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BOOK REVIEWS

NORWEGIAN, IRISH AND AFRICAN ROOTS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION


The editor’s Introduction is an excellent summary of the book, vividly expressed. The press editor persuaded Richard Lowenthal, a lifelong friend of Borkenau, to edit and translate Borkenau’s essays and manuscripts. We learn exactly the various sources and the editor’s handling them in Appendix I. The resulting book is approximately half as long as Spengler’s Decline of the West. Borkenau is another name to list with Vico, Spengler, and Toynbee, since Borkenau (1901-1956) is their equal.

Borkenau holds that Toynbee’s notion of the affiliation of one civilization to another is an oversimplification of history, even though, in affiliating Western Civilization to the Graeco-Roman Civilization, Toynbee improves on Spengler’s exclusiveness. Later civilizations assimilate parts of worldviews. The historical evidence shows that a civilization is likely to draw upon several other civilizations. Insofar as there is a mere affiliation, as in China in the early Christian centuries, the old culture of the past may work to the detriment of the society.

There is no getting around the fact that the great cultural innovations that led to the formation of Western Civilization approximately 800 A.D. were Christian. Western Christian authors found stimulation partly in Byzantine and Egyptian Christianity. The ideas of their own secular society also inspired Western Christian authors, all of them monks and clerics.

Norwegian ideas strongly stimulated the Irish in the eighth century. This Abortive Far Western Society of Toynbee, the Irish Civilization, was not an abortive society; it was an Iro-Norse culture. Probably Pelagius was Irish. He was a devout, sincere cleric, and his remarkable optimism, coupled with his strong moral sense, led him to hold that Christian man is able to achieve salvation by his own efforts. Thus he went too far, and presented a pagan doctrine, though he was a sincerely Christian author. He was, however, an influential author among his Western readers. Moreover he represented
a way of thinking in the West during the early centuries of the Christian era. He probably reinforced a stratum of philosophical or religious individualistic trust in the efficacy of the human Will, and a stratum of religious optimism.

The historical development is highly complex. There was, in the earliest Western Christian Church only one place where the populace took to Christianity as their religion: Africa. We can speak of the African Church. It later produced a Tertullian and an Augustine. This African Church, Roman Catholic, of course; figures importantly in the origins of Western Civilization. Early Western theology was African theology, that of the Punic region. It established a church discipline around the see of Rome and thus a Christianity that was independent of the Eastern church. Western Civilization, with the special character that I call Faustian thereby became possible.

There is something else. The early Merovingian society, in the land of the Franks, fell into utter degradation. The Frankish kings became mere puppets of ruffians and scoundrels; the commotion thoroughly disrupted the Frankish society and their church. Eventually an enormous guilt-inspired despair prevailed in the Frankish people. It took the form of paranoia. Borkenau describes this demoralization with the Nordic and German epics, particularly the Nibelungen and sagas. That the Western Church could become an appendage of Eastern Christianity (and, thereby, of what I call the Eastern ChristoMagian Civilization) was a real possibility. Then there would have been no Western Civilization with its technology, its individualism, and its interest in the human Will. There was another, similar, breakdown of Frankish society following the death of Charlemagne, and a similar resurgence of guilt and pessimism.

In 851, the monk Gottschalk, at Corbie Monastery in France, a Saxon nobleman, acted against Pelagius. He revived the doctrine of predestination in its most extreme form. He was as extreme as the contemporary Muslim theologians in Baghdad, who held that God decides all, and man nothing. His superiors punished him for denying individual responsibility; the Carolingians, in their immense guilt (ca 850) could easily have gone the Eastern route. Paschasius Radbertus, however, abbot of Corbie twenty years earlier, had proclaimed the dogma of Transubstantiation, namely of the physical presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. It was a timely proclamation; for in the barbarity and brutality of the contemporary laity, the doctrine appealed to many Franks and Germans partly as a protective magic, the materialization of the spiritual. What is more important, in those terrible days after Charlemagne, a metaphysical doctrine of salvation and a sacramental ritual based on it enabled a Western church and a Western Civilization to survive. Western religion did not, then, become another appendage of Eastern Christianity. The moral problems raised by the
Northern individualism of total responsibility find a solution in a transformed version of Eastern Christianity." (Lowenthal: p. 25)

The point is that certain elements of Pelagianism entered into the foundations of Paschasius’ new doctrine. The Eucharist seems worlds apart from Pelagius’ moralism, but the old Pelagian concern with sin—a preoccupation very different from those of the Eastern church—remained the central problem of Western Christianity. Pelagius’ doctrine that one could save oneself, unaided, from damnation, is not there. His moralism, though, is present with its sense of sin and of radical freedom of the will. This and other sacraments were not the magic spells of earlier religions. Its healing was not irresistible, man himself must work his salvation. The dogma of the Eucharist is thoroughly concerned with the basic moral problems. Thus Paschasius is an immensely important figure.

It is a remarkable fact, a great amount of historical evidence points to the source of the peculiarly Western traits of individualism and radical freedom of the will. Their origin lay in the Iro-Norse Culture of the early Christian centuries, or, more simply, in the Irish monastic culture. The Irish church developed through Irish contact with the Greek, the Eastern Christian church. The hermit life, and especially the monastic life, for which early Egyptian Christianity is famous, produced the structure of early Christian (and non-Roman Catholic) Ireland. Earliest Irish history is shrouded in mystery. The Irish sagas, nevertheless, unlike the Germanic, are not tragic; they reveal a society that was relatively peaceful and calm, no great upheaval, no deep paranoia, no enormous guilt, no tremendous pessimism. It was in this kind of situation that the Irish quietly and calmly adopted Christianity. Pelagius was St. Augustine’s great adversary. But the optimistic, self-reliant Pelagius greatly affected the Irish church. His influence is a well-established fact.

The great Irish missionary to Europe, Columbanus, is not a pivotal figure, but his failed monasteries in France at least left a tradition to be taken up again. He is significant in the way that Pelagianism lay over Irish Christianity, even if Pelagius was pagan-like and a heretic. Columbanus stressed in his many monastic foundations, not contrition but morality according to the law, not inward penance but a struggle with nature. This has an optimistic cast of mind about it. This Pelagius-influenced moral discipline was to join with the ecclesiastical discipline of the African church in various ways. At the Synod of Whitby, the English, and the Irish and the Northumbrians, and those at Lindisfarne, opted for the Roman, instead of the Irish, church.

Irish and Scottish Celts, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes did not emigrate to the British Isles as clans or peoples. Rather, individual groups formed a
following, headed by a leader. In crossing the seas, their clan and family ties were broken. The I-form of speech developed, first among the Irish, then in the Germanic languages. “The sea is the great source of freedom.” (p. 182)

The historical background is much more complex than I have indicated. Pelagius takes over the Stoic morality; at the same time he takes over the religious morality of Clement and Origen of Alexandria. But he transforms morality. The Stoics were elitists and so, too, were Clement and Origen, and they would all use free will and personal liberty to flee the world. Pelagius was no elitist. His moral extremism was for everybody. His asceticism is a rule of permanent struggle in the world, a struggle to conquer the world. There would be no desert foundations for him but, instead, missionary work.

The Franks did not have what was necessary, in order for a new Western Civilization to take form. The Germans finally supplied the culture in which the seeds of [Faustian] Western Civilization, and of a Western (as opposed to an Eastern) Christianity, could become fertile. Here the all-important figure, Boniface, comes into view as one of the great pivotal personalities of Western Civilization, an organizational genius. Though he was born in Devon, his training and upbringing were Northumbrian; thus he was in the Iro-Norse or IroScottish cultural sphere. He took his missions to the Germans, where he had freedom. A pity he naively agreed under pressure from the Franks to evangelize non-Germans. The Frisians killed him. Boniface’s church reforms had succeeded, and they were essential to the Franks and to the civilization.

There is another factor, regarding the all-important timing of the evangelization of the Germans, namely the Eddas. In particular, the middle Eddas and the parallel Siegfried saga, were heroic and optimistic, in contrast to the paranoia, despair, and guilt of the early and late Eddas.

I haven’t mentioned Athanasius, Benedict, Cassian, the Cabbala, Paschomius, Erigena, all and others figuring in various degrees of relevance and non-relevance in the emergence of Western Civilization. Franz Borkenau wrote on many other subjects in this book. His discussion of language study in the analysis of civilizations is brilliant. His essay on Roland, the defender of Charlemagne against the Saracens, and the Song of Roland is full of historical and psychological insight. All these writings invite reading and rereading.

David Richardson