development. Students of philosophy or literature or history do not see themselves as building up a body of knowledge on the foundations laid before. The succession Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein is not like the succession of bricks laid on a foundation to build a building which grows with each new generation. A scientist will say of a new discovery in his field: 'We now know' Such a claim in the field of the humanities would be regarded as arrogant. All statements regarding what is ultimately true and good and beautiful are matters of personal opinion. All opinions are the proper target for sceptical and critical assault. Truth in these areas is in principle unknowable. In this area

of our culture it is not accepted that there is a reality 'out there' beyond the self, a reality which we are called upon to explore and – though never completely – know. In this area everything is relative. What is 'true' for you is not true for me. Scepticism is the mark of intellectual competence.

The resulting situation has been graphically described by an outside observer – the Chinese theologian Carver Yu. Surveying, with great competence, what he sees of western culture, he sums it up as 'technological optimism and literary despair'. In the field of technology he sees boundless energy and optimism. In the invention and perfecting of means to achieve any ends we desire, we are brilliant. But if one asks the forbidden question: What is it all for in the end? What ends are intrinsically worth pursuing? What, in fact, is the chief end of man? the question is brushed aside. It is a matter of private opinion. The result – as Yu sees it – is a literature which expresses only nihilism and despair about anything intrinsically lovely, good, beautiful, worth pursuing for its own sake. As our technology enables us to eliminate more and more of the sheer physical labour which occupies most of the waking hours of men and women in what we call undeveloped societies, so more and more time is available for leisure, for the possibility of doing things which are valuable in their own right and not as means for physical existence, but the problem of filling this leisure time becomes more and more demanding. We have to be continuously entertained and we have developed miracles of technology for the purpose of keeping ourselves perpetually amused. There develops a vast entertainment industry designed to save us from the anxieties that would arise if we had a lot of time to think about serious matters. As Neill Postman in his book 'Amusing ourselves to death' has pointed out, while students of current affairs were worrying about the possible advent of George Orwell's '1984', they failed to notice that Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World' had already arrived with television to provide the soma, the delightful drug which keeps us happy and saves us from asking questions about ultimate meaning. The marvellous achievements of the rationality which we have honed and sharpened in the past three hundred years become in the end the purveyors of absurdity. We move towards the point where there is no real world out there to be explored and known, only the world of the self, its imaginings and fantasies. The world of television becomes more real than the world of our everyday life. We reach the point where an American friend said to me: 'You have to accept the fact that we are living in a culture where, even if you have participated in an event, it is not real till you see it on television.'

Because in this culture questions of ultimate truth and therefore of the meaning of human life are relegated to the world of private opinion; because the question 'What is the chief end of Man?' can no longer be part of the school curriculum but is one for each individual to decide for herself, it follows that our rational powers are devoted to the devising of means and not to the discerning of ends. As long as the scientific method was applied to non-human realities, to inorganic matter and to organic life, no great harm was done. When, however, it began to be applied to human behaviour in the sciences of economics and sociology, its results became momentous. It is appropriate to take the example of economics here in this University where Adam Smith laid the foundations of the modern science which bears that name. In an earlier age economics had been simply part of ethics. It was about human behaviour in a certain area of affairs, and therefore subject to moral judgements which ought to be made about greed, covetousness, the duty to support the family, responsibility for the poor, and so on. With Adam Smith there has not yet been a complete severance of economics from morals, but the separation has started. It has led, as we know, to the development of a science of economics in which such moral judgements have no place. It is assumed that the human person is simply a unit in a determinate mechanism comparable to the universe as Isaac Newton had described it, in which the operative forces are human greed and laziness functioning in a manner analogous to inertia and gravity in Newton's cosmos. This has reached its natural result in our day in a global financial and industrial market which operates as an impersonal mechanism apart from the deliberate purposes of individuals or even of the most powerful governments, a mechanism which can easily be wrecked but cannot, it seems, be controlled for chosen human purposes. A certain concept of

rationality leads in the end to absurdity. If the question of the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life is excluded from the area of public truth, if a science such as economics is exempt from any questioning of its philosophical foundations and treated as an independent science, such absurdity must necessarily follow.

I do not need to apologise for taking economics as a key element in our culture because it does in fact dominate all aspects of our public life. It has come to dominate politics to the virtual exclusion of all else, and even in the world of culture in its narrower definition it has a dominant role. But if we are now speaking of culture in the broader sense, then I want to come to the question: 'How does Christianity relate to this culture?' It is well known that there has been a great deal of thinking in foreign missionary circles in recent years about the relation between Christianity and culture, because missionaries have been aware of their failure in the past – failure to distinguish between the Gospel and their own culture which they assumed to be Christian, and failure to recognize that many elements in the cultures of those to whom they brought the Gospel were of great value even if they were strange to the missionary. Our present problem is a different one, because we are thinking about the relation of the Gospel to this culture of ours which was so deeply influenced by the Gospel over so many centuries but which no longer accepts Christianity as public truth and is governed by another vision of truth. The foreign missionary knows from the start that he is meeting a culture which is rooted in another way of looking at things, and he knows that he is charged with a message which is going to call that way of looking at things into radical question. The Christian living in Europe, educated from childhood in the way of looking at things which Europe has developed in the past three hundred years, is not conscious of the same sharp contrast between two ways of looking at things. Even though the movement which called itself Enlightenment, the movement in which a new way of looking became explicit and conscious, began as a violent attack upon the Christian tradition, the European churches have in general learned to live with it, and indeed to adjust their thinking to its demands. The many attempts in the past three hundred years to demonstrate what was called the 'reasonableness of Christianity' were attempts to show that the Gospel could be accommodated – with some chipping away of awkward corners – into the new way of seeing things. With these adjustments it is possible for Christianity to be somewhat comfortably accommodated within our culture. It can be the opinion of those individuals and communities of individuals who so choose. But it cannot enter the public arena to challenge the reigning culture. An economist may be a Christian in her private life, but if she were to submit a paper to a journal of academic economics, which challenged the reigning assumptions of economic science on the basis of the Gospel, the article would not be published. She would be advised to submit it to a journal of Christian opinion where it properly belongs.

In spite of the differences between the situation of the foreign missionary going to another culture than his own, and the situation of the Christian within our contemporary culture, I think nevertheless that there are lessons to be learned from this missionary experience. When I have stood in an Indian street to preach the Gospel to those for whom the name of Jesus has no meaning at all, I must – of course – speak in the language of the people. In that sense I must enter their world. In preaching I will have to use one of their words for God. All human languages have words for God, and these words have a deep resonance in their minds. They are full of meaning. My problem is that the meaning is other than the one I want. It is a meaning given by centuries of experience as a Hindu or a Moslem or whatever. Yet I cannot communicate without using that word. It is only after a long time, probably, that my hearers will suddenly realize that I am saying something entirely new, something which disrupts the idea of God which they had held hitherto. The supreme example of this is surely in the Fourth Gospel. Here the writer uses words like *logos* which are part of the current coinage of the syncretistic religious world of his time. The reader feels at home. This is a familiar word and we know roughly what it means. But then comes the sudden and shocking identification of the *logos* with a Galilean preacher. The hearer must either simply turn away in ridicule, or else recognize that something is being said which drastically challenges his whole way of looking at things. If it is actually true that the *logos* has entered into

the relativities and contingencies of human history in the person of this man Jesus, if this is actually true, then all that we have hitherto taken for granted has to be rethought in relation to this new reality. Not that everything we have thought hitherto has to be scrapped, has to be treated as rubbish. Not at all. But it does mean that it has to be rethought into a new pattern which is controlled by the reality which has now been revealed. The statement that the logos was made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth is not something which arises out of philosophical reflection on human affairs. Nor can the truth of the statement be verified by reference to some prior and more fundamental truth. It is open to rejection as mere assertion with no foundation. But it may also be accepted and become itself the foundation upon which a coherent understanding of human experience as a whole can be built. And if it is argued that the choice seems to be wholly arbitrary and without rational justification, how shall that complaint be answered? The only answer that can be given is a theological one, and specifically an answer in terms of the theological doctrine of divine election. The believer will not say: 'I decided to follow Jesus'. That may be true but it is a secondary truth. What is fundamental will be in some such terms as these: 'God in his amazing grace chose and called me to be a witness to his saving act on behalf of all people'. The epistemological question has to have a theological answer; and to say that is – of course – just another way of saying that I believe in God.

This is the point at which our culture will shrug its collective shoulder and turn away. This sort of claim is simply out of order in public discussion. I referred earlier to the split in our culture which is so vividly represented in those places which are the visible centres of culture – in our universities. Here we have, as C.P. Snow stated it, the two cultures. The one is vigorous and confident of its ability to give us reliable knowledge about the real world with which we have to deal, the world of 'facts'; the other dealing in what are called 'values', about which we do not say 'we know' but rather 'some people at various times in the history of thought have believed'. The study and discussion of these various beliefs is, strictly speaking, only a game. They are beliefs which were held by people who believed them because they thought they were true. But of course other thinkers have thought that other things were true. Probably it depended upon their circumstances, their culture, their psychological formation, the way they were treated in childhood. It is very interesting to study these different beliefs, but of course it would be shocking if at the end one were to say: 'This and this is true; that and that is false'. That would mean that the game would be over. Statements of that kind are proper in the science departments where proof is possible. They are out of place here.

This disastrous bifurcation in our culture is surely the result of the quest for a wrong kind of assurance. Perhaps those are right who claim that Descartes was the source of the trouble with his search for a kind of knowledge which could not be doubted. That very quest rested upon an assumption which we have to question namely, that the universe is so constituted that certainty of this kind is available. The truth seems rather to be, as Michael Polanyi, following Einstein has put it, that only statements which can be doubted make contact with reality. Statements such as Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' may be indubitable but they make no contact with any reality outside of the mind of Descartes. The truth surely is that all knowing of any reality beyond the knowing self has both subjective and objective poles. It is subjective in that it is the enterprise of a knowing subject with all the enabling or limiting factors which are furnished by his culture, his psychological make-up, his particular circumstances, and so on. There is no knowing of any kind which is not conditioned by these subjective factors. But, at the same time, when I say that I know something, I am not simply describing an interior psychological state. I am claiming to make contact with reality beyond myself and I test that claim by publishing my belief about the reality in question and inviting others to agree or disagree. If I keep it as a private opinion, I am in effect abandoning the claim that it is true. Such knowing is never complete. There is always more to be explored. But it is, or may be, a real (if incomplete) knowing of the reality in question. To deny this is of course logically possible, but it would be to turn all human language into nonsense. We all in fact talk and act as if we believed that there was a real world available to our knowing, the knowledge of which can be shared among us.

The split on our university campuses is the outward sign of a split between a false ideal of objectivity and a false relapse into subjectivity. As we know, modern science is far more aware of the subjective elements in scientific knowledge, the enormous part played by imagination in the framing of hypotheses, and all the psychological and sociological factors which play a part in the development of science. In fact the scepticism about any possibility of true knowledge in the arts and humanities is tending to seep into the science faculties. But much more significant is the way in which a false idea of objectivity has paralyzed thought in the other half of the university. Since this is a gathering of theological students it would be sensible to take one outstanding example from the field of biblical studies. How often one reads, for example, statements to the effect that the teaching of the New Testament cannot be authoritative for us since everything there written is conditioned by the cultural situation which is not ours. How absurd it is to imagine that there might be available to us some perceptions of truth which are not culturally conditioned, which are not communicated to us through the minds of human beings who – as human beings – are necessarily part of one culture in one set of circumstances. And how arrogant is the idea that our way of seeing things, the world-view which controls the culture of Europe and North America at the end of the 20th Century is somehow the yardstick by which one measures the truth-claims of people in other times and other cultures. How absurd is the illusion, which is constantly present in discussions of the truth claims of the Christian faith, that there is – or ought to be – available to us some standpoint which is above all specific human standpoints, thus enabling us to survey all possible world views and decide on the basis of some supra-cultural and supra-historical criteria which among them is to be preferred. But just such an illusion seems to be present in the question so often asked: How do you know that the Christian faith is truth?

Let us return to the split between the two cultures. I have said that contemporary science has become much more clear-sighted in recognizing the subjective elements in all scientific knowledge, without – except perhaps at the margins – losing the confidence that it is real knowledge of a real world. On the other side of the divide there seems to be no corresponding movement. It still seems to be assumed that objective knowledge of a real world belongs only to the empirical sciences and that there are no objective realities which could be known as the basis for judging that some values are false and others true. Why should this be so? The answer must again, surely, be theological. What is the meaning of this much-used word 'values'? What is the objective reality to which the word refers beyond the self with its preferred 'values'? Technical rationality enables us to judge what are the best means for achieving a given end. But what kind of rationality is needed to judge between alternative ends? No reasoning would have the data needed without some answer to the question "What is the ultimate end? What is the purpose for which human beings and all created things exist?" If that question is unanswerable, then no judgements of value can be made except in the very short term. 'Good' and 'bad' are terms without meaning if there is no meaning in the cosmos as a whole. What is good for one purpose may be bad for another. But the question of ultimate meaning is, as we have seen, the question which is expressly excluded from public doctrine and reserved for private opinion.

How would the question of purpose be decided, or decidable? Purpose is a personal word. The difference between a purpose which is in course of being realised, and the end of that process in the successful realization of the purpose, is that the latter is visible, a matter of empirical investigation, while the former is still locked in the mind of the person whose purpose it is. While it is not yet realized it can only be made known if the person whose purpose it is reveals it. A word has to be spoken. There has to be revelation. No other possibility exists. And if a word is spoken, its truth cannot be verified by examination of the situation as it now is. It can only be received in trust as something given, a datum, something which can be doubted but can also be believed. The world of what are now called 'values' can only be a matter of knowledge – as distinct from private opinion – if the starting point for its investigation is the revealed word of the one whose purpose created and sustains the cosmos and will bring it to its true end. It would seem therefore that in strict truth the study of what are now called 'values' must, if there is no

revelation, be essentially a game, and must exclude the possibility of saying in respect of any of these values 'we know.'

Before returning to some implications of this, let us be clear what it means to accept the revelation as true. It does not mean the end of enquiry, but the beginning of enquiry on a new basis. It means that when we enquire into matters which concern the good, the beautiful and the true, we are not compelled to be either relativist or sceptics. Or rather, we are relativists and sceptics in a sense different from the one normally current. We are relativists in that we relate all claims to that which is given in the revelation, and seek to distinguish between what is true and what is false in all human cultures in the light of the revelation. We are sceptics in that we are not taken in by the claims which each age and each culture tends to make for itself, the claim to make itself the judge of all other ages and cultures. But above all we are explorers because we have been given the clue by which to enter with increasing understanding into all possible human experience. This is, if you like, the logic of mission. Mission, the communicating of the gospel to all peoples in all situations, is not only the necessary implication of our belief that it is true. Mission is also a continuing exegesis of the Gospel as the given revelation in Jesus Christ is received by new peoples, new cultures and in new situations so that the full reality of God's purpose may be progressively grasped and the Church, as Jesus promised, be led into all the truth. The revelation is not the end of exploration but its starting point.

I have been speaking so far mainly of culture in the broad sense in which anthropologists and sociologists use the word. I am not well fitted to speak of culture in the narrower sense, to speak of the worlds of art and literature, of music and poetry and the visual arts. I wish that I were better qualified. But if I understand rightly the rather difficult book of George Steiner entitled 'Real Presence', he is arguing very powerfully that without an acknowledged sense of the presence of the transcendent, in some form, then the arts must inevitably degenerate into nonsense and absurdity. It seems to me that there is evidence to support this thesis. And, to look at the same point from the other side, to think of the great art, music, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry that has been nourished in Christian Europe in intimate relation with the central faith that God has made known and effected his purpose in Jesus Christ, is to realize how that revelation has inspired and enabled much of the greatest and most enduring work of the human imagination. Of course Christianity is not dead in Europe. The belief in the meaningfulness of human life which it has communicated to our culture through the thousand years in which Europe was shaped into civilization cannot be immediately destroyed. But the destruction is under way. And it is surely obvious that if there is no public doctrine which gives some meaning and purpose to human life, it is inevitable that the arts will reflect that disorientation and will tend to degenerate into the irrational and the absurd.

But my main concern is with culture in its broader sense, with the way of understanding the world and organizing the common life which informs all our public educational systems and all our political life. At the heart of it is the view that there is a world of reliable knowledge, the world of what are called 'facts', and that it is only in this world that reliable knowledge is to be had, and that statements about what are called 'values' are merely matters of personal opinion unless they can be verified by the kinds of enquiry that are used in the empirical sciences. As I suggested in speaking of the missionary approach of the Fourth Gospel, we do not communicate the Christian faith in this kind of culture by trying to show that it can be accommodated within its assumptions. Rather, we have to question these fundamental assumptions in the light of something which is simply given, namely God's revelation of himself in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. The acceptance of this can only be a work of God and it can only be through a conversion of the mind. When I try to communicate the Christian faith I am constantly asked the question: But how do you know? The question implies that there is some reality more ultimate, more certain, more reliable than Jesus Christ, something from which one could argue that Jesus Christ is to be accepted as God's revelation of himself. There is no such reality. The idea that there is is the master-illusion of our culture. At the heart of this illusion is the belief that the only certainly known reality is the human self with its limitless desire for autonomy. I said earlier that

when I am asked the epistemological question: How do you know?, I can only give a theological answer: 'God called me to be his witness'. I think this is the crux of the matter. Only God can reveal to man the truth of human being. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is in the Son that we see what it means to use the word 'God'. And it is by the presence of the Spirit in the believing community that the revelation becomes available and that faith becomes a possibility for human beings. We cannot commend the Gospel to our culture by proving its truth on the terms which our culture lays down. But, thank God, the Holy Spirit does continue to bear witness to God's revelation in Christ through the faithful lives and deeds and words of communities of believers who are continually interpreting the Gospel and truth in and for the life of the world in all its variety. The call to the Church in relation to culture is to be bold enough to affirm the Gospel as public truth and to undertake the long, hard, difficult and risky business of learning what it involves for the public life of society, its intellectual and cultural life as well as its politics, its industry, its economics, its search for health and for universal welfare. If we return to the first definition of culture, with its elitist implications, I think we can say that it is time we got rid of our fear of the word elite. Its corruption is a self-serving element in society which uses its advantages to marginalize others. But there can be an elite in a true sense. There can be people in society who seek to achieve excellence in all areas of our common life on the basis of their faithful following of Jesus. That will not be self-serving but will be the kind of service that a torch-bearer does for a company travelling through the dark. He goes ahead not to leave them behind but so that they may follow. In that sense I think there can be a Christian culture. Not a Christian state which enforces conformity to Christian belief, but a society in which ' (to quote from the first. definition in my dictionary) the standard of 'what is generally recognized as excellent' is set by those who have been made captive to the truth as it is in Jesus.

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