

Remarks on some Kings of France

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WHEN 3 is multiplied by 4, the product is 12; it is neither 11 nor 13, but expresses exactly the conjugated powers of the multiplicand and of the multiplier. Likewise, metaphorically speaking, when the Christian religion is multiplied by Western humanity, the product is the Middle Ages; it is neither the age of the barbarian invasions nor that of the Renaissance. When a living organism has reached its maximum of growth, it is what it should be; it should neither stop short at the infantile state nor should it grow on indefinitely. The norm does not lie in hypertrophy, it lies at the exact limit of normal development. The same holds good for civilizations.

If we compare St. Louis and Louis XIV, we could of course confine ourselves to saying that they represent different ages, which is either a truism or an error; it is a truism to assert that every man lives in his own age, and it is an error to declare that the difference between the two French kings, or rather the worlds in which they live and which they incarnate, is only a difference of time. The real difference is that St. Louis represents Western Christianity in the full development of its normal and normative possibilities, whereas Louis XIV represents something entirely different, namely that substitute for religion, or for Christendom, which calls itself "Civilization"; admittedly, Christianity is still included in this but the emphasis is elsewhere, namely on the titanesque and worldly humanism, which is strangely hostile to virgin nature, following the example of ancient Rome.¹

Outward forms are criteria in this regard. It is either false or insufficient to allege that St. Louis wore the costume of his period and that, *mutatis mutandis*, Louis XIV did the same; the truth is that St. Louis wore the dress of a Western Christian king, whereas Louis XIV wore that of a monarch who was already more "civilized" than Christian, the first epithet referring, needless to say, to "civilizationism" and not to civilization in the general sense of the word. The appearance of St. Louis is that of an idea which has reached the fullness of its ripening; it marks, not a phase, but a thing accomplished, a thing which is entirely what it ought to be.² The appearance of Louis XIV is the appearance, not of a thing, but of a phase—nor yet even a phase, but an extravagant episode; whereas we have no difficulty in taking seriously the appearance not only of a St. Louis, but also of a Pharaoh, an Emperor of China, or for that matter, a Red Indian chief, it is impossible to escape an impression of ridiculousness when confronted by the famous portraits of Louis XIV and Louis XV.³ These portraits, or rather these poses and these accoutrements which the portraits so humourlessly and pitilessly fix, are supposed to combine all imaginable sublimities, some of which cannot in fact be fitted together into a single formula, for it is impossible to have everything at one and the same time; the hieratic and as it were incorporeal splendour of a Christian emperor cannot be piled up on top of the paradisaical naked splendour of an ancient hero.

St. Louis, or any other Christian prince of his time, could figure amongst the kings and

queens—in the form of columns—of the cathedral of Chartres; Francis I or Louis XIV would be unthinkable as sacred statues: the ostentatious worldliness of the one and the vainglorious megalomania of the other are opposed to all hieratic stylization.⁴ Not that all the princes of the Middle Ages were individually better than those of the Renaissance and later ages, but this is not the question; it is a question exclusively of demeanour and dress in so far as these are adequate manifestations of a norm that is both religious and ethnic, and thus of an ideal which allies the divine with the human. The king, like the pontiff, is not merely an official, he is also, by reason of his central position, an object of contemplation, in the sense of the Sanskrit term *darshan*: to benefit from the *darshan* of a saint is to be penetrated by his appearance in all its unassessable aspects if not also by the symbolism of his pontifical robes, as the case may be. St. Louis is one of those sovereigns who spiritually incarnate the ideal which they represent so to speak liturgically, whereas the majority of the other medieval princes represent this ideal at least in the second way which, let it be said once more, is far from being without importance from the point of view of the concrete intelligibility of the royal function, whose undertones are both earthly and heavenly.

In saying this we know only, too well, that visual criteria are devoid of significance for the "man of our time", who is nevertheless a visual type by curiosity as well as from an incapacity to think, or through lack of imagination and also through passivity; in other words he is a visual type in fact but not by right. The modern world, slipping hopelessly down the slope of an irremediable ugliness, has furiously abolished both the notion of beauty and the criteriology of forms; this is, from our point of view, yet another reason for using the present argument, which is like the complementary outward pole of metaphysical orthodoxy, for, as we have mentioned elsewhere in this connection, "extremes meet". There can be no question, for us, of reducing cultural forms, or forms as such, objectively to hazards and subjectively to tastes; "beauty is the splendour of truth"; it is an objective reality which we may or may not understand.⁵

Napoleon once said that if Louis XVI had shown himself on horse-back, he would have won the day, which is profoundly true; but one can go further and say that if the king had walked barefoot to Notre-Dame, reciting his rosary as he went, everything could have been saved. In one sense, Louis XVI was the innocent victim of Louis XIV; not incarnating personally any sort of megalomania or libertinism, he was the prisoner of forms which were like labels of these very things to the exclusion of all else; he was a modest and pure man wearing the costume of a hollow and decadent luxury and of a worldliness priding itself on its incredulity; this whole style, in a certain way, is already bourgeois. It would have been necessary to turn in one's tracks, putting on once more St. Louis' fleur-de-lys robe and taking religion out into the streets. St. Louis had, alongside him, St. Thomas Aquinas; Louis XIV had Bossuet. On the one hand a monk who is a peak of intellectuality, and on the other a "civilized" and blustering orator, only too happy to be able to seize the opportunity of quietism in order to kill quietude.

One may wonder what would have become of Latin Christianity if the Renaissance had not stabbed it. Doubtless it would have undergone the same fate as the Eastern civilizations: it would have fallen asleep on top of its treasures, becoming in part corrupt and remaining in part intact. It would have produced, not "reformers" in the conventional sense of the word—which is without any interest to say the least—but "renewers" in the form of a few great sages and a few great saints. Moreover, the growing old of civilizations is a human phenomenon, and to find fault with it is to find fault with man as such.

As for the modern world, it represents a possibility of disequilibrium which could not fail to be manifested when its time was ripe; the metaphysical inevitability of a phenomenon should not prevent us from declaring what it is in itself, not does it authorize us to take it for what it is not, especially since the truth is by definition constructive, either directly or indirectly. Even what seems to be the most hopelessly ineffective truth, though it cannot change the world, will always help us in some way or other to remain, or to become, what we ought to be in the face of God.

¹ The adjective "saint", applied to Louis IX, is of one piece with the name Louis, and we would not dream of dissociating these two words; but when one speaks of Louis "the Great", the marriage of words is unconvincing and this expression has never been able to gain an unqualified and unquestioned acceptance.

² The appearance of Clovis or Charlemagne might be that of a perfect Germanic type or of a perfect monarch, but it could not epitomize Western Christendom in an age when its constituent elements were as yet uncombined and had not yet interpenetrated.

³ By Rigaud, who combines the exuberance of Rubens with a sort of theatrical coldness.

⁴ The column statues of Chartres have, like an iconostasis, the value of a criterion of formal orthodoxy: no exhibition of individualism or of profanity could find a place amongst them.

⁵ What is admirable in the Orthodox Church is that all its forms, from the iconostases to the vestments of the priests, immediately suggest the ambiance of Christ, and the Apostles, whereas in what might be called the post-Gothic Catholic Church too many forms are expressions of ambiguous civilizationism or bear its imprint, that is, the imprint of this sort of parallel pseudo-religion which is "Civilization" with capital C; the presence of Christ then becomes largely abstract. The argument that "only the spirit matters" is ridiculous, for it is not by chance that a Christian priest wears neither the toga of a Siamese bonze nor the loin-cloth of a Hindu ascetic. No doubt the "cloth does not make the monk"; but it expresses, manifests and asserts him!