

RELIGION AND CULTURE

On 30 November of this year, Jam Van Bragt was invited to address a group gathered for Inculturation Ceremonies at Dong-A University in Pusan, which has just established a new center, the Sokdang Academic Research Institute of Korean Culture. The text of that lecture follows, as another source of reflection for topics for upcoming conferences of Inter-Religio.

Religion and culture. The question of their relationship is a vital one, and our inability to find an acceptable answer to it might prove fatal for mankind. It cannot, therefore, be called accidental or whim-

sical for the Sokdang Academic Research Institute to have chosen it as the theme of this special lecture on the occasion of its inauguration ceremony.

But let me first deliver myself of a shameful confession of ignorance: I do not know your noble country and its culture well enough to make my words bear directly on the situation of religion and culture in Korea. This may point to an important future task of the Institute: to make Korea's culture known to the world in its uniqueness as well as in its universality. As of now, I only know that yours is a very old and cultured tradition, intimately connected with Chinese civilization but with a taste all its own; and that Japan owes the earlier part of its cultural development to Korean influences and the workings of the many immigrant families with their deeply religious attitudes and admirable skills in all fields of culture. So I want to ask your forbearance if my reflections do not always seem directly relevant to your situation; they are, of course, born out of the situations I know best: those of Western Europe and Japan.

Almost exactly one month ago, Japanese television showed the Leipzig Radio Orchestra and Chorus in their performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solennis*. It struck me then that this thoroughly religious performance represented a highlight among the cultural exports of a communist—and therefore supposedly atheist—country to Japan. I felt this as rather incongruous but was not really surprised by it.

What cultural legacies would East Germany have to show if they wanted to shun all relationship with religion? Are not all the great cultural monuments of mankind inspired by and pervaded with religion? And did not China's cultural revolution cast our question in an utterly concrete and three-dimensional form: Can a culture really afford to reject its past without losing all dynamism towards the future?

Can a civilization, whose past is admittedly steeped in religion, spurn all religious principles without disintegrating? And what happens if the leaders of a civilization—and maybe the majority of its members—lose faith in the spiritual heritage their culture is built on?

Our final question might remind us that not only nations with a militantly anti-religious bent are faced with a serious problem, but equally those people who, while professing deep respect for their own past and paying lip service to the intrinsically religious nature of their own tradition, nevertheless see their present cultural endeavors lose organic contact with that life-giving spirit. We may remember here what Arnold Toynbee said about western civilization: "...We have obviously, for a number of generations past, been living on spiritual capital, I mean clinging to Christian practice without possessing the Christian belief— and practice unsupported by belief is a wasting asset as we have suddenly discovered, to our dismay, in this generation."¹

As you all know, present-day science of religion treats the question of the relationship of religion and culture mostly under the heading of "secularization." No agreement exists about the definition of this term, but there is no doubt that it wants to express a phenomenon which may have been at work for centuries but today appears to explode all over the cultural scene: time alienation of the various realms of culture from

religion and the concomitant loss of influence of the great religious institutions on the public life of society. These institutions "survive and continue to influence human life, but all of them have lost their organic relation to society which was expressed in the traditional synthesis of religion and culture in East and West alike."²

We cannot enter here into the question of the role which the invasion of western technological civilization has played in this secularization process in non-western cultures—important as this question may be for present-day Korean culture—but must direct our attention to the still more fundamental question of what this growing apart of religion and culture might signify for each of the partners. But before looking at things from their two different standpoints, we can safely assume, it seems to me, that for religion and culture both, their actual divorce appears as a decisive watershed in their development. Do we possess any yardstick by which to judge this event as progress or as degeneracy? Are we even sure that these two can survive in mutual isolation? *Religion in an age of secularization: What is really happening to religion nowadays?*

When it comes to the fundamental meaning of secularization for religion, sociology of religion, while rather unanimous in seeing secularization as a universal and irreversible trend, appears to present two divergent interpretations. For some, secularization means that religion is finally retreating from the human scene. The anthropological implication is then, of course, that religion does not belong to the essential make-up of man, but was only the initial matrix for man's humanization and culture-building—an idea Auguste Comte has familiarized us with. Others, however, see secularization as a process of privatization of religion: while in the past religion presented itself as also a social phenomenon, in the future it will content itself with being a matter of the individual in his solitariness.

The former hypothesis allows room for two emotional reactions: either the triumphal "At long last we succeeded in killing the tyrannical Father-God!" or the dejected "We are orphans now, and what is going to happen to us?" The latter hypothesis, while permitting more mixed feelings, might be more conducive to a serene reappraisal of the role of society and culture in religion.

From a perusal of history, this role may seem to be an ambiguous, or even a paradoxical one. For from the twilight of bigotry wherein human society and religion are inextricably interwoven and confused, up to the recent past with its greater differentiation, the principle seemed to hold true: "However universal and spiritual a religion may be, it can never escape the necessity of becoming incarnated in culture and clothing itself in social institutions and traditions if it is to exert a permanent influence on human life and behavior."³ Mere detachment or aloofness on time side of religion—a refusal to dirty its hands in the poor doings of human society—may occasionally have been interpreted as a sign of spiritual freedom but, on the whole, rather appeared as a sign of religious inauthenticity. But on the other hand, there seems to have been no surer way for religion to lose its meaning, vigor, and function than for it to identify too narrowly with the structures and tenets of a given society. In such a "sociological adulteration," a religion's loss of transcendence and universality is further compounded by a particularization which makes it an element of division in mankind, and the

and time danger of "becoming bound to the corpse of a dead culture."⁴

Taking into account the development from archaic religions to world religions with their greater independence over against a particular society, we might say that history shows us the spectacle of a progressive differentiation of religion and culture, whereby both are allowed to rise out of an opaque mixture into a more "clear and distinct" presentation of their respective essences. This would at the same time mean that the matter of their relationship has been growing into a more and more urgent problem. The theologian, Paul Tillich, tries to catch the difference of religion and culture, and their relationship, in the following short formula: "Religion is directedness of the spirit toward the unconditioned meaning. Culture is directedness of the spirit toward conditioned forms. Both, however, meet in the orientation to the completed unity of the forms of meaning."⁵ We might be well advised to follow the lead of this admirable phrase but, unfortunately, time does not permit its elucidation here. Permit me, instead, to pass over directly to my second point. *Culture in an age of secularization*: What is happening to the world's cultures?

Culture may be roughly defined as the unfolding, in a human community, of the properly human life, whereby man is elevated above the level of animals or mere nature. As such, it necessarily implies an *order* wherein individuals can unite to build up their common humanity together, and a conquest of *reason* or consciousness over irrationality or the darkness of primeval chaos. These two elements, order and rationality, are certainly related to one another, but must still be distinguished. From the viewpoint of rationality, science and technology might be seen as the acme of culture; but what about the sexual taboos and refinements, with their conquest of the raw immediacy of sensual pleasure, the stylization of human relationships, eating and dressing habits, etc., which constitute the "mores" of a people? They undoubtedly build a social order, but can hardly be called rational in any direct sense.

A consideration of the arts might oblige us to recognize one more dimension of culture. Could we simply classify the arts among the above kind of order-building elements of culture? Again it cannot be doubted that time arts of a culture are rendered possible only by a definite ordering of the indeterminate mass of possible aesthetic feelings into a set of rules and traditions. We might think here for example of the way the peoples of the Far East have built up their aesthetic perception of that natural given, the four seasons. On the other hand, however, art would not be alive as art, if at its root artistic intuition did not forever try to catch the primordial or to revert to the primary field of things before their domestication by our human concerns. In other words, if it did not endeavor to break through the established order of society. The failure of all art forms imposed by the dictates of a political regime is significant as well as notorious.

Letting our wanderings lead us at last to religion, we must begin with the admission that the students of a culture, let us say the Korean culture cannot but consider religion as an element of that culture. But then the question must be asked: Where does religion find its place in the spectrum of cultural components which we sketched, admittedly all too roughly in the above? I do not want to go into the thorny question of religion and rationality, except to note that the language most adapted

to religion appears to be, after all, not logos but mythos. Instead, while being convinced that "art is in a sense the opposite of religion" —and inclined to challenge the close proximity into which Far Eastern cultures tend to draw the religious and the aesthetical—I want to draw your attention here to a point which religion seems to have in common with art. Religion, too, cannot simply be captured within a cultural order. Living religion, too, always shows the tendency to go back to the primordial beyond the human-made—primitive celebrations involve the breaking of social taboos; gods and demons consistently threaten the manmade order; the God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity is situated before creation—and, in its peak phenomena even shows an "anti-cultural" face—religious celibacy has been experienced as upsetting the order of society, self-chosen poverty militates against that prime condition of culture called wealth, and the religious choice for rusticity runs counter to the trend of culture towards sophistication and elitism.

It might precisely be this negation of the primacy, and thus a relativization, of all cultural elements, that has enabled living religions often to constitute the dynamics of a culture. And the question may be asked: if in the future this leaven loses its force of upheaval (by total reduction to an element of cultural tradition or domestication by the social structure) or is kept apart from the dough, where then can the culture of the future look for its necessary dynamism?

All this, however, does not mean that religion did not play a decisive role in the establishment of cultures as ordered wholes. To many historians of culture, it rather looks as if precisely by lifting the eyes of every citizen to the same trans-social reality, religion acted as the universal inspirator of a total meaning, and thus as the integrating factor of the entire culture. The fear is then evoked that total secularization of culture would leave us no factor of spiritual integration, and could easily lead to a disintegration of civilization. In this vein, Christopher Dawson speaks of a "secularized scientific world culture which is a body without a soul, while on the other hand religion maintains its separate existence as a spirit without a body."⁶

Such rather gloomy forebodings are not restricted to historians of culture, but appear to color, however unconsciously, the views of the masses in several countries and to provoke there a strong wish to "return to a better past." For America, texts like the following speak for themselves: "Bellah's lament that our public life exhibits a 'yearning for something that has so slipped out of memory as to be almost without a name:' the vision of a republic whose laws and politics are grounded in religious virtue and sacrifice for the commonweal."⁷ I imagine that something very similar could be said about Japan where, over against the aimlessness and chaotic character of today's society, return is sought to the prewar situation of sacralization of the national goals by traditional religion. The difference with America could then be that, in the case of Japan (and possible also of Korea), the influence of western ideas tends to be blamed for many of the ills of present-day society.

What then is to be done? It would be nice if I could present you with a ready formula for the culture of the future. But I am convinced that no single individual could perform this conjuring trick and that, if our culture is to be saved, then only through the combined efforts of all scholars and people of good will, East and West, will this come

about. And I want to express the wish that the Sokdang Institute may contribute significantly to that noble task. In the meantime, I can share with you some of my convictions:

1. We cannot find salvation, but at the most escape, in a so-called "return to the past—something which is, after all, intrinsically impossible.
2. The greater distance between religion and culture brought about by modern developments has meant invaluable benefits for man as a cultural being and for man as a religious being as well.
3. Still, I do not believe that it would benefit either culture or religion if, in the future, the role of religion were to be totally reduced to the private realm; nor that the great religions would be fully playing their God-given roles if they only cared for the individual in his solitariness. So, I dare to hope for a spiritual reintegration which would restore a vital relation between religion and culture.
4. At the same time, however, I believe that this relationship will have to be a creatively new one and not merely a copy of the relationship as it existed under several different guises in the past.

May the spirit guide us in this task, with his kindly light!

1. Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Cleveland, 1964), p. 207.
2. Christopher Dawson *Religion and Culture*, London, 1949, p. 214.
3. *Ibid* p. 5.
4. *Ibid* p. 207.
5. Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* New York, 1973, p. 72.
6. *Religion and Culture* p. 216.
7. Richard K. Fenn in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 21 (1982), p. 281.

Jan Van Bragt
Nanzan Institute for
Religion and Culture