

The Road All Peoples Travel:
An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's
Interpretation of Cultural History

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Chapter Five

Interpreting our Secularised Western Civilization

Editor's Note: This is the final chapter and Epilogue for the E-book, now entitled *The Road All Peoples Travel: An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's Interpretation of History*. Earlier chapters are available in prior issues of AEJT, 11--14. This work promises to be a significant catalyst for a major revision of Christopher Dawson's interpretation of the relationship between culture, history and religion.

We referred at the end of the last chapter to a critical view of Christopher Dawson's work, as a nostalgic idealisation of a past age. It is disappointing to find an author as influential as Charles Taylor making such a criticism. In a

recently published work, *A Secular Age*¹, Taylor dismissed Dawson in a few lines, as ‘nostalgic’, tempted to embrace the unrealistic ideal, that a perfect ‘fit’ can be realised between ‘the established political, cultural, intellectual orders of society’, and ‘the larger order (say of God and his Church)’². This criticism is doubly regrettable, because the objective of Taylor’s study is very similar to Dawson’s – to offer a historical perspective which helps towards an understanding of developments in our Western tradition which we call ‘secular’.

Let us respond to this criticism, not only because it probably represents a view of Dawson’s historical writing which is widespread among those who only know it superficially, but also because clarifying this issue will serve as an introduction to the approach Dawson adopted in his interpretation of developments in our Western tradition since the Middle Ages. It is clear that Taylor does not appreciate Dawson’s interpretation of the development of the Christian civilization of the West. Dawson does not envisage the possibility of a ‘perfect fit’ between the ideals of the Christian Gospel and the historical culture created by those who commit themselves to following these ideals: he would see such an expectation as a utopian illusion. For Dawson, what the Christian looks forward to in human history is the carrying forward of the dialogical dualism between Christianity’s transcendent ideals and the cultural reality of human society.

Dawson made this clear as he described the highest achievement of this dualism in the life of Francis of Assisi. What Francis desired, he wrote, was nothing but ‘the following of Christ’, accessible to those reading the gospel story, as ‘the divine source of eternal life, with which it is possible to have an immediate personal contact’³. M.-D. Chenu’s study of the period confirms Dawson’s interpretation. Since ‘the letter of the gospel insured a radical dynamism of the Spirit’, Chenu wrote, ‘for St Francis the gospel was, in absolute terms, the rule of his religious fraternity; and one had to practice it *sine glossa*; that is, without any of those explanations which dilute the meaning in order to accommodate it to passing conditions’⁴. In his reference to St Francis, Dawson went on immediately to acknowledge that this ideal ‘rule’

¹ *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

² *A Secular Age*, 732-33.

³ RWC 212

⁴ *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, 247

which Francis himself lived so magnificently, was outside the bounds of possibility for his band of followers: 'The Friars Minor became a religious Order' with their own spirit, keeping alive the memory of Francis whose spirit 'remained a creative force in the life of the time'⁵.

Thomas Aquinas, who for Dawson also embodied the highest achievement of the Middle Ages, gave theological expression to this ideal of Francis of Assisi. For Aquinas, the New Law is the Gospel itself, the transcendent Truth that is the object of Christian faith. Discussing what is grasped through the blessing of Christian faith, St Thomas states that it puts the believer in contact, not with a verbal formula, but with the truth of God itself to which the credal formula refers⁶. Contrasting the 'New Law' of Christian faith with the Law of the Old Testament, Aquinas wrote that it is 'the very grace of the Holy Spirit given to Christ's disciples' which is fostered and served by credal formularies and Church teaching⁷.

With today's awareness of the plurality of human cultures, we readily recognise that this teaching of Aquinas implies a distinction between the divine truth, which is encountered in Christian faith, and the cultural realities through which faith is expressed and communicated. The dialectic implied by this distinction, Dawson made the key to his interpretation of the development of medieval culture. Contemporary theologians have drawn attention to the importance of this dialectic for the Christian movement. The American theologian, Matthew L. Lamb, in an article entitled, 'Inculturation and Western Culture: The Dialogical Experience Between the Gospel and Culture'⁸, sees a renewed theological interest in the process of inculturation as motivated by a recognised need to avoid a false absolutism, 'that identifies the absolute truth and normativeness of the (transcendent) gospel with ... finite words or ideas'. This '*fallacy of misplaced normativeness*', as he calls it, disregards the fundamental principle of Christian faith: 'The absolute norm of the gospel is the concrete Person of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, as sent by the Father, and with the Father sending the Spirit to inform the ongoing mission of the Church'. Acknowledging a debt to Christopher Dawson, Lamb draws a conclusion that is in complete accord with the view of the human condition that stands behind Dawson's survey of the development of the cultures

⁵ RWC 212

⁶ 'actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem' (*S.theol.* 2-2, q.1, art. 2 ad 2um).

⁷ *S.theol.* 1-2, q.106, art.1

⁸ 'Inculturation and Western Culture', *Communio* 21(1994)122-44.

of the world: ‘religion orients human beings into the divine mystery which transcends all cultural achievements and grounds all truth, goodness and holiness’⁹.

Australian theologian, Orm Rush, has published a work which develops this line of thought, suggesting that the history of the Christian movement may be seen as a coherent unity if it is recognised as the waxing and waning of a process of ‘reception’ of the transcendent Gospel, which is the essential life of the community of Christian faith¹⁰.

It is interesting in this context to compare Dawson’s work with that of John W. O’Malley, the distinguished Jesuit historian. It is a comparison which illustrates how Dawson’s historical writings – not easy to categorise because of the variety of issues he raises, and having no clear point of intersection with the concerns of contemporary historians – is largely overlooked. The comparison also shows the contribution Dawson could make to the work of scholars like O’Malley.

Church renewal has loomed large in O’Malley’s scholarship as a historian. Not long after Vatican II, O’Malley published a long article discussing the reform program of the Council¹¹. Recently, he returned to this subject in another substantial article¹². O’Malley, like many leading historians today, is alive to the place of cultural development in the historical process. This is evident in his recent publications, which include an interpretation of Catholicism’s development in the aftermath of the Reformation¹³. This work is a painstaking survey of the interpretations offered by historians of Catholic, Protestant and secular backgrounds; it makes a case that the Council of Trent was only one factor in the reshaping of Catholicism in the modern period. Changes in the outlook and style of Church government, O’Malley argues, were paralleled by changes in ‘all great institutions of the early modern era’ (p.71). He applauds the suggestion of Evennett, a Catholic historian working in Cambridge, that both the Protestant movement and changes in the Catholic Church were giving expression to a cultural

⁹ ‘Inculturation and Western Culture’, 127-28

¹⁰ Orm Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: Sensus Fidelium and the Reception of Revelation* (Washington: CUA Press, 2009.).

¹¹ ‘Reform, Historical Consciousness and Vatican II’s Aggiornamento’, *Theological Studies*, 32 (1971) 573-601.

¹² ‘Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?’, *Theological Studies*, 67 (2006).

¹³ *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006). References which follow are to this work.

development of the time: ‘different outcomes of the same general aspiration towards “religious regeneration” ’; indeed, that ‘the two movements were more significant for the ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that they shared than for what divided them’ (p.72). O’Malley gave his support to the judgment of the Italian historian Paulo Prodi, who saw papal government of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as ‘evolving and acting as a creature of a new social, political and cultural situation. It was the impact of this situation on the papacy that gave it its new characteristics – that gave it indeed a distinctly modern character’ (p.85). O’Malley also commends Prodi for insisting that an adequate history of the Catholic Church must concern itself, not only with the doings of the hierarchy, but also with the life of the Christian community as a whole – indeed with the whole compass of cultural life: it should be an ‘exploration of the dynamic interaction of ecclesiastical organisation, religious practices, spirituality and theology’ (pp.87-88).

In his more recent article on Vatican II, O’Malley acknowledges that *spiritual renewal* was the ultimate concern of the Council’s pastoral guidance of the Church towards the future. Commenting on the frequently used phrase, ‘the spirit of the council’, he wrote, ‘the council has a spirit because in its more profound reality it was about our “spirits”, our souls. It was about the well-springs of our motivation, about our call to holiness, about, therefore, spirituality’. In the same article O’Malley also wrote, ‘Vatican II was about the inward journey, it was about holiness. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Lumen gentium* is Ch 5, “The Call to Holiness” ’. This addition to the central constitution of the council was made, it should be noted, at the suggestion of John XXIII.

Given all of this, one would expect O’Malley to appreciate Dawson’s interpretation of the reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries which we have reviewed in Chapter 4. In fact, O’Malley’s summary reference to the period in *Trent and All That* completely overlooks the spiritual dimension of reform in this period – what Chenu described as an ‘Evangelical Awakening’¹⁴. Thus O’Malley writes, ‘the ideal that the Church needed to be radically reformed had its genesis in the revival of the study of canon law ... canon law would achieve a normative centrality in Christian life ... Reform thus dealt with *mores*,

¹⁴ Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, Ch 7, which Chenu concludes writing: ‘one can define the evangelical reawakening as an active presence of the gospel, not only because men took up the text and read it directly in its literal fullness, but also because, at the same time the word of God was announced as real and present by action of the Holy Spirit in a vibrant church and a revitalised theology’, p.269.

which meant not so much “morals” or morality, as public discipline ... practices in accord with the norms of law’ (pp.16-17).

Obviously, O’Malley was not familiar with Dawson’s understanding of renewal in this period – as a productive dialectic between the transcendental ideal of Christian life and the cultural reality of the Church of the age. This is unfortunate, because Dawson’s insight can add a very important dimension to O’Malley’s understanding of Church renewal, especially that initiated by Vatican II. In fact, in the valuable section of his 2008 article, discussing the significance of the ‘new genre’ of language adopted by Vatican II, a language which reflected the pastoral intentions of the Council, O’Malley looked in this direction, writing, ‘*Lumen gentium* ... opened with “mystery”, something beyond definition ... the document raised up before our eyes Christ, God, the Church and the dignity of our human nature to excite us to wonder and admiration’.

Long before this present work led me to study for the first time Dawson’s *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, which gave me an appreciation of Dawson’s understanding of the dialectic which shapes the life of the Church, I have argued that the ‘mystery’ theme of Vatican II involves such a dialectic¹⁵. When the Constitution on the Liturgy, the first constitution to be published by the Council, gave its central focus to the Saviour’s ‘Paschal Mystery’ as the source of the Church’s life, this term made an impact on the whole Church, pointing to the ‘mystery kept secret for endless ages but now revealed’ (Rom 16:23). When *Lumen gentium* commenced with the theme of mystery, ‘exciting wonder and admiration’ as O’Malley put it, the word was more than a rhetorical flourish; it carried overtones of the great Pauline theme; and when this constitution called the Church a ‘sacrament of unity with God and the unity of mankind’, it pointed to the mystery of reconciliation made present in human history in the life of God’s people. As *Dei verbum* set the life of the people of God in the midst of a ‘salvation history’, living by a faith tradition that is a remembering of salvific encounters with divine initiatives, and confident in the abiding presence and power of what was given in these encounters, we are reminded of the same mystery perspective. As *Gaudium et spes*, seeking to initiate dialogue with the modern world, declares that ‘only in the mystery of the Word made flesh, does the mystery of man become clear’, and offers to all

¹⁵ John Thornhill, ‘Historians Bring to Light the Achievement of Vatican II’, *Australasian Catholic Record*, 82 (2005) 259-80; cf. pp 274-80.

humanity the possibility ‘in a way known only to God, of sharing in Christ’s Paschal Mystery’ (n.22), the centrality of the theme is again underlined.

It was the subtle but remarkable leadership of John XXIII which shaped the outlook of Vatican II. John hoped that his ‘pastoral’ council would bring an age of renewed life in the Church – nothing less than a ‘new Pentecost’. He knew that he could offer no blueprint for a renewed Church – indeed, historian that he was, he probably had some awareness that any ‘blueprint’ produced by the council would reflect the inevitable limitations of the age in which it was framed. But his forthright expectations – which certainly motivated his call to holiness – implied the need for something more than a blueprint reshaping the historically conditioned life of the Church, they called for something that could only be realised through a return to the very sources of the Church’s life in Christ.

The place given to the theme of ‘mystery’ in the constitutions of the Council, it can be argued, were in effect a response to John’s call. The measure against which a revitalised Church must measure its life is nothing less than the ‘mystery’ of God’s saving action in Christ. Today’s theology can give a clear formulation of the inspiring implications of the theme of ‘mystery’ for Christian faith. The ultimate ‘Mystery’, central to both the Pauline and the Johannine witness, is the saving plan conceived from all eternity in the depths of the divine freedom. On another level, the ‘Christian Mystery’ is the definitive revelation of this plan in the life, death and resurrection of the Saviour. And finally, the ‘Paschal Mystery’ present in the life of the Church is the on-going actuality of God’s initiative in Christ in the Church’s life of fellowship in Word and Sacrament¹⁶. It is not difficult to see that, if this interpretation – substantially consonant with Dawson’s dialectic of healthy life in the Church – is sound, it adds an important dimension to O’Malley’s interpretation of Church renewal.

We will now consider Dawson’s interpretation of developments in the post-medieval culture of the West. Early in the present study it was pointed out that

Dawson drew attention to the importance of distinguishing among his writings those written for different audiences. On the one hand, his historical and sociological works, and on the other, what he wrote for a Catholic readership of the time. We shall not have a full appreciation of Dawson’s understanding of our secularised Western culture if we do not

¹⁶ Cf. J. L. Empereur, art. ‘Paschal mystery’, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. J. Komonchak etc.

make a further distinction among his writings, between those written about the time of World War II, and his final work, *The Crisis in Western Education*, published some years later when he was lecturing at Harvard University in the United States. What follows in this chapter, therefore, will be in two sections. The first summarises the analysis he made in the earlier writings, and a final section will discuss the approach to contemporary Western civilization proposed in the last years of his life.

It will become clear to the reader that, once again, Dawson is addressing two different audiences. His earlier works – written between the two world wars, during World War II, and immediately afterwards – addressed a readership in the midst of one of the most challenging upheavals of world history, an upheaval that seemed to call for a reappraisal of the assumptions our civilization had long taken for granted. In *The Crisis of Western Education*, Dawson spoke to a Western world buoyed up by the achievement of post-war reconstruction and prosperity. His basic cultural diagnosis had not changed, but what was called for as the West faced the future was discussed with a more thoughtful optimism.

In 1929, in *Progress and Religion*, Dawson made an analysis of the cultural evolution of Western Civilization; in his plan to write a five-volume history of culture, this work was intended as an introduction to the series¹⁷. When it appeared, it made a great impression, as an important contribution to the history of ideas. The influential Anglican, Dean Inge, who is on record as saying that Dawson was the only Roman Catholic who didn't annoy him, referred to this book as 'a great work, one of the best we have had in recent years'. A future Director of the BBC's Third Program reported in his biography that this book sent him to the British Museum to achieve an education omitted at Oxford. And James Oliver, who first had contact with Dawson's thought in *Progress the Religion*, wrote that this work impressed the rising generation: 'before the outbreak of war, he had become the master of the generation who went into it'¹⁸.

In different contexts in his writings, Dawson has made reference to the cultural divide between regions of Europe included in the Roman Empire and those outside its boundaries – those using the Romance languages and those using other languages. It will be recalled that,

¹⁷ Cf. *A Historian and His World*, p.82.

¹⁸ See Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 89-90.

in the former regions, the barbarian conquerors were culturally assimilated, whereas in the latter a new culture was to develop. 'The medieval state', Dawson wrote, 'was a congeries of semi-independent principalities and corporations, each of which enjoyed many attributes of sovereignty, while all of them together formed part of a wider society – the "Christian people" '. Apart from its Christian allegiance, 'this wider unity did not possess ... social and cultural homogeneity'. 'It incorporated and overlaid a number of distinct earlier cultural traditions, such as those of the Latin culture of the Mediterranean, and the more barbarous tribal societies on Northern Europe'¹⁹.

Dawson related the distinctive political nationalism of modern Europe to the waning in the late medieval period of a sense of unity which had been achieved by the culture of the high Middle Ages. The old 'underlying diversity of cultural traditions expressed itself in the awakening of the national spirit, and the formation of separate national cultures which reached their full development in the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation'²⁰. The cultural divide, Dawson wrote, between North and South led to two forms of reaction. In the South, Italy, Spain and France for instance, this movement took the form of 'a return to the older tradition of culture ... the recovery of a lost inheritance'. It 'revolted against the medieval culture, not on religious grounds, but because it was alien and uncivilized'. On the other hand, in Northern Europe, Germany and Scandinavia for instance, the movement of national awaking took a different form: 'national awakening', Dawson wrote, 'had to find a different form of expression, since there was ... no older tradition of higher culture, and beyond the medieval period lay an age of pagan barbarism ... Northern Europe could only assert its cultural independence by a remoulding and transforming of the Christian tradition itself in accordance with its national genius'. 'The Renaissance of Northern Europe', Dawson concluded, 'is the Reformation'²¹.

This is a startling claim that many may want to qualify. It illustrates a contention made by Dawson in different contexts, that cultural factors have been largely overlooked in the discussion of the divisions that have emerged in the Christian movement²². However, leaving

¹⁹ PR 177.

²⁰ PR 177.

²¹ PR 178.

²² See *The Judgement of the Nations* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1943) 119-126, reproduced in DWH 80-89.

aside Dawson's judgment concerning the origins of the Reformation, we must recognise that the North/South cultural divide of Europe has affected the history of the West far more than is often recognised. The division between Northern and Southern Europe, Dawson wrote, would still have existed if Christianity never had existed. It 'is a natural one which cannot be condemned as necessarily evil since it is part of the historical process. If it had been possible to keep life to a dead level of uniformity, in which Englishmen and Spaniards, Frenchmen and Germans, were all alike, conditions might be more favourable to religious unity, but European civilization would have been immensely poorer and less vital, and its religious life would probably have been impoverished and devitalised as well'²³ This cultural divide is well illustrated in the forms taken by the Enlightenment movement in different national contexts.

It will be recalled that Dawson closed his interpretation of the development of medieval culture by making the judgment that this culture's creative and unifying dynamism faltered because late medieval society did not produce leaders equal to the task of carrying its development forward, more concerned with international and Church politics than with giving a prophetic expression to the authentic ideals of the Christian tradition. As a result, there developed a centrifugal movement in which intellectual criticism and cultural change made it impossible to build upon the achievements evident in the first half of the thirteenth century. *Progress and Religion* begins with a discussion of the origins of the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement. Voltaire (1694-1778), the brilliant satirist who was one of the inventors of the new movement, judged that the French genius had been oppressed by a 'Gothic regime of disorder and ignorance'; he was of the opinion, Dawson wrote, that 'only four centuries are worthy of the attention of the philosopher, the age of Philip and Alexander, the age of Caesar and Augustus, the Italian Renaissance, and finally the Grand Siecle (of Louis XIV)'. This 'absolutism of judgment', Dawson wrote, 'has its roots in the literary culture of the Renaissance, which revived in an abstract form the old dualism of Hellenism and barbarism, and thus for the first time introduced a cleavage between the facts of social development and the ideals of the educated classes'²⁴.

²³ DWH 83-84.

²⁴ PR 10.

The Italian Renaissance, Dawson wrote had involved a reaction against medievalism as alien and uncivilized but – unlike the Enlightenment – this reaction was not based in religious grounds, it was ‘the recovery of a lost inheritance’ seen as overwhelmed by ‘Gothic barbarism’²⁵. As a movement of cultural reaction, however, it was not discriminating – Renaissance scholars expected no enlightenment from medieval thought; they turned to the principles of Platonism in an attempt to frame a new *philosophia perennis*²⁶.

Dawson pointed to a more immediate source of Voltaire’s confidence in the program of the Enlightenment, which called for the courage to use one’s own understanding in calling traditional ways to account – as Immanuel Kant put it in his 1794 essay, ‘An Answer to the Question, What is the Enlightenment?’ It was Descartes (1596-1650), Dawson wrote, ‘the parent of modern rationalism’ who set the tone for a new movement of philosophical and scientific thought. ‘The originality of Descartes’, Dawson wrote, ‘consisted in his complete divorce of the human mind as a thinking substance from any dependence on, or even any apparent relation to, the body which it informs and the conditions of physical existence with which it appears to be bound up’. Human reason, for Descartes, Dawson concluded, was essentially a-historical and disembodied, able ‘without recourse either to experience or to authority ... to deduce an absolutely certain and complete knowledge from the clear and simple truths which are innate in its own being and which it comprehends by a direct act of intuition’²⁷.

This approach, Dawson continued, called for a reform of the whole body of human knowledge. The traditional heritage of European culture was called into doubt ‘as an impure and uncertain compound of truth and error’. ‘The simple reasoning of an intelligent man – *un homme de bon sens* (a common sense man) – is ... of more value than all the learning to be

²⁵ PR 178.

²⁶ See Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped our World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991) 209-19. An eloquent expression of this assumption is documented in the writings of Marsilio Ficino, a key figure in the early Renaissance. Cf. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vols 1-5 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1978-94). Ficino writes, for instance: ‘It was the chief work of the divine Plato, as the dialogues of Parmenides and Epinomis show, to reveal the principle of unity in all things, which he called appropriately the One itself. He also asserted that in all things there is one truth, that is the light of the One itself, the light of God, which is poured into all minds and forms, presenting the forms to the minds and joining minds to the forms. Whoever wishes to profess the study of Plato should therefore honour the one truth, which is the single ray of the one God’ (Voll, letter 42).

²⁷ PR 10.

acquired from books and the schools, for they are founded on a direct intuitive certitude that cannot be deceived'. To an age impatient under what it saw as the dead hand of political and ecclesiastical tradition, this attitude of mind – the spirit of the eighteenth century Enlightenment – had an obvious appeal. It produced, Dawson wrote, 'an extraordinary impression on the thought of the age. It was responsible for the formation of those abstract ideas: Reason, Science, Progress, and Civilization, which became the idols of the new age'²⁸.

The irony of this development – which was to lead to an immense advance in scientific thought and material progress in the Western tradition – was not lost on Dawson. Descartes' contribution to its development was not motivated by the desire to exalt human reason, he wrote, for that had been characteristic of the despised Aristotelian tradition in medieval scholasticism²⁹. Dawson quoted Adolf Harnach, the Liberal Protestant historian: 'Scholasticism is nothing else but scientific thought. The science of the Middle ages gives practical proof of an eagerness in thinking, and exhibits an energy in subjecting all that is real and valuable to thought, to which we can find perhaps no parallel in any other age'³⁰. What flawed this medieval project, Dawson observed, was the fact that medieval thinkers, overawed by the scientific achievement of Aristotle, undertook little new experimental research, and endeavoured to rationalise the reality of the material world by a form of reasoning that was often inappropriately *a priori*, rather than based on the observation of empirical facts. Descartes' parallel achievement – quite distinct from his philosophy of the mind – wedding empirical observation and mathematical analysis, was providing 'common sense man' with the resource with which he could carry forward the rational interpretation of reality.

There can be no doubt that the 'clear distinct ideas' of Cartesian reason belong to the intellectual tradition the West inherited from the classical civilization of the Greco-Roman world. The outlook of the German Enlightenment, however, reflects a very different tradition, the tribal solidarity of the pre-Christian past. A new current of thought, initiating 'the new Romantic movement' Dawson wrote, had its origins in Germany in 'the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth'. It had a spirit 'utterly

²⁸ PR 11.

²⁹ PR 10.

³⁰ PR 172.

different from that of French philosophical rationalism, and still more from the practical utilitarian thought of contemporary England'³¹. Its ideal of knowledge – in such writers as Novalis (1772-1801) and Goethe (1749-1833) was not found in rational analysis, but in a 'direct intuition of reality by imaginative vision'. Even the reason of the German philosophers, such as Fichte (1762-1814) and Schelling (1775-1854), Dawson wrote, was different from that of the French rationalists, a 'higher reason' which is capable of comprehending pure and absolute being in an act of simple intuition – very different from the scientific outlook derived from the work of Isaac Newton (1642-1727) in the scientific tradition initiated by Descartes. Dawson quoted Fichte's description of his philosophical vision: 'there flows onward, with a rushing movement of mighty waves, an eternal stream of life and power and action which issue forth from the original source of all life'. This outlook of German Romanticism, Dawson commented, 'is in fact musical rather than mathematical'; it engendered 'an entirely new attitude to history and society. A people is not an accumulation of separate individuals artificially united ... for their mutual advantage ... it is a spiritual unity for which and by which its members exist'³².

This emphasis on social reality found a focus in the 'collective soul' of Herder (1744-1810), for whom civilization is 'the offspring of tradition and culture'. Through the Romantic movement, which was shaped by this outlook, Dawson wrote, 'the peoples of Northern and Western Europe, above all the Germans, rediscovered their own medieval past with something of the same enthusiasm and wonder which Renaissance Italy experienced at their recovery of classical antiquity ... it was like the discovery of a new world, and it provoked a general reaction against the whole rationalist culture of the previous age'. Dawson situated the idealistic philosophy of Hegel (1770-1831) within this development; for Hegel, he wrote, 'History is the progressive manifestation and self-realisation of the absolute spirit in Time'³³.

It was this movement, Dawson went on to write, that led ultimately to the fatalistic view of Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), in *The Decline of the West* (1922) – 'the logical, if extreme, conclusion of a current of thought which reached back to the Romantic epoch'. For Spengler,

³¹ PR 25-26.

³² PR 25-28.

³³ PR 28-30; see also 199-201 for further details of the development of German culture.

‘each culture has an individual style or personality which can be seized intuitively by whoever possesses a feeling for history’³⁴.

The cultural development we have outlined, of course, saw the progressive marginalisation of the Christian religion as an animating principle of unity in Western civilization. The French Enlightenment, and the Revolution it led to, were positively antagonistic to the Christian tradition; and though the German Romantic movement was initially accepting of that tradition – as is evident in Herder’s writings and the philosophy of Hegel – its final expression was the cultural relativism of Spengler which saw no lasting value in particular religion traditions. Dawson was writing before the rise of Nazism in Germany. Its link with the cultural tradition he has described is clear.

The two centuries in which our secularised Western tradition has brought profound changes to the whole world are an obvious challenge to Dawson’s basic principle that religion has always been the life-giving unifying principle of the world’s great cultures. *Progress and Religion* was Dawson’s response to this challenge. For Dawson, it will be recalled, vital cultures, as expressions of human potentialities, are organic in nature, with roots in the soil of physical environment and an openness to the heavens of spiritual reality. If, for Dawson, religion has been the principal influence in the realm of the spirit, he often spoke in more general terms of the need for a ‘spiritual’ component in a vital culture. Responding to the challenge of interpreting the evolution of modern Western history, his essential argument is that the idea of ‘Progress’ has provided a central spiritual ideal which accounts for this remarkable evolution. ‘Every period of civilization’, he wrote, in the first lines of *Progress and Religion*, possesses certain characteristic ideas that are peculiarly its own ... accepted as principles of absolute truth and universal validity. They are looked on, not as the popular ideas of the moment, but as eternal truths implanted in the very nature of things, and as self evident in any kind of rational thinking’. The idea of ‘Progress’, Dawson continued, ‘has occupied a position of this kind in the modern civilization of Western Europe ... it has

³⁴ PR 31-2. Dawson has made a lengthy criticism of Spengler’s elaborate interpretation of the evolution of civilizations, not only because of the impact of Spengler’s work in the immediate aftermath of World War I, but especially because he appreciated the fact that Spengler attempted an interpretation of history in terms of culture. In the end, as we have seen, he emphatically rejected Spengler’s ‘fundamental philosophical relativism’ as a betrayal of authentic rationalism – for which, Dawson wrote, ‘There are no eternal truths. Each philosophy is an expression of its age, and only of its age’; for Spengler, the world’s philosophers have made the error of falsely absolutising their own culture and its ‘truth’ (PR 33-34; see also DWH 374-389).

permeated the whole mind of society from the leaders of thought down to the men of business ... the working faith of our civilization ... any attempt to criticise it has seemed almost an act of impiety'³⁵.

However, when we analyse the idea of Progress, Dawson observed, it is not such a simple idea as we are apt to suppose. We immediately encounter very different understandings. For historians and anthropologists, the present state of the world has been produced by a process that has endured for infinite ages – a fact that would seem to indicate that any ultimate goal of perfection must be in the distant future. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the other hand, the concept of Progress gave rise to the powerful dynamic of an optimistic faith in the proximate advent of a new age of justice and enlightenment³⁶.

For the Enlightenment, Dawson wrote, 'Civilization' constituted an idea complementing 'Progress' and engendering a similar faith: 'The dominant characteristic of the eighteenth century ... was the concept of Civilization as something absolute and unique – a complete whole standing out in symmetrical perfection, like a classical temple against a background of Gothic confusion'³⁷.

Dawson linked the development of the idea of Progress with the thought of the eighteenth century English Deists, attempting 'to substitute the Religion of Nature for orthodox Christianity as the ruling faith of modern civilization'³⁸. By the mid-seventeenth century, Dawson wrote, it was increasingly obvious that it was not possible to restore the spiritual unity of Christendom by diplomatic means. Europe, however, maintained a spiritual unity in many things. The culture of the Renaissance and the new scientific knowledge were not limited by national and religious boundaries. Intellectuals, turning away from religious controversy, were attracted by the idea of a rational religion common to all sensible people. This outlook, Dawson wrote, in the eighteenth century 'attained its full development with the English Deists and their disciples the French philosophers, who attempted to substitute the

³⁵ PR 3.

³⁶ PR 4-5.

³⁷ PR 9.

³⁸ PR 189.

Religion of Nature for orthodox Christianity as the ruling faith of modern civilization'. 'Served up with the salt of Voltaire's wit', these ideas reached a wide public³⁹.

Despite its unorthodox and even anti-Christian character, Dawson wrote, Deism's Religion of Nature derived all its positive elements from the Christian tradition. 'A civilization cannot strip itself of its past', Dawson wrote, 'The religion that has governed the life of a people for a thousand years enters into its very being and moulds all its thought and feeling'. In their rationalist doctrines, Dawson continued, the philosophers of the eighteenth century were in fact simply abstracting from the ancient faith of Christendom 'those elements that had entered so deeply into their own thought that they no longer recognised their origin. Eighteenth century Deism was but the ghost or shadow of Christianity, a mental abstraction from the reality of a historical religion, which possessed no independent life of its own'⁴⁰. Their Religion of Nature took for granted a beneficent Creator and the idea of an all-embracing Providence, which however was presented as a mechanistic natural law. It upheld the chief precepts of the moral law of Christianity, which were interpreted as belonging to the utilitarian rationalist scheme of contemporary philosophy.

Dawson emphasised the place in this program of the idea of Progress: 'While the new philosophy had no place', he wrote, 'for the supernaturalism of the Christian eschatology, it could not divest itself of the Christian teleological conception of life ... belief in the moral perfectibility, and the indefinite progress of the human race took the place of the Christian faith in the life of the world to come, as the final goal of human effort'. The God of Deism's Religion of Nature, Dawson wrote, 'was but a pale abstraction, a mere *deus ex machina*'; belief in Progress, however, showed itself to be 'an ideal capable of stirring men's emotions and arousing genuine religious enthusiasm. It played an equally important part in the formation of German Idealism and English Utilitarian Liberalism'⁴¹.

The pseudo-religious enthusiasm Dawson has pointed to was still a powerful force in the culture of the twentieth century. He pointed to the vision of John Dewey, the American educationalist whose influence spread through the English-speaking world: 'The ultimate end

³⁹ PR 188-89.

⁴⁰ PR 190.

⁴¹ PR 190-92.

of the whole process' of education championed by Dewey, Dawson wrote, 'is a state of spiritual communion, in which every individual shares in the experience of the whole, and contributes according to his powers to the formation of ... the democratic mind'. This concept of education, Dawson continued, 'is a religious one in spite of its secularism. It is inspired by a faith in democracy and a democratic "mystique" which is religious rather than political in spirit. Words like "community", "progress", "life" and "youth" etc., but above all "democracy" itself, have acquired a kind of numinous character which gives them an emotional or evocative power and puts them above rational criticism'⁴²

Dawson drew attention, in this regard, to the millenarian visions of social progress which were characteristic of the nineteenth century. He saw the social idealism which Rousseau promoted with a zeal derived from his Calvinistic background as influencing these developments, not only in the Revolution of 1789, but later in the programs of the Socialists who envisaged a dramatic leap forward in human history through the correction of defective social systems. The philosophy of Hegel, he wrote, was an important link between the mystical idealism of Romanticism and the rationalism and positivism of later nineteenth century thought. The teaching of Karl Marx, of course, brought together the hopes of the Socialists and a dialectic of historical progress derived from Hegel⁴³.

Thus the idea of Progress, Dawson wrote, was a pervasive influence in the thought of the first half of the nineteenth century: 'It dominated the three main currents of European thought, Rationalist Liberalism, Revolutionary Socialism and transcendental Idealism', evoking all the enthusiasm and faith of a genuine religion. It seemed, he continued, that the Religion of Progress was to restore to Europe 'the spiritual unity which she had lost since the Middle Ages'. 'The nineteenth century was "the Century of Hope", he concluded, 'but it was also the Century of Disillusion'⁴⁴. Dawson drew attention to the complex cultural developments that led to this disillusionment; 'At the same time that the influence of the new ideas was producing an intellectual and political revolution on the continent', he wrote, 'in England the material conditions of civilization were being transformed by the new economic methods which produced the Industrial Revolution'. Both of these developments 'were equally

⁴² CWE 104.

⁴³ PR 193-201.

⁴⁴ PR 201.

indebted to the new science of nature and to the old religious tradition, in its secularised Deist form⁴⁵.

Contrasting developments, Dawson wrote, were taking place in France and England: ‘at the time that the French were attempting to reconstruct society on abstract principles, the English were devoting themselves to a practical utilitarian activity which was to have an even greater effect on society’. The shapers of developments in England, he wrote, ‘were apostles of the Idea of Progress’ who combined ‘individualism with strict moral discipline and’ a ‘religious optimism’, with ‘an enthusiasm for social and political reform which was to inspire the age of the Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of English Liberalism’⁴⁶. He noted the judgment of Troeltsch and Max Weber that the industrial movement owes a great deal to the moral and social ideals of Puritanism. ‘The Protestant asceticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, he commented, ‘did not lead men to fly from the world and to give up all their goods to the poor and the Church, as in the Middle Ages. It inculcated the duty of unremitting industry and thrift, while at the same time it discouraged rigorously every kind of self-indulgence and extravagance in the expenditure of what had been gained. Thus there grew up a new social type ... men who spared themselves not more than their employees, and who looked on their work as a kind of religious vocation’⁴⁷.

If in theory, Dawson wrote, developments stemming from the Industrial Revolution were ‘the application of the Liberal doctrines of Free Trade and *Laissez faire*’, in reality they constituted ‘a vast cooperative effort towards the economic conquest of the world which involved a very high degree of social discipline and organisation’. ‘The true note of the age’, he concluded, ‘was not economic freedom but economic conquest and exploitation’⁴⁸. And Dawson compared the success of this project with ‘the conquest and unification of the ancient world by Rome in the first and second centuries BC’. ‘Regions of which the very existence were unknown a century’ earlier were soon ‘producing wealth for the European markets and’

⁴⁵ PR 202.

⁴⁶ PR 203.

⁴⁷ PR 204.

⁴⁸ PR 205-06.

were ‘in closer communication with Europe than England had been with the continent in the eighteenth century’⁴⁹.

The remarkable social and material changes that characterised the early nineteenth century, confirmed the widespread assumption of European culture, that the Law of Progress shaped the future. To the Victorians and their contemporaries, the continental Liberals, Dawson wrote, these developments were ‘a tangible proof of the theory of progress, and mark the beginning of a new era in the history of humanity’⁵⁰. The unprecedented horror of World War I brought a terrible disillusionment.

Dawson’s reflections on the instability of the world of the twentieth century related this instability to the lack of a coherent, shared ‘spiritual’ vision. With the passing of the medieval culture, Dawson wrote, ‘physical science’ was seen to have brought emancipation ‘from the dead hand of Aristotelian cosmology ... it was a defeat for philosophy which now lost its former undisputed intellectual hegemony, and became a wanderer and outcast, with no sure foothold in the world of reality – like a discredited political leader ... continually offering its services as a mediator between the opposing parties (the upholding of truths seen to be part of Europe’s heritage, and the verities of a world shaped by the scientific movement) only to be disavowed by both sides, and left to bear responsibilities for their blunders’⁵¹.

Commenting that science as a discipline has purified itself from the ‘bastard quasi-metaphysical conceptions which were masquerading as scientific truth’, and has become aware of the limits of its claims to solve human problems, Dawson wrote that this left modern science ‘poised insecurely on the verge of a metaphysical abyss ... For the more rigidly the province of science is defined and its claims are limited, the more pressing becomes the need for a metaphysical or rather meta-scientific explanation of reality’⁵².

⁴⁹ PR 206.

⁵⁰ PR 207-208.

⁵¹ PR 219.

⁵² PR 227.

In a world shaped by the scientific movement, Dawson wrote, ‘All aspects of reality which could not be reduced to mathematical terms and regarded as resulting from the blind operation of material forces were treated as mere subjective impressions of the human mind, and in so far as man himself was viewed as a by-product of this vast mechanical order, they were inevitably deprived of any ultimate reality. A universe of this kind seems to leave no room for moral values or spiritual forces’. The mind of the age, however, Dawson continued, ‘refused to accept the consequences of a thorough-going materialism, and combined its scientific determinism with semi-philosophical, semi-theological Deism. The physical mechanism of the universe was not all ... there also exists the Divine Engineer who had constructed the cosmic machinery, and who still supervises its working ... it was possible to conceive the universe in the spirit of strict scientific determinism, while still preserving a belief in an ultimate teleology’⁵³.

Our Western tradition found it difficult to respond satisfactorily to the social problems which are the outcome of its spectacular achievements. The economic and industrial developments that had taken place through the application of Descartes’ mathematical rationalisation of the world of nature inevitably led to social unrest. ‘It must be admitted’, Dawson wrote, ‘that the industrial movement, while raising the general standard of life, has caused a retrogression in the position of the ordinary worker. Politically he gained full rights of citizenship such as he never possessed at any other period of the world’s history; economically he lost the control that the craftsman possessed under the old system of hand industry over the conditions of his work, and became a mere cog in the vast machinery of modern industrialism’⁵⁴. This outcome led to a new expression of the Religion of Progress. The earlier revolutionary propaganda on behalf of the rights of man, associated with the eighteenth century Enlightenment, Dawson wrote, ‘took an economic form. Socialism was, in fact ... the heir of earlier revolutionary Liberalism’. ‘In spite of the scientific interpretation that it received at the hands of Karl Marx and his disciples’, Dawson added, ‘it was like the doctrine of Rousseau, no cold rational theory but a creed and a religion’⁵⁵.

⁵³ PR 219-20.

⁵⁴ PR 208.

⁵⁵ PR 208-09. Writing in 1935, Dawson discussed this aspect of Marxism, relating it to the belief in Progress pervading the culture of the West (DWH 247-250; see also 210-11, 225-230).

Thus, Dawson's interpretation of Western history's cultural development has brought us to the twentieth century. We shall now follow his evaluation of contemporary developments⁵⁶.

As the work of a historian, Dawson's writings are primarily intended to bring to light an understanding of the past. But such an understanding can also hold lessons for us as we take part in the ongoing project of our shared civilization. Several times in his writings, Dawson has pointed to the similarity between the present situation of Western culture and the Roman Empire at the height of its power. 'Our civilization', he wrote in 1929, in *Progress and Religion*, 'needs social and moral unification even more than did the Roman world in the age of Augustus, since the interests at stake are even greater'. Those of the Right, he continued, who stand for the traditions of the past are 'wedded to national particularism and strife, and most bound by vested interests in economic matters'. The parties of the Left, on the other hand, he continued, 'who profess the highest ideals of social justice and international brotherhood care little for the historic tradition of European culture, and stand committed to a policy of class war and social revolution'. And the Liberal tradition, which 'stands for international peace and the old ideals of social freedom and progress ... no longer holds the dominant position that it had in the nineteenth century ... the Liberal doctrines of progress and the perfectibility of society by purely rational means are no longer accepted as undisputed dogmas by the thinkers and writers of the present day'. 'The scepticism and unbelief which in the heyday of Liberal enlightenment were directed against traditional religion have now been turned against the foundations of Liberalism itself'⁵⁷. The interpretation of cultural development which we have followed, with its many strands of incompatible assumptions, amply confirms this judgment.

For Dawson, as we have seen, the lack of consistency and unity in today's Western culture can only be overcome by a *spiritual* revival which unites our civilized community in a shared understanding of the true potentialities of our human existence. Of course, for Dawson the ideal way of realising this is through the authentic spirit of the Christian tradition. He would make this judgment, in the first place, because his historical analysis has convinced him that the ideals that still motivate our remarkable civilization have their roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But he would also make it because his profound understanding of the

⁵⁶ For a brief summary of the developments we have been considering, see PR 217-221.

⁵⁷ PR 215-217.

authentic ideals of that tradition convinced him that this tradition can give new life to those ideals. It is probably unfortunate that the writing in which he has argued this case were produced on the eve of the Second World War (*Beyond Politics* in 1939) and during that war's protracted conflict (*Judgement of the Nations* in 1943) – in an atmosphere in which European civilization itself seemed under threat and it seemed that it would only survive through a new beginning and a profound reappraisal of its basic assumptions. As we shall see, in his final work Dawson's approach was sensitive to a very different post-war mood.

In *Beyond Politics* he showed himself sensitive to the difficulties that must be faced in promoting the recovery he was then advocating. The Christian, he wrote, 'must not look for a quick and easy solution to a problem on which the whole future of humanity depends ... there is a great danger that Christians ... take the line of least resistance and acquiesce in some facile synthesis of their religion with the dominant ideology. But it is no less dangerous for Christians to go to the other extreme, to preach a kind of Christian totalitarianism which would make Christianity a rival to the modern social ideologies on their own ground'. 'Modern society', he continued, 'is obscurely conscious of its need for recreation and rebirth, and is groping in a blind and instinctive way after life and light. Yet it has not sufficient time to look far or dig deep'⁵⁸. Dawson showed his acute cultural awareness, anticipating developments such as those of the 'New Age' movement – as those seeking to recovery a religious dimension in their lives 'demand that religion shall come back to earth – to an immediate contact with nature and man, and give up its vain pursuit of a mirage of the Absolute'⁵⁹.

In *Progress and Religion* Dawson showed himself aware of the self-criticism the Christian tradition must find, if it was to speak meaningfully to the cultural outlook of the day. This is an issue that was touched on in chapter 4. Any attempt to promote a revival of the spiritual dimension in our civilization, Dawson was convinced, must take seriously the legitimate

⁵⁸ BP 90-91.

⁵⁹ For this outlook, he wrote, 'the religion of the future' would 'be a kind of neo-paganism which will consist in the worship of the vital forces of nature in the place of spiritual abstractions'. Such an approach, Dawson wrote, has no future: we 'cannot go back to the paradise of the primitive' when we have 'tasted of the Tree of Knowledge'; 'As soon as man had gained a certain measure of control over his environment and had learned to regard nature as amenable to human reason and will, the old naïve attitude of awe and worship had gone forever. Henceforward, man was master in his own house' (PR 238-39; see also DWH 121-22, 180-88).

autonomy of the secular order and must show itself a wholehearted promoter of genuine material and political development. ‘It must be admitted’, Dawson continued, ‘that the modern criticism of the great world religions is not altogether without foundation’. These traditions’ ‘intellectual absolutism and their concentration on metaphysical conceptions have tended to turn men’s minds away from the material world’; their ‘spirit of otherworldliness ... is antipathetic to the modern mind, since it seems to destroy the value and significance of relative knowledge – that it to say of natural science – and of human life itself. The present age seems to demand a religion which will be an incentive to action and a justification of the material and social progress which has been the peculiar achievement of the last two centuries’⁶⁰.

In his 1947 Gifford Lectures it will be recalled, Dawson observed that ‘the absolute transcendent claims of religion’ should not lead to ‘a denial of the limited, historically conditioned and temporal values of culture’. And he noted that the world religions have often failed to achieve a right relationship between the transcendent and the cultural forms in which they give expression to their life. It is hard to find any example of a religious culture, he wrote, which does not incline towards a subtle form of idolatry, which ‘attributes to their way of life and their social tradition a universal moral or spiritual validity, so that in practice they are identified with the divine order and the moral law’.

It was the *authentic* spirit of the Christian tradition which Dawson was convinced was capable – despite the many aberrations and shortcomings evident in the cultural life of this tradition – of engendering a satisfactory cultural relationship between the Absolute and the reality of secular life⁶¹. He based this judgment on his appreciation of the creative dialectic which should be a consequence of an acceptance of the Christian Gospel as a meeting with the transcendent Absolute, present in history through the Incarnation and the Sacramental Communion which is the life of the Christian people. ‘It is through the sacraments’, Dawson wrote, ‘that the Incarnation of the Divine Word is no longer merely a historical fact, but is

⁶⁰ PR 238-39. On this issue see also DWH 121-22, 180-88.

⁶¹ RC 208-09. Dawson’s biography, *A Historian and His World*, gives interesting details of his critical reflections on the shortcomings of contemporary Catholic culture, recorded by one of his friends after a long conversation: ‘sectarian’ (133); becoming far more ‘institutional (in a bad sense) and mechanic so to say ... (having a belief) in effecting things by organisation and formulas etc. etc.’ so that ‘“propaganda” is universally dominant in the Church as outside it’ (141); ‘taking his own line on some of the more legalist aspects of the Church’ (141).

brought into vital and sensible contact with the life of the believer. So far from being an alien magical conception superimposed upon the religion of the Gospel, it forms the very heart of Christianity'⁶². And in this perspective, Dawson saw human history as belonging to 'the very heart of Christianity'. It is not too much to say, he wrote, that without this heart 'there would be no such thing as Christianity. For Christianity, together with the religion of Israel out of which it was born, is an historical religion in a sense to which no other world religion can lay claim – not even Islam, though this comes nearest to it in this respect'⁶³.

Leaving aside Dawson's judgment, in these writings, concerning the way in which unity can be restored to our Western cultural tradition, however, his comments are worth considering by those who are concerned to understand the present state of our civilization.

In the first place, we find throughout his discussion of the world's cultures frequent return to the theme of the organic nature of vital cultures. In his critical consideration of Oswald Spengler's theory of the nature of civilized cultures, as deterministic *sui generis* organisms, Dawson wrote in a passage we have already cited: 'In reality, a culture is neither a purely physical process nor an ideal construction (as a purely spiritual movement of ideas). It is a living whole from its roots in the soil and in the simple instinctive life of the shepherd, the fisherman, and the husbandman, up to its flowering in the highest achievements of the artist and the philosopher; just as the individual combines in the substantial unity of his personality the animal life of nutrition and reproduction with the higher activities of reason and intellect. It is impossible to disregard the importance of a material and non-rational element in history ...The change of a culture is not simply a change of thought, it is above all a change of life'⁶⁴.

Writing in 1924, Dawson developed the implications of this organic nature of culture with his characteristic flair for concrete imagery. Pointing to the 'rawness and ugliness' of the urban developments taking place in Europe at that time, he wrote that they were symptomatic of 'an insufficient or false relation to environment, which produces strain, wasted effort, revolt or failure'. 'Just as the mechanistic industrial civilization', he continued, 'will seek to eliminate all waste movements at work, so as to make the operative the perfect complement of his

⁶² DWH 185-86.

⁶³ DWH 234-35.

⁶⁴ DWH 387-88.

machine, so a vital civilization will cause every function and every act to partake of vital grace and beauty'. This, Dawson added, can be to a large extent instinctive, as in old agricultural operations, or the result of conscious effort, as the calligraphy of a Muslim scribe or the highly developed codes of Oriental etiquette. 'Why', Dawson continued, 'is a stockbroker less beautiful than a Homeric warrior or an Egyptian priest? Because he is less incorporated with life, he is not inevitable, but accidental, almost parasitic ... the full Victorian panoply of top hat and frock coat undoubtedly expressed something essential in the nineteenth century culture, and hence it spread with that culture all over the world as no fashion of clothing had ever done before ... a fit emblem of the ruthless and great age that created it ...but it misses the direct inevitable beauty that all clothing should have – like its parent culture, it was out of touch with the life of nature and human nature as well'⁶⁵.

Pointing to the rapid urbanisation taking place in the cosmopolitan world culture which has developed through the influence of our Western tradition, Dawson wrote in *Progress and Religion*, 'modern urban civilization no longer has any contact with the soil or the instinctive life of nature ... Everywhere the conditions of life are becoming more and more artificial ... The rhythm of social life is accelerated, since it is no longer forced to keep time with the life of nature'⁶⁶. Dawson judged that this 'mechanisation of culture' has far reaching consequences, which we can disregard only at our peril. 'We are apt to believe', he wrote in 1949, 'that everything would go well with the world if only we could enforce common standards by universal economic planning and some kind of political world organisation, and we ignore the tremendous dangers which threaten man's spiritual freedom under the impersonal tyranny of a mechanical order in which the individual is considered merely as one among a hundred million or five hundred million units which compose the modern promiscuous mass society. But no class system or ... social structure can save us from the horrors of total planning. On the contrary, I am sure that the mechanisation of our society would inevitably produce a new and more exclusive system of specialised classes or castes, such as was developed in a more primitive form by the collectivism of the later Roman Empire'⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ DWH 66.

⁶⁶ PR 212.

⁶⁷ DWH 106-07.

It is important, however, to recognise that Dawson did not discount the possibility that our Western tradition may have internal resources that can evoke a response to this challenge that sustains the organic vitality of our Western tradition. We are reminded that, while he stresses the ultimate potential he sees in the Christian tradition to bring such a vitalisation, he is open, as a historian, to the possibility of other developments that cannot be anticipated. In principle, for Dawson, as we have said, what is called for is a *spiritual* response that gives expression to the potentialities of our common humanity. ‘It may be possible’, he wrote in *Progress and Religion*, ‘to reach a new stage of social equilibrium in which the vital forces of society are scientifically safeguarded and preserved from the deteriorating influences of the new conditions’ brought by industrial urbanisation⁶⁸. ‘It is true’, he continued, ‘that the urban development of our age has not the same parasitic character as that of the ancient world. Moreover, the possibilities of scientific control over the material conditions of social life and even its organic development are infinitely greater’. He added however ‘whatever the possibilities of a new social development may be, they cannot be realised by blind or uncoordinated activity. Our civilization needs social and moral unification even more than the Roman world in the Age of Augustus’⁶⁹. Writing some years earlier, in 1933, Dawson spelt out the implications of what we have just seen, writing, ‘The crisis that has arisen in the modern world ... is not merely an economic one. It involves the future of Western culture as a whole ... The problem ... cannot be solved by the manipulation of credit and currency. It is a question of how to adjust the traditional forms of social and political order which are the result of a long and gradual process of historical evolution to the new economic forces that have transformed the world during the last century’⁷⁰.

Let us conclude this section of the present chapter, recalling Dawson’s discussion of an issue related to this question: the prevailing understanding of the processes of social order in our modern Western tradition. Dawson had a consistent point of view of this question derived from his following of the developments of world history – as taking place through the evolution of humanity’s self-expression through its innate potentialities. Significant writings on this matter, as we have seen, were occasioned by the crisis evident in the conflict of the Second World War. It is not surprising, therefore, that these works discuss the inadequacies

⁶⁸ PR 213.

⁶⁹ PR 215.

⁷⁰ DWH 213.

of the totalitarian regimes that played such a large part in that crisis. He saw these ideologies as a reaction against the Western culture's inadequate response to the realities of today's mechanised society. Dawson's analysis of the cultural developments that led to this reaction is worth following in detail.

'We are children', he wrote, 'of a period which marked the climax of the material prosperity and material organisation of Western culture while the sense of spiritual community had reached its lowest point ... the new movements and ideals which the nineteenth century had attempted to set up as an alternative to the old sense of community engendered by Christian faith – liberalism, idealism and even positivism – had failed to satisfy men's minds, and the century had closed in doubt and disillusionment. In so far as men still believed in a spiritual community, it was ... that of a universal ideal, and even this idealism no longer inspired the faith and hope which had given it such power in the days of the Enlightenment and during the early nineteenth century'. At the same time, Dawson continued, as 'the Christian tradition of community was becoming increasingly isolated and segregated from modern economic and cultural life, the world was becoming obscurely conscious of the loss of community and the need for social integration'⁷¹.

Revolutionary Socialism, with its anti-individualist and anti-capitalist spirit, Dawson saw as a response to this felt need. This search for the fellowship of community also found expression, he judged, in the 'nationalist movements' so characteristic of the nineteenth century – 'which were an assertion of cultural and racial community, against the artificial unity of military or bureaucratic imperialism'⁷².

Dawson interpreted the history of the second half of the nineteenth century as involving a compromise between these forces of nationalism and the bureaucratic traditions of the European monarchies. This compromise, however, came to an end after the upheaval of the First World War: 'The leading characteristic of all the new regimes and political movements that have arisen since 1917', Dawson wrote, 'has been the tendency to merge the state in the community and to assert the supremacy of the common will over every legal and

⁷¹ BP 62-64.

⁷² BP 65.

constitutional limitation'⁷³. It was this tendency in an extreme form, Dawson wrote, that produced the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Communist theory taught men to regard the State as an instrument of class war with the function of forcing individuals in society to merge their consciousness and their interests in those of the mass community. In Italy, as the Fascist movement turned in this direction, it had to compromise to some degree with the traditions of a venerable culture. In Germany, however, conditions were exceptionally favourable to an implementation of this ideal. While the traditional bureaucracy had been discredited, the idea of a national and racial community as something transcending the artificial juridical forms of the State had behind it the prestige of a great literary and philosophic tradition. 'Hence it was in Germany', Dawson continued, 'rather than in Russia or Italy, that the two different tendencies towards community ... Nationalism and Socialism, united to produce a new creed – that of National Socialism', the creed of the ruling Nazis⁷⁴.

Dawson concluded from his analysis that 'the essence of the totalitarian regime is to be found, not in dictatorship but in mass consciousness and mass organisation'. The real conflict of the mid-twentieth century, he wrote, 'is not that between democracy and dictatorship, but between individualism and "communitarianism"'⁷⁵. The most essential characteristic of Germany's National Socialism, Dawson wrote, was 'its attempt to create an ideology which' was to 'be the soul of the new state ... a new form of natural religion ... a mystical neo-paganism which worships ... the spirit of the race as already manifested in the heroic dead and the living nation, and as about to be perfected in the ideal racial community of the future'⁷⁶.

The chief evils of the totalitarian State are not due to its ideals, Dawson concluded, 'but to the means used to enforce them'⁷⁷. The ideological program of the Nazis, he pointed out had many parallels in the nationalist movements of the past; the evil of Nazism consisted in the

⁷³ BP 67.

⁷⁴ BP 67-68.

⁷⁵ BP 68-69.

⁷⁶ BP 81-82.

⁷⁷ BP 83.

use of this ideology as an ‘instrument of the totalitarian State for the control and unification of mass opinion’⁷⁸.

Dawson judged that the view which saw the conflict between the totalitarian regimes and the free world as a conflict between democracy and dictatorship displaced the real problem. In his judgment, the world faced the problem of establishing a political order which fosters authentic human community. It is interesting to note that in our own day the so-called ‘neoconservatives’ in the U.S. have seen the liberal democracy of the West as the ultimate panacea for the world’s disorders. Dawson would have judged this approach to be superficial and ineffectual. Following his reasoning can shed light on what is a continuing problem for the civilized tradition of the West.

Dawson expressed his view on this question in simple terms in *Judgement of the Nations*: ‘It is necessary, in the first place, to understand what we mean by democracy’. As we shall see presently, Dawson’s analysis points to different understandings of this apparently self-evident notion that have emerged in our Western tradition. ‘Secondly’, Dawson continued, ‘it is necessary to distinguish between what is living and dead in the democratic tradition that we have inherited from the nineteenth century. By democracy we mean not merely self-government or popular government, but rather that particular form of self-government which is based on the ideal of personal liberty and which was embodied in representative or parliamentary institutions’⁷⁹.

Dawson had spelt out the implications of this position more fully in *Beyond Politics*, as we have seen, – democracy means far more than ‘the destruction of social inequality and the reduction of our culture to the lowest common factor of intelligence ... the existing tendency towards social uniformity is far from solving the problem of social organisation ...the unorganised mass ... has to be informed by a living spirit and ordered to a higher end. Without this, social uniformity can mean no more than a reversion to tribal barbarism, and democracy nothing more than the rule of the herd. Obviously there is no room in such a society for liberty, as it has been understood in the past. For liberty is not the right of the

⁷⁸ BP 82.

⁷⁹ JN 13-14.

mass to power, but the right of the individual and the group to achieve the highest possible degree of self-development'⁸⁰.

As a historian of culture, Dawson followed the developments that led him to judge that in the Western tradition, 'democracy' is a term used 'in an equivocal sense to cover two distinct systems and traditions' which 'are far from identical'. Leaving Russia out of account, he observed that the term 'democracy' refers to 'distinct systems and traditions', and much confusion in political discussion comes from a failure to recognise this fact. English parliamentary democracy, Dawson pointed out, is shaped by centuries of English cultural history, reflecting the nation's pragmatic outlook. French democracy, on the other hand, has its roots in the Enlightenment and its revolutionary outcome at the end of the eighteenth century. German democracy had a very different genesis, as we have seen. English parliamentarianism, Dawson wrote in 1939, is no less different from French Democracy than it is from German nationalism, though the political circumstances of the moment have drawn the English closer to the one and further from the other, just as, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they had the reverse effect, bringing the English closer to Germany and alienating us from France⁸¹.

These changing alliances of the nationalist politics of Europe, attempting to maintain a balance of power, Dawson continued, have tended to obscure the real diversity of the democratic traditions of the English speaking world, the French, and the German. The establishing of an international order which is authentically democratic therefore, Dawson argued, cannot be based on abstract principles of international democracy. The problem as he saw it, therefore, was 'to reinterpret the English ideal of freedom and toleration in accordance with the requirements of a post-individualist and post-capitalism age ... If the English tradition and English political and social ideal are to survive we have got to find a *via media* between the totalitarian socialism of the dictatorships which is alien to our culture and the liberal individualism which was consonant with our traditions but which belongs to the past'⁸². If the old liberal individualism should not shape our common future, Dawson continued, 'the ideal behind it' which gave it whatever spiritual dimension it possessed – the

⁸⁰ BP 47.

⁸¹ BP 42.

⁸² BP 42-44.

values of liberty and toleration – are by no means dead, even though they seem threatened with extinction; any attempt to achieve a social organisation adapted to the English genius must hold these ideals in view.

In 1933, in an article entitled ‘The World Crisis and the English Tradition’⁸³, Dawson traced the development of the English parliamentary tradition. It grew up in an England whose isolation made it a world apart, with no need for the rigid centralisation or bureaucratic organisation which was absolutely necessary for the survival of the continental nations. ‘A new type of civilization grew up’, Dawson Wrote, ‘that was not urban or courtly, but essentially rural and based upon the life of the family’, and which possessed an ‘exceptional stability and strength ... which impressed continental observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’. The eighteenth century English squire, a central figure in this development, Dawson continued, ‘was not a member of a noble class as was even the smallest German baron or French count, he was a glorified yeoman’ who, if he could be highhanded, was never a stranger to his fellow countrymen. ‘Thus’, Dawson concluded, ‘the English culture and the social discipline that went with it were not a civilization imposed from above but grew up from below, out of the very soil of England’. In contrast with the nation states of the continent, England’s ‘constitution was not a paper document, based on the most admirable abstract principles and entirely altered every few years, it was herself; she could not throw it aside any more than a man can discard his own personality’⁸⁴.

This culture, Dawson continued, passed through various phases until the end of the Georgian era, when it faced the disruption of the Industrial Revolution and the challenging developments it has brought in its train. It is not difficult to recognise a correlation between this cultural development, and Dawson’s recurrent theme of the organic nature of a vital culture. In the article to which we have referred, he cited the impression English culture made on the pioneer sociologist, Frederic Le Play, when he visited England in the course of his research, in 1836: he was impressed ‘by the stability of the social organism and by the weakness of the forces of irreligion and disorder which were then in the ascendant throughout Western Europe’, finding the source of this stability in the characteristics Dawson

⁸³ Reproduced in *Enquiries* (1933)33-46, and in DWH 213-224.

⁸⁴ DWH 215-16.

described⁸⁵. These developments, Dawson wrote, had their roots far back in the Middle Ages. They remind us of the culture of the medieval communes so much admired by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch.

What then is an authentic democratic social order according to Dawson? Perhaps we can express his position in simple terms by making a distinction between ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’. The two terms are practically equivalent, of course, but the latter term has a subtle tendency in its use to refer to persons. ‘Freedom’ on the other hand has a broader less defined reference; it can be applied to human beings and to brute animals. The specifically *human* condition deserves another term. What Dawson has written in passages already quoted, makes clear the added dimension that is appropriate for a human agent. ‘Liberty’, he wrote, ‘is not the right of the mass to power’ – a social order which is based on such a principle implies a curtailing of personal freedom according to the whim of the majority of citizens. It is, Dawson wrote, ‘the right of the individual and the group’ within an established social order ‘to achieve the highest possible degree of self-development’⁸⁶.

In discussing the social order of the high Middle Ages, as analysed by Thomas Aquinas, we will recall, Dawson expanded this definition: ‘The medieval city was a community of communities in which the same principles of corporate rights and chartered liberties applied equally to the whole and to the parts. For 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 the highly organised form of corporate life which possessed its own constitution and rights of self-government’⁸⁷. This understanding, of course, presupposes that many of the greatest actualisations of human potential derive from this corporate sharing – what Aristotle called ‘political friendship’.

John Courtney Murray, the American theologian whose views were an important influence in the framing the Second Vatican Council’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965), in his work *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*⁸⁸, discussed

⁸⁵ DWH 216.

⁸⁶ BP 47.

⁸⁷ RWC 172-73.

⁸⁸ *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

the American Constitution as it was intended by the Founding Fathers of the United States. Murray's analysis of the social order they intended, is substantially one with the democratic social order Dawson has defined. Murray writes, in fact, the Founding Fathers 'were individualists, but not to the point of ignoring the social nature of man'. 'They did their thinking', he explained, 'within the tradition of freedom that was their heritage from England. Its roots were not in top of anyone's brain but in history. Importantly, its roots were in the medieval notion of the *homo liber et legalis*, the man whose freedom rests on law, whose law was the age-old custom in which the nature of man expressed itself, and whose lawful freedoms were possessed in association with his fellows'⁸⁹ Murray argued that the widespread acceptance of John Locke's understanding of democratic society, as a social contract whereby citizens make a compromise to safeguard the maximising of their individual interests – in Locke's words, 'for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name of property'⁹⁰ – has led to a superficial and distorted understanding of what was intended by America's Founding Fathers. He wrote:

(T)he principle that the state is distinct from society and limited in its office towards society ... was inherent in the Great Tradition (having its origin in medieval times). Before it was cancelled out by the rise of the modern omniscient society-state, it had found expression in the distinction between the order of politics and the order of culture ... The American Proposition, in reviving the distinction between society and state, which had perished with the advance of absolutism, likewise renewed the principle of the incompetence of government in the field of opinion. Government submits itself to judgment by the truth of society; it is not itself a judge of the truth in society. Freedom of the means of communication whereby ideas are circulated and criticized, and the freedom of the academy (understanding by this term the range of institutions organized for the pursuit of truth and the perpetuation of the intellectual heritage of society) are immune from legal inhibition or government control. This immunity is a civil right of the first order, essential to the American concept of a free people under a limited government.⁹¹

⁸⁹ *We Hold These Truths*, 38.

⁹⁰ *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, par.123.

⁹¹ *We Hold These Truths*,35. Murray was aware of Dawson's work. He was one of the distinguished academics to voice their support for a basic course of integrated studies proposed by Dawson while he

Dawson did not proceed from his analysis to offer practical suggestions for today's politicians. He was of the opinion that it is beyond the capacity of political planning alone to create the community of communities in which the human spirit can find its full development. 'A free culture', he wrote, 'is an unplanned culture: the organization of culture means bringing it into the service of social ends and hence of the state. This is a vital issue. Is it possible to develop a planned culture which will be free? Or does cultural planning necessarily involve a totalitarian state? ...The remoulding of human nature is a task that far transcends politics, and ... if the state is entrusted with this task it will inevitably destroy human freedom in a ... fundamental way ...The planning of a culture ... is a much higher and more difficult task than any economic organisation, it demands greater resources of powers of knowledge and understanding'⁹². In *Beyond Politics* Dawson, in making the same point, recalled the tradition of English democracy: 'If it is dangerous to attempt the fundamental reorganization of economic life by purely political means, it is far more dangerous to bring politics into the order of culture, for this means the invasion of the human soul by the hand of power. This is the original sin of every totalitarian system, and this is why the English mind revolts instinctively at the idea of forcible imposition by the State of any kind of ideology'⁹³.

Dawson made passing reference in his discussion of the contemporary situation to attempts in the mid-twentieth century to establish a 'corporate state' – in Italy, Austria and Portugal. Their failure would not have surprised him.

It is only a shared spiritual vision that can give rise to a genuine community of communities, making possible the realisation of a democratic order that maximises the possibility of actualising humanity's innate potential.

The views of Dawson we have been considering to this point bring to mind the evaluation of contemporary Western culture made by Max Weber (1864-1920), the great German sociologist. Weber recognised the importance of religion in social life, devoting much of his

was lecturing at Harvard. See the Dawson Symposium, *Eternity in Time* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1997, edited by Caldecott and Morrill) p.21.

⁹² JN 81, 83.

⁹³ BP 18.

work to the analysis of its influence. ‘Magic and religious forces’, and the ethical ideas of duty based on them, he wrote, ‘have in the past always been among the most important formative influences on conduct’. But he frankly admitted that his positivist methodology had nothing to say on the competing claims of religious traditions: ‘Whoever wants a sermon’, he wrote, ‘should go to a conventicle ...It is true that the path of human destiny cannot but appal him who surveys a section of it. But he will do well to keep his small personal commentaries to himself ... unless he knows himself to be called and gifted to give them expression in prophetic or artistic form’⁹⁴. Weber returned somewhat wistfully to this thought in a memorable passage in which he sums up the crisis brought by our Western culture’s ‘disenchantment’, creating for itself an iron cage of rationalised bureaucracy that shapes our contemporary existence:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.’⁹⁵

The views of Christopher Dawson some years after the end of World War II must be taken into account if one is to have a balanced understanding of his critical analysis of Western civilization. No doubt it was the experience brought by an invitation to take up a chair at Harvard University that helped shape these views, published in 1961 in *The Crisis of Western Education*. Stimulated by his contact with the vital American culture of the time, Dawson was convinced that educational initiatives must provide one of the ways towards solving the problems of contemporary Western civilization. Dawson began his last publication observing that ‘culture is inseparable from education, since education, in the widest sense of the word, is what anthropologists term “enculturation”, i.e. the process by which culture is handed on by society and acquired by the individual’⁹⁶. He argued that education must give a more effective introduction to the cultural developments that have produced our civilization.

⁹⁴ Included in Lawrence Cahoon’s anthology, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (Cambridge Mass.: Blackwells, 1996) p.167.

⁹⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1958) 182.

⁹⁶ CWE 3.

Carrying forward our study of Dawson's interpretation of history we find that his final publication was motivated by convictions concerning the future prospects of Western civilization more optimistic than those of Max Weber. It was the methodologies adopted by these two scholars that gave rise to this contrast. Weber acknowledged that his methodology did not make it possible for him to evaluate the competing claims of religious traditions. Dawson, on the other hand, made it clear that for him the quality of essays in historical interpretation depends upon an 'intuitive understanding, creative imagination and universal vision transcending the relative limitations of the particular field of historical study'⁹⁷; and Dawson also made it clear that the universal vision providing the grounds for his interpretation was the vision of Christian faith. His views concerning the future prospects of Western civilization gave expression to an optimism that is a necessary corollary of faith in a God whose ultimate plan for humanity will certainly be realised.

What we have seen of Dawson's historical interpretation in the course of this study makes clear its constant reference to this Christian vision. More than once we have referred to his regret that modernity's tripartite division of the history of our tradition obscured its essential unity. As Dawson wrote in a passage cited in an earlier chapter, speaking of the interpretative genius of St Paul in his articulation of the vision of the new-born faith: '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 historians and philosophers'⁹⁸. And it was Dawson's profound understanding of the essential genius of Christian faith that enabled him to offer an interpretation of the emergence of a distinctive Christian civilization in the West – as the outcome of a dialectic between this transcendent reality and the struggles of a society emerging from barbarism. This is an achievement which – when it comes to be appreciated by theologians and Church historians – may well be seen as Dawson's enduring contribution to Christian thought in the field of ecclesiology.

⁹⁷ DWH 272; cf. 292-93.

⁹⁸ DWH 236-38.

Dawson's optimism is evidenced in the realism with which, as a historian, he faced the uncertainties of the future. Taking a long-term view, he contemplated the possibility that today's attempts 'to create an international world order to safeguard peace and freedom' could in the end 'prove an illusion', so that 'the world descends into the twilight of barbarism and a new dark age'. He considered however that even a catastrophe of this nature would not destroy 'the continuity of human culture'. The seeds of new life would still be present, as the peoples of the world took up again the task which gives meaning to the world's history⁹⁹.

Dawson's reflections on the situation of contemporary Western culture in the post-war calm of his Harvard experience show that his diagnosis of the root problem facing our tradition had not changed; however, in view of the fact that this later work offers an optimistic response to this situation, it is enlightening to hear Dawson returning to themes we are familiar with from his earlier writings.

Ever since the loss of a united Christian faith, Dawson wrote, modern society has been seeking a 'bond' to give expression to its unity. Various 'substitute religions' or 'counter-religions' have been proposed, he continued: 'the democratic ideal of the natural society and its general will', 'the nationalist cult of a historic racial community, 'communist faith in the revolutionary mission of the proletariat'¹⁰⁰.

Dawson saw the drift of Western culture towards today's secularism as gradual and largely unconscious. Dawson wrote, for instance, that in spite of the disunity of Christendom the new national literatures were one of the elements of culture that united the peoples of Europe: 'through these vernacular literatures', he wrote, 'the humanist tradition reached down to the level of popular culture until it eventually reached every man who could read ... the literate classes had long ceased to be identified with the clerical profession'¹⁰¹ 'Thus under the influence of humanism', Dawson continued, 'Christian culture flowered again, even in the

⁹⁹ CWE 126.

¹⁰⁰ CWE 108. Dawson noted that in this development the English-speaking world 'followed a different tradition ... based on the older conception of a limited state ... and left the larger part of life as an open field for the free activity of individuals and independent organisations'. In this situation, 'Religion was active and influential but not united ... in England the formal secularisation of the State was not due to an anti-clerical attack on religious belief, but the work of pious nonconformists who were concerned above all with the defence of their own religious liberties and privileges. All this has had an immense influence on the history of English education' (loc.cit.)

¹⁰¹ CWE 39-40.

arid soil of Puritanism. Indeed, in the course of the seventeenth century there was a moment when this culture possessed a greater richness of content and a clearer vision of the world *sub specie aeternitatis* (in the light of eternity) than at any time before or since'¹⁰²

This culture, however, was to be confronted by its basic inadequacy: 'The breakdown of liberalism', Dawson wrote. 'has been followed by collectivism and the totalitarian state – a development which is closely related to that of the technological order'. The radical solution of totalitarianism, Dawson continued, 'solved the conflict between human nature and civilisation' – the 'dualism', we will recall, which Dawson judged to be a primary catalyst of culture creativity – 'forcing human nature into conformity with the political and economic pattern ... which fits the new man into the new order'¹⁰³. However there is no reason, Dawson pointed out, to support an assumption 'that the ends of the collective will of society or the state will be more rational or more moral than those of the individual. On the contrary, the moral standards of states and governments, especially in time of war and revolution, are usually very much lower than those of the individual ... as we have seen in our own lifetime'¹⁰⁴.

Dawson's criticism, however, was directed not only against totalitarian regimes but also against the social order of contemporary democracy. 'The modern Western synthesis of political liberalism and economic technology involves', he wrote, 'certain moral weaknesses and contradictions ... For while the democratic technological society is free, it lacks the higher moral aims which alone can justify the immense developments' that have taken place 'in technological power and organisation. The system exists primarily to satisfy the material needs and demands of consumers, and these demands are artificially determined by the advertisers who are the agents of the producers, so that the whole system has a circular movement and feeds upon itself'¹⁰⁵.

In his earlier writings, Dawson foresaw far-reaching consequences of the 'bourgeoisie' coming to possess the substance of power in Western society: For all their failings, Dawson

¹⁰² CWE 41.

¹⁰³ CWE 196.

¹⁰⁴ CWE 196-97.

¹⁰⁵ CWE 197.

the meta-historian wrote, ‘The king and the priest ... were united to their people by a bond of organic solidarity. They were not individuals standing over against other individuals, but parts of a common social organism and representatives of a common spiritual order.’ The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, ‘upset the throne and the altar, but they put in their place nothing but themselves. Hence their regime cannot appeal to any higher sanction than that of self-interest. It is in a continual state of disintegration and flux’¹⁰⁶.

In Dawson’s judgment, both totalitarianism and the contemporary democratic system are defective because they share in assumptions that cannot provide for the ultimate wellbeing of the human persons for whom social order should exist. Dawson argued that there can exist a social order which ensures that ‘the individual is not entirely sacrificed to the community nor the community to the individual’, a social order that is not self-serving but open to the truths and values that shape an authentic human existence. This alternative type of society, Dawson wrote, is represented ‘by the traditional religious or philosophical doctrine which solves the psychological and moral conflict by reference to the higher order of transcendent truth and values and ends, to which both the life of the individual and that of society are subordinate’¹⁰⁷.

Dawson’s historical and cultural analysis in *The Crisis of Western Education* not only clarified the issues which today’s Western culture must face; it also provided an encouraging evaluation of the secularism which is the principle obstacle to be overcome if this culture is to find the openness advocated by Dawson.

Secularism, of course, has many forms in the constituent cultures of the modern Western world. In his last published work, Dawson addressed the challenge presented by the secularised culture with which he had immediate contact. What he has to say, however, can shed light on parallel situations in other national traditions. If it has largely been through the educational system that today’s secularised culture has been established, it is heartening to recognise with Dawson, that in the cultures of England and the United States, ‘the victory of secular education’ was almost an accident of history; it did not come from a powerful current

¹⁰⁶ DWH 227-28; cf. 203-04, where Dawson cited Aquinas (*S. theol.*, 2a2ae, q77, art 4), condemning commerce that has no worthy end but ‘the greed for gain, which knows no limit’.

¹⁰⁷ CWE 198.

of anti-religious sentiment, but was ‘due above all to interdenominational friction and jealousy’. Making this point, Dawson reminds us of his conviction of the importance for healthy cultural tradition to maintain distinction between the limited responsibilities of the State and the larger totality of initiatives in the culture of a community. Dawson pointed out that at the very times when interdenominational divisions diminished the effectiveness of the Christian tradition’s contribution to education ‘the whole relation of State and community’ was changing, giving rise to a ‘growing responsibility of the State for social and individual welfare and its increasing control of economic life’. He continued, ‘The continental conception of the State as an all-embracing community, a kind of secular church, has entered as it were by the back door’¹⁰⁸.

Dawson’s cultural analysis is enlightening in another way, concerning the nature of contemporary secularism. Rather than being a conscious option to live in a world that is not open to the transcendent order of life-giving truths and values, it is for the vast majority of people a mood of unawareness. Citing a survey carried out in England in 1951, concerning ‘what influence Christianity exerts in the lives of people today’, he concluded: ‘the real threat to Christianity ... as shown in this survey, is not the rational hostility of a determined minority, but the existence of a great mass of opinion which is not anti-religious but sub-religious, so that it is no longer conscious of any spiritual need for Christianity to fulfil’¹⁰⁹.

Dawson’s interpretation of this situation is remarkable and convincing. It is a situation, he observed, that is without precedent: ‘in the past, a low level of culture did not necessarily involve a lack of religious belief’; and ‘even the primitive peoples who are lowest in the scale of material culture have never shown themselves entirely devoid of the religious sense’. The reason for this situation, he concluded, must be found in something peculiar to contemporary Western culture. Dawson calls to mind what he has discussed in his previous writings (cf. DWH 66, 106-07; PR 212), arguing that the cause is to be found in ‘the artificial character of modern culture, which is unlike anything previous ages have experienced ... a kind of hothouse growth’. Those living in the closed environment that has shaped this culture, he explained, are ‘sheltered from the direct impact of reality’ and thereby deprived of the basic

¹⁰⁸ CWE 109. Dawson commented: ‘In some respects we are now worse off than the continental peoples, since there is no place in our traditions for the idea of a concordat, as a kind of treaty between Church and State considered as two autonomous societies’.

¹⁰⁹ CWE 172.

experience which gives access to the mysterious dimensions of human existence. What is more, in the man-made environment of their experience, 'they are subjected to a growing pressure which makes for social conformity'. They seldom have to think for themselves 'or make vital decisions'; their 'whole life is spent inside highly organised artificial units – factory, trade union, office, civil service, party' and 'success or failure depends on... relations with this organisation'. If membership in a religious tradition were one of the compulsory organisations, Dawson continues, 'modern man would be religious, but since it is voluntary, and makes demands on his spare time, it is felt to be superfluous and unnecessary'. Dawson concluded, 'the sub-religious is also in a certain sense subhuman, and the fact that apparently healthy and normal individuals can become dehumanised in this way shows that there is something wrong in the society and culture that have made them what they are'¹¹⁰,

In the light of the 'personalism' that was fundamental to Dawson's interpretation of the history of cultures – seeing culture, in the last analysis, as an actualisation of the potentialities of the human person that should provide a 'highway' leading to the fulfilment of human destiny – it is not surprising that he judged the situation he has analysed to involve 'a conflict between human nature and civilization'. Such a conflict has existed, in some form, Dawson would acknowledge, in all the cultures of the world, but he saw the inherent conflict in our Western civilized tradition to be 'far more severe than anything that was known in the past'. This is so, he argued, because today's technological order involves a much more far-reaching system of social control ... the inner logic and outward efficiency of the system demand total coordination and total unity, so that education and science, business and industry, government and public opinion shall all cooperate with one another in a closed organisation from which there are no outlets'¹¹¹.

There is an irony, Dawson observed, in the fact that the system which has evolved in our civilized tradition 'is entirely opposed to the ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism which have inspired the growth of modern democracy'¹¹².

¹¹⁰ CWE 173.

¹¹¹ CWE 194-95.

¹¹² CWE 195.

In the light of Dawson's analysis, one must conclude that our cultural tradition must be open to self-criticism, if it is to resolve its present problems. Dawson's far-sighted wisdom anticipated some of this criticism when he wrote, in 1931, in the concluding lines of *The Making of Europe*: 'We no longer have the same confidence in the inborn superiority of Western civilization and its right to dominate the world. We are conscious of the claims of the subject races and cultures, and we feel the need for protection from the insurgent forces of the oriental world and for closer contact with its spiritual tradition'. What the future holds, he continued, 'we can only at present guess. But it is well to remember that the unity of our civilization does not rest entirely on the secular culture and material progress of the last four centuries... we must go back behind Humanism and behind the superficial triumphs of modern civilization, if we wish to discover the fundamental social and spiritual forces' which have shaped our cultural tradition¹¹³.

Dawson's description, in *The Crisis of Western Education*, of the challenging situation we face in our Western tradition had an optimistic tone because he judged that this situation can be remedied. In particular, his cultural analysis made it clear that the secularised outlook is a relatively recent and comparatively superficial development in the centuries-long evolution of our cultural tradition.

The measures envisaged by Dawson are straightforward in themselves. If their realisation may take a long time, Dawson, the meta-historian, thought in terms of the age-long rhythms of the human story. What Dawson envisaged, it must be clearly understood, is not an unrealistic utopia. 'There has never been a temporal society of saints', he wrote, such a goal 'represents a sectarian perversion of Christian culture'¹¹⁴. His understanding of the past experience of the Christian movement convinced Dawson that what can be achieved is a creative, life-giving, dialectic between the transcendent ideals of Christian faith and the ongoing march of cultural development.

¹¹³ TME 230. In the Introduction to TME Dawson wrote: "What the oriental resents is the arrogant claim that our civilization is the only kind of civilization that matters, and he is far more likely to view it with sympathy if he sees it as a spiritual whole than if, as at present, he regards it as an incomprehensible material power that is seeking to control his life' (pp.xxv-xxvi).

¹¹⁴ CWE 138-39.

Those working towards this objective, he wrote, must be made ‘aware of the relativity of culture’ in its historical forms. People tend to absolutise the cultural forms in which they live, he continued, ‘It needs a considerable amount of study and imagination to understand the difference of cultures and the existence and value of other ways of life which diverge from’ the familiar pattern¹¹⁵.

Dawson saw the program he envisaged as an expression of the ‘dynamic process’ which ‘is co-existent with the history of Christianity and inseparable from it’. It involves three essential elements: ‘(1) the confrontation of Christianity – the Church and the Gospel – with the non-Christian secular and pagan environment; (2) The process of permeation of one by the other; (3) the eventual creation of new forms of culture and thought – art, literature, institutions, and so forth – from the process of interaction’¹¹⁶. There is no doubt that, though he does not mention it, Dawson would recognise as essential to this creative interchange a *respectful dialogue* in which both sides are open to learning from the other.

It is helpful to relate the practical observations made by Dawson in the course of *The Crisis of Western Education* to each of the three elements he has indicated.

With regard to the first element, *a vital meeting between a Christian culture and today’s secularised culture*, Dawson saw as essential, if this meeting is to prove worthwhile, that Christians, especially their pastoral and theological leader, have a balanced and practical understanding of the Christian ideals they witness to. He was convinced that educational initiatives must open the way towards an understanding of today’s culture and its inherent contradictions. In particular, he argued that Christian education runs the risk of becoming an unconscious component of a dominant secular culture, if Christians do not become aware that theirs is a ‘millennial tradition and possesses all the treasures of three thousand years of spiritual creativity’¹¹⁷.

The second element, *interaction between a Christian point of view and that of the secularised environment*, is obviously crucial in the whole program Dawson envisaged: ‘It is of the very

¹¹⁵ CWE 147.

¹¹⁶ CWE 164.

¹¹⁷ CWE 152-53.

nature of Christian faith and Christian life', he wrote, 'to penetrate and change the social environment in which they exist, and there is no aspect of human life which is closed to this leavening and transforming process'¹¹⁸. Dawson's respect for the dignity and integrity of alien cultures would certainly have made him share in today's recognition that the dialogue of evangelisation must avoid a proselytising approach that does not respect the freedom and integrity of those with whom Christians are in dialogue. The metaphor of a 'leaven' which transforms the unpromising lump of dough Dawson has inherited, of course, from the Gospel teaching of Jesus. If the result he envisaged may seem far-fetched to contemporary awareness, Dawson reminded his readers that such a result has been achieved in the history of our cultural tradition; 'the historical reality of Christian culture as a world movement was created by the conversion of Hellenistic Roman culture to Christianity, and its diffusion to the peoples of the West ... In the course of ages it has passed through many phases and influenced the development of many different peoples ... It has created new spiritual ideals and new philosophies and new arts and new social institutions ... it has preserved the unity of the Christian faith and the community of the Christian people ... It must find new channels of expression in this new world and a new approach to the new peoples who do not share in the ... tradition of the Christian past'¹¹⁹.

If we understand the mind of Christopher Dawson, we recognise that what he advocated is not the emergence of a Christian culture that is able to manipulate the political life of the community – something he found abhorrent. Dawson looked forward to something very different, the influence that can come from a genuine *witness* to the life-giving potential of a community living by Christian ideals. Though he does not labour the point, it is at the heart of his understanding Christian culture. It is also, it may be argued, the central issue confronting Catholicism in its confused response to the call of Vatican II to revitalise its life and mission – a demanding issue that calls for a profound renewal of the complacent, highly institutionalised culture of modern Catholicism.

Dawson's writings made it clear that he had long been aware of the challenging implications of a life of genuine Christian witness. Writing the Introduction to *The Making of Europe* in 1932, he described the spirit of the 'makers of the new age' of a dawning European culture –

¹¹⁸ CWE 139.

¹¹⁹ CWE 151-52.

Augustine, Benedict, Gregory the Great, Boniface – in these terms: ‘If that age was an age of faith, it was not merely on account of external religious profession ... It was rather because they had no faith in themselves or in the possibilities of human effort, but put their trust in something more than civilization and something outside history ... The foundations of Europe were laid in fear and weakness and suffering – such suffering as we can hardly conceive of’¹²⁰. And in his Gifford Lectures, published as *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, he returned to this theme as he discussed the reformers who pointed the way towards the high achievement of medieval civilization, expressing the same conviction in memorable terms: ‘the true helpers of the world are the poor in spirit’¹²¹. These words of Christopher Dawson are not empty rhetoric, but the expression of a conviction to which he has been led by his profound Christian faith, as he studied the history of the world’s cultures.

What can be said of the third element spoken of by Dawson, *the new forms of culture that can emerge in the future*. As a historian, of course, Dawson was reluctant to anticipate the future of course of human history. In a text that has already been cited, however, Dawson spoke of the historical reality of the first Christian culture in the West as a ‘super-culture’¹²². Though he was speaking of the unitary higher culture that emerged in Europe with the arrival of Christianity, perhaps this situation provides a parallel which can help us envisage what could emerge from a fruitful dialectic between a vital Christian culture and our secularised Western culture. With the passing of time, the ‘super-culture’ spoken of by Dawson coexisted with the very diverse cultures of a united Christian people. Perhaps, in an analogous fashion, it may be suggested, a revitalised Christian culture could coexist with a variety of cultural traditions in the pluralistic world of a coming age – confident in the sovereign truths of a Christian faith and life it is ready to share with the whole world, but with a respectful tolerance of other traditions that is mindful of the mystery of God’s agency and designs in the unfolding of human history. ‘We must make an effort’, Dawson wrote ‘to achieve a open Christian culture which is sufficiently conscious of the value of its own tradition to be able to meet secular culture on an equal footing’¹²³.

¹²⁰ TME p.xxii.

¹²¹ RWC 123-124.

¹²² CWE 151.

¹²³ CWE 188.

Dawson cautioned against the emergence of a sectarian spirit as Christians relate to a dominant secularised culture. Christians, he declared, are a ‘people’, not a sect – sectarianism, he warned, can be as destructive as secularism. The horizons of Christians must be broadened by their ‘super-culture’: ‘The idea of a Christian culture involves a more comprehensive and realistic conception of Christian society than we are accustomed to’, he wrote, ‘We have to recover the idea of “Christian people” as a true world society of which Israel was the antitype; no mere ecclesiological organisation, but the organ of a new humanity’¹²⁴. Several times Dawson warned of the danger that coming challenges could lead committed Christians to the formation of a ‘ghetto’ culture which no longer was in contact with the reality of the contemporary world, and developed an outlook of ‘social inferiority’¹²⁵.

Epilogue

What first stands out for me in Dawson’s cultural history is the recognition of a simple Epilogue-historical continuum embodying a vast range of apparently unrelated moments of human experience. How satisfying it is to hear the story of humanity which includes such things as Icelandic Sagas, Australian indigenous culture, the spirit of St Francis, the teaching of Confucius, Islamic mysticism, Homeric epics and Indian *fakirs*. This unity has been achieved through Dawson’s ‘personalism’ – his recognition that all cultural developments are the self-expression of our common humanity.

Christopher Dawson showed his thoroughness as a scholar in what he wrote concerning an issue that goes to the heart of this ‘personalism’. Dawson’s historical research convinced him that religious experience and aspirations have been a fundamental dynamic in cultural development. This recognition led him to wide reading as he sought to understand this dynamism. The brilliant, but unconventional nineteenth century thinker, Ralph Waldo

¹²⁴ CWE 162.

¹²⁵ CWE 111, 147, 152, 188.

Emerson, gave expression to a mood with which struggling humanity readily identifies, in his phrase, ‘divine discontent’. Reflecting on this fundamental human malaise, Dawson commented that all the world religions have engendered an outlook which is ‘not satisfied with the demonstration of the Absolute’ but demand ‘the experience of the Absolute’. ‘But is such an experience conceivable?’ Dawson asked, ‘Certainly it transcends the categories of human thought and the normal conditions of human experience. Yet it has remained for thousands of years as a goal – whether attainable or unattainable – of the religious life; and no religion which ignores this aspiration can prove permanently satisfying to man’s spiritual needs ... A religion that remains on the rational level and denies the possibility of any real relation with a higher order of spiritual reality fails in its most essential function, and ultimately, like Deism, ceases to be a religion at all’¹²⁶. Dawson had a clear understanding of the problem he wished to solve.

In his published works, Dawson more than once wrestled with this problem. It was an issue to which he returned in his correspondence in the final years of his life. A competent study of the development of his thought on this question would be a valuable contribution to our understanding the mind of this great thinker.

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¹²⁶ DWH 178-79.