

An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's Concept of History: Chapter Three--The World Religions bring a New Order of Civilizations

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Our survey of the evolution of human cultures now brings us to consider an innovation that was to have far-reaching consequences. 'About 2500 years ago', Dawson wrote, 'civilization underwent a great revolution owing to a change in ... perceptions of Reality. Throughout the ancient world from the Mediterranean to India and China, men came to realise the existence of a universal cosmic law to which both humanity and the powers of nature are subject. This was the foundation of the great religion civilizations, whether theistic or non-theistic, which have controlled the world for some 2000 years'¹.

Eric Voegelin, a thinker whose work in many ways parallels Dawson's, describes this development and the challenge it brings to philosophers in our own time: 'It was a process which occupies about five centuries in the history of mankind, that is, roughly the period from 800 to 300 BC; it occurs simultaneously in the various civilizations, but without apparent mutual influences. In China it is the age of Confucius and Lao-tse ... in India the age of the Upanishads and the Buddha; in Persia, of Zoroastrianism; in Israel of the Prophets; in Hellas, of the philosophers and of tragedy ... This simultaneous outbreak of the truth of mystic philosophers and prophets has attracted the attention of historians and philosophers since it came into full view in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some are inclined to recognise it as the decisive epoch in the history of mankind. Karl Jaspers ...has called it the axis time of human history. And ... Henri Bergson has formed the concepts of a closed and open society ... characterising the two social states ...which are created by the epoch'².

Discussing this development in another place, Dawson reminded his readers of his judgment that the undifferentiated awareness of the religion of primitives expressed a concern to find a life-giving relationship with the Transcendent. 'Civilization', he wrote, 'did not create ... the essential nature of the religious experience, but gave it new modes of expression and a new intellectual interpretation'. He went on to describe the new mode of expression and intellectual interpretation involved in the emergence of the world religions: 'the great religions or religious philosophies that arose in all the main centres of ancient civilization about the middle of the first millennium BC ... attained to the two fundamental concepts of metaphysical being and ethical order, which

have been the foundation of religious thought and the framework of religious experience ever since'³.

This development, Dawson wrote, 'brought with it a complete revolution in culture, since it destroyed the old religious civilization that was based on a cooperation with the divinized forces of nature'. It did this through 'the discovery of a new world of absolute and unchanging reality beside which the natural world – the world of appearances and of earthly life – paled into a shadow and became dream-like and illusory'⁴. The recognition of this new order shaping religious consciousness, Dawson wrote, brought a liberation 'from the power of nature daimons and the dark forces of magic ... The religious life was no longer bound up with irrational myths and non-moral tabus; it was a process of spiritual discipline directed towards the purification of the mind and the will ... The new type of religious experience ... consisted in an intuition that was essentially spiritual, and found its highest realisation in the vision of the mystic'⁵.

In this chapter we shall consider world religions other than that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In doing so we shall have a frame of reference which shows how our tradition fits into the ongoing progression of the world's cultural development, and what it has in common with other world religions. In the next chapter, tracing the development of Western civilization, we shall learn how it has met the difficulties encountered by other world religions.

Following this development, as it first occurred in the Indian sub-continent, will help us to understand it and the complexity of its relationship with previous cultural forms. 'Alike in India and Greece', Dawson wrote, 'we can trace a striving towards the conception of an invisible underlying cosmic cause or essence - *Atman*, *Logos*, 'the One' – and of the unreality of the continual flux which makes up the phenomenal world, but it was in India that the decisive step was first taken, and it was in India that the new view of reality was followed out unwaveringly in all its practical implications'⁶.

The example of India is remarkable in different ways. The religious vision associated with this discovery of the Absolute, Dawson wrote, 'was not confined to a few philosophers and mystics, but became the goal of the whole religious development'; it was, he wrote, quoting the words of an authority on Indian culture, 'the great discovery that has remained for at least twenty-five centuries the capital and most cherished truth of the Indian people'⁷. Moreover, as we shall see, this development took place in a way that kept alive the traditional practices of the people's past, while giving them a completely new meaning.

The *Upanishads*' affirmation of a transcendent Absolute had clear antecedents, according to Dawson⁸. Despite the 'extravagance of mythological fantasy' to be found in the older religious traditions, Dawson wrote, there was a tendency towards unity and order inherent in the religions of archaic cultures 'which tended to exalt the central object of their worship by making it the creator and source of all the other divine figures'⁹. However, in the judgment of Dawson, 'the main source from which the idea of cosmic

order developed' was the ritual of the priestly group which 'was regarded in every society of archaic culture as the pattern and archetype of world order'. This outlook had the seeds of a further development. No doubt, in archaic cultures, Dawson wrote, 'the gods are regarded as ruling over and intervening in human affairs, but they do not seem to belong to a different order of reality from that of nature'. In other words, there was no appreciation of the transcendent nature of divinity. It was a small, but momentous step, to go beyond the old symbolic conceptions, and recognise that 'there is a power beyond the gods, or at least beyond their anthropomorphic and naturalistic aspect, the divine order ... which governs alike the world of man and the world of the gods'¹⁰.

The teaching of the *Upanishads* made this step. 'The movement of introversion by which man attains a consciousness deeper than that of his discursive reason, but no less real', Dawson wrote, 'appears to be a universal human experience, common to almost all forms and stages of human culture ... what is given in the experience itself is the existence of transcendent spiritual Being in and beyond the depths of the soul itself ... This simple intuition of transcendent spiritual Being is latent in many forms of religious experience, where it is not overtly recognised'. 'It is in fact', Dawson concluded, 'an ultimate natural basis of the idea of God, and the condition of higher spiritual development'¹¹. This question, challenging to philosopher and theologians alike, Dawson wrestled with throughout his life. We shall return to it in our concluding chapter.

There is, however, Dawson wrote, another form of religious experience, 'the sense of cosmic transcendence which finds its classical religious and literary expression in the Book of Job'¹², and which has a great importance in the development of the religion of primitives. In Dawson's judgment, this sense of cosmic significance only 'realises its full religious significance' when it is associated with 'the transcendent spirit beyond the soul' taught by the *Upanishads*: 'When the God of nature, the transcendent power which creates and governs the world is identified with the God of the soul, the transcendent spiritual Being, the presence of which is obscurely felt in the profoundest states of human consciousness, then the basis exists for a higher type of development such as we find in the historic world religions'. For Dawson, 'The classic instance of this is to be found in Indian religion and philosophy, where the identification of *Atman* (the transcendent Self) with *Brahman* (the transcendent cosmic power) is formulated with exceptional clarity, and where it becomes the foundation of the whole religious and philosophical development of orthodox Hinduism'¹³.

As Dawson has observed, it is not easy for our Western mindset to appreciate the approach of the thinkers who produced the *Upanishads*. Our tradition looks back to the approach of Greek thinkers to transcendent reality. Dawson's comments can help us to relate this approach to the very different approach of the *Upanishads*. The Ionian thinkers, who initiated the philosophical tradition of the Greeks, explored the scope of *nous* (mind or reason) – seeking 'to explain and rationalize nature', Dawson wrote, 'and God was ultimately brought in as the keystone of the philosophical edifice – as

First Cause or Prime Mover'. The thinkers of the *Upanishads*, on the other hand, 'started with the principle of transcendent Being, and then attempted to explain the world, or the existence of relative conditional existence in terms of the absolute'. Each approach arrived at 'the affirmation of transcendent Being': the Western approach through a rational inquiry, and that of the *Upanishads* 'by a direct intuition of the Absolute as present in us and transcending the deepest limit of our consciousness'¹⁴. This great difference in approach, Dawson commented, leads Western thinkers to compare the teaching of the *Upanishads* with idealistic philosophies, such as those of Hegel and Spinoza, whereas it should be seen as a religious statement more akin to the teaching of Western mysticism, such as one finds in the writings of Meister Eckhart (d.1327)¹⁵.

Dawson's description of the *Upanishad's* teaching, as finding the transcendent Absolute 'in and beyond the depths of the soul itself'¹⁶, will remind students of Greek philosophy of Plato's teaching that our understanding of an order of intelligible ideas points to another world of immutable Forms or Ideas. Though he makes no mention of him in this context, Dawson could have made reference to St Augustine, whose thought owed so much to 'the divine Plato', as Renaissance humanists called him. In a memorable passage of his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote: 'Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new ... For behold you were within me and I outside; you were with me and I was not with you, and I sought you outside, and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were with me and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all'¹⁷. Dawson could also have made reference to Plotinus, who opened the door to the Neo-Platonism experienced by Augustine.

As has been said, the remarkable advance we have been considering took place in a way that gave a new meaning to the religious rituals that had their origins in the culture of primitives and had existed for thousands of years. 'We can trace the whole process', Dawson wrote, 'by which there had developed, first a highly specialised class devoted to the study of the sacred formulas and ritual techniques, and secondly the movement of theological thought and speculation concerning ultimate religious truths which finally became concentrated in the primary intuition of the absoluteness of Being which underlies and transcends alike the self and the cosmic process'¹⁸. 'Already thousands of years ago' Dawson wrote, the priestly tradition 'had been codified in an elaborate system'. In the development of this tradition, 'Poetry and mythology, ritual and magic, education and law, philosophy and mysticism are all interwoven in an elaborate pattern which centres in the sacrifice and is controlled and ordered by the priesthood ... It is the sacrifice that makes the sun rise and controls the course of the seasons. It is by the sacrifice that the gods live, and it is for the sacrifice that men exist and through sacrifice that they acquire wealth and success in life and power and knowledge, that reach beyond life and beyond the gods, until they penetrate to the innermost mystery of being'. 'From the primitive conception of the magical potency of the sacred formula', Dawson wrote, 'there develops the speculative theory of the creative power of the divine word – the *Brahman*;

until finally we reach the conscious philosophical identification of the enlightened mind, the *Atman* (the self), with *Brahman*, the ultimate basis of all things and the sole transcendent supersubstantial Reality'¹⁹.

'There is an enormous gulf between the extraverted polytheism of the *Rig veda*', Dawson wrote, 'with its naïve wholehearted desire for wealth, long life and victory, and the *via negativa* expounded by the great sages and ascetics of the *Upanishads*. Nevertheless, we can trace every step of the transformation in Vedic literature, and it was by the dialectic of the sacrifice that it was achieved'²⁰. There developed, Dawson wrote, 'a growing sense of the cosmic significance of sacrifice as an act of mystical communion by which the priest participated in the mystery of creation'²¹. It was inevitable that this development displaced the centre of religious gravity from the anthropomorphic figures of the gods to the sacred mystery of the sacrifice as an impersonal cosmic divine act, so that eventually the power of sacrifice took the place of the recipient of sacrifice as the ultimate divine reality'²².

The tradition of the priestly class was therefore the fertile soil from which came the teaching of the *Upanishads*: as the attention of the priesthood became concentrated on the central mystery, they became increasingly aware of the importance of mind and thought in the *opus divinum*, and it was recognised that 'in the cosmic process it is *Brahman*, the All-knowing and All-pervading, from whose brooding contemplation arise the world of the gods and the world of the creatures ... almost simultaneously the teachers of *Brahman* attained the intuition of the identity of *Brahman*, which is the soul of the universe, with the self of the thinker. This is the fundamental doctrine of the *Upanishads*'²³.

The challenging, but logical outcome of the enlightenment evidenced in the *Upanishads* was that, together with the tradition of sacrificial ritual, the priesthood itself was surpassed – so that the *Brahmin* should become 'a hermit, an ascetic who renounces the world and the life of society in order to gain enlightenment and release'. And in the religious culture of India, this practical conclusion has attracted and still attracts many followers. It has a direct relationship with the Buddha's teaching on salvation in the 6th century BC. 'Though Buddhism and Jainism were created by individuals who were not of the *Brahmin* class, Dawson wrote, 'Buddhist monks and Jain ascetics are the linear descendents of the *Brahmins*, and their thought a logical development, of the old tradition of Indian religion'²⁴.

Visitors to India become very much aware, however, that the old tradition of priesthood and sacrifice has reasserted itself; and today one finds a temple culture very similar to that of the archaic civilizations. With the paradoxical ability of Indian culture to maintain elements that seem incompatible, this culture has brought together the ritual tradition of the *Brahmins* and the philosophical theology of the *Upanishads*²⁵. Thus the religious culture of India has come to distinguish a 'lower' and a 'higher' knowledge. For those following the 'lower' knowledge', external sacrifice has an earthly benefit; but these benefits will perish with the present life and may lead to a return to the same life or a lower life. But through the 'higher' knowledge, those 'who

practice penance and faith in the forest, tranquil, wise and living alone', one reads in the *Upanishads*, 'depart free from passion through the Sun to where that immortal person dwells whose nature is imperishable'²⁶.

Among the civilizations of the world, that of China has remarkable characteristics. 'Among the great world civilizations that have survived to modern times', Dawson wrote in 1947, 'none possesses such a degree of continuity and autarky as the civilization of China. Through all the changes and revolutions of their history, the Chinese people have remained masters of their destiny and have shown a power of absorbing alien elements and resisting foreign influences, such as no other people has ever possessed'. He went on to attribute this, to a large degree, to the maintaining of a tradition of 'sacred order' and 'ancestral rites'²⁷.

Events of the half century since Dawson made this judgment seem, at first sight, to make it questionable. However, Dawson's analysis of the dynamics that have shaped the culture of the Chinese people can shed light on these developments, and explain to some degree the readiness of the Chinese to place their destiny in the hands of the father-figure they found in Mao Tse-Tung.

This analysis also helps us to compare the cultures of India and China, and to recognize the communality that exists between these two great but very different civilizations. This communality is immediately evident in the fact that both of these civilized traditions had their beginning in the culture of an archaic religion civilization. In the judgment of Dawson, 'the archaic civilization in North China seems to be more recent' than those of the Near East, and he considered it possible that the archaic civilization of China may have owed a great deal to 'the slow penetration of influences from the West'²⁸. He pointed to evidence of a remarkable cultural continuity, extending back to the fertility religion of an archaic civilization: 'We find in China alone, all the characteristic features of the religion of the archaic culture ... Down to 1912, the Emperor still offered the great sacrifice of the winter solstice at the altar of Heaven, with all the ritual of a remote almost prehistoric past, and every spring he performed the ceremony of the sacred ploughing which opened the agricultural year'²⁹.

The culture expressed in these rituals provided the background for the achievement of Confucius (d. 479 BC) who, Dawson wrote, 'has always been reckoned as one of the founders of the world religions, like the Buddha and Zarathustra – and not without reason, since he transformed the archaic nature religion of ancient China into a religious philosophy and a moral law that have ruled the mind of China ever since'. The greatness of this achievement is evident, Dawson wrote, in the fact that it has 'survived the competition of world religions like Buddhism and the criticism of the philosophers and sceptics'³⁰.

The world of Confucius was one of turmoil – characteristic, as we have seen, of an archaic order that was under challenge by a tribal warrior culture: 'The theocratic order of the old feudal empire', Dawson wrote, was 'dissolving into

a chaos of warring states which were increasingly dominated by sheer power politics'³¹. The approach taken by Confucius in addressing this situation was very subtle. 'He claimed no new revelation', Dawson wrote, 'He was a traditionalist *par excellence*' one who prided himself in being '“a transmitter and not an originator, a believer in and lover of antiquity”'. He upheld 'the religious inheritance of the archaic Chinese culture ... in a spirit of filial reverence'. According to this tradition, Dawson wrote, 'All political power and authority was derived from ... divine order by the mandate of Heaven, which was given and withdrawn by the sovereign decrees of providence ... any breach of order at any point in the social hierarchy from the top to the bottom was liable to disturb the sacred harmony and provoke the anger of Heaven'³².

Confucius was a charismatic educator, whose work 'was not confined to the idealisation of a vanished past', Dawson wrote, 'it involved the transformation of the old conception of the sacred ritual order into a new principle of ethical order which became the heart of Chinese civilization'. He taught that external order was not enough, but it should be conformed to 'with the complete adhesion of mind and will'³³. The spirit of 'the first age of Confucianism will not be understood by the Western mind', Dawson wrote, if it not recognised that 'the attitude of the teacher towards moral training and social duty and knowledge of the Rites was more comparable to the attitude of a monk towards the Holy Rule and the Divine Liturgy than it is to the attitude of a Western scholar towards humane letters and philosophy'³⁴. 'The Rites of the Confucians', Dawson wrote, 'were public and social, their morals were a social ethic, their ideal was the perfect citizen, the “superior man” or “gentleman” of Confucius'³⁵.

The essence of the vision imparted by the teaching of Confucius, Dawson wrote, was 'that every man should do his duty in that state of life to which it has pleased Heaven to call him'. 'It may seem to us', he added, 'a slight foundation on which to build a world religion, but as a system of social ethics and a rule of culture the foundations laid by Confucius and the Confucian scholars have outlasted the rise and fall of civilizations and religions ... Again and again throughout Chinese history, after a temporary phase of militarism or a temporary triumph of Taoism or Buddhism, we find scholars bringing China back once more to the perennial teaching of Confucian ethics and the sacred order of the past'³⁶.

Family life and custom were set in this vision of order: 'All social relationships are bound together by ... (a) single all-embracing attitude of filial piety', Dawson wrote, 'which makes the family a microcosm reflecting the order of the empire and the order of Heaven'. Thus, Dawson concluded – as if anticipating the question we have raised concerning the events of the past half century: 'The canonization of filial piety as the great Confucian virtue provided a perfect psychological basis for the paternal authority of the Confucian state and the ceremonial piety of the state religion'³⁷.

While making the claim that the teaching of Confucius established one of the world religions, Dawson acknowledged that, despite an ever present reference to the 'sacred order' established in Heaven, 'there is a strange lack

in Confucian teaching of theological doctrine and theistic devotion'. In the judgment of Dawson, 'This is not a sign of religious scepticism or of a rationalistic attitude; it is part of the extreme reserve and distrust of unregulated private feeling which characterise Confucian thought ... All man's relations to the powers above are determined by the Sacred Rites ... Anyone who tries to go beyond the Rites by entering into a personal relation with divine powers, or seeking knowledge which Heaven has not revealed, is guilty of impiety ... just as the subject who disregards the etiquette of the court and meddles in the affairs of the state outside his proper office is worthy of condemnation and punishment'³⁸.

The reserve we have just mentioned provoked a reaction, Dawson wrote, 'which finds its classical expression in the writings of the Taoist philosophers'. 'The Taoists believed no less than the Confucians', Dawson wrote, 'in the existence of a universal order to which man must conform himself in order to fulfil his destiny ... They differed only in the application of the fundamental idea ... the Confucians strove to conform themselves to the cosmic order by an active moral discipline and the observance of ceremonial rites, the Taoist sought the same end by mystical contemplation and the practice of magic and alchemy'. Critical of the 'artificial character of Confucian ethics', 'the niceties of ceremonial etiquette', and the 'cult of precedents of antiquity', the teaching of the Taoists, that mystical contemplation would restore the golden age of human life, led them to become in effect 'metaphysical nihilists and political anarchists'³⁹.

Despite the fact that Taoist philosophy was, in itself, an advance in the appreciation of the transcendent Absolute, it has always ultimately been Confucianism, Dawson wrote, that has reasserted itself as the true soul of Chinese culture, giving rise to the remarkable characteristics of that culture to which we have made reference. Dawson acknowledges, however, that the achievement of Confucian culture is counterbalanced by failures and defects. 'For example', he wrote, 'the excessive emphasis on the patriarchal pattern of authority and tradition has always exposed China to the danger of a destructive social crisis whenever there is a change of dynasty or a loss of prestige and efficiency on the part of the government; and even more serious is the lack of satisfaction for the religious needs of the individual, which leaves a spiritual void at the heart of Chinese culture'. 'This explains', Dawson concluded, 'the part which Buddhism has played in China as a secondary unofficial religion which has co-existed with official Confucian cult'⁴⁰.

Writing long before Islam had a problematic place in popular awareness, Christopher Dawson was profoundly aware of this world-religion civilization and its part in shaping the world's history. In his general writings, he often made reference to Islam, relating it to the issues he was discussing. What he had to say sheds light on our present situation. We have already heard him citing Islam as an outstanding example of the far-reaching changes that can come about through a prophetic religious message. In another place he returned to this theme: 'There is an unknown quantity in religious change', Dawson wrote, 'which defeats the most careful analysis' and prediction. 'The state of the Near East in the sixth century AD, for example, certainly

suggested the possibility of a religious change. But ... no one could have foreseen the sudden apparition of Islam and the lightening speed with which it swept over the world from the frontiers of India and China to the Atlantic'⁴¹. Suddenly age-old beliefs and rites were swept aside, Dawson wrote in another place, 'the whole of life' was 'brought into direct relation with the new religious conception'. Terrestrial life 'lost its intrinsic importance – it is but as "the beat of a gnats wing" in comparison with the eternal'⁴². 'A common faith', Dawson wrote, 'has imposed its stamp on the most diverse human material ... The Arab of the desert, the West African Negro, the Malay pirate, the Persian philosopher, the Turkish soldier and the Indian merchant all speak the same religious language, profess the same theological dogmas, and possess the same moral values and the same social convictions'⁴³.

As we might expect, Dawson's discussion of Islam situates it within a context of cultural development. He relates it to the cultures of the world in which it had its origins; and he discusses the inevitable process of cultural development which has shaped its subsequent history. But before we consider Dawson's analysis a brief summary will be helpful of what history has to tell us of Islam's origins.

Mohammed (c.570 - c.632) was a religious genius who, over many years, shared with his followers revelations he received from God. He related what had been communicated to him so that it could be memorised by them. These communications were later written down and gathered together in the written *Koran*⁴⁴. Mohammed shaped Islam's faith in and acceptance of the *Koran* as an earthly reproduction of an uncreated and eternal heavenly original. Thus, 'the *Koran*' is not only the book of the Islamic scriptures, but also the divine truth that is communicated through the Scriptures.

Mohammed's teaching called for the destruction of the old tribal shrines; not surprisingly this gave rise to violent reactions. His profound sense of the reality of God and the transitory and dependent nature of created things found expression in a religion of fear rather than love. 'The goal of its striving', Dawson wrote 'was not the vision of God, but the sensible delights of the shady gardens of Paradise'. This view, Dawson continued, 'had a positive theological basis. Man's reward was proportionate to his nature. God was so exalted above creation that any idea of human communion with the divinity seemed presumption ... But it was never a purely a external system. Its Puritanism was not only that of the warrior, it was also that of the unworldly ascetic who spends his time in prayer and fasting and his goods in almsgiving. From the first there existed in Islam ... a tradition of interior religion, an "Islam of the heart" which showed itself ... among the Companions of the Prophet'⁴⁵.

It is well known that the *Koran* contains much material that parallels the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Islamic orthodoxy absolutely rejects the suggestion that the Prophet made use of material from other sources, holding that he received every word of the *Koran* directly from God. Certainly there is no evidence of direct borrowing from this source. But the biblical themes and the Prophet's insistence on the Last Things suggest the possibility that his

outlook has been influenced to some extent by the preaching of the Syrian Church's missionaries.

Immediately after the Prophet's death, the community of Islam was split over the question of leadership. The *Sunnah* or traditionalist faction (who now constitute the majority of Islam) believed that Mohammed had designated no successor. Another, *Shiah* faction claimed that he had designated his son-in-law. At first a compromise was reached to preserve unity, but the question remained unresolved, and when, some forty years after the Prophet's death, the current successor (or *caliph*) was murdered, a major schism developed that persists until the present day. Though the differences were at first political, with the passing of time the two groups have developed different theological positions.

Dawson situated the emergence of Islam within the cultural world of the time. 'No doubt great changes would have occurred in the culture of the Near East about the seventh century AD in any case, but that they should have taken the form they did can be explained only by the personality of Mohammed and by the doctrine he taught'⁴⁶. 'The age of the decline of the Roman Empire', he commented in another place, 'was also an age of spiritual rebirth which prepared the way not only for the coming of medieval Christendom, but also for the civilizations of Byzantium and Islam. It proved to be a great watershed that divided the streams of Western and Eastern culture and determined the channels in which they were to flow for a thousand years'⁴⁷.

Acknowledging the unique contribution of Mohammed's genius, Dawson took it for granted that many cultural traditions helped shape the culture of Islam⁴⁸. As an outstanding example of prophetic religion, Dawson recognised that Islam identified with a tradition that had deep roots in Semitic culture. 'It is in the Semitic world, rather than the West', he wrote, 'that the classical type of prophetic religion is found and it is there that the relation between the religious institution of prophecy and the social order of culture is most fully exemplified'⁴⁹. Dawson linked Semitic preoccupation with prophecy with the primitive religious outlook of the nomads, who saw themselves as living in a battle field of contending forces, a world ruled by 'fate and chance and personal luck and prowess', looking 'for help to supernatural guidance and warnings, to divination and implicit obedience to an incomprehensible divine will' – a description it will be recognised that evokes the outlook so often met in the Old Testament. Dawson recalled the old pattern of the overthrow of archaic civilizations by warrior nomads, as he describes Islam's expression of the Semitic tradition: 'No doubt the Semites have occupied the old centres of the archaic culture; they have built cities and founded kingdom and empires. But it is not here that the dynamic force of their culture is to be found; the roots of their spiritual life are elsewhere. Again and again the wind blows from the desert and a new movement of prophetic inspiration comes to overturn kingdoms and bring new life into the settled cultures'⁵⁰.

Observing that the prophetic dimension is 'the bond between the religion of Israel and Christianity', Dawson continued, 'But the continuity of prophetic religion is also preserved in its original Semitic environment in the tradition of

Islam, which is the religion of the Prophet *par excellence*⁵¹. Recalling his identification of the three archetypes of specialised religious classes that have emerged in the world's traditions (Seer or Prophet, Priest, Ruler of King)⁵², Dawson wrote 'As a rule, the prophet does not stand alone as the sole spiritual organ of a developed culture. His office is counterbalanced by that of the priesthood which normally acts as the authoritative regulating principle in religion and the institutional bond between religion and culture. Islam is almost unique in its subordination of priesthood to prophecy'. And he pointed to a paradoxical outcome of this situation: 'Islam, the typical prophetic religion is also the classical example of traditionalism, so that any saying of the Prophet and the companions of the Prophet, every action, custom and decision has been recorded ... and built into a vast fabric of orthodox theology and canon law'⁵³.

Dawson returned to the image of several cultures flowing in the same bed in a text that sums up the complex cultural setting in which Islam had its origins: 'The true significance of the Roman Hellenistic period', he wrote, 'is not decay but syncretism. Two different streams of culture, which we describe loosely as "Oriental" and "Western", as "Asiatic" and "European" flowed for several centuries in the same bed, mingling with one another to such an degree that they seemed to form a new civilization... The passing of ancient civilization is marked, it is true, by these two streams once more separating and flowing out again to East and West as the new Daughter Cultures of Islam and Western Europe, though the central bed is still occupied for a time by the dwindling stream of the Byzantine civilization. Nevertheless the two streams continued to bear witness to their common origin. The West was moulded by a religion of the Levant, the East carried on for centuries the tradition of Hellenic philosophy and science. Aristotle and Gallen travelled to India with the Moslems ... Roman law lived on alike with the medieval canonists and the *Ulema* of Islam⁵⁴ ... And it was in the same age of syncretism that the Jewish tradition acquired ... new contacts and opportunities for expression'⁵⁵.

Let us now turn to Dawson's understanding of cultural developments *within* the tradition of Islam. Our appreciation of this remarkable cultural tradition would be very inadequate if we did not recognise the greatness with which it completely overshadowed the Christian West at the end of the first millennium. In his *Medieval Essays*⁵⁶ Dawson described this flowering of Islamic culture: 'The Mediterranean world possessed a relatively uniform type of cosmopolitan culture. From Constantinople to Cairo and Aleppo to Cordova we find the same type of city, with its palaces and bazaars and public baths, the same intensive type of garden agriculture, the same industries and art ... Religion not nationality was the dominant factor, and at least in the Moslem lands even religious barriers were less exclusive than one might have supposed ... The cosmopolitan character of the Mediterranean culture is to be seen at its best in the intellectual cooperation between Moslem, Jewish and Christian scholars which bore fruit in the period in the great flowering of Arabic science and philosophy. Although the Greek and Syrian Christians still contributed their share to the international culture of the age, the leadership in both philosophy and science had definitely passed from Eastern Christendom to Islam ... the bonds of common religion, common

language and common law ... held Islam together as a vast cultural unity, in comparison with which Western Christendom seemed small and provincial ... scholars and theologians travelled from one end of Islam to another; Persian artists and musicians worked at the Spanish court, and scientific and artistic development was stimulated by the rivalry of so many different centres of learning and culture⁵⁷.

This cultural flowering was hardly what might have been expected of the 'Puritan' movement of Islam's origins – which saw earthly existence as 'a time of training and warfare, of which the discipline and suffering are repaid by the eternal joys of Paradise'⁵⁸. But human cultures are rich in their potential. We have already learned that among the companions of the Prophet there were some who had turned towards an 'Islam of the heart'. And there is a tradition which attributes to Mohammed the saying: 'Differences of opinion among my community are a blessing'. We should bear in mind the potential implied by these elements of Islam's founding moment as we follow developments within the theological culture of Islamic tradition.

The cultivation of the 'Islam of the heart' appeared early in the history of Islam. Dawson made a detailed study of Islamic mysticism⁵⁹. 'Of all types of mysticism', he wrote, 'that of Islam is the richest perhaps in quantity and certainly in the quality of its literature'⁶⁰. Mysticism emerged as part of an early reaction against the growing worldliness of Islam in the decades after the death of the Prophet⁶¹. The *Sufi* brotherhood, in Basra, adopted a rule of life founded on prayer and retirement from the world under the leadership of Hasan (643-728). Rati'a, a saintly freedwoman, was a prominent early Sufi mystic who spent the night in prayer on the rooftop. Prayers of hers are remembered, including these remarkable examples: 'O my Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and the kings have shut their doors, and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here I am alone with Thee'; and 'O my Lord, whatever share of this world Thou dost bestow on me bestow it on Thine Enemies, and whatever share of the next world Thou dost give me, give it to Thy friends. Thou art enough for me'⁶².

Not surprisingly 'puritan' traditionalists in the Islamic movement were antagonistic to this development, emphasising the externals of religious observance and rejecting any possibility of a personal communion with God. For them, the *Koran* was the sole mediator between humanity and the divinity. The Sufi movement on the other hand championed the possibility of a personal communion with God. Both of these groups advocated a *prophetic* type of religion: the traditionalist group appealed to the unique authority of Mohammed's prophetic inspiration; the mystics claimed the possibility of further spiritual vision by way of asceticism and the contemplative life⁶³.

This dispute, which continued for centuries, led to the death of the great Martyr of Sufism, al-Hallaj at Bagdad in 922. As he was about to be executed al-Hallaj asked for a prayer mat, and after formal prayer he made this amazing prayer: 'O Lord, I beseech Thee to make me thankful for the grace Thou hast bestowed on me in concealing from the eyes of other men what Thou has revealed to me of the splendour of Thy radiant countenance with is

without form ... And these servants, who are gathered to slay me for Thy religion and in desire to win Thy favour, pardon them and have mercy on them ... Glory unto Thee in whatsoever Thou doest, and glory to Thee in whatsoever Thou willest'⁶⁴.

The question arises whether these developments were influenced by contact with Christian teaching. Dawson noted that 'spiritually minded Moslems could not but be interested in the life and ideals of the monks of the desert (in Egypt), and there are numerous references in Arabic literature to the impression created by their stories and sayings'⁶⁵. However in his judgment – though there may have been some influence from Christian sources – 'the fact remains that Sufism originated as a historical movement ... in the very centre of early Moslem orthodoxy in eight-century Basra'; and he notes that scholars most competent to make a judgment 'seek its sources in the *Koran* and the orthodox Islamic tradition'⁶⁶.

The history of Islam has seen a continuing tension between the traditionalist and mystical outlooks. The importance of continuing prophecy was upheld, Dawson wrote, by Ibn Khaldun, the famous Arabic historian who wrote in North Africa in the later 14th century (1332-1406), and based his whole theory of history on the dynamic influence of successive prophetic movements'⁶⁷. It had already found considerable support from Al Ghazali (1058-1111), a most influential Moslem philosopher, 'a religious genius of the first order', Dawson wrote, 'like St Augustine, who did not study religious phenomena from without, but wrote of things that he had known, under the influence of a life-changing experience'⁶⁸.

Unlike the traditionalists, however, those who championed on-going prophetic experience were in danger of producing aberrant 'false prophets' and groups who compromised Islamic orthodoxy. 'If orthodox historians are to be believed', Dawson wrote in 1948, 'the Ismailians and the Assassins in the Middle Ages were as unscrupulous and ruthless ... as the agents of any modern totalitarian party'. The Assassins, he explained, were an Ismailian branch of the Shiites 'who set up an opposition Khalifate on North Africa and Egypt and carried out an immense underground movement against orthodox Islam through the East from the ninth to the thirteenth century'. Dawson's comment on this development could well be applied to developments in the Islamic tradition in our own day. He judged that this was an instance of the dissociation in a revolutionary movement of a missionary or charismatic principle from its proper religious background 'in order to mobilize the unconscious forces that lie dormant in civilized men, and transform them into instruments of power'⁶⁹.

For a time, the Sufi tradition became lost in what Dawson described as 'esoteric theosophy'. But ultimately, he wrote, its basic contention – that a 'transformation of the inner man' is possible, through which the believer can 'become a familiar friend of God and ... attain to the union of divine love'⁷⁰ – found support 'through their doctrine of sainthood, which was their greatest contribution' to Islam 'as a living religion'. He quoted one contemporary scholar's description of the *wali* or saint: a 'believer who bridges the chasm

which the *Koran* and scholasticism have set between man and the absolute transcendence of God. He brings relief to the distressed, health to the sick, children to the childless, food to the famished, spiritual guidance to those who entrust their souls to his care, blessings on all who visit his tomb and invoke the name of Allah in his name⁷¹.

But this process was gradual. At an intermediate stage, 'in the ninth century', Dawson wrote, 'this development was only in germ, and the new ideal of mystical sanctity was still unassimilated by Islamic theology. There were Sufis ... who maintained the superiority of the Saint over the Prophet, and who regarded Jesus, in accordance with certain passages of the *Koran*, as the Seal of the Saints, as Mohammed is the Seal of the Prophets⁷².

The Sufi martyr, al-Hallaj, to whom reference has been made, lived in this period. His life Dawson wrote – citing the 'epoch-making researches of Massignon' – was shaped by a piety that was traditional and Koranic. Al-Hallaj made 'a constant attempt to work out the Sufi ideal of the saintly vocation to its full practical conclusions', which led him to 'a far sharper conflict with the orthodox piety of the theologians than did the esoteric theosophy of the later Sufis'. 'To him', Dawson continued, 'the mystery of creation was not, as to Mohammed, the divine will – the sheer decree of divine Omnipotence; it was the divine Love, the Essence of the divine Essence in which man was called to participate. Hence (for him) the mystical union does not consist in that pure intuition of the divine unity which is the goal of later Sufism; it is a personal adhesion to the divine *fiat* which makes the soul of the mystic the organ of the Divine Spirit and causes it to participate in the life of God⁷³. This ideal of mystical conformity, Dawson continued, was 'personified in the person of Jesus, who even in the *Koran* appears as the typical representative of the outpouring of the Spirit and of "those who have access to God" '. Al-Hallaj goes further, Dawson commented 'and regards Jesus as the type of deified humanity – the Second Adam in whom the divine vocation of humanity is realised⁷⁴.

As al-Hallaj spread his doctrine through the Islamic world, Dawson wrote, we can trace in his story 'a growing thirst for martyrdom which is, so far as I am aware, absolutely unparalleled in the life of any other Sufi saint ... al Hallaj had found his ideal of mystical sanctity in the Koranic tradition of Jesus, and this imitation of the Koranic Christ led him on to a literal conformity with the real Christ in his Passion and Death⁷⁵.

Ultimately, Dawson wrote, 'Sufism has succeeded in reconciling its ideal with Moslem orthodoxy by means of a *tour de force* which, in defiance of history and of the evidence of the *Koran*, converted Mohammed himself from a simple messenger of Allah into ... the archetype of mystical sanctity, and of the whole lower creation⁷⁶.

Let us conclude this survey of Christopher Dawson's understanding of the characteristics of the world religions, turning to the problem they encounter, as they relate the recognition of a transcendent reality which is the measure of human existence's relationship with the affairs of the present world.

Dawson judged that 'the violence with which the world religions rejected and condemned the idolatry of earth-bound religions' was often 'injurious to religion as a social force' making some relationship with the cultural achievements of the past very difficult. Indeed, some attitudes common in the cultures of the world religions – 'the condemnation of matter and the body as evil, the flight from nature and the world of sense, the denial of the reality of the world, and the value of the social order – gave the impression', Dawson wrote, that 'any real synthesis between religion and culture' was impossible⁷⁷.

In India, Dawson wrote, a kind of compromise was reached, maintaining the ancient rites while giving them a new esoteric significance so that 'the archaic culture was able to maintain itself almost intact, in spite of the dominance of the new religion'. Nevertheless, material *progress* was at a standstill, so that 'in the great temple cities of Dravidian India... we can still see before us today the vanished civilization of Egypt and Babylonia'⁷⁸. Islam, Dawson wrote, despite its strong social and historical consciousness, 'compared very unfavourably with the earlier religions of the Near East'. Dawson quoted Sir William Ramsay, an authority on the Middle East, who considered 'the depopulation of ... lands of ancient culture, the decline in fertility of the soil, the abandonment of irrigation, and the victory of the desert over sown land, were closely related to religious changes, above all to the loss of the Archaic piety towards the earth and the powers of nature which once held nature and society in harmony with one another in allegiance to a common divine law'⁷⁹.

We are speaking of *material* culture, of course. 'The great achievements of the new (Islamic) culture', Dawson wrote, 'lie in the domain of literature and art. But from the material point of view, there was expansion rather than progress. The new culture simply gave new form and new spirit to the material it had received from the archaic civilization'. After an initial flowering, the great religion-culture became stationary and even decadent, Dawson wrote in 1925 – 'Eternity is changeless, and why should man, who lived for eternity change? This is the secret of the "Unchanging East" which has impressed so many Western observers ... But such societies are living in the past ... it even seems as though they are retreating step by step until they disappear', like the marvellous temple complexes of South East Asia which 'have been swallowed up by the jungle'⁸⁰.

As we shall see when we consider the Western tradition, Dawson considered that a fruitful cooperation is possible between a world religion and culture. If this is to take place, he wrote, 'On the one hand, the assertion of the absolute transcendent spiritual claims of religion must not be interpreted as a denial of the limited, historically conditioned and temporal nature of culture; and on the other hand, the forms of a particular culture, even when they are inspired or consecrated by a religious ideal, must not be regarded as possessing universal religious validity'. This latter mistake, he continued, involves a subtle form of idolatry, which attributes to a way of life and a social tradition 'a universal moral or spiritual validity, so that in practice they are identified with the divine order and the moral law'. 'It is very hard', Dawson wrote, 'to find any example of a religious culture which does not fail in this respect'⁸¹.

I am sure that Dawson saw these critical observations as applicable to Catholicism, together with the other world religions. The increased cultural awareness with which we can assess the life of our tradition calls for genuine self-criticism as Catholicism seeks to enter into a more positive relationship with the other world religions and with the contemporary world.

A further comment can be made on this question of cooperation between world religion and culture. The history of Islam is paradoxical. On the one hand, the original message of the Prophet seemed to make any fruitful relationship with mundane culture impossible; but on the other hand one cannot but be impressed by the remarkable culture of Islam at the end of the first millennium which Dawson has described for us. His comments on Buddhism involve a similar paradox. He described it as presenting 'the anti-natural, world-denying conception of life in its extremest form'⁸². But he also noted that Buddhism has had an immense influence in shaping the cultures of Asia, 'taking different forms in different cultures and at the same time changing the cultures themselves'⁸³.

Dawson went on to offer an explanation of this apparent contradiction: 'The spiritual experience from which a religion receives its initial impetus – like the contemplation of the Buddha under the Bo tree or Mohammed's vision in the cave on Mount Hira – may seem completely divested of historical and social reference ... Yet as soon as the teacher comes down among men and the followers begin to put his teachings into practice a tradition is formed which comes into contact with other social traditions and embraces them or is absorbed by them, until its very nature seems to be changed by this chemistry of history'⁸⁴.

Clearly, both of these traditions must have possessed, even in their originating moment, an openness to developments which correspond to the potentialities of an authentic human existence. Of course, discernment is called for in the evaluation of these subsequent developments; and one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary Islam is the making this critical discernment.

As he concluded his study of Islamic mysticism, Dawson wrote, 'The mystical tradition has entered so deeply into the mind of Islam that its disappearance would leave the Moslem world disastrously impoverished. For all its faults and weaknesses, the Sufi movement remains one of the great witnesses outside Christianity to the religious need of humanity'⁸⁵. Let us hope that, as Islam evaluates its great cultural tradition, Dawson's words point towards the future that a genuine discernment may bring.

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ABBREVIATIONS:

CWE: *The Crisis of Western Education* (Steubenville OH: Franciscan University Press, 1989)

TME: *The Making of Europe* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946)

DWH: *The Dynamics of World History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1957 – edited by John J. Mulloy)

RC: *Religion and Culture*, Gifford Lectures 1947 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948)

RWC: *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, Gifford Lectures 1948-49 (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1958)

¹ DWH 52. Dawson discussed this development at length in his work *Progress and Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945) chapter 6.

² Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University Press, 1952) 60-61.

³ DWH 177.

⁴ DWH 117-18.

⁵ DWH 178.

⁶ DWH 118.

⁷ DWH 181.

⁸ Some Sanskrit terms should be explained. The *Veda* (literally 'knowledge') is a collective term for the sacred writings of the Hindus. The term *Vedanta* (literally, 'conclusion of the Vedas') refers especially to the *Upanishads* which were commentaries which developed the material of the older *Vedas*.

⁹ RC 142-43.

¹⁰ RC 143-44.

¹¹ RC 35.

¹² Book of Job, chapters 38 and 39. Cf. Isaiah, 40:12-26, and Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 1:1-20.

¹³ RC 36.

¹⁴ RC 36-37.

¹⁵ DWH 182.

¹⁶ RC 35.

¹⁷ St Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Folio Society, 2006) Book 10, p.190. Despite their vastly different approach from his own, a Western philosopher of the calibre of Jacques Maritain took seriously the teaching of the *Upanishads*, editing a French version of G. Dandoy's *An Essay in the Doctrine of the Unreality of the World in the Advaita* (1919), under the title of *L'ontologie du Vedanta* (1932). Cf. Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948) 35 note.

¹⁸ RC 42.

¹⁹ RC 92. Dawson's conclusions are based upon the study of the scriptures which reflect the unfolding of the *Veda* tradition. Among these, the *Rig veda* is a collection of the earliest

writings of this tradition concerned mainly with ritual of sacrifice. Associated with these rituals was a priestly class, the *Brahmins*. These texts reflect a polytheistic religion, concerned to propitiate divinities associated with the Sky – almost certainly reflecting the outlook of the Indo-European invaders who subjugated the older peoples of the subcontinent.

²⁰ RC 94.

²¹ RC 95.

²² RC 92.

²³ RC 95-96. Various schools which have emerged, as interpreters of the *Upanishads*, have proposed differing understandings of the relationship and degree of identity between individual self-awareness, (*atman*) and the transcendent Absolute (*Brahman*) – ranging from unqualified identity to a *theistic* understanding that qualifies the manner of identity.

²⁴ RC 98.

²⁵ RC 100.

²⁶ RC 97-98.

²⁷ RC 161.

²⁸ RC 88.

²⁹ RC 162.

³⁰ RC 163.

³¹ RC 164.

³² RC 163.

³³ RC 163.

³⁴ RC 164.

³⁵ RC 168.

³⁶ RC 165, 171.

³⁷ RC 166.

³⁸ RC 165.

³⁹ RC 168-69.

⁴⁰ RC 17.

⁴¹ DWH 90-91.

⁴² DWH 121.

⁴³ RC 55.

⁴⁴ The word *Koran* is derived from a verb meaning 'to recite', probably referring to the formation of the written collection. It may also echo the term used for 'readings' in the liturgy of the Syrian Christians of the time. Some scholars consider that Mohammed, who was raised in a tribal religion, may have had contact with a dissident Christian group who did not accept the divinity of Jesus, considering him a great prophet; but this is no more than conjecture.

⁴⁵ Enq 164-165.

⁴⁶ RC 59.

⁴⁷ DWH 408-09.

⁴⁸ Cf. DWH 383-84.

⁴⁹ RC 72.

⁵⁰ RC 73-74.

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- ⁵¹ RC 73.
- ⁵² Cf. RC 66, and Chapter 2 of this study.
- ⁵³ RC 84.
- ⁵⁴ *Ulema*: the class of theologians and canon lawyers in Islam.
- ⁵⁵ DWH 385-84.
- ⁵⁶ *Medieval Essays* (ME) (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953) which reproduced material of the earlier collection *Medieval Religion* (1934) with the addition of new essays.
- ⁵⁷ ME 121-23; cf. also 223-28 on Islamic influence in the development of the medieval West's ideals of chivalry.
- ⁵⁸ DWH 121.
- ⁵⁹ Cf. 'Islamic Mysticism', in *Enquiries in Religion and Culture* (Enq) (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933, pp.159-190.
- ⁶⁰ Enq 159.
- ⁶¹ Enq 165.
- ⁶² Enq 162.
- ⁶³ RC 81.
- ⁶⁴ Enq 162-63.
- ⁶⁵ Enq 168.
- ⁶⁶ Enq 163-64.
- ⁶⁷ RC 74.
- ⁶⁸ RC 77.
- ⁶⁹ RC 83; cf. Enq 176.
- ⁷⁰ Enq 168.
- ⁷¹ Enq 169.
- ⁷² Enq 171.
- ⁷³ Enq 172.
- ⁷⁴ Enq 172-73.
- ⁷⁵ Enq 173.
- ⁷⁶ Enq 171.
- ⁷⁷ RC 207.
- ⁷⁸ DWH 121.
- ⁷⁹ RC 207-08.
- ⁸⁰ DWH 122.
- ⁸¹ RC 208-09.
- ⁸² DWH 119.
- ⁸³ DWH 274.
- ⁸⁴ DWH 274.
- ⁸⁵ Enq 189.

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