

FROM Christendom
TO Americanism
AND Beyond

*The Long, Jagged Trail
to a Postmodern Void*

THOMAS STORCK

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Foreword by
Joseph Pearce

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Joseph Pearce

Introduction

Sources

- 1 What Was Christendom?
- 2 Religion and Life in Christendom
- 3 Liberalism's Three Assaults
- 4 Europe, Christendom, and the Faith
- 5 Reason, Traditionalism, and the Enlightenment
- 6 The Social Order as Community
- 7 The Dissolutions of Modernity and the Catholic Response
- 8 Seeking Beauty in Art: Some Implications of a Thomistic Statement About Glass Saws
- 9 The Making and Unmaking of the English Catholic Intellectual Community, 1910–1950
- 10 The World, Modernity, and the Church
- 11 Christendom or Europe?
- 12 Christendom or the West?
- 13 Post-Modernism and the End of an Age
- 14 The Catholic Vocations of the Americas
- 15 Government, Society, and the Common Good
- 16 John Locke, Liberal Totalitarianism, and the Trivialization of Religion
- 17 The Catholic Failure to Change America
- 18 The End of the New Deal Coalition and the Transformation of American Politics
- 19 What Happened in the 1960s

20 Toward a Biblical Theology of History

21 The Apostasy of the Gentiles

Foreword

by
Joseph Pearce

THOMAS STORCK is a well-connected man. Indeed, there are very few men who are *better* connected. I do not mean that he is well connected in the sense in which the world normally thinks of being connected. He does not have legions of powerful friends walking and stalking the corridors of power who can make things happen for him. On the contrary, he has so few friends in such places that this timely and important book will certainly not make *The New York Times* Bestseller List, nor is it likely that the wisdom it contains will enlighten the darkened minds of that highly prejudiced journal.

Mr. Storck is well connected in a much better and more important sense. He knows and makes the connections between those branches of knowledge that have been severed from each other by the modern world's radical disconnectedness with the wholeness of things. He makes these connections and connects himself and his understanding of things to this wholeness. Finally, as this volume and Mr. Storck's other writings testify, he connects us to this wholeness, helping us to become the well-connected people that we need to be.

First and foremost, he connects the lesser sciences of philosophy, history, politics, and economics to the queen of sciences, theology. He knows that to separate *theos* from *logos*, God from meaning, is the beginning of the dis-integration of knowledge into disconnected and atomized "disciplines," each of which is effectively excommunicated from the others.

In philosophy, the humanism of the Renaissance, divorcing itself from the scholasticism that connected Man with his Creator, has led inexorably to the anthropocentrism that is the blight of our self-centered culture. In politics, such humanism has led to the cynical *realpolitik* of Machiavelli and the justification of Machiavellian self-interest over Christian concepts of social and political justice.

The separation of *theos* and *logos* has also led to the divorce of physics from metaphysics, separating what was once known as natural philosophy from all other aspects of the love of wisdom, thereby ensuring the decay of science into scientism.

Mr. Storck connects these radical problems, rooted in the story of man's divorce from God, to the historical developments that led to the economic, social, political, and cultural problems facing our world today. In doing so, he reminds us of others who have endeavored to do likewise. We think perhaps of the works of Christopher Dawson or R.H. Tawney, or of Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, written as a charitable response and riposte to H.G. Wells's superciliously "progressive" *Outline of*

History, or of Hilaire Belloc's own response to Wells, less charitable but nonetheless effective, in his *Companion to Mr Wells's 'Outline of History'*. Apart from his war of words with Wells, Belloc also wrote panoramic studies of history, such as *The Servile State*, *Survivals and New Arrivals*, and *The Great Heresies*, each of which illustrated that ideas have consequences and, more specifically, that bad ideas have bad consequences.

Like his illustrious forebears, Mr. Storck illustrates that one's philosophical presuppositions will invariably and inevitably color one's understanding of the "outline of history." He understands the beliefs of the past and why people acted as they did; he sees *why* things happened, as well as *when* and *how* they happened. Such a vision of the past contrasts starkly with the "progressive" view of history now in the ascendant, which regards the beliefs of the past as primitive and superstitious and therefore unworthy of serious consideration. This chronological snobbery blinds the secular historian to the ideas that motivated the actions of the past, thereby preventing modernity's understanding of history from rising above the *when* and *how*. In stark and much-needed contrast, Mr. Storck shows that the *when* and *how* are determined by the *why*.

Once again, Mr. Storck emerges as a worthy heir of Hilaire Belloc. "In history we must abandon the defensive," Belloc had written in 1924, ". . . We must make our opponents understand not only that they are wrong in their philosophy, nor only ill-informed in their judgement of cause and effect, but out of touch with the past: which is ours." ¹

Like Belloc, Chesterton, and Dawson, Mr. Storck insists that the history of Western civilization can only be comprehended if we see it as *Christendom*—as the cultural and political manifestation of the fruits of the Faith, and for this reason he shows that the history of modernity can only be comprehended if we see it as an anthropocentric rebellion against Christendom and the Christocentrism that informed it.

As in *Survivals and New Arrivals* and *The Great Heresies*, in which Belloc maps the war of ideas that forged the history of the modern world, Mr. Storck illustrates in the present volume how the historian can emerge as a prophet, not only teaching us about the past but also warning us of the abyss we shall face if the ill-fated path we have been following is not abandoned. Like Belloc, Thomas Storck is not merely an historian but also a prophet. He must be heard and heeded.

1. Hilaire Belloc, Preface to Dom Hugh G. Bevenot, OSB, *Pagan and Christian Rule* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1924), ix.

Introduction

THIS BOOK is not a history of the last few centuries. Neither is it a history of the Church nor an intellectual history of Europe or the United States. Rather its aim is to be a guide to understanding that history, to understanding the last several hundred years, particularly the way ideas about the social order have changed and the immense implications of those changed ideas for modern thinking about politics, about economics, about art, and in fact, about nearly every other aspect of human life—and, by implication, about what might be the proper response of Catholics to these changes.

It might seem that when we look at the history of any particular time or place, the task is simply to note down what happened and then to try to make sense of it. But even what we should note down will often not be obvious if we do not already have some framework for interpretation. The past abounds in facts, but which are important and why? Should we view the nineteenth century as a record of increasing freedom or of increasing dechristianization? as the triumph of the Industrial Revolution or the destruction of traditional ways of life? Depending on which historical process we think primary or important, we shall probably highlight certain events and ignore others. And which we think primary and important will depend on our own first principles. A non-Christian historian who sees any form of Christian faith as an unfortunate survival of mythological thinking will probably pay attention to the diminishing place of Christianity in the public life of Europe, chiefly in the context of the triumphs of natural science and of philosophies that set themselves against all religious belief. A Catholic, on the other hand, even when looking at the same facts or events, will not only understand them differently, but will also have a different organizing principle for recounting and evaluating them. This book is intended to help the reader place the events of the past several centuries into a Catholic context, to understand them relative to the Church's unique place in human history, which is ultimately founded on the unique place of the Incarnation in history—the actual coming of God upon earth for the salvation of mankind and the Church's subsequent mission to evangelize all of human life, to shape cultures, not merely to provide religious solace and foster private piety and morality.

Until recently in the West we divided the past into B.C. and A.D. Now, of course, the fashion is to use the terms B.C.E. and C.E., and for a non-Christian this is entirely understandable. But Catholics, one presumes, will continue to recognize that the earlier terms expressed the truth that Our Lord's Incarnation really was the turning point of human history, indeed of the entire cosmos. Too often, though, Catholics have implicitly accepted an historical narrative that belies this supposed recognition of the centrality of the Incarnation. To see, for example, the last few centuries primarily as a succession of triumphs in the cause of human freedom or as a record of technological

betterment and the conquest of nature, or to regard the regime established by the American Revolution as the New Order of the Ages and a departure from all past history, is to look at history not in the light of the Incarnation and its effects, but according to some other organizing principle. If we think of history as the march of freedom or of material progress, then it matters little if we continue to use B.C. and A.D., for in effect we have abandoned the Incarnation as the real turning point for humanity.

Thus, for a committed Catholic, it is necessary in the first place to grasp the significance of what is meant by *Christendom*. Christendom was not merely a social order in which there were many Catholics: it was a social order in which there was an attempt to bring everything, public and private, into subjection to Christ the King. Religion existed not simply as one department of life permitting, for example, the economy to go its own way in pursuit of its own aims. Everything—political, economic, artistic—was to be subject to the Kingship of Our Lord. Only if that fact is grasped is there hope of correctly perceiving what happened when that principle of social unity was rejected, and thus of understanding the modern world, which is the offspring of that rejection of Christendom.

Any student of history can point to a number of notable changes that occurred over the centuries from about 1500 to about 1970. But which changes were most noteworthy and, more to the point, which were the more fundamental ones that led to the others? As I suggested above, most moderns will regard the political, economic, and especially the technological changes as most worthy of note. But these changes were in fact derivative. The fundamental changes were in the first place religious and secondly ideological. The rise of liberalism is the salient fact here. Liberalism brought about the privatization of religion in the Western world and led to the dissolution of a cultural order that was organized as a hierarchy, that is, the Church and her teachings (or some substitute in Protestant countries) as the apex, with everything subordinated and arranged under that cultural sovereignty. Liberalism in this context does not of course mean quite the same thing it generally denotes in the United States. Thus, one of the essays here is devoted to explaining what is meant by that word. A crucial figure in giving an intellectual justification for this liberalism was John Locke, whose teachings have been of immense importance in the United States. The working out of Locke's theories in other areas, such as the arts, led to even more cultural disunity, although the connection of Locke's political and social ideas with the arts is not usually well understood.

Catholics, as might be expected, were not unaware of these changes while they were occurring. Although the French Revolution hindered and delayed an effective response on the part of the Church, in the nineteenth century Catholics set forth in answer to what was happening a restatement of the Church's position, based in large part on a revival of the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. This produced a brilliant era in the history of the Church, but unfortunately one that was cut short in the 1960s by missteps on the part of many within the Church herself.

As an American, I have long been fascinated by the peculiar ideological and cultural trajectory of my country. Thus, the special situation of the United States is given considerable attention here, particularly its understanding of itself and how that has affected Catholics. Some more recent chapters in American history are also

considered, including the best example hitherto of a reasonably effective vehicle for Catholic involvement in American politics.

Finally, I offer an attempt to look at history in light of what we know from Divine Revelation about the course of man's life on this earth. Here one must be cautious, for it is easy to go beyond what is really known; and everything said must be seen as tentative. But because the intellectual atmosphere we live in has no conception of history as a sacred process from Creation to the Last Judgment, it does not seem without value to specifically remind ourselves of what we do know about this process.

Most of the essays in this book were previously published, but all have been revised to a greater or lesser extent. For the most part, I have kept their original historical context, even when subsequent events have introduced new ideas or controversies. I should note that several of the essays overlap to the degree that they consider the same sets of historical facts, although from different angles. This overlapping should in fact be helpful to a greater understanding of these complex historical events and trends.

Finally, my thanks go to Mr. Joseph Pearce for his generosity in writing the Foreword and to Mr. John Riess of Angelico Press for his helpfulness and the ease of working with him.

THOMAS STORCK

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1

What Was Christendom?

IT IS VERY EASY for a Catholic to come near to despair as he regards the shape of twenty-first-century life. Everywhere the laws of God are ignored, disdained, and ridiculed while sin and wrongdoing are not only practiced but also justified, encouraged, recommended, and praised. The institutions that form and define our culture—in religion, government, education, the fine arts—are for the most part in definite opposition to much of the moral law and to the Catholic view of life. Meanwhile, the voice of the Catholic Church, the true oracle of God, is confused and muted because of the raging dissent, indifference, and turmoil within her ranks. Of course, sin has always been pervasive on earth; if it had not been for sin we should have had no need of a Redeemer. But what is especially troubling about this pervasiveness now is not that men sin, but that sin is publicly accepted and justified and virtue derided. It is the *public* and *official* acceptance, and even promotion, of sin by institutions, by our culture as a whole, and at the same time the rejection of a Catholic way of life, that is especially disturbing. In this essay, however, I will argue that even this should not surprise us over much if we reflect on certain facts about our world.

In C.S. Lewis's novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, Professor Ransom is carried to Mars and there converses with that planet's angelic ruler. The angel tells Ransom that Earth is the "silent planet," long subjected to the rule of its evil chief angel, and that there is no communion between Earth and the rest of the cosmos, which is inhabited by unfallen beings and good angels. All this is simply an imaginative retelling of the truth that Our Lord told us, that Satan is the prince or ruler of this world.¹ In other words, since this world has been given over to the powers of darkness, we should not expect peace and goodness, for "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). And especially and in particular, here on this earth *Christendom* will never be stable and lasting.

Christendom is sometimes used to mean those countries in which most of the population is Christian or at least has Christian traditions or is used roughly to describe the totality of Christians existing throughout the world. But it really means something much more important than this. Christendom is nothing else but the attempt to make real, even in this fallen world, the social reign of Jesus Christ the King; to subject every part and aspect of human life to His authority; to shape public life and, as far as may be done, private life so as to reflect His reign. Pope Leo XIII briefly described

such a situation in the following words:

There was once a time when States were governed by the philosophy of the Gospel. Then it was that the power and divine virtue of Christian wisdom had diffused itself throughout the laws, institutions, and morals of the people; permeating all ranks and relations of civil society. Then, too, the religion instituted by Jesus Christ, established firmly in befitting dignity, flourished everywhere, by the favor of princes and the legitimate protection of magistrates; and Church and State were happily united in concord and friendly interchange of good offices. The State, constituted in this wise, bore fruits important beyond all expectation, whose remembrance is still, and always will be, in renown, witnessed to as they are by countless proofs which can never be blotted out or even obscured by any craft of any enemies. (Encyclical *Immortale Dei*, no. 21)

In other words, a truly Christian state of affairs would involve a political and cultural order subordinate to the reign of Jesus Christ. It would not simply be such obvious offenses against the law of God as abortion or divorce that would be prohibited, but aspects of social life that are often overlooked by many modern Catholics, such as the economic order, would be regulated for the glory of God and the welfare of mankind. As Pope Pius XI put it:

It is therefore very necessary that economic affairs be once more subjected to and governed by a true and effective guiding principle. . . . To that end all the institutions of public and social life must be imbued with the spirit of justice, and this justice must above all be truly operative. It must build up a juridical and social order able to pervade all economic activity. (Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 88)

In other words, when Christendom flourished, the political order, the economic order, artistic activity, the legal system, all of these in their own particular and proper ways, were conceived of as subordinate to Almighty God. Indeed, the entire life of man was to be lived within an order that extended from the inanimate world through plants and irrational animals to man, the highest and rational animal, through the various orders of angels to the Holy Trinity. But it was not merely man as an individual who was part of this order, but the human community. The state *as such* owed allegiance to Jesus Christ and to His representative on earth, the Sovereign Pontiff. This beautiful order was expressed theologically by St. Thomas, especially in his *Summa Theologiae*, and by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, as well as in a host of other writers, theologians, philosophers, and poets. Even in a document written after the Middle Ages had begun to decline, the Prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one can see the entire array of society, the activity of each man and woman, meant to serve God and the common good in its unique way.

This Christian civilization had been gradually built up over many centuries, from the beginning of the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine until the High Middle Ages. But at the moment when it seemed the Church had finally succeeded in establishing a social order somewhat in keeping with the teachings of Jesus Christ, it began to unravel. As Christopher Dawson wrote:

The fourteenth century was an age of division and strife, the age of the Great Schism, which saw instead of the Crusades the invasion of Europe by the Turks and the devastation of France by England. And at the same time the intellectual resources of Western society which had been so much strengthened by the extension of the university movement no longer assisted the

integration of Christian thought but were used negatively and critically to undo the work of the previous century and undermine the intellectual foundations on which the synthesis of the great thinkers of the previous age had been built. It is as though the spiritual tide which had been steadily making for unity for three centuries had suddenly turned, so that everywhere in every aspect of life the forces that made for division and dissolution were predominant.²

Another historian spoke of it in this way:

The influence of the Church had never seemed greater than in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, and some modern historians have claimed that the pontificate of Gregory X (1271–1276) marked the peak of papal power.

Yet the young men who witnessed the execution of Conradin, who studied under Thomas Aquinas, who accompanied St. Louis on his last crusade, were hardly more than middle-aged when the medieval papacy received a blow from which it never fully recovered. In an open conflict between the head of the Church and the kings of France and England, the secular rulers carried off the victory. As a result of this victory the popes deserted Rome and established themselves on the borders of the kingdom of France. The prestige of the papacy was tarnished and the leadership of the Church was shaken. The popes of the fourteenth century could no longer make all important social activities serve the cause of Christianity. They were placed on the defensive and had to devote most of their energy to the task of preserving the machinery of ecclesiastical government.³

How brief was the pinnacle of the Catholic Middle Ages! how often in the course of history has the attempt to establish or preserve a Christian civilization proven elusive! how often has the “prince of this world” defeated the best attempts to organize or maintain a Catholic social order on this earth! As the Middle Ages continued to decline, suffering not only from the effects of the Great Schism, but from a series of worldly popes and the corruption of philosophical and theological instruction by Nominalism, heretical movements increased their activity in all corners of Europe until suddenly in 1517 Martin Luther issued his challenge to some aspects of the doctrine of indulgences, a challenge occasioned by an indulgence that was being preached in various parts of Germany and that masked a rather shady financial deal between the new Archbishop of Mainz⁴ and Pope Leo X.

With the success of Luther’s revolt in north Germany and Scandinavia and of other Protestant movements in parts of Switzerland and France, the geographical basis for reestablishing the fullness of Christendom throughout Europe was destroyed. Shortly thereafter, the intensely Catholic country of England was separated from the Faith owing to the pride and lust of her king, Henry VIII. Then after the short reign of Henry’s son, Edward VI, Queen Mary Tudor began the restoration of the Faith in England, to the great joy of most of the people. But her premature death in 1558 left unfinished her efforts at restoration, efforts that were then entirely undone by her treacherous half-sister, Elizabeth. Later, the failure of the Spanish Armada in 1588, caused in part by “Protestant winds” that blew King Philip’s ships off course, and later still the failure of Louis XIV of France to heed the request of Our Lord, transmitted through Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, that he publicly honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus and thereby obtain victory over his enemies, contributed to the final demise throughout Europe of a Catholic social and cultural order.⁵ And although the Faith remained the official basis of the polity in Catholic Europe until the French Revolution of 1789, and remained so even longer in much of Latin America, by then rationalism

had sapped the foundations of this social order, which became a mere shell of Christendom. Though the peasants in many places continued to live Catholic lives and observe Catholic customs, no one could say that eighteenth-century Europe was a Catholic culture. The aristocracy, most intellectuals, even many of the higher clergy, espoused ideals that were not Christian, ideals that matched the disordered lives many of them led.

Of course, the Church did not cease to exist with the Revolution of 1789. In fact, in many ways there was a revival of Catholic life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however, one important difference was that Catholic life from the Revolution on rarely encompassed entire social orders.⁶ Catholicism was now, for the most part, a matter of individual or family commitment. Although Catholic intellectual life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries entered on a period of brilliance, this renewed Catholicism failed to become the framework in which whole nations lived, in which their political, intellectual, and social life was conducted, as it had been during the Middle Ages. The revival of personal commitment to the Faith and of Catholic thought was, of course, both excellent and necessary, but it should have been the springboard to a new political, intellectual, and social conversion of the entire Western world. Instead, after beginning to run out of steam in the 1950s, it vanished abruptly after the Second Vatican Council.

But should we be surprised by all of this? Should we be surprised that it is only in brief periods that the fullness of Catholic life triumphs? Should not the state of our world, as a *fallen* world, make us expect exactly this? Not that we should fall into the Protestant error of condemning God's creation. As many passages of Holy Scripture make clear, especially the beautiful hymn in Daniel 3:52–90, the physical creation is engaged in a ceaseless praising of God and still retains the approbation that God pronounced upon it in Genesis 1. It is mankind that has sinned, and it is the order that we have established that always tends away from God.⁷

Christendom, then, whenever and wherever it has been established, has been a heroic attempt to reclaim a part of the world from the Devil's power, to make effective even now the Kingship of Jesus Christ, a Kingship that in its fullness will not be known till after the Second Coming. Since men have a constant tendency to sin, the clerics and statesmen who in the past ruled over Christian social orders faced an uphill battle to maintain that happy state of affairs; and one wonders whether God gives extraordinary graces at one period of the world's history that for His own reasons He withholds at other times. As in the passage from Christopher Dawson that I quoted above, it seems as if everything that had been working for good suddenly changed and began working for discord and evil:

It is as though the spiritual tide which had been steadily making for unity for three centuries had suddenly turned, so that everywhere in every aspect of life the forces that made for division and dissolution were predominant.

It is not possible to understand entirely God's purposes in history. The best we can do is sometimes to get a glimpse of them. But our duty always remains. Whether in favorable or unfavorable times, we always have the duty of trying to make Jesus Christ King of both our own lives and of the life of our social order and even of the

entire world. Even though the social reign of Jesus Christ the King will never rest upon secure foundations in this world, still we must do all we can to achieve a Christian social order. As St. Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 15:25), “*Oportet illum regnare*”—He must reign!

1. Satan is called the ruler of this world several times in St. John’s Gospel, 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11. St. Paul refers to Satan as the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). Cf. also Satan’s words, who, after showing Our Lord “all the kingdoms of the world . . . said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.” Luke 4:5–6 and Matthew 3:8–9.

2. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 238–39.

3. Joseph R. Strayer and Dana C. Munro, *The Middle Ages, 395–1500* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear Publishing, 5th ed., 1970), 418–19.

4. Albert of Brandenburg, also Archbishop of Magdeburg and administrator of the diocese of Halberstadt. He was only twenty-six years old and had been a bishop since the age of twenty-two!

5. Among other things, Louis XIV was told to put an image of the Sacred Heart on his flag and to build a chapel dedicated to the Heart of Jesus, and in turn he was promised success to his arms. It is not certain, however, whether this communication ever reached the King.

6. Of course, there were valiant attempts to revive Catholic political and social structures in places as varied as Ecuador, Austria, Spain, and Quebec, to mention only a few.

7. Of course, man’s sin has affected all of creation. Cf. Romans 8:19–23. Cf. also these words of Josef Pieper, “In his Commentary on St. John’s Epistle, St. Thomas remarks that we can find in Sacred Scripture three different meanings for the term ‘the world’: first, ‘the world’ as the creation of God, and second, as the creation perfected in Christ; last, as the material perversion of the order of creation. To ‘the world’ in this last-named sense, and to this world only, may one apply the saying of St. John: ‘The world is seated in wickedness’ (1 John 5:19). It is precisely the claim of St. Thomas that the first meaning of ‘world’ (as creation) may not be identified nor interchanged with the third (‘world’ as material perversion of the order of creation); the world as creation is not seated in wickedness.” *The Silence of St. Thomas* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 31.

2

Religion and Life in Christendom

There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried 'Murder!'
That they did wake each other; I stood and heard them:
But they did say their prayers, and address'd them
Again to sleep.

Macbeth, Act II, Scene 2

THE ABOVE LINES are part of the account that Shakespeare's Macbeth gave to his wife of his murder of King Duncan. He is speaking about the two sleeping attendants of the King as he crept into the room to kill him. Though of course the speech is fiction, nevertheless it had to be believable to the audience. What I think is noteworthy about it is that two common attendants or soldiers awakened in the middle of the night should say their *prayers* before going back to sleep. Could this scene be imagined in modern literature, or indeed in modern life? But during the centuries of Christendom the Faith had sunk so deeply into men's minds and actions, both individual and corporate, that it is difficult for us to grasp how thoroughly Christian that society was, "when religion and civilization were so closely united that religious institutions were the main organs of culture and almost every form of social activity possessed a religious sanction."¹ Moreover, this traditional attitude persisted so that several decades after the Faith had begun to collapse in England the old ways of behavior could still be portrayed by Shakespeare and be understood by his audience.

This is not to say that there was not plenty of sinning, by both princes and private persons, in that culture so profoundly shaped by the Church's Faith. Sin will be committed until the end of the world, but in a sense that is beside the point. What is not beside the point is to try to understand what was the depth of the Christianization of everyday life in Christendom—how thoroughly the Faith ruled everything and permeated both private and public life. In fact, this attempt is necessary if we are to grasp how profoundly the coming of modernity altered the social life of mankind.

The first bar to our understanding of what the civilization of Christendom was and what it meant is the fatal modern divorce between private and public life, especially as regards the Faith. Catholics with any pretensions to orthodoxy realize of course the grave difficulties—the ongoing crisis of faith—that exist in the Church today. I fear, however, that among too many the desire is merely to restore the *status*

quo ante 1963 or so. The notion that personal orthodoxy and rectitude of behavior is all that is needed for a healthy Catholic world is in need of correction. Although personal orthodoxy and piety are obviously necessary, they are not enough: for unless the Faith is incarnated in public life and public discourse; in institutions; in a civilization's art, literature, and education, we do not have a Christian civilization, nor even the precondition for a healthy Catholic life.

Although the so-called religious revival of the 1950s is far behind us and largely forgotten, we can nevertheless learn something about how religion is regarded in America by looking at the 1950s. Will Herberg's book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*,² first published in 1955, reveals much about the American approach to religion, an approach that remains pretty much the same. Based on answers obtained from public-opinion polls addressing church attendance and the importance of religion, as well as on other data, a religious revival seemed to be occurring.³ But an odd fact about this revival is that it seems to have had very little to do with the doctrine of any form of Christianity or even with God. What I mean by this can be illustrated with a few quotations from Herberg. In the first, he presents the following from an article that appeared in *Parade* magazine in 1954:

"It was back in those days," a prominent American churchman writes, recalling his early years, "that I formed a habit that I have never broken. I began saying in the morning two words, 'I believe.' Those two words *with nothing added* . . . give me a running start for my day, and for every day."⁴

Herberg quotes the President as follows:

"Our government makes no sense," President Eisenhower recently declared, "unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and *I don't care what it is*."⁵

Herberg writes:

This contentlessness of American religion is curiously illustrated by the confessions of faith of a hundred "thoughtful men and women in all walks of life," published in 1952 . . . in the volume *This I Believe*, edited by Edward P. Morgan. As one reads these statements, perplexity grows. The great majority of the hundred men and women who present their "philosophies of life" are unquestionably professed Christians or Jews, yet barely half of them found it necessary so much as to mention God, and only ten made reference to their formal religious beliefs. These eminent citizens proclaimed their faith in many and diverse things—in "brotherhood," "service," "idealism," and "spiritual values," in "life," "reason," and "tolerance," in "freedom," "self-reliance," "democracy," and, of course, in "faith"—but only incidentally, if at all, in God.⁶

There are many more such references; and, indeed, Herberg's entire book, even at a remove of more than fifty years, is well worth reading. But what is relevant to our inquiry here is what results from such a contentless religion. For naturally such a religion *must* be a private affair, since there are no doctrines to be shared. Such a faith is intensely private by necessity. Thus comes about the frequently heard notion that religion is simply too personal a matter to be discussed.

With such ideas about what religion is, Americans of course cannot understand how a faith could ever inform an entire culture. We make religion personal, so

personal in fact that it sometimes has no effect even on our individual conduct (“I am *personally* opposed to abortion, but I would never think of acting on my belief, even voting in accordance with it.”), whereas the culture of Christendom made religion so public and corporate that it affected the actions even of lax Christians.

In the culture formed by the Faith, from the foundation of the Middle Ages until, in some parts of the Catholic world, into the nineteenth century, all of our life, action, and thought was meant to be subsumed under Catholic faith and morals. This did not mean a proliferation of “pietistic” acts and writings, however. Such caricatures of genuine Catholic living occur when the relation between the Faith and our life is not organic but forced and artificial. If our literature, for example, is really informed by a Catholic sense of the real drama and the choices and their eternal consequences that make up so much of life, and yet is able to see even the most tragic of circumstances in the light of the Gospel, then, without pretending to have easy answers for every situation, it can effectively present Jesus Christ as the hope of the world and the end of every human person. But if an essentially secular outlook is ornamented by a few references to faith or morals, then the result is truly worthy of rejection—precisely in the name of the true Faith.

How did the medievals achieve their authentic Christian culture?

For the people of that time [i.e., the Middle Ages] religion or the Faith ran through the whole of life, in the sense of being inextricably entangled with it. The teaching of Christian tradition was not always lived up to nor ever lived up to perfectly, but the Church as the institution which in their eyes had been given them to be the living embodiment of that teaching could never wholly be put out of their lives. In the village, the church as a building was the centre of the village life, round it and in it moved the important events of life, individual and communal. It had no rival. Even in the towns, where at the beginning of the thirteenth century there were less visible signs of the domination of the Church, it was impossible to get away from the influence of the Faith. However much the medieval preacher might inveigh against the evils of men’s lives, and however distressingly he might lament the ignorance and superstition of so many even of his audience, he could not but be conscious that life nevertheless was lived in surroundings that for ever bore witness to the Faith.⁷

Anyone acquainted with medieval literature or art or architecture knows that this is true.

The foundations of this corporate sense of the Faith were those publicly recognized facts that were pretty much accepted without question by the whole society. Around those the intellectual and emotional life of nearly everyone revolved. Blessed John Henry Newman, in his book, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, strikingly described this as actually observed by him in contemporary Italy.

Now, it being considered, that a vast number of sacred truths are taken for granted as *facts* by a Catholic nation, in the same sense as the sun in the heavens is a fact. . . . A bad Catholic does not deny hell, for it is to him an incontestable fact, brought home to him by that supernatural faith, with which he assents to the Divine Word speaking through Holy Church. . . .

Hence, the strange stories of highwaymen and brigands devout to the Madonna. . . . We know the dissolute character of the medieval knights and of the troubadours; yet, that dissoluteness, which would lead Protestant poets and travellers to scoff at religion, led them, not to deny revealed truth, but to combine it with their own wild and extravagant profession. . . .

Once more, listen to the stories, songs, and ballads of the populace; their rude and