

An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's Concept of History:

Chapter Four

The Emergence of a Christian Civilization in the West

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Editor's Note: Earlier chapters of this E-book are available in prior issues of AEJT, 11--13. The author continues to present his case for a significant re-thinking of the place and importance of Christopher Dawson for a contemporary philosophy and theology of history.

We come now to consider the origins and development of our Western civilization. The cradle of this civilization is the European continent. The idea of 'Europe' as a community of peoples united by a common culture is comparatively recent. 'In spite of the Greek origin of the word and its occasional use in the Middle Ages', Dawson wrote, ' "Europe" is a peculiarly modern concept, which was introduced by the scholars of the Renaissance ... for them "Europe" was not a continent but a comparatively small society of peoples' who 'dreamed of the re-flowering of the classical tradition, first in Italy and then in lands beyond the Alps'¹ In fact, during the long period in which the world religion of Christian faith engendered the unity of culture that animated a new civilization, the European continent was a patchwork of diverse cultural groups who saw themselves as having little in common.

The Greco-Roman culture that united the Hellenistic civilization, as we have seen, proved unstable and transitional. For Dawson, this illustrated a general principle of cultural evolution. The last stage of a culture, he wrote, 'is not

¹ DWH 406

decay but syncretism'. The cultural development which took place in the final phase of Hellenistic culture, Dawson observed, 'was not merely of importance as the conclusion of the old world, it had decisive influence on the future'². Thus the pantheon of Hellenistic deities was an amalgamation of the gods of the subjugated peasant culture and those of the conquering warrior culture³. But in this period of decline, the Hellenistic religious tradition had lost its vitality: Dawson pointed to clear evidence of this in the evolution of the role of the temple priesthood – as this institution lost its religious vitality and became 'a purely social institution – a sort of honorary ornamental magistracy'⁴. That the Hellenistic culture of the first century AD was open to new influences was evident in the spread of exotic Eastern cults. But the internal resources of this culture were unable to supply this need. 'It was through the golden mouth of Plato', Dawson wrote that the vision of the two worlds – the world of appearance and shadow, and the world of timeless, changeless reality – found classical expression in the West'⁵. But the teaching of Plato did not inspire a religious response that could revitalise the ailing culture. 'Nothing could show the impossibility of curing the ills of humanity by pure intelligence more completely', Dawson wrote, 'than Plato's own attempt to reform the state of Sicily by giving a young tyrant lessons in mathematics'. 'The political problems of the Greek world', he concluded, 'were solved not by the philosopher-king but by condottieri and Macedonian generals, and the gulf between the spiritual world and human life grew steadily wider until the coming of Christianity'⁶.

Coming into a Hellenistic culture whose decline had encouraged a spirit of syncretism and a search for a more satisfying vision of human existence, the

² DWH 385

³ DWH 96

⁴ RC 84

⁵ DWH 119-20

⁶ DWH 181

message of Christian faith began to make converts. Dawson's understanding of the evolution of human cultures helps us to situate the biblical story which is the heart of Christian faith within the broader picture of human history; his description of Christian faith's antecedents and the message it brought to the world of the first century was well informed, in tune with the findings of today's biblical scholarship. Christian faith saw itself as the heir to the monotheistic tradition of Israel, and as fulfilling the great hope this tradition had engendered.

As we have seen already, Dawson saw the monotheistic tradition as an extraordinary outcome of the interaction of peasant and warrior cultures. He described as remarkable, 'the interaction between the religion of the warlike pastoral Hebrew tribes and the fertility cults of the ... Canaanite population', an outcome in which 'the "gods of the land" never succeeded in coming to terms with the deity of the immigrants'. 'The religion of the Jewish people' Dawson concluded, 'owed its characteristic form to a series of reactions on the part of the religious tradition of the conquerors *against* the process of assimilation that was the normal condition elsewhere'⁷.

We have already noted Dawson's observation that the gods of the ancient world 'do not seem to belong to a different order of reality from that of nature'⁸. This apparently simple statement has momentous philosophical implications, which help us to understand the absolute monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In fact, it was a failure to recognise that the transcendent Absolute belongs to a different order from that of nature that prevented Plato and the Greek philosophers from arriving at an unambiguous monotheism.

⁷ DWH 96

⁸ RC 144

Gerhard Lohfink, a contemporary scripture scholar has commented on this fact, writing: ‘the great Greek philosophers ... in one decisive point never attained the unique aspect of Jewish belief in God: they could not reach the concept of genuine *creation* ... It was inaccessible to the Greeks because they could neither free themselves from the numinous divinity of the world, or achieve a consistent idea of a God who is utterly Other, a God who stands over against the world and its history’⁹.

Lohfink continues: ‘The sharp distinction between God and the world that Israel had discovered and from which all the history of enlightenment from then until now is derived was thus not a further development of Greek philosophy, nor was it a concentration or sublimation of the Eastern myths of the gods; it arose out of the experience of a God who constantly led Israel out of societies in which everything was static and divinized. In this very experience of constantly being led out Israel found that its God was revealed as the Wholly Other, absolutely distinct from a numinous, god-infested world’.

‘Even the critics (of biblical faith)’, Dawson wrote in 1935, ‘admit the unique character of the relations between Israel and its God. In the case of the other Semitic peoples this relationship is a natural one and consists in the kinship of the people with its god. Only in the case of Israel is the relation an adoptive one that had its origin in a series of particular historical events ... And in the writings of the prophets we see how the successive crises of Jewish history were the occasion of fresh revelation of the divine vocation of Israel and of the divine purpose in history’. With the passing of time, the message of denunciation against Israel’s unfaithfulness and human pride in general is associated with ‘an increasing revelation of the hope of Israel. The New Jerusalem will not be a

⁹ G. Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* (Collegeville Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 4,5. Lohfink refers his readers to Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936) 42-83).

kingdom like the kingdoms of the Gentiles, but an eternal and universal one, founded in a new spiritual covenant ... in the book of Daniel which formed a model for later apocalyptic literature ... the Kingdom of God does not belong to the series of the world empires, it is something that comes from outside and replaces them ... It is the universal kingdom of the Son of Man which will destroy the kingdoms of the four beasts and will endure for ever’.

‘This is the tradition’, Dawson continued, ‘that was inherited by the Christian Church. Indeed it may be said that it was precisely this prophetic and apocalyptic element in Judaism to which Christianity appealed ... to the primitive Christian it was in the literal sense the Good News of the Kingdom. It was the announcement of a cosmic revolution, the beginning of a new world order: the dispensation of the fullness of time to re-establish all things in Christ’¹⁰.

The world religions were inspired by the discovery of a transcendent order against which human existence and destiny must be measured. Christianity found this measure through faith in the One God of Israel’s scriptures which recognised the unfolding of a divine purpose in history, a purpose finally expressed and fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Word of God.

This Christian vision challenged the outlook of Hellenism, Dawson wrote, ‘History was not longer a mere unintelligible chaos of disconnected events ... Eternity had entered into time and henceforward the singular and the temporal had acquired eternal significance. The closed circle of time had been broken and a ladder had been let down from heaven to earth by which mankind can

¹⁰ DWH 252-54

escape from the “sorrowful wheel” which had cast its shadow over Greek and Indian thought, and go forward in newness of life to a new world’¹¹.

In another place, Dawson further explained the vision Christian faith brought to the ancient world: ‘The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is not simply a theophany – a revelation of God to man; it is a new creation – the introduction of a new spiritual principle which gradually leavens and transforms human nature into something new ... the unique divine event gives spiritual unity to the whole historical process ... The Christian conception of history is essentially unitary. It has a beginning, a centre and an end ... (which) transcend history ... they are not historical events in the ordinary sense of the word, but acts of divine creation to which the whole process of history is subordinate ... The world-transforming events which changed the whole course of human history have occurred as it were under the surface of history unnoticed by the historians and philosophers. This is the great paradox of the gospel, as St Paul asserts with such tremendous force. The great mystery of the divine purpose which has been hidden throughout the ages has now been manifested in the sight of heaven and earth by the apostolic ministry ... He fully accepted the Jewish doctrine of a sacred history which would justify the ways of God to man. What he denied was an external justification by the manifest triumph of Jewish national hope. The ways of God are deeper and more mysterious than that, so that the fulfilment of prophecy towards which the whole of history of Israel was tended had been concealed from Israel by the scandal of the Cross’¹².

The spread of Christian faith was to engender a new order of civilization; but the cultural turmoil of the region we now call Europe, which lasted for several centuries, proved to be an important factor in the gradual shaping of this new

¹¹ DWH 256

¹² DWH 236-38

civilization. A few historical details will help us situate the developments we are going to discuss¹³.

The 'Franks', who were to play a major part in the first phase of these developments were tribal warrior groups who infiltrated the northern region of the old Roman territories from early in the fifth century. They shared much in common, including their Germanic dialects and similar religious cults, and were given a collective name, 'the Franks' (literally, 'brave ones'). They were to drive the rival Visigoths over the Pyrenees and subjugate other tribal groups. Having become overlords, they allowed Latin speakers in the northern region under their rule, including nobility and Catholic clergy, to stay on, provided they accepted the authority of the Frankish kings. In the southern region, where the conquerors were very much outnumbered by people of the old Greco-Roman culture, they were gradually absorbed into a society that gave birth to the French language. This region, however, lived under the authority of barbarian kings and paid their taxes to them.

The rule of these Frankish kings was exercised, in time, by two dynasties. The *Merovingian* dynasty (called after a tribal ancestor) came to power when Clovis (465-511) overthrew the last Roman governor in Gaul, taking control of a large area between the Somme and the Loire. Still a pagan, he married Clotilda of Burgundy who converted him to Christianity after a victory over the Alemanni, another barbarian group. With two thousand of his warriors he was baptised by Remigius, the bishop of Reims. A supporter of orthodoxy, he did battle against the Arian Visigoths, taking possession of territory reaching Bordeaux and Toulouse, and making Paris his capital.

¹³ What follows is in large part derived from Alessandro Barbaro's *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (London: Folio Society, 2006) 5-23.

The Merovingian dynasty disintegrated, weakened by the custom of dividing the kingdom among the sons of the deceased ruler. Whereas, in the barbarian culture from which these kings had come, these kings had a sacred priestly role on behalf of the people comparable in importance with their warrior leadership, after their conversion to Christianity, this role lost its significance. As a result, officials of the royal household, known as ‘Mayors or the Palace’ – men who boasted no sacred charism, but knew how to lead the Franks to victory – became increasingly powerful.

In 688, Pepin of Herstal, a powerful Mayor, took over effective rule of the Frankish people. In 714, Pepin’s son, Charles Martel inherited his effective rule, increasing his prestige by defeating a Muslim incursion at Poitiers (732). When Charles Martel’s son, another Pepin, became effective ruler he proclaimed himself king in 751, and was anointed in the role by the bishops of Gaul. In 754, Pope Stephen, under threat in Rome from the barbarian Lombards, came to Gaul and repeated the consecration.

Charlemagne (747-814), ‘Charles the Great’, the eldest son of Pepin who gave the *Carolingian* dynasty its name, became the undisputed ruler of the Franks, when his younger brother died at an early age in 771. Charlemagne’s immense achievements helped shape the future course of European history, as we shall see. However, his dynasty did not long survive after his death.

The cultural development which took place during the period we have outlined, which in Dawson’s judgment laid the foundations of Western civilization, had at its heart a ‘dualism’ – the coexistence of two cultural strains which interacted creatively in a way that enriched them both. We are familiar with this dynamic in Dawson’s earlier analysis of the interaction between the peasant and the warrior cultures. In this case, it brought forth an actualisation of the

potentialities of human nature which gives the Western tradition its distinctive characteristics. In the formative period of this cultural tradition, this dualism brought together the barbarian vitality of the warrior tribes dominating the continent, and the vision of the Christian faith to which they were converted as they embraced the higher culture of the peoples they had conquered. An interaction took place in which the ideals of Christian faith – which at first sight seemed to have little prospect of surviving – not only survived true to their origins, but brought forth a vital new culture which brought to light the potentialities of these ideals in a way that the Eastern Christian tradition was unable to do, in the absence of this challenging dualism.

Dawson was of the opinion that the period we are considering has not been sufficiently studied by modern historians, with the result that its importance in the formation of our Western tradition has been little appreciated. He attributed this neglect to ‘the curious divorce between ancient and modern history’¹⁴. In another place, Dawson explained further this neglect of the period we have come to call ‘the Middle Ages’. The ‘idealisation of classical antiquity’ which ‘became the characteristic feature of Renaissance culture, affected every aspect of Western thought ... above all, it changed the Western view of history, and inaugurated a new type of historiography ... Thus the unity of the medieval conception of history was lost and in its place there gradually developed a new pattern of history which eventually took the form of a threefold division between the ancient, medieval and modern periods, a pattern which in spite of its arbitrary and unscientific character has dominated the teaching of history down to modern times and still affects our attitude to the past’¹⁵. In his long critique of Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to which reference was made early in this study, Dawson attributed the

¹⁴ RWC 28

¹⁵ DWH 245.

shortcomings of this influential work to the outlook we have described: ‘His thought had been so moulded by the culture of the Enlightenment that he could recognise no other values. Everything that was of value in the world came from antiquity, or from the modern classical culture that was rooted in antiquity. The world between was a world of darkness and disorder, of superstition and barbarism’,¹⁶

Making the analysis of the medieval period we are now to consider, Dawson is something of a pioneer, therefore. As a consequence, we may well ask ourselves whether the judgments he makes are reliable. I am reassured when I compare his work with that of the Dominican theologian, M.-D. Chenu¹⁷. Chenu’s work, the outcome of a lifetime of specialized study, comprehensively documents the period of the remarkable renaissance which took place towards the end of the medieval period. Dawson’s Gifford Lectures (1948 and 1949), *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, present an interpretation of the cultural dynamics at work in the late medieval period completely in harmony with Chenu’s findings.

A comparison of the interpretation of the medieval period in the West offered by Dawson with that of Jacques Le Goff, in his influential work, *Medieval Civilization (400-1500)*¹⁸, is enlightening. Le Goff makes use of Chenu’s research. However, his comments on Chenu’s approach show his understanding of an acceptable historical methodology to be diametrically opposed to Dawson’s. As we have seen in Chapter 1, Dawson saw the achievements of great historians of the past as involving a sympathetic ‘identification with their subject’ (as in the case of Gibbon) which made possible the ‘intuitive

¹⁶ DWH 333.

¹⁷ *La théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957). An English version of a large part of this work was published in 1968, under the title, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: University Press).

¹⁸ *Medieval Civilization 400-1500* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1988), a version of the French edition 1964/84.

understanding, creative imagination an universal vision' with which they approached their work of critical analysis and interpretation (as in the case of von Ranke and de Tocquville). Le Goff, on the other hand, criticises M.-D.Chenu and Henri de Lubac for adopting such an approach: 'Even when their analyses are as luminous, as penetrating and as sensitive to developments as are those of Père Chenu or Père de Lubac, which have deepened historical understanding, they are dependent on a *parti pris* (in the best sense of the phrase). One must distance oneself from this to try to cast a light on the intellectual history of the middle ages which is perhaps less "affectionate" '19.

In other words, Le Goff assumes that a sympathetic identification with the subject makes an acceptable critical analysis impossible. It is important, of course, for historians to recognise the distinction of these two dimensions of their task, and their inherent limitations; but the examples given by Dawson make it clear that they are certainly not incompatible. In fact, the approach taken by Le Goff arrives at an understanding of medieval Christianity which, to those who understand the genius of Christianity, seems like a caricature which completely disregards the self-understanding of the period. Le Goff's main interest, as he makes his interpretation, is material and economic development during the period, and he has made an important contribution in this field. In the realm of ideas, his interpretative frame of reference is the outlook of contemporary modernity, for which he seeks remote origins in medieval culture – a legitimate line of inquiry, but one which proves insufficient when it disregards the spiritual dynamisms that shaped the remarkable achievements of medieval Christendom

In making a pioneering study of the cultural complexities of this long and turbulent period, Dawson may well have made judgments that can be qualified

¹⁹ *Medieval Civilization*,p.344.

in the light of later research. However, what he has written sheds a great deal of light on this period, and makes a convincing case that the outcome of its cultural interactions helped to shape the Western civilized tradition. Let us now follow something of the analysis he has made.

Developments in the East – the region around the Aegean Sea dominated by the new imperial capital at Constantinople – were more straightforward than what was to unfold in the West. ‘For centuries to come’, Dawson wrote, ‘the Eastern empire was to remain the centre of the development of Christian thought and culture. The new religion had its origin in the semi-oriental underworld of the great Hellenistic cities ... estranged from the soulless materialistic culture of the Roman world-state. By degrees it permeated the whole society ... and inspired a new type of Byzantine culture ... The mother tongue of the Church was Greek and its theological development was mainly due to Asiatic Greek councils and Asiatic Greek theologians’. Meanwhile, in the Latin West, Dawson continued, ‘paganism was still strong, and the ruling classes, and, far more the rural population, were still largely non-Christian in culture and tradition’²⁰. Dawson judged that because the Christian tradition of the East did not face these overt challenges, it gave little attention to ‘historical and social issues’, and moved towards becoming ‘an absolute static religion of the Oriental type’. As a consequence it experienced ‘a decline in moral energy and in spiritual freedom and initiative’. Its energies came to be applied to ‘the mystical and metaphysical side of religion’²¹.

We shall have little further to say of the Byzantine culture, because our study aims to give an understanding of the Western tradition. It would be unfortunate, however, if the reader were not alerted to the immense contribution of the

²⁰ RWC 29

²¹ DWH 186.

Christian tradition of the East to the life of the whole Christian Church. Dawson's comparison of the two traditions is enlightening. Western Christianity, reflecting the pragmatic outlook of the Roman tradition, and facing practical problems which threatened to overwhelm it (such as apostasy during persecution and a subsequent weakening of Church unity, and later, coming to terms with barbarian invasions) developed a theology which, Dawson said, 'found its centre and principle of organisation in the doctrine of Grace, the Sacraments are conceived primarily as means of Grace, the Christian life as the Life of Grace ... Thus the tendency of Western theology finds its representative in St Augustine, the Doctor of Grace, whose influence dominates the whole medieval development'. The cultural heritage of Hellenism led the Eastern tradition along another path: 'In the East, theology is the doctrine of the Consubstantial Word. The Sacraments are conceived as mysteries of illumination, and the Christian life is seen a process of deification by which humanity is assimilated to the immortal nature of the Divine Word'; and 'the typical representative of Eastern theology is to be found in Origen, who continued the development of Greek Christian thought through the medium of Athanasius and the great Cappadocian Fathers, Basil and the two Gregorys'²². Thus the whole Church owes to the Eastern tradition what Dawson described as 'the great age of creative theological thought', in which 'the development of dogma was organically linked with sacramentalism and mysticism ... three aspects of a single reality – the great mystery of restoration, illumination and deification of humanity by the Incarnation of the Divine Word'²³.

It is impossible to understand the strengths that brought Western Christianity through the many challenges it was to face if the debt it owes to the Eastern tradition is not recognised. Dawson commented: 'While the Orthodox East was

²² *Medieval Essays* (ME) (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953) p.99.

²³ DWH 186.

too proud of its high culture and its wealth of theological learning to learn anything from the West, the Latin world remained open to oriental influences' as evidenced in the works, for instance, of Jerome, Marius Victorinus, Hilary, and Ambrose; and the translations of Denis the Areopagite had considerable influence on the development of religious thought in the medieval period²⁴. As we shall see, the monastic ideal was a gift of the Eastern tradition to the West²⁵. This gift was reshaped, however, in the spirit of the West by the practical approach of St Benedict.

In the West, the Christian movement faced challenges that were unavoidable. The aristocratic class, Dawson wrote, even after Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire, 'shut its eyes to the existence of the new faith'. This conservatism was strongest in the West, where Roman patriotism and the old senatorial class resented the transfer of the imperial capital to Constantinople, and held the Christians responsible for undermining the morale of the state as it faced the attacks of the northern barbarians. 'There were a few Western European cities such as Rome and Lyons', Dawson wrote, 'which had an important share in the first movement of Christian expansion', but even at Rome the pagan resistance was strong. 'There were only eighteen years between (the emperor) Theodosius' closing of the (pagan) temples and the first sack of the Eternal City by the barbarians' (410)²⁶.

The Western sphere included the southern region around the shores of the Mediterranean, where the barbarian conquerors were vastly outnumbered by the Latin-speaking population. However the spread of a vital Christianity was hampered there by the fact that the conquerors were Arian Christians who sometimes persecuted those who did not embrace Arianism. Paradoxically, as

²⁴ ME 100.

²⁵ Cf. ME 19-20.

²⁶ RWC 29-30

Dawson pointed out, the northern regions, ‘where the conquerors were far more barbarous in culture and pagan in religion ... were more accessible to the missionary action of the Church, which was also the representative of the higher culture ... The spiritual resources of the Church had not been seriously impaired by the fall of the Empire. Indeed in certain respects they were strengthened, since the Church now united the social tradition of Roman culture with its own spiritual tradition, and thus fulfilled a double function in a society which needed social as well as religious leadership’. The barbarian rulers maintained social order of a sort ‘but everything belonged to the Church – moral authority, learning and culture, the prestige of the Roman name and the care of the people. A man’s real citizenship was not to be found in his subjection to the barbarian state, but in his membership of the Christian Church, and it was to the bishop rather than to the king that he looked to as leader of Christian society’. ‘A process of assimilation was going on’, Dawson wrote, ‘which tended to create a new social unity’. But this evolution had a down side. ‘As the barbarians were converted to Christianity, they also acquired elements of the higher culture’; at the same time, however, ‘the Christian society was gradually losing touch with the traditions of Roman culture, and was itself becoming positively barbarized’. By the age of Gregory of Tours (538-94), Dawson wrote, ‘the barbarism which had destroyed the Empire had also invaded the Church. The Merovingian kings had not ceased to be barbarous by becoming Christians. Indeed, in proportion as they became detached from the tribal background of the old Germanic kingship, they seemed to become more ferocious, more treacherous and more corrupt ... the outward decline in the condition of culture was accompanied by a deterioration of moral standards which also affected the bishops and the monasteries’²⁷.

²⁷ RWC 31-33

‘The declining civilization of the post-Roman period’, Dawson wrote, became ‘a world in which war and famine and slavery and torture were the unavoidable facts of daily experience, where the weak could hardly survive, and the strong died young in battle’. Magnanimous statesman that he was, Gregory the Great gives us a glimpse of the age as he bewails these evils – prisoners ‘tied by the neck like dogs and led away into slavery’, peasants mutilated, cities depopulated and starving. ‘Everywhere we see sorrow and lamentation’, he wrote, ‘No peasant is left to till the fields, there are few inhabitants left in the cities ... Some are led away captive ... and still more slain before our eyes’²⁸.

How was the Christian faith to remain true to its tradition in this chaotic situation? The Western Church, Dawson wrote, did not see itself as having a ‘civilizing mission’, and had no ‘conscious hope of social progress’. It brought to the times ‘a tremendous message of divine judgment and salvation. Humanity ... was sinking ever deeper under the burden of its own guilt. Only by the way of the Cross and by the grace of the crucified Redeemer was it possible for men to extricate themselves from the *massa damnata* of regenerate humanity and escape from the wreckage of a doomed world’²⁹. It is not difficult to recognise that this outlook left its mark on the psyche of Western Christianity.

Dawson saw this situation as affecting the Western tradition in another way. How was the Christian message to express its authority in the midst of this barbaric and largely illiterate people? Apart from the wrath of God, Dawson wrote, ‘the vengeance of the saints was the only power capable of intimidating the lawless ruffians who were so common among the new ruling class in the semi-barbaric Frankish state’. ‘In the Dark Ages’, he continued, ‘the saints

²⁸ RWC 35-36

²⁹ RWC 35

were not merely patterns of moral perfection whose prayers were invoked by the Church. They were supernatural powers who inhabited their sanctuaries and continued to watch over the welfare of their land and their people'. He pointed to the outstanding example of St Martin, whose shrine at Tours was 'a fountain of grace and miraculous healing, to which the sick resorted from all parts of Gaul; an asylum where all the oppressed – the fugitive slave, the escaped criminal and even those on whom the vengeance of the king had fallen – could find refuge and supernatural protection'.

'It would be difficult', Dawson continued, 'to exaggerate the importance of the cult of the saints in the period that followed the fall of the Empire in the West, for it was felt equally at both ends of the social scale – among leaders of culture like Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great, and among the common people, especially the peasants who, as "pagani" had hitherto been unaffected by the new religion of the cities'. The legends of the saints, Dawson wrote, became 'a new Christian mythology', telling of 'the world of divine power and mystery in which the harsh necessities of daily experience no longer dominate man's life – where nothing is impossible and every human suffering and misfortune may find a remedy'. 'In this twilight world', he continued, 'it was inevitable that the Christian ascetic and saint should acquire some of the features of the pagan shaman and demigod: that his prestige should depend upon his power as a wonder-worker and that men should seek his decision in the same way as they had formerly resorted to the shrine of a pagan oracle'.

'It is very difficult for the modern mind', Dawson commented, 'to enter into the world of popular Christian imagination which finds expression in the early medieval legends of the saints, since it is further removed from us than the mysticism of the late Middle Ages, or the metaphysical religion of the age of the Fathers. Yet it is genuinely Christian in spirit, though it is the Christianity

of a society striving against the all-pervading influence of a barbaric environment’³⁰. Associated with this cult of the saints and their shrines were the medieval practice of pilgrimages and the veneration of relics. The fact that these things are not easy for the modern mind to appreciate, and the place that they retained in the popular religion of Catholicism long after the circumstances which inspired them had changed, was to prove something of an embarrassment to the Catholic tradition at the time of the Reformation and its aftermath.

Dawson links the spirit in which these practices originally developed, however, with the central truth of Christian faith, the Incarnation as ‘the revelation of the divine purpose manifested on earth and in time, as the fulfilment of the ages’. The liturgical celebration of the feast-days of the saints, he wrote, provided an element of historical and social continuity. ‘It is almost impossible to convey to the modern mind the realism and objectivity with which the Christians of those ages viewed this participation in the mystery of salvation. The commemoration and mystical re-presentation of the sacred history was at the same time the initiation and rebirth of the creature into an eternal existence ... the old order has already passed away and the eternal world invaded and transfused the world of time’³¹. We may be tempted to see Dawson reading into this situation an awareness that he derived from contemporary theology. In 1964, the German theologian, Romano Guardini, in an open letter to the Mainz Liturgical Congress, discussing the problems the contemporary Church faces in fostering greater liturgical ‘participation’, recalled an experience he once had in Sicily, of a situation not culturally remote from what Dawson has described – watching ‘the attention with which the people were following the blessings on Holy Saturday for hours on end without books or any words of “explanation”’ – he became profoundly aware that ‘looking’ can be ‘in itself a living participation in

³⁰ RWC 33-34

³¹ RWC 42

the act'. One of the problems the contemporary Church faces, he declared, is the fact that today's culture has robbed most people of the contemplative ability displayed by these simple unlettered people³².

What we have just heard from Dawson concerning the vision of hope Christian faith brought to the Dark Ages, invites us to clarify further Christian theology's interpretation of the 'Good News' which is the heart of Christian faith. As we have seen, the Christian movement inherited from Judaism an assured hope in the coming of an eternal and universal 'kingdom' of God, established by a gratuitous divine adoption which gives a final expression to the ways of the living God. Christian faith saw in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the mysterious fulfilment of this hope, a 'mystery' of divine purpose, hidden from all ages and now revealed in the Saviour who is, in person, the Good News of God for every age and every human situation. In him the ways of God have been finally revealed – ways that will be fulfilled as the whole of creation is gathered up in God's final achievement. And these ways must find expression in the lives of God's people – ways of compassion and reconciliation, ways of generosity and love, ways that are open to all that is authentic and life giving, ways that, while they affirm the value and uniqueness of every human person will never use personal advantage to dominate and manipulate others, ways that recognise that the form all human relations should have is that of friendship.

To the age we have been considering, so well interpreted for us by Dawson – overwhelmed as it has been by a culture of barbarism – these ideals, if they could have been clearly articulated, would have seemed an impossible ideal in the present world. They were looked forward to in the life of eternity. But the message of the Christian gospel was capable of inspiring a far more optimistic

³² *Herder Correspondence*, vol.1 n.8, 1964.

interpretation. And it was in the monastic movement that we must now consider that this interpretation began to become a manifest reality in the life of the Christian people, with far reaching implications for the ongoing development of the civilized tradition of the West.

‘Throughout the whole period that extends from the decline of classical civilization, to the rise of the European universities’, Dawson wrote, ‘the monastery was the most typical cultural institution’. ‘It was through monasticism’, he concluded, ‘that religion exercised a direct formative influence on the whole cultural development of these centuries’³³.

After the age of the Christian martyrs, those who embraced a heroic life of asceticism, either singly or in groups, took their place in Christian imagination as witnesses to the world to come. This movement developed rapidly in the East, and – at the time when Rome itself was under threat from barbarian invaders – it led influential Western thinkers such as Jerome (d. 420) and Cassian (d. 435) to go and see for themselves the developments taking place in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. The writings of John Cassian, founder of a monastery in Marseilles, had great influence in fostering monastic life in the West.

In the West, however, the monastic movement soon developed a culture very different from the eccentric individualism which often characterised developments in the East. ‘There was much in oriental monasticism’, Dawson wrote, ‘that was repugnant to the disciplined and practical ethos of the Roman tradition’. St Augustine (d.430), though he was a bishop, had with a group of followers embraced a monastic form of life. He was, Dawson wrote, one of the creators of the Western monastic tradition, outspoken in condemning the

³³ RWC 44.

hypocrisy of false ascetics and wandering monks who lived in idleness and exploited popular superstition.

The political situation in the West made it possible for monasticism to develop as a kind of alternative society. Dawson helps us to understand the influence of Western monasticism by situating it in a society struggling not to be overwhelmed by the barbarism we have become familiar with. In the political stability of Eastern Christianity, monasticism was subject to the imperial legislation of Justinian; in the West, however, the barbarian rulers were in no position to control the new movement – so that, in the words of Dawson, the great legislators of (Western) monasticism were St Benedict (d.547) and St Gregory the Great (d.604). ‘The Rule of St Benedict’, he added, ‘marks the final assimilation of the monastic institution by the Roman spirit and the tradition of the Western Church’³⁴.

The monastic community which developed, Dawson wrote, was a self-contained society ‘which was completely Christian in so far as it existed only for spiritual ends and was regulated down to the most minute detail by a rule of life which took the place of social custom and secular law. Thus it was a free society, independent of external control and based on voluntary membership ... Thus in an age of insecurity and disorder and barbarism, the Benedictine Rule embodied an ideal of spiritual order and disciplined moral activity which made the monastery an oasis of peace in a world of war’. We can glimpse the Christian ethos of this age when we learn that Gregory the Great – himself a Roman aristocrat who had embraced the monastic life, and who was certainly not lacking in a sense of social responsibility, as his achievements on the world stage make clear - deliberately dissuaded his friends from entering public

³⁴ RWC 44-47

service, on the grounds that the world was nearing its end and that it was better to seek the peace of the cloister in which a man became a partaker in eternity ³⁵.

The movement spread rapidly in the West, reaching Spain and Britain at the same time as Gaul, and it soon reached Ireland. Dawson pointed to the ironic fact that the monastic way of life had a certain similarity with the culture of a tribal warrior society: ‘On the one side we have the chieftain and his company of warriors who are bound to follow him to the death; on the other, we have the abbot and his community which is sworn to obedience to eternal life’. Each culture was founded on honour and fidelity; each was bonded together by the stories of their heroic traditions. ‘This correspondence’, Dawson wrote, ‘made it possible for men to pass from one to the other by a profound change in their beliefs and their system of moral values without losing vital contact with the old social tradition, which was sublimated and transformed, but not destroyed or lost’. Dawson linked this parallel with the remarkable fact that ‘so many men and women’ of royal blood and the lesser nobility ‘entered the cloister and took a leading part in the conversion of their kinsfolk’ ³⁶.

The spread of monasticism inevitably led to educational initiatives. New candidates must be instructed in Christian doctrine, in reading and writing and the Latin tongue, in the skills necessary for the life of the monastery such as agriculture and building construction, calligraphy, music, and a knowledge of the calendar. ‘Thus there developed’, Dawson wrote, ‘an autonomous Christian culture centring in the monasteries and permeating the Church and the life of the people’ ³⁷.

³⁵ RWC 47-49

³⁶ RWC 50-51

³⁷ RWC 51

As we have seen, Dawson judged that a healthy culture is ‘a living whole’ – ‘from its roots in the soil, and in the simple instinctive life of the shepherds ... up to its flowering in the highest achievements of the artist and the philosopher’³⁸. For this reason, he saw as a significant factor in the decline of the Greco-Roman civilization, its loss of a vital relationship with the peasant way of life of its origins. We are reminded of these judgments, as Dawson describes another achievement of the monastic movement. The benefits it brought to northern Europe went far beyond the educational developments we have just mentioned. The strength of the new movement, Dawson wrote, ‘was due, not only to its appeal to the kings and nobles of the barbarian kingdom, it was also a power ... which brought Christian culture to the heart of the rural society. For the monastery was ... capable of becoming the spiritual and economic centre of a purely rural society ... so that the peasant who for so long had been the forgotten bearer of the whole social structure, found his way of life recognised and honoured by the highest spiritual authority of the age’. Dawson went on to quote the writings of Gregory the Great who, in giving ‘a most sympathetic picture of the peasant life of contemporary Italian monasticism’, described an abbot who ‘when summoned to give an account of his mission, presented himself before the pope’s messengers in peasant dress and hobnail shoes carrying the scythe with which he had been mowing the hay’. ‘It was the discipline and tireless labour of the monks which turned the tide of barbarism in Western Europe’, Dawson wrote, ‘and brought back into cultivation the lands which had been deserted and depopulated in the age of the (barbarian) invasions’³⁹.

The part played by monasticism in the formation of European culture has often been pointed out. John Henry Newman, for instance, summed up this

³⁸ DWH 387

³⁹ RWC 52-53

movement. ‘Benedict’, he wrote, ‘found a world, physical and social, in ruins; and his mission was to restore it, in the way not of science, but of nature ... so quietly, so patiently, so gradually, that often till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration, rather than a ... correction or conversion. The new work which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing and building ... There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city’⁴⁰.

Robert Nisbet, the social philosopher, could be giving a commentary on Newman’s words as he explained what was essential to the movement inspired by *The Rule of St Benedict*. What he wrote helps us to appreciate the formative influence this movement was to have in the emergence of European civilization⁴¹. It was, he wrote, an ‘uncovering of those autonomous and free interdependences among human beings which are believed to be natural to man and his morality ... the most fundamental aim of the tradition of community in Western social thought’ (150). Monasticism’s ‘complex of values centred upon decentralisation of the social order’ – which was in contrast with what was taken for granted in the Roman Empire that preceded it and in the modern national state that succeeded it. Nisbet related this attitude to the general ethos which was to develop later in the Middle Ages, to be considered later in this chapter: a ‘natural autonomy of the competent groups of the social order: family, local community, guild, church, and the various forms of voluntary association’ (151). The monastic spirit was ‘a resurrection of what is believed to be essential in man’s nature ... reliance upon a simple untrammelled

⁴⁰ Cited RWC 53-54.

⁴¹ R. Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983). References which follow at to this work.

cooperation and love among human beings rather than coercion in many of its manifestations' (151). In this context, Nisbet wrote, Benedict's *Rule* showed a 'penetrating insight into the competitive impulses which can operate even in a setting that is communal'; 'What the rule says', Nisbet wrote, 'is that even the most virtuous of objectives must be pursued in moderation, without the kind of single-mindedness, the fanatical intensity, that has often in history transformed even the good into the despotic and corrupting' (158). The monastic spirit, Nisbet wrote, found a harmony with nature which 'made possible the reclamation of marshes, waterless areas and impassable forests ... in non-exploitative fashion' (153). And Nisbet noted the 'essential *healthiness*' of Benedict's attitude to the monks' welfare in mind and body, which was never dealt with 'other than with respect'. One of the most remarkable qualities noted by those who have studied the Benedictine Rule, he wrote, is the fact that 'it is composed of injunctions which elevate, rather than degrade the human body and its functions' (155-56).

Celtic monasticism's influence was similar to that of the Benedictine monasteries. In Ireland, a tradition of learning was stimulated by its interaction with the old barbarian culture: the Christian culture, Dawson wrote, 'had to compete with a very ancient and elaborate system of vernacular cultures and education, which had been handed down for centuries by the sacred order of seers and poets who held a very important place in Irish society'; as a consequence, 'the representatives of the new culture could only triumph by meeting their rivals on their own ground, as men of learning and masters of the word of power, and therefore it was natural that Irish monasteries should ... become not only abodes of prayer and asceticism but also schools and centres of learning',⁴².

⁴² RWC 54

This vital Celtic monasticism produced a movement of missionary expansion which contributed to the Church on the continent, and brought a new vitality to the monastic life in Western Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries. As the monastic traditions of continental Europe and the Celts came to interact, Dawson wrote, ‘the Rule of St Benedict showed its greatness, providing the ideal *via media* between the superhuman asceticism of Celtic monasticism and the chaotic multiplicity of independent rules and observances that prevailed in Merovingian Gaul’⁴³.

It was in Anglo-Saxon England, Dawson observed, ‘that the meeting of the two monastic traditions produced the deepest and most lasting influence in Western culture’. Gregory the Great had sent Benedictine missionaries to southern Britain from Rome; and Celtic missionaries had converted the region of Northumbria, founding the island monastery of Lindisfarne in 634. It was in this region, Dawson wrote, ‘that the two traditions influenced and stimulated one another’. The result was an outstanding culture that is evident in the writings of Venerable Bede (d.735), in the calligraphy of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and in a vernacular literature that showed ‘how the new literary culture was able to assimilate and preserve the epic traditions of the old heroic poetry of the Teutonic barbarians’⁴⁴.

It was from this monastic culture that both St Boniface (675-753), the ‘apostle of Germany’, and Alcuin (730-804), the influential advisor of Charlemagne, came. Both of them were to have key roles in developments which were to reap some of the fruits of the age of monasticism.

⁴³ RWC 57-58

⁴⁴ RWC 58, 60-61

‘The work of St Boniface’, Dawson wrote, ‘did more than any other factor to lay the foundations of medieval Christianity. His mission to Germany was not an isolated spiritual adventure like the achievements of his Celtic predecessors; it was part of a far-sighted program of construction and reform, planned with all the method and statesmanship of the Roman tradition. It involved a triple alliance between Anglo-Saxon missionaries, the Papacy, and the family of Charles Martel, the *de facto* rulers of the Frankish Kingdom, out of which the Carolingian Empire and Carolingian culture ultimately emerged’. As apostolic legate of the Holy See, Boniface was able to challenge the resistance he encountered from local monastic groups and local bishops. With the help of the sons of Charles Martel, he carried through a program of ecclesiastical reform in a series of local councils held between 740 and 747⁴⁵. Boniface consecrated Pepin as king of the Franks in 753.

All of this was only possible with the help of Anglo-Saxon monks and missionaries, whose monasteries – drawing on the heritage of Northumbrian culture – became centres of Christian culture and missionary outreach to newly converted regions. These monasteries were vast complexes of buildings, housing whole populations of monks and dependents. The monastery, Dawson wrote, had taken the place of the cities of the Roman Empire ‘and was to remain the centre of medieval culture until the rise of the new type of city commune in the eleventh and twelfth centuries’⁴⁶.

The full plan of reform envisaged by Boniface was never realised – meeting opposition from the profoundly secularised episcopate and a lack of cooperation from Pepin. He retired to his former monastic and missionary life, to die a martyr at the hands of barbarian pagans. Later papal initiatives, however, led to

⁴⁵ RWC 62

⁴⁶ RWC 62-63

a new relationship of the Frankish kingdom with the Holy See during the reign of Pepin and his successor, Charlemagne (748-814), a relationship which was to have far reaching consequences.

In the eighth century, the Lombards – a Germanic tribal group which had invaded northern Italy in the sixth century and gone on to establish an extensive kingdom – were threatening the papal territories. They were defeated and brought into subjection by Charlemagne in 774. The king of the Franks became the patron and protector of the Holy See. With Byzantine authority effectively abolished, Charlemagne was, in 800, crowned in Rome by the pope as Emperor of the Romans. Thus the papacy came to accept a situation in which the Carolingian monarchy had a large measure of control over Church property and personnel in the lands ruled by the Franks.

Charlemagne's political success was enormous; directly or indirectly he ruled most of the European continent from eastern Spain to the Danube and the Elbe. Equally impressive, however, was the quality of his administration. 'His sword', Dawson wrote, 'had created the new Empire'; but his enlightened rule was inspired 'by the ideals of the monks and scholars whom he gathered at his court and from whom his counsellors and ministers and officials were recruited'. What developed under Charlemagne's rule, Dawson wrote, 'was an essentially theocratic institution ... In fact the fusion of the temporal and spiritual powers was far more complete in the Carolingian state than it had been ... in the Byzantine Empire. The legislation of Charles the Great, which was of such importance for the development of Western culture ... covered every aspect of the common life of the Christian people, from economics and police to liturgy and higher education and preaching'⁴⁷. In civil administration, bishops shared authority with the counts, being appointed and controlled by the

⁴⁷ RWC 79-80

emperor. In the end, Charlemagne's authority brought about ecclesiastical and liturgical reforms which did much to increase the cultural unity of Europe.

The legislation promulgated by Charlemagne, Dawson wrote, marked 'the emergence of a new social consciousness of Western Christendom'. For the first time, laws which covered the whole field of social activity in Church and state 'referred all things to the single standard of the Christian ethos'. Alcuin (the emperor's Northumbrian monk advisor and scholar) 'writes again and again of Charles as the second David, the chosen leader of the people of God'. This was not empty flattery, Dawson continued, but an indication of 'a unitary conception of the Christian community in which the distinction of Church and state' which we take so much for granted 'had become blurred and unimportant'. For this culture, Dawson wrote, 'both the priest and the king were members and ministers of the same Christian society; both alike were consecrated by God for their office, one to teach and the other to judge'⁴⁸.

Throughout the Middle Ages, this acceptance of two consecrated authorities governing the one society gave rise to tensions and conflicts. This did not mean, however, that the Church's authority was seen as essentially subordinated to that of the ruler. The authority of the anointed monarch, Dawson wrote, was 'counterbalanced throughout the greater part of the Middle Ages by its conditional and revocable character; and this was not a mere concession to theological theory; it was enforced by the very real authority of the Church' – as was dramatically demonstrated twenty years after the death of Charlemagne, when in 834 his successor, Louis the Pious, was judged unfit to rule and deposed by the bishops of the realm⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ RWC 80-81
⁴⁹ RWC 82-83

The achievements of Charlemagne did not last. His successors were men of lesser stature. But the principal reason for this decline was the fact that for the next century and a half Western Christendom experienced a new storm of barbarian invasions, more destructive than those experienced during the decline of the Roman Empire – Scandinavian pirates from the north, Saracen raiders from the western Mediterranean and Magyars from the eastern steppes. Eventually, what began as sporadic raiding gave way to organised invasions by professional Viking armies bent on conquest and settlement. Paris was sacked by the Northmen; Rome was plundered by Saracen raiders. The movement targeted monasteries, the Empire's cultural centres, following the same path, Dawson wrote, as the Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries and spreading a new outburst of barbarism. The monastic culture of Ireland and Northumbria was never to recover. Describing what he called 'the destruction of the Christian people', a contemporary chronicler wrote, 'The Northmen slay and carry off into captivity, destroy the churches and burn the towns. There is no road or place where the ground is not covered with corpses'⁵⁰.

The Carolingian Empire was finished as a political unity, and new kings emerged whose authority came from their ability to protect their region from barbarian invaders. The reign of law initiated by Charlemagne gave way to a society in which the old warrior ethos reasserted itself, and private wars and blood feuds were as prevalent in Christian society as among its pagan neighbours. The feudal oath between lord and subject became the only basis of social order.

Dawson's cultural analysis of the situation we have just described, however, suggests a pattern similar to what we saw in an earlier age. The lessening of the difference between the culture of Christians and that of the barbarians, he wrote,

⁵⁰ RWC 84-87

‘made it easier for the latter to become assimilated by Christian society. The Viking conquerors on Christian soil ... often became Christian from the moment of their settlement, thus forming an intermediary zone between Christendom and the pagan world, through which Christian influence gradually penetrated back to the homeland of the conquerors and prepared the way for the conversion of Scandinavia’⁵¹. Even though the structures of government had disappeared, Dawson judged that the sense of international Christianity fostered by Charlemagne played an important part in this process, as that sense was given a continuing expression in the authority exercised by the bishops.

Dawson makes an interesting comment on the work of the English king, Alfred the Great (849-99). Faced with the onslaught of the Viking invasions, Alfred sought a remedy for a crisis that threatened to wipe out Christian culture, Dawson wrote, in ‘the development of the vernacular culture ... All his achievements as a warrior king are perhaps less heroic than the determination with which he set himself in his later years to acquire learning in order to restore to his people the lost tradition of Christian culture’. ‘It is interesting’ Dawson continued, ‘to compare the work of Alfred with that of Charlemagne. He was attempting to do for England what Charlemagne had attempted to do for Western Christendom as a whole. He was working in far more unfavourable circumstances with insufficient resources and inadequate intellectual help. Nevertheless his modest plan for the diffusion of a vernacular Christian culture was perhaps more suited to the real needs of the age than the theocratic universalism of the Carolingian Empire’⁵². The remarkable translations Alfred produced with the help of foreign scholars represented, Dawson wrote, ‘a deliberate attempt to adapt the Christian classical culture, which had been confined to the international world of Latin culture, to the needs of the new

⁵¹ RWC 88
⁵² RWC 90.

national culture’; and he went on to quote Alfred’s remarkable declaration of what he had in mind, in the preface he wrote to Gregory and Great’s classic, *Pastoral Care*: ‘It seems good to me that we should also turn some of the books that all men ought to know into that language that we can all understand, and so bring it about – as we easily may with God’s aid if only we have peace – that all the youth of England, sons of free men who have the wherewithal, shall be set to learning before they are fit for other things, until they can read English writing well; and let those whom one wishes to educate further and to advance to a higher rank afterwards be instructed in the Latin language’⁵³.

Alfred’s efforts bore fruits long after his death, Dawson wrote. ‘It was, above all, in Iceland that the scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries took up the tradition of King Alfred and founded the great school of vernacular historiography and archaeology to which we owe so much of our knowledge of the past’⁵⁴.

Dawson has summarised the complex unfolding of this conversion process in Scandinavia. In the late tenth century, England was the principal victim of a new wave of Viking attacks, until in 1016 Canute the son of the leader of the attackers was recognised as the king of England and became the founder of an Anglo-Scandinavian empire. Canute, become a Christian, was a generous patron of the Church, introducing English bishops and monks into Denmark and Norway. This mixing of cultures exposed the northern peoples to the international life of western Christendom without destroying their traditional culture.

⁵³ TME 217.
⁵⁴ RWC 100.

Canute's rule was fragile. In 1030, his forces defeated Olaf, the Norwegian ruler seeking greater independence. This battle, Dawson wrote, was in fact 'a civil war against Canute's pagan subjects who had been bought by English money'. Dying in battle, Olaf was considered a national hero, and he was canonised by popular acclaim the next year. His successor, Olaf Haroldson, who ruled the nation in an extended period of peace rare in Norwegian medieval history gave the Church a more stable organisation and established good relations with the reforming pope, Gregory VII⁵⁵.

The collapse of the political unity achieved by Charlemagne on the continent gave rise, Dawson wrote 'to local centres of military control – the county and feudal principality – which became the vital political realities'. The 'kingdoms' which emerged were little more than relics of ancient prestige, he concluded: 'The king of the tenth century was no more than the 'honorary president of a committee of feudal magnates who were their own masters and ruled as kings in their own principalities'⁵⁶.

The Church, Dawson wrote, was a counterbalance to this centrifugal tendency; 'the loyalty of the episcopate to the monarchical principle was solemnly reasserted ... by the great synod of Hohenaltheim in 916'. Otto the Great (912-73), the duke of Saxony, brought the great tribal duchies under his monarchical rule, first as king of Germany (936), and later as Emperor of the West – being crowned in Rome in 962. Having the support of the churchmen, Dawson wrote, 'Otto I went even further than Charlemagne in his reliance on the Church in the practical administration of the Empire, so that the bishops ... became the main instruments of government'. Dawson pointed to the far reaching consequences of 'the conversion of the episcopate into a territorial and political power'

⁵⁵ RWC 94-97.

⁵⁶ RWC 90-91

throughout the territories ruled by Charlemagne, especially ‘in the lands of the Empire in Germany and Lorraine, where it was destined to condition the relations of Church and state for six hundred years’, and even afterwards ‘until the ecclesiastical principalities were finally liquidated in the age of Napoleon’⁵⁷.

Dawson pointed to the irremediable flaw in the situation churchmen now found themselves in. Leading minds in the Carolingian Church, he wrote, including such men as Boniface, had refused to accept that secular office was consistent with the spiritual functions of the episcopate. If Charlemagne’s theocratic order aimed in principle to embrace the whole of Western Christendom, the new German Empire was very different – ‘never coterminous with Western Christendom’, it had national aims and interests, so that ‘there was an inherent contradiction between the spiritual office and the political functions of the new type of count-bishop who was the central figure in the administration of the Empire’⁵⁸.

In Gregory VII (Hildebrand), with whom Olaf Haroldson established friendly relations on behalf of the Scandinavian Church, we meet one of the initiators of a new era of medieval history, a reformer who sought to carry forward the expression of the ideals of Christianity as the Church emerged from the tumultuous developments we have been following. In the judgment of Dawson, this involved a further evolution of the cultural dualism that had been at work in the formative period of our Western tradition, and it was to lead to a remarkable flowering in the early thirteenth century.

⁵⁷ RWC 91-92

⁵⁸ RWC 92. Dawson pointed to Otto the Great's brother, as a prototype of the political ecclesiastics who were to feature prominently in later European history; he ‘accumulated every kind of ecclesiastical and secular dignity ... Archbishop of Cologne, Abbot of Lorsch and Corvey, Arch-Chancellor of the Empire, Duke of Lorraine and, finally, Regent of the Empire during the absence of Otto in Italy’ (RWC 92).

We are already familiar with this cultural dualism – the dialectic which brought a meeting between the ideals of Christian faith and the chaotic reality of life in communities adjusting to life in the aftermath of barbarian invasion and conquest. It was not easy, of course, for those involved to understand the complexity of their situation. In particular, representatives of both sides of the dialectic shared an outlook that did not recognise the ‘inherent contradiction’ Dawson has referred to – of a situation in which, since the rule of Charlemagne, it was seen as the duty of Christian princes to intervene in religious and ecclesiastical affairs; and the responsibilities of Christian bishops and abbots were seriously compromised by their involvement in the feudal system that was seen as the safeguard of social stability: making them proprietors of huge estates on which a large part of the population were serfs and descendants of serfs bound to work on these estates.

The abuses that arose from this state of affairs were obvious enough. Abbeys and bishoprics – apportioned by the civil rulers – ‘were treated’ Dawson wrote, ‘in the same way as lay fiefs. They were appropriated by violence; they were bought and sold, or used as rewards for successful military adventures’⁵⁹.

Dawson cites a declaration of churchmen of the province of Reims in 909, describing a society ‘without law or restraint’, in which ‘the powerful oppress the weak’, ‘men devour one another like the fishes in the sea’, and monasteries that have not been destroyed no longer have any ‘observance of the rule’ – presided over by ‘lay abbots with their wives and children, their soldiers and their dogs’. This situation has come about the bishops declared ‘by our negligence, our ignorance and that of our brethren’, so that ‘an innumerable

⁵⁹ RWC 120

multitude of both sexes and every condition reach old age without instruction ... ignorant even of the words of the Creed and the Lord's prayer'⁶⁰.

'When the leaders of any society realise the gravity of the situation and admit their own responsibility like this', Dawson wrote, 'the situation is never desperate, and in fact at the very time when the bishops of the Belgic province were composing this Jeremiad, the first steps of reform were being taken in neighbouring provinces ... A new movement arose from the midst of feudal society to meet the new danger of the feudal secularisation of the Church'⁶¹.

Reading Dawson's analysis of this development, one realises that he is giving us a striking example of his contention that one of the historian's greatest assets is a cultural imagination that can identify with the subject being interpreted: it is Dawson's deep appreciation of the genius of the Christian tradition that made possible the enlightening interpretation he offered.

The reformers realised, Dawson observed, that 'the reign of injustice has its roots deep in human nature and cannot be abolished by reliance on external means ... the spiritual reformer cannot expect to have the majority on his side ... the true helpers of the world are the poor in spirit'⁶². It is not surprising therefore that the movement of renewal began in the monasteries. If the monk's primary concern was his own spiritual journey, Dawson wrote, 'Western monasticism always possessed a strong consciousness of its social responsibility and its missionary functions ... The Augustinian theology and philosophy of history'⁶³, and their conception of divine grace as a continually renewed source of

⁶⁰ RWC 120-121

⁶¹ RWC 121

⁶² RWC 123-24

⁶³ Augustine's *The City of God* was 'the one great work of Christian antiquity', Dawson wrote, 'which professedly deals with the relation of the state and of human society in general to Christian principles' (DWH 294)

supernatural energy which transforms human nature and changes the course of history ... had become part of the spiritual patrimony of the Western Church and, above all, of Western monasticism'⁶⁴.

Dawson gave an example of the awakening that was taking place, by quoting the words of St Odo, the second abbot of Cluny (927-942), one of the leaders of the reform movement: How can the nobles who are robbing the poor be called Christians? he asked; 'You have only to study the books of antiquity to see that the most powerful are always the worst. Worldly nobility is due not to nature but to pride and ambition. If we judged by realities we should give honour not to the rich for the fine clothes they wear but to the poor who are the makers of such things, for the banquets of the powerful are cooked in the sweat of the poor'⁶⁵.

As an autonomous movement within the alternative world of monasticism, Dawson observed, the reform movement 'was assisted rather than hindered by the decentralisation and local particularism' of the political situation, so that 'the loose and shapeless organisation of the feudal state made it possible for the reformed (monastic) congregations to extend their influence by patronage and recommendation in the same way as a great feudal estate'⁶⁶.

The reform movement emanating from Cluny (on the Rhone, north of Lyons) – through new foundations and older monasteries seeking reform – extended from Southern Italy to Eastern England. Similar centres came into existence in the Low Countries, in Germany and elsewhere in France. These various movements, Dawson wrote, 'often crossed and blended their influence with one another ... Thus all over Western Europe new centres of monastic reform were

⁶⁴ RWC 122

⁶⁵ RWC 122-23

⁶⁶ RWC 124-25

arising like islands of peace and spiritual order in a sea of feudal anarchy. Monasteries had ceased to be a helpless spectator of the moral disorder of Christendom and had become an independent power in Western society'⁶⁷.

How was the call for a reform of the prevailing ways of feudal society to have effect however? The reformers themselves, Dawson wrote, had as yet no idea of any fundamental change in the relations between the spiritual and temporal power ...In so far as they were concerned with the state of the Church outside the monastery, it was to the royal power rather than to the bishops or the Papacy that they looked for support'. In fact, Dawson continued, 'It was the Emperors rather than the Pope who took the initiative in the work of reform'. The first reforming councils and synods – held early in the 11th century in Germany, Italy and France – took place through initiatives of the Emperor and the kings of France. Eventually Emperor Henry III, an austere and devout friend of the reforming party, confronted the situation of the Holy See. 'The Papacy', Dawson wrote, 'under the control of the Roman nobility, its interests limited by the feuds of local factions ... far from taking the lead in the movement of reform ... was in dire need of reform itself'. After a disputed papal election, Emperor Henry III, at the Council of Sutri (1046), set aside all three claimants and imposed a German bishop as his nominee. The three popes whom the Emperor nominated in rapid succession, Dawson wrote, bringing the Holy See 'into intimate relations with Northern and Central Europe, had an immediate effect on its international influence'⁶⁸.

Leo IX, the third of these popes, elected in 1048, Dawson continued, 'created an alliance between the Papacy and the movement of religious reform which had its centre in Lorraine and Burgundy. The aides he brought to Rome gave a new

⁶⁷ RWC 125-26

⁶⁸ RWC 127-29)

life and purpose to the Papacy; now, Dawson observed, ‘The reform of the Church was no longer the aim of scattered groups of ascetics and idealists, it became the official policy of the Roman Church’⁶⁹. Besides crossing the Alps and holding reforming councils in Germany, Leo IX had to contend with a Norman invasion in Southern Italy. Attempting to meet this danger by political and military means, he was defeated and captured by the Normans. But his work of transforming the papacy from the outstanding example of corruption into the chief agent of Church reform was continued by his successors, Victor II (1055-59), Stephen (1057-58) and Nicholas II (1058-61).

After the death of Henry III, the empire was ruled by a minor, and the Papacy could no longer count on support from the imperial authorities in the work of Church reform. In a daring political switch, Rome entered into a new alliance with the Normans in southern Italy. During these developments, two men emerged who were to be key players in the program of reform, Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida, and the monk Hildebrand who was appointed Archdeacon of the Roman Church.

Humbert was a dynamic figure whose intransigence in negotiations with the Byzantine Church contributed to an estrangement which was finally to lead to schism between Eastern and Western Churches. His polemical writings against the widespread abuse of simony (the buying of ecclesiastical office) took the extreme view that simony was not merely sinful but a heresy which rendered the sacramental ministry of those being raised to Church office in that way null and void. The confusion that existed in the period is made evident by the fact that even members of the reform party, such as St Peter Damian, did not recognise that such a view was indefensible.

⁶⁹ RWC 129

A figure of great influence as Archdeacon of Rome, Hildebrand was elected pope as Gregory VII in 1073. Dawson judged that he is a far more significant figure than Cardinal Humbert. Though his importance has always been recognised, Dawson wrote, ‘his personality and his work have been the subject of most diverse judgments’. It is now recognised, he continued, that extreme views, which have seen him, on the one hand, as ‘the prime author and inspirer of the whole reforming movement, and on the other, as an ambitious ecclesiastical politician, must be modified’⁷⁰. It was Cardinal Humbert, Dawson concluded, ‘who was the theorist and ideologist of the reform movement’; Gregory VII, for his part, was not an original thinker, but ‘a man of intense spiritual convictions with a deep sense of his prophetic mission ... It is in the Bible and, above all, in the Prophets that the real source of Gregory VII’s inspiration is to be found ... His sense of the urgency of his mission and the terrible predicament of the Christian world finds its most striking expression in the last appeal he addressed to the Christian people from his exile in Salerno before his death: ‘To me also ... that word of the Prophet has come “Go up into the mountain and cry aloud, spare not” ... Since the day when the Church has placed me on the apostolic throne, my whole desire and the end of all my striving has been that the Holy Church, the Bride of God, our mistress and our mother, should recover her honour and remain free and chaste and Catholic’⁷¹

The reform movement’s objective was to do away with the abuse of unworthy leadership in the Church which was often a consequence of the part played by civil authorities in Church affairs. This objective, and the movement’s new alliance with the leadership of a reformed Roman Church was, in Dawson’s judgment, in tune with the evolving social reality of medieval society: the Empire, he wrote, ‘had become an archaic survival from the point of view of

⁷⁰ For details of the tumultuous reign of Gregory VII, see Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 94-99.

⁷¹ RWC 131-133

Western Europe as a whole, where the new feudal states had become the leaders of culture. Yet the sense of the unity of Christendom was stronger than ever and demanded some new institutional expression, and the reformed Papacy provided such an expression more effectively than any political institution could have done'. The Papacy, Dawson continued, transcended national and territorial rivalries, and it had the flexibility to enter into new forms of relationship with the existing political reality – Gregory VII established such relationships with remote Christian territories, such as Spain, Denmark, Hungary and Croatia, which accepted the protection of the Holy See as 'vassals of St Peter'. And though this did not imply any direct political control, Dawson concluded, 'it emphasised the new position of the Papacy as the centre of international society'⁷².

While this development was well accepted by the new feudal societies, in the Empire – where the bishops were the mainstay of the imperial system – there was a conflict of ideals that led to a struggle that was to go on for generations. It was this conflict that initiated debate concerning the principles on which Christian society was based, the relation of Church and state, and the issue of resistance to unjust authority.

The evolving cultural situation was very complex, involving convoluted politics and a philosophical and theological outlook which was struggling to formulate an authentic expression of the ideals of the Christian tradition⁷³. Dawson demonstrated his historical genius by identifying a theme which makes possible an illuminating interpretation of this complexity – he saw the developments which were to lead to a remarkable outcome in the 13th century, as being

⁷² RWC 133-34

⁷³ For further details concerning the political situation, see Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners*; concerning the intellectual climate, see M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto, University Press, 1968).

produced by the dialectic between the raw reality of a society emerging from barbarism and the authentic ideals of the Christian tradition.

The ultimate outcome, Dawson wrote, the dominant spirit of thirteenth-century culture, concerned far more than Church politics; its ideal was ‘the universal organisation of human knowledge and human life by a spiritual principle’. It inspired Roger Bacon’s ‘immense survey of all existing and possible science ... It finds an almost perfect literary expression in Dante’s epic, and it was embodied in visible form in the great French Cathedrals. But above all it found supreme expression in the philosophical systems of the 13th century – those great “cathedrals of ideas” as Professor Gilson has called them, in which all the acquisitions of Aristotelian and Arabic science have been organically incorporated within the Christian tradition in a intelligible unity’⁷⁴.

Dawson guides his reader through the involved history of the 11th and 12th centuries drawing attention to the way in which, through the dialectic we have referred to, the Christian ideal expressed itself in a whole range of cultural developments – developments which were to come together in the remarkable culture of the early 13th century.

The renewed Christian spirit that had been engendered in the reformed monasteries, Dawson wrote, began to influence society at large, as a new political stability promoted cultural interaction. The very ruthlessness of the feudal rulers’ maintenance of social order led to an increase of population; roads were once more open to traders; towns and markets were revived; and there was a revival of religious, intellectual and artistic life⁷⁵. The vengeful spirit of barbarian society was gradually transformed. If the feudal noble was descended

⁷⁴ RWC 197

⁷⁵ RWC 141

from tribal warriors, he was reminded that he was a Christian knight who owed loyalty to Christian society and a certain fidelity to the Church. The feudal relation between the warrior and his lord became associated with religious motives; in a ritual presided over by the bishop, the knight became a consecrated person, pledged not only to be faithful to his lord, but to be a defender of the Church, the widow and the orphan⁷⁶. And this gradual leavening of the heroic ethos by the influence of Christian values found a popular literary expression in the *chansons de geste*.

Not surprisingly, these cultural developments gave rise to a new tradition of humanism. Dawson suggested that contact with the culture of Moslem Spain played a part in this, pointing to the transmission of Arabic philosophy and science which was taking place at the time, and citing contemporary accounts reflecting the deep impression made by a meeting with the brilliance of Islamic culture upon ‘the men of the North, who knew only the harsh and comfortless life of the stronghold’⁷⁷. Through the music and poetry of the troubadours, the vision of a new and delightful way of life penetrated feudal society. This exotic spirit, Dawson observed, which was frankly worldly and hedonistic – exalting love and honour, wealth and liberality, beauty and joy – seemed the very opposite of the other-worldliness and asceticism which inspired reformers like the influential Bernard of Clairvaux.

In fact, however, the beginnings of a genuine humanism can be recognised within the eleventh century monastic culture, exemplified in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, and Aelred of Rivaux, in a concern to nourish the interior psychological development of the individual’s emotional

⁷⁶ RWC 147
⁷⁷ RWC 154

life and affective bonds within the monastic community⁷⁸. The Benedictine spirit, as Nisbet has analysed it for us, was obviously favourable to such a development from the beginning. It is surprising that Dawson made no reference to this cultural strand as he discussed the origins of humanism in the medieval West.

If in some places this courtly culture bordered on pagan hedonism, Dawson wrote, ‘we find in Italy a really profound and fruitful assimilation of the ideals of the courtly culture by the spiritual life of medieval Christendom ... above all in the case of St Francis ... In fact, the life of St Francis shows a conscious, but entirely spontaneous ... transposition of the ideal of courtesy to the higher plane of the Christian life, thus freeing it from its conventional aristocratic limitations, and endowing it with a transcendent cosmic significance’⁷⁹.

The group of friars who gathered around Francis were part of a widespread emergence of evangelical fellowships in many parts of Europe⁸⁰. St Francis’ group of friars, Dawson wrote, had a considerable resemblance to these other evangelical fellowships. ‘It differed from them’, however, ‘above all by the fact that its founder was one of the greatest religious geniuses in the history of Christendom, a man of the most intense originality who had a profound influence on the spirit of Western Christianity and Western culture ... What St

⁷⁸ Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?’, in *Jesus Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley Ca.: University of California, 1984) pp.82-109.

⁷⁹ RWC 158-59

⁸⁰ Chenu describes this development: ‘For a century already, from the original impetus given by Gregory VII, this evangelical revival had tended increasingly to take institutional form ... The *vita apostolica* (apostolic life), a juridical as well as a spiritual concept, became the principle theme of the new movement ... By proselytising the cities, the new reformers transubstantiated the Gregorian ideal ... The movement was expanded and greatly strengthened by the proliferation of groups of laymen who, though part of the new society, had sufficiently broken with the world to proclaim the absolute and literal value of the gospel – and to proclaim it even at the risk of causing institutions fundamental to the Church to be questioned ... the formation of numerous orders of ‘poor men’ on the eve of the Lateran Council (1215), and shortly thereafter ... the foundation of the mendicant orders ... not only brought evangelism and the Church into happy equilibrium but, in the field of *doctrina sacra* (sacred teaching) blended the study of the Bible with theological construction’ (M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, 240-241).

Francis desired was not a new religious Order nor any form of ecclesiastical organisation but a following of Christ – a new life that would shake off the encumbrances of tradition and organisation and property and learning, and recover an immediate personal contact with the divine source of eternal life, as revealed in the Gospel’⁸¹.

Another remarkable development of the period, with unmistakable links with the ideals of Christianity was the emerging culture of the towns – ‘free towns’, the population of which was made up in great part by citizens who had absconded to free themselves from the often harsh obligations of the feudal system. With the towns, Dawson wrote, ‘there arose the *commune*, which was one of the social creations of the Middle Ages ... an association in which all inhabitants of the town, and not the merchants alone, bound themselves by oath to keep the common peace, to defend the common liberties and to obey the common officers’. This development, Dawson commented, though it challenged the feudal system to which many of the bishops were committed, ‘was far from being anticlerical in the vulgar sense of the word’; it was closely related ‘to the movement of ecclesiastical reform’; and it was often under the leadership of popular preachers of ‘reformist’ ideals that towns rose in armed revolt against their feudal overlord bishops⁸².

The medieval city, Dawson wrote, with its ‘integration of corporate organisation, economic function and civic freedom’ was ‘the most complete

⁸¹ RWC 210, 212

⁸² RWC 164-65. Dawson quotes the German philosopher historian, Ernst Troeltsch, describing these towns: ‘It was only when the city which arose out of the disintegration and surplus of feudal land ownership had united its varied population, drawn from all sorts of different social origins, that a ground was prepared on which the higher qualities of medieval society could be purified from the crudity and violence of feudalism ... From the political and economic point of view the period of civic culture which begins in the eleventh century may be regarded as a preparation and foundation of the modern world. But for the historian of ethics and the religious life it also appears, with its cathedrals and its intense church life, its religious confraternities and guilds, its care for the spiritual and material welfare of its inhabitants and its educational and charitable institutions, as the highest point of the development of the medieval spirit’ (RWC 162).

embodiment of the social ideals of the Middle Ages'. These ideals found their most highly developed expression, Dawson continued, in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries: 'Mankind was one great society, and above all the regenerated human race, that portion of mankind which was incorporated in the Church ... by its allegiance to the divine law and by its dedication to one transcendent end ... a body with many members, each having a vital function to fulfil, each with its own office and ministry for the service of the whole ... every individual member of the whole is an end in himself, and his particular *officium* or *ministerium* is not merely a compulsory social task but a way of the service of God through which he shares in the life of the whole'. Dawson acknowledged that the social realities of the day tended to limit the possibilities open to individuals; 'but, in principle', he concluded, 'the theory favours the conception of vocation and the internal autonomy of each particular organ (i.e. member of the body social)'⁸³.

Here we can see the seeds of the liberty that has come to be so prized in our Western tradition. Dawson sums up very neatly the understanding of liberty formulated by Aquinas, an understanding that compares favourably with the understanding widespread in today's liberal democracy – of personal liberty as a compromise to maximise the self-interest of individual citizens: 'The medieval idea of liberty, which finds its highest expression in the life of the free cities, was not the right of the individual to follow his own will, but the privilege of sharing in a highly organised form of corporate life which possesses its own constitution and rights of self-government'⁸⁴. For Aquinas, the human person is not a means to social achievement, but has a sovereign value. If he made use of Aristotle's political theory, Dawson wrote, according to which 'society is a natural organism, sufficient to itself, in which the different classes

⁸³ RWC 171-72
⁸⁴ RWC 172

exist solely for the sake of the whole, so that the lower classes, which are concerned with the mechanical arts or with unskilled labour, have a purely instrumental character’, Aquinas showed that ‘it is quite possible to incorporate the organic materialism of Aristotelian politics into the organic mysticism of the Christian view of society, but only on condition that the state itself is recognised as an organ of the spiritual community and not as the sovereign end of human life’⁸⁵.

It is worth pointing out that the monastic culture, and its new expression in the community of the mendicant friars, provided a culture that was open to the developments we find in the thought of Aquinas. In the Benedictine tradition, the abbot of the monastery was elected by the monks, and the abbot consulted the views of the monks in their ‘chapter’ meetings. From its origins, St Thomas’ Dominican order had an ethos and form of governance that encouraged both participation and individual autonomy. It was the community, especially through the regularly held chapters, that was the locus of authority and administrative wisdom⁸⁶.

The mendicant friars who were the companions of St Francis and Aquinas made an important contribution to the medieval universities – another development with clear roots in the revival of Christian faith taking place during the 11th and 12th centuries. The widespread revival of culture fostered scholarship and literary activity, Dawson wrote, producing ‘an intellectual proletariat of needy and ambitious scholars, contemptuous of the past, impatient of restraint, following the fashionable teacher and doctrine of the moment’. It was during

⁸⁵ RWC 177. For a fuller discussion of the social theory of Aquinas, see my *Modernity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000) Ch 8, ‘The “Free Society” of Modernity and the Consolidation of What It Has Achieved’.

⁸⁶ Cf. R. J. Zawilla, ‘Dominican Spirituality’ in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993, ed. M. Downey) pp.286-294.

this time, ‘in the 12th century, that the schools of Paris gradually achieved their corporate organisation, which culminated in the great *universitas*, or corporation of “masters” or licensed teachers under the control of the Chancellor’. Animated by the spirit of the *commune*, Paris became the archetype of most of the universities of northern Europe⁸⁷.

Meanwhile, in the same spirit, the law schools of Bologna moved along a different path. This renowned centre of legal studies attracted students of a more mature age and higher social status than the clerical students of Paris and Oxford. ‘From a very early date’, Dawson wrote, ‘they began to manage their own affairs and to control their conditions of study’, so that Bologna and the Italian universities which followed its tradition were essentially student corporations that ultimately had control over their teachers⁸⁸.

In the climate brought by the sense of a single international community that had been engendered by a common Christian faith, the development of the universities and the foundations of the Franciscan and Dominican friars were fostered by the rejuvenated Papacy, Dawson wrote – as ‘part of a far-reaching design of the medieval Papacy for the intellectual organisation of Christian civilization which is one of the most remarkable examples of the planning of culture on a large scale that history has ever seen’⁸⁹.

However, after the great flowering of the first half of the 13th century, Dawson wrote, ‘the movement towards integration and unity which had dominated Western Christendom since the eleventh century had lost its impetus, and no longer found leaders capable of carrying it forward to new achievements’. As a consequence, there followed a period of intellectual criticism and cultural

⁸⁷ RWC 185

⁸⁸ RWC 186

⁸⁹ RWC 197

change ‘which is of the utmost importance for the history of Western culture, but proved fatal to the synthesis of religion and culture that seemed to have been achieved in the previous centuries’⁹⁰.

Dawson’s contrasting of the outlooks of reformers like Gregory VII, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi with later developments in Church politics prepares us for his reiteration of the view that a lack of leadership qualities in those responsible for Church policy proved fatal to what seemed promised by the achievements of medieval culture. Though ‘the creation of the Mendicant Orders together with the foundation of the universities marked a culmination of the movement towards international and super-political unity which was the ideal of medieval Christendom’, these developments came too late: the great age of the reform movement was over, and ‘the Popes who did most to favour and make use of the Friars were not men of the type of Gregory VII or St Bernard, but able lawyers and statesmen’, preoccupied with international and Church politics, so that, ‘it came about that the prophetic and evangelical vocation of the early Friars became subordinated to the demands of ecclesiastical power politics, and thus produced a rift in the reform movement from which Medieval Christendom never recovered’⁹¹.

For Dawson, the historian of cultural change, this breakdown had many dimensions. In his last publication, *The Crisis of Western Education* (1961), he referred to it as it affected grassroots scholarship. The medieval ideal Dawson saw as expressed in the vision of the great twelfth century English scholar and pioneer humanist, John of Salisbury: ‘a sweet and fruitful marriage of Reason and the Word (of God)’, which would be the source of a wholesome civilized culture. Those who did not live up to this vision, Dawson observed, included

⁹⁰ RWC 198

⁹¹ RWC 215

‘the clerical utilitarians who were intent on using education as a means of getting on in the world - producing ‘an extraordinarily vital, disorderly, tumultuous democracy’ which was out of touch with the ideals of the early thirteenth century⁹²

For Dawson, the late 13th century was a turning point: ‘For three centuries the development of Western Europe had been centripetal, towards the creation of an intellectual and spiritual system’, but now ‘this movement reversed and a centrifugal process begins which continues in later centuries’⁹³. Dawson saw a relationship between this development and today’s ‘dislocation of the inner and outer worlds of human experience’ and the many consequences of this dislocation.

In order to understand Dawson’s interpretation of these developments, it is important to note that he did not judge that it was conflict and debate as such that proved fatal for the developing synthesis. His analysis of the history of the period convinced him that conflict and debate were part and parcel of the movement of religious reform which came to maturity in the first half of the 11th century: ‘the creative centuries of medieval culture owed their unity, not to the absence of strife, but to the fact that the party of reform, which was the dynamic element in medieval culture, for a time attained a position of cultural leadership through its alliance with the governing element in the Church’, becoming the primary force shaping the spiritual life of Western culture, ‘a principle of unity rather than division’, breaking down ‘the barriers of feudal class privilege and territorial particularism and division, and giving new opportunities for spiritual leadership and the free choice of individual vocations’⁹⁴.

⁹² CWE 19-20.

⁹³ RWC 217

⁹⁴ RWC 199-200

Dawson has been seriously misrepresented by those who see his interpretation of medieval cultural development as the view of a nostalgic restorationist, holding up the achievement of the 13th century as a model to be recovered. As we shall see, as we follow his interpretation of post-medieval cultural development in our Western tradition, Dawson's radical understanding of the dialectic that was at work in the medieval achievement makes it clear that he is anything but a nostalgic restorationist.

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