

A Basis of Christian Cooperation

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The Natural Law

WHEN at the Reformation, the unity of Europe was split at the high level of dogma and church allegiance, the division did not at first rend Western civilization in two. An enormous amount remained in common between Catholic and Protestant Europe and between their extensions into the New World. Catholics, of whom I am one, would argue that the unity which persisted depended upon the unity that was lost; for as man depends on God, and fallen nature upon grace, the maintenance of a truly human order ultimately depends upon the maintenance of a supernatural order as well. The important thing here however is the degree of unity which lasted beyond the sixteenth century and was the foundation and cement of the most ambitious structure man has ever built—Western civilization.

Its basis was the natural law. The age of science—which has practically seen the disappearance of all general appreciation of the natural law—nevertheless throws a great light upon it. All the achievements of our material civilization are built up on a simple act of faith, which can be proved to a high degree of probability but for which logicians assure us, there is no absolute proof. This affirmation is that like causes have like effects. To give a simple example, modern warfare would be impossible if the behavior of steel could not be predicted. The modern scientist knows the way in which his materials behave, be they plants, metals or the basic components of matter. The patterns of their behavior are scientific laws, laws of nature. A "scientific world view" would be impossible if the whole of the material universe did not conform to law.

Christians believe that the laws which govern the behavior of created things are the ideas in God's mind in creating them. "In the beginning was the Word," the Logos, the Greek form, the Platonic archetype. The universe is rational because it reflects the mind of its Creator. Man, the summit of the created universe, is also bound by the law of his being, for God created him according to a certain idea—as we know "in His own image." Man's pattern of behavior is fixed in the mind of

God. The natural law, subjectively and objectively, reflects God's purpose in creating man. Subjectively, it is the law of conscience, the consciousness of right and wrong; objectively, it is justice, the laws governing the behavior of man is society. All great civilizations have reflected more or less clearly the natural law, not only in the similarity of the moral system taught by their greatest men and in the obscure conscientiousness of millions of men and women, but in the universal recognition of a law which since it is held to reflect the will of God—or of heaven or of destiny—transcends human ordinances and which is the yardstick of their validity. Even in China, which of all great civilizations appears to have been least conscious of God, the Emperor yearly dedicated the ordering of his kingdom to the way of heaven—a ceremony which symbolized the dependence of human laws upon a transcendent and eternal order.

The Law of Conscience

The distinction between laws of nature and the natural law is the distinction between man and all other created things. Laws of nature are not violated. The plant does not grow backwards to the root. The combination H_2O cannot be anything but water. The natural law can be violated because men have free will and can choose or not to fulfill the pattern God had in mind at their creation. They can choose to sin and they can choose to build or to tolerate societies that are unjust. The knowledge of this choice has been "the grandeur and servitude" of European civilization. For centuries, it preserved it from the fatalism into which other great cultures have fallen; but it placed a fearful load on the human conscience. When in recent centuries this haunting sense of personal responsibility was sloughed off, a sense of relief was an undoubted result at first; but it entailed the return to serving "the weak and needy elements," the return of fatalism, the return finally of despair.

But for a time in post-Reformation Europe, every one—Catholic and Protestant—believed in the necessity of good personal conduct. They hun-

gered for righteousness or admitted that they were sinners. The conception of sin and of personal responsibility for sin was at the roots of man's consciousness. The concept of good and evil entailed genuine, personal decisions. Conscience guided conduct or gave its owner a fore-taste of hell. The law of right and wrong, the law of personal ethics, the law of conscience, "graven on the fleshy tablets of the heart," gave Europe a common consciousness (or which was maybe even more important, a unified subconsciousness.)

Constitutional Government

The maintenance of unity was less obvious but still profound in the sphere of justice; the division between Calvinist and Catholic was not so great as that between both of them and the Lutherans, who believing that there could be no correspondence between the will of God and a corrupted human justice, and believing more in the terrible power and majesty of God than in His justice, cut off the heavenly from the earthly kingdom and handed over the civil order to the arbitrary power of the sovereign.

The historical shape of Reformation and counter-Reformation divided the Calvinist from the Catholic in the sphere of justice and the natural law. The Catholics had relied on the sovereigns to maintain them and for the next centuries, altar and throne were bound together in the magnificent but brief flowering of Baroque. In the Protestant lands the connection was fainter. In the new lands of America, it was faintest of all. But the struggle between Catholic and Protestant was not between lawlessness and law, between arbitrary and legal government. It was between two increasingly different principles of legitimacy, monarchic and democratic.* Vittoria, the Spanish Jesuit, preceded Grotius, the Dutch Calvinist, in drawing up a code of international law. Slavery was forbidden in the Spanish and Brazilian colonies in the New World on the declaration of the moral theologians that slavery was incompatible with the "glorious freedom of the sons of God." It is significant that when Britain in the seventeenth and France in the eighteenth century fought against royal absolutism, they did so in the name of a law which they had enjoyed in the past. The Commons appealed to then "ancient rights" against Charles I. The French monarchy was compelled to *re-summon* the States General. It was then obvious in both cases that the reformers were appealing to a legal and constitutional system which they felt they had enjoyed in the Middle Ages and which the kings, one

Protestant, one Catholic, were violating. But even absolute monarchy was not totalitarian. I might be arbitrary and despotic but it operated within a framework of law, upheld by the Church and by custom. It is absurd to call Hitlerism "a return to medieval barbarism." The rule of the Middle Ages was constitutional. In Bracton's words, "The king is below God and the law."

The American colonists were drawing on the natural law, inherited from the Christian centuries, when they wrote the Declaration of Independence. (I have even heard it said the Jefferson's thought at the time of drafting the Declaration was influenced by the writings of St. Robert Bellarmine.) The Constitution recognizes that popular sovereignty is limited by law. Not even the most absolute majority shall be in a position to violate the just rights of the citizen. Against a majority as against a monarch, he is to have the redress of law. In a secularized form, the rights of man and the "liberty, equality and fraternity" of the French Revolution were still part of the great tradition. These inalienable rights were said to be part of the nature of man; they were an abstract, as it were, of the natural law.

The New Economics

The real rifts in Europe begin with the weakening of the natural law. Though the roots go back in time, it was during the nineteenth century that three different attacks converged on the old ideas of order and morals and justice. One came from the new economics. The natural law for man with its possibility of choice—and so, of good and evil—was replaced by a fixed "scientific" law of the natural harmony of interests. Let each pursue his own ends and order and happiness would emerge. But what ends? Gain and ambition? As the century advanced, the survival of the fittest, a law deduced from the evolution of subrational beings, took the place of natural harmony, to justify the autonomy of economic law. In this way, a whole area of human behavior, with all its personal and social consequences, was withdrawn from the area of free choice and moral responsibility, and placed in the area of immutable scientific law. The split in the Christian conscience was absolute.

The Marxist Dialectic

The next attack came from the Marxist dialectic. If religion, philosophy, art, institutions, and justice reflected the basic economic and technical processes of the age, then clearly universal justice or laws of right and wrong were meaningless. There could be Roman justice, or feudal justice, or capitalist

* This question is brilliantly discussed in Guglielmo Ferrero's *The Principles of Power* (Putnam).

justice, or socialist justice—but no Justice. And since the processes of life were entirely conditioned, personal righteousness had no meaning. The dialectic has this truth in it that each age is profoundly influenced by the structure of society when it comes to define the particular content of the natural law. This adulteration of the lasting principle by the expressed fact creates an area of indeterminacy—which is also an area of growth. But to say that for example the Christian conception of family rights in the Middle Ages differs from the Christian conception today is not at all the same thing as to maintain that the family is a bourgeois, property-rotten institution. The area of indeterminacy complicates the task of those who collaborate on the basis of the natural law. It does not make the task completely fruitless.

National Sovereignty

Finally there is the attack launched by the “sovereign” national state. The claim of the nation state to gather to itself all the right and privileges which belong both to its citizens and to its neighbor states is not confined to Germany. It is the universal sin of Europe. But Nazism is its most horrible and extreme form. Here the state, in the name of the national group or race, claims absolute authority. “I am the law,” says Hitler. There is no more universal pattern, only the rule of the strongest—“humanity begins to prey upon itself, like monsters from the deep.”

The Tower of Babel

We are living today in the chaos which has followed the collapse of European unity. Our civilization is a tower of Babel without an interpreter's house. In our personal lives the old responsibility, born of the consciousness of good and evil and the fact of choice, is gone. Externally men are conditioned by environment, internally by the subconscious. Man created “a little lower than the angels” has slipped unhappily down into the arbitrary uncontrollable condition of inanimate things.

The symbol of his servitude is the new totalitarian state in which his rights and freedoms are extinguished and the conception of justice is replaced by the will to power of the dominant clique. In this world order, which at the level both of individual behavior and of state action, so grossly violates the pattern of freedom and order preordained by God, that those who, whether Catholic, Anglican, Free Churchmen, remain faithful to the concept of personal responsibility and immutable justice have a sure foundation and a very large field in which to work—especially in Britain and the United States

where what is best in the democratic system is grounded in the tradition of the natural law. If Christian people come together with the purpose of deepening their understanding of this common tradition, of discussing together its implications for the society in which they live, of creating informed and active citizens bent on restoring a society in harmony with the divine pattern, can it be doubted that mutual confidence and far greater political social and economic effectiveness will be the result?

With the founding of *The Sword of the Spirit* and *Religion and Life* in Britain, a first step has been taken at an official organizational level. In the prisons and concentration camps and underground movements of Europe, we have evidence that a new brotherhood is being forged in danger and agony and death. The drawing together must become a world wide process—a crusade such as Pope Pius XII called for, of “all men of good will” to bring mankind back “from the broken cisterns of material interests to the living fountains of divine justice,” from the individual and collective pursuit of pleasure and the individual and collective pursuit of power to the ordering of society according to the natural law. In this crusade, Christians would be working to save the image of man as he was created from the inhuman forces that tear him down. And if unity at the level of creation can be restored, unity of redemption and revelation will be easier to seek.