CHAPTER 12

The Moot, the End of Civilisation and the Re-Birth of Christendom

Jonas Kurlberg

Introduction

The Moot was an exclusive group of intellectuals who endeavoured to produce a blueprint for a Christian revolution in Western societies during the years 1938–47. It was the brainchild of J.H. Oldham, a lay theologian and pioneering ecumenist, who dreamt of a new lay Order that would catalyse a Christian social and political movement. Its membership was a motley crew consisting of the Roman Catholic historian Christopher Dawson, the secular Jew and sociologist Karl Mannheim and his fellow émigré economist Adolf Löwe, the educationists Sir Walter Moberly and Fred Clarke, literary figures such as John Middleton Murry and T.S. Eliot, the philosopher H.A. Hodges, the theologian John Baillie, the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi and others. In addition, the group dialogued with and was frequented by a network of prominent Christian thinkers both in Britain and beyond.

The argument of this paper is that the Moot constitutes a Christian expression of “political modernism.” Drawing upon Roger Griffin’s conceptualisation in Modernism and Fascism, modernism will be understood in the broader sense as a series of socio-political movements reacting to the social and moral fragmentation of modern societies. Accordingly, modernism involved the attempt to recreate a “sacred canopy,” or set of overarching meanings, that had been lost through the demise of Christianity and the proliferation of laissez-faire liberalism in Europe during the Enlightenment. As such, modernism as a project sought to create a new world by revitalising late-modern society through the re-appropriation of a mythical past and the appeal to transcendent values against a perceived collapse of cultural coherence.1 A comprehensive overview of the vast amount of Moot material is not feasible in this short paper.2 Instead, I will limit my attention to the group’s discussion and

2 The Moot gathered for a total of 24 weekends. Prior to each gathering between two and four confidential papers were circulated, giving each member the opportunity to submit
adaption of French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain’s ideas in *True Humanism*, to argue that the Moot was a “Christian” expression of modernism precisely in its utilisation of pre-modern Christian tradition in its venture to revitalise a decadent modern society.

**The Crisis in Western Civilisation**

The group’s analysis of the malaise of modern society reflects the modernists’ gloom: the nineteenth-century ideology of Progress seemed to them suspect; the 1930s economic crisis revealed the weaknesses of capitalism; liberalism, unable to provide a coherent worldview, had resulted in social fragmentation and nihilism; industrialisation had caused inhumane living and working conditions for large segments of society; and secularisation had left civilisation hollow and empty. However, the accent of the Moot’s analysis was on the spiritual roots of the peril around them. In an open letter addressed to the nation after the Munich agreement, published in *The Times* on 3 October 1938, Oldham states, “The basal truth is that the spiritual foundations of western civilisation have been undermined...” Tracing the origins of their societal crisis, the Moot singled out a slow paradigmatic shift over the centuries since the Reformation, from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview. Oldham writes of the distress caused by this shift in a paper presented in an early Moot meeting: “May not the deepest cause of the present evils in the world be that man has sought the meaning and end of his existence in himself and thereby denied and perverted his true nature as a being created by God and for God?”

---