

# **An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's Interpretation of History: Chapter Two—An Age of the Gods**

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## **Chapter 2**

### *An Age of the Gods*



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We now begin to follow the progressive stages of cultural development recognised by Christopher Dawson. The title of this chapter echoes that of Dawson's first major publication, *The Age of the Gods: a Study in the Origins of Culture in Prehistoric Europe and the Ancient East*<sup>1</sup>. The phrase 'Age of the Gods' was used by a pioneer in metahistory, the eccentric genius Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), to describe one of the progressive states passed through by human societies – a phase which is characterised by a preoccupation with the supernatural. Dawson would have appreciated Vico's magnum opus, *Scienza Nuova* (1725) which, critical of the deductive methods fashionable in human inquiry under the influence of Descartes, attempted to model a humanistic approach to history open to the whole range of human experience.

Dawson's first work, as its subtitle indicates, deals for the most part with the findings of archaeology, ethnology and philology which shed light on early developments in Europe and the Middle East. The fruit of fourteen years of intense scholarship, this work shows that Dawson was familiar with the work of leading authorities in these fields and able to write with authority when on occasions he disagrees with their conclusions. Some of the material to be cited from the collection, *Dynamics of World History* (DWH) comes from *The Age of the Gods*. Dawson's views on the nature and development of culture, were further elaborated in his Gifford Lectures of 1947, published under the title *Religion and Culture* (RC), also cited in what follows.

Dawson's approach to historical interpretation was very different from that of the contemporary essays in metahistory of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee<sup>2</sup>. These thinkers made *civilization* the key to an understanding of history. Dawson judged such an approach to be flawed, because it overlooked something more elemental than civilization in the historical process – the complexity and evolution of *cultures* that shape the histories of human communities, including those of civilizations.

Dawson judged Spengler's elaborate theory, which interpreted civilizations as *sui generis* organisms with a predetermined destiny of successive phases, to be at odds with an understanding of the life of civilizations which takes account of their cultural components. 'A culture', Dawson wrote, 'receives its form from a rational and spiritual element which transcends the limits of racial and geographical conditions. Religion and science do not die with the culture of which they formed part. They are handed on from people to people, and assist as a creative force in the formation of new cultural organisms'<sup>3</sup>.

Because Toynbee neglected an adequate cultural analysis, Dawson saw his understanding of civilization as flawed because it failed to recognise that the first civilizations had their origins in the cultures of the so-called 'primitive' societies which preceded them. Dawson criticised Toynbee's failure to take seriously the findings of social anthropology. 'Contemporary anthropologists', Dawson wrote in 1955, 'have accepted the principle of the essentially historical character of social anthropology, and ... it seems reasonable that the historian should pay more attention to the methods and contribution of social anthropologists'<sup>4</sup>. Dawson reacted strongly, therefore, against Toynbee's assumption that 'primitives' and 'sub-humans' can be lumped together as an amorphous prelude to civilizations as 'a sheer misuse of terms': 'Certainly', he wrote, 'the societies of the ape-men must have been primitive, as primitive as can be. But they are not societies in the same sense as the human societies of the prehistoric world, or of the non-civilized today. All of these belong to the same world of history as the higher civilizations. They possess language and culture and religion and art ... The higher forms of Neolithic culture, for example, stood midway between the culture of the hunter and food gatherer and that of the early civilizations, and the lowest form of primitive culture that we know at first hand, such as that of the Australians or the Bushmen, is infinitely removed from the highest forms of sub-human society'. Toynbee, Dawson wrote, 'goes out of his way to reject many of the distinctions commonly made between civilizations and primitive societies ... The only criteria of differentiation that he admits are quantitative ones – the civilizations are much fewer and larger than the primitive cultures, so that (in Toynbee's words) "the two species stand one to another like elephants to rabbits"'. 'But after all', Dawson continued, 'it is not just size and scarcity that distinguishes the elephant from the rabbit'<sup>5</sup>.

What we have just seen provides a good introduction to Dawson's analysis of the way in which the world's first civilizations had their origins in the cultures of the primitive societies that preceded them. As the study we are embarking on will show, because Dawson understood human cultures as the self-expression of our common humanity, he saw the whole span of human history as a continuum in which emerging cultures have their roots in cultures of their past.

Dawson recognised a great variation in the cultures commonly lumped together as 'primitive'. He referred to the existence of 'lost worlds' of human interaction, antedating the data available to contemporary research concerning these cultures. He called 'precultures', the ways of life of people such as 'the prehistoric ancestors of the Negroid and Mongoloid peoples whose cultures were largely shaped by life in a particular environment'. But he saw them as the outcome, nonetheless, of 'human activity and spontaneous cooperation with nature'<sup>6</sup>.

Elsewhere, he makes a distinction that is of some moment – as we shall see in his analysis of the evolution of civilizations through their interaction with their primitive neighbours. Those cultures which he describes as of 'really primitive peoples', who are food gatherers, he

distinguished from the cultures of 'warlike tribes', who are 'advanced and specialized types, even further removed from the really primitive peoples than they are from the civilized'. The former, he said, are predominantly peaceful, whereas the attitude of the latter group gave rise to the stereotype of the 'primitive savage' – because it was with these tribal cultures that civilized peoples have had most contact<sup>7</sup>.

Dawson gave a central place to religion in the dynamics of 'primitive' cultures. His findings are at variance with the interpretation of religion given by James Frazer in his monumental study, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). In the outlook of primitives, Dawson found, religious attitudes concern *concrete* objects: 'the powers that manifest themselves in nature ... gods, and things and events'<sup>8</sup>. Dawson criticised Frazer's interpretation, which he saw as attributing to primitives an *abstract* notion of 'nature' which does not belong to their outlook: 'The existing evidence suggests that the primitive, even when concerned with a utilitarian object like rain-making, is as remote from scientific positivism as the tribal seer 'to whom he is closely related sociologically ... The religious magic of the primitive hunter is not a technique for control of subhuman nature, but a means of communion with divine powers'<sup>9</sup>.

To the primitive, Dawson wrote in another place, 'agriculture was one of the supreme mysteries of life, and he surrounded it with religious rites because he believed that the fertility of the soil and the mystery of generation could only be ensured through the co-operation of higher powers. Primitive agriculture was in fact a kind of liturgy ... Primitive man had already found the Transcendent immanent in and working through nature'; he 'saw the spiritual world diffused and confused with the world of matter'<sup>10</sup>. In another place, Dawson wrote: 'There is reason to suppose that the veneration of the Mother Goddess as the principle of fertility goes back to Palaeolithic times, and thus far antedates the origins of agriculture'<sup>11</sup>.

It is in the religious concerns and practices of primitive cultures that Dawson found the antecedents of the cultural developments that were characteristic of the cultures of the first civilizations. Primitive cultures 'first attained a conception of the order of nature', not by rational observation but through the 'initiations' they prized so highly. 'Knowledge was the greatest and most perilous gift of the gods', Dawson wrote, 'and nothing is more common in primitive myth and saga than the figure of the hero or the wise man who traverses the dangerous path between the two worlds and who by some heroic labour or sacrifice wrests from the gods the secret on which the welfare of mankind depends ... Everywhere the knowledge which is regarded as indispensable for dealing with the vital affairs of life – for salvation in a pragmatic sense – is communicated by religious or magical rites accompanied by mythological and symbolic representations'<sup>12</sup>.

Though the modern mind, Dawson recognised, must judge this knowledge to be of no 'objective value', and 'it may be false, superstitious and absurd', in his judgment 'its cultural significance is of the highest importance, since it is the source and archetype of the tradition of higher knowledge out of which theology, philosophy and science developed in the course of the archaic culture' that was to emerge<sup>13</sup>.

Dawson identified a complex of cultural institutions and practices as constituting the primitive antecedent for what was to unfold in the later stages of the culture of humanity: 'In every culture and in every religion from the lowest to the highest we find these elements simultaneously present and organically related to one another. In the first place there is the *religious rite* itself ... in the second place there is the *myth* which validates the ceremony by

relating it to some religious belief and tradition; and finally there is the *supernatural power or blessing* which is the end of sacred action'<sup>14</sup>.

As we shall see in the next section, dealing with the life of archaic civilizations, this complex tradition of religious life is to be found in the cultures that succeeded that of the primitive. It was to become more highly organised and institutionalised – the responsibility of a 'spiritual class' that 'forms and is formed by the sacred tradition that binds the whole culture together'<sup>15</sup>. These specialized religious classes differ from culture to culture, Dawson observed, 'but everywhere we find the same social types recurring to such an extent that it is possible to reduce their multiplicity to a few primary archetypes ... There is first the *Priest* ... set apart to perform the rites and ceremonies ... which form the essential bond between the society and its gods ... Secondly, there is the *King* or *lawgiver*, who is regarded as the personal representative or embodiment of divine power. And finally, there is the *Prophet* or *Seer* ...mouthpiece of the divine will, and the interpreter of dreams and oracles and the revealer of sacred mysteries'<sup>16</sup>.

At first the role of the *Seer* – articulating religious truth – was the most fundamental of these roles. Dawson observed that as, in more developed cultures, the three roles were institutionalised, the unpredictable and uncertain nature of this role led to its being 'counterbalanced by that of *Priesthood*, which normally acts as the authoritative, regulating principle in religion and the institutional bond between religion and culture'<sup>17</sup>.

Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* has similarities with the work of Christopher Dawson. Recognising that an adequate interpretation of history must look beyond the national state, in the volumes Toynbee completed prior to the Second World War he studied the rise and fall of civilizations. The volumes written after the interruption of the war had a new orientation, interpreting the histories of civilization as a prelude to the ultimate establishing of a single World Religion. As we have seen already, Dawson's basic criticism was that Toynbee failed to appreciate the fact that *culture* is the primordial element in historical development – more fundamental than civilization itself. He found the early volumes to be lacking any rationale for a comparative study of the achievement of civilizations. In the later volumes, Dawson commented, Toynbee recognised the cyclic movements by which civilizations rise and fall are not the whole of history, that history is 'progressive and purposeful – a process of spiritual evolution'. Dawson judged, however, that Toynbee was not convincing in the interpretation he gave of 'Religion' as goal of historical development<sup>18</sup>.



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Dawson has no quarrel with the idea that history has a unity 'in the existence of some common standard by which the achievements and failure of different civilizations can be judged', and he was of the opinion that contemporary historians 'still believe in the unity of history and are unanimous in their rejection of a thoroughgoing historical relativism'<sup>19</sup>. What then was history's unifying principle for Dawson?

As we have already seen, Dawson does have such a normative and unifying principle – his *personalism*, his interpretation of cultural and historical developments as expressions of the

innate potentialities of our common humanity; and for him it is this principle that gives a unity to the ongoing movement of history.

Dawson defined civilization as ‘essentially a cooperation of regional societies under a common spiritual tradition’<sup>20</sup>. Dawson explained that he did not understand ‘spiritual’ to imply the influence of *religion* in the ordinary sense of the term. For him, the Hellenistic world and contemporary Western civilization constitute genuine spiritual entities. This common spiritual tradition, as Dawson observed many times in his writings, gives rise to a shared ‘vision of Reality’. ‘The great stages of world culture’, Dawson wrote, ‘are linked with changes in man’s vision of Reality’<sup>21</sup>.

These deceptively simple words of Dawson prompt a comment, comparing Dawson’s work with that of Eric Voegelin in his series, *Order in History*. These thinkers are in substantial agreement in their interpretation of the evolution of human history. Voegelin’s analysis, however, takes up and discusses the philosophical issues involved in his interpretation. It is exceptional for Dawson to discuss philosophical issues; guided by a keen intelligence he formulates his interpretation in straightforward language that is remarkable for its precision. Thus Dawson speaks of ‘changes in man’s vision of reality’; Voegelin refers to the same development as progressive ‘differentiations of consciousness in its representation of truth’<sup>22</sup>. As has been pointed out, the present study aims to provide a text for undergraduates and the thinking public. Dawson’s self-expression is admirably suited to this end.

Underneath their profound differences Dawson saw a real commonality between the vision of Reality of primitive cultures and that of the more developed cultures of the first, or ‘archaic’, civilizations. As we have seen, in Dawson’s reading of archaeological and anthropological evidence, primitive cultures had already found the Transcendent ‘immanent in and working through’ nature. But the outlook of food gatherers and hunting cultures ‘does not necessarily imply reasonable purpose or any reflective vision of Reality’ such as was to characterise civilized cultures. ‘The dawn of civilization’, Dawson wrote, ‘came only with the discovery of natural laws, or rather of the possibility of man’s fruitful cooperation with the powers of nature’<sup>23</sup>.

This transition, which was to prove of momentous consequence in the history of humanity, took place in the course of a long period of which we have little detailed knowledge: ‘We still know too little’, Dawson wrote, ‘of the great revolutionary change in human life which occurred in Western Asia and Egypt from the sixth to the fourth millennium BC on which all the subsequent achievements of the higher culture are based’<sup>24</sup>.

We have some knowledge of the outlook of the culture of primitives, which ‘saw the world as a living world of mysterious forces ... in the placating and service of which the culture’s life consisted’<sup>25</sup>. Because they left abundant evidence, including written records, we have a clear understanding of the archaic civilizations that were to emerge; and we can recognise evidence that these developments had antecedents in primitive cultures. But we have no detailed knowledge of the process that produced these developments. That this transition was extremely gradual is evident in Dawson’s finding: ‘It is impossible for us to draw a line between religion and magic, between law and morals, so intimately is the whole life of a primitive people bound up with its religion. And the same is true of the earliest civilization’<sup>26</sup>. ‘Civilization did not create the religious attitudes or the essential nature of the religious experience’, Dawson wrote in another place, ‘but gave them new modes of expression and a new intellectual interpretation’<sup>27</sup>.

As we have seen already, primitive cultures saw knowledge that made it possible to come to terms with the mysterious forces surrounding them as a precious gift, and the tribal lore through which this knowledge came to be preserved and shared became the archetype of the traditions of higher knowledge that came to shape the vision of Reality of more developed cultures.

In the cultures of archaic civilizations, Dawson wrote, a 'spiritual elite formed and was formed by a sacred tradition embodied in a sacred literature, a sacred philosophy and a sacred code of ritual ceremony', as the tradition united the culture and gave it its distinctive character<sup>28</sup>. Dawson saw in this development of an organised elite the origins of priesthood, an institution 'of immense importance as a culture building institution; for in ancient times it was the only institution which was culturally self-conscious and possessed the power to control the whole social way of life and guide it towards an ultimate spiritual aim'<sup>29</sup>. 'The existence of a class of this kind is closely bound up with the origins of civilization', Dawson wrote, 'the same development is to be found in every centre of archaic culture in both the Old and New Worlds, from Egypt to Yucatan (in central America)... this sacerdotal type of culture must be regarded as the central tradition of world civilization on which all existing forms of higher culture depend or from which they derive'. Dawson noted that, in this development, some degree of cross-fertilization has taken place in the Near East, as the earliest centres of civilization there were 'in contact with one another from prehistoric times'; but, in addition to the cultures of the New World in central America, he noted 'a contemporary centre of archaic culture in the Indus valley, the existence of which has only recently been discovered'<sup>30</sup>. Since Dawson wrote the great temple complexes of South East Asia have been much publicised.

Dawson concluded that 'the essential feature of the archaic civilization is the existence of a learned priesthood whose prominence gave the whole culture a markedly theocratic character'. 'In most cases', he continued, 'the society found its centre in a sacred city and the city temple, the god of which was the ruler and owner of the land ... The rise of wealthy and learned temple corporations which possessed archives and schools and all the apparatus of scholarship was of decisive importance for the history of culture, since it opened the way to the systematic accumulation of knowledge and the cultivation of science and literature'<sup>31</sup>.

The theocratic order of these cultures – like those of their primitive antecedents – was related to the mystery of fertility. 'Men did not learn to control the forces of nature to make the earth fruitful, and to raise flocks and herds as a practical task of economic organisation in which they relied on their own enterprise and hard work' as the modern observer will tend to assume, Dawson wrote – 'They viewed it rather as a religious rite by which they cooperated, as priests or hierophants, in the great cosmic mystery of the fertilization and growth of nature. The mystical drama annually renewed, of the Mother-Goddess and her dying and reviving son and spouse, was, at the same time, the economic cycle of ploughing and seed time and harvest by which the people lived'. Dawson found that, in the fertility rituals, 'the mimicry of nature was carried to very great lengths', making it 'possible that agriculture and the domestication of animals ... had their origins in ritual observation and imitation of the processes of nature which is so characteristic of this type of religion'<sup>32</sup>.

'In Babylonia at the very dawn of history in the fourth millennium BC,' Dawson wrote, there 'had already developed a highly specialised theology and temple ritual'. The outlook shaped by this religion was totally theocratic: 'The god and goddess were the acknowledged rulers of

their city ... The temple, the house of the god, was the centre of the life of the community, for the god was the chief landowner, trader and banker, and kept a great staff of servants and administrators'. 'And the remains of the ancient literature that have come down to us', Dawson added, 'prove that this is not merely the phraseology of the State religion; it represents a profound belief in the interdependence and communion of the city and its divinity'. Dawson cites Egypt as an outstanding example of the theocratic culture, where 'the whole vast bureaucratic and economic organisation of the empire was directed to a single end, the glorification of the Sun-God and his child the God-king'<sup>33</sup>. In another place, Dawson observed that in the cultures of this type 'the material and spiritual factors interpenetrate one another so completely that they form an inseparable unity, so that religion and life have become one'<sup>34</sup>.

This 'inseparable unity' of religion and life characterising the cultures of archaic civilizations disappeared, as we shall see, in the evolution of later civilized cultures. 'In the majority of cases', Dawson wrote, 'a culture represents a fusion of a number of different elements, and the history of world civilizations is a process of diffusion and cross-fertilization'<sup>35</sup>. Writing elsewhere, Dawson judged that the unitarian culture of the first civilizations has not been seen in history for thousands of years, 'perhaps not since the earliest kingdoms of Egypt' – though he sees the culture of China as an interesting exception<sup>36</sup>; and he notes that such cultures are to be found among the more highly developed pre-civilization cultures, for example the Pueblo culture of New Mexico<sup>37</sup>. The civilization of China will be discussed in another place in our study.

Dawson judged that the *extended cooperation* that was the defining feature of the first civilizations was associated with the developing of a political unity under the leadership of 'the figure of the Sacred King'. 'It is clear', he wrote, that a 'concentration of religious and social power was directly connected with the revolutionary changes in man's way of life represented by the rise of the archaic cultures'<sup>38</sup>.

The role of the king in these civilizations was defined by the religious outlook of the culture. If 'the god and the goddess were the acknowledged rulers of their city, the king was but their high priest and steward'<sup>39</sup>. Discussing the evolution of political leadership, Dawson pointed to the antecedents of primitive cultures. He found no evidence for the idea 'that primitive society was ruled despotically by the power of the Stronger – an idea which appears in medieval literature and still lingers in the Freudian theory of the primitive ape-like human horde'. 'It seems', he wrote, 'that the simplest and the most primitive type of society, such as we see in the Arctic, in Australia and among the Pigmies and the Bushmen, are democratic or gerontocratic, while the absolute power of the warrior chieftain, which made such a deep impression on European travellers... was the product of a relatively advanced type of social organisation'<sup>40</sup>.

It is not surprising that social leadership was associated by primitive cultures with their religious outlook. A preoccupation with blood and lineage and a belief in the divine origin of kings, Dawson pointed out, 'is almost universal among peoples who have advanced beyond the most primitive stages of culture'. 'We find it', he continued, 'among the Polynesians and the Melanesians, among the Indians and the Greeks, among our own Celtic and Teutonic ancestors and among the Egyptians and other peoples of the ancient East. It is often associated with a legend of cultural origins, so that divine kings are also heroes and cultural bearers, who come from some divine homeland'<sup>41</sup>. While he recognised that cultural diffusion may have had some part in this, he points to independent developments of a similar

kind, for example in ‘the legend of the foundation of the Inca monarchy in Peru, and the foundation of the Bahima monarchies in Central Africa’<sup>42</sup>.

No doubt, the origins of political leadership were associated with the recognition of leadership qualities, in the context of the religious outlook. ‘The idea that what we call “the gift of leadership” was a supernatural quality of origin akin to the gift of prophecy or divination’, Dawson wrote, ‘is a very primitive one ... it is in this sense of the daemonic that we find the psychological root of King worship and of the Divine Kingship’<sup>43</sup>. ‘Primitive man’, Dawson continued, recognises an ‘inexplicably overpowering quality ... in heroism and in wise counsel, and where he finds it he recognises it as divine. It is the *mana* of the chief, to use the Polynesian term, which contains something of the sense of grace, and good fortune and supernatural power’<sup>44</sup>. This idea was associated with a preoccupation with ancestry and lineage: ‘It is not enough for the Polynesian chief to possess personal prowess and prestige’, Dawson wrote, ‘he must inherit his sacred authority from sacred ancestors’<sup>45</sup>.

The archaic civilized cultures saw their kings as stewards of the gods, initiating a tradition that was to have great moment in later understandings of social order. Dawson’s apparently simple observation that, ‘From the beginning of history the king has been distinguished from the tyrant’<sup>46</sup> invites us to reflect further upon the implications of what we have called his ‘personalism’. The ruler must serve, not the dictates of expediency or de facto power, but the interests of *justice*. The traditions of later civilizations have wrestled and continue to wrestle with the implications of this great principle, so fundamental to our shared life as human persons. More than one of these traditions, as we shall see, ground their understanding in the relationship of our shared human life with the Transcendent. Dawson’s personalism saw a real continuity in the evolution of cultures. As we have seen, he interpreted the religious outlook of primitive culture and of the archaic civilizations that succeeded them as a naïve openness to the Transcendent. Their symbolic and mythological understanding of the divine powers upon which they depended, however, did not come to a reflective awareness. Their Gods were regarded, Dawson wrote, ‘as ruling over them and intervening in human affairs, but they did not seem to belong to a different order of reality from that of nature’<sup>47</sup>. Dawson would see what was to develop in later cultures as having its origin in this naïve awareness. In another place, he wrote that ‘throughout the history of Western culture from classical antiquity through the Christian Middle Ages down to modern liberal and humanist civilization, we find a consistent development of the concept of law as something which transcends political expediency and human will, and is grounded in external reality’. And his work as a historian had convinced him, he continued, that ‘this conception is not peculiar to a single historical tradition of thought and culture. It is to be found in all cultures and systems of thought’<sup>48</sup>.

The intense regional cooperation of the archaic civilizations of the Middle East brought material prosperity and security that gave rise to an increased population. These civilized cultures reached their full development in the third millennium BC, as their highly organised theocratic way of life gave expression to human resourcefulness. ‘In many respects’, Dawson wrote, ‘the general level of material culture stood higher in that age than any subsequent period. All the great achievements on which the life of civilization rests had been reached, and there was no important addition to its material equipment until the rise of the great scientific and industrial movement in Western Europe in modern times’<sup>49</sup>. He went on to give an impressive list of these inventions: agriculture and the domestication of animals, the plough, the wheeled vehicle, irrigation and the construction of canals, the working of metals, stone architecture, navigation and sailing ships, writing and the calendar, the city state

and the institution of kingship, which had all been achieved by the fourth millennium BC. And by the third millennium they had highly organised bureaucratic states, written codes of law, well development commerce and industry and the beginnings of astronomy and mathematics.

It comes as a surprise, Dawson continued, to find that ‘the creative power of the archaic civilization deserted it when it was almost in its prime’. While he acknowledged that this development had complex causes, he attributed it in the main to two factors – above all, ‘the rigidity which seems to characterise a form of culture that has attained a complete equilibrium with its environment’; but it was also associated with ‘the rise of a new type of warlike society’ at the end of the Neolithic age, when far-reaching movements of peoples and warlike invasions broke down the frontiers of the old culture-provinces’<sup>50</sup>. As we shall see, Dawson was of the opinion that this second factor is of great significance in the ongoing development of later civilizations.

Dawson’s comments on the cultural implications of this waning of concern for material development are interesting when they are related to his personalist interpretation of history, linking cultural development with the dynamic potentialities of the human person. When the theocratic culture of the first civilizations began to decline, by the second half of the third millennium BC, Dawson wrote, their material success had ‘made man less dependent on the forces of nature’, and at the same time ‘brought him face to face with a new series of problems – moral and intellectual – which appear in striking form in the early Egyptian literature of the Middle Kingdom’. He gives several examples of this literature which ‘bear witness to a profound criticism of life, and an intense spiritual ferment’. One of these is the so-called *Dialogue of One Weary of Life*. ‘At the same period in Babylonia’, Dawson wrote, ‘we find a similar attitude expressed in the poem of the Righteous Sufferer, the so called Babylonian Job’. He went on to comment, ‘Man no longer accepted the world and the state as they were, as manifestations of the divine powers. They compared the world they knew with the social and moral order that they believed in, and condemned the former. Consequently, for the first time we get a sense of dualism, between what is and what ought to be, between the way of man and the way of the gods’<sup>51</sup>.

Here we meet for the first time the ‘dualism’ that Dawson will often refer to as a source of change and creativity in human cultures – the dialectic which is set up when a culture brings together two strains that are in tension with one another.

Dawson associated this unrest in the final period of archaic civilization with a new political awareness, the emergence of ‘kings of a new type’. ‘We are conscious’ he wrote, ‘of a clear realization of human, personal power and responsibility, and at the same time of a profound disillusionment’<sup>52</sup>.

Thus we come to the emergence of what Dawson considers a new order of ‘transitional’ civilizations. Today we take for granted, Dawson has pointed out, the ‘great distinction between the age-long racial and spiritual communion which is a civilization, and the association for practical ends which is an actual political society’. ‘Not for thousands of years’, he added, ‘perhaps since the earliest kingdom of Egypt ... have the two coincided’<sup>53</sup>.

All subsequent civilizations are animated, not by a unitarian culture such as characterised the archaic civilizations, but by cultures in which different traditions are in interaction and creative tension. In his interpretation of later civilizations, therefore, Dawson applies his

basic insight, that the elementary matrix of the historical process is not the civilization but the cultural components which animate it. ‘The higher civilizations’, he wrote in his critique of Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, ‘usually represent a fusion of at least two independent traditions of culture ... Hence I do not believe it is possible to study the higher civilizations satisfactorily until we have succeeded in analysing their different cultural components’<sup>54</sup>.

The ancient world at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, in the era of the archaic civilizations, was described by Dawson as having a number of ‘culture-provinces’ – in particular, that of Egypt, that around the Aegean Sea, and that in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In the present chapter, as we follow the developments that led to the origins of our own Western civilization, we shall be concerned with development in the Aegean region and on the Italian peninsula. Thus we shall discuss: 1) The interaction between archaic and nomadic warrior cultures that led to the emergence of a new phase in the development of civilizations; 2) the cultural processes that produced the classical Greco-Roman civilization.

‘There is abundant evidence’, Dawson wrote, ‘to prove that no type of social change is more common, or more profound in its effect on culture, than the reaction of an urban or peasant culture of the archaic type against the warrior culture that has subjected it’<sup>55</sup>.

Dawson described the development of more advanced primitive societies on the periphery of the prosperous communities of the first civilizations. Hunter-gatherers, he noted, inevitably acquired some elements of the higher culture from their more civilized neighbours. The domestication of animals, hand in hand with agricultural methods, was probably, in Dawson’s judgment, the invention of the higher settled cultures. ‘But it was an invention’, he added, ‘which in the nature of things spread quickly and widely ... Thus there grew up a new type of society – that of the nomadic tribe – based on a combination of the life of the hunter and that of the shepherd’. The result was that there was found ‘around every centre of higher civilization a zone of lower culture to some extent dependent or parasitic upon its civilized neighbours, while at the same time possessing a higher degree of mobility and a greater aptitude for war’<sup>56</sup>.

In every respect, Dawson observed, there was a great contrast between the two cultures juxtaposed by these developments – which took place in many different regions, such as Mesopotamia, Central Asia and East Asia . In their social organisation, the sedentary agricultural societies had a fixed territorial arrangement, and they carried forward their common project in a routine of custom and labour. For the pastoral people, on the other hand, property was important – wealth in flocks and herds becoming an ever varying factor in their lives, bringing inequalities and rivalries. While the agricultural communities were typically matrilineal in their organisation, the pastoral tribe was patrilineal and aristocratic, with the masculine element everywhere predominant – as flocks were defended against wild beasts and the raids of other nomads, and the choice of new pastures and the conduct of tribal forays called for strong leadership and decisiveness<sup>57</sup>.

This contrast found its deepest expression in their religions. ‘Both of them’, Dawson wrote, ‘are Nature Religions, having their origin in the vague undifferentiated religion of primitive peoples ... but each has concentrated its worship in a different aspect of nature. The religion of the peasant is concerned above all with the mystery of life ... embodied in the Earth Mother and the Vegetation God who was her consort or son. The religion of the shepherd, on

the other hand, is concerned not so much with the Earth as with the Heavens, and it is the powers of Heaven – the Sky, the Sun and the Storm – that take first place in his worship’<sup>58</sup>.

The Sky Gods of warrior peoples, Dawson noted, were ‘incalculable and formidable powers ... after the image of their own chieftains ... the guardians of the masculine tribal morality – righteous gods who hate lies and uncleanness and disobedience’. It was these pastoral peoples, Dawson continued, who developed high concepts of the divinity; their intellectual and moral development was far more advanced than one would expect from their material condition; freed from the grinding necessity of continual labour, their way of life stimulated the activity of mind and body – so that the Highland shepherd was often of higher spiritual culture than the wealthy farmer or trader of the plains. ‘Even in primitive tribes’, Dawson continued, ‘poetry and reflection on the problems of existence have been common features among pastoral peoples of a comparatively rudimentary culture’<sup>59</sup>. The great sagas of the Celts and the Nordic peoples come from this same ethos.

In an aside, in the course of the comparison we have just summarised, Dawson observed that ‘pastoral society produces types like Abraham, men rich in flocks and herds, with many wives and children, wise in counsel and resolute in war’. And he concluded, ‘the Jewish people could never have developed their ethical and monotheistic religion amidst the idolatrous and voluptuous cults of the agricultural people of Syria had it not been for their pastoral and tribal tradition, and it was to the desert that the prophets and reformers turned for inspiration, in the great crises of nation history’<sup>60</sup>.

The analysis of the two cultures made by Dawson makes it clear that conflict was to be expected. ‘It is clear’, Dawson wrote, ‘that the existence of these pastoral societies, with their intensely masculine and warlike ethos, their mobility, and the high degree of physical efficiency which their wandering life entailed, was a potential danger to the civilizations of settled agriculturalists’. In Dawson’s judgment it is probable, however, that it was the civilized peoples who were the first aggressors and that it was from them that the barbarians first learnt the possibilities of organised warfare and the use of weapons of metal<sup>61</sup>.

Once conflict began, Dawson observed, ‘the ultimate advantage was all on the side of the barbarians, for every fresh invasion increased their warlike efficiency, whereas the destructive effects of warfare on the higher civilization were cumulative’. The culture of the agricultural societies was essentially unwarlike. Their settlements were typically open, and in their social organisation they had no military caste, forming a population that gave unquestioning loyalty and submission to a small ruling class<sup>62</sup>.



Image Source:  
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

In another place, Dawson describes archaeological evidence of the contrast of the two cultures. In their graves, the kings of Mycenae – a society which had been reshaped by the incursions of warlike tribal invaders – lay in their graves ‘with their long swords by their sides and their gold death-masks on their faces – grim bearded faces of warrior kings’. They were a complete contrast, Dawson observed, to ‘the effeminate beauty of the Priest King of

(Minoan) Crete, who stands unarmed, almost naked among the flowers, in a great painted relief of the Palace of Cnossus', the ruler of one of the most remarkable archaic cultures of the ancient world<sup>63</sup>.

This aggression on the part of nomadic tribes – especially the Indo-European invaders (cf. DWH 143-47) – may have been due in part to natural causes, such as the growing aridity of Central Asia. It was greatly facilitated by the use of horses, a development that revolutionised the art of warfare in the second millennium BC<sup>64</sup>. The expansion of these Indo-European Aryans was swift, leading to a rapid diffusion over the vast continental region between Northern Europe and India, which is made clear by 'the remarkably homogeneous character of their languages' in this great region. The influence of these dramatic invasions was not, Dawson continued, wholly destructive: 'It was far less so than that of the later Turkish and Mongol conquerors'. These people possessed, he continued, 'a natural aptitude for assimilating the higher culture of the peoples they conquered', so that 'the vigorous life of the warrior tribes fertilised the ancient civilizations and gave birth in time to a new and brilliant development of culture'<sup>65</sup>. The Mediterranean region was also affected, in this period, by a movement of invasions that came from the West – not from land but from the sea<sup>66</sup>.

Once the warrior invaders had established their rule, the interaction of archaic and warrior culture did not involve open conflict, Dawson wrote, but entailed 'a gradual and almost unconscious adjustment and symbiosis of the different ways of life ... out of which after centuries a new integration of cultures emerged'. Dawson judged that 'the great ages of cultural achievement represent, as a rule, the culmination of some such process of spiritual fusion, and it is in the sphere of religion that the new synthesis finds its characteristic expression'<sup>67</sup>.

During the second millennium BC, through the interaction of archaic and warrior cultures, Dawson wrote, 'the peaceful Aegean culture' of which Minoan Crete was a splendid example, gave way to 'the chivalrous but semi-barbaric world of the Homeric epics'<sup>68</sup>. The interaction of the two cultural traditions which we have described had a variety of outcomes. In some societies, the warlike attitude almost submerged the values of the old civilization. Dawson described the outcome of this process in different regions: 'In Asia, the Assyrian Empire represents the complete militarisation of the archaic Sacred Monarchy, while in Europe the union of the sacred city and the warrior tribe gave birth to the new city state of ancient times'<sup>69</sup>. This process was gradual however. Though the Homeric poems as we know them date from a much later period, Dawson judged that they reflect the culture of the Aegean region before a further wave of invasions by the Dorians, at the end of the second millennium BC. Though this 'Heroic Age' portrayed by the Homeric poems still maintained something of the ethos of the old civilizations, it was predominantly warlike; and in Dawson's judgment it could only shape 'a transitional type of society which prepared the way for a new age'<sup>70</sup>.

The end of the second millennium BC saw fresh waves of invaders from the north. In the midst of great turmoil however, Dawson wrote, 'The Aegean world was only saved from complete barbarisation by the survival of the old culture on the coast of Asia Minor, in Aeolia, and above all in Ionia, where the Asiatic element in Greek culture was strong'. 'It was in the coasts and islands of Asia Minor', Dawson wrote, 'that the Hellenistic civilization of classical times had its origins, gradually returning westward to European Greece, with the revival of trade and economic prosperity, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC'. And he concluded,

‘Thus the rise of classical civilization was to a great extent the renaissance of the old Aegean culture’<sup>71</sup>.

If the classical Hellenistic culture was to prove, in the end, another transitional stage in human history, its many achievements were unprecedented. Those in literature, art and philosophy are well known. Dawson underlined the originality of the city state of classical Greece: ‘If the Greek city was ancient and oriental’ by reason of its antecedents in the archaic civilizations, ‘Greek citizenship was new and European. The city state, the greatest and most original creation of the Greek genius, owes its existence to the marriage of the oriental sacred city with the Indo-European warrior tribe’. In Dawson’s judgment, ‘the greatest achievements of both Greece and Rome were made when the tribal spirit was yet strong ... there came into (the cultural tradition of the Mediterranean world) a new leaven, the tribal society from the north, and the consequent process of fermentation resulted in the production of the classical culture of the ancient world, and the rise of a true European civilization’<sup>72</sup>.

The immense influence of the Roman Empire in this world, we know, helped shape later developments of European civilization. Dawson interpreted the origins of Roman culture as a straightforward example of interaction between the two types of cultural tradition we have been considering: ‘The Roman state and its culture were due’, he wrote, ‘to the fusion of two distinct elements – the Etruscan city state and the Italic peasant community. As in the Aegean, the union of the oriental city with the tribal society of Bronze Age Europe gave birth to a new type of civilization’<sup>73</sup>.

The situation on the Italian peninsula was very similar to that of the Aegean region. The archaic civilization of the Etruscans – which was probably influenced to some extent by developments in the Aegean region – was well established in the first half of the first millennium BC. Pressure from Greek incursions had inspired a territorial expansion that incorporated Rome – a small conglomerate of villages – into their territory, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. But the Greek incursions and the resistance of native tribes turned the tide against the Etruscans. By the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century they had lost control of Rome and Roman power gradually incorporated much of the territory in which the Etruscan civilization had been established. In the interaction between the two cultures, Dawson pointed out, Rome acquired from the old culture many of the things we have come to take for granted as characteristic of ancient Rome: the city with its institutions, such as magistracy and its insignia, the purple toga and the rods and axes of the lictors, triumphal processions and public games; and in the sphere of religion and art, they inherited religious ritual and the plan of temples. They were indebted to the Etruscans for their knowledge of the alphabet and the art of writing, ‘the most decisive mark’, Dawson commented, ‘of the attainment of true civilization’<sup>74</sup>.

In both Greece and Italy, Dawson wrote, ‘we can trace the conflict between the relatively advanced city culture and a simple tribal culture, out of which there arose a new type of society unlike anything that had existed before’. He went on to emphasise that these developments – which owed so much to European tribal culture - would not have occurred except for the tradition inherited from the archaic cultures of Bronze Age Western Asia and the Aegean region, through the Greeks and the Etruscans. The culture that emerged, however, had a relatively short life: ‘This new Iron Age type of culture’ Dawson wrote, ‘did not possess the stability which is so impressive a feature of the archaic culture as we see it in Egypt and Babylonia – perhaps because it was a hybrid form which failed to achieve internal equilibrium, or because the predominance of the military element produced a premature

exhaustion of the class of citizen soldiers which was the foundation of this type of society ... the Greek city and the Latin peasant republic, in spite of their immense achievements, experienced an almost equally rapid decline'<sup>75</sup>.

Dawson's reference to the 'internal equilibrium' which is called for in a healthy culture reminds us of his understanding of a human culture as an organic unity which effectively meets the manifold needs of the people sharing in the common life it provides. In the light of subsequent developments, Dawson judged that these 'new cultures represent an intermediate transitional stage between more permanent forms of religion-cultures – between the Archaic Civilization of the Ancient East, and the new World-Religions which were already coming into existence during this period'<sup>76</sup>.

In another place, Dawson discusses more fully the implications of his comment concerning the weakness in the Greco-Roman culture which was due to its having failed to achieve an 'internal equilibrium'. Recalling his admiration for the work of Le Play – analysing 'the ultimate human and natural bases of a society in the life of a region' – he wrote, 'every society has two kinds of roots in place and time – in the natural life of the region, and in the tradition of the culture'. Dawson was convinced that a culture will only maintain its vitality if it maintains contact with these sources of its life'<sup>77</sup>.

Dawson judged that the culture of Hellenism 'withered from within' because it had lost contact with its true sources of life: 'In the age of Pericles', he wrote, 'man seemed at last to have come of age and to have entered into his inheritance. Art, Science and Democracy were all coming to a magnificent flowering in a hundred free cities ... Yet at the very moment when the whole Mediterranean world was ready to embrace the new knowledge and ... ideals ... when barbarians everywhere were turning to the Hellenic cities as the centre of power and light, all this promise was blighted. Hellenism withered from within'. The decline was not due, Dawson wrote, to the external causes that have been suggested – war, malaria, or the degradation of the soil – though these factors may have contributed. He rejected Gilbert Murray's suggestion that it was due to a 'loss of nerve' within the religious tradition. 'We see', Dawson wrote, 'the gradual disappearance of those vital characteristic types in which the spirit of the culture had embodied itself, the passing away of traditional institutions and the fading of the vivid and highly differentiated life of the regional city-states, into a formless, cosmopolitan society, with no roots in the past and no contact with a particular region'<sup>78</sup>.

Dawson noted that developments of this kind in other civilizations that have neglected the roots of their traditional way of life have often been associated with a 'premature concentration on power and wealth, so that their temporary conquest of the world is paid for by the degradation and perhaps the destruction of their own social organs'. 'The most striking instance of this morbid and catastrophic decline', Dawson wrote, 'is that of ancient Rome in the first and second centuries BC. Here there is no question of senescence ... The danger to civilization came, not from the decline of vitality, but from the sudden change of (social) conditions – a material revolution, which broke down the organic constitution of society'<sup>79</sup>.

Rome, Dawson explained, was essentially an agrarian state. Peasants, who were also soldiers and citizens, and brought with them the values and loyalties of their agrarian culture, were the backbone of the Roman state. Spread throughout central region of the Italian peninsula, they 'gave Roman power a broader base than any other ancient state possessed, and differentiated profoundly the Roman legion from the mercenary armies of the Hellenistic states'.

This peasant culture gave Rome's republican era its admirable characteristics. But with Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean region all this was changed. In the end, Dawson wrote, 'the fundamental peasant-soldier-citizen gave place – as farmer to the slave – as soldier to the professional (warrior) – as citizen to a vast urban proletariat living on government doles and the bribes of politicians. So too, the noble began to give place to the millionaire, and the magistrate to the military adventurer. Rome became more and more a predatory state that lived by war and plunder, and exhausted her own strength with that of the victims',<sup>80</sup>.

Reformers such as the Elder Cato, tried vainly to revive the old values; the genius and persistence of Augustus slowed the process; but he too failed. 'For it was literally Rome that killed Rome', Dawson wrote, 'The great cosmopolitan city ... had nothing in common with the old capital of the rural Latin state. It served no social function, it was an end in itself, and its population drawn from every nation under heaven existed mainly to draw their government dole, and to attend the free spectacles with which the government provided them. It was a vast, useless burden on the back of the empire which broke at last under the increasing strain',<sup>81</sup>.

Throughout this period, however, as Dawson observed, 'the intellectual achievements of the Hellenic civilization remained, and Greek culture in an abstract and standardised form was spreading East and West far more than it had done in the days of its living strength',<sup>82</sup>. This relative independence of the 'spiritual' elements of a culture, as Dawson called them, reminds us of Dawson's ever present assumption that all cultures have a basic human communality.

As he made the analysis we have been recalling, Dawson was aware that it had implications for those who seek to understand the vicissitudes of our Western civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Age of the Gods* (London: John Murray, 1928).

<sup>2</sup> Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (German ed. 1918), and Toynbee's 10 volume *A Study of History* (1934-54) were metahistorical essays centred in the life trajectories of civilizations. Dawson made detailed assessments of each of these works in articles included in *Dynamics of World History*, an anthology edited by John J. Mulloy (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. J. Molloy (London: Sheed & Ward, 1957), 388; hereafter DWH.

<sup>5</sup> DWH 401-03, citing the writings of the distinguished Oxford anthropologist, E. E. Evans-Pritchard.

<sup>6</sup> DWH 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> DWH 131. Dawson's comments in this context are of interest of Australian readers seeking to understand the attitudes of our aboriginal peoples at the time of white settlement: 'War is not a paying proposition for most primitive peoples, since it can yield no booty – for hunters and food gatherers possess no stored up wealth or goods and cattle. They may fight to defend their hunting grounds, but unless they are driven to seek new lands by some natural catastrophe, such as drought, each tribe tends to keep to its own territory, and not to interfere with its neighbours. An attack on the civilized agriculturalists and cattle-keepers would of course be profitable, but primitive food gatherers are too few and weak to be a serious danger to a settled population' (DWH 131-32).

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, Gifford Lectures 1947 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 133; hereafter RC.

<sup>9</sup> RC 133-35.

<sup>10</sup> DWH 177.

<sup>11</sup> RC 139.

<sup>12</sup> RC 135-36.

<sup>13</sup> RC 136.

<sup>14</sup> RC 136.

<sup>15</sup> RC 65.

<sup>16</sup> RC 66.

<sup>17</sup> RC 84.

<sup>18</sup> DWH 393-94.

<sup>19</sup> DWH 393-94.

<sup>20</sup> A change in Dawson's terminology should be noted. In *The Age of the Gods* he used 'civilization' as a generic term including primitive cultures. In his later writings, as in this text, the culture of a 'civilization' is essentially differentiated from primitive cultures.

<sup>21</sup> DWH 41.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University Press, 1952); also my *Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000) pp.12-15.

<sup>23</sup> DWH 10.

<sup>24</sup> RC 114.

<sup>25</sup> DWH 113.

<sup>26</sup> DWH 113.

<sup>27</sup> DWH 177.

<sup>28</sup> RC 65.

<sup>29</sup> RC 87.

<sup>30</sup> RC 88.

<sup>31</sup> RC 89.

<sup>32</sup> DWH 113-14.

<sup>33</sup> DWH 114-115.

<sup>34</sup> RC 197. The reductionist approach adopted in the interpretation of past societies which was criticised by Dawson is still adopted today. In 2006, a group of distinguished archaeologists published *The Art and Architecture of Mesopotamia* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2006 – Giovanni Curatola etc.) a comprehensive illustrated study of archaeological findings. Its few references to cultural developments interpret them as motivated by the needs of an expanding society. Writing was seen as meeting the need to control the elaborate initiatives in a growing society (p.19); political structures met a need for a hierarchical structure in an enlarged group (p.15). Religion was interpreted as inspired by the need to 'reinforce social cohesion', making appeal 'to a higher power with indisputable authority' belonging to 'a divinity set in the midst of humanity in a building that

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manifests its presence' (p.23). These are *a priori* interpretations made on the basis of ideological assumptions; Dawson's interpretation is made after an exhaustive investigation of the ways in which these civilizations give an account of themselves.

<sup>35</sup> RC 197-98.

<sup>36</sup> DWH 51.

<sup>37</sup> RC 197.

<sup>38</sup> RC 115.

<sup>39</sup> DWH 114.

<sup>40</sup> RC 110.

<sup>41</sup> RC 113.

<sup>42</sup> RC 114.

<sup>43</sup> RC 110, 112.

<sup>44</sup> RC 112-13.

<sup>45</sup> RC 113.

<sup>46</sup> RC 107.

<sup>47</sup> RC 144.

<sup>48</sup> RC 155.

<sup>49</sup> DWH 129.

<sup>50</sup> DWH 129-30.

<sup>51</sup> DWH 116.

<sup>52</sup> DWH 116.

<sup>53</sup> DWH 51.

<sup>54</sup> DWH 402.

<sup>55</sup> RC 200.

<sup>56</sup> DWH 132-33.

<sup>57</sup> DWH 133.

<sup>58</sup> DWH 134.

<sup>59</sup> DWH 135-36.

<sup>60</sup> DWH 133-35.

<sup>61</sup> DWH 136.

<sup>62</sup> DWH 136-37.

<sup>63</sup> DWH 148.

<sup>64</sup> DWH 144.

<sup>65</sup> DWH 147.

<sup>66</sup> DWH 150.

<sup>67</sup> RC 200.

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- <sup>68</sup> DWH 148.  
<sup>69</sup> DWH 154.  
<sup>70</sup> DWH 130.  
<sup>71</sup> DWH 152.  
<sup>72</sup> DWH 52-53.  
<sup>73</sup> DWH 153.  
<sup>74</sup> DWH 153.  
<sup>75</sup> DWH 154.  
<sup>76</sup> DWH 154-55.  
<sup>77</sup> DWH 66-67.  
<sup>78</sup> DWH 59-60.  
<sup>79</sup> DWH 63-64.  
<sup>80</sup> DWH 64.  
<sup>81</sup> DWH 64-65.  
<sup>82</sup> DWH 60.

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