AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTOPHER DAWSON'S INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

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Editor's Note: What follows is the first instalment (Introduction & Chapter One) of John Thornhill's masterful interpretation of the writings of Christopher Dawson. Subsequent chapters will appear in future issues of the Journal.

PREFACE

Modern research into our human past has immense achievements, making possible a review of the whole sweep of human history and pre-history. Christopher Dawson was a brilliant pioneer in the work of interpreting the various stages through which the shared life of humanity has unfolded.

Unfortunately, as we shall see, the circumstances in which Dawson shared his insights meant that he has left an immense body of writings that are not readily accessible to scholars and general readers. Towards the end of his life, Dawson suggested that tertiary education should incorporate an over-view of humanity's cultural development, relating the issues studied by the many specialised disciplines to this over-view. The present text aims to provide a text that can contribute to such an approach.

A couple of observations which may help readers embarking on this study. Writing in the early twentieth century, Dawson followed the unquestioned usage of the time, using 'man' as referring the human agent in general. Some may object to his use of terms such as 'primitive', and to his reference to 'higher' and 'lower' cultures. For Dawson, however, these terms imply no disparagement; they are related to Dawson's fundamental principle that human culture has progressed through successive and related stages. It is clear that Dawson appreciated the authentic humanity of all the world's peoples. In fact, his historical approach could well be called a historical 'personalism', recognising all cultures as expressions of the innate potentiality of our common humanity – on 'a road that all peoples travel'.

I am not an academic historian. Given the vast compass of Dawson's historical judgments, not doubt come of them will be open to discussion. Considering his thought from the point of view of a philosopher and theologian, however, I have found them immensely enlightening and unfailingly inspiring. He takes up issues of great moment that lie outside the normal purview of academic history. In my judgment he has established himself as a genuine metahistorian whose work stands with Eric Voegelin's *Order in History*.

After a chapter introducing Dawson and the method of historical interpretation he adopted, our later chapters will follow the progressive phases of cultural developments that have produced today's secularised Western civilization.

Chapter 1

A CHALLENGING ORIGINALITY

My life as a philosopher and theologian has been given to following the triumphs and setbacks of human thought. It is a superlative experience to meet a singularly gifted mind, concerned with what really matters, who is able through his gifts as a wordsmith to share his wisdom. This has been my experience in recent months, as I have made a study of the writings of Christopher Dawson.

Dawson did not write as a controversialist, as many Catholics with only a superficial knowledge of his work have presumed; he wrote as a historian bringing to light the facts of our human past, so that they can speak for themselves. As one reviewer of the published text of his 1948-49 Gifford Lectures wrote, 'his authority is of that unquestionable and self-validating sort which simply cannot be ignored by the serious student'.

What is particularly refreshing in Dawson's historical interpretations is the fact that they are free of ideological overtones. Reading his texts is an exhilarating, even liberating experience – one feels invited to relax in a mood of reflection before a truth that has been uncovered. As we shall see, Dawson was critically aware of the ideological bias of much writing in his field of interest; and he was impatient with the ideological presentation of historical material by Catholic writers.

The high praise of this introduction may well leave some readers disconcerted. Let me offer as a validation of these remarks, the remarkable impartiality shown by Dawson in his evaluation of Edward Gibbon's eighteenth century classic, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon's work was one of the influences which inspired Dawson. According to Dawson's biographer, his daughter Christina Scott, 'Gibbon and Augustine were his early heroes; when he first visited Rome at the age of nineteen he retraced Gibbon's pilgrimage to the steps of the Capitol, where he had been inspired to write *The Decline and Fall*'; and it was on this occasion that Dawson conceived the idea of writing a series of works on the history of culture[1]. Five years later, Dawson decided to become a member of the Catholic Church.

Though his critical understanding of Gibbon's work was to undergo a considerable development, throughout his life Dawson was to maintain a profound admiration for what Gibbon achieved, an admiration he expressed at

great length, in an address on Gibbon which he delivered to the British Academy in 1934, and in the Preface which he was invited to write for the Everyman Edition of *Decline and Fall*.

Dawson's scholarly impartiality is made abundantly clear when we consider his evaluation of Gibbon's history against the background of Gibbon's personal development, in many ways in stark contrast with that of Dawson. Early in his life, Gibbon embraced Catholicism. Stripped of his Oxford degree, as a consequence, he went into exile in Lausanne; there he soon regretted what he saw as a 'childish revolt against the religion of my country', and returned to Protestantism. In Lausanne, he lived among the Enlightenment group associated with Voltaire, and though he was put off by their disdain for scholarship and their fondness for philosophical generalisations instead of historical facts, he came to share in the ideals of the Enlightenment. As a result, Dawson observed in his 1934 lecture, 'His thought had been so moulded by the culture of the Enlightenment that he could recognise no other values … everything which was of value in the world came from antiquity or from the modern classical culture that was rooted in antiquity … This complete lack of sympathy and understanding for the religious forces which have exerted such an immense influence on Western culture is Gibbon's great defect as a historian: and it is a very serious one, since it invalidates his judgment on the very issues which are most vital to his subject'[2].

Despite this 'very serious' qualification, Dawson did not hesitate to acknowledge that Gibbon has produced a historical work of genius. It is worth detailing aspects of *Decline and Fall* which were praised by Dawson, not only because they show how his scholarly judgment rose above ideological bias, but also because in describing Gibbon's genius it is clear that Dawson is holding Gibbon's work up as a model through which he has come to a greater understanding of the historian's craft.

The extraordinary success of Gibbon's classic, Dawson judged, was 'due to his extraordinary literary gift', which surpassed 'every other English historian with the exception of Macaulay'. Together with this, Dawson added, in the choice of the theme to which he applied his talent, he showed a sensitivity to the spirit of the age. The late eighteenth century, Dawson wrote, was becoming aware of the different worlds created by human history – the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. He quoted Carlisle's comment, 'Gibbon is a kind of bridge that connects the ancient with the modern ages, and how gorgeously does it swing across the gloomy and tumultuous chasm of … barbarous centuries'[3]. Gibbon, Dawson wrote, was 'without peer' among historians of his age and later times 'in the supreme architectural power with which he disposes of his vast material', to create 'an ordered and intelligible whole' [4].

Above all, Dawson related the genius of Gibbon's work to the way in which he identified with his subject: 'I believe', he wrote, 'that he has identified with his subject as no other historian has done … possessed and obsessed by the

majestic spirit of Rome. His conversion to the Church may have been transitory and superficial, but his conversion to the City and Empire was profound, and governed his whole life and work. He felt as a Roman; he thought as a Roman; he wrote as a Roman'[5]. Thus, Dawson wrote, 'Gibbon's style, stately and ornate as a Roman triumph, possesses the authentic and living spirit of classical rhetoric'[6].

Not only did Gibbon bring to life the spirit of the classical world, Dawson observed, but he also left a valuable record of his own age. 'We cannot fully understand an age', Dawson wrote, 'unless we understand how that age regarded the past, for every age makes its own past, and this re-creation of the past is one of the elements that go to the making of the future'. If Gibbon's recreation of the past 'contains only a part of the full content of the historic past', nevertheless it is invaluable, Dawson continued, as 'a translation of the past into the language of eighteenth century culture'[7]. This Enlightenment outlook is given famous expression, Dawson wrote, in the pages which conclude the first part of his history: 'his profession of faith in the permanence and progress of European civilization', seeing that civilization as 'a kind of renewed and extended *pax Romana*' – which Gibbon described as 'the great republic whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation'[8].

What we have just seen serves as an excellent introduction to the consideration of Christopher Dawson's own historical method. The youthful Dawson resolved to write a history of *culture,* as he retraced Gibbon's pilgrimage to Rome's Capitol Hill. For him, Gibbon's history was a work of genius because it captured the spirit of the era he was interpreting; and in doing so left a remarkable record of the eighteenth century culture of the author. Culture – the all-important environment in which the events of history occur – was to be the guiding principle of Dawson's historical interpretation.

Dawson's cultural awareness, he tells us, began in childhood. Writing in 1949[9], he recalled the beginnings of this awareness. He began life at Hay on the border of England and Wales, in the home of his grandfather, an Anglican clergyman, in the midst of Welsh speaking country people and Welsh traditions; even at an early age he was conscious of the co-existence of two different worlds, that of the rich English country side and that of the poor and wild Welsh hills. The Family's move to Yorkshire brought him into contact with another different world. Later, it was reading that opened up new cultural horizons for him. 'Thanks to my parents', he wrote, 'I came to know the past … through the enchanting world of myth and legend. In this way I discovered very early that history was not a flat expanse of time, measured off in dates, but a series of different worlds, and that each of them had its own spirit and form and its own riches of poetic imagination … the old road which carries us back not merely for centuries but for thousands of years; the road by which every people has travelled, and from which the beginnings of every literature have come'(p.239).

As, in his maturity, he recalled the world of his childhood, Dawson reflected that such a recovery of one's cultural heritage can be an exercise in *pietas*, putting a person in contact with something sacred. 'The cult of parents and kinsfolk and native place as principles of our being', he wrote, 'is not a matter of sentiment … it is a moral principle that lies at the root of every culture and every religion … a new key to the understanding of the past … the world revealed by memory of childhood and family tradition is quite a different world from that which the historians have shown us' (pp.222-23).

Dawson's reflections on the spirit in which he approached his work as a historian bring to mind an observation of J.R.R. Tolkien, that the stories that have made him famous have grown 'out of the leaf-mould of the mind: all that has been seen or thought or read, that has long been forgotten, descending into the deeps'[10]. It is interesting to compare the two men; they were contemporaries, each living to the age of eighty one, and dying within three years of each other. Though they do not seem to have met, they had many things in common, especially a love of what Dawson called 'the enchanted world of myth and legend' and its 'riches of poetic imagination'. The comparison, however, brings out something that is fundamental to the work of each of them. Though they applied their scholarship to very different enterprises, their achievements are both measured by the same moral universe.

It would be wrong to see Tolkien's stories as the creation of a dream world in which one can escape. There is something valuable to be found in them as the countless people who have read and reread them make very clear. In a Foreword to *Lord of the Rings,* written fifteen years after this work first appeared, Tolkien pointed to what may be found in his story. To those seeking to uncover allegories he wrote, 'I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations … I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse "applicability" with "allegory"; but one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author'. He went on to acknowledge – in the spirit of his 'leaf-mould of the mind' comment – that whatever applicability may be found in the narratives of his stories is shaped by the author's personal experience[11]

In his study of Tolkien's achievement, *Master of Middle Earth*[12]*,* Paul Kocher discussed the scope of this 'applicability'. Tolkien, he recalled, saw an authentic Fairy Story as having an 'internal consistency' and a form of credibility established by combining the ordinary with the extraordinary. Kocher discussed Tolkien's use of this formula in his stories: they reflect, for example, the author's love of the English countryside and his expertise as a philologist. But far more importantly, Kocher shows in the body of his study, they reflect the moral universe of Tolkien's personal experience. He shows, for instance, that virtually all the characters struggling against the forces of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* believe in a 'moral dynamism in the universe to which each of them freely contributes'; they saw each crisis they faced, 'not as an intellectual problem but

as a stern occasion demanding concrete choices and chances'. 'Being thoughtful people', Kocher continued, 'they say quite enough in the process to give a good idea of the kind of order in which they believe' (p.34).

This aspect of Tolkien's work finds a parallel in Dawson's historical interpretation. As I hope to make clear in this study, the guiding principle of his interpretation is his understanding of cultures as the self-expression of our common humanity. The humanism of these contemporaries was shaped, of course, by many shared influences, notably their identification with the rich traditions of English culture, and by the Catholic tradition in which they both shared. Their Anglo-Saxon preference for the concrete as the medium though which they share their thought, provides in their writings an effective antidote to the contradictions of a doctrinaire 'postmodernism'.

Let us return to Dawson's approach to his work as a historian. His critique of Gibbon's classic makes clear his incisive intelligence. It was only to be expected that he would clarify his understanding of the nature of the 'cultures' of which he had become aware from an early age. Though his writings show that he was well informed in matters philosophical and theological, he does not seem to have had any formal education in these disciplines. His biographer records a sentence from a journal he was keeping as a young man which, on the face of it, is puzzling when we consider that he was to become a writer of considerable originality: 'As regards writing I find the greatest difficulty in expressing my simplest thoughts and feelings'; and she went on to comment, 'he came to the conclusion that it was better to stick to facts'[13].

This paradoxical comment may in fact point to a fundamental feature of Dawson's mind – which was far more at home with concrete images and examples than with doctrinaire abstractions. His writings are filled with striking metaphors which convey far more than could be expressed in abstract statements, and which have their roots in his rich cultural awareness. It proved a valuable asset in his historical writings; reviewers remarked on his ability to single out concrete individuals or developments that he made emblematic of the point he wished to make in the development of his interpretation. The Dean of Harvard Divinity School, reviewing a text based on material Dawson had used in his lectures at Harvard, commented that Dawson belonged to that rare company of historians 'who can look at the multiple events of an era, distinguish among them those of lasting from those of passing consequence, and set forth the former in a pattern which gives meaning to the whole'.

Dawson's writings contain ample evidence of his reflections on the nature of culture. He expressed in clear and simple terms the place of culture should have in the historian's work of interpretation. 'The essence of history is not found in facts', he wrote, 'but in traditions. The pure fact is not as such historical. It only becomes historical when it can be brought into relation with a social tradition …

wherever a social tradition exists, however small and unimportant may be the society which is its vehicle, the possibility of history exists'[14].

Dawson saw neglect of the fact that culture is the primary matrix of human history as leading scholars to fall back upon the national state as the fundamental unity of their study. 'Since the unit is a political one', he observed, 'the method of interpretation has tended to be political also, so that history has often sunk to the level of political propaganda'. Writing this in 1928, Dawson judged that this state of things was 'one of the great predisposing causes of the late war'[15].

Reflecting on the development of cultural awareness, Dawson credited the Romantic Movement with 'first having taught men to respect the diversity of human life, and to regard culture, not as an abstract ideal, but as a vital product of an organic social tradition'[16]. As we shall see later in our study, when we consider Dawson's interpretation of our modern Western civilization, he shows that the Enlightenment classicism we have seen in Gibbon continued to influence cultural awareness until comparatively recently, through the pervasive notions of 'Civilization', and 'Progress'.

Commenting on an essay of T.S. Eliot – 'Notes towards the Definition of Culture' (1948) – Dawson observed that, on a more superficial level, the meaning of 'culture' has been very confused. When Mathew Arnold (1822-88) took up the defence of culture against the 'Philistines' of the time, the term was unfamiliar – for the average Englishman meaning little more than 'a smattering of two dead languages'. In the mid-twentieth century, he wrote, the term had a more comprehensive meaning, serving 'as a convenient omnibus expression to cover all the subordinate non-economic social activities which have to be included in the organisation of a planned society'[17]. In another work written at the same time, Dawson pointed to the rise of 'new political ideologies and ideological ideas of history' as calling for a more adequate understanding of contemporary culture 'in terms of social processes and spiritual ends, whether these ends are defined in religious terms or secular formulae', to counteract the efforts of totalitarian regimes 'to create historical myths as a psychological basis for social unity'[18]. He was in fact describing the approach he had chosen in his own historical interpretation.

Having made 'culture' his fundamental tool, Dawson had a consistent understanding of its nature and its complex processes. In his Gifford Lectures of 1947, published as *Religion and Culture* he provided a clear summary of this understanding: 'Every human culture is a conscious adaptation of social life to man's external environment and to the order of nature. What the animal does instinctively, man does with conscious purpose and with a greater or less degree of rational calculation. Thus, culture is rooted in nature, just as the higher achievements of the individual human mind are rooted in culture'[19]. In many places, he developed the implications of this understanding. He saw human

cultures as expressions of the rational purposefulness of the human agents who create them. As ‘a way of life’, he pointed out, even the most primitive cultures involve ‘a certain degree of social specialization and the canalization of social energies along certain lines’[20]. This conscious rationalization is evident, Dawson wrote, in the ‘extreme conservatism’ which is ‘the most striking feature of primitive culture’, maintaining the social order that has been achieved; ‘the initiation rites’ of primitive cultures, he wrote, ‘represent an intensive effort of social discipline directed toward the incorporation of the individual into the community and its social order’[21]. A shared understanding, therefore, Dawson saw as the animating principle of a culture. ‘The society without culture’, he wrote, ‘is a formless society – a crowd or collection of individuals brought together by the needs of the moment … It is clear that a common way of life involves a common view of life, common standards of value … a culture is a spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought’[22]. And, because the form assumed by particular human cultures is not instinctive, Dawson wrote, it calls for ‘a continuous moral effort’. ‘It is a lesson of history’, he continued, ‘that the higher the achievement of a culture the greater the moral effort and the stricter the social discipline it demands’[23].

Dawson acknowledged, of course, that the rational purposefulness that animates a particular culture develops in interaction with other factors. ‘A culture’, he wrote, ‘is a common way of life – a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs … Not that man is merely plastic under the influence of his material environment. He moulds it, as well as being moulded by it. The lower the culture the more passive it is. But the higher culture will express itself through its material circumstances, as masterfully and triumphantly as the artist through the medium of his material’[24]. ‘It is impossible’, he wrote, ‘to disregard the importance of a material and non-rational element in history. Every culture rests on a foundation of geographical environment and racial inheritance, which conditions its highest activities. The change of a culture is not simply a change of thought, it is above all a change of life … Nevertheless, though culture is essentially conditioned by material factors, these are not all. A culture receives its form from a rational and spiritual element which transcends the limits of racial and geographical conditions’[25]. As he continued, Dawson pointed to the fact that that some elements of cultures transcend the limits of the particular culture in which they had their origins, making it possible for the ‘rational and spiritual element’ to live on in other cultures – a fact which confirms the communality which is the source of all human cultures: ‘Religion and science do not die with the culture of which they formed a part. They are handed on from people to people, and assist as a creative force in the formation of new cultural organisms’[26].

Dawson often returned to a consideration of the organic life of a vital culture. In a memorable passage he wrote, ‘a culture is essentially a growth, and it is a whole. It cannot be constructed artificially … It is a living body from the simple and instinctive life of the shepherd, the fisherman and the tiller of the soil, up to the

highest achievements of the artist and the philosopher. The man of genius is not an absolute and unrelated phenomenon in society, a kind of celestial visitant. He is, in an even more intimate sense than the ordinary man, the product of a society and a culture. Science and philosophy are social products just as much as language is, and Aristotle or Euclid could no more have appeared in China, than could Confucius in Greece. A great culture sets its seal on a man, on all that he is, and all that he does, from his speech and gesture to his vision of reality and his ideals of conduct; and the more living it is, the deeper is the imprint, and the more highly developed is the element of form in Society. Hence every culture develops its own types of man, and norms of existence and conduct, and we can trace the curve of the growth and decline of cultural life by the vitality of these characteristic types and institutions as well as by the art and literature in which the soul of the culture finds expression'[27]. Discussing the development of Hellenic culture's highest forms of expression, Dawson wrote: 'First Religion, then Society, then Art, and finally Philosophy. Not that one of these is cause and the others effects. They are all different aspects or functions of one life'[28].

Dawson compared the cultural organism as a whole with the individual human agent, who 'combines in the substantial unity of his personality the animal life of nutrition and reproduction with the higher activities of reason and intellect'[29]. Clearly, he saw this correspondence as more than an interesting analogy; he saw it as confirmation of his fundamental conviction that human cultures represent the expression of our common humanity.

Cultural evolution, Dawson's research showed him, is an extremely complex process. As a general rule, for cultures that have achieved 'a permanent state of equilibrium with the external world … any change will come, not from within, but from the foreign pressure of some external culture'. Moreover, cultural progress is 'an exceptional condition, due to a number of distinct causes, which often operate irregularly and spasmodically'[30]. 'In the majority of cases', Dawson wrote, 'a culture represents a fusion of a number of elements, and the history of world civilizations is a complex process of diffusion and cross-fertilization and hybridization like the blending of different racial element in the growth of a nation … The most common form of cultural change is that which results from the conquest of one people by another, so that it also involves biological and racial changes'[31] (RC 198).

The adopting of 'some elements of material culture developed by another people', Dawson wrote, can bring cultural changes of great importance – 'showing the close interdependence of cultures'. 'We see', he continued, 'how in the past the use of metals, agriculture and irrigation, a new weapon or the use of the horse in war, have spread from one end of the Old World to the other with amazing rapidity'. Moreover, 'such innovations may alter the whole system of social organization'[32]. Dawson warns, however, that history indicates that 'it is remarkable how often external change of this kind, leads not to social progress,

but to social decay'. 'As a rule', he judged, 'to be progressive, change must come from within'[33]. As we have seen earlier, Dawson interpreted cultures as living, organic wholes; and, as we shall see, he saw this as of fundamental importance for their vitality and survival. 'A culture is essentially a growth, and it is a whole.' Dawson wrote, 'It cannot be constructed artificially, nor can it be divided'[34].

The impact of new religious movements can be far more dramatic than the acquiring of new elements of material culture, bringing 'revolutionary changes that are by no means rare in history'[35]. In his writings he has often made reference to the spread of Islam as a dramatic example of such an influence. 'Here we see in full clearness and detail', he wrote, 'how a new religion may create a new culture. A simple individual living in a cultural backwater[36] originates a movement which in a comparatively short time sweeps across the world, destroying historic empires and civilizations, and creating a new way of life which still moulds the thought and behaviour of millions from Senegal to Borneo'[37].

Having a very clear understanding of the methodology he used in his historical interpretation, Dawson was acutely aware of the confusion in the methodologies that have been used in the study of human society since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such a study was called for by the enormous quantity of data that was made available by oriental and archaeological research and anthropological investigation of the life of primitive societies. Dawson saw the Enlightenment spirit – which we have seen in the work of Gibbon – as having an unfortunate influence in these developments. 'The apostles of the eighteenth century Enlightenment', Dawson wrote, 'were above all, intent on deducing the laws of social life and progress from a small number of simple rational principles. They cut through the luxuriant deep-rooted growth of traditional belief with the ruthlessness of pioneers in a tropical jungle … they traced religious origins no further than the duplicity of the first knave and the simplicity of the first fool'[38].

The pioneers of sociology, Dawson observed, adopting the methodology of Positivism, were 'haunted by the dream of explaining social phenomena by the mathematical and quantitative method of the physical sciences, and thus creating a science of society which will be completely mechanistic and determinist'[39].

This methodological confusion was compounded, Dawson wrote, by the reformist pretensions of sociologists: 'The besetting sin of the sociologist has been the attempt to play the part of a social reformer, whether, like Comte, he embarked on grandiose schemes for the reconstruction of society or, with the modern sociologist, he plunges into the practical work of civic reform'. Often, their generalisations, Dawson concluded, 'carried them beyond the limits of sociology proper into the deep waters of ethics and metaphysics'[40].

The shortcomings of this sociological approach were illustrated for Dawson in the development of the new discipline of Comparative Religion at the end of the nineteenth century. J.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, was the first important synthesis of the recently acquired anthropological knowledge, initiating a new epoch in social studies of religion. The new discipline, influenced by the prevailing scientific climate, Dawson wrote, aimed at a study of the facts of religious development while abstracting from theological and philosophical judgments: 'This attitude was determined, on the one hand, by the ideal of scientific objectivity borrowed from the physical sciences, and on the other by the practical necessity of establishing a neutral territory on which orientalists, missionaries, anthropologists and psychologists could cooperate harmoniously'. This program of philosophical neutrality has proved to be impractical, Dawson observed, because 'the comparative method and the concept of evolutionary development' that were taken for granted 'involved judgments of value which had philosophical implications', and the new science 'no longer possessed any criterion by which to judge the intrinsic value and significance of the religious phenomenon'. In Dawson's judgment, the new discipline has, in the end, achieved little more than the creation of 'a museum of dead cults and anthropological curiosities'[41].

Dawson saw William James' influential work, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) as a reaction to the reductionism we have been considering, as James sought to address the inadequacies of studies in Comparative Religion by making 'a new existential study of religious phenomena in their experimental particularity'. James recognised that religious experience is *sui generis*; Dawson quotes approvingly his description of this experience: ' "It is where the further limits of our being plunge into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely understandable" that this experience has its origin; and the spiritual forces that originate in this region have a real and transforming effect on human life and social conduct'[42]. Clearly, it is difficult to find a place for the existential concern James sees as essential to a genuine religious experience within the value free analysis adopted by the discipline of Comparative Religion.

Sociology's adopting of a methodology which has 'little use for history and for social reality' in its complexity, Dawson wrote, has alienated academic historians, whose 'experience of the complex reality of the social process makes them naturally hostile to the simplicity of pseudo-scientific generalisations'[43]. However, Dawson profoundly regretted this estrangement between historians and sociologists. Writing in 1934, he saw the task of providing an understanding of the workings of human society as 'probably the most vital scientific issue of our time'[44]. And the complex social problems facing humanity as we enter the third millennium would indicate that we are today even more in need of the understanding Dawson was calling for. In fact, in Dawson's judgment 'sociology and history are two complementary parts of a single science – the science of social life. They differ, not in their subject matter, but in their method, one attempting a general systematic analysis of the social process, while the other

gives a genetic description of the same process in detail. In other words, sociology deals with the structure of society, and history with its evaluation'[45].

What then was Dawson's understanding of the methodology that should be employed by the historian? During his life time, this was a much discussed question[46]. Not surprisingly, some historiography was influenced by the positivist climate of the times. By and large, however, historians have discounted an understanding of history as a value free recovery of the past. For his part, Dawson welcomed the advances that had been made in the critical methods used in the recovery of the events of the past. In his judgment, however, good history involved something more than a recovery of the factual past. 'The academic historian', he wrote, 'is perfectly right in insisting on the importance of the techniques of historical criticism and research. But the mastery of these techniques will not produce great history, any more than a mastery of metrical technique will produce great poetry'.

What Dawson saw as necessary for the historian in his work of interpretation, of course, was knowledge of the cultural setting of his facts. He explained this by relating it to the historical awareness that has developed in the modern period. This awareness recognises that different cultural situations have their own social traditions and their own spiritual ideals, so that 'we cannot understand the past by applying the standards and values of our own age and civilization to it, but only by relating historical facts to the social tradition to which they belong and by using the spiritual beliefs and the moral and intellectual values of that tradition as the key to their interpretation'[47]. To achieve this, Dawson wrote, the historian must add to his techniques of research and criticism, 'intuitive understanding, creative imagination and finally a universal vision transcending the relative limitations of the particular field of historical study'.

Dawson points to Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America* (1835), as exponents of the method he is describing. Tocqueville, he wrote, 'is generally admitted by academic historians to be one of the greatest historians of the nineteenth century'. This is surprising, he remarks, because he brought to his task resources which seem, at first sight, to disqualify him from such acclaim, describing the 'kind of religious dread' he experienced as he undertook the 'holy task' of interpreting the march of history; and writing, 'it is not necessary that God himself should speak in order to disclose to us the unquestionable signs of his will; we can discern them in the habitual course of nature and in the invariable tendency of events'. 'Yet somehow', Dawson observes, 'he gets away with it … and he succeeds, not in spite of his principles, but because of them. If we compare his work with that of his contemporaries, Tocqueville is incomparably the greater historian; he is greater because he is more profound and his profundity is due to the breadth of his spiritual vision and the strength of his religious faith'[48]. Tocqueville's religious awe before his task reminds us of Dawson's remarks, in 'Memories of a Victorian Childhood', that the interpretation of the past can be an exercise in *pietas*. In her

biography, Dawson's daughter quoted his description of the interpretative vision of the historian, as 'partaking more of the nature of religious contemplation than of scientific generalisation'[49]. We only have to recall what we have learned of Dawson's remarkable cultural awareness from an early age to recognise that this apologia reflects the rich resources – from 'the leaf-mould of his mind' – that informed the 'intuitive understanding, creative imagination and universal vision' he brought to his task of historical interpretation.

Dawson pointed to a development that has disadvantaged today's historians in this regard. He saw the development of distinct and unrelated disciplines in historical studies as giving rise to an intellectual fragmentation that makes collaborative sharing of their findings more difficult. 'The study of Western religion and Western culture is difficult', he observed, 'because we know too much', with the result that, in a particular field which he was discussing, 'the vast field of study had to be divided among a number of different sciences – with the result that we have a number of highly developed separate studies: political history, constitutional history, and economic history, on the one side, and ecclesiastical history, the history of dogma and liturgiology on the other'. This situation, he concluded, 'has tended to separate and divide the elements we have to unite and bring together', with the result that 'the vital subject of the creative interaction of religion and culture in the life of Western society has been left out and almost forgotten, since it has no place in the organised scheme of specialised disciplines'[50].

Something further needs to be said about Dawson's methodology. Though he would have claimed no expertise in the field of philosophy, there is an accuracy and precision in the articulation of his historical interpretation that is remarkable. His skills as a wordsmith were praised in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*[51]. But his writings evidence more than literary skills. As he marshalled and evaluated his findings, he made use of what the philosopher, Jacques Maritain, has called 'common sense'. Maritain described what he intended by this term as 'a natural and spontaneous growth, the product so to speak of rational instincts' that have not attained the reflective understanding of philosophical thought, but 'attain the same objects in a different fashion … a vigorous and unreflective sketch drawn by the natural motion, and spontaneous instinct of reason'. 'This is why', Maritain concluded, 'common sense attains a certain though unscientific knowledge of God, human personality, free will, and so on'[52]. G. K. Chesterton anticipated Maritain's 'common sense', describing healthy human reason as 'the ordinary common daylight of intellectual instinct that has guided the children of men'[53].

This profound grasp of the implications of human existence is very evident in the understanding of culture we have reviewed, which became the guiding principle in Dawson's historical interpretation. Dawson's historical vision is person-centred: for him culture is the individual and communal self-expression of the innate potentialities of our common humanity. Dawson's daughter gives us a

glimpse into the rich humanism that he brought to historical interpretation, when she notes that he appreciated D.H. Lawrence's wonder before the mystery of human sexuality[54]. Dawson's openness as a humanist is also evident in his correspondence with Dom Bede Griffiths, the Benedictine monk who lived in India, making a study of the relationship of Hinduism and Catholicism. In his autobiography, Bede Griffiths acknowledged a debt to Dawson.

Comments of Dawson's biographer, Christina Scott, concerning Dawson's attitude to Maritain are significant, helping us to situate Dawson in the contemporary development of Catholic thought. She quotes Dawson as praising Maritain for promoting Catholic thought in America, and notes that he published writings of Maritain when he was editor of the *Dublin Review*, even though he was criticised for publishing views critical of General Franco. She remarks, however, 'Christopher Dawson's name has often been linked with that of Maritain, but in actual fact he had little in common with him'. In her judgment, her father would have been critical, I presume, of Maritain's interpretation of medieval thought as an a-historical given. This judgment is confirmed by the fact that, quite independently of those who would present the thought of St Thomas from an a-historical point of view, there has been a revival of Thomistic studies, stimulated and illuminated by questions arising in modern thought, such things as the ongoing exploration of human personhood and the nature of truth. Christina Scott concluded, 'Modern Catholic history, in Christopher's view, derived from centuries of humanism, however incompletely this was received by the Church. As a Catholic writer and thinker, Christopher Dawson belonged more to an earlier tradition – that of Newman, Von Hugel and Acton'[55].

Whereas fifty years ago Dawson's work was widely acclaimed, today, in his native England, he is largely forgotten. When he delivered the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University (1947, 1948-49), reviews of the publications that made these lectures available to a wider public were remarkable, describing him as 'the most exciting writer of our day', 'supreme master of cultural history today'. When Dawson died in 1970, the distinguished medievalist, David Knowles, wrote a memoire published by the British Academy which praised his vast erudition, his outstanding prose style and the manner in which he organised his material. 'In his field', Knowles wrote, 'he was the most distinguished Catholic thinker of this century'[56]. When I commenced this study, however, I was amazed to find that an electronic word search of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* showed that his name nowhere appeared in the 2005 edition. On the other hand, Google indicated that Dawson has a well established following in the U.S.

Some reasons for this eclipse are recognisable. Dawson was a polymath whose work spanned a number of fields; though his extraordinary talent was evident from the beginning of his career, it was not easy to situate him in the world of scholarship. His tutor at Oxford, Sir Earnest Barker, a man destined to become a distinguished political scientist, was a good medievalist. He encouraged his pupil's wide reading and his interest in the philosophy of history. Years later,

reviewing Dawson's *The Judgment of the Nations* (1943) for the *Spectator*, Barker wrote that he 'began to learn history the day he became Dawson's tutor'. When, in 1933, Dawson applied for a professorship at Leeds University, in the Chair of Philosophy and History of Religion, his application was supported by six eminent scholars and academics. The most glowing recommendation came from Sir Earnest Barker, who wrote, 'I always knew that in intellectual power he stood alone among all the men I ever taught'. As a Catholic scholar, he wrote, Dawson was 'a man and scholar of the same sort of quality as Acton and Von Hugel'[57].

When, in 1958, Dawson was invited to become Harvard's first Professor of Roman Catholic Studies, however, the only university post he had held was as lecturer in the History of Culture at Exeter University – a position specially created for him, entailing one lecture a week and a small number of specialised tutorials. Almost seventy years of age, he had worked and written as a private scholar. As a consequence, not having a specific audience, his writings were not readily accessible to the general reader.

Dawson's vast literary output, therefore, is not in a form which makes his coherent understanding of the vast sweep of human history as available as it deserves to be – something which prompted me to undertake the present study. Dawson's books, some in part carrying forward his project of a series on the history of culture, some containing the content of his Gifford Lectures and material from his Harvard lectures, and some being monographs in which he responded to the cultural crisis of Western civilization associated with the Second World War, are more accessible to the general reader, since they have a definite audience in mind. But this is not the case with the countless journal articles in which he discussed a wide range of issues in cultural history. Some of these have been made available in single volume collections – *Enquiries in Religion and Culture* (1933), *Medieval Essays* (1953), *Dynamics of World History* (edited by John J. Mulloy, 1957), and *Religion and World History* (edited by James Oliver and Christina Scott, 1975).

It is unfortunate, however, that Dawson's publishers let him down in their presentation of his works. His first major work, published by John Murray in 1929, *The Age of the Gods: A Study in the Origins of Culture in Prehistoric Europe and the Ancient East,* indicates Dawson's recognition that the immense assemblage of material that is characteristic of his writings is in need of a well organised Index if it is to be useful for students. For this work, Dawson himself drew up, not only a detailed Index, but extensive Reading Lists and several elaborate chronological tables. When, a few years later, Sheed and Ward began to publish Dawson's works, they appeared without an Index[58]. It is especially regrettable that the collections of papers previously published in journals lack the Index that would have given access to the immense wealth of scholarship they contain[59]. The circumstances we have described, in which Dawson's body of writings were produced already made it difficult for his original contribution to

human thought to be widely recognised. The failure of his publishers to present these writings in a more accessible form is therefore all the more unfortunate.

That Dawson was not widely appreciated among academic historians and sociologists is not surprising when we recall his criticism of the inadequate perspectives and methodologies many of them have made use of. Passing comments of Dawson, however, point to a more fundamental reason for today's lack of interest in his historical interpretation. In the symposium, *Eternity in Time*, Dermot Quinn, observing that Dawson's concerns were unfashionable, commented that 'fashion has passed him by because it never embraced him in the first place. Indeed Dawson seems not to be of this century at all'. The comparison with Acton, Quinn continued, 'seems to confer on him a Victorian *gravitas*, separating him from his contemporaries … After Paschendaele and the Somme, the world grew suspicious of the politician as preacher, the historian as homilist. Dawson continued to see pattern in history long after others could only see absurdity'[60].

Dawson, it seems, would recognise the truth of Quinn's observation. As he opened his essay, 'Memories of a Victorian Childhood', in 1949, Dawson wrote, 'The changes that have been taking place during the present century are so far-reaching that no one can foresee what their effect on human life will be. But already they have caused a loss of social tradition and a dislocation of human experience such as no previous generation has known since the beginning of human history'. Concluding his essay, he returned to the same thought. In a memorable passage, calling cultural tradition 'the road by which every people have travelled', he observed, 'It may be that the changes of our generation, the increased speed of life and the mechanisation of popular culture … have closed the road for ever. But if so, those of us who remember the world before the wars have witnessed a change in human consciousness far greater than we have realised, and what we are remembering is not the Victorian age but a whole series of ages – a river of immemorial time which has suddenly dried up and become lost in the seismic cleft that has opened between the present and the past'[61].

Dawson's graphic image of the 'seismic cleft' that has opened between the present and the past in contemporary awareness suggests the further thought – that this awareness is suffering from a form of 'culture shock' which gives rise to an indifference to history, since it is difficult to own the proper context of our on-going human existence as essentially the product of social interaction – the culture which is Dawson's essential concern. Another contributor to the *Eternity in Time* symposium, Fernando Cervantes, begins his essay by quoting Carl E. Schorske, who makes a similar observation: 'twentieth century Europe has proudly asserted its independence from the past … The modern mind has been growing indifferent to history, because history as a continuous nourishing tradition has become useless to it'[62].

Dermot Quinn, in the passage we have already quoted, observed, ‘Perhaps (Dawson’s) insistence that religion lies at the heart of culture seems’ to the contemporary mind ‘reductionist and confessional’[63]. What we have already seen has made it clear, I hope, that Dawson was well aware of the dangers of reductionism and religious bias in historical interpretation. His biographer several times returns to this issue[64]. The historical interpretation offered by Dawson was not motivated by his personal beliefs, but the result of his long study of much of the vast body of data made available to him by modern research – though, as we have seen in discussing his methodological assumptions, he would be the first to admit that personal religious experience can help an understanding of the data of historical research.

In fact, Dawson would challenge those who reject religious experience as a suitable subject of historical analysis, as making it impossible for an adequate interpretation to be made of human history. ‘It may be said’, he wrote, that the religious outlook ‘belongs to the past, and that we cannot return to it. But neither can we escape from it. The past it simply the record of the experience of humanity, and if that experience testifies to the existence of a permanent human need, that need must manifest itself in the future not less than in the past’[65]. It follows as a logical consequence that an adequate interpretation of humanity’s past – and present! – calls for a readiness to study the place religion has had in cultural development, on religion’s own terms – that is giving attention to religious experience’s explanation of itself, its ‘theologies’. ‘All the higher religions’, Dawson wrote, ‘do in fact assert the existence of a science of divine faith and base their teaching upon it. And it is obvious that if there is no true knowledge of the object of religious experience, religion loses its vitality and even its social coherence, and becomes an irrational impulse like any other delusional form of psychosis’[66].

Dawson was aware, of course, of the difficulty confronting today’s secularised outlook when asked to take these claims seriously. All he asks from those who experience this difficulty is that they ‘make a provisional acceptance’ of the validity of the principles essential to a religious outlook, because without such an acceptance it is impossible for them ‘to understand religion at all’[67].

Abbreviations:

- DWH: *The Dynamics of World History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1957 – edited by John J. Mulloy)
- RC: *Religion and Culture*, Gifford Lectures 1947 (London: Sheed and Ward,1948)
- RWC: *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, Gifford Lectures 1948-49 (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1958)

[1] 'The Vision and Legacy of Christopher Dawson', contained in *Eternity in Time: Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History*, eds. Stratford Caldecott and John Morrill (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997) 12. Christina Scott's biography is entitled, *A Historian and His World: A life of Christopher Dawson (1889-1970)* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1984).
[2] British Academy Lecture, 1934, reproduced in DWH 326-65; this quotation, 333-34. Much of this sketch of Gibbon's development is derived from this lecture.
[3] DWH 331-32.
[4] DWH 333.
[5] DWH 335.
[6] DWH 337.
[7] DWH 352.
[8] DWH 335.
[9] 'Memories of a Victorian Childhood', first published in *The Wind and the Rain* (1949), this text was included as an Appendix to the Transaction Edition of Christina Scott's biography, *A Historian and His World*, published in the U.S., pp 221-239; cf 221-23 Further references which follow are to this edition.
[10] Quoted by Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: The Authorised Biography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977) 126.
[11] Tolkien's approach is explored further in Tony Kelly's enlightening article, 'Faith Seeking Fantasy: Tolkien on Fairy-Stories', *Pacifica* 15(2002)190-208.
[12] Paul Kocher, *Master of Middle Earth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972). The reference in what follows is to this text.
[13] *A Historian and His World*, 56.
[14] DWH 273.
[15] DWH 4.
[16] DWH 270.
[17] DWH 103-04.
[18] RWC 13.
[19] RC 131.
[20] RC 47.
[21] RC 56.
[22] RC 48-49.
[23] DWH 159.
[24] DWH 56-57.
[25] DWH 388. It is important to note that for Dawson the term 'spiritual' has a much broader meaning than a reference to what is specifically 'religious'. Cf RC 48-49 cited above.
[26] DWH 388.
[27] DWH 387.
[28] DWH 50. In another place, Dawson wrote, 'A true civilization is much more than a mere piecing together of the different cultural elements supplied by different regions. It has an individuality of its own, which is capable of moulding, as well as being moulded by, the life of its component parts' (DWH 41).
[29] DWH 387-88.
[30] DWH 7.
[31] RC 198.
[32] DWH 8-9.
[33] DWH 9.
[34] DWH 56.
[35] RC 52.
[36] More than once Dawson refers to this mystical experience of Mohammed, which inspired the movement of Islam. He wrote, for example, 'Behind every civilization there is a vision … which sometimes springs from the sudden flash of inspiration of a great prophet or philosopher … as was that great vision of the vanity of human achievement which Mohammed saw in the Cave of Mount Hira and which made civilization and all temporal concerns as meaningless as "the beat of

a gnat's wing" in comparison with the splendour of Eternal Power, burning alone like the sun over the desert' (DWH 41).
[37] RC 53.
[38] DWH 11.
[39] DWH 21.
[40] DWH 14-15.
[41] RC 16-17.
[42] RC 18.
[43] DWH 21.
[44] DWH 12-13.
[45] DWH 20. Dawson more than once in his writings refers to the sociological method of Pierre Le Play (1806-82) 'who more than any other sociologist', he wrote, 'may be regarded as the discoverer of a scientific method of social study … giving an economic interpretation of society which' avoided a 'one-sided determinism' and 'showed the influence of geographical factors in social life', providing a 'biological interpretation of society which had nothing in common with the semi-scientific, semi-philosophical generalisations of writers such as Herbert Spencer'. Le Play took as his unit of study, the family in its concrete geographical and economic circumstances and analysed its social life and structure in terms of Place and Work; his great work, *Les ouvrieres Europeens* (1835) was a detailed study of thirty six typical workers' families, chosen from every part of Europe from eastern Russia to the north of England, and from every stage of culture from the Tartar herdsman of the steppes to the artisans and factory workers of Western Europe (DWH 22-23).

[46] Cf. H.-J. Marrou, *De la Connaissance Historique* (Louvain-Paris, 1954), a work which incorporates the thought of the previous 75 years; G.J. Renier, *History: Its Purpose and its Methods* (London, 1950); R.C. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946); J. Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History* (New York, 1957).
[47] DWH 272.
[48] DWH 292-93. Taking up the suggestion of Henri Marrou, in *De la Connaissance Historique,* that the great historian must have something of the poet's inspiration, Jacques Maritain compared the historian's understanding of the object of his interpretation with the poet's creative intuition (*On the Philosophy of History*, 7).
[49] *A Historian and His World*, 74.
[50] RWC 12-13.
[51] *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, 1970, pp. 897 and 921, cited by Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World*, pp. 118-19.
[52] J Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945) p.29. Aristotle had made a similar point, noting that a pre-critical understanding can come to grips with the issues raised by the basic principles of morality. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1145b2-7; *Eudemian Ethics* 1216b26-35.
[53] Cited by Stratford Caldecott in the Dawson symposium, *Eternity in Time* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997) p.203.
[54] *A historian and His World*, pp93-94, citing Dawson: 'We must be prepared to find in sex a mysterious element which is akin to the ultimate mysteries of life. The religious significance of sex has always been felt by man. Primitive religion regarded it as the supreme cosmic mystery'.
[55] *A Historian and His World*, pp.193, 136-37, 209-10.
[56] Cited by Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World*, p.210.
[57] *A Historian and His World*, pp.44, 110.
[58] Those which were provided for the Gifford Lectures were apparently prepared by Dawson's friend and collaborator, E. I. Watkin.
[59] *Enquiries in Religion and Culture* and *Medieval Essays* appeared without any Index. *Dynamics of World History* contains an Index that is disappointingly piecemeal and disorganised. *Religion and World Culture* has only an Index of Proper Names.
[60] *Eternity in Time: Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History,* Eds. Stratford Caldecott and John Morrell (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997) p.70.

[61] 'Memories of a Victorian Childhood' (first published in *The Wind and the Rain* in 1949, under the title, 'Tradition and Inheritance'), included as an Appendix to the American edition of Christina Scott's biography, *A Historian and His World* – with these references on pp.221 and 239.
[62] *History in Time*, 51.
[63] *Eternity in Time*, p.70.
[64] *A Historian and His World*, on Belloc's 'triumphal Catholicism', pp.71, 196; on 'Romantic distortions' and 'Catholic illusions' concerning the Middle Ages, pp.120-21; on contemporary Catholicism's tendencies towards sectarianism, pp.133, 141.
[65] DWH 168. We have already seen that Dawson cites William James' empirical findings that religious experience is *sui generis*.
[66] RC 21.
[67] RC 22.

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