

CHRISTIAN CULTURE: WHY BOTHER?¹

By Cameron M. Thompson

“God did not deign to save man by means of a mere syllogism...” (St. John Henry Newman) but rather He became Incarnate and lived among us, thus giving us not only knowledge and commandment, but a way of life.

Why bother with Christian culture? Isn't being a good Christian simply a matter of doctrine and morals, following certain rules and believing certain things—a mere matter of faith?

First we should ask: what do we mean by culture? Well, the word ‘culture’ comes from the Latin word *cultus*, which means worship or, if you will, ritual action. It is also related to the idea of cultivation, as in *agriculture* (care and tending of the fields), *viticulture* (care and tending of the vines), or *horticulture* (care and tending of gardens), and so on. So perhaps one could say that *cultus* (the root of culture), as the systems of ritual and worship, has conceptually a sense to it of “care and tending of divine things.”

Christopher Dawson, that preeminent scholar of Christian history, defines culture as “the more or less stable, if continually developing, practices, norms, institutions, and relationship systems of a people, that endures from generation to generation.” In other words, culture is a relatively stable, if evolving, thing—that encompasses the whole network or complex system of social practices, institutions, and norms, which have at their center the care and tending of divine things, or gods—whatever those gods may be. I might add that culture is typically not something that is done self-consciously, but rather something “done” (or rather, participated in) almost semi-consciously or naturally—in the same way breathing is done mostly without thought. Just like you’ve been doing right now, up to this moment. Except now you’ve become aware of your breathing because I’ve just pointed it out to you. Perhaps in becoming aware of your breathing you’ve noticed something about it, whether it is fast or slow, shallow or deep. In this same way, we often go about participating in the culture around us without noticing (1) *that* we’re doing it, nor (2) *what* the particular qualities of the cultural rituals are that we’re participating in. That is, just what *are* the divine things—or gods—that my actions, relationships, and institutions center on: Christ or the gods of Babylon?

So from all this we might say that a specifically Christian culture is one wherein it is natural—as natural as breathing—for one’s life to be oriented to the divine things of Christ at the center of *all* social practices, norms, institutions, and relationships. This is not the same as saying that this orientation is self-conscious—but rather that the ebb and flow of participation in the ritual systems and practices of Christ’s Incarnate power in the world is as natural as breathing.

So that’s what a Christian culture *is*, but that brings us to the question of why should we bother with Christian culture at all? So what? Surely it is all very interesting, all very well and good for a historical study, but culture doesn’t guarantee sanctity after all, and isn’t the goal of Christian life really just to have faith, or a personal relationship with Christ? Now, the word ‘faith’ (and its related concept, ‘belief’) is an interesting thing. In the post-secular society we in the Modern Global West inhabit, we tend to think that faith (and belief) means assenting in some way or another to a set of propositions, or for the more cynical, “faith means believing what I know ain’t true” (Mark Twain); however, this is not what the word faith (and belief) actually, or historically, means. Period. This

¹ From in *The Original Benedict Option Guidebook*, Published by Marchese di Carabàs, 2021.
Available from: <http://cameronmthompson.com/featured-books>

popular (mis)conception of the term actually refers to mere notional assent—the kind of knowledge about some fact or another that you’ve been told or found out yourself to be the case, but that’s not biblical meaning of the word ‘faith’.

The true concept of faith, which in the Greek of the Bible is *pistis* (and the verb ‘to believe’ is *pistevo*), which is what we in English might call ‘religious belief’, has less to do with notional assent to some *proposition*, so much as with loyalty to a *person*. The traditional concept of ‘faith’ has to do with what even in modern English we retain in the concept of *faithfulness* and *fidelity* (rooted in the word ‘faith’/‘fides’). We all acknowledge that the concept of faithfulness doesn’t mean that he or she has many or particularly strong propositional beliefs (in, say, the quadratic equation, or that the Earth revolves around the sun), but rather that he or she is trustworthy and loyal to some person, and this fidelity is an ever-present life reality.

Taken then to the idea of Christian Faith, this means that Faith is not a matter of belief-knowledge, but a matter of trustworthy loyalty—one’s trust *in* Christ, and also one’s trustworthy loyalty *to* Christ in all aspects of one’s life (for instance, in the enduring social practices, norms, institutions, and relationships one participates in with the formalness and organic nonchalance with which one breathes).

Thus a Christian culture is one wherein it is easier—or at least more natural—to concretely live out one’s Christian faith: that is, one’s fidelity to Christ and the social practices and structures that are the lived practice of one’s trust in Him. It behooves us then to stop and examine the qualities of the social norms, practices, and institutions we so naturally and unconsciously are participating in, and to find out just what are the “divine things”—or gods—that are at their center. And in order to better understand how we might rectify our situation, should we find ourselves embedded in a cultural system that is at odds with fidelity to, and trust in, Christ as Lord, then it will be necessary for us to re-cultivate through communities a living and authentic Christian culture. For, a Christian culture is the fertile soil of a Christian life, and without it, all the doctrine and law and moralizing in the world is the merest pretense of a withering branch, whose only hope for roots—let alone for bearing abiding fruit—is to be re-embedded into the soil of a living Christian community. Sure, Christian culture isn’t a guarantee you’ll be a saint, but it may just be a necessary precondition, at least for most of us humans of flesh and blood.

So why bother? Simply put, a Christian culture is a culture wherein it is possible—perhaps the only way possible—to live a Christian life and become holy.