

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON AND CATHOLIC
EDUCATION IN AMERICA

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The eminent historian of culture, Christopher Dawson, believed America possessed a unique opportunity in the aftermath of two world wars to revitalize Christian education and help stave off the disintegration of Western civilization. Only an authentic effort to recover the historic reality of Christian culture would ensure that Europe, and thus the west, regained the viable unifying principle of a common spiritual outlook.

The death of Christopher Dawson in May 1970 brought to a close the career of one of the most distinguished Catholic historians of the twentieth century. Many of Dawson's writings, kept alive by the efforts of his devoted American student, John J. Mulloy, in the pages of *The Dawson Newsletter*, have recently been reprinted, and provide the focus for seminars and lectures on his thought and importance as an historian of culture. Of special significance, in light of Pope John Paul II's call for a new evangelization and the issuance of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, are Dawson's works on Catholic education and culture. This was a particular focus of Dawson's scholarship in the Fifties and also the source of some of the sharpest criticisms he received, for he proposed a unique and challenging approach to Catholic higher education, which, he believed, might best be realized in the United States.

Dawson's optimism was undoubtedly sustained in part by his appointment in 1958 as the first occupant of the Charles Chauncy Stillman Chair of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard University. Unlike many European thinkers, Dawson had never been to America and apparently never regarded such a trip as a basic requirement of a complete education. He was nearly sixty-nine when he accepted the Harvard appointment. Nonetheless, he responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to make his views of the significance of Christian culture study more widely known. His first students at Harvard were both impressed by his immense erudition and overwhelmed by his expectations of them.¹ And Dawson was unrelenting in his efforts to promulgate his ideas for revitalizing Catholic education. His efforts culminated in the publication of *The Crisis of Western Education* in 1961. Here Dawson set forth his analysis of the failure of the West to

find a satisfactory approach to education that would address the cultural disintegration he perceived. But his work was not merely negative, for he set forth in clear terms his prescription of Christian culture study.

Dawson's proposals, often criticized as reactionary and likely to return Catholic intellectual life to the ghetto, were never implemented to any substantial degree in America. His failure is perhaps not surprising, especially given the timing of his arrival in America and the publication of his work on this issue. An appeal to embrace the historical reality of Christian culture as the basis for Catholic education, coming at a time when many Catholic educators sought to retain state favor by accommodating the university to the age and the supposed spirit of Vatican II was, if not doomed to failure, certainly not assured of success. And yet the historical exclusivity and provincialism of which Dawson was sometimes accused was, in fact, exactly what he struggled against, and his methodology no less than his historical vision represented a far-reaching attempt to realize both a more accurate understanding of our Christian past, and a greater appreciation for the interaction of Christian culture with the other great world cultures of China, India, and Islam.

Key in Dawson's approach to educational reform was his belief that religion was the critical factor in understanding cultures, from the most primitive to the most advanced. His definition of culture was essentially that of the anthropologists: "a common way of life—a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs." Culture was not, Dawson maintained, a "sublimated abstraction," but was "the expression of a living tradition which animates the whole society and unites the present and the past."² The common way of life so critical to the idea of culture was rooted, above all else, in religious conceptions of reality. Every culture, Dawson maintained, was essentially a moral order and its life was governed by its spiritual perceptions, no matter how inchoate those might be. Man's life was utterly dependent upon his understanding of the supernatural world. Whether he sought to appease angry gods, enjoy success in the hunt, or participate in the beatific vision, all demanded a spiritual consciousness from the most primitive society to the most civilized. Thus, if a culture rejected the spiritual understanding of its origins, it denied its first principles and assured its own disintegration.

In his earliest writings, Dawson took a generally dim view of American culture, identifying it with the trend toward secularization and materialism. Protestantism conditioned its cultural history in general and, in New England, Calvinist theology created a "strong moral motive for action without any corresponding intellectual ideal." The result was a thin veneer of humanist idealism that existed only so long as Calvinism

retained a position of authority over the New England mind.³ As the great Puritan leader Cotton Mather observed, the prosperity Calvinist New England enjoyed proved its undoing; what was left, Dawson posited, was a soulless, post-Calvinist America.⁴ The comfortable, bourgeois ideal of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, a self-help manual for material success, replaced it.

Writing in the interwar years and in the midst of prohibition in America, Dawson's assessment of American culture is understandable. He saw the apparent triumph of materialism in the runaway consumerism of the Twenties. And the attempt at prohibition likely resonated with Dawson's assessment of America as characterized by the triumph of action over the intellect; an effort at utility with little or no regard for the aesthetic.

That early assessment of American culture gave way to a far more favorable view in the midst of the Second World War. Dawson served as the Vice-President of the Sword of the Spirit, an organization devoted to Christian ecumenism and unity in the face of the totalitarian onslaught. He hoped, as well, to demonstrate that Christians and liberals might make common cause. This opportunity was especially great in the United States, where liberals and Christians enjoyed historically harmonious relations, and both benefited from the Calvinist assertion of the natural rights of the individual against the state. Though the Calvinism of the Puritan fathers was gone, their influence on Americans' understanding of political rights remained. Calvinist thought was thus a fundamental support to the American democracy that now bore the weight of resistance to fascism, and eventually, communism.

Though Dawson did not write about America for the remainder of the decade, he returned to the topic of America's unique role in world affairs with the publication of *Understanding Europe* in 1952. In the concluding chapter, Dawson pressed for the study of Christian culture as the only viable alternative to complete secularization of the West. It was, however, an article entitled "Education and Christian Culture," published in *Commonweal* the following year, that fully introduced his educational ideas in America. For the next eight years, Dawson produced numerous articles in support of Christian culture studies and responded to many letters and articles critical of his approach as provincial, too conservative, and too Catholic.

Among the more common criticisms were those offered by Father Herbert Musurillo, whose article in *Thought* in 1955 drew a response from Dawson in the same journal and in the pages of *The Catholic World*. Musurillo argued that Dawson's approach would "substitute a narrow form of sectarian exclusivism" for classical

education and thus “thrust Catholic higher education back into the Ghetto.” Yet a thorough reading of Dawson’s work does not substantiate the charge of exclusivity. Dawson’s goal was not to omit the study of the classical world he knew well. Rather, it was to broaden the student’s understanding of the equally rich tradition of Christian culture, and thus provide an answer to the narrow focus on specialization and vocational training that had come to dominate most university curricula.⁵ “Without such understanding,” Dawson noted, “it is impossible either to interpret our own religion to others or to understand those problems of intercultural relations which are of such incalculable importance for the future of the modern world.”⁶ Far from being provincial or sectarian, Dawson here recognized the importance of an authentic multiculturalism in education that sought to integrate a study of Christendom and the other great world cultures of China, India, and Islam.

The demise of classical studies and the secularization of the means and goals of education were relatively new developments. With the emergence of nationalism and the democratic faith in the nineteenth century came a fundamental reorganization of education in America. Though not essentially anti-clerical, the new thrust of educational theory was toward ever-increasing state control as a means to uniformity and widespread participation. America’s phenomenal growth in the industrial age coincided with (and was in some part a response to) the progressive faith in science. The result was an emphasis on efficiency and a determination to realize the “intellectual potentiality of society by a scientific system of universal education.”⁷ Thus education was increasingly turned toward the cultivation of a common “mass mind” that sought its fulfillment in economic enrichment and measured the good life, not by the traditional goals of leisure and contemplation, but in terms of an improved standard of living and material success.

In America, Dawson attributed this trend toward specialization both to the influence of the demand for universal education and to the impact of the thought of John Dewey. For Dewey, the ultimate goal of education was to initiate the student into the democratic community. So strong was Dewey’s democratic impulse that it became an article of faith—a religion—and he would have no other in the classroom. Thus secular idealism did not simply seek the end of a particular mode of education; it was also creative. To Dawson, that religious faith in action and participation via the “democratic church” meant that the very notion of democracy was unassailable, acquiring a mystique that was beyond criticism. However, democratic idealists saw religious education, with its insistence on individual responsibility and objective truth, as

authoritarian, and regarded it as a threat to their goals. As Henry Steele Commager noted, Dewey believed that “morality was social, not individual.”⁸ Thus, education was increasingly the business of the state that sought to ensure not only universal access but also uniformity. The democratic dogma reached its height in America where the separation of church and state virtually assured the triumph of the secularists in matters of education and, consequently, in the vital process of enculturation.

The clear exception to this process, Dawson believed, was the Catholic system of education in America that retained its independence at every level. And it was the Catholic university, in particular, that resisted the temptations to embrace the utilitarian views of progressive theorists like Dewey, who were largely responsible for the “disintegrated mass of specialisms and vocational courses” found in most universities. And though the Catholic university was, in Dawson’s estimation, the likely focal point of resistance to this trend, he called upon Christian educators, Catholic and Protestant alike, and any university that had not already succumbed to the omniscient state, to enlist in the effort.⁹

That effort, as Dawson saw it, began by recognizing the centrality of Western civilization to the modern world, indeed by recognizing it as the maker of the modern world. Thus, a solid grounding in the history of the West was an essential component of education. And this applied both within Europe and without. Though the age of Western imperialism had ended, the influence of the West throughout many countries of the rest of the world had not. The task of harmonizing “their traditional cultures and the new ideas and the new ways of life which they have derived from the West” remained.¹⁰

How the study of Western civilization was best approached was unclear, and Dawson believed that America represented perhaps the best opportunity from which to view the problem. America possessed the advantage of seeing the continuity of European culture from which it emerged. This was not possible in Europe, however, where the student became mired in the intricacies of his own national history and never perceived Europe as an intelligible unity. It was in America, above all, that the need for a broader approach was perceived. This was the challenge, and it was the metahistorians like Arnold Toynbee and Dawson, among others, who took it up. If the term “metahistory” is out of fashion among historians, it is nonetheless descriptive of the broader approach to historical study that Dawson and Toynbee sought. As distinct from the historian, the metahistorian sought, not simply an accurate cataloguing of facts and an assessment of their future significance, but an explanation of the meaning of history in the broadest sense.¹¹

Toynbee's massive *Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1961, attempted to see the larger pattern of human history rooted in the life of civilizations, and Dawson acknowledged the immense erudition that went into the effort. Still, expecting a student to comprehend this world historical approach was more than could be accomplished in a reasonable course of study. Western civilization was more easily managed. Yet, Dawson noted, Toynbee's work clearly demonstrated that

Western civilization is inseparable from Christian civilization, and the latter is the more fundamental and intelligible unit. By studying Christian culture in its several forms we are led to understand Western civilization from within outwards; whereas it is much more difficult to achieve a unitary study if we begin with the centrifugal multiplicity of Western civilization and attempt to discover its principle of unity by going from without inwards.¹²

That statement stands in sharp contrast to the eminent historian John Lukacs' assertion that Dawson did not intend an in-depth study of the manifestation of Christian culture as the remedy to western secularization.¹³ Such a study, Lukacs argued, would have been impossible given the essential historical illiteracy of most students. Why ask the student to grapple with the idea of Christian culture when he could not demonstrate a reasonable understanding of Western civilization?

First, Dawson did not hold that Christian culture study excluded the study of Western civilization—the critical task of the liberal arts college. And, secondly, Dawson clearly believed that the study of Christian culture served the dual purpose of giving the student an understanding of a culture—Christian culture—that was essentially foreign to him. Further, this program of study would serve as the key to illuminate the study of Western civilization generally.

Christian culture study, then, allowed the student to understand the formative moral and intellectual basis of Western civilization and provided an integrative way of understanding his past.

Before the study of Christian culture could begin, however, the task of overcoming the embedded hostility to the millennium of history between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance had to be overcome. Voltaire's ahistorical assessment of this era, which saw nothing but barbarous stupidity for a thousand years, suggests the enormity of the task. That view, passed down from the Enlightenment, continued to

obscure the authentic culture and accomplishments of the era. If Christian culture was ever to receive the attention it deserved, Dawson argued, that false picture of the Middle Ages, which depicted medieval Christendom as bereft of any significant cultural achievements, had to be dispelled. This was the business of the educators who must “make a positive effort to exorcise the ghost of this ancient error.”¹⁴

Once this was accomplished, the institution of a program of study could be undertaken through the liberal arts college. The great advantage to this approach, Dawson maintained, was the integrating principle of Christianity that ensured an intelligible relation of each part to the others and to the whole. The nationalist approach could never fully explain institutions unique to Christendom, such as monasticism or the papacy; it was only within the framework of Christian culture that they were intelligible.¹⁵

Besides rejecting the strictly nationalist approach to history, America offered another distinct advantage in the implementation of Christian culture studies. While most of the modern world tended toward a uniformity in culture aided by the highly centralized state and a passion for democratic equalitarianism, Americans presented a somewhat different and, Dawson believed, paradoxical picture. On one hand, many embraced the idea of conformity as witnessed by the widespread adoption of Dewey’s educational reforms while, on the other hand, they possessed a unique, even unprecedented opportunity to experience a dynamic and diverse culture. This was made possible not only by the variety of its immigrant peoples but in America’s very origins, with the multiplicity of Native American cultures whose ways of life were dramatically different from those of the European immigrants.¹⁶

This presented a tremendous opportunity for the Catholic scholar who, though he may have been tempted to retreat from the secularism that surrounded him, and focus only on Christian culture, would thereby only fashion “a kind of Christian ghetto.” The real opportunity was to “find new channels of expression in this new world and a new approach to new peoples who do not share the common tradition of the Christian past.” It was not in spite of his commitment to Christian culture, but because of it, that Dawson advocated this openness to the study of other peoples. And yet that interest in and appreciation of other cultures must not come at the expense of Western Christian culture. In an age where universities emphasized the study of non-western peoples and religions, the danger was that the astonishing ignorance of—or indifference to—both Christianity and Christendom would ultimately lead to “a position of cultural inferiority,” and

Christianity would be rejected as hopelessly out of place in the new world of technology.¹⁷ Dawson's concern seems especially relevant as the European Union is being forged without regard to the Christian faith that was Europe's historical underpinning.¹⁸

The emergent technological order in the West was of grave concern to Dawson. Western man, especially in America, enjoyed a level of material wealth unprecedented in human history. He had also unleashed forces that he could not control—a fact to which two world wars bore solemn witness. And yet the vital spiritual resources that gave Western Civilization its purpose were being abandoned for secular ends. Reflecting on the aftermath of World War II, Dawson noted:

After this experience it is impossible for educated man to return to the old rationalist illusions. We must face the fact that the vast expansion of man's external powers by science and technology which are the creation of human reason have done nothing to strengthen the power of reason in the moral order which is its proper domain.¹⁹

The passage is reminiscent of Henry Adams who, throughout *The Education of Henry Adams*, decried the chaos the industrial age ushered in. Material prosperity could not overcome the spiritual vacuum that Western man had created. But Dawson did not embrace the philosophical nihilism of Adams. Adams' Dynamo had indeed come to threaten the life, not only of the West, but of all humanity. Nonetheless, the Church, Dawson believed, demonstrated "an infinite capacity for regeneration."²⁰ He refused to retreat from the secular assault on Christendom or to apologize for the effort to establish Christian culture as the basis for education. Rather, he advocated a positive program of cultural renewal: a *via media* that fully acknowledged the blights on the Christian record while illuminating the cultural significance of the Christian faithful after nearly two thousand years of existence.²¹

"For, after all," Dawson noted, "Christian culture is nothing to be ashamed of. It is no sectarian tradition. It is one of the four great historic civilizations on which the modern world is founded."²²

Notes

1. Daniel Callahan, Dawson's assistant at Harvard, pointed out the illusions Dawson had of his students' preparation and capabilities. See Jeffrey Hart, "Christopher Dawson and the History We Are Not Told," *Modern Age* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 210-211.
2. Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933), xiii, and idem, *Understanding Europe*, Image Books ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 18.
3. Christopher Dawson, *Christianity and the New Age* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931; reprint, Manchester, NH: Sophia, 1985), 15-16.
4. Mather's lament for New England is found in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* published in 1702.
5. Christopher Dawson, "The Study of Christian Culture," *The Catholic World* 182, no. 1095 (June 1956): 198.
6. Christopher Dawson, "Mr. Dawson replies to Fr. Musurillo," *Thought* XXXI, (1956): 159.
7. Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 81.
8. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; Yale Paperbound, 1959), 99.
9. Dawson, *Crisis*, 82-88, 99.
10. Ibid., 126.
11. Dawson discussed this idea in "The Problem of Metahistory," *History Today* 1, (June, 1951).
12. Dawson, *Crisis*, 127-128.
13. John Lukacs, "Christopher Dawson's Historical Philosophy," *Belmont Abbey College Symposium on Christopher Dawson*, 2000.

14. Ibid., 131.

15. Ibid., 142.

16. Ibid., 147.

17. Ibid., 152-153.

18. For a recent analysis of this critical question see George Weigel's *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God*.

19. Ibid., 194.

20. Dawson, *Christianity and the New Age*, 103.

21. Gerald J. Russello "Christopher Dawson," *Commonweal* 123, no.7 (April, 1996):21.

22. Dawson, *Crisis*, 135.