

THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE

An Analysis of Christopher Dawson's
Program of Christian Culture

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THE RECENT PROPOSALS of Christopher Dawson for making the study of Christian culture the core of the Catholic university curriculum form an organic whole with his socio-historical studies which have been a life-time endeavour and which have found expression in numerous learned books and essays. In the brief articles which Mr. Dawson wrote to explain his program, principally for *The Commonweal*, much of this essential background material had to be taken for granted. With many of Mr. Dawson's "hidden" postulates unfamiliar to those who took up their pens to comment on his proposal, it was inevitable that what was only partially understood should receive a reception often less than enthusiastic. After some of the unsympathetic comments found their way to England, Dawson wrote to *The Commonweal* that he was

somewhat disconcerted by the violence of the reactions aroused by my suggestions for the study of Christian culture in Catholic universities. I certainly did not realize that there was an influential body of Catholics who reacted to the words "Christendom" and "Christian Culture" in the same way as a bull reacts to a red cloth."¹

It is the purpose of this present article, in the first place, to isolate from Dawson's socio-historical studies some of his essential postulates and show, at least in part, how these postulates give a certain compelling logic and urgency to his suggestions for the study of Christian culture. His program for the study of Christian culture will then be examined in the light of this general teaching. Finally, certain objections and difficulties offered by those who have commented on the Dawson plan will be considered.

By 1900, as Christopher Dawson himself has often indicated the new science of Comparative Religion had replaced Natural Theology as the only valid approach to a study of the historic religions. Since

it denied Natural Theology, which led by reason to the knowledge of a Transcendent Being, Comparative Religion reduced all religious phenomena to "a museum of dead cults and anthropological curiosities." It was only to be expected, then, that most sociologists, taking their lead from the anthropologists, would deny to religion a formative role in the development of culture. It is Christopher Dawson's special achievement that he has taken the findings of later anthropologists, more scientific and impartial in their approach, to trace out religion's autonomous, dynamic influence upon the course of history.

In his study of religion's influence upon history Dawson has used all the sciences to assist him in his researches: theology, metaphysics, psychology, anthropology, and so on. Thus, while denying many of William James' conclusions, Dawson credits James' emphasis upon the study of the unconscious as having a revolutionary effect on the study of religion. Taking his lead from William James' explorations of the unconscious, Dawson saw that in the primitive culture, which was essentially religious, there was a close co-operation between man's unconscious and his external, rational activity. Agriculture, the art of writing, astronomy, were by-products of the elaborate cults by which man tried to express his dependence on some external power which simultaneously sustained and dwarfed his own existence.

Dawson has never tired of discovering religion's creative role in history. He sees a religious inspiration behind the first creative works of every culture. Religion, he believes, has also been the great energizer which has set all later cultural changes in motion. Believing that neither an inferential rational knowledge, nor a supernatural revelation explains the primitive cults, Dawson suggests a metaphysical intuition, "an obscure but profound and continuous intuition of God" as the source of man's first experience of spiritual reality.² While the co-operation of the psyche, the source of man's religious sense, and his exterior, social activity to produce new and higher forms of culture has been the usual pattern of history, in the 20th century man there often exists an abnormal divorce between the psyche and reason. Caught up in external efforts, and, in his scientific power, seemingly less dependent on any outside assistance, modern man has neglected that introversion which is the well-spring of all religious inspiration. Dawson could not have expressed the matter more emphatically than when he insisted that what distinguishes the religious from an irreligious person is a difference between levels of consciousness.

One primary goal of Catholic education in the present era, then,

beyond the imparting of doctrine and the dialectical proofs of truths common to Faith and reason, must be to emphasize the outstanding examples of the co-operation of the psyche and reason, religion and activity in the Christian man. The Liturgy, for instance, which is a preeminent example of this organic relation between Christianity and a given culture, must be studied in its historical development and in its present potentialities to direct man's attention and energies to spiritual goals. It is not the well-informed Christian whose head is crammed with responses learned in an Apologetic's course and with the elements of a systematic course in philosophy and theology (necessary as these are), but the integral Christian who has studied his Christian past in its sociological dimensions and has considered and even experienced Christianity's creative power to transform society, who meets the Church's great present need. Such a Christian has the best chance to preserve his own heritage since he sees its pertinence to every department of his life, and, at the same time, though part of a minority group, seeks to discover ways and means of penetrating a secularized society with Christianity's spiritual influence.

A LIVING PAST

Making the Incarnation history's focal-point, Dawson demonstrates that for the Christian the past can never be dead. History is the story of the divine plan in time, a process which is still reaching towards its fulfillment. Christianity's nineteen centuries are nineteen chapters in an uncompleted book. They must be carefully studied according to many approaches if Christianity's dynamic role is to be appreciated, and if the origins of its present crises are to be discovered.

Just as the psychic disorders of the adult must be traced back to the influences of childhood, so too Christianity's abnormal estrangement from society can only be understood by studying its "case-history" in its entirety. The psychiatrist cannot reasonably be accused of flying from the face of reality because of his preoccupation with the past. So, neither is the modern Christian the victim of a ghetto-complex if he studies his past to understand his present mission and the means at his disposal to accomplish it.

Of all the world's religions Christianity has shown itself to be the most potent dynamic force in transforming society. This is because Christianity was a conscious effort while the pagan religions had been instinctive cults. This spirit of moral effort, the consciousness of moral responsibility, says Dawson, may well be the essential note

of Western Culture. If this moral effort were not enough in itself, Christianity's central doctrine of the salvation of the integral man, body as well as soul, would inevitably exert a profound influence on the cultural process.

This does not mean, however, that Christianity's ability to accomplish its social mission is independent of the cultural and political environment in which it finds itself. In Christian Byzantium the Church became so closely identified with the social order that its potential to influence society never gained free scope. For in the East Christianity encountered a highly developed culture of Graeco-Roman origins, and the vast and complex machinery of government of a semi-oriental monarchy, totalitarian in its demands and hostile to any autonomous spiritual power. In the West, on the other hand, conditions were uniquely favorable to Christianity's efforts to reform society according to its own code. Here, Christianity which brought with it the cultural traditions of the Romans and the Greeks and its own ecclesiastical organization, confronted primitive, tribal societies who possessed the most elementary cultural and political institutions. Because of their dependence on the Church's cultural resources, the Western tribes had to permit the Church's spiritual leadership within society. This permeation of Western society was a gradual thing, and, in fact, never reached its completion. The nearest approach to the total transformation of Western civilization by Christian principles came in the 13th century. For Dawson, St. Francis of Assisi is Christianity's organic expression in Western man. St. Francis resolved in himself the conflict between religion and culture, Faith and Life; the barriers of race and social tradition were broken through.

Yet, in the 13th century, the apogee of the Church's influence, dormant powers, hostile to its spiritual hegemony, begin slowly to assert themselves. From the 14th century to the present, from Nominalism to Communism, Europe's institutions have become increasingly secular in structure and orientation. It would be beyond the mark to discuss here, in any detail, the progress of this secularizing influence in Western society, an influence which appears to have achieved a near-total victory in the 20th century "isms." Yet, some mention must be made of the high-points in this process, in so far as they have consciously shaped the form and content of Dawson's educational program.

With the Church playing the role of cultural matrix in Western society through the monastic foundations and later through the mixed religious orders, it is not surprising that the higher organs

of culture should receive from her their spiritual form and unity. Until the Renaissance, in fact, there was no spiritual power in Western society which did not acknowledge its subordination to the Church. The Church's spiritual hegemony gave to the West a unity of outlook and purpose which made the achievements of the Middle Ages possible. Unfortunately, culture and clerical learning had become identified. Even in the medieval university the layman had no established place. When, in the Renaissance period, a genuine lay culture did come into being it assumed a consciously secular orientation almost as a matter of course. In this way an independent ideal of lay culture sprang into existence, an independent spiritual power which refused to follow the Church's guidance, though the Papacy had been the chief patron of the new humanist learning.

The consequent division of culture into two halves corresponded to the social division between clergy and laity. While the clergy studied the Bible and the Fathers, the laity studied the classics; while the clergy studied the history of the Church, the laity studied the history of the State; while the clergy studied the traditional Christian philosophy, the laity studied the philosophers of pagan antiquity and the new natural science. No doubt the division was not so sharp and schematic as this, but it did undoubtedly lead to an increasing neglect of the traditional culture as a whole by the laity. And when we remember how for the last four hundred years the sphere of lay education has been steadily widening, and that of clerical education has been narrowing, it is difficult to exaggerate the effects of this division on the secularization of modern civilization.³

The Church's cultural hegemony had now been broken. Even in Italy, the reassertion of the native element in the culture, the national effort to free the Latin world from Gothic barbarism, saw scholars, clerical as well as lay, spurning a thousand years of Christian history and erecting a wall between the European mind and medieval culture.

While the Italian Renaissance gave to lay culture a consciously secular purpose, the Reformation tended to rob Christian culture of its aesthetic elements. Luther's extreme theological dualism between Faith and Works left no place for a positive conception of Christian culture. His exaggerated supernaturalism, with its preoccupation with the Bible and the preaching of the Word, destroyed the liturgical character of the popular culture. An impoverished and viscerated Christian culture thus became secularism's easy prey in Nordic Europe at least, and the Protestant intellectual's lack of rapport with his culture has been a perennial trait of continental Protestantism.

UNSUBSTANTIAL SHADOWS

Dawson's basic premises may be thus simply put: religion has been throughout history the dynamic force behind all great cultural changes; Christianity, partly because of its intrinsic vitality, partly because the matter was so well disposed, has placed its indelible stamp on Western civilization. But if the English Revolution of 1688 marks the end of all attempts to establish society on a religious basis, and if from that point the state successfully imposes a virtual quarantine upon Christianity's social influence, it would seem that the Dawson thesis breaks down when it is applied to Post-Reformation Europe. It must be borne in mind, however, that Dawson is speaking of a normal state of affairs, and that he has never tired of showing how there has come about in Western society an unnatural divorce between religion and culture. Yet, those who were most eager to throw over their Christian heritage were often the very ones who were most indebted to it. Something which has entered so completely into the blood-stream of Europe's life as has the Christian mystique, creates certain instinctive attitudes and habits of thought. And even beyond his Christian atavisms, there is in the post-Christian that need to be a part of a holy community which has been characteristic of men everywhere and in all periods of history. The Christian, steeped in his Christian culture, is in a better position to understand modern secularized culture than the secularist himself. He can see the Christian influence in Robespierre's civic cult, in 19th century Liberalism, in humanitariansm "the peculiar possession of a people who have worshipped for centuries the Divine Humanity," and in the proletarian revolutions, a decisive factor missed by the secularist because of a blind spot on his field of vision. The secularist often fails to detect this unconscious Christian influence because spiritual movements like Liberalism and Communism, precisely because they deny their Christian parentage, often compound the crass materialism they set out to battle. But the Christian holds the ideological key. In studying his Christian past he is plunging ever deeper into the heart of the neo-pagan present.

In proposing a program of Christian education based on a systematic study of Christian culture, Christopher Dawson is doing a great deal more than offering an alternate curriculum. Guided by his historical studies he is proposing the systematic study of Christian culture as a calculated means of respiritualizing Western society. Dawson has observed with concern the growing isolation of the Church from social reality. While the modern state has taken on many of the features of a church, the Church itself has retreated to

isolated strongholds, to the inner life of its members. The Reformation with its hostility to traditional Christian culture, and secularism, dominating the consciousness of the popular mind, effectively killed the popular religious culture. The press and the other mass media of communication occupy the psychic territory once held by the Church's Liturgy and the sacred art, music and poetry which it inspired. The Church, effectively neutralized by religious division, anti-clericalism, neo-paganism and the totalitarian state, in her efforts "to inspire and mould the subordinate categories of social life" has herself become *de facto* a secondary society and appears to the modern to have nothing to offer in answer to his own personal and social needs.

The Church must again become the informing principle of Western society. Now one among many competing organs of culture lost in the jostling crowd, the Church, while not monopolizing culture, must reclaim for itself its rightful share to disseminate Christian culture in the full sociological sense of that word.

If the modern Catholic must live on sheer Faith, disinherited of his Christian culture, he will find himself naked in an alien culture. Discouraged by a feeling of cultural inferiority and social estrangement, he will be entirely overwhelmed "by the tide of circumambient materialism." The graduate of our Catholic institutions of learning needs more than knowledge. Our idea of culture, as Dawson points out, has become over-cerebralized and over-competitive. Education has always meant *the transmission of a culture*, and Christian education, in particular, with its emphasis upon the salvation of the integral nature, has always been a discipline of the whole man. The point at which Catholic educators might part company with Dawson would be precisely in his contention that

The central problem of the Catholic educationalist is a sociological one; how to make students culturally conscious of their religion; otherwise they will be divided personalities with a Christian faith and a pagan culture which contradict one another.⁴

Christians in the Atomic Age must recover the sociological oneness and wholeness that characterized the Christians of the New Testament. Yet, the transmission of Christian culture is not to be for purely defensive ends. The chief obstacle to the spread of Christian influence, remarks Dawson, is the failure of believers to be aware of the profundity and dynamism of this Christian tradition; as in the past, so today, it is only through the medium of a culture that the Faith can penetrate civilization and transform the thought and ideology of modern society.

The attitude of scholars, both Catholic and non-Catholic, to the Middle Ages has grown considerably more sympathetic since the Enlightenment when Voltaire described Europe's Christian millennium as "the barren prospect of a thousand years of stupidity and barbarism." Yet, the prejudice against the Christian millennium, a part of the 20th century man's inheritance from the Renaissance, remains so strong that Christian culture has never received recognition as worthy to be the core of the curriculum, even in Catholic Liberal Arts Universities. Christian culture's immense wealth as a living world tradition has been tapped only by the specialists and then for their own purposes. Today, classical humanism, which has served as a bond of intellectual and artistic unity between the two halves of a divided Christendom, has been replaced in the curriculum by scientific specialisms. Dawson nominates Christian culture for the needed integrating, humanizing element. Dawson cautions that if an integrating principle is not found to replace classical humanism, there will be a complete break in the continuity of the educational tradition. Such a lapse inevitably means the demise of the previous culture.

Dawson defines Christian culture as "the Christian way of life in its historical development"; or again, as "the actual reconte of Christianity with human life in terms of history and sociology." The study of this historical process has peremptory claims on the attention of Western man. It manifests in a special way the fulfillment of the divine purpose in history. Considered on a natural level, it is one of the four great world cultures, and through Europe's colonial empires in the 19th century has the best claim to being called a universal, world culture.

Consistent with his belief that a culture should be studied especially in its "classical moments," Dawson suggests the Byzantine, Gothic and Baroque phases as desirable areas of concentration. He believes that Christian culture should be studied principally through works of synthesis, and that the curriculum "should not base itself on the textual study of the Christian classics to anything like the degree that the old classical education did with its authors."⁵ Relying on the right book of synthesis leading the student on to further reading and study, Dawson feels that such a synthesis will in the end prove far more rewarding than an out-sized, somewhat featureless program of great books or extracts.

In "Christian Culture Its Meaning and Its Value," *Jubilee*, May, 1956, Dawson for the first time got down to the specific details of a curriculum. Here he indicated six desirable elements: I. Basic Theological Principles; II. Literary Traditions; III. Christian Social In-

situations; IV. Christian Thought; V. Christian History; VI. Post-Medieval Social and Economic Development. Faithful to his ideal of a sociological approach, he has been careful to include all phases of the Christian culture.

At least three of Dawson's "Basic Theological Principles" may cause some surprise: F. The Cult of the Saints; G. The Holy Places of Christendom; H. The Holy Images: Christian Art in its relation to culture. The cult of the saints has been included largely because of its historic importance in the period following the fall of the Empire in the West. As Dawson points out: "It was only in the world of Christian mythology that the transfusion of the Christian faith and ethics with the barbaric traditions of the new peoples of the West could be achieved."⁶ The holy places of Christendom are important because the great pilgrimage routes were in the Middle Ages "the chief channels of cultural influences." The holy images show the organic relation that existed between religion and culture and witness to the Church's sociological impact on Western society: Dawson, of course, also includes among his Theological Principles the relation of the Liturgy to culture, since till the Reformation the Liturgy became increasingly the center of Christian culture. Poetry, music and art found their expression in the Liturgy.

PARIS AND CHARTRES

For Dominicans the most crucial question raised by Dawson's plan is the effect it would have on the place of Theology in the curriculum. While insisting that he does not wish to reduce the role of Theology in education, he recalls that Theology has always been the crown, not the foundation of the Christian educative process. He cannot conceive of a Liberal Arts curriculum which would not have a humanist center, in preference to one that was theological or metaphysical.

Since in worship religion touches the individual psyche, the fundamental religious classics most rewarding in classroom use, Dawson believes, are not the works of St. Augustine or St. Thomas, but the Bible, Missal, Breviary and the *Acta Sanctorum*. Foundations for these basic Christian classics must be laid in the primary and secondary schools, with courses in Sacred Scripture, Catholic Liturgy and Worship—the dramatization of theology. Further, Dawson would like to see Theology as a whole more completely integrated with its historical context, while Dogmatic Theology, in particular, should be related to contemporary Mystical Theology.

Why is the appreciation of Theology's historical context so important to Dawson? Precisely because Dawson feels that the heresies and doctrinal disputes which have so often produced the defining Councils are frequently the expression of a duality of culture. In the Eastern Christian Empire, for instance, Dawson sees the reassertion of the native cultures of the subject oriental peoples, not on a cultural level, but rather in abstract theological disputes. Again, when Bulgaria was conquered by Constantinople in the 9th century, the Bogomiles found in "the fundamental world-refusal of oriental dualism" an escape from Orthodoxy which had become identified with the Byzantine overlord. Applying these same principles to the Protestant Reformation, Dawson calls it a Nordic revolt. The Reformation was the counterpart of the Renaissance; the one made Southern Europe's culture more exclusively Latin; the other made the culture of Northern Europe more exclusively Teutonic. So, to appreciate the origin and significance of a given heresy or schism a sociological analysis is usually essential.

Few would disagree with Dawson in according to the Bible, Missal, Breviary and *Acta Sanctorum* an important place in a religion course. The renewed emphasis of theologians upon the revealed founts of their science may perhaps point toward a solution. A conscientious effort to relate Scripture studies to the theological courses and to show history's influence upon Theology's development (an effort already being made in a number of Catholic colleges) would considerably narrow the area of difference between Dawson's Christian Culture Plan and curricula which would make Theology the integrating element. Dawson has no desire, it is true, to curtail Theology's role in education. Yet, unless some compromise were made between the two points of view, e.g., by bringing out Theology's sociological features and consciously relating it to Scripture and the Liturgy, but with Theology remaining at the center of the curriculum, it is difficult to see how as demanding a subject as Theology could be taught at all. Some hold, of course, that systematic courses in Theology and Philosophy should not be attempted on the college level as beyond the average student's capacity. The truth of this assertion is best tested against the actual teaching experiences of those engaged in conducting such courses. While a superior text and a resourceful teacher are both essentials, the gratifying benefits that have been realized, despite the difficulties encountered, make the effort more than worthwhile.

Under section No. 6 of his Plan "Post-Medieval Social and Economic Developments" Dawson has listed "Christianity and the American Revolution" and "Christian cultural traditions in

the U.S.: a study of American 19th century society as the result of the pattern of Free Church competitive enterprises." Dawson realizes that an organic relation must be established between the student's living culture and the culture he desires to study. Since he drew up this curriculum for American Catholic colleges Dawson left room in his Plan for the study of American institutions precisely in their order to the Christian heritage.

Until now the realm of culture in the democratic countries has remained a no-man's land. Dawson is convinced that the democratic state's "hands-off" policy towards its cultural institutions is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. If the democratic mystique becomes the principle of national union and the source of spiritual energy, divided spiritual loyalties cannot be tolerated. John Dewey's concept of education was almost purely religious. For him education exists to serve democracy and to form a spiritual community. Education thus becomes the instrument of politics and the curriculum becomes centered on a study of the national culture. Universal education, in fact, once it is enrolled in the service of the state, inevitably comes into conflict with the Church, which is also a universal institution and is also directly concerned with the human mind and the formation of character. With political ideology unseating science itself as the ultimate authority in education and culture, it should come as no surprise when American Catholic education is branded as divisive. Catholic educators in this country must show democracy's debt to the Christian heritage and prove that it offers the best guarantee of the safety of our democratic institutions against the totalitarian tendencies inherent in a mechanized, mass society.

Some of the objections brought against the Dawson Plan have already been taken up, at least implicitly or in passing; the study of Christian culture is retrograde and marks the beginning of a retreat to Christian ghettos; it would neglect the examination of secularism, our present foe; it would relegate Theology to the sidelines (an apprehension which is not entirely groundless).

Another objection offered is that Christian culture itself cannot be understood without an appreciation of the classical culture of Greece and Rome for which Dawson makes little or no provision. Dawson answers that the specialized study of the classics and the culture that produced them should be the work of the Liberal Arts high school.

One of the great advantages of the old classical education

was that it involved the study of only two languages, literatures and histories. How then is Christian culture to be encompassed in a college curriculum if it involves the study of Europe's twenty or more vernacular literatures? Dawson feels that the problem presented by the vernacular literatures is largely offset by the fact that each European people possesses its own approach to the common culture of Christendom through its literature and history. In addition to the learning of one vernacular, preferably French, the Catholic student would also be expected to have mastered Medieval Latin so that the Christian classics might be studied in their originals. While Dawson frankly admits that no literature is less read or less readable than that of the Dark Ages (only a few specimens retain any literary vitality or human interest) he suggests that this period could be very well covered by a good historical synthesis.

Mr. Dawson readily concedes that the utilitarian demands made on our Catholic colleges may make it impossible to place Christian culture at the core of the curriculum. In addition, many collegians would be hopelessly unequipped to embark on such a course (Medieval Latin, a vernacular, etc.), so that it might prove impracticable to give the program too broad an extension, especially in its early stages. Yet, the Oxford Movement in England showed what even a small number of integral, zealous Christians can do to influence a neutral or hostile environment. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that for Mr. Dawson even the highly educated Catholic is ignorant of his Christian heritage in its cultural dimensions and as a living tradition. Yet, as he is only too well aware, it is not until a culture is dying that we bother to study it.

Mr. Dawson drawing on his profound historical knowledge has made most valuable suggestions as to how the Christian may best utilize the unsuspected treasures of his Christian heritage:—

. . . this sacred tradition remains like a river in the desert, and a genuine religious education can still use it to irrigate the thirsty lands and to change the face of the world with the promise of new life.⁷

¹ *The Commonweal*, April 1, 1955: Communications.

² *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*, p. 194.

³ "Christian Culture, Its Meaning and Its Value," Christopher Dawson. *Jubilee*, May, 1956.

⁴ "Problems of Christian Culture," *The Commonweal*, April 15, 1955.

⁵ "Problems of Christian Culture," *ibid.*

⁶ *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, p. 34.

⁷ *Understanding Europe*, p. 255.