



10-1-1968

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Recommended Citation

Ball, Bertrand Logan Jr. (1968) "Saint-Exupéry and “le culte du passé”," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol8/iss4/8>

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Saint-Exupéry and "le culte du passé"

BERTRAND LOGAN BALL, JR.*

The civilization that Saint-Exupéry lauds in *Citadelle* is ideal, but it is inspired in part by traditional civilizations with which he was familiar. Having been born in an aristocratic family that could trace its ancestry back to the Crusades, he admired the Christian civilization which flourished in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. At that time religion oriented all human activities and gave coherence to society and human relationships. Man was not conceived as an end in himself, but rather as the image of a principle infinitely more elevated and universal. His character and inner being were developed much more than in the materialistically oriented democracies of the Twentieth Century. Modern mechanized civilization is a disaster because the individual is deprived of the conceptual culture of the past. Machines have changed the individual too fast for him to be able to develop new concepts that harmonize with his new mode of living (*Carnets*, p. 118). Social equality is not found in nature—the strongest and the most intelligent reign among animals and men (*Carnets*, pp. 64-65). A great civilization is built upon what is demanded of men, not what is furnished for them. To serve another, as the medieval servant served his feudal lord, is not humiliating when considered as a normal social process (*Carnets*, p. 67). As they emulate them the common people grow to be like their aristocratic leaders (*Carnets*, pp. 198-199).

AN IDEAL CIVILIZATION

In *Citadelle*, Saint-Exupéry describes an ideal civilization that resembles medieval Christian civilization in certain important aspects. All activity that leads to spiritual growth implies resistance to natural material tendencies. The individual exchanges himself for something greater and rises to a higher spiritual level; he discovers new spiritual relationships between

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disparate objects and facts; he finds a new meaning to life, a "sens des choses." An ideal civilization is composed of individuals who collaborate and sacrifice for permanence and order. In the process of exchanging themselves for higher spiritual values, they "become." Action is of value in becoming; thought alone is not enough.

A "sens des choses" is related to objects which exist contemporaneously, whereas a "sens du temps" connects objects which exist and events which occur in temporal sequence. Customs, traditions, and rituals passed on from one generation to the next produce stability and direction. The leader of a civilization gives arbitrary direction to his subjects by imposing upon them prescribed ways of doing things, called ceremonials. Man has no meaning except in the context of ceremonials; he is but a transitory vehicle in contrast to civilization itself, that which endures through time. The most satisfying life is found in cultivating the soil and adjusting to the four seasons. Social life is fullest when tied to the events of the family—birth, marriage, and death. The family is the fundamental social unit; the father should have authority over his children and be held accountable for their actions. He not only bequeaths material possessions to his sons, but he passes on to them the culture of the past. A mother may also fulfill this role. In *Terre des hommes*, the author recounts visiting a peasant woman on her deathbed surrounded by her three sons. Her face had hard lines but was peaceful; her lips were tightly drawn. Her sons had inherited her physical features; but, more important, they had received from her hands a spiritual heritage that went back many generations: traditions, concepts, and myths. In the same literary work Saint-Exupéry again observed the richness of the past when he visited a dilapidated country house near Concordia, Argentina. The dwelling was thick and massive like a citadel; it offered the peace of a monastery. Its occupants had a respect for the past and would not remodel the building. The attic was undoubtedly rich in old letters, coins, and keys. Two girls with a grave expression met the author at the door. He observed that they lived close to the natural world and reacted with great sensitivity to plants and animals. They reigned over a group of pets, including snakes, with rare intuition. Le petit prince also lived close to nature and understood it intuitively. He communicated with the rose, the fox, and the serpent.

THE OLD LIFE

Bernis, Geneviève, and the narrator of *Corrier Sud* played together as children in an old château whose walls were crumbling, a symbol of the richness of time. Generations had lived the same kind of life in that château; the peasants were still tilling the soil. Life was made up of seasons, vacations, marriages, and deaths. Their traditions protected the people from time, the great enemy; "le culte du passé" was firmly engrained in them. On a moonlit night looking out the window of the château, Geneviève listened intently to the sounds of nature. She communicated with each tree and blade of grass; she made pacts with the trees and the animals. She seemed eternal because she had such a close relationship with the natural world and the four seasons. The old furniture and art objects that surrounded her gave meaning to her existence for they tied her to the past and the family traditions. Without them, her life was empty.

In addition to praising the traditions associated with those who till the soil and live close to nature, Saint-Exupéry also praises the dedicated artist intent upon creating beauty. The skilled craftsman of previous centuries was willing to sacrifice himself to produce a porcelain cup, but the factory worker of today would never become personally involved with what he produces on the assembly line (*Carnets*, p. 43). The artist of today must expend great effort and devote long hours to produce a work of beauty, just as did the artist of the past. The masses will not appreciate his toil; he must rely, as formerly, upon a wealthy patron to support him (*Carnets*, pp. 205-206).

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITARIANISM BEST

Responsible authoritarianism is the most beneficial form of government. The leader must aspire to the ennoblement of his people and be capable of constraining them. He must possess the qualities of the patriarch of a large family. Men should be organized into a hierarchy with mutual dependence and responsibility; individuals should feel themselves integral parts of the greater whole. All people would be equal since all would have a common measure in God, the ultimate in a scale of values. But all would not be identical. Each one would develop his talents and abilities through differentiated types of

work. The leader would impose constraints upon his subjects by forcing them to do their work in a prescribed manner, a ceremonial. He would be aiding them to progress to higher spiritual levels. The efficacy of the constraints would be measured by how well the individuals were molded. If the leader erred in imposing a ceremonial, this very error would be a condition of growth since it would aid in the synthesis of contradictory elements in a greater whole. The failures of some individuals would be the conditions of success of others, and all would benefit by the success. The will of the people would be identical to that of the leader; all personal interest would blend with the interest of society. In impelling his subjects to action, the leader would appeal to their emotions rather than to reason. Experience and intuition are to be preferred to logic and reason in the process of learning. By imposing a system of constraints upon his people, the leader would be directing them toward God. God is conceived as the highest value in a hierarchy of values, the overall purpose or sense of life, "le noeud essentiel d'actes divers." Love, prayer, silence, meditation, and work are aspects of exchange as the individual develops new relationships and sets of values and rises to higher spiritual levels. There are no real contradictions; they appear as such only at levels at which one has not risen higher in order to absorb them in a larger structure. Modern education relies upon gadgets to teach effortlessly and reduces the child to a machine that absorbs facts and figures. In the past educators strove to inculcate a style and a soul (*Carnets*, p. 119). Without religious training human relationships would be reduced to brute force and blackmail (*Carnets*, pp. 75-76). The greatness and efficacy of religions are to have established a spiritual image to guide men (*Carnets*, p. 53). Modern man's disinterest in religious concepts has left his spiritual world bare (*Carnets*, p. 28). He performs a routine type of work in a respectable but undistinguished fashion. He needs something resembling a Gregorian chant. Just by listening to a village song of the Fifteenth Century, one realizes how much civilization has degenerated. The bonds of love are so lax today that one does not feel absence as in the past. During the Middle Ages, if a man left his place of residence for a long journey, he left behind a vast complex of habits. But today men have no permanent relationships to people or to things. They ex-

change Frigidaires and wives, houses and homes, political parties and religions. They can no longer be unfaithful; they have nothing to which they owe true allegiance (*Lettre au général "X"*).

By turning to the Middle Ages for part of his inspiration, Saint-Exupéry created his ideal civilization. Although he was not an orthodox Catholic, he admired the role that the church had played in giving meaning to human existence. He conceived of God as the highest in a scale of values. Those values that ennobled men were good regardless of their source. To find the values that could save the spiritual life of Twentieth-Century men, he turned to the past. He developed within his characters "le culte du passé."