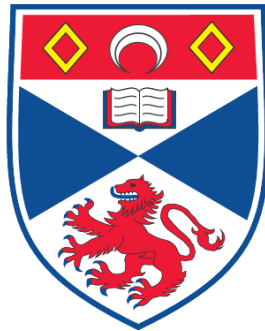


THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION OF CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

Glen Austin Sproviero

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St. Andrews**



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The Historical Imagination of
Christopher Dawson

by

Glen Austin Sproviero

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Philosophy
Department of Modern History
University of St Andrews
January 2007

For Kathleen

The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

The men of the East may search the scrolls
For sure fates and fame,
But the men that drink the blood of God
Go singing to their shame.

The wise men know what wicked things
Are written on the sky,
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings,
Hearing the heavy purple wings,
Where the forgotten seraph kings
Still plot how God shall die.

The wise men know all evil things
Under the twisted trees,
Where the perverse in pleasure pine
And men are weary of green wine
And sick of crimson seas.

But you and all the kind of Christ
Are ignorant and brave,
And you have wars you hardly win
And souls you hardly save.

I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.

Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?"

— *G.K. Chesterton, Ballad of the White Horse*

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Declarations

I, Glen Austin Sproviero, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 44,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

I was admitted as a research student in September, 2004 and as a candidate for the degree of Master of Philosophy in June, 2005; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2005 and 2007.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Master of Philosophy in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in February 2007.

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The typescript was read and criticized by Miss Kathleen M. Goggins, the Earhart Foundation Scholar in the University of St Andrews, and by Mr. David Hunsicker, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews.

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Glen Austin Sproviero
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Abstract

Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) was one of his generations most important historians and religious thinkers, and was a significant influence on many contemporaries including T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, and Russell Kirk. This dissertation is a study of his most fundamental ideas concerning history and culture.

Chapter one examines Dawson's sociological view of history. Convinced that history was more than a scientific enterprise, he believed that the true historian is one who reaches beyond the material world to understand the essence of history's dynamics. In this way, the world can be conceptualized as a united whole, separated by regional differences as a result of environment, race, material, psychological, and religious factors. Dawson believed that the political histories of the past several centuries failed to grasp the undercurrents of historical change, and that the best way to understand the past is to appreciate culture as an expression of primeval religious traditions.

Chapter two treats Dawson's understanding of progress. Dawson was convinced that progress had become the "working-religion" of our age. This secular faith, founded on scientific rationalism, first pledged to fix the material failures of Western culture, but unwittingly eroded its faith in God, and eventually, its moral fiber. Dawson believed that true progress was progress of the soul in its ordering toward the Creator.

Chapter three is a study of Dawson's Christian, and more specifically, his Catholic beliefs. Informed by religion, his historical and cultural visions are not dogmatic, nor are they polemical. He conceived of history as the unfolding of a divine economy in the temporal world. Although Dawson is a proponent of Roman Catholicism, his scholarship is an objective treatment of history shaped by an undisguised, Christian worldview.

Additionally, the appendix is an introduction to Dawson's life and the circumstances surrounding his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Particular attention is paid to the development of his moral and historical imagination—both of which became intertwined to form the basis of all of his scholarship.

Introduction

This dissertation will attempt to give an account of Christopher Dawson's principal ideas concerning history and culture—ideas eternally bound to religion, and in the West, to Christianity. Little has been written about him, and he is all but forgotten among students of history, while only a handful of professors are familiar with the full-range of his works. There is taking place, however, a changing intellectual atmosphere as the early twenty-first-century unfolds, and there is a revival of interest in Dawson as evidenced by a flurry of articles and the reprinting of his major works by prominent academic presses and commercial publishers. Once dismissed by the academic establishment for his failure to possess an advanced degree, and for his unapologetic Catholicism, newspapers and popular magazines have taken him up again, and students are beginning to see the influence he exerted over an entire generation of thinkers. There is the strong possibility that this recognition of Dawson's genius can be attributed to the rising generation's disgust for material culture and its blind faith in scientific rationalism.

Dawson's principal mission was to demonstrate the importance of our recognizing the organic unity of the West through the relation of religion and culture. He did not lose himself in banal discussions on the nature of historical objectivity, rather he presented a thorough and sophisticated vision of the past, and it is this "historical imagination" that will be the concentration of this study. Convinced that history and sociology are partners in a larger mission, Dawson believed in the scrupulous methods of

historical research, but he eschewed the concept that history is a discipline subordinate to science and the scientific method. To Dawson, history is an intricate, deeply humane affair. This study of his thought is broken into five principal sections in addition to this introduction.

The first chapter introduces the reader to Dawson's early life and details the circumstances surrounding his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Particular attention is paid to his family's background because of the immense influence it played in both his spiritual and intellectual development. Imagination is a characteristic of the mind that takes immense cultivation, and the circumstances surrounding Dawson's early years are rich with these qualities.

The second chapter focuses on Dawson's view of history as a sociological endeavor that is shaped by unique historical circumstances. Its objective is to understand why Dawson believed the social sciences to be such an important part of historical research, but it draws a distinct line where he thinks the sciences are no longer applicable and lead to a distortion of reality.

The third chapter treats the idea of progress. Few ideas have so fully captivated the human mind, Dawson claimed. He believed that progress had effectively become the "working religion" of the West since the time of Abbé Saint-Pierre, and that the treatment of history by western historians since then has been burdened by this historicism that possesses a solid element of inevitability. The historians of progress do not see human psychology as variable, nor do they fully embrace the idea of Free Will. To the Catholic,

however, history is the constant unfolding of creation with the active help of God, who intervenes, from time to time, in the affairs of His people on Earth. The idea of Sanctifying Grace—which is central to both standard Catholic thought and to Dawson's historical vision—is the main Catholic obstacle to the secular idea of progress.

The fourth chapter is a discussion of Dawson's vision of Catholicism and its influence on the historical imagination. Dawson is often labeled—mistakenly—a medieval historian. Although much of Dawson's work focuses on the Middle Ages, and he appreciates the spiritual and material unity of that time, he was not a historian of any particular period. Dawson's task was much more "catholic," in the universal sense of the term, for he wanted to trace the historical unity of culture in an unbroken chain. This is a major factor that ultimately led to his conversion to Catholicism—a faith that delivers an uninterrupted historical path to antiquity. He was no Church historian, but a historian of culture. As he wrote to the chairman of the Department of Church History at Harvard:

I have never been a Church Historian in the strict sense; my point of departure has always been historical in the broad sense—that is to say I come from the study of Western history (as understood by secular historians, like J.B. Bury) and then attempt to see how this stream of temporal change has affected and had been affected by religion whether considered as a way of life or as a vision of reality.¹

Christopher Dawson was perhaps the most important English-speaking, Catholic historian of the twentieth-century. The scope and depth of his scholarship, his elegant, yet clear style, and his

¹ George H. Williams to Christopher Dawson, 13 October 1961, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 164, and Christopher Dawson to George H. Williams, 17 October 1961, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 164.

dedication to the Truth put him in a league above the Whigs, the German Idealists, or the high-priests of the "cult of objectivity." Dawson's powerful intellect allowed him to synthesize vast amounts of information and organize it into a coherent picture. His goal, like Butterfield's, was not to tell the story of man's existence, detail by detail; rather, he wished to convey a general understanding of the most important aspects of our past and show that religion was the most important element of our cultural heritage. Religion, in this picture of reality, was not an auxiliary element of culture, but the foundation of it, and to neglect this meant certain death. The dynamics of world history, he contends, are not explainable through neat formulas, economic trends, political victories, or military defeats—they are explained through an understanding of human beings and their relationship with God. As Dawson would articulate in *The Age of the Gods*, every culture, even those of primitive character, possess a complete religious spirit. This is the underlying force of human history, he believed, and the troubles of modernity are the result of a misplaced spiritual understanding and a crisis of spiritual identity.

Dawson did not believe that culture could be "restored" or brought back to some previous age—nor did he believe that such a task, if possible, was an admirable goal—but he did believe that it was possible to employ the vast powers of the human imagination to bring about a new "Augustan Age." Dawson knew the values buttressed by the ancient, Baroque monarchies at which he used to sneer as a young man were gone, but that in their place arose "sham

democracies," and pathetic, often dangerous, socialist republics. Just as Christ needed Augustus and John the Baptist, so modern civilization needs a renewal of belief in the Spirit or it will face certain destruction.²

There are, however, several points of contention in Dawson's work that need thorough discussion. The limits of his Catholicism as both an internal vehicle for spiritual renewal and as an external mode of cultural transformation, the possibility of his understanding of cultural dynamics as a "cyclical" theory, the limited role of material causes to fluctuations in cultural change, his dismissal of Thomistic thought in both historical understanding and in modern education, an idealization of the medieval idea of progress, and the use of selective sources, all require attention. Furthermore, some will object that his sociological view of history, in the final analysis, is too theological, and that although he criticizes the metaphysical approach to history, he is himself subordinating his conclusions to such a process in his defense of metahistory. The formal academic historian will, no doubt, object to the fact that Dawson did not produce a single work of history that dealt with specific events or people, and will deride Dawson for his reluctance to spend any significant amount of time poring over archival records. His failure to provide footnotes or citations in his major works, and the implicit need to trust Dawson's evidence *prima facie*, exacerbates this perceived dilemma. Nevertheless, Dawson is no mere "popularizer," religious reductionist, or "terrible simplifier."

² Christopher Dawson, specifically undated, random notes, "Notebook 18," Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 9, Folder 18.

Dawson was an amateur historian, but his erudition and immense learning are overtly obvious, and this makes him an amateur in the greatest sense of the term. Although his work suffers from several major flaws, they are overshadowed by his keen insights, his vast and commanding knowledge of the past, and his theologically competent mind. Imagination is a disposition of the mind to reach beyond the mundane in order to appreciate and grasp higher realities that are otherwise unknowable.

Dawson was vague when it came to recommending specific programs for political and cultural renewal. To some degree, like Paul Johnson and Russell Kirk, he was apolitical. His recurring theme of religious unity lacks any realistic ability to come to fruition in the social sphere—a fact to which he was not blind. He paid little attention to the economy, and was, heavily skeptical of capitalist ideology, democratic politics, and especially, socialism and the totalitarian doctrines. Each one of these taken to its extreme, he maintained, was a modern supplement that attempted to fill the void caused by the corrosion of spirituality. While they were not legitimate faiths, Dawson argued, they fulfilled the same spiritual desires. "All these New Jerusalems are earthly cities established by the will and power of man," and to the Catholic, there is a fundamental disorder in this type of organization.³ In this way it seems as though everything Dawson wrote was in some way a reaction to the mechanical thought of Marx.

³ Adam Schwartz, "Confronting the 'Totalitarian Antichrist': Christopher Dawson and Totalitarianism," *Catholic Historical Review*, July 2003, vol. 89, issue 3, 464-488.

At base, Dawson was a historian and a pluralist. He was proud of his Catholicism, but he did not allow it to mutate into a fundamentalist caste. While he was influenced by anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and the other sciences, "he manage[d] to preserve his historian's virtue."⁴ When he began publishing shortly after the First World War, "history as past politics" remained the paradigm, and it was Dawson, with the help of others, who ushered in a new view of historical scholarship. Uniquely, though, Dawson was the one who carried the Catholic banner, and despite his deep religious sympathies, he managed to maintain a critical degree of open-mindedness, similarly to the Marxist historian Christopher Hill, that won him the respect of those who had little sympathy for his faith.⁵

Dawson's work as a historian is not merely the product of a prolific career dedicated to the true story of man's past, but the fruit of a humble vocation to serve what lay beyond the material world—the Eternal City of God. He was dedicated to his work and to the idea of culture as a unified organism, continually growing from its religious seeds. The haunting question of this study remains, however, whether or not Dawson is to be considered a serious historian or merely regarded as a Christian or Catholic polemicist in the line of Chesterton and Belloc? His writings, however, indicate that there is something deeper than mere polemics as the backbone of his work, and that the heart of his mission is to understand, not only the events that gave rise to European

⁴ Crane Brinton, "Review of *The Dynamics of World History*," *Speculum*, vol. 33, no.2, April 1958, 272-273.

⁵ James Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," *American Scholar*, vol. 62, issue 1, Winter 1993, 111-119.

civilization, but the "nature of the thing itself, and of the process by which, in general, civilizations grow, mature, and decay."⁶ Dawson's Catholicism did not preclude him from cultivating independent ideas, and he believed that faith was not merely the product of supernatural knowledge. The ideal, he argued, was for the supernatural to be in touch with the human—an ideal that has been lost in modern culture's compartmentalized character, which has resulted in the artistic and creative being separated from the theological.⁷ In Dawson there is a mature, sophisticated vision of history that transcends both politics and religious parochialism, and it is in this imaginative understanding of human affairs by which his legacy should ultimately be judged.

⁶ Robert Park, "Review of *Enquiries Into Religion and Culture*," *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 1, July 1935, 109-111.

⁷ Christopher Dawson, undated, "Misc. Notes and Drafts," Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 86.

Chapter One: Sociology and the Cultural View of History

I

Christopher Dawson's importance as a historian is largely linked to his distinct approach to the past as something far more complex than a composition of disparate elements, each reducible to some formula accessible from the present through some simple, deconstructive pattern. A cursory study of Dawson and his contemporaries immediately reveals the severe differences he had with them, not only in method, but also in an overall historical vision. In Dawson, there is a deliberate break with the traditional study of history as it had been practiced in its rational form, and a return to the Patristic vision of the past of which St. Augustine is the most prominent expositor.

For Dawson, the greatness of the Christian past is not found in its purely material achievements, but in its mysterious nature that is experienced by human beings under the grace of God. To Dawson, the glory of history is found in what St. Paul called the "fullness of time." History contains more than the banal facts of human existence: it is wrought with inner-meanings and mysterious circumstances. To Dawson, this meant a theological understanding of the past, and not just one concerned with the study of temporal events.

It is impossible to study the matter [history] aright without theological insight. The Christian view of history which is a contemplation of the divine interposition in time, is essentially concerned with the supernatural and this supernatural dimension of history is inaccessible to scientific observation.⁸

⁸ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, c.1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1.

This inability to access certain parts of history does not mean that historians should abandon their scrupulous methods of research; instead, it shows that they must widen their nets to allow for non-material, sometimes ethereal, factors to intervene.

Historians of ideas will find much difficulty in consuming Dawson's thought without serious reflection. How is it possible, the contemporary historian might ask, to even talk about the nature of history from a Christian perspective, but still deny the existence of a "Christian" or "Catholic philosophy of history"? One must look carefully into the traditions of the Christian West to understand why Dawson approaches the past as he does, and it is only within a broad vision of this patrimony that it makes sense. There remain serious questions about consistency and soundness of argumentation in Dawson's thought, but in the end, there is a compelling logic in his approach to the past. Dawson was not a professional historian in the strictest sense of the term, but by the same token he was no dilettante. In his work we find seemingly simple historical insights, but insights whose simplicity is the result of diligent and penetrating thought. Such is Dawson's cultural view of history in which religion is the most significant factor. Indeed, Dawson was not the first to insist that spiritual factors deserve a prominent place in our understanding of history, but he was among the first to use religion as the cornerstone of his panoramic view of the past.⁹

⁹ Lord Acton said that religion is the "key" to history, but his own writings do not fully carry this principle into action. Dawson, therefore, seems to be the most prominent apologist of this type of historical reasoning.

This chapter will discuss Dawson's role as a historian of culture and the methods he employed to put his philosophical outlook into action. He lived in an age encumbered by ideology, but he avoided aligning himself with any intellectual "club." He cannot be labeled, nor can his vision of the past be viewed as a systematic treatment of material circumstances, for in Dawson's actual practice of history, his belief that the past harbors mysterious forces that cannot be qualified in human terms is ubiquitous. Thus, Dawson's value as a historian is not to be judged by his vision of the past, but by his acceptance of it as a partial manifestation of material events. Like his friend and admirer T.S. Eliot, Dawson seeks to understand history as it relates to man's relationship with the eternal—the coming together of time and eternity. This can only be accomplished through a comprehensive study of culture in which the larger forces are not obscured by the seemingly important, though insignificant, material circumstances of our daily life. Dawson's vision is at once metahistorical and spiritual, but it arguably captures the essence of culture more than the narrow minutiae that are the obsession of the modern historian.

In the pages that follow, there will be an extensive exposition of Dawson's historical writings followed by a critical evaluation of his thought. This clear separation is meant to allow Dawson to speak for himself, but forces his writings to be accountable to further inquiry and debate. Dawson's importance as a historian is fully dependent upon his ability to withstand objections to his view of history as a cultural concept, and more

importantly, as a cultural institution tied to the religious structures that are the patrimony of the West.

II

Dawson's imagining of the past is inextricably linked to his idea of culture as a living organism. What, however, is a social culture, and how does it differ from a civilization? The difference is of high importance, and to Dawson, a social culture is a way of life, organized around a common tradition and settled in a common environment.¹⁰ This tradition is deeper and more complex than the materialism exhibited in its most outward characteristics, and in even the most primitive societies, culture is deeply rooted in the *cult*. Dawson's first set of Gifford Lectures delivered at Edinburgh in 1947 examines this relationship in great detail. Avoiding the temptation to study readily available material concerning the Christian West, Dawson fixes his attention on neglected cultures as a way of understanding the dynamics of history without reducing the process to some form of mechanistic determinism. Dawson's findings, which are similar to those of Fustel de Coulanges, who died in the year of Dawson's birth, are that religion is the basis of a dynamic culture no matter what its level of material sophistication.¹¹ His examination of the Esquimaux and the Bushmen of South Africa provides a firm understanding of the relationship between religion and materialism in the building of a culture, and demonstrates

¹⁰ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 47.

¹¹ Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, & Company).

important parallels between ancient, primitive cultures and modern society.¹²

At the foundation of Dawson's thought is the idea that both advanced and primitive cultures rely upon religion to provide both the conservative force that preserves tradition and the dynamic impulse that allows progress to occur.¹³ Culture, however, is not synonymous with the term civilization, which "involves a high degree of conscious rationalization."¹⁴ While civilization is concerned with the more material development of a people, it does not necessarily involve intellectual, psychological, or spiritual growth. Civilization usually entails a higher degree of material sophistication, but such progress is extensively dependent upon the religious impulse among various peoples. Dawson, in *The Age of the Gods*, turns the reader's attention to the German scholar, Eduard Hahn, who held that in Western Asia, animal domestication and agricultural advancement was made possible by the "religious observation and ritual imitation of the processes of Nature."¹⁵ Thus, it is as a form of religious expression that certain agricultural methods were formed, and material gains were merely a secondary consequence. He develops this point with Sir William Ramsay's observation of Asia Minor:

The art of agriculture was there taught almost by Nature herself, who thus revealed herself as mother and teacher of her people. Step by step and precept upon precept, the Goddess Mother, the Thesmophoros or law-giver of the Boeotian and Athenian plain, educated her people and showed them how to make the best of the useful animals, swine, ox, sheep, and

¹² These two cultural groups are extensively treated by Dawson in *Religion and Culture* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), and in his first book, *The Age of the Gods* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933).

¹³ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 48.

¹⁴ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 47.

¹⁵ Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods*, 107.

goat, and later also of the horse, by proper nurture and careful treatment and breeding. The history of education which she gave remains for us in the Anatolian religion, in which lies the key to an extremely early stage of human development.¹⁶

The civilizing influences of the "Great Mother"—nature—played a central role in the development of primitive peasant cultures. It is largely as a by-product of religious rituals that we can understand the genesis of simple agricultural life. Every action of the primitive farmer was an imitation of some natural process by which he was able to yield significant material gains. The tools of agriculture—plows, carts, hand instruments—these were all sacred objects. The opening of the earth and the reaping of her goods was a ritualistic enterprise, as it was with the Babylonians and the peoples of India.¹⁷

It is this anthropological approach to history that marks Dawson's distinctive understanding of the past. Dawson, much like Eric Voegelin, understands history as "the process in which man articulates his own nature."¹⁸ This means that history entails a large degree of self-understanding and a consciousness of the transcendent reality of human life.¹⁹ History is the unfolding of a grand epoch chartered under the direction of God, but realized by morally-free human participants. Understanding the nature of human beings, not in a national or political context, but as part of a metahistorical, cultural superstructure was Dawson's task. For a cultural historian, there is something beyond the deterministic

¹⁶ Sir William Ramsay, "The Religion of Greece in Asia Minor," in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. v, 135.

¹⁷ Dawson, *The Age of the Gods*, 105-106.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: Volume II* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1987), 68.

¹⁹ Michael Federici, *Eric Voegelin* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 89.

system of economics, and far beyond the fighting over national boundaries and territories, that defines the development of history. Dawson enjoyed quoting Edmund Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace* as an elegant illustration of his historical vision: for a "common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn have changed the face of the future and almost of Nature."²⁰ This is the essence of the unpredictable, unfolding process of history that forms the core of Dawson's thought. It must be noted, however, that such a view does not reduce his historical vision to a "great-man" theory of history. Werner Stark raises an objection to Dawson's approach as demonstrated by his treatment of certain events in *The Formation of Christendom*. Dawson's argument that the Carolingian Empire's demise was largely the result of the personal deficiencies of Charlemagne's heirs is a failure, Stark explains, to account for external factors that might further explain these circumstances. In this case, the waning threat of a Saracen invasion, combined with a decrease in fear that Christendom would be destroyed "no longer forced the tribes of Europe into a unity of defensive action, is surely as least as important, and probably more so," than any personal defects in a ruler.²¹ Stark maintains that Dawson's flaw is not in any specific commission of errors, but in the omission of important truths. In this way, the errors of Charlemagne's successors are used as an excuse for circumstances Dawson would rather avoid. Although he was not immune to making errors, the criticism that Dawson intentionally omits material for the sake of polemics, or

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999).

²¹ Werner Stark, "Review: *The Formation of Christendom*," *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 28, Issue 3, Fall 1967, 172-173.

subordinates his scholarship to known falsity is to misunderstand, or discount, his entire historical vision. For Dawson, truth is at the heart of historical knowledge, and to knowingly serve a lie—through action or omission—is a disservice to God and a stain on the historian. Dawson's probable error here is over-enthusiasm.

The anthropological and sociological view of history, as opposed to rationalist, nationalist, or materialist interpretations, is for Dawson, grounded in his studies of non-Western peoples. Although the West is Dawson's primary interest, and it is as a medieval historian by which he is primarily—though mistakenly—known, he is keenly aware of the unity of mankind and that the basic dynamics of cultural history are rooted in the same elements regardless of race, time, or geographic region. At the center of man's life are his religious inclinations, often fueled, in primitive times, by dependence on forces beyond his immediate control. From the earliest records, there is evidence that very primitive people knew they could not live in isolation apart from the mysterious forces that govern the world. Dawson writes:

The conviction that "the way of man is not in himself", that it is not for man to walk and direct his own steps, is as old as humanity itself. We can find most clear and moving expressions of this belief among the primitive peoples—most of all perhaps among the hunting peoples like the North American Indians whose conception of dependence on spiritual powers has been described with exceptional fullness by a series of excellent scholars and observers, like J.O. Dorsey, F. Boas, and Ruth Benedict.²²

²² Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 49. Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) was an American anthropologist and a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University. Her *Patterns of Culture* (1934) was a standard textbook for many years and was translated into 14 languages, and her *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was widely-read. She died two months after being appointed to a chair in anthropology at Columbia. Franz Boas (1858-1942) was one of the pioneers of modern anthropology. German by birth, he received a doctorate in physics before turning his attention to cultural anthropology. A staunch apologist of empiricism, the notion of culture as dynamic, and cultural relativism, he was

It is not unreasonable to argue that Dawson's thought closely resembles that of Fustel de Coulanges—excepting a few minor instances—for many of the same themes are found in the work of both men. For Fustel, like Dawson in later years, religion is the root of all cultural activity whether it is in the home, the community, or the larger institution of the state. Fustel captures the essence of religion's place in society through his studies of ancient cultures, which is itself an attempt to set the stage for a study of the institutions of classical Greece and Rome.²³ For Fustel, the study of a culture that excludes its religious character is vapid and only leads to distortion. The revolutions of the century pre-dating Fustel are a testament to idealizing the past without seeing its inherently religious character. The proper historian, enamored by a search for truth, will attempt to see beyond the skeleton of the civilization that he studies, for he will engage in a struggle to see its inner-workings, its dynamics, its psychological character, and its overall essence. In Fustel's judgment, this has been the error of historians who idealize the classical past and attempt to reconstruct it without its spiritual dimensions. As far as it is impossible to create a genuine spirituality *ex nihilo*, it is impossible to resurrect the great cultures to their supposed

for many years the Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. His writings include *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Race, Language, and Culture* (1940). He was a major influence on Claude Levi-Strauss and Ruth Benedict. (J)ames (O)wen Dorsey (1848-1895) was an American anthropologist known for his work among the Native Americans. Although much of his writing remains unpublished, he exerted a large influence over generations of scholars. He was particularly well-known for his knowledge of two Siouan languages—Tutelo and Quapaw.

²³ Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 12.

former glory.²⁴ Thus, for Fustel, and later Dawson, religion is an integral part of the "disinterested" historians' task of attaining some understanding of his subject.

For Dawson, secular living is an anomaly of modern society as religion traditionally has been the "great central unifying force in culture." Religion was the keeper of tradition and law, and the force behind education and cultural advancement. Lord Acton's aphorism that religion is the "key to history," is a recurring theme in Dawson's Gifford Lectures and is the driving force of his acutely tuned historical imagination. Religion is, at once, the conservative, dynamic, creative, and life giving force of the community. Dawson maintains that we cannot fully comprehend the "form of society" unless we are able to understand its spirituality. "We cannot understand its cultural achievements unless we understand the religious beliefs that lie behind them."²⁵ The great literary, philosophic, and aesthetic traditions of the world are each rooted in a strong religious heritage whether it is Christianity in the West, Islam in the Middle East, Buddhism in East Asia, or Shamanism in Northern Asia and Mongolia.

Modern culture, despite its secular inclinations, is still alive with religious symbolism and spiritual activity, and one only need to look at the coronation of the British sovereign to find a seemingly secular, political event steeped in a deep religious heritage.²⁶ Furthermore, marriages, funerals, and the inauguration of public officials are centered on ceremonies cloaked in religious

²⁴ Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 13-14.

²⁵ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 50.

²⁶ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 50.

language. Religion is the principal source of order in most societies both ancient and modern. Social distinctions are routinely drawn along religious lines as we can clearly see in the institution of the priesthood. Dawson writes:

The Sumerian and Egyptian temple priesthods, the Brahmin caste in ancient India, the clergy and the monastic orders in medieval Christendom are not merely religious institutions, they are also vital organs in their respective cultures. And the same is true of the Shamans, the medicine men and witch doctors among primitive peoples although our own current terminology often blurs the distinction between the sorcerer, whose function is non-social or anti-social, and the priest, who is the recognized religious organ of the community—a confusion which has been increased by the attempt to draw a rigid and exclusive line of division between religion and magic.²⁷

Primitive cultures, the concentration of Dawson's early studies, do not possess the ability to have secular and religious authorities existing side by side. Thus, in such cultures where "religion is bound up with the elementary needs of life," social and economic activity is inextricably linked to the higher, spiritual order.

Religion also serves as a medium for transporting ideas. Dawson gives us the example of the Wovoka, a little-known Indian tribe from Nevada, whose Ghost Dance spread across the plains "like wildfire," and "finally stimulated the Sioux to their last desperate rising against the United States government."²⁸ Dawson keenly observes that a similar process occurred—albeit at a significantly higher level of sophistication—with the rise of Islam in pagan Arabia during the sixth and seventh centuries. In this case, an isolated culture developed into an

²⁷ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 51.

²⁸ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 52.

international transformation.²⁹ Several centuries earlier, a similar movement that at the time seemed like a small disruption in the province of Judea, rocked the Roman world. Who could have known that the son of a Galilean carpenter, crucified during the reign of Tiberius, would have such a profound affect on the development of culture, both East and West? Here, both Islam and Christianity illustrate how the social function of a culture can be wholly transformed by a seemingly benign religious change. The way, however, that knowledge of the transcendent is kept as a part of the cultural consciousness "is through the place given to prophecy and mysticism. Religion becomes merely social activism, lacking depth or vitality, where these channels of communication with the realm of the supernatural are cut off or neglected."³⁰ To Dawson, it is impossible to separate religious spirituality from culture.³¹

In Dawson's work, cultures are treated as organic structures and possess three distinct, yet general tendencies: progression, stasis, and decay.³² Nationalist and economic historians tend to miss the vital signs of such movement because political and material shifts are usually representative of some greater social change and not the direct cause of it. For Dawson, cultural change entails four main factors: race, the genetic factor; environment, the

²⁹ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 53.

³⁰ John J. Mulloy, "Preface to the 1978 Edition," *Dynamics of World History* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002), xxxv.

³¹ Christopher Dawson to "The Editors," 9 November 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4. Here Dawson details the consequences of not being able to separate religion from culture, especially for the Christian. "It is impossible to be a Christian in church and a secularist or pagan outside. Even a Christian minority, which lives a hidden and persecuted life, like the early Christians in the age of the catacombs, possesses its own patterns of life and thought, which are the seeds of a new culture." In this way, the separation not only applies to Christians, but to persons in any dynamic culture.

³² Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1953, 1990), 69-71.

geographical factor; function, the economic factor; and thought, the psychological influence.³³ It is the interaction of these four separate elements by which society functions as a cohesive cultural unit. For Dawson, any attempt to explain history by excluding, or exclusively focusing upon, one of these factors will lead to an inevitable distortion. This is similar to H.A. Taine's view of race, milieu, and moment, although Dawson would have disapproved of Taine's historicism, his love of abstraction, and his considerable devotion to positivism.³⁴

For Dawson, to focus exclusively upon the genetic factor is the mistake of the racialists who argue, on faulty grounds, that culture is purely the result of biological differences. Thus, they assert, people are born with a *priori* cultural distinctions that give rise to natural elites. Failing to account for environmental distinctions, as a factor in the development of a certain racial type—dark skin in warmer climates—is a critical flaw in the racialists' argument. It is not purely a specific genetic composition that leads to the development of a certain culture, but a variety of influences of which race is only a single factor. Dawson provides the case of the Esquimaux, whose race is most likely the result of passive reactions to a harsh environment, and are completely dependent upon their surroundings, as an example of this developmental process of biological factors in the composition of a culture.³⁵

³³ Christopher Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 7.

³⁴ (H)ippolyte (A)dolphe Taine (1828-1893) was a French cultural critic and historian. He was a major proponent of sociological positivism and is a founder of the modern historicist tradition.

³⁵ Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, 6-7.

Similarly, he believed, the economic factor is an insufficient means of explaining cultural development. Materialist interpretations of history exclude essential elements of a civilization's maturation and offer a mere accompanying characteristic of cultural change. While economic factors, such as tool production and sources of labor play a key role in understanding the history of any people, they do not account for the totality of its cultural achievements, nor do they exclusively deserve the blame for its failures. In Dawson's judgment, the Christian view of history—because it is a spiritual enterprise—is far more complex and difficult to understand than the rationalist's, and this intangibility of fact is a principal reason why it is often neglected.³⁶

The most neglected aspect, however, of this morphology of cultures—which has been given credence with the rise of an anthropological and sociological view of history—is the psychological factor. Nationalist and economic historians have traditionally ignored the spiritual and intellectual aspects of a culture in their extensive, compartmentalized treatments. The artificial breakdown of historical studies into categories of race, material structures, and national identity did, for many years, distort our understanding of what lies at the heart of cultural achievement and decline. Dawson argues that the inclusion of this missing factor sheds much light on our understanding of past

³⁶ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 August 1953, in response to questions asked by Mulloy in a letter of 21 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

civilizations. It is this "cultural" view of history that he, along with Spengler and Toynbee, strongly advocates.³⁷

The rise of sociology as a science is a relatively new phenomenon. Auguste Comte's conception of the science of man as the crown jewel of the sciences has yet to develop into his original ideal—much to the credit of its modern proponents.³⁸ To Dawson, the three-stage conception of human history (theological, metaphysical, and scientific) advocated by Comte, and of which, to him, only the last was truly valid, was a gross simplification of history. Dawson agreed that these three forms of knowledge do exist, but he believed they were not arranged in some triumphal manner, but acted in a concert of mutual cooperation.³⁹ The inability of modern sociology to overcome this error, he believed, placed large barriers in the way of this science's potential for good use. "Sociology no longer possesses a clearly defined program and method," Dawson wrote. "It has become a vague term which covers a variety of separate subjects. Sociologists have abandoned the attempt to create a pure science of society and have directed themselves to the study of practical social questions."⁴⁰ The danger, Dawson argued, is that sociology, as it is currently practiced in such an unscientific manner, can easily become the "scrap heap" upon which all discarded aspects of other disciplines are mounted. If this is the case, then it is impossible for us to admit the possibility of a scientific study of

³⁷ Christopher Dawson, "Toynbee's Study of History: The Place of Civilizations in History," *International Affairs*, vol. 31, April 1955.

³⁸ See Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (New York: Kessinger Books, 2003), originally published with translations and edits by Harriet Martineau (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855).

³⁹ Ernest Kilzer, "Review: *Religion and Culture*," *American Catholic Sociological Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, June 1949, 135.

⁴⁰ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 13.

humankind. The failure of sociology is far more than a defeat for sociologists—it is a defeat of the scientific method itself.⁴¹

Anthropology suffers from much the similar fate: their [anthropologists'] theories of "social evolution divorced from history became *a priori* dogmatism."⁴²

While the anthropologist deals with more ancient societies, the sociologist makes it his business to study the more advanced cultures and contemporary life.⁴³ Anthropology, Dawson maintains, is more easily seen as the objective discipline because of the distance the researcher is able to maintain from his subject. Both time and culture separate him from the object of his research and he is able to report findings more easily than the sociologist whose life is entangled with his subject.⁴⁴ Additionally, in the study of ancient peoples, the anthropologist is often able to work in cooperation with the historian and the archeologist. Even when competing theories are debated, differences are not a matter of emotional disjuncture. Modern historians, however, and the sociologist do not enjoy such a cordial relationship.⁴⁵

Dawson is careful to outline the difference between sociology and history, and shows how they are important complements to one another. He writes:

In reality sociology and history are two complementary parts of a single science—the science of social life. They differ, not in their subject matter but in their method, one attempting a general systematic analysis of the social process, while the other gives a genetic description of the same process in detail. In other words, sociology deals with the structure of society, and history with its evolution, so

⁴¹ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 14.

⁴² Dawson, *Progress and Religion* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2001), 48.

⁴³ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 17.

⁴⁴ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 17.

⁴⁵ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 18.

that they are related to one another in the same way as general biology is related to the study of organic evolution.⁴⁶

Sociologists, then, are concerned with the general structure of society. They study its generic points, and leave the historian to fill in all of the specificities. Dawson stresses that the weakness of modern sociological research is in its "abstract theorizing," and its dismissal of historical facts. This is the result of two disciplines trying to assert their mutual independence from the other, leaving each other in states of fractured understanding.

Dawson provides the example of the sociological study of ancient Greek culture. In such a study, the sociologist would concentrate on the organization of the state, its political structures, the family, its economy, and other general characteristics. All of this, however, must be based on evidence provided by the historian. The historian needs the sociologist, or at least his methods, as a tool to interpret the social circumstances of a past people, or else he is left with a heap of useless data. This allows the historian to relate his findings to the "organic whole" of the Greek world; similarly, because of evidence provided by the historian, the sociologist can rely on more than mere presumptions and technical abstractions.

To Dawson, the failure of modern sociology is apparent in its inability to place itself on any firm ground. He argues that, "from the beginning sociology has been haunted by the dream of explaining social phenomena by the mathematical and quantitative methods of the physical sciences and thus creating a science of society which will

⁴⁶ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 21.

be completely mechanistic and determinist."⁴⁷ This has earned sociology the deep suspicion of historians.

Dawson draws our attention to the organic, "biological" method of cultural inquiry brought into maturity by Frederic LePlay. He, Dawson argues, more than any other of his "famous contemporaries such as Marx, Spencer, and Buckle," developed a science of society that avoids the deterministic tendencies of Marxian historicism.⁴⁸ His admiration of LePlay is clear, but nevertheless cautious, when he recommends him to an admirer asking about the subject of European sociology: "I think much the best book on this subject is *Les Ouvriers Europeens* by Frederick LePlay in six volumes. He shows how the different economic occupations and the natural environment influence the form of the family and hence the culture. LePlay is a Catholic and very much alive to the religious aspect of the subject but he is not so strong on history as his study was directed to the existing types of peasant and worker families in Europe during the nineteenth century."⁴⁹ A culture is more than a society of material production or a place in a specific region—this is a centerpiece of LePlay's understanding and was important in the formation of Dawson's own thought. The concept of culture entails the higher psychological factors of intellect and spirituality, both of which transcend basic material elements and are often elusive to the pure rationalist.

Dawson relies heavily upon the religious aspects of mankind's growth to trace the development of culture. His treatment of this

⁴⁷ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 22.

⁴⁸ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 23.

⁴⁹ Christopher Dawson, Cambridge, MA, to Colonel Robert Patterson, Chicago, IL, 20 September 1960, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 15, Folder 89.

subject is extensive in his first book, *The Age of the Gods*. Here he demonstrates that the comparative study of religion and history share an emphasis on the finding of a Transcendent Reality by which man finds his true purpose. For Dawson, the external forms of religious systems and rigid determinism are, in the face of these Realities, superficial and tawdry.⁵⁰ For example, he recalls the late Paleolithic period and argues that it is very important for two reasons: first, it is the time that we first see the appearance of modern man, and second, we can for the first time see the "inner life" of primitive culture.⁵¹ Dawson maintains that religion is the principal force behind primitive man, because he was dependent on supernatural forces beyond his own control. Broader than the definition of religion provided by Sir James Frazer, which reduces religion to any worship of natural forces, primitive man saw the force of the supernatural as something much greater than his own powers.⁵² This creates a feeling of awe and personal debasement before the deity, and results in a form of emotional dependence and worship.⁵³ Religious fervor is especially high among hunting peoples because their entire existence is based upon forces beyond their control. The primitive hunter, Dawson reminds us, is a "primitive pan-theist" who possesses a vague notion of the supernatural.⁵⁴

The earliest forms of religion seemed to him to be connected with the idea of death, but we cannot draw any absolute conclusions because of a lack of available evidence. Although Neanderthal man

⁵⁰ John Mulloy, "Preface to the 1978 Edition," *Dynamics of World History*, xxxviii.

⁵¹ Christopher Dawson, *The Age of the Gods* (New York: 1928, 1933), 21.

⁵² James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Oxford: 1890, 1994).

⁵³ Dawson, *Age of the Gods*, 22.

⁵⁴ Dawson, *Age of the Gods*, 26-27.

seems to have practiced crude religious rituals surrounding the death of another, the first true picture of primitive religion dates to the Paleolithic period.⁵⁵ It is to this time that we can date extensive cave paintings depicting man and his relationship to the supernatural world.⁵⁶ These relations are often agricultural and involve the worship of certain animals as sacred objects.

Appropriately, we may turn again to Fustel de Coulanges who argues that notions about the soul and death encouraged the growth of the "hearth," which in the ancient world was the center of supernatural activity. For the Hindu, the Greek, the Aryas of the East, and the early Romans, death was the centerpiece of spiritual life.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, from this supernatural fascination came significant developments including the development of marriage and family structure, laws of personal conduct, property rights, political organization, and the idea of civic duty.

For Dawson, the importance of religion to early man shows that the work of modern sociologists fails to grasp the complexities of human development. In a zealous attempt to find some rational simplification of the process of cultural development, sociologists often turn to the seemingly most basic element of human life—materialism.⁵⁸ This allows them to quantify human activity in terms of economics, race, and geography; in essence, these thinkers neglect the psychological factor that is so important to understanding Dawson's conception of culture. Marxian historical

⁵⁵ It is important to note that Dawson considered the earliest tangible sign of a culture's maturity to be its development of language. John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversation with Christopher Dawson," 19 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

⁵⁶ Dawson, *The Age of the Gods*, 23.

⁵⁷ Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 22-23.

⁵⁸ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 25.

analysis is the hallmark example of this type of thinking in which all other elements, such as spiritual devotion, are merely reflections of an economic, racial, or geographically determined necessity.

In reaction to the materialists, we find the troubling interpretations of Idealist philosophers, and most profoundly Hegel, who look to the spirit or *Zeitgeist*, to understand the past. This is a purely reactionary effort. Dawson writes:

To Hegel and his followers History is the progressive self-manifestation of absolute mind. Each culture or people is a successive proposition in the process of a cosmic dialectic, and the material aspects of culture are merely the embodiment of the immanent idea. Such theories are now almost entirely discredited; nevertheless, we must remember that they played an essential part in the development of their apparent opposite—the dialectical materialism of Marx.⁵⁹

This idealism is distinguished by its faith in an "absolute Law of Progress," that possesses an immeasurable ability to alter culture through a fixed system of principles.⁶⁰ Abstract concepts, Dawson reminds us, are considered far more than mere ideas—they are treated as "real forces" that dictate the direction of a culture.⁶¹ Dawson is clear in his argument that this type of belief, treated as the "efficient cause of social change," is religious and not sociological.⁶² Thus, it is an equally bad alternative, Dawson claims, to the materialist view of history.⁶³

⁵⁹ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 26.

⁶⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller with foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

⁶¹ For a more detailed examination of the impact of ideas on human culture, see Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

⁶² Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 27.

⁶³ For a thorough treatment of the materialist view of history, see Karl Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, and also, Maximilien Rubel, *Marx without myth: A chronological study of his life and work* (London: Blackwell, 1975).

Dawson's central claim is that culture cannot be reduced to a simple explanation of material or spiritual causes. It is quintessential, he maintains, for the sociologist to forget the idea of reducing all human activity to a few root causes, and instead, focus on the interrelationship of these factors to gain a more complete picture of the whole. As long as the sociologist does not attempt to usurp the role of the philosopher or theologian, and merely applies the philosophic and theological factors as an influence on society, he is well-grounded. Dawson notes that the "sociologist who creates a religion of his own for sociological purposes is just as unscientific as if he were to invent new anthropological or geographical facts to suit his theories."⁶⁴ Thus, it is a vision of reality that lies at the core of Dawson's thought, and this reality is most vividly expressed in religion and philosophy.⁶⁵

Take, for instance, the Samurai in Japan. Another of Dawson's non-Western examples, this group provides strong evidence to support his claim that cultures are far too complex to be reduced to any few elements no matter how seemingly simple they may appear. Dawson writes:

In order to understand it, it is not enough to study the historical evolution of Japanese feudalism and the economic structure of Japanese society. The Samurai type is also the embodiment of a whole complex of moral ideas and religious beliefs—native, Confucian and Buddhist—some of which have a very remote relation both to Japan and to the military tradition.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 30.

⁶⁵ John Mulloy, "Preface to the 1978 Edition," *Dynamics of World History*, xxxii.

⁶⁶ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 31.

Furthermore, for Dawson, the ethical ideal of the Samurai is not merely an entity of "historical interest," but is rather a living part of Japanese society and an element that is needed to have any comprehension of its inner dynamics.⁶⁷

Dawson argues that many of the schisms and religious battles that have been waged throughout history are not the result of theological differences, but are really a matter of national and social tribulation. Such disagreements are cloaked as religious arguments, but are not, at base, religious at all.⁶⁸ It is important to keep separate the actual theological aspects of religion and its social consequences, because when the lines are blurred, grave cultural consequences often follow. Such has been the case with the extensive conflicts of medieval Christendom, and with the modern conflicts concerning Islamic Jihad. Thomas Sowell writes about this dilemma as being particularly difficult to overcome because of the nature of religion and its historic consequences. It is sometimes impossible to separate the two in a distinct manner because of their complete interdependence upon one another, and because "purely secular motives can be cloaked in religious language, as can behavior antithetical to the very religion being invoked in its defense."⁶⁹ This was the case with the Christian crusaders who sacked Constantinople, and with Moslems who enslaved other Moslems in direct violation of the Koran's teachings.⁷⁰

This confusion is a source of great conflict in modern times, and modern democracies, Dawson claims, are most susceptible to

⁶⁷ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 31.

⁶⁸ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 32.

⁶⁹ Thomas Sowell, *Conquest and Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 357.

⁷⁰ Sowell, *Conquest and Cultures*, 357-358.

making these mistakes. While the modern state continuously extends its powers over the whole of everyday life, centralization becomes only one source of social failure. The main threat is the politicization of culture, so that policy-makers directly impact every aspect of life. Concerns formerly belonging to the province of churches, private charities, and individual choice, quickly become instruments of social change to such a degree that they are incorporated into national political party platforms and the agendas of ruling governments. Government leaders are called upon to answer questions of a sociological nature, and this may result in a complete transformation of society. Dawson writes:

The abolition of war, the destruction of poverty, the control of the birth-rate, the elimination of the unfit—these are questions which the statesmen of the past would no more have dared to meddle with than the course of the seasons or the movements of the stars; yet they are all vital issues today, and some of them figure on the agenda of our political parties.⁷¹

The only solution to this is to call upon the abilities of sociology to remedy its own misuse. Dawson argues that the practical politician will attempt to solve problems, including these questions of an advanced sociological nature, by invoking a combination of social idealism and attempting to somehow change material conditions. Ending poverty, opening the markets to free-trade, and redistributing the tax burden are each a vain attempt to blur the distinctions between sociology and the historic burden of practical governing—the maintenance of order within the state, and the defense of it from external enemies. "A sociology which disregards its

⁷¹ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 33.

proper limits may create Utopias," Dawson writes, "but it cannot help the statesman in his practical tasks."⁷²

If the historian of culture is to find a Transcendent Reality through the intermingling forces of social phenomena and religious experience, the idea of progress then requires extensive treatment. Dawson's conception of progress is quite different from those of the social philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in that he is patient in his understanding of the general state of mankind as it moves toward a position of greater goodness than the present. The disciples of Condorcet, the Jacobins, and the Utopians of the social justice movement—their zeal for perfection in this world leads them to the delusion that ultimate perfection must be visible on the current horizon. For Dawson, "the ultimate goal of perfection must lie in the infinitely distant future."⁷³ The support for doctrinaire, idealistic beliefs in progress mostly finds its support among the political theorists, and not the historians or social anthropologists. The abstractions of social perfection concocted by Utopians are the basis of revolutionary thought in late eighteenth-century France, and in the social upheavals of the following two centuries. This is not the progress that Dawson admires as a vehicle of social change.

A culture that does not possess some form of progress is static, and for a culture to lose its religion is tantamount to its losing the ability to change. Such stasis is responsible, Dawson argues, for the greatest cultural collapses in history. For a culture to relinquish its spiritual dynamic, it must relinquish its

⁷² Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 33.

⁷³ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 16.

soul. This was the fate of Rome, and for Dawson, it must be the fate of the Christian West in a world obsessed with materialism, individuality, egalitarianism, and political affairs. Culture has lost its connection with the *cult*, and civilization will pay the price. What, however, is a healthy form of progress? Dawson makes an attempt to explain this in what is probably his most important book, *Progress and Religion*.

The distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas, in an introduction to *Progress and Religion*, argues that Dawson's work is of particular importance. She writes:

Though focused on comparative religion this book includes for good measure a lot on the anthropology of the time. It would hardly have been possible to take the position that he did without mastering a huge and diffuse literature on exotic religions. In this book Christopher Dawson artfully stages a dialogue between the eighteenth-century philosophers, Condorcet, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, and the people they thought of as primitive: the Sioux, Dakota and Tlingit Indians, native Australians, African Bushmen, Zulus, and Shamans of the Arctic and world wide, are given a chance to put in their word.⁷⁴

Unique among Western historians is Dawson's deep respect for, and encyclopedic knowledge of, both primitive and ancient cultures. Additionally, Dawson views the sociological foundations of those cultures as essentially the same as those underpinning the major world religions.

The nineteenth-century sociologists seem at times to possess a naiveté that stifled scientific method although it was itself possessed of scientific idealism. While their attentions remained focused upon the idea of Progress, they were negligent in their

⁷⁴ Mary Douglas, "Introduction," *Progress and Religion*, xxiii.

treatment of a community's ability to decay.⁷⁵ Russell Kirk's aphorism that the torch of innovation is not necessarily the torch of progress was a foreign concept to the social thinkers in the line of Condorcet and Comte. For these men, "whatever was the fate of particular societies it was always possible to follow the progress of humanity in the converging lines of individual progress—economic, intellectual and political."⁷⁶

The study of civilizations must, for Dawson, be considered as studies of a singular, indivisible, organic entity.⁷⁷ As the physician studies concrete biology to better understand the human anatomy, the sociologist must study the organic growth of human history. The study of humankind is a concrete enterprise that must not be riddled with unsubstantiated abstractions. Society is "a living body from the simple and instinctive life of the shepherd, the fisherman and the tiller of soil up to the highest achievements of the artist and the philosopher."⁷⁸ Every culture has its ideal type which is fixed by its own standards of ethical conduct and moral order. "Great cultures" produce vibrant philosophies and scientific achievements based on the dynamic character of their respective traditions. Dawson observes that "Aristotle or Euclid could no more have appeared in China, than could Confucius in Greece."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Christopher Dawson, "Progress and Decay in Ancient and Modern Civilization," *Sociological Review*, vol. 16, January 1924. Reprinted in *Dynamics of World History*, 59. Also reprinted, in part, in *Progress and Religion*.

⁷⁶ Dawson, "Progress and Decay in Ancient and Modern Civilization," *Dynamics of World History*, 59.

⁷⁷ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 60.

⁷⁸ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 60.

⁷⁹ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 60.

In *The Making of Europe*, a particular culture shapes the external accomplishments of what became Western Europe during the so-called Dark Ages. From the Loire to the Rhine, the rise of medieval architecture, university systems, and the monastery were all set against the backdrop of an organic cultural system with its roots springing from the synergistic energy fueled by two important systems: local customs and the influence of a Universal Christendom.⁸⁰ Dawson removes the pejorative stigma of a savage attached to the term "barbarian" and shows how the barbarians of Europe fused with the Christian tradition to become a united, vibrant culture.⁸¹ Architecturally, the rise of the Gothic Cathedral is a paramount example of the West's organic growth, both spiritual and intellectual, manifested in a physical building. The unique architecture of York Minster could not be found in Constantinople, just as the great Mosques of Istanbul, or the churches of St Basil, or San Marco, could not be found in northern England.

What, however, constitutes cultural decline? In Dawson's view, each of the great cultures is an "integrated whole, a functioning unity, composed of interrelated, interdependent culture elements."⁸² Thus, when a central part of that tradition is weakened, the whole fabric undergoes a transformation. For Dawson, an intentional break with the historic reality of any culture will herald its own demise.⁸³ When new forms of religion, literature,

⁸⁰ Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1932, 2003), 252.

⁸¹ Dorothea Price, "Review: *The Making of Europe*," *The Sociological Review*, vol. 24, no. 3, Oct. 1932, 307.

⁸² George F. Fitzgibbon, "The Cyclical Theory of Christopher Dawson," *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1941, 36.

⁸³ Dawson's view of culture as a "super-individual" finds similar expression in the works of numerous contemporaries including Ruth Benedict.

philosophy, architecture, and thought begin to artificially inculcate themselves in an established cultural system, a culture loses its significance.⁸⁴ Consequently, in Dawson's work, there was a "primacy...attributed to non-material factors as the significant motivating forces of cultural change."⁸⁵ Thus, a failure to incorporate new ideas into an existing system, and instead, to install a completely new system in place of established mores and social customs is the mark of cultural decline. The Reformation, and to a large degree the Enlightenment, are for Dawson, both representative of this type of decay. "Only so long as change is the spontaneous expression of the society itself does it involve the progress of civilization; as soon as the internal vital development of a culture ceases, change means death."⁸⁶ Dawson's emphasis on religion, it might be objected, runs the risk of simplifying a complex interrelation of cultural factors if there is a "unilateral relationship of cause and effect" among social changes.⁸⁷ This is unfounded, however, because he explicitly understands culture to be the result of a combination of genetics, geography, economics, and psychology—the last of which entails a spiritual function. In any analysis of cultural change, each of these factors would play an equally important role in determining the dynamics of a given system. Toynbee's understanding was similar in that civilizations grow in response to new challenges, but he insisted "civilizations die from suicide," and not murder, because the demise of great civilizations is usually the result of internal strife that leads to

⁸⁴ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 61.

⁸⁵ Fitzgibbon, "The Cyclical Theory of Christopher Dawson," 37.

⁸⁶ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 62.

⁸⁷ Fitzgibbon, "The Cyclical Theory of Christopher Dawson," 38.

failures in diplomatic and military affairs. In this way, Toynbee was more mechanical than the culturally-concerned Dawson, but he understood that it is the internal dynamics of a civilization that are most responsible for social change, and possibly, social decay.

An examination of the decline of Hellenic culture is an interesting case-study in understanding Dawson's explanation. While the sciences flourished, the Hellenic world was deteriorating in both a moral and historical sense. A loss of the vibrancy of Greek life, covered by a veneer of literary and philosophic triumph, resulted in the decomposition, and eventual collapse, of the Hellenic world. The Greek city-state, once the rigid social construction of Hellenistic society, decayed "into a formless, cosmopolitan society, with no roots in the past and no contact with a particular region."⁸⁸ Throughout this period of decline, however, the external accomplishments of the Greeks flourished. Intellectually, Greek culture represented an abstract form, while its particulars—to adopt Greek metaphysical language—were withering away under the pressures of cultural decay. For Dawson, the warning is written in letters of fire: a high degree of intellectual and material accomplishment can manifest itself even in times of greater cultural disintegration.⁸⁹ The modern West, with all of its scientific and material advancements, must learn the lessons of classical civilizations that perished while appearing to be in a state of pristine health. Importantly, the seemingly weak Oriental cultures, because of their comparable lack of material

⁸⁸ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 63.

⁸⁹ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 63.

sophistication, might possess a higher degree of cultural sustainability and vibrancy than the West.

Dawson notes, however, that there is reason to be optimistic. The West is not fated to a particular historical destiny, and if we dismiss the closed-circuit historicism of Spengler, we can see that cultures—especially in the modern, technologically advanced world—are in constant contact with one another, and will therefore not act as completely independent systems.⁹⁰ The social organs of Egypt and China survived for abnormally long periods of time because they tended to preserve the foundations of their cultures instead of seeking gratification solely in material advancements. Their strict codes of moral and social order, buttressed by a strong sense of religious duty, preserved the structure of their society although they appeared to possess relatively static economic systems.⁹¹ Rome, on the other hand, was seduced by material and imperialist ambitions, much to the neglect of its cultural foundations. The result: a loss of cultural vitality and the spiritual collapse of the Roman ideal in the first and second centuries before Christ.

Early Rome, Dawson argues, was primarily an agricultural society. "The foundation of her power and of her very existence was the peasant-soldier-citizen." The achievements of Rome, as a local power, are to be primarily regarded as the result of peasant religion, a farm economy, and simple morality. When Rome expanded, however, and the Republic cast its eyes upon conquering the Mediterranean world and abroad, the local culture was lost in a vacuous sea of cultural confusion. The professional soldier, and

⁹⁰ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 63-64.

⁹¹ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 66.

not the Cincinnatus of legend, became the ideal type, and although he was not a mercenary, such a militaristic vision would soon overtake Roman life. Furthermore, the slave trade and land speculation flourished as conquered peoples could be ravaged for profit. The morality of the peasant farmer was replaced by the rapid materialism of a cosmopolitan Rome. This disjunction was ruinous to Roman morale and to the spirit of the traditional keeper of agrarian life. Roman life became characterized as a steady decline: "The fundamental peasant-soldier-citizen gave place--as farmer to the slave--as soldier to the professional--as citizen to a vast urban proletariat living on Government doles and the bribes of politicians."⁹²

The situation worsened as Rome became a politicized nation. Conservatives like the Elder Cato, Dawson notes, tried to keep the old traditions alive, while radical liberals attempted to "restore the citizen class" through a state sponsored redistribution of private property among those who did not own land.⁹³ Rome soon became its own end, and served no other purpose than to augment its own powers and prestige. Rome no longer sustained as a unique cultural entity, nor did it resolve to protect its citizens. Similarly to the oppressive, totalitarian regimes of the twentieth-century, Rome became the embodiment of its own ideal and its own purpose.

Dawson's concern with a loss of cultural awareness is centered in his skepticism over the health of an urbanized people. Arnold Toynbee, writing about Christopher Dawson's thinking on radicalism,

⁹² Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 67.

⁹³ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 67.

urges the readers of *The Gods of Revolution* to consider the impact of the urban proletariat on the French Revolution.⁹⁴ Similarly, the urban proletariat must be considered as a constituent part of the fall of the old Roman tradition in order to comprehend its full magnitude. It was the urbanization of Roman life that most influenced the beginnings of Europe and helped to create outposts of civilized living throughout barbaric lands. Dawson writes:

At first sight it is the military aspect of Rome's work which is most impressive, but the civil process of urbanization is even more important in the history of culture. It was Rome's chief mission to introduce the city into continental Europe, and with the city came the idea of citizenship and the civic tradition which had been the greatest creation of the Mediterranean culture. The Roman soldier and military engineer were the agents of this process of expansion: indeed the army itself was organized by Augustus as a preparation for citizenship and an agent for the diffusion of Roman culture and institutions in the new provinces.⁹⁵

It was, however, this urbanization that was at the very root of Rome's decline. Not only was every foreign settlement a taxing economic burden, but it caused a fracture in the military structure. The city's racial and religious cosmopolitanism, mixed with classes of every imaginable kind, required an extensive fighting force, itself an eclectic mix, with loyalties to various entities other than Rome. The Imperial system paid for itself, but as soon as the growth stopped, the economic realities of a vast empire caused financial collapse. To counter mounting deficits, imperial governors were forced to raise taxes, and to impose duties on the wealthy patricians who formerly served in municipal offices at no

⁹⁴ Arnold Toynbee, "Introduction," *The Gods of Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), xi.

⁹⁵ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, 20.

expense to the public. The urbanized Empire was a recipe for its own cultural ruin.⁹⁶

If cultures are organic structures, grounded in a historical reality, then cities are, for Dawson, their natural nemesis. Nothing is more culturally artificial than an urbanized population. This is not to say that cities are nothing more than culturally harmful organizations, but rather to illustrate that cities do not have the same organic structure as more rural societies because of the cosmopolitanism that such an environment naturally creates. Cities, by their very nature, are meeting centers of different religions, races, economic classes, social classes, and intellectual ideas. This is why urban areas are often the breeding grounds for violent, though not necessarily physical, cultural change. This is the type of change that Dawson sees as a breach of historical understanding, and the usher of cultural change—often for the worse.

III

Dawson's approach to history is unique in that it represents a definitive break with the way history was viewed since the end of the sixteenth-century. From the dawn of the scientific revolution and the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* in the seventeenth-century, to the reign of the Whig historians in the nineteenth, history underwent substantive changes in both perception and method. Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, although neglected for many years, became an authority in the argument that history must be viewed in the same terms as other forms of scientific inquiry. Capturing the essence of his age—the age of Isaac Newton and

⁹⁶ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, 22-23.

scientific advancement—Vico insisted that history was something that could be known because men made it. Here Vico makes an epistemological claim: namely, that in order to truly know something, it is necessary to have created it. In Vico's view, natural history is outside of our realm of knowledge because it is God's pure creation; however, the building of states and international transactions are perfectly within the boundaries of man's capabilities of understanding. Now a firm line has been drawn separating natural history from its man-made counterpart, and history is given a plane upon which to build a greater inquiry. Dawson did not agree with Vico's epistemological claims wholeheartedly, but he did possess sympathy for his view of history as a developmental process. Furthermore, Vico and Dawson share a view of Catholicism that possesses an intimate, spiritual universalism that transcends the mundane and extends to the mysterious and unknown.

For Vico, human nature can be seen, at least partially, in a historical inquiry because it is through the actions of men by which our own nature is most prominently put on display. Dawson would agree, although he would not go as far to subordinate all knowledge of man to the *process* of history. Thus, it is possible to know some things about the natural world, albeit imperfectly. Man is not a purely rational creature, and this is where Vico believed the imaginative and critical character of man's personality were instrumental in understanding the past. Men progress, Vico argued, through cycles in which periods of "barbarism and myth" are displaced by more "civil" periods. Here there is a definite break with the patristic fathers whose distaste for cycles is rooted in

the Gospels' conception of Christ the redeemer who dies, once and for all, so that sins can be forgiven. This belief in cycles, although not wholly inconsistent with early-Catholic thought, represents a major break between Dawson and Vico, although the importance of imagination is in the forefront of Dawson's thought as it is with Vico two centuries earlier.⁹⁷

Dawson struggles, like Vico, to put history in its proper place among the disciplines. In such an organizing effort—and it is the nature of historians to put things into categories—Dawson confronts the concept of history as a branch of scientific knowledge. Again, the epistemological confrontation is a matter of immediate concern because it is the nucleus of all prospects for finding a consensus upon which to view historical knowledge.

Dawson finds common ground with many of the great philosophers of history, but he has important differences with all of them. For instance, Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas toward a Philosophy of the History of Man* provides several instances where Dawson would be in agreement with the author concerning the scientific approach to history.⁹⁸ Herder's insistence that historians cannot judge the past from a contemporary perch is an inherent part of Dawson's thinking, but Herder's argument that the variety and individuality of specific nations are the core of historical change would make Dawson cringe. Here lies a serious distinction between Dawson and one of his important predecessors. While Herder possesses a love for the abstract idea of the State, Dawson finds the means of historical

⁹⁷ See Book I of Giambattista Vico's, *The New Science* (New York: Cornell University Press), translated by T.C. Bergin and M.H. Fisch.

⁹⁸ See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideas toward a Philosophy of the History of Man*, translated by T. Churchill, 1803. Especially see the "Introduction," and chapters I and V of Book 15.

change in deeper recesses of the human drama. Herder breaks with many of his contemporaries of the Enlightenment in his rejection of history as the deduction of general principles concerning human nature, and strangely, he finds good company with Dawson in the belief that variety and imagination are among the numerous keys to understanding the past.

While Dawson does not believe that historians are right to cast moral judgments upon their subjects, he does not reject the notions of natural law or moral responsibility. Dawson's vision of history as a function of a culture's religious patrimony is directly linked to that religion's "intimate relation" to a definite moral code. Thus, morality is an important part of understanding a culture and the super-structure under which any particular culture exists. To Dawson, if we are to identify the ends of a particular culture and their achievements, the historian must look upon it as a moral enterprise. The worth of any moral system, for both the individual and the larger culture of which he is part, is the extent to which that system is "true to its destiny, to sacrifice the bird in the hand for the vision of the bush, to leave the known for the unknown, like Abram going out from Harran and from his own people, obedient to the call of Yahweh, or the Aeneas of Virgil's great religious epic."⁹⁹ Dawson makes this claim because he believes that this view of reality is felt "intuitively" before it is intellectually digested or rationally understood. Thus, for Dawson, the challenge to the modern world is to reconcile its inner-sense

⁹⁹ Dawson, "Civilization and Morals," in *Dynamics of World History*, 51.

and teleological vision with the discoveries of the present day and the growing knowledge man has of himself and of nature.¹⁰⁰

Arguing against the inclusion of moral principles as a key to understanding history, Henry Thomas Buckle believed that it was through the advancement of the intellect by which history can be most articulately understood. For Buckle, history's significance is not the result of religious inquiry or the working-out of moral principles, and like Comte before him, he thought that society must be studied by way of some scientific procedure. Buckle insisted that reluctance to embrace a scientific approach to history is the result of two ancient dogmas—Free Will and predestination. In Buckle's thought, the doctrine of Free Will is flawed because it rests upon indefensible metaphysical assumptions that are, he claims, mere speculation. Similarly, he maintains that predestination depends upon vulnerable assumptions of a theological nature.¹⁰¹

Buckle's adherence to Comtean positivism, and in essence, Hume's empiricism, places him in square contrast to Dawson, but there remain several points of agreement. Dawson's thought is at once logical but reluctant to lend itself to any one "school," and although his views seem to run contrary to Comte's, and naturally Buckle's, the disagreements are not sweeping indictments. With Le Play, Comte retains Dawson's admiration despite apparent shortcomings. John Mulloy writes:

Dawson is indebted to Le Play for putting his sociology into touch with the concrete bases of human life, through the

¹⁰⁰ Dawson, "Civilization and Morals," *Dynamics of World History*, 55.

¹⁰¹ Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), especially Book I, chapters 1, 3, and 5.

latter's classic study of the family in embarking on "grandiose schemes for the reconstruction of society" and for creating a theory of society which "was at the same time...a system of moral philosophy and a non-theological substitute for religion." Dawson is impressed with Comte's recognition that the "study of social institutions must go hand in hand with the study of the intellectual and spiritual forces which give unity to the particular age and society in question."¹⁰²

Dawson admires Comte's strength as a thinker because of his recognition of the importance of the "living community" as a centerpiece of cultural identity; nevertheless, he is careful to distance himself from Comte on his pure philosophy of history as a replacement for sociology. It is in the spiritual and intellectual development of man through which the roots of culture are most visible, Dawson argued, following Comte, and not in the bland materialism of external causes.¹⁰³ Fixating upon the material causes of social change is the fatal flaw of modern sociologists. Comte's idealization of positivism—especially in its quasi-religious form—is distasteful to a mind such as Dawson's, yet the scientific method of such a system, carefully incorporated into a more humane outlook, provides essential structure to the cultural historian's task.

G.W.F. Hegel provides another important contrast by which Dawson's thought is placed into context. For Hegel, history represents a rational process that exists in definite stages and is ultimately defined by the idea of freedom—a freedom, which must be distinguished from the ideas of Lord Acton. The freedom of Hegel is a direct function of the essence of an age's spirit, and thus there is a definitive differentiation between natural and non-natural history. The primary factor in the drawing of this distinction is

¹⁰² John Mulloy, "Afterword," *Dynamics of World History*, 445.

¹⁰³ Mulloy, "Afterword," *Dynamics of World History*, 445.

that in non-natural history, human people are involved in a rational process by which there is a progressive development toward some certain goal. Natural history, on the other hand, does not involve rational principles or the actions of individual persons. To Hegel and his students, history is the working-out of a progressive self-manifestation of absolute Mind. In this system, each culture and people are nothing more than the "embodiment of the immanent idea." To Dawson, Hegel's ideas are wholly simplistic, but they capture a renewed importance through their recollection in Marx's dialectical materialism. Furthermore, while Hegelian philosophy suffers from a credibility problem, its older, Enlightenment-age relative, Liberal idealism, is alive and powerful.¹⁰⁴ Dawson confronts the issue of liberalism with a deliberate sense of purpose in that he suspects it possesses an inherent contradiction at its core. While the scientific spirit is the pervasive element of Enlightenment rationalism, the practitioners of enlightened thought were all too quick to make unfounded metaphysical assertions of their own. The belief in an absolute law of Progress, the right of Liberty, the supremacy of Science, the search for Justice, and the assertion of Reason are all forces that determine the course of culture, but are not empirical matters. Dawson understands that metaphysical concepts are part of human development, but independently they are weak forms to which society needlessly conforms because of its dogmatic adherence to the religion of Progress.

Dawson could not accept Hegel's philosophy for a multitude of reasons, and foremost among these is his idealization of the State

¹⁰⁴ Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," *Dynamics of World History*, 26.

as the highest form of understanding. Dawson's Catholicism kept him from seeing the state as the realization of the Divine Idea as it exists on earth. It is in Augustine, not Hegel, in which Dawson sees the proper relationship between the City of Man and the City of God explained. Augustine draws a clear line of demarcation between the two cities, especially in their relation to the Catholic Church, and insists that the Church is not a reflection of Heaven, but an instrument of it.¹⁰⁵ Clearly, then, Hegel and Augustine stand diametrically opposed in their vision of the relationship between Heaven and earth, and it is with Augustine that Dawson makes his stand. Hegel's thought penetrates beyond historical thinking, and even politics, because its quasi-religious character allows it to permeate every aspect of culture. Thus, religion, history, politics, economics, and art, are all susceptible to the supremacy of the State. Richard Wagner's *Ring*, and eventually the historical imagination of historians such as Niebuhr, and later Ranke and Mommsen, are prominent examples of this vision of culture. By the mid-twentieth-century, the results of this "armed doctrine" would be disastrous.

In Hegel's system, history is accorded the highest form of knowledge because it is the culmination of all other disciplines in its ability to find the absolute spirit. Thus, all other forms of inquiry, scientific and humane, are subordinate to this overarching concept that envelopes every aspect of society and culminates in an unbridled exaltation of the State. This is unacceptable to the Christian, and especially to the philosophical Catholic. Hegel's

¹⁰⁵ St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, edited with introduction by Thomas Merton (New York: 1878, 1950, 2000).

fault, and Dawson draws from his Catholic theology to justify this claim, is that he equates the national State with the common culture that is its foundation. As a consequence, historians—especially in Germany—did not study cultures, but produced political histories that would reign unchallenged for nearly a century.¹⁰⁶

Dawson's assessment of Hegel is a devastating attack on Idealism and the abstraction of nationalist history. If the common culture is reduced to a function of political identity, then historians fail to grasp the real root of what causes cultural change. While wars and economic policies have tremendous impact on any social structure, they do not fully capture the "spirit" of an age. Hegel's markedly un-Christian conception of the State as the highest level of culture fails to take into account spiritual factors, which, no matter how intense the veneer, could never be a part of a genuine political machine.

If Hegel's idealization of the political state is a distasteful, if not impossible, concept to internalize, then Oswald Spengler's concept of culture, and later Toynbee's idea of civilization, become objects of vital importance. Spengler's "morphological" conception of history in which civilizations undergo cyclical changes, each possessing its own "soul," but simultaneously progressing toward the same destiny, presents a conundrum to the historian because it challenges the standard structure of history as a sequence of ancient, medieval, and modern. The scientific view of history is called into question by Spengler's argument that history is a special type of knowledge that cannot be studied through the

¹⁰⁶ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 34-35.

application of scientific techniques. For Spengler, science deals with fixed systems in nature, while history is not fixed, develops at unpredictable intervals, and is not the product of definite causal uniformities.¹⁰⁷ Spengler argues that cultures, and not purely political institutions, must be the proper object of historical inquiry. So it would appear that he and Dawson are in the same camp: both reject the scientific method as a means to capture the past and they agree that culture is most effective means by which to understand what went before. However, there are some important differences that must be elucidated.

Dawson rejects the Hegelian notion of history as the glorification of a political system, but he does not endorse Spengler's compartmentalization of cultures as independent units. Spengler's history is burdened by an intensely determinist gloom, while Dawson's vision is enlivened by a spirit of Christian hope and Free Will. Dawson viewed Spengler's system, not as a philosophy of history, but as an attempt to create a new, "historical, kind of philosophy."¹⁰⁸ For Dawson, the insufficient means by which modern historians have come to view culture—as closed systems depending upon law of causality instead of as living organisms—reflects the same error committed by Spengler. His vision of the past as self-contained cultural units creates a problematic "philosophical relativism," in which eternal truths are incapable of expression or basic existence.

¹⁰⁷ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1926).

¹⁰⁸ Dawson, "Oswald Spengler and the Life of Civilizations," *Dynamics of World History*, 389.

What makes Spengler's historicism so important is its viewpoint. Dawson argues that Spengler, whose Germanic background predisposes him to place his interests outside of the politics of typical English historians, produces an exceptionally practical history in his *Decline of the West*. Dawson attempts to explain the relevance of Spengler to the metaphysically-blind English mind by arguing that the Anglo-American historians must treat him as a serious subject regardless of the discomfort that results from an undergraduate career of reading Macaulay and Stubbs.¹⁰⁹ Europe's cosmopolitanism does not guarantee that students, or even professional historians, will be exposed to a wide-range of scholars; however, Dawson writes this between 1922 and 1929, when Spengler was already under a cloud.

Dawson's break with Spengler is particularly important because both men view history in terms of a larger context than crude, nationalist historians, but their conceptions of this underlying "culture" are radically different. Dawson concedes that Spengler essentially holds the right cards, but has them disordered, or at least reads them incorrectly. For Dawson, history is an organic structure that cannot be contained within neat, fixed categories. Spengler sees the Christianity of the Patristic period and the Middle Ages as two different religions, but a cursory examination of Catholic history renders this judgment naïve, at best. Dawson's criticism of this is not unfair because he sees the unity of the Christian tradition as a succession of events, ideas, and people, each building off of the past to achieve a sort of cultural

¹⁰⁹ Dawson, "Oswald Spengler and the Life of Civilizations," *Dynamics of World History*, 394.

synthesis. In this light, Christianity becomes, for Spengler, a great stumbling block, and for Dawson, the greatest example of how Spengler's metahistorical theory is fatally flawed no matter how important some of its constituent elements may appear at first glance.

Arnold Toynbee's approach is similarly lacking in that it is the opposite extreme which ignores the cultural foundation that is responsible for the construction of his basic element of human affairs—civilization. For Dawson, the weakness in Toynbee's approach is displayed in his Spengler-like reductionism of cultures to independent social units. Although he does not embrace a cyclical vision of the past, he denies the unity of history, and embraces the idea that history is enlivened by the abstract concept of progressive world stages. Toynbee does not accept the subjective historical approach advocated by Spengler, and it is in his adherence to the idea that history is subordinated to a higher, over-arching principle, by which all civilizations are judged on common ground that he and Dawson are similar. Dawson makes the argument, albeit implicitly, that this is a step closer to his own historical vision that is chastened by Thomistic philosophy and the existence of natural law.

Natural law and the working-out of metahistorical forces in culture is an intellectual intersection at which the Catholic philosopher (and theologian) must not become ensnared in rigid, often confusing systems—most of them the product of nineteenth-century German Idealism. Dawson's worldview, against Hegel and the Idealists, is that history is the servant of culture, and the

handmaiden of Christianity—not the converse. The failure to understand the relationship between history and religion—and thus, the failure to understand the limits of historical inquiry—has placed history between the uncomfortable, unhelpful, and outdated extremes of subjective and objective inquiry. When history is subordinated to a greater system such as Christianity, properly understood through metaphysics and theology, the objectivity question becomes moot. This is because human events, when seen in a context outside of their own existence, and in relation to the greater eternal structure of the universe, become a secondary aspect of knowledge. The question becomes, not what specifically happened down to the last minor detail, but rather, what value the intrinsic significance of historical events, or people, holds.

The secular historian who does not wish to subordinate his discipline to seemingly abstract subjects such as philosophy and theology will make objections to this type of thinking, but he cannot use history to answer his critics. Science and philosophy are themselves the objects of social construction, and thus, cannot comment on social determinants without circularity. They are, however, the best means to understanding our past as long as their limits are properly respected.¹¹⁰ "It is important," Dawson wrote, "to keep the study of culture on the scientific plane and not let it be infected by the political controversies of the moment. Nevertheless in so far as it is a genuinely humane study it is bound to exert a liberalizing and humanizing influence on its own level, i.e. the world of ideas." In this way, scientific method must not

¹¹⁰ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 61.

be corrupted by ephemeral fads, or by the tinge of day-to-day politics.¹¹¹ There is an added complication for the Christian, and thus for Dawson: the meaning of history is found, not purely within the "outer world of historic events," but rather, in the world of spiritual change.¹¹² Unlike Machiavelli and Hobbes, who tried to understand history as a non-moral enterprise consisting of the story of political power, Dawson sees the meaning of history shrouded in the mystery of the Gospels and enlivened by the spirit of Christian virtue. He imagines the significance of history in its relation to the eternal world and in its recognition of the hand of God intervening, at various points, in human affairs.

Dawson's insistence that history is something non-scientific reflects his view that, for the believing Christian, history is inseparable from the tenets of faith. History is not an abstract construction, as the nineteenth-century philosophers argued; rather, it is something that is far more intimately involved in Christianity's core principles, and Christianity's basis as a world religion, than a pure philosophy such as Hegel's or Kant's. This does not mean, however, that science should be thrown aside in an effort to decipher the mysteries of the past. Dawson's view is elucidated by his belief that sociology and history must participate in one endeavor while maintaining definite boundaries. With Max Weber, Dawson believed that scientific thinking, as demonstrated by

¹¹¹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 16 August 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

¹¹² Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 251.

sociology, only achieves its proper ends when placed in the context of a specific historical problem.¹¹³

Scientific thinking has its place in historical inquiry, but Dawson is right to reject it as the basis of all historical thought because history is not purely a matter of materiality, and is thus, something removed from the reign of pure science. While he doesn't go as far as Trevelyan in railing against historians who, in the words of Peter Gay, "forget their obligations to literature in whoring after the false god of science," Dawson is chastised by the ever-present obligations of the historian to understand the past, not merely reconstruct it neatly along scientifically drawn lines.¹¹⁴ Dawson's undergraduate career was a struggle to maintain distance from both the fanatics of scientific objectivism on the one hand, and the Whigs on the other. Unlike Karl Manheim whose "situational determinism" turned on an argument that objectivity was impossible because every historian is the product of cultural and historical circumstance, Dawson eschews the idea of pursuing an abstract objectivity from the outset.¹¹⁵ This does not mean that his accounts are tinged with relativistic assertions or fanciful myths, but that he accepts history as an endeavor that reaches to the heart of humanity itself, and beyond into eternity. Accordingly, history becomes a humane endeavor even more than it is a scientific one or the apparent results of simple, causal actions.

For Dawson, the hope of finding Truth in the modern age was not a problem of objectivity, but one of understanding the role of

¹¹³ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (New York: 1946).

¹¹⁴ Peter Gay, *Style in History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 187.

¹¹⁵ See Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.) for a more detailed account of Manheim's "situational determinism."

primeval religious traditions as a component of contemporary, secular life. In the West, this means the reconciliation of Christian values with the ideals of the Humanist tradition—including its scientific components. Science is a tool that can be used to help understand the past, but it must not be the only avenue by which history is viewed. Many of the historical problems faced by philosophers since the first extensive treatments of history began in the seventeenth-century are the result of an identity crisis: an inability of the West to come to a consensus on what exactly constitutes those constituent elements which form the basis of our culture. Until the building blocks of culture are put in their proper context, and historians allow other, non-scientific criteria to affect the picture, we have no hope of ending the objectivity debate. There is an inherent contradiction in the scientific view of history in that it commits the very error that it seeks to eradicate. The scientific tradition is itself a religious institution with its own priests, creed, and faithful followers. Dawson argued against this inversion with vigorous energy.

Does this constitute a thorough philosophy of history? Probably not. Such systems depend on thoroughly material circumstances to support their abstract claims. Dawson is no historicist, but at the same time, he does not write in the manner of his philosophical mentor, Augustine. In fact, Dawson is more like Bede in his treatment of Christianity in early England than like Augustine in his grand theodicy, *The City of God*. Dawson does not set out to create a grand system or establish an elaborate philosophical framework, but what he does intend is to turn man's

attention back to the most fundamental part of his being—his relationship with God and the relationship between time and eternity. For Dawson, history is the study of particulars, but these particulars must be framed within the context of the eternality of God's time. Thus, for the Western historian, the proper understanding of history is not sought in abstract metaphysics, but in the unfolding of a divine plan—essentially, within the context of a "theology of history."

Dawson's vision of history is wholly entangled with his understanding of the cosmos as a dynamic system that progresses with the active participation of God. In Dawson, there is an outright resistance to the "clockmaker" view of the universe in which God is merely the builder of a world that He set into motion and leaves to its own devices. Understandably, then, Dawson is reluctant to see history in a vacuum where it is divorced from the greater, Transcendent Reality of the cosmos. Thus, for Dawson, questions concerning history are more than attempts to understand what happened as matters of *fact*, but to understand why general, metahistorical movements occur, and place them into the context of a more concrete framework. He was not concerned, as Dermott Quinn writes, with "monographic miniaturism," or particular periods, for his questions were metaphysical and concerned the pattern of history itself.¹¹⁶ In this way, Dawson's historical imagination is at once empirical and humane, scientific and literary, factual and theological—and this is why he stands apart from his predecessors and contemporaries alike.

¹¹⁶ Dermott Quinn, "The Catholic Idea of History" in *Eternity in Time*, 70.

IV

Objections could be raised on several grounds—that Dawson's sociological view of history is ultimately too theological, for example, and that his understanding of sociology is narrow and, to a degree, antiquated. Furthermore, it can be argued that his dismissal of a historical metaphysics is contradicted by his own philosophical arguments in favor of metahistory, and that his Catholicism prevents him from directly answering certain claims about his own methodology and conclusions.¹¹⁷ These are broad criticisms that must be viewed in light of Dawson's understanding of culture and its most basic elements. To Harry Elmer Barnes, these criticisms are the product of "perfectionism," and need little elucidation to convince even the most hardened skeptic of Dawson's value as a historian.

For Dawson, civilizations were the ultimate social existence.¹¹⁸ When seen against the backdrop of a transcendent reality, they became complete social organisms and vibrant cultures as in the cases of India, China, Islam, and Europe. The synergistic effect of this combined spiritual and social enterprise produced a cultural dynamic that the sociologist could not understand if he were to dismiss religious factors. In Europe, which is poorly defined by terms of geography, religion plays an immense role in the cultural milieu, even in what Dawson considered to be a post-Christian age. The whole fabric of European culture is woven from various strands of the Christian faith, and at its most basic point,

¹¹⁷ Harry Elmer Barnes, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1, October 1957, 78.

¹¹⁸ Robert E. Park, "Review: *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 1, July 1935, 110.

from the universal, pre-Reformation Church. Thus, to argue that a cultural understanding is too theological in its approach is to misunderstand the elements of culture in the first place, both in Europe and beyond.

It is unfair to argue that Dawson's understanding of sociology is a dated understanding merely because it focuses on the central role of religion in culture. Unmoved by pure quantitative analysis, Dawson's vision of culture was a complex vision of material, religious, and psychological factors. None of these alone, he argued, could account for the development of culture; accordingly, each one must be addressed if the accepted definition of culture, and the picture it produces, are not to be mere caricatures of the truth. If Dawson can be accused of anything here, it is his selective choice of sources that do not clash with his methodology, but that selectivity is itself the product of a consistent vision of sociology's limits and his own vision of that science. "He takes culture in the anthropological sense of a people's total pattern of living," and this pattern is not exclusively found through statistics and data analysis.¹¹⁹ Dawson's vision is illustrated by his understanding of the Enlightenment as a "complete divorce between the religious and the secular worlds," with the most obvious breaks occurring in the sphere of education.¹²⁰ This differentiation from and break with the traditional educational paradigm is as important as any economic data that could be "objectively" evaluated. Arnold Toynbee sees this as the value of Dawson's

¹¹⁹ Leo R. Ward, "Educational Crisis: Cultural Crisis," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4, October 1961, 531.

¹²⁰ Ward, "Educational Crisis: Cultural Crisis," 531.

approach, and often praised him for his reluctance to turn his studies into dogmatic apologetics or to reduce them to quantitative visions.¹²¹

Dawson's defense of metahistory borders on the metaphysical, but it never subordinates history to philosophy. In this way, there is no "philosophy of history," because for Dawson, history's ultimate reality is found in the intricate workings of a divine plan.¹²² Consequently, his vision is not philosophical, but theological; yet, this theology shows no hint of fundamentalism, for Dawson is a pluralist in the most liberal sense of the term.¹²³ His vision is informed by theological insights, not composed by them. In this way, his sociological view is enhanced because it captures a more complete vision of social reality than if he were to concentrate exclusively upon material concerns.

Dawson's concerns were broad and the historian is sometimes liable to get lost in his cultural analysis. As William McNeill notes, Dawson never wrote a book that dealt with an exclusive object of historical interest, and consequently will never be considered a historian in the same way as Spengler and Toynbee.¹²⁴ Yet his interests were different in that they were not strictly concerned with details of the past—they were concentrated upon the larger historical workings that he believed were the causes of cultural development and social change. In this way, and this is even

¹²¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, "Review: *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 26, No. 3., July 1950, 374-375.

¹²² Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," *The American Scholar*, 112.

¹²³ Crane Brinton, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *Speculum*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 1958, 272-273.

¹²⁴ William H. McNeill, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, September 1957, 257.

apparent to the Catholic thinker, Dawson is not a typical historian in the proper sense of the term. Always disappointed that the Oxford dons did not enthusiastically receive him, he did, however, possess an immense body of historical knowledge that is communicated to his readers in all of his books.¹²⁵ It is true that his limited use of notes and citations inhibits his students from going directly to his sources, and this failure to firmly establish matters of fact does require his readers to place a great deal of trust in his judgment.¹²⁶ Dawson's methods may never be fully accepted by professional historians, as it is almost impossible to build effective arguments upon "facts" that are largely unsubstantiated by careful references. His arguments were never theoretical in that they always possessed a historical framework, and perhaps his overall mission was very different from that of the usual historian in that he was not out to recreate the past or to participate in the detailed research of the typical historian. Dawson wanted to understand history itself as an intellectual project. To incorporate a body of detailed historical works into his penetrating historiographical studies would have been a practical impossibility for any one man. With this in mind, he had to assume that the reader already knew his facts so that he could concentrate his energies upon larger arguments. He was rarely criticized for "assuming" things to be true, and the so-called "professionals" often praised him for his extensive, and accurate, understandings of

¹²⁵ John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversation with Dawson," 29 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹²⁶ John T. McNeill, "Review: *The Dividing of Christendom*," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 38, No. 4, December 1966, 425-426.

various disciplines.¹²⁷ Dawson was rare in that he possessed a vast command of historical, sociological, anthropological, and archaeological knowledge that allowed him to incorporate disparate elements into a general setting, and to "sketch it, literally, from a fresh point of view."¹²⁸ Those who disagreed with him did so on matters of interpretation, not evidence. As Sidney Painter argues, those already possessing a strong historical background most easily appreciate Dawson, while anyone unfamiliar with his subject matter would be forced to trust his evidence.¹²⁹

For instance, Everett Hughes argues that Dawson errs in his characterization of the psychoanalyst as one who too often mixes "his medical with his moral categories."¹³⁰ He does not contend that Dawson's "facts" are incorrect, but that his perception and understanding of certain facts are misconstrued or intentionally skewed. Hughes argues against the idea that no account of a person's moral outlook is sufficient enough to draw conclusions about their historical significance.¹³¹ While Dawson does contend that morals are inextricably linked to the greater historical reality, he does not reduce history to a matter of moral judgment. Here it is the perception of facts, and not the facts themselves, that are the matter of contention. One reviewer claims that Dawson's knowledge is so vast and commanding that his subjects

¹²⁷ C. Daryll Forde, "Review: *The Age of the Gods*," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 34, No. 2, April-June 1932, 340-341.

¹²⁸ J.L. Myres, "Review: *The Age of the Gods*," *Man*, Vol. 28, October 1928, 180.

¹²⁹ Sidney Painter, "Review: *Medieval Essays*," *Speculum*, Vol. 29, No. 4, October 1954, 798-799.

¹³⁰ Everett C. Hughes, "Review: *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 2, September 1935, 261.

¹³¹ Hughes, "Review: *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement*," 261.

became too big for their space.¹³² This was especially true with his Gifford Lectures, but the overarching weakness remains that his facts are often left unsubstantiated and the reader must place his faith in Dawson's own erudition and research. Dawson, not unaware of this problem, lamented that there did not exist a proper audience for his work—not one that was scholarly, *per se*, but well-educated enough to be "familiar with the older literature and with names like Andre Chenier who belong to literature rather than politics."¹³³

Ironically, however, it is in this weakness that we can find Dawson's strength as a historian. His scholarship is unique in that it captured those movements of world history that would be lost if he were to strictly abide by the methods of the historical profession. In his failure to both manufacture thorough notes and to produce parochial studies, Dawson succeeds in providing his readers with an understanding of history's general principles. In the *Movement of World Revolution*, Dawson articulates his wish to provide a universal history, not in the fashion of H.G. Wells, but in a way that shows the whole world to be a unity through the "diffusion of a civilization that first took shape in Western Europe."¹³⁴ Dawson's historical imagination was imbued with the idea of capturing the essence of history's dynamics, and to understand the intricacies of human affairs against the backdrop of a transcendent reality that found ultimate existence through an acceptance of certain theological norms.

¹³² Hoxie N. Fairchild, "Review: *Religion and Culture*," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 22, No. 3, September 1950, 267.

¹³³ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 1 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

¹³⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, "Review: *The Movement of World Revolution*," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1960, 213-214.

Chapter Two: History and Progress

I

Dawson's understanding of history was at once realistic and Christian, but it did not subscribe to the naïve assumption that the past is purely visible through its material achievements. His engagement in a "triangular conversation" among history, sociology, and theology, did not permit him to view the past through an "objective" lens, nor through one that was completely Christian or Western.¹³⁵ Dawson hoped to discover the "truths" of history by way of careful inquiry in which the imagination and the powers of the intellect would come together to form a unique synergy that was not purely scientific and not a mere literary exercise. For Dawson, "the basis of all cultural achievements is some religious impulse and direction, often overlooked by scholars who concentrate too exclusively on economic and political factors in history."¹³⁶ Dawson's general view of history as a religious enterprise, however, is not enough because its ends are a matter of theological, not historical, belief. In this, Dawson displays an almost Protestant understanding of Divine Providence and the mysterious nature of God's relationship with the temporal world. In this way, with Herbert Butterfield, Dawson understands the "contingent and unpredictable" nature of history, and that its real meaning is something different than any individual person could know.¹³⁷

The experienced historian will note striking similarities between the thinking of Dawson and his predecessor, Burke,

¹³⁵ Roger L. Shinn, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January 1958, 70-71.

¹³⁶ Shinn, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*, 71.

¹³⁷ Shinn, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," 71.

especially in their contemplation of progress as an institution of faith. Burke was not the first statesman to understand the inherent dangers of "displacing theology by philosophy," but he was the first in recent memory to conduct a sustained attack on philosophical liberalism that became an armed doctrine through its radical tone and voracious spirit. But unlike Burke, Dawson's historical realism prevented him from becoming a Christian apologist or a staunch defender of political conservatism. He was aware of the "deficiencies to be found in various periods of Christian culture," and he was mindful of the difficulties involved in restoring a previous, idealized age.¹³⁸ While Dawson maintains that an "Augustan age" of Christian culture lay in the future, he offers no explanation of how to get there, and as a historian, he is conscious that he must refrain from doing so.

Dawson, like Burke, questions liberalism as it was represented in eighteenth-century thought, and in the later arguments of the nineteenth-century social scientists, because of their limited scope and unscientific claims of objectivity. The cult of the fact was the product of the unmitigated belief in the ability of man to transcend the boundaries of nature to understand the inner-workings of the universe through mathematical principle and rational inquiry. Facts, and nothing but methodically collected data were seen as valuable assets to both physical and social sciences. For Dawson, however, history transcends the social sciences, and with Karl Popper, he recognizes that it is a discipline of an utterly different character from the physical sciences, although there are

¹³⁸ Philip H. Ashby, "Review: *The Movement of World Revolution*," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 4, October 1959, 283-284.

some tenuous similarities.¹³⁹ There was a trend, for several generations, to assume that fixed physical laws in nature would naturally mirror the perceived "laws" of history. For Dawson and Popper, this was an improper analogy because history was the product of human actions, which, even under the direction of natural law and the workings of a consistent human nature, were still subject to psychological and other variables.

The eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century ideas of progress and their development into a system of historicism in the social sciences is a primary concern of Dawson's scholarship, although the foundations of these ideas are much deeper. To the mature Dawson, the role of Erasmus as the founder of the liberal tradition was more central than he had ever supposed in his early career. It is possible, Dawson argued, to trace a line of "intellectual descent" directly from Erasmus to the foundations of the Enlightenment. This was just as true in both Protestant and Catholic thought, but was particularly telling for the Calvinists who regard him as their "spiritual ancestor."¹⁴⁰ For most of his time as a historian, however, he regarded both Bacon and Newton as the initial sparks of scientific, Enlightenment thought. The sociological view of history, of which Dawson is a partisan, represents his interest in correcting the perceived "errors" in the subject that is paramount in any attempt to achieve genuine historical understanding. The early-modern devotion to science, which became a secular creed, and

¹³⁹ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge Classics, 1957, 2002), 4-6, 40-41, 141; also, Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), especially "The Moral Theory of Historicism."

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 26 February 1960, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 12.

committed many of the same errors its alleged adherence to the doctrine of "objectivity" was supposed to eliminate, eventually collapsed, in Dawson's evaluation, into an intolerant dogmatism complete with its own assertions and unfounded assumptions. He set about setting the record straight and correcting these deficiencies, but he does not aim to destroy the scientific method or the idea of an objective reality. In fact, the existence of an objective reality lies at the heart of his historical vision, and the use of science—in its proper context and within certain limits—remains paramount to a thorough historical inquiry. It is this incorporation of science into history that prevents it from becoming a wholly literary endeavor. Nevertheless, Dawson never loses sight of the idea that what we see in history is only a "partial and uncertain manifestation of the spiritual activity which is taking place at once below and above the level of historical study."¹⁴¹

Dawson understood progress as term describing movement, but a movement of a very specific type. Unlike pure motion that can move forward, regress, or maintain stasis, progress entails a very specific meaning that attaches itself to advancement. To Dawson the Catholic sociologist, progress is a function of how human beings order their lives toward God. In the section that follows, there will be two overarching priorities: first, to explain Dawson's ideas on the concept of progress; and second, to put Dawson's ideas into context with other key thinkers on this subject and to question the logistical and theological implications of his understanding of this term. Questions about the nature of progress will also be treated

¹⁴¹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, c.1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1

in the last section, and Dawson's attempts to understand them will be examined. Of particular interest, is Dawson's use of non-Western cultures to buttress his arguments in order to avoid the charge of possessing a provincial world-view.

II

Dawson is interested in the idea of progress to the extent it involves cultural change. He does not attempt to build a grand system of fixed laws by which to ascertain the direction of human history, nor does he wish to construct a grandiose scheme to understand history as a rational exercise in material advancement. To understand Dawson's conception of progress, it is first necessary to grasp his understanding of the word culture as it relates to social life. In *Religion and Culture*, Dawson begins the final chapter with a brief definition. Like T.S. Eliot, Dawson regards religious, and particularly spiritual, energy as the main source of cultural change. Every social culture "is at once a material way of life and a spiritual order."¹⁴² The intersection of the spiritual and the temporal, such as in the case of the Incarnation, stands at the center of the reality of the human existence. In his usual attempt to place a distance between himself and his subject, Dawson explicitly appeals to non-Christian cultures to make his argument. In the ancient civilizations of Egypt and China, as well as the Pueblo civilization in the Americas, the material and religious aspects of life are inextricably linked so that they form a single cultural organism based on this unity. Every instance of social

¹⁴² Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Meridian Books, 1948), 197; also see, Christopher Dawson, "Christian Culture Symposium, July 8-11," Harvard Divinity School, 27 May 1959, unpublished notes, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 11.

interaction was based on a spiritual foundation to which all activity was directed.¹⁴³ The architecture, traditions, laws, myths, and customs are all reflections of the divine spirit manifested in the temporal order. Nevertheless, says Dawson, cultures of such a pure composition are relatively rare throughout the course of history. Most cultures are a fusion of various sects, often coming together as the result of conquest.

The combination of disparate cultures is frequently the product of a variety of means. First, some cultures migrate into new geographical surroundings and readapt to fit the environment into which they are attempting to integrate. Dawson maintains that this is the simplest type of cultural change, but one of great importance. The shaping of modern Europe is in large part a result of this type of migration. The coming of Asiatic groups from the Steppe plains into India, and of inland groups moving to sea coasts provides for much of the movement of early peoples affecting the West in his own day.¹⁴⁴

The second form of social movement arises through the meeting of two distinct cultures, often as the result of conquest or subjugation. Sometimes the result of peaceful contact, this is the "most typical and important of all the causes of cultural change, since it sets up an organic process of fusion and change, which transforms both people and culture."¹⁴⁵ This type of cultural change is marked by several initial centuries where there is an unmistakable clash of orthodoxies; however, this is followed by a

¹⁴³ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 197.

¹⁴⁴ Dawson, "Sources of Culture Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 7; also, see Thomas Sowell, *Conquests and Cultures: An International History*, 7-9, 241-243.

¹⁴⁵ Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 8.

period of "intense cultural activity," where the union of the two cultures forms into a singular entity. While this is a period of high achievement, it is also a time of serious unrest. The violence, however, eventually calms and there is attained a stable equilibrium between the two cultures.¹⁴⁶ Unlike Toynbee, Dawson does not believe that it is possible to study these cultures until their separate cultural components can be isolated. The "higher civilizations" are usually the result of a combination of separate cultural factors, but although one of the pre-fusion cultures might possess a stronger character than its counterpart, it is not enough to dismiss the weaker "subculture as an internal proletariat," which is, by definition, a class within a society and not a constituent "culture or sub-culture within a civilization."¹⁴⁷ Every advanced culture is a compound of varied elements.

Another way of achieving change comes through the transmutation of custom by way of adopting another culture's material elements. Although Dawson sees this as a very "superficial" change, it is nevertheless one of immense importance. The spread of metals, weapons, and agricultural tools has provided the basis for many periods of cultural change. This change, Dawson cautions, is not always the path to social progress, for it is often the road to confusion, social stagnation, and cultural decay. "As a rule, to be progressive change must come from within."¹⁴⁸

In some cases, a culture develops because of its adoption of new beliefs or practices that are not necessarily material in

¹⁴⁶ Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Dawson, unpublished lecture given at the University of Exeter, 4 November 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, 1955-1962, Box 1, Folder 2.

¹⁴⁸ Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 9.

character. A change in a culture's view of reality may severely alter its operations and outlook. This is the type of change that swept through the Arabian Peninsula during the time of Mohammed, and through the west during the evangelism of St. Paul in Rome and St. Columba in the Celtic regions. Cultural transformation of this kind is more profoundly related to the intellectual and spiritual character of men, and thus more easily accomplishes change from inside the cultural organism.

The cultural achievements of new generations are built upon those of the past, and it is with extreme rarity that ideas based upon pure reason are successful in transforming the cultural outlook in a permanent way. The greatest works of art and the most influential philosophical treatises, Dawson reminds us, are the result of a succession of past accomplishments upon which new innovations are built. Reason provides the organizing force by which this process is accomplished, and the history of mankind is one continuous "process of integration, which, even though it seems to work irregularly, never ceases."¹⁴⁹ The use of reason to comprehend an objective reality, therefore, is at the core of Dawson's understanding of cultural transformation.¹⁵⁰ Our world is not a purposeless heap through which human beings must muddle in a meaningless existence. Rather, it is through our ability to understand abstract concepts, as well as real objects in a temporal matrix, that we gather information to educate us about the intelligible order of the world. This vision of reality allows us

¹⁴⁹ Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 11 July 1959, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

to comprehend the ontological order, as opposed to a subjective world of pure illusion. The increase in sophistication of the vision of reality directly corresponds to the vision of culture. Intellectual reflection on the basis of reality is key for understanding culture. Thus, it is when man came to reflect upon reality that he started to become civilized.¹⁵¹ For primitive men, like moderns, this reality was the result of a spiritual outlook that shaped the whole understanding of the external world. Dawson writes:

Every religion embodies an attitude to life and a conception of reality, and any change in these brings with it a change in the whole character of the culture, as we have seen in the transformation of ancient civilization by Christianity, or the transformation of the society of Pagan Arabia by Islam. Thus the prophet and the religious reformer, in whom a new view of life—a new revelation—becomes explicit, is perhaps the greatest of all agents of social change, even though he is himself the product of social causes and the vehicle of an ancient cultural tradition.¹⁵²

For Dawson, advances in technology have made cultural isolation impossible; thus, he searches for an underlying unity that links the historical drama of various cultures into an understandable, coherent vision. This is not an attempt to write a history of the world in the fashion of H.G. Wells or J.M. Roberts, but to understand the movement of world history as the product of some universal agent, and for Dawson, that bonding force is religion.¹⁵³ In *Christianity in East and West*, Dawson makes the important observation that between antiquity and the end of the Reformation cultures were almost wholly identified by their

¹⁵¹ Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 10.

¹⁵² Dawson, "Sources of Cultural Change," *Dynamics of World History*, 10.

¹⁵³ See, H.G. Wells, *Outline of History: Being a Plain History of the Life of Mankind* (London: Cassell and Company, 1920, 1930); and, J.M. Roberts, *A History of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995).

religious affiliation. The four major world cultures of China, India, Islam, and Christendom were all the direct product of their spiritual identities. It was not until the Reformation, and the birth of nationalism, that this began to change in any meaningful way. For the pre-modern commentator, creed was identical with culture. To leave one's religious tradition was to divorce oneself from the whole fabric of society. "The Indian who ceased to observe the laws of caste and the worship of the gods and accepted the teaching of Mohammed ceased to be a Hindu and became a Moslem." The same is true for the Moslem who converted to Christianity. He not only abandoned his religious heritage, but he departed from his whole culture.¹⁵⁴

By the end of the nineteenth-century, national identity had almost completely displaced religion as the primary source of culture. This nationalism, of course, degenerated into various ideologies that would explode by the early-twentieth century. However, upon close inspection, the observer will notice distinct similarities among these various ideologies and religious impulses. The major difference, however, is the displacement of the spiritual by the material. Ideology became a religion of its own, and thus in the modern world, a primary source of cultural energy. For Dawson, this change does not pass without serious consequences. T.S. Eliot offers the most poignant aphorism: If you do not worship God, and he is a jealous God, you may as well pay your respects to Stalin or Hitler. Thus, to Dawson, the problem is not "just that of the triumph of materialism over spirituality, brutality over truth."

¹⁵⁴ Christopher Dawson, *Christianity in East and West* (LaSalle, IL: Sherwood, Sugden & Co., 1981), 104-105.

Modern ideas about progress have brought a new crisis to the surface—the rise of a new social dynamic in which the community “aspires to be something more than the old state.” This is totalitarianism—an ideology in which the individual is completely absorbed into the social fabric of his state and retains little, if any, identity of his own.¹⁵⁵ The roots of this crisis are deep within the fabric of the Western tradition—a patrimony that is itself a developmental paradox.

Dawson’s hostile vision of totalitarianism is tempered by his sympathetic understanding of the human need for community. The necessities man fails to fulfil in his spiritual life, Dawson believed, he will search to find in other places. He has been accused of treating totalitarianism, especially if it is of a Catholic brand, with mild approbation because it is in line with his belief that religious unity is the primary need of culture. Francis O’Malley even goes so far as to argue that Dawson has a strong respect for the “cultural unity accomplished by totalitarianism.”¹⁵⁶ While Dawson did believe in religious unity, he did not believe that political regimes were necessarily the proper manifestation of this unity. In his view, a Catholic government is best, but only when it is serving the proper ends of society. A Catholic government, and to a large extent a nominally Catholic society, must not be confused with the City of God. O’Malley’s accusation is fair to the extent that he recognizes Dawson’s wish to unite Western culture under a single Christian umbrella, but he errs as a matter of degree and as

¹⁵⁵ Francis J. O’Malley, “Review: *Beyond Politics*,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3, July 1939, 348-349.

¹⁵⁶ O’Malley, “Review: *Beyond Politics*,” 349.

a matter of means. O'Malley claims that this Catholic "totalitarianism" is not organic, and is thus contrary to Dawson's own understanding of "internal" cultural change, but here he fails to identify any specific contradiction in Dawson's thought. Dawson worked for a reunification of the Christian people, but he did not, like O'Malley, confuse material and spiritual progress. In Dawson's view, a return to a universal Christendom is not an inorganic growth, but a correction presented to mend a past blunder on the part of all sides. Dawson knew that totalitarianism was not compatible with the Church, for the triumph of a "Christian totalitarianism" could not be confused with the triumph of the Cross. To him, true progress is progress of the spirit.¹⁵⁷

Dawson claimed to be an heir to medieval English scholasticism—"a theological absolutism combined with philosophical relativism."¹⁵⁸ This is not a subscription to a hardened Catholic totalitarianism, but a metaphysical understanding that presupposes that things such as ideas and concepts, "like ethics and laws are relative to culture."¹⁵⁹ He did not believe that the Catholic scholar was shackled by his faith; rather, he is given the freedom to develop philosophically within the context of a transcendent reality. Theological concepts, in this way, are separated from history and distinguished from philosophy.

For Dawson, progress represents something beyond the empty abstraction of infinite human improvement advocated by liberal

¹⁵⁷ Carl E. Purinton, "Review: *The Judgment of the Nations*," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 4, November 1943, 232-233.

¹⁵⁸ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 19 January 1957, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 9.

¹⁵⁹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 19 January 1957, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 9.

thinkers from the time of the Enlightenment. The "progress" of Abbé St Pierre, Rousseau, Condorcet, Voltaire, and Priestley, differs profoundly from the concept of progress envisioned by Dawson and his philosophical predecessors from the time of Burke. The eighteenth-century conception of progress was one of unlimited intellectual, moral, spiritual, and aesthetic improvement. The triumph of reason over tradition, of individualism over the collective good of society, and the new over the ancient—these are the things against which Dawson makes a definitive stand.

Dawson's intellectual life was consumed by defending the idea of movement in history, but he eschewed what has become known as the "cult of Progress." The similarities in thought between him and Burke are striking, especially when Burke's aphorism that change is the means of our preservation, is taken into account. Dawson does not wholly condemn the idea of progress, but he puts it into a context that fits with the larger picture of human history. With Burke, Dawson refuses to see progress as an abstract term representing a perpetual improvement of the human condition.¹⁶⁰ Even the ancient Greeks, persuaded by Aristotle, understood that the idea of infinity precludes the ability to achieve any good, for if something is infinite, there can be no ordering from top to bottom, thus, there cannot exist a higher or lower.¹⁶¹ Unyielding faith in

¹⁶⁰ Although Dawson admired Burke for his philosophical principles, his historical vision, and his treatment of the French Revolution, he remained skeptical of Burke's everyday political judgment. Burke's organic conceptions of culture are prevalent in Dawson's *Beyond Politics* and in *Judgment of the Nations*, but not in his practical politics. He finds a similar, yet increased dissatisfaction with Lord Acton. See John J. Mulloy, *Record of Conversation with Dawson*, 24 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1 of 1, Folder 2.

¹⁶¹ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 51.

the idea of progress was in some ways a regressive metaphysical endeavor and bore the weight of inherent contradiction.

Originating as a coherent ideology in the late sixteenth-century, the idea of progress has since captured and dominated culture from the time of the French Revolution through to the present. Far more influential than a regional obsession, or an isolated intellectual movement, it has "permeated the whole mind of society from the leaders of thought down to the politicians and the men of business, who would be the first to proclaim their distrust of idealism and their hostility to abstract theorizing."¹⁶² For Dawson, progress has become the "working faith" of our civilization, and like all cultures, ours possesses a religion that dominates the entire outlook of its typical attitude—the religion of Progress. Dawson sees the rationalists' doctrine of progress as having been driven by the idea that the human condition, and thus human society, is steadily improving toward some goal of temporal perfection. The view promulgated by such thinkers is predicated upon a failure to "recognize the inseparability of Reason and Tradition." For Dawson, these two forces are dependent upon one another for their legitimacy and definition. Without tradition, there can be no reason, and without reason, no perceptible recognition of tradition.¹⁶³ It is ironic, Dawson argues, that the idealistic vision of unlimited human progress was championed, not by the historians who dealt with hard historical realities and the truths of an objective existence and

¹⁶² Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 15.

¹⁶³ Christopher Dawson, "Memorandum: Dawson to Mulloy," unpublished, 11 July 1959, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

tradition, but by sociologists and political philosophers.¹⁶⁴ This inadequacy, Dawson held, cries out for the development of a more critical, and to a large degree, more sophisticated idea of progress.

To the Western thinker, Dawson argued, time is a very real concept that possesses a power to differentiate between ages. Unlike the Greeks and eastern thinkers (excepting certain Patristic Church fathers), Western man believes that time has an ultimate significance and meaning. He is not lost in a cosmic cycle of rebirth or complete chaos. There is meaning to his life, there is a point to his existence, and there is a reason for his ability to act without divine coercion. This idea is centrally embodied in the Christian idea of history whereby the Incarnation of Christ marks a specific point in history from which all other events flow. For the Western man, time, and by virtue of it, history, becomes the center of his ultimate reality.¹⁶⁵ It seems as though the rationalist philosophers were at war with this conception of history for some time, and it was only with the rise of German historiography that it was re-secured in the Western intellect.

Dawson describes the German view of history as "musical rather than mathematical." For the Germans, says Dawson, a culture is more than the artificial construction of separate persons living in a loose society. It is a "spiritual unity for which and by which its members exist."¹⁶⁶ For the German historian, especially in the wake

¹⁶⁴ See Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, and Antoine-Nicolas de Cordorcet's *Progress of the Human Mind* as broad, representative examples of social theories concerning the organization of men by non-historians.

¹⁶⁵ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 30-31.

¹⁶⁶ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 31.

of Herder, civilization ceased to be the abstraction championed by the French philosophers, and instead, it became an organic entity with roots, traditions, and moral norms.¹⁶⁷ It was with this movement that the medieval world was recognized as a period of intellectual and cultural growth, as opposed to the standard acceptance of it as a time of pure, in the view of Gibbon, barbarism and myth.

To Dawson, Spengler's thinking disguises a sinister subjectivism that undermines the concepts of moral Truth and objective cultural standards. If each civilization is a self-contained unit, constructed in a vacuum, then the standards of one culture must not be applicable to another. If this is true, then culture is purely the product of racial circumstances. Dawson believes that such a view of culture is untenable. In an answer to Spengler's closed-circuit theory of cultural development, Dawson offers the examples of Aristotle and Mohammed. While both of these figures were the product of their social circumstances, they transcended cultural and racial boundaries and achieved almost universal importance.¹⁶⁸

In order to explain the life of civilizations, it is not sufficient to possess a formula for the life-cycle of individual peoples, we must also understand the laws of cultural interaction and the causes of the rise and fall of the great cultural syncretisms, which seem to overshadow the destinies of individual peoples. Considered from this point of view, the last stage of a culture, the phase to which Herr Spengler confines the name of "Civilizations," acquires peculiar importance. It is not merely a negative period of petrification and death, as he describes it, it is the time when civilization is most open to external influence."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideas Toward a Philosophy of the History of Man*, translated by T. Churchill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1803, 1968).

¹⁶⁸ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 41.

¹⁶⁹ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 42.

One only need to look at the rise of both Oriental and Western societies to see their constant intermingling. The rise of Eastern Christianity, as detailed in Dawson's *Making of Europe*, becomes a striking example of how cultures of a distinct flavor are not the result of a purely internal development.¹⁷⁰ Gibbon is guilty of this cultural isolation in his treatment of the fall of Rome because he dismisses the rise of the Byzantine Empire as a mere footnote to the larger historical forces instead of treating it as an integrated part of cultural transmission and development. Dawson writes that "while the Latin west was gradually sinking into chaos and barbarism, in the East the Empire not only survived but became the centre of a new movement of culture."¹⁷¹ It is easy for Gibbon to ignore the importance of the Byzantine world because he implicitly alleges, through his neglect, that it was not a culture of great political or economic achievement; rather, its accomplishments were primarily in the "sphere of religion." Christianity was a world movement, transcending traditional cultures, and the spread of the "Good News" was not necessarily an empirically quantifiable entity.¹⁷²

It is necessary, Dawson argues, for historians to cease justifying a "denial of the objective reality of cultural unity." Some of Spengler's critics would have us believe that history is nothing more than a blind, subjective movement, directing us toward

¹⁷⁰ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, 99.

¹⁷¹ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, 99.

¹⁷² Dawson makes quite clear that Christianity, like humanism in later years, is not an ideology. In essence, these are both "super-ideological" in that they create ideologies as opposed to being created by them. Christopher Dawson, Lecture Given at Mainz, Germany, 1955, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 9.

a singular universal culture. In this way, historians attach labels to momentous events in the past and construct artificial periods as a method of explaining these events. In his neo-Hegelianism, Collingwood for example, defines history as a vast, single, amorphous movement. For Collingwood, materialism is a secondary part of the historical process and the movement of history is provided by a purely "spiritual movement of ideas."¹⁷³ For Dawson, to embrace a completely material or spiritual view of history is to betray the goal of true understanding. If history is an organic substance, then it must be something beyond a simple idea that is reducible to constituent elements.

In Dawson's view, cultural progress—a phenomenon inextricably linked to its material conditions—is never the passive result of geography and climate. The creative aspects of the human imagination, intermingled with the psychological and spiritual forces of religion, combine to form a dynamic that is inexplicable if expressed solely in empirical and material terms. Buckle's attempt to rationalize history along the same lines as Comte, an endeavor evidenced by his assertion of the existence of universal laws in his *History of Civilization in England*, contradicts this principle held by Dawson. Buckle deterministically holds that environmental factors, to the exclusion of most other causes, are the main reason for the development of the intellect of western man. Although Dawson would—in a sense—agree with Buckle's contention, which is similar to that of John Stuart Mill, that history should be studied from a scientific perspective, he would strongly disagree

¹⁷³ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 44.

with dismissal of free will as an agent of historical change. For Buckle, both free will and predestination are metaphysical and theological presumptions that scientific evidence is incapable of proving. Thus, history must move as the result of some quantifiable, or at least empirical, force that is universal to all cultures.¹⁷⁴ This was all rubbish to Acton whose Catholicism contradicted such an eclectic view. To Acton, as would be true of Dawson's thought, Buckle treated men as machines and not as persons created in the image and likeness of God. This allowed Buckle to group his subjects into bizarre categories that complicated any cultural understanding because of its artificial, abstract character.¹⁷⁵

A cornerstone of Dawson's understanding of progress is the idea that morals are inextricably linked to the health of any culture. Every society possesses a distinct code of behavior that is often linked to its religious heritage. For the Jews, God's command to Noah at Sinai marked the consecration of a new Covenant, and the birth of a new order. Russell Kirk argues that the Decalogue fulfilled a void in the ancient world. The Commandments, far from being an oppressive regimen, freed the Israelites from a life of perpetual slavery in sin. Citing Hesiod, Kirk declares that in a world ruled by Zeus, void of proper moral instruction, progress was impossible. Order, being the first need of a dynamic culture,

¹⁷⁴ Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (Oxford: 1857, 1926).

¹⁷⁵ Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 48-49.

was brought to the ancient world through the Mosaic law and the coming of the prophets.¹⁷⁶

This description of the foundations of ancient morality in the Hebrew world fits precisely with Dawson's understanding of the intermingling of religion and social behavior. In non-theistic cultures, it is possible to understand the code of ethics as a type of "discipline of salvation," which is a reconciliation of human events with the divine that governs the universe. This, says Dawson, is the type of moral ordering found in Buddhism, Vedantism, and to an extent, Confucianism. Furthermore, if the historian is inclined to look for systems of morality existing before the rise of the great world religions, the root of such order is almost always found in the primitive religions whose goal was to placate the vicious powers of the gods and "render them friendly."¹⁷⁷

Dawson's view holds that in a society where spirituality has been replaced with secular idealism, the progress of civilization and its relationship to morality changes into a different type of social environment. While some persons adhere to the old faith, conserving the faith and standards of their ancestors, others follow a new system based on rationalism and "a new interpretation of reality." There is, however, a third group that dominates the social spectrum, and this group follows a sort of moral pragmatism. Dawson maintains that this last group, characterized by its lust for financial gain and material comfort, adopts local tribal customs, and is potentially nationalistic to an extreme measure. This

¹⁷⁶ Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order, 4th Edition*, (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003), 27.

¹⁷⁷ Dawson, "Civilization and Morals," *Dynamics of World History*, 47.

pragmatic moralist clings to certain ethical standards leftover from his ancient faith, but these tend to be almost universal rules of conduct and of extreme nature. Among those near-universal principles of conduct, says Dawson, would be the idea that it is wrong to commit murder, steal, or engage in adultery. This was the intellectual basis of the eighteenth-century rationalists who endeavored to create a perfect society based on abstract principles of natural right, displacing natural law because of its associations with religion.¹⁷⁸ It was against this destruction of an organic religious patrimony, replaced with an ungrounded system of conceptual rights, to which Dawson directed much of his energy.

Far from being a moralist, Dawson did not hesitate to call his reader's attention to the triumphs and pitfalls of the past, and to the errors of modern technology. As Russell Hittinger writes, "whereas the moralist will examine human choices one by one, focusing upon the particular act, the cultural historian is interested in cultural habits and institutions; for these trace out the actual and imaginative bounds of men and women as social beings."¹⁷⁹ This was Dawson's task. To study the parts of a culture in microform is the mistake of the modern historian. Particularly, this is the error of those who discount the Middle Ages as a period of perpetual darkness. The historian's task, says Dawson, is not to become an expert in an isolated field, but to embrace the whole of civilization in its totality so that it can be understood as a

¹⁷⁸ Dawson, "Civilization and Morals," *Dynamics of World History*, 48-49.

¹⁷⁹ Russell Hittinger, "Christopher Dawson on Technology and the Demise of Liberalism," *Christianity and Western Civilization: Christopher Dawson's Insight--Can a culture survive the loss of its religious roots?: Papers presented at a conference sponsored by the Wethersfield Institute, 15 October 1993*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).

living structure. For Dawson, the Middle Ages represent the triumph of religion intermingling with social institutions. The value of studying this aspect of our past, good and bad together, is incalculable to the discipline of history.¹⁸⁰ Dawson does not judge the past, but he does not hesitate to judge those who make such a project their own private task.

So, against the scientific rationalism dominating the historical profession of his age, Dawson combated the "Gospel of Progress." The nineteenth-century was undoubtedly the age of unbridled optimism. Faith in God was replaced by a faith in man predicated upon the concept of almost universal benevolence. By the close of Queen Victoria's reign, some began to express doubts in the coherence of this pseudo-religion, but, by 1914, no one except for the most partisan liberal, would argue that man does not possess a fully benign nature. The Catholic belief in the fallibility of man—the doctrine of original sin—became a very real part of everyday life throughout the early years of the twentieth century. It is said that Pope Leo XIII had a dream in which one century would be a period of great bloodlust and unprecedented barbarism. If he had lived another decade, the author of *Rerum novarum* would have witnessed the materialization of his nightmare in the first of its many forms.

The Great War destroyed the belief in the unyielding betterment of human society, but the foundations of this collapse can be traced to much earlier sources. Aside from the flimsy grounds upon which the theory of progress is based, unforeseen world

¹⁸⁰ Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954, 1959), 53.

events stood as barriers to accepting this secular religion *de facto*. The French Revolution, with all of its violence and disorder, is a penetrating example of the raw selfishness and animalistic behavior intrinsic to the human being. To Dawson, the intellectual forces behind the eruption of 1789 possessed an almost divine power, and it was this ability to seize the intellect and spirituality of the masses that caused it to become a powerful movement. Revolutionaries, dogmatically armed and possessed of a frail human nature, massacred the ancient culture of France and maimed its Catholic tradition. In many ways, the revolution was not merely a political or economic revolt, but a revolt against the Roman Church and its medieval patrimony. Moving away from the methodical learning of the Schoolmen, the elevation of state powers over those of the Church, and the growing faith in the perfectibility of the human condition—these are the most significant factors that contributed to the rebellion against Christendom, an event largely orchestrated by petty nobles and middle-class families. Contempt for order, and hostility toward the religion that secured it, lay at the foundation of the revolutionary cause. In Dawson's view, the material circumstances of pre-revolutionary France are only one aspect of the cause of revolt, as there were other important spiritual and psychological variables that need serious consideration as well. This failure, he maintains, to view the events in late eighteenth-century France in terms of spiritual, as well as economic and political causes, has been a significant flaw in the corpus of historical literature since the time of the Revolution.

For Dawson, the material advances of civilization are only a part of the total picture, which if fragmented by the historian in his studies, will be a mere caricature of the truth. In the case of the revolutionary spirit of Europe during the early-modern period, we see a transformation occurring that is not only material and social, but spiritual as well.¹⁸¹ The scientific advances of Newton were especially important to the modern observer, a stark contrast to the world emerging from the medieval order. Nevertheless, these scientific discoveries were an integral part of the social culture from which they arose, for man is more than the sum of biology and logic. Breaking down the constituent parts of nature's inner-workings helped modern man to understand the world around him, but with his growing mastery of this world, he became more skeptical of the Church, spirituality, and God.

The empirical knowledge gained from scientific discovery caused a great revolt against the Christian understanding of the world. Few historians capture this sentiment more than Edward Gibbon, the perpetual secularist and last of the true Romans, in a famous passage from his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. For Gibbon, the miracles of the primitive Church, "after obtaining the sanction of the ages," had become the object of public ridicule. Gibbon saw the succession of bishops, popes, and saints, and the miracles often attached to them, as a chain that needed to be broken, so that "the progress of superstition," as he called it,

¹⁸¹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, c.1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1.

would be displaced by a skepticism brought about by rationality grounded in empirical thought.¹⁸²

While the revolution that affected Europe during this time, beginning in the Renaissance and Reformation, was of political, scientific, and economic origin, none of these things, Dawson maintains, was the direct cause of the others. Dawson argues that these were parallel movements rooted in the "organic process of change which has transformed western society and the western mind during the modern age."¹⁸³ When we speak of Europe in the modern age, Dawson warns, we largely mean by that term a geographic region and attach to it a generic sense of civilization. More realistically, however, if we are to understand the idea of progress in the West, it is necessary to understand what truly constitutes Europe in the cultural sense.¹⁸⁴ Here is where Dawson's concept of Europe as an organic principle, most accurately depicted as a spiritual endeavor, similar to that of medieval Christendom, is placed into the structure of his historical scholarship.¹⁸⁵

Dawson strongly believed that great civilizations must not concern themselves with social progress in the abstract, but instead, they must focus on the historical realities of the great persons who partake in the construction of its cultural achievements. This is an assumption that is questioned by Werner

¹⁸² Edward Gibbon, "Progress of Superstition," from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1995), 152-153.

¹⁸³ Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, with an introduction by Arnold J. Toynbee (New York: New York University Press, 1972), 4.

¹⁸⁴ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

¹⁸⁵ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*. Also see, Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture: Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (New York: Doubleday, 1950).

Stark when dealing with Dawson's assertion that the Carolingian empire was destroyed as the result of the failure of Charlemagne's heirs, when other important factors also come into account.¹⁸⁶ In this case, the "great-man" conception of history is undermined by external circumstances such as the reduced threat of a Saracen invasion that no longer forced Europe into a defensive unity, leading to the demise of a centralized political authority. The criticism, though valid to a degree, fails to understand the extent to which a ruler—or a peasant—can exert immeasurable influence over a culture. If the Catholic view of history, as understood by Dawson, in which God can directly intervene in daily affairs is true, then God could use individual characters as vehicles of change. These people are the "greats" who have an enormous impact on national, and on a deeper level, cultural development.

"Culture is essentially a growth, and it is a whole. It cannot be constructed artificially, nor can it be divided."¹⁸⁷ Cultures, Dawson maintains, are living organisms at every level of their material achievement, and at every level of their social dynamic. It is because every culture produces its own type of men, as shown by its art, literature, and philosophy, that we can trace the decline of a particular civilization through its failure to live up to its own ends. The art and literature of a culture are the expressions of that people. They are not abstractions, but rather, they are integrated parts of a people living in communion with the organic culture. "When the social tradition is broken," writes

¹⁸⁶ Werner Stark, "Review: *The Formation of Christendom*," *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 28, Issue 3, Fall 1967, 172-173.

¹⁸⁷ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 60.

Dawson, "when there is a deliberate choice of styles, as in a modern building contract, true style ceases—there is death."¹⁸⁸

How, then, can a culture maintain any form of dynamism if deliberate change is a means to certain death? The change must not be a deliberate, sudden break with the old system. This change must have a direct relationship with the "internal vital development" of a culture, or it is not change, but the end of that culture. A society is the sum of its changes, but when a change is sudden and "external," that society ceases to exist, and a new culture emerges. This is the principal difference between the ideology of progress and organic cultural transformation.

Dawson appeals to the "sudden blighting" of Hellenic civilization as an example. Challenging Gilbert Murray's contention that the end of Hellenic culture was due to a "loss of nerve," Dawson argues that the causes are significantly deeper. He writes:

Hellenic civilization collapsed not by a failure of nerve but by the failure of life. When Hellenic Science was in full flower, the life of the Hellenic world withered from below, and underneath the surface of brilliance of philosophy and literature the sources of the life of the people were drying up.¹⁸⁹

The spirit of the culture, while appearing to be alive with intellectual and scientific energy, was draining as a result of a devouring cosmopolitan that consumed that ancient people. Traditional institutions were debased, and a country life lived in conjunction with the ancient homeland was traded for a disconnected, new brand of urbanism. Rome would suffer the same fate as its population became more distant from its cultural roots, tempted by

¹⁸⁸ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 60-61.

¹⁸⁹ Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 63.

the appeal of city life and the material comforts such an existence offered. Dawson's dislike of urban society is visible in his convincing arguments that culture needs to be in firm touch with its origins, none of which, in the panorama of the world's major civilizations, is rooted in the city. He does believe that ancient and medieval cities were a dynamic influence on culture, such as those of medieval England, but when they mutated principally into economic centers—as opposed to seats of religion—they became a cultural drain.¹⁹⁰ Dawson's perception that urban society fails to be a force of vibrancy and cultural renewal is the result, it seems, of their unique character as multicultural and materialist centers. A culture, by its definition, is something unified by its own nature, and cities, by their own definition, are the negation of such a unity. This does not necessitate that cities must be centers of cultural decay, but they can hasten a culture's demise at a much more expedient pace than a rural population. Dawson's own preference for rural life is tempered by his understanding of the limitations such a life entails. His own relocation from the remote Hartlington Hall in Yorkshire to the Oxford suburbs as a matter of practicality demonstrates the extent to which cities are an important part of some cultures and their conservation, even to a country-dweller like Dawson. Rome, as a republic and as an empire, could never have attained its greatness without the rise of a specific urban center that was eventually a factor in its own demise. Dawson's negative view of cities is tempered by a paradoxical knowledge that these places are necessary to cultural

¹⁹⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 9 January 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

development.¹⁹¹ In this way, he tacitly recognizes that cities have a role, much like change itself, in the preservation of culture, even though it is the character of urban society that is possibly culture's greatest nemesis. To this dilemma, Dawson gives no conclusive response except to sound a note of caution. His view of urban life is one of uneasy acceptance.

It is often remarked that cities are the seat of a civilization's cultural assets, but for Dawson, such an idea is an optimistic assumption lacking in both intellectual merit and historical justification. This is especially true when city life becomes synonymous with material culture. It is possible, and history has shown it to be the repetitive paradox of apparently thriving cultures, those periods of intellectual progress and scientific expansion are often times of "vital decline." A culture can appear vibrant and thriving on the outside, but if its inner-dynamic is failing, little hope remains for its survival. For Dawson, the "fate of the Hellenic world is a warning to us that the higher and the more intellectually advanced civilizations of the West may be inferior in point of survival value to the more rudimentary Oriental cultures."¹⁹²

Dawson's role as a historian of culture requires that he do more than provide an historical framework to critique the shortcomings of progress. After all, Dawson is very much among those historians who believe that their craft is only good insofar as it is done with a sense of duty to evaluate the past with a

¹⁹¹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 9 August 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

¹⁹² Dawson, "Progress and Decay," *Dynamics of World History*, 63.

dispassionate eye. He sees that progress is the natural consequence of a culture that worships at the altar of rationalism, but this false deity is not the result of an unbridled liberalism, although liberalism is the vehicle by which the true culprit travels. Perhaps the most accurate depiction of Dawson's view of progress is captured in his indictment of technology, not as an abstract entity, but as an ideology that is the source of what C.S. Lewis called the "abolition of man."

In an essay on "The World Crisis and the English Tradition," Dawson maintains that there has never been a civilization that has been able to successfully "resist the destructive effect of urban and bureaucratic centralization." For Dawson, cities are the "grave of culture," for they are not a part of man's organic growth, but instead, are artificial creations that are centers of materialism.¹⁹³ Few men, however, find complete satisfaction in ends which are achieved by complete self-indulgence. The pure materialist is as uncommon as the pure mystic, because most men have some sense of a spiritual world beyond their immediate control, and more so, beyond their spectrum of knowledge.¹⁹⁴ The confusion between tools which help man to achieve his proper ends as a human being, and the actual replacing of man with those tools, is much of what Dawson sees as the problem with the religion of progress.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Dawson, "The World Crisis and the English Tradition," *Dynamics of World History*, 236.

¹⁹⁴ Dawson, "Stages in Mankind's Spiritual Experience," *Dynamics of World History*, 179.

¹⁹⁵ It must be noted that Dawson does see some merit to urban life, especially in the part cities played in the development of medieval culture. For further reference, please see Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 162-163.

While Dawson was intent on bruising liberal progressivism, he refused to fully condemn liberal institutions and hoped never to see the demise of the liberal tradition. This tradition was, he maintained, an important part of the western patrimony, and not necessarily an enemy to it. It is part of the West's organic heritage, but like technology, liberal ideology can be a vehicle of immense cultural destruction as easily as it can be the bearer of a rejuvenating spirit. Liberalism should be, for Dawson, an expression of the older Christian humanist tradition, and not necessarily an enemy to the good order of a civilized people. His hesitations about it are fed by his perception of the West being seduced by a ravenous zeal for technological advancement, and oftentimes, this advancement is in the form of a mechanization of the human spirit. The attempt to find universal laws that govern human actions, as opposed to the Christian doctrine of Free Will, is the heart of the scientism that has become the creed of the modernity. Faith in God has given way to faith in man's ability to overcome nature, to transcend the limits of our world, and to declare ourselves supreme over any empirically intangible force.

Under liberalism, God was questioned; in the scientifically planned, progressive society, the god became technology itself. In the liberal world, God retained a place in the sphere of morals, but in modernity, the world finds it inconceivable that anything greater than its material-self can exist. "The emphasis today," Dawson wrote in his 1947 Gifford Lectures, "is no longer on Western ideas but rather on the Western scientific techniques which provide the common framework of human existence and on the basis of which a new

scientific world civilization is being formed."¹⁹⁶ Here it is the force of positive liberalism that allows the scientific spirit to triumph. In an effort to create a universal understanding, the scientific tradition has created a banal, uniform world, in which moral progress and cultural stasis are confused, and the continuity of a dynamic culture is essentially defeated. For the scientific order to claim victory, the traditional pillars of the Western order needed to be eliminated, sometimes by ideological force, other times by raw firepower, and often by a combination of the two.¹⁹⁷ Dawson writes:

The scientific revolution has been almost inseparable from movements of social and political revolution and with a far-reaching secularization of social life which produces a new type of conflict between religion and culture. We see a typical example of this in the Russian Revolution and the twenty years of acute anti-religious conflict which followed it, but this instance is far from being unique, since we see the same process at work in the French Revolution and in many of the European revolutions of the nineteenth century, as well as in the twentieth century revolutions in Turkey and China. The result of these tendencies has been to produce a wider, more intense and more complete secularization of culture than the world has ever known.¹⁹⁸

To Dawson, the religion of progress now reigns supreme, and our culture, divorced from its organic faith, morals, and traditions, fades in meaning and in its ability to maintain order in the soul, and consequently, order in the commonwealth. Progressive, scientific culture is "devoid of all positive spiritual content," and it possesses such a universal aim that it is no longer grounded in the western tradition, and is instead, a morally neutral force.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 213.

¹⁹⁷ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 214.

¹⁹⁸ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 214.

¹⁹⁹ This is in contrast to a belief in natural law grounded in the Christian tradition. See Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 25-28 July 1955, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

Oftentimes, technological advances, divorced from the moral principles of western orthodoxy, become vehicles for mass executions and weapons of war, and not the panaceas envisioned by optimistic Utopians. One only need to look at pre-1945 Japan, the former Soviet Union, and the advanced nuclear arsenals of third-world nations that fail to feed their own people, to see the inherent danger. For Dawson, a culture based on technology is not a culture at all, as it has no basis in the spiritual foundations of society. There is, he says, a limit to the progress that science produces "detached from spiritual aims and moral values."²⁰⁰ Once this line is crossed, there is an unavoidable nihilism that is itself repugnant to the human spirit. This is why the ordinary man is skeptical of wholesale progress, and must remain rooted in his organic past.²⁰¹

III

Dawson's work elucidates both his support and skepticism of progress as a term of cultural significance. This paradox is possible because Dawson sees the unique position the doctrine of progress occupies in the West, but he is careful not to succumb to the overwhelming temptation to place it center-stage. Since the time of Abbe Saint-Pierre, the dynamism of Western culture has been rooted in the idea of a historical progress, but this concept is only a constituent element of the Western tradition, and the historical foundations of the West are much deeper than the ideologies that materialized in the seventeenth-century. Dawson's

²⁰⁰ Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 215.

²⁰¹ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 February 1955, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 5.

conception of progress is made more lucid by seeing how he considered the shaping of Western culture from the time of the ancients to the present.

Christianity chastened the classical concept of historical repetition because history became an apocalyptic enterprise with the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. Although not universally accepted as the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth nonetheless provides a center to history because of the immense impact his life had on the development of culture in both the East and West. For the believer, however, this relationship between God and man, Heaven and earth, and time and eternity, attained special meaning with the coming of God who was at once human and divine. The coming of Christianity is not the story of man's fall—it is the story of man's attempt to rise to the kingdom of heaven. For Dawson, this means understanding our role in the temporal world, and our willingness to subordinate our own wills to the will of God.

Dawson does not believe the rationalist's entirely secular vision to be a viable position, and as a consequence, the idea of progress becomes a formidable conundrum. Although religion was, for the thinkers of the Enlightenment, an unimportant, and indeed, a destructive force, their reaction to earlier ages shows a willingness to ignore the historical record in an effort to enact their dogmatic ideological systems. The martyrdom of saints, the murders of young princes, regicide at the hands of fanatic mobs, and the countless wars between different peoples shows just how untenable the idea of progress as a law of constant succession truly is. The *philosophes*, however, believed that progress was not a

linear or gradual progression, but rather, they conceived it as something that would be immediately thrust upon society in one instant.²⁰² It was the enlightened philosopher, acting in the interests of the people, by which this progress would occur.

Dawson mounts a powerful defense against progressive historicism, but he fails to address Thomistic thought in any serious manner, and although Aquinas was not particularly concerned with history, his ideas on development are, nonetheless, entirely relevant. Aquinas primarily appears in Dawson's work as a historical figure, and not a commentator on history itself.²⁰³ Dawson does not ignore Aquinas, but he is not a prominent fixture at any point in his work beyond matters of theology.²⁰⁴ Aquinas's understanding of development, as an abstract idea that includes the material world, is that things in nature proceed from being simple to being complex. In nature, those things that are most complex seem to be the most perfect and complete. Thus, for Aquinas, the mind of man must proceed from the simple to the complex, and from the imperfect to the perfect. This logic, it could be argued, justifies the Enlightenment idea of progress; however, upon close inspection, the opposite is true. Aquinas's "progress" is not a fixed-law, but a description of the value of things as measured by their satisfaction of certain ends. To Aquinas, progress is a function of teleology, and for the human being, much of this

²⁰² Condorcet's "9th Epoch" is representative of this type of thinking. This thought was a major source of inspiration to the leaders of the French Revolution in 1789.

²⁰³ For instance, see *Progress and Religion*, pp. 136-137, where Dawson uses Aquinas as an analogy.

²⁰⁴ Not to be confused with theology in the sense of a "theology of history." Here the term is used to describe theology as it relates to metaphysical questions regarding the nature of God.

progress is tied to morality, and specifically for the Christian, to his relationship with God. The language here must be understood in terms of Progress as an immutable law versus progress as something freely-chosen by men in search of morality and guided by something deeper than vanity.

Dawson conceived Thomistic thought to be an inadequate understanding of reality because of its abstract, unhistorical nature—a worldview at odds with his own. His differences with Jacques Maritain are largely concerned with educational reforms that place Thomistic thought at the center of undergraduate education, while Dawson wanted to introduce a specific type of "great-books" program that included a wide-range of classical, as well as religious texts, to spark an almost devotional, rather than intellectual, interest among his students.²⁰⁵ Through such methods, Dawson believed, students would come to understand the unity of society—Western and non-Western—through experiencing the vibrancy of an actual culture.²⁰⁶ To Aquinas and the high-medieval thinkers, truth was "encapsulated in particular forms once and for all," while Dawson, as a historian, "was interested in tracing its changing embodiments over time."²⁰⁷ Such a view shapes Dawson's conception of progress as mystery that will only be revealed at the end of time. Dawson did not believe, it must be observed, that a fundamental contradiction existed between Thomism and the cultural view of history.²⁰⁸ Accordingly, "the importance of secular history

²⁰⁵ N.R. Tempest, "Review: *The Crisis of Western Education*," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, May 1962, 206-207.

²⁰⁶ Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," *The American Scholar*, 117.

²⁰⁷ Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," *The American Scholar*, 117-118.

²⁰⁸ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 30 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

decreases in direct proportion to the intensity of man's concern with God and himself."²⁰⁹ In this understanding of history, progress becomes distinct from any conception of secular idealism and is only measurable in relation to God, and its ends are found in the eternal. To Dawson, John Dewey missed the point in his understanding of progress as a steady march toward democracy. While Dewey and the pragmatists were very skeptical of teleological thinking, they believed that society would ultimately prevail as a sort of unified intellect in which all minds would pool intelligence, and thus, create the ideal, "democratic mind."²¹⁰ In Dawson's vision, these views were a misunderstanding of ends. He long believed that Aquinas's metaphysical emphasis did much to damage the Hebrew understanding of history that is so fundamental to Christianity, and using the "historiographical tools that Augustine himself completely lacked, Dawson brings the theme of the two cities into the midst of contemporary historical understanding."²¹¹

To Enlightenment thinkers and their heirs, Dawson believed, progress was not a moral term, but in this he is somewhat imprecise, and the criticism needs elucidation. Philosophers such as Condorcet surely believed their actions to possess a moral end, but for Dawson, these ends were not founded upon anything more than theoretical ideas of right and wrong. Without an informing guide, these principles became the dogmatic teachings of a religion founded upon abstraction and self-righteousness. No matter how unaffected

²⁰⁹ E. Harris Harbison, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," *Church History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 1952, 100. Originally delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, 30 December 1951.

²¹⁰ Leo R. Ward, "Educational Crisis: Cultural Crisis," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 4, October 1961, 532-533.

²¹¹ Roger L. Shinn, "Review: *The Dynamics of World History*," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January 1958, 70-71.

by a "higher authority" these moral ideals may have been, the progressives nevertheless believed that they were advancing humanity and an objectively rational standard of living. Dawson's understanding of morals as something intimately connected to a religious heritage makes it impossible for him to accept the idea of a "rationalist morality," and this accounts for his lack of clarity in this instance. His general point that religion and morality are closely bound, however, remains unharmed by admitting that the rationalists may have *believed* their actions to be aimed at a supposed standard of moral excellence.

It can be argued, of course, that progress is a natural, even inevitable part of human affairs. Thomas More's *Utopia* possesses this spirit, and although it is sometimes read as a treatise on the development of society, it is probably more accurate to view it as a reflection on the development of the soul.²¹² Either way, at the very least, it forces us to draw a distinction between two types of progress: material and spiritual. Spiritual progress is unique because it cannot be quantified, nor can it be equated with "progressive" as an adjective of social improvement. Spiritual progress, then, becomes the cultivation of the soul and its relationship with God. Of course, this type of progress becomes manifested in a variety of social circumstances, but it is not an abstract moral system like the ones advocated by philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo.²¹³ For Dawson, however, some of the

²¹² Paul Turner's introduction to Thomas More's, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 10-11.

²¹³ See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976), and *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1976), pp. 21-23. Also, see David Ricardo, *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo* ed. Piero Sraffa (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), pp.273-275.

most significant achievements in human history were the product of material failure, and some of the greatest long-term failures have been the result of immediate material success. Dawson's understanding of the limits of progress are informed by this spirit of the limits of the corporeal world as something by which metahistorical judgements are not easily rendered. In this light, progress becomes a term devoid of almost any meaning because of its abstract nature. Progress is limited, not just in the strict sense of its describing forward momentum, but in its application to different circumstances as well.

Defining the limits of progress is a principal task of Dawson's because progress has become the foundation of secular thought that diminishes the unifying bonds of culture. The decline of spirituality, coupled with a rise of materialism from the end of the Middle Ages, is a function of the idea of progress as a temporal project that is disconnected from the higher realities of the universe. In Dawson's view, and it is a fairly logical one, such an understanding reduces historical explanations to an isolated caricature of half-truths. If history is something that grapples to understand man's existence, it cannot simply discount his spiritual beliefs, nor can it displace the influence of his religious character on the development of morality.

The limits of progress became increasingly pronounced in the early-nineteenth century when the very concept of progress as a law of history was challenged by sombre social circumstances, a realization of the horrors produced by the Reign of Terror, and the rise of Napoleon. Skeptics of progress, nevertheless, did not

completely abandon faith in the old system, but they began to understand that progress was not necessarily something that occurred as the passive product of time's progression. Chateaubriand's observation that when men lose their faith in God they begin to have political doubts becomes exceptionally clear around the turn of the nineteenth-century when he wrote his *Essay on Revolutions*, and this reflects the widespread doubts expressed by an entire generation raised in the wake of almost unprecedented civil unrest since the fall of Rome.²¹⁴

The scientific spirit that Dawson lauds in his essays on sociology and anthropology provides an almost paradoxical view of the social sciences and their impact on history. Buckle's approach differs from Dawson's methodology in that Dawson demands the presence of free will in his analysis, and as a Catholic, predestination is seen as a theological conundrum that is both unsubstantiated by logic, and incompatible with the Roman conception of Christology. Dawson does not accept the idea that history is trapped in a cycle, bound to a restrictive process, and devoid of any means of escape. Nevertheless, in his attempt to build a "realist" view of history, Dawson finds certain recurring qualities in the dynamics of world history that leads him to subscribe to a form of metahistory, of which religion is the keystone. Unlike C.S. Lewis, who calls the philosophy of history a "pseudo-science," Dawson, understands history as a discipline containing a certain degree of universality.

²¹⁴ F.A. de Chateaubriand, *An Historical, Political, and Moral Essay on Revolutions, Ancient and Modern* (London: Henry Colburn, 1815), 380.

Martin D'Arcy conceives Lewis's position to be that there are many legitimate objects that the historian can study, but that when he attempts to systematize a universal dynamic process by virtue of natural powers, or to discover an "inner meaning in the historical process," he becomes a historicist.²¹⁵ The attempt to receive from history conclusions that are not historical, and are many times abstract models, is an error of historicism in Lewis's sense of the term (which also resembles Popper's). Lewis's inaugural lecture at Cambridge, *De Descriptione Temporum* was largely an attack on historicism. He even goes so far as to call himself a "desperate skeptic," and decries the ability to know whether or not "the human tragi-comedy is now in Act I or Act V, whether our present disorders are those of infancy or old age."²¹⁶ His view of the limits of history is an indictment of the looseness with which the modern historian, and most notably those employing methods of quantification and "facts," construct grandiose theories, which are, after all, mere conjecture. This is the primary objection Dawson has to the way sociological research is conducted today. Understanding fully that man is an active participant in history, with Herbert Butterfield, Lewis frowns upon the arrogance of historians who try to stand on a pedestal and view the entire past from their modern positions of relative comfort. Lewis writes:

Between different ages there is no impartial judge on earth, for no one stands outside the historical process; and, of course, no one is so completely enslaved to it as those who take our own age to be not one more period but a final and

²¹⁵ Martin Cyril D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), 159.

²¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," Cambridge Professorial Lecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

permanent platform from which we can see all other ages objectively.²¹⁷

This does not indicate that Lewis wants historians to give up the conversation about historical understanding; ultimately, he is arguing against the presupposition that *a priori* historical arguments can be made, and furthermore, he denounces the idea that grand, dogmatic generalizations about trends in history are the proper subject of the historian. D'Arcy objected to this notion, and Dawson would probably have agreed with him, on several grounds. Although Dawson questions whether there is indeed such a thing as the "philosophy of history," he gives the existence of historical theory more credit than Lewis. Dawson and Lewis agree that there is something deeper in history than the mundane facts that could be found in a chronicle, but they differ in degree to the extent to which each conceives history as containing larger truths. Lewis's mildly-positivist position is simpler in that he denies that we can derive from history any sense of understanding of the inner-workings of human affairs. Dawson's understanding of the historical character of Christianity, however, forces him to accept a more sophisticated, metahistorical view. Lewis broadly accuses anyone who attempts to find meaning in history of being a historicist, but in Dawson, there is an equilibrium, which allows for truths to be uncovered, while not creating a sense of inevitability, circularity, or inescapable pattern. To some degree, Lewis followed Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield, who, on Christian grounds, believed that history is too complex and unique to be understood through even

²¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harvest Books, 1958, 1964).

the "profoundest philosophies of history."²¹⁸ Niebuhr, however, sides with Dawson on this matter because he does not reduce historical understanding to a function of metaphysics, and thus, believes in the viability of a "theology of history." For Butterfield, sounding much like Dawson, the "understanding of the past is not so easy as it is sometimes made to appear."²¹⁹ D'Arcy warns, in agreement with Dawson, that failing to look beyond the facts of history to find an inner meaning might lead the historian down the path of positivism.²²⁰ Karl Popper's insistence that history remain free of philosophical questions is laden with such implications.²²¹

If the positivism of Popper and his school is a valid lens by which to view the past, then it is impossible, D'Arcy maintains, to include religious or moral judgments as a valid part of historical inquiry. If religion and morals are a part of history, a point thoroughly argued by Dawson, then it is impossible to adopt this view. St. Augustine, who fits Lewis's definition of a historicist because of his conclusion that Rome "suffered the fate it deserves because of its failure in morals," bases his arguments on exactly the type of evidence that would exclude him from the label of historicist, chiefly, those arising from religion and ethics.²²² Again, morality becomes the cornerstone of historical understanding and a foundational element of progress in its most positive sense.

²¹⁸ E. Harris Harrison, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," 100-101.

²¹⁹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: 1951), 131-132.

²²⁰ D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred*, 161-162.

²²¹ Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1963), 340.

²²² D'Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred*, 162.

The changing face of the temporal order is only apparently due to mechanical, universal forces in Dawson's worldview. Although it may seem as if change, and indeed material progress, is sometimes inevitable, these changes are in fact the result of both human creativity and anonymous forces.

This vast transformation of human life is not due to external causes, although it may seem as universal and impersonal as the forces of nature. It is a result of the creative activity of the human minds and wills: not of human mind in the abstract, but of the mind and will of concrete personalities living in a definite social environment and working in and through a definite historical tradition. For this world revolution, universal as it is in its effects, is not universal in its origins. It has its source in a particular society and a particular civilization and it has spread outward from this centre by cultural expansion and diffusion instead of by a process of independent parallel development according to the old evolutionary conception of the law of Progress.²²³

While the revolution that affected Europe during the late eighteenth-century, with roots in both the Renaissance and Reformation, was of political, scientific, and economic origin, none of these things was the direct cause of the others. Dawson argues that these were parallel movements rooted in the "organic process of change which has transformed western society and the western mind during the modern age."²²⁴ When we speak of Europe in the modern age, Dawson warns, we largely mean by that term a geographic region and attach to it a generic sense of civilization. More realistically, however, if we are to understand the idea of progress in the west, it is necessary to understand what truly constitutes Europe in the cultural sense.²²⁵ Here is where Dawson's concept of

²²³ Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, 3.

²²⁴ Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, 4.

²²⁵ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 11 September 1956, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

Europe as an organic principle is placed into the structure of his historical scholarship.²²⁶

Turning again to the commentary of Russell Hittinger, it becomes clear that liberalism is not the problem Dawson has with modernity.²²⁷ In fact, it is fairly obvious that the liberalism of Burke, Smith, Tocqueville, Macaulay, Acton, and Dawson is not a betrayal of western orthodoxy, but a reaffirmation of it through a program of reconciling the organic culture with the new energy required to keep it from stagnating. Although the liberal tradition—which in Dawson's view only reigned triumphant for a little over a century—can be a devouring conflagration, it is not the root of cultural demise.²²⁸ It is the planned society which seeks to achieve its ends by means of a steadily advancing technological apparatus that threatens the stability of culture.²²⁹ Here, Dawson fits well with other contemporary critics of modernity such as F.A. Hayek, and even more strikingly, Wilhelm Roepke, whose *A Humane Economy* is a warning against this type of cultural organization.²³⁰ The industrial world of Eliot's *Wasteland*, planned, mechanical, emotionless, and self-serving, is what the techno-obsessed society must expect. As Professor Hittinger warns, however, we must not be quick to judge all technology as the path to our eminent doom. It isn't necessary for the Catholic thinker to throw away his microwave

²²⁶ See, Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture: Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (New York: Doubleday, 1950).

²²⁷ Russell Hittinger, "Christopher Dawson on Technology and the Demise of Liberalism," *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 243-264.

²²⁸ Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 113.

²²⁹ Christopher Dawson, *America and the Secularization of Modern Culture* (Houston: University of St Thomas, 1960), 10.

²³⁰ See F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, with Introduction by Milton Friedman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); also, see Wilhelm Roepke, *The Humane Economy* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998).

along with contraceptives.²³¹ The crux of any technological dilemma is the way in which our new methods and tools are employed. Here enters the role of morality in cultural progress.

While Hittinger is well-grounded in arguing that Dawson's primary concern is the burgeoning faith in material progress as it is expressed in an ideology of technology, we must approach such an understanding with considerable caution. Technology is a constant problem for traditional orthodoxy, no matter the level of its sophistication, because it often bursts onto the cultural scene with immense power. Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* shows how advances in technology often mean a shift in the paradigmatic structure of an established society.²³² Nevertheless, it is Dawson's view that culture is an organic unity, firmly planted in the soil of a primeval way of life. When the paradigm shifts, as Kuhn maintains it does, then culture, as Dawson understands it, dies. Although technology is given a means of empowerment through liberalism, it is necessary to see the corrosive effects—culturally—of a liberal system.

Dawson's conception of progress is ultimately a pessimistic understanding because it is often conceived as being exclusively material. To Dawson, Progress is an illegitimate, secular religion that is based on neither spiritual nor qualitative factors, but is instead an abstract ideology grounded in a techno-scientific view of history, which is itself grounded in rationalist ideas first given complete expression in the seventeenth-century. Dawson, with

²³¹ Hittinger, "Christopher Dawson on Technology and the Demise of Liberalism," 258.

²³² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Pegúy, argues that the passing of a religion—and this includes its replacement with a secular ideology—“is not a sign of progress, but a token of social decay.”²³³ The spiritual dynamics of a culture are, in Dawson’s view, the cornerstone of a healthy social order—for we cannot expect to possess order in the commonwealth if we lack order in the soul.

Dawson’s importance as a historian is linked to his defense of religion as the driving force of history. When the spirituality of a culture erodes to the point that it is an empty representation of its former self, that culture necessarily becomes something different from what it was when it possessed an active spiritual life.²³⁴ While some of the material facts of Dawson’s scholarship have been adjusted with the findings of new research, his main thesis has found some support by the same methods. As Gerald Russello writes:

Dawson’s insights into the importance of religion in the history of culture have been vindicated by recent empirical research, which has largely refuted the “secularisation” thesis of social theory. The contemporary value of Dawson’s work lies in his recognition of the continuing importance and influence of the religious impulse in the postmodern age, and its enduring ability to shape culture, even when diverted into what Dawson saw as pseudo-religions, such as consumerism.²³⁵

Akin to the materialists’ consumerism, progress became, for Dawson, the genuine spiritual dynamic of culture led by false prophets, and fed by false hope. Thus, for Dawson, progress as an ideology represents the decline of culture, and that position alone justifies his claim that progress is an inarticulate abstraction—although

²³³ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 181.

²³⁴ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 27 August 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

²³⁵ Gerald Russello, “Christopher Dawson (1889–1970),” in *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* eds. Bruce Frohnen, Jeremy Beer, & Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 220.

seemingly benign—that carries heavy cultural burdens and questionable intellectual merit.

The question has been raised whether Dawson's view of history is cyclical as a result of his rejection of indiscriminate progressivism. The conspicuous trend of turning away from linear conceptions of progress that were made popular by Comte and Spencer has resulted in a "re-emergence of cyclical and 'tirelessly undulating' theories of cultural dynamics."²³⁶ Although Dawson believed that cultures go through periods of growth, progress, and maturity, he did not adhere to any specific, wholesale theory of cycles. He did believe that there was a cyclical aspect to culture, but he readily admitted that the scientific knowledge of such cycles remained unknown.²³⁷ His belief was that many cultures go through similar stages of development because of certain constants in human nature and in environment.

Furthermore, it must be asked whether or not Dawson understands the traditional problems of history since the time of Augustine: progress, conceptions of time, human nature, and divine judgment.²³⁸ Those who would accuse Dawson of being antiquated in method and in scope fail to acknowledge that he, like Augustine, is concerned not just with the "why" of history, but with the "when" and "how."²³⁹ He combines the qualities of a medieval chronicler with those of a scrupulous, modern historian. This, combined with

²³⁶ George F. Fitzgibbon, "The Cyclical Theory of Christopher Dawson," *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 34.

²³⁷ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 28 December 1951, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

²³⁸ E. Harris Harbison, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," *Church History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 1952, 102. First delivered as a lecture at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, 30 December 1951.

²³⁹ E. Harris Harbison, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," 106.

his carefully articulated cyclical view, brings another question to the surface: is Dawson an eschatological thinker?

This is perhaps the most crucial question regarding his understanding of progress if it is to be considered as a spiritual endeavor. To Dawson, with his spiritually vibrant character and morally cognizant mind, progress cannot be measured in material terms—thus, in his view, the scientific method is useless to determine whether or not something is ultimately “progressive.” Progress as an ideology, though, is not so easily dismissed. Dawson’s thinking is teleological, but it is not historicist—his ends are not of this world, but they provide meaning and context for it. The Christian view of history, and consequently of progress, is concerned with the “contemplation of the divine interposition in time,” and is supernatural in character.²⁴⁰ The Christian view—similarly to the traditional humanist—is super-ideological in character, and is thus a creator, not a product, of ideology.²⁴¹ Empirical measures of cultural advance, Dawson held, were not always adequate scales of genuine cultural progress; consequently, much of what is considered “progressive” hinges on theological assumptions and spiritual belief. Dawson hopes for the triumph of a spiritual culture over one that is material, but this temporal creation is not the City of God, nor is it a re-emergence of Christ’s presence in this world.²⁴² Catholic theology holds that Christ is eternally present, for He is—according to the Council of Nicea—“begotten, not

²⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, c.1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1.

²⁴¹ Christopher Dawson, “Christendom and the Ideologies,” Lecture given at Mainz, Germany, 1955, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 9.

²⁴² Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

made," and "one in being with the Father." Thus, Christ is not "created," nor is his presence ever absent from this world. Dawson's understanding is markedly Catholic in that he views history as an eternal "becoming" in partnership with God, and not as a perpetual anticipation for the arrival of the "end of history" and a re-entering of Christ into time. For Dawson, progress is movement toward ultimate perfection and a conscious choice to live in God's love.

Dawson's conception of progress is limited by its intensely theological nature, but it is simultaneously given depth by its spiritual character. In this vision, progress cannot be divorced from the transcendent, ultimate reality that has God as its center. Like history, with its strange corridors and twisted paths, progress in the material sense has no truly objective spirit; thus, progress must be viewed in terms of an overall cultural framework that includes material, spiritual, psychological, and environmental factors—this was Dawson's sophisticated understanding. His vision of progress as something that cannot be isolated from the various facets of culture is a testament to his universality and pluralistic historical vision.

Chapter Three: Christianity, Catholicism, and History

I

To the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, history entails a much more sophisticated nature than that of cause and effect empiricism or the scientific positivism practiced by pure rationalists. Thus, the Christian scholar considers historicism of any form as an invalid attempt to foresee the will of God, but his vision remains plural and open.²⁴³

For Dawson, history was the product of free will interacting with the will of God. Man is not the slave of his time and place, but the master and creator of his environment through a dynamic, creative process powered by the imagination. History does not repeat itself, for it grows, Dawson believed—in the tradition of Augustine and Origen of Alexandria—into an organic whole that parallels the human experience. The past is constantly incorporated into the present, and although he commits himself to a major theoretical assumption in believing this, Dawson argued that it is this compilation of human experience that produces a cultural dynamic of either a progressive or regressive character. Some would claim that Dawson is unjustified in his belief that the present is a combination of past events, but to him, this is the only reasonable way by which to understand the development of human affairs in an organized, empirical, and coherent vision. This stems from his unflinching belief in the doctrine of Free Will and the consequent effects freely-chosen, past actions have on the future. For him, the mechanization of the modern state was a breach with this

²⁴³ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 4 May 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

fundamental aspect of human nature and an example of the type of products such a denial entails.²⁴⁴ Like his vision of progress, Dawson sees in the present the distinct fingerprints of the past.

Take Dawson's definition of Europe:

What is Europe? Not a geographical expansion, not a racial unity, but a spiritual community. It is a dynamic tradition of thought and life which has been transmitted from people to people from land to land through the ages for nearly 3000 years. It began almost outside geographical Europe in both sides of the Aegean and then it has passed slowly westward and northward, until finally it passed the ocean and became the organizing principle of a new work. Europe has never been a static self-sufficient unitary culture like the great civilizations of the ancient east. Multiplicity and change are its essence. The oriental civilizations have been like pyramids standing powerfully and heavily in the same foundations, seemingly built for eternity but slowly eaten by the erosion of time. But the West is always building afresh in new foundations, and changing its form and content in every age, yet for all that preserving spiritual continuity.²⁴⁵

The vision of Europe as a spiritual community is the fundamental structure by which any measure of progress must be measured in the West—essentially, for Dawson, there must exist some degree of context. The question of progress, then, becomes teleological: to what degree is European, and indeed, Western culture fulfilling its spiritual ends? Additionally, progress must be seen in light of the objects of spiritual devotion, for it is necessary to draw distinctions between a faith in God and faith in man-made ideologies. Dawson, it must be noted, did not believe that we should concentrate exclusively upon Christian culture, although such

²⁴⁴ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 9 August 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

²⁴⁵ Christopher Dawson, Unpublished notes, "Sword of the Spirit/Dublin Review," Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 9, Folder 22.

a concentration was necessary if any understanding of the West was to be attempted.²⁴⁶

The essence of Catholic historical thinking is captured by its theological approach to understanding time and eternity. This theological viewpoint obviates the need for an abstract "philosophy of history" such as those propounded by the scientific rationalists or the nineteenth-century Idealists. Theological explanations, it might be objected, lack the intellectual grit needed to form a thorough historical understanding—or at least as complete an understanding as this mysterious world allows. The insistence that philosophical explanations—or even more vapid, scientific explanations—compose the corpus of thought on this subject reflects the secular character of modern culture, but does not, although it is its intention, pose a threat to the credibility of theology as a valid process of understanding. To the believing Christian, something special happened to history when Christ entered the world as a living, breathing man. His crucifixion at Golgotha signifies an almost unimaginable shift in human affairs for the believer and non-believer alike. In Christ, God entered time—not as an abstract spirit—but as a physical man. In doing so, there is a convergence of time and eternity. Because Christ is God, and is begotten not made, he is eternal and thus eternity entered into temporal existence at the moment of His incarnation.²⁴⁷ Consequently, the question of Christ's standing in history cannot be separated from His relationship to the present physical reality and the people in

²⁴⁶ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

²⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Harper Collins, 1952), 153-163.

it.²⁴⁸ In Christ, history is not given meaning, but Christ is shown to be "history Himself"—this is Dawson's historical norm.²⁴⁹

St. Paul's observation that love is the center of Christ's mission is at the crux of the Christian vision of history, and this, along with faith and hope, cannot be divided into temporal and non-temporal virtues.²⁵⁰ The theology of time, the basis of temporal context, is "determined as to its content by faith, hope and love."²⁵¹ Thus, man's time is subordinated to, and contained within, Christ's time which is eternal and without human measure. In Christ's eternal reign *with* the Father, the love of the Son is alive in the daily affairs of men—it is not merely contained in the first-century person of Christ. Accordingly, the Christ of God's affection existed forever and always, and was not a mere creation in time. Balthasar elegantly explains his view:

Only a genuine theology of time, gained from the contemplation of Christ's existence, can provide a sound concept of eternity, consistent with revelation, as a basis for the very ground of Christian existence, which is believing and hoping love. If we think in terms of escaping from time, faith and hope will necessarily be reduced to preliminaries belonging to this world. But that is an attack on the basic phenomenon of Christian existence: the perfect openness of Christ to every word which comes from the mouth of God and, since the Son himself is the Word, openness to himself only in openness to the Father.²⁵²

Christ's death on the Cross represents his submission to the Father as the master of his this-world existence, and in doing so, he shows

²⁴⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (London & New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 20.

²⁴⁹ History, here, is used to denote both time and historical unity, not historical writing or method. Thus, for the Catholic historian who holds Christ as the "norm" of his historical vision, history is captured wholly in God's tripartite being. This is predicated upon the idea that God is the ultimate reality, and thus, the embodiment of ultimate existence.

²⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:7.

²⁵¹ Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 36.

²⁵² Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 40.

that He must speak to the Father and not to Himself. The eternal is embodied in the temporal through Christ's incarnation, and the ultimate meaning of history, for the Christian, is embodied in God entering time. God the Son changed the course of history by shaping it instead of being formed by it. Every experience, every event, and every person—before and after Christ walked the earth—is given significance through His begotten nature.

The coming of Christ into history forever altered the path of human affairs. From the time of the Incarnation forward, humans lost the ability to possess a naïve realization of time, for in Christ's life and death, time was consecrated as the embodiment of selfless, perfect love. In the eternal life of Christ, God is reborn, suffers death, and is resurrected every day. All of the contemplations about sociology and progress, economics and politics: these are of mere secondary importance because they are constituent elements of the historical "norm" that has Christ at its center. Although Dawson is quite right, and well grounded, in his refusal to quit the traditional techniques of historical scholarship, he knew the focal point of history was not found exclusively in empirical facts. Dawson did not believe that every secular historian was guilty of misunderstanding—or even worse—distorting the past, through inadequate methods; rather, he believed that their questions regarding history were inadequate because of a failure to understand the true nature of reality—a transcendent reality based on God. He understood that secular thinkers possessed their own methods, theories, questions, and approaches, but he found them to be empty of any enduring value.

This chapter will examine Dawson's view of Christianity, and especially Catholicism, and its unique relationship to history. Dawson's traditional understanding of a "theology of history" is a sophisticated view of the past that challenges the more mechanistic "philosophies of history" that have been developed since the collapse of Christendom both before and after the Reformation. Additionally, the question as to whether Dawson should be considered primarily as a historian or as a Catholic polemicist is further examined.

II

Dawson's historical writings, explains the English Dominican, Aidan Nichols, are very similar in intention to Augustine's in that he "tries to show the special history of Christian revelation confronting and transforming the general history of the world, while remaining conditioned by its possibilities and limitations."²⁵³ With this in mind, Dawson's defense of metahistory becomes more clear and principled. Catholicism is a universal concept in which social and spiritual functions are ordered toward one end, "not by the denial and destruction of the natural human values, but by bringing them into living relation with the spiritual truth and spiritual reality."²⁵⁴ Thus, metahistory does not obscure the vision of reality by losing sight of the particular but, when kept within limits, it allows the historian to grasp the more general movement of human affairs.²⁵⁵ Dawson's distinctive character as a historian is linked to this claimed-ability to see the flowing currents

²⁵³ Aidan Nichols, "Christopher Dawson's Catholic Setting," *Eternity in Time*, Stratford Caldecott & John Morrill, eds., (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 34.

²⁵⁴ Christopher Dawson, "General Introduction," *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931), viii-ix.

²⁵⁵ See Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," *Dynamics of World History*, 303.

beneath the day-to-day affairs of men. Here the calling of Abraham, the Covenant at Sinai, the testing of the Prophets, and the Incarnation and Redemption—the last of which forms the foundation of all history—are all a part of the creation of a “new humanity,” that is the consequence of intangible, spiritual dynamics. For Dawson, human observers merely see the superficial plane of material change, as the deep dynamics of spiritual causes are never fully manifested in this world. His own words clearly capture the dynamic spirit of his historical imagination:

In my view and dominating my whole life work, the key problem is that of Theology and History. For while philosophy and theology occupy different spheres, theology and history do not, except in so far as history is purely factual or untied to special aspects of culture. Christian theology is a theology of Incarnation and of the successive stages of revelation—Mosaic, Prophetic and Christian; and each of these stages is not simply a question of new truths, but of events through which the truths are revealed. ²⁵⁶

Dermot Quinn comments extensively on Dawson’s ability to see the wider landscape of history as opposed to the “monographic miniaturism” represented by the English Whigs and their successors. “His [Dawson] preoccupations were the nature of culture and civilization, progress and religion, the pattern of history itself,” writes Quinn.²⁵⁷ While Dawson does not ignore the particulars of history, he values them only inasmuch as they correspond to what he sees as the deeper dynamics of human affairs. Thus, some events acquire a much greater significance than others although minor occurrences might initially seem dramatic, but in retrospect, have little enduring value. Likewise, seemingly unimportant events, and

²⁵⁶ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

²⁵⁷ Dermot Quinn, “The Catholic Idea of History,” *Eternity in Time*, Stratford Caldecott & John Morrill, eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 70.

almost positively unimportant persons, might become the objects of significant historical inquiry. This is definitely the case with St. Paul and his early converts, and even more poignantly, it is true with the seemingly unimportant life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Dawson's choices of what constitutes these "deeper dynamics" can be seen as being arbitrary or whimsical, yet these selections appear more defensible when placed against the backdrop of cross-cultural, sociological research. Religion seems to be the common denominator among the vast majority of primitive cultures, he maintained, and this is most lucid when studying the foundations of the major world cultures. It can be objected that this emphasis on religion is a matter of pure belief, regardless of the culture in which it thrives, and that such belief possesses no ability to affect reality in an existential sense. To Dawson, this is where the idea of true belief in one's faith is applicable to historical understanding. In his view, God is part of a larger, objective reality upon which the entire world order is based; thus, every culture seems to have at its core a belief in a transcendent reality that is the groundwork of its historical vision. Since human beings are possessed of free choice, they are affected by their religious values and spiritual heritage, thus forming an extra-material force that shapes cultural, and as a consequence, historical development. This was why Dawson was convinced that history was more than the product of material circumstances, biological development, and human psychology. In Dawson's vision, the malady of modern society, and especially Christian culture, was a result of its failure to

understand its spiritual inheritance—it was a “malady of the soul.”²⁵⁸

Dawson’s embrace of metahistory is at once warm and careful. While he recognizes that historians tend to become lost in the petty details of narrow specializations, he is equally aware of the possibility of sinking into complete abstraction. Again turning to Dermot Quinn, we see how Dawson deals with the “universal metahistorical vision” of Spengler, and why such a conception of the past can easily become a trap.²⁵⁹ While Dawson sees great benefit in Spengler’s conception of the past, he is disappointed by his “philosophic relativism” which is the necessary result of conceiving each civilization of the past as an independent cultural unit, completely severed from all other influences. For Spengler, there are no eternal truths and the only measure of a philosopher is whether or not he embodies the “spirit” of his age. Spengler sees the civilization around him as “civilization” in the abstract, and thus, each one of them has its own soul, brought into maturity by some essence of “progress.”²⁶⁰ Each culture is a “fixed organism” that is its own end, and it must pass through a life-process much like that experienced by the individual human. History, then, must be an unintelligible garble of civilizations that possess no ethical meaning, and it is destiny, not Causality, that represents the dynamism in human culture.²⁶¹ In Spengler, the metahistorical vision is so great, yet so restricted, that we loose touch with the

²⁵⁸ Carl E. Purinton, “Review: *Judgment of the Nations*,” *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 4, November 1943, 232.

²⁵⁹ Quinn, “The Catholic Idea of History,” 71.

²⁶⁰ Christopher Dawson, “Oswald Spengler and the Life of Civilizations,” *Dynamics of World History*, 391.

²⁶¹ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, vol. 1, in Dawson, “Oswald Spengler and the Life of Civilizations,” 395.

historical reality of cultural interaction. As Dawson notes, there are two movements in world history, one of which is touched upon by Spengler's concept of culture as a life process in contact with a specific people in a specific geographical area, the other, however, is "common to a number of different peoples, and results from political, intellectual and religious synthesis and interaction."²⁶² Dawson here finds himself more comfortable with Toynbee's vision of the past that includes a respect for universal states that he sees as a possible metahistorical paradigm, which encompasses smaller cultural units within. Dawson does possess a hesitation with Toynbee that stems from his view that there is an inconsistency in his insistence that religions are more important than civilizations while simultaneously expecting those religions to conform to political and cultural ends. Furthermore, Dawson believed, the intellectual conversion of Toynbee to Jungian psychology was a major "setback" in his thought because of its insistence that psychology replace theology as the "ultimate criterion in religion."²⁶³

The Catholic historian is necessarily beholden to a universal historical sense because Christ came as a redeemer, not just for those who believe in Him, but for all of mankind. Thus, there can be no Catholic "view" of history, nor can there exist, strictly speaking, a philosophy of history that is compatible with Catholic theology. Developed by the book of Daniel, and springing forth from the ashes of an earlier Mediterranean civilization, the Catholic

²⁶² Dawson, "Oswald Spengler and the Life of Civilizations," 403.

²⁶³ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 13 September 1956, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

possesses a "theology of history" that bears a deep significance.²⁶⁴ For the Christian, and especially the Catholic, there is merely a Christian history—to be clearly distinguished from a "philosophy of history"—and as a matter of understanding, a Christian "theology of history." Furthermore, to demand that a Christian—and even more specifically, a Catholic—historian separate his faith from historical judgment is an impossibility given that the world is linked in a historical drama with God at its center. The Catholic is imbued with a sense of history because his faith is at once embodied by the concepts of Incarnation and Providence—it is a view enraptured by the idea of openness to spiritual transcendence and untainted by ideology.

The Protestant historian is similarly bound to a historical universalism developed in pre-Reformation thought because his understanding is tied to a Patristic, Augustinian model, which is shared by the Catholic. Nevertheless, there are distinct differences growing out of disagreements over Free Will, different ideas about predestination, and various eschatological visions. Certain Protestant groups are more closely associated with—and in the case of Anglo-Catholics, almost indistinguishable from—the old-Catholic tradition. Nevertheless, differences, some minor and some not, continue to exist. Dawson was keenly aware of this and sought to bring Christians to a consensus based on their common historical and theological heritage. He is sometimes accused of wanting to form this consensus along strictly Catholic lines, and to this charge, there is some merit. In *The Judgment of the Nations*, Dawson

²⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Europe and Its Discontents," *First Things*, Number 159, January 2006, 16.

argues that "the sin of schism does not arise from a conscious intention to separate oneself from the true Church." At first there seems to be no problems with this statement, but there is revealed one major assumption: he presupposed that Catholicism is the "true Church."²⁶⁵ Dawson wore his Catholicism on his sleeve, and he believed that the problem of religious schism needed to be settled, but on Catholic terms—especially when dealing with questions of history. His Catholicism was not dogmatic nearly as much as it was principled, and the spirit of William McNeill's criticism that Dawson was a Roman Catholic fanatic—and even more alarmingly that he was looking to settle theological claims through historical analysis—is misguided.²⁶⁶ Dawson converted to Catholicism precisely because of its openness to truth, its universal character, and its search for reality in the human existence. He did not view his faith as a barrier to achieving a high degree of professionalism and objectivity—he believed it to be an agent of clarity.²⁶⁷ His unwillingness to stray from Roman Catholicism in questions of orthodoxy was a matter of faith and not of history. To Dawson, even if the Catholic Church could be faulted for various things, it was nevertheless the most "sound" of the Christian sects, both historically and theologically. Nevertheless, Dawson understood that both Catholics and Protestants share in one overarching belief about the significance of history: that it is important to "value history but not to overvalue it." Human beings are judged, as Niebuhr reminds us, by their actions committed within a historical

²⁶⁵ Purinton, "Review: *The Judgment of the Nations*," 232-233.

²⁶⁶ William McNeill, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, September 1957, 257.

²⁶⁷ Frederick W. Henssler, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 64, No. 2, September 1958, 204.

existence.²⁶⁸ Thus, in Christianity, there is a clear "affirmation" of the historical as an essential element of any conception of a transcendent reality.

Dawson sees the Catholic historian as one who must see the value of objectivity to, and within, his faith. Particularly impressed by Irenaeus's "spirit of historical realism," Dawson focused his attention upon the clues that history can offer in the interpretation of theological objects.²⁶⁹ Metahistory is a concept that helps the historian to gain a grasp of the overall landscape by which the past is understood. It is the creative powers of the historian, and in many cases his "moral imagination," by which the past can be rescued from the grips of an overly scientific view of the past, and elevated to a higher plane that coexists with his vision of reality. This is why Dawson was so imbued with the idea of a "positive theology" that was first developed in the Baroque period. In contrast to philosophy, which Dawson viewed as an obstacle to religious understanding, this critical form of theological thinking was, he believed, the only way by which the Catholic could confront the problems of historical and religious relativism.²⁷⁰

J.P. Kirsch writes of the reasonableness of the Catholic claim to withstand pressures from secular theorists to disavow their faith for the sake of an abstract objectivity. He reasons that faith is an integral part of any objective reality:

²⁶⁸ E. Harris Harbison, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," *Church History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, June 1952, 106. Originally delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, 30 December 1951.

²⁶⁹ Christopher Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 108.

²⁷⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 April 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

To demand from the ecclesiastical historian an absence of all antecedent views is not only entirely unreasonable, but an offence against historical objectivity...It could be maintained only to the hypothesis that the end of scientific investigation is not the discovery, but merely the seeking after truth without ever finding it...[a hypothesis] quite impossible to defend, for the assertion that supernatural truth, or even plain objective truth of any kind is beyond our reach, is itself an antecedent hypothesis.²⁷¹

Secular history, itself unfounded upon "objective" grounds, need not object to a Catholic "theology of history" on the basis that it is not an impartial account of the past. Catholicism is intimately bound to its historic reality, and it is only by the means of studious research that history, and thus Catholicism, can be fully understood. For Dawson, the Christian view of history is not "a secondary element derived by philosophical reflection from the study of history," for it is an understanding rooted in a primary participation in the Eternal order and characterized by a consciousness of God in human experience.²⁷² History forms the very center of Christianity through the Incarnation, and thus, without history, the Christian faith could not be a viable creed.

Non-Christian historians, however, will still raise objections to this view of history because, they maintain, it is colored with the stain of blindly-accepted precepts. This leads the philosophic historian to ask about the nature of history, and whether or not it is merely a chronicle of the past. For the Christian, history contains truths which are displayed through a material medium, and it is only in the context of reconciling these eternal truths with the tangible world that we are able to grasp any understanding of

²⁷¹ J.P. Kirsch, "History," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII (New York, 1910), 367.

²⁷² Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 246.

history. This does not mean that it is the historian's task to find what Gabriel Marcel called "that armed ghost"—the meaning of history. History must, says Russell Kirk, reflect truth, and the real meaning of history is found by searching for what we can learn about the "framework of the Logos...about the significance of human existence: about the splendor and the misery of our condition."²⁷³ To the Christian, Dawson believed, this meant understanding the universality of the human soul, and realizing its coextensive relationship with the Universal Church, "which has become incarnate in history."²⁷⁴

Kirk brings our attention to a very important Dawsonian theme: that the concept of a philosophy of history possesses an inherent contradiction. With Jacob Burckhardt, Kirk and Dawson both maintain that "history coordinates, and hence is unphilosophical, while philosophy subordinates, and hence is unhistorical."²⁷⁵ For Dawson, the great historians such as Tocqueville and Ranke are not practitioners of a universal metahistorical vision based in an allegedly "objective" reality formed through a scientific lens, but rather, they are the exemplars of a sophisticated view embodied in a deep humanist tradition, which is itself imbedded in a long tradition of faith.²⁷⁶ Metahistory, then, is not something that needs to be separated from the Christian tradition—in fact, it must not be separated unless it risk being reduced to banal generalizations and superficial moralizing. While the academic

²⁷³ Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1996), 102.

²⁷⁴ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 11 September 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

²⁷⁵ Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 103.

²⁷⁶ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

historian must follow scrupulous methods of inquiry, he must not become encumbered by the burden of the nineteenth-century creed of scientific objectivity. Dawson writes:

The academic historian is perfectly right in insisting on the importance of the techniques of historical criticism and research. But the mastery of these techniques will not produce great history, any more than the mastery of metrical technique will produce great poetry. For this something more is necessary—intuitive understanding, creative imagination, and finally a universal vision transcending the relative limitations of the particular field of historical study.²⁷⁷

Hence, what is crucial to Dawson is his sense of the historical imagination. The creative powers of the historian, enacted in conjunction with his moral and intellectual strengths, are the elements of any history embedded in the fabric of a dynamic culture. For the European, especially, this dynamic culture is bound with the historiography of the Catholic Church. For as Dawson maintains, it is the Church, and not secular humanism, that provides a direct path leading from the ancient to the modern world.²⁷⁸ To insist that the historian impose a standard of material objectivity would diminish his ability to write truthfully. Creating a dualism of material and spiritual matter would do much to destroy the historical unity upon which our current conception of reality is based.

Material events are intimately tied to the spiritual formation of Christendom as a body of faithful believers. Russell Hittinger insists, then, that there is a natural "tension" between believers and non-believers in their vision of the past. Christianity's historic character insists upon fully partaking in the material order, and thus, makes it necessary for the Christian historian to

²⁷⁷ Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," *Dynamics of World History*, 309-310.

²⁷⁸ Dawson, "Edward Gibbon and the Fall of Rome," *Dynamics of World History*, 353.

confront the past in a realistic manner. Dawson's concern, writes Hittinger, "is the inclination of many schools of secular historiography to either neglect or distort the subject-matter in which Christianity has considerable interests."²⁷⁹ Hittinger gives the example of Gibbon, whose real problem with Christianity was not a matter of doctrine, but rather, one directed at the material concerns of the faith. For Gibbon, the "Dark Ages" represented a material regression that led him to call into question the cultural contributions of the Christian religion, not the theology itself.²⁸⁰

Some philosophers of the eighteenth-century, and most notably Voltaire, saw the modern age as a step in an unending progress of cultural gentrification that rejected spirituality, but Dawson sees a recovery of Christianity as a necessary task if we are to ever establish "definite points in time and place" in our larger historical quest. The soul must be open to the transcendent and ordered to the ethical. Importantly, Dawson eschews the temptation to reduce Christian history to the subject of ecclesiastical history. Such an error, he reasoned, would isolate Christianity as an entity not fully incorporated into the material and non-Christian world. For Dawson, Christianity not only possesses a power over the faithful, but it casts its net over the whole drama of human affairs and touches every aspect of creation. For this reason, Dawson makes it his ambition to attempt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture, thus allowing him to understand the full impact of Christianity aside from its internal nature. As R.V. Young

²⁷⁹ Russell Hittinger, "The Metahistorical Vision of Christopher Dawson," *The Dynamic Character of Christian Culture*, ed. Peter J. Cataldo (London: University Press of America, 1984), 7.

²⁸⁰ Hittinger, "The Metahistorical Vision of Christopher Dawson," 7.

maintains, what makes Dawson such an important historian is his "ability to consider his subject in the broadest possible terms—the development of world civilizations and their interactions—without losing sight of the concrete details of history."²⁸¹ Within these concrete details, Christianity plays an immense role.

The relationship between Christianity and history has been severely damaged, Dawson argues, by the nineteenth-century historical theorists. Idealist and materialist philosophers both did a great disservice to this relationship by complicating the past with philosophic systems—especially that of liberal Protestantism. Thus, we have two competing schools of Christian history—the original, as understood by the Church fathers, and then, various philosophical systems based on speculation that are the result of a century-and-a-half of metaphysical interpretation. Dawson insists that an authentic Christian theology of history is based, not in Idealist philosophy, but rather, in a realistic conception of the past. This "realism" includes the belief that God consistently intervenes in human affairs at definite times and places.²⁸² In this way, the doctrine of Incarnation takes a central role in our historical consciousness as a fixed moment.²⁸³ In addition to being a central part of the Christian faith, the Incarnation provides a measure by which the historian can assign a chronological system to provide context to individual people and events.

²⁸¹ R.V. Young, "Christopher Dawson and Baroque Culture: An Approach to Seventeenth-Century Religious Poetry," *The Dynamic Character of Christian Culture*, ed. Peter J. Cataldo (London: University Press of America, 1984), 127.

²⁸² Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 247.

²⁸³ This is true as far as Jesus Christ, the physical being is concerned because in his dual nature, Christ the eternal God is not confined by space or time. For further explanation see von Balthasar's *A Theology of History*.

This concept also informs Dawson's view of other religious cultures. He draws our attention to the Hindu concept of incarnation found in the Bhagavad-gita. Here, however, there is little significance to "history" because Khrishna is "mythical and unhistorical," and this incarnation is not unique, but reoccurring in an unending, cyclical process.²⁸⁴ If history is to be judged by some "objective" standard, then the eastern tradition—in its non-Christian sense—provides little guidance. For the Christian, there is more to the Incarnation than a permanent standard by which to measure time: it is a transforming event in the history of man, and it is a unique event which gives life to the dynamic of world history. The Christian interpretation of history is a tempered vision because it is a temporal vision that includes an end, and is an "interpretation of time in terms of human events in the light of divine revelation."²⁸⁵

The Catholic historian must make sense of providentialism—he must make the case for a divine purpose working through the material forces of this world.²⁸⁶ History is concrete in that discovers events in time interacting with the eternal. Human events are but a small part of the history of this world, the universe, and beyond. This is a concept with which Dawson is intimately familiar, and it affects the way he writes history, as well as the way in which he deals with his faith. There is little difference among the various methods shared by good Christian historians and their secular counterparts, but the Christian historian wants to penetrate to

²⁸⁴ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 248.

²⁸⁵ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," 248.

²⁸⁶ Quinn, "The Catholic Idea of History," 73.

something deeper than the mundane details of the material world—he sees the unfolding of a “divine economy” that is both mysterious to us and ordained by God. Thus, the Catholic historian’s task differs from that of the secular historian in one significant sense: he may worry less about perspective, but he must continually decide the “extent to which his historical project is more or less open to theological norms which he acknowledges in acknowledging his Catholicity.”²⁸⁷ In Dawson’s understanding, faith and the sacraments are intimately tied to social institutions, morals, and behavioral norms. This belief is, he maintained, largely Catholic in origin and practice, although many Protestants possess similar understandings.²⁸⁸

In the *Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, Dawson brings our attention to the metaphorical character of history as represented by coronations. While it is not the physical act that captures the reality of the past, these events penetrate beyond the regalia and pomp to show the psychological and spiritual transformation of a leader.²⁸⁹ Charlemagne’s coronation on Christmas Day, 800, shows the conversion of a barbarian military leader into a Christian monarch. The reality of Christian civilization as it existed for over a thousand years is based in a culture transformed out of barbarism. The Catholic historian is one who is able to see this transformation, and looks beyond the material circumstances

²⁸⁷ Quinn, “The Catholic Idea of History,” 74.

²⁸⁸ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 15 January 1958, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 16.

²⁸⁹ Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960), 36.

that surround it to find its inner dynamic.²⁹⁰ The Catholic historian looks to see the inner-soul of culture as opposed to giving artificial credence to a temporal façade.

This is not to say that Catholicism involves a belief in the rise of a theocratic form of government, or in an idealized—notably, medieval—past. Although Dawson is enchanted by the architecture and lives of medieval people, he is by no means a medieval romanticist. The Catholic historian—properly understood—is one who exercises imaginative faculties in conjunction with the material world. Thus, his subject matter is not Christendom, but rather, the Christian people—*Christianitas*—and how they relate to God.²⁹¹ This relationship is seen, especially in the Middle Ages, through architecture, education, literature, and art—all enlivened by the historical imagination.

For Dawson, the meaning of history transcends the rise and fall of great empires. From the past's great events—often cataclysmic—we can find only means, not ends, to the most important and mysterious aspects of our being. Christianity confers significance upon events that would otherwise lack any transforming or dynamic power. The rise of a small, and seemingly insignificant clan in a Jewish province of Rome, and their development as the people of God became the epicenter of historical inquiry, not just for Christians, but also for the development of world history on a truly universal scale. It is in periods of great crisis and doubt, he believed, that God's Providence could most fully assert itself,

²⁹⁰ Francesca Murphy, "Can There Be a Catholic History Today?," *Eternity in Time*, Stratford Caldecott & John Morrill eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 125.

²⁹¹ Murphy, "Can There Be a Catholic History Today?," 127.

and through this interposition of God in time, history is given its divine and mysterious character.²⁹²

It was not until the beginning of the Middle Ages that men became aware of the differentiation between the end of an age and the end of history itself, although some still find confusion in the modern world as well.²⁹³ The fall of Rome was not the end of time, nor was it the end of history, Dawson argued, but it must have been a psychologically disturbing event to witness. It is easy to see why so many would view the fall of the Eternal City as the end of the world, but the sacrifice of Christ reassured his followers that the end of a regime is not the end of time. Although there is an unending conflict between the City of Man and the City of God, the two orders coexist in a matrix that forms when they meet and it is this matrix that is the crux of history.²⁹⁴

The real meaning of history is often obscured by material factors that overshadow the more crucial, yet seemingly inconsequential, people and events. Catholic historiography attempts to transcend the empiricism of the rationalists, such as Hume, because it refuses to discount the miraculous and unaccountable events that occur throughout the ages. How does the rationalist explain the ascendancy of Christianity when most of the early Christians, and indeed Christ himself, lived obscure lives? Compared with the great emperors, consuls, generals, and senators of the time, the life of an obscure peasant, in the eyes of the

²⁹² John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversation with Christopher Dawson," 22 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

²⁹³ See Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

²⁹⁴ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 19 February 1957, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 9.

rationalist, could not captivate, and in essence change, the course of human history. While the rationalist looks for patterns and scientific causalities, the Christian historian makes the case for the unique character of every living person, and the ability of that person to have a profound effect on the dynamics of world history.

To the Christian, material circumstances, when placed in opposition to the will of God, stand no chance of dominating the course of history. Material causes are not necessarily causes *per se*, but instead, they can be tangible signs of God's will transcending from eternity into the temporal world. The coercion of peoples by state power is an insufficient means by which to overcome the dynamic forces of history; thus all of history that is divorced from God's grace is nothing more than the tale of successive attempts to build Towers of Babel.²⁹⁵ Echoing St Augustine, Dawson argues that love is the most powerful force by which men are compelled to action. Thus, it is the appropriation of love that determines the inherent goodness in a particular event. When men are drawn to material comforts and fall in love with the temporal world—whether this love is directed at money, power, or comfort—they confuse the true good with illusions of a false paradise. The Catholic historian is keenly aware that temporal happiness is not the ultimate goal of this life, and the overwhelming force of God's love chastens him to seek something beyond the Gnosticism of material and rationalist dogma. Thus, the love of the self, often fueled by material gratification, is the foundation of the earthly city, while divine love accompanied by its creative powers, is the

²⁹⁵ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 252.

basis of the City of God. The destructive powers of self-love, a yearning that grows in proportion to our willingness to shy away from God's grace, leads to disorder in both the soul and in the commonwealth. When men cannot order themselves toward God, the unity of the material world dissolves.

Dawson is not a metaphysician, but his approach to history is philosophical and reflective. Nonetheless, he maintains a strictly-grounded way of attempting to make sense of the past by calling into action particular persons and events that reflect broader meanings. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* represents a great milestone in the historiography of the West, and for Dawson, this work provided a framework in which historians could work for centuries. Bede had the unique ability to capture people and events in a chronology that reflects their relation to the broader scope of history. This is especially true in his treatment of the saints. For Dawson, Bede wrote so that "the saint is not merely an historical figure...[he is] a citizen of the eternal city, a celestial patron and protector of man's earthly life. So that in the lives of the saints we see history transcending itself and becoming part of the eternal world of faith."²⁹⁶

Bede's monumental achievement captures what Dawson called the Third Age of the Church's historical development. In this time, the Good News was spread to the Anglo-Saxon and German lands, notably by St Boniface and the Benedictine order. The conversion of the Frankish Court represents the maturation of a somewhat barbaric dynasty into an explicitly Christian enterprise—it shows the

²⁹⁶ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 254.

transformation of pagan lands, and thus pagan history, into one enlightened by Christian ideas.

The transition from the so-called "medieval" into the "modern" period is marked by the rise of nationalism and the empowerment of rulers whose entire basis of authority is found in the medieval idea of kingship. Furthermore, this kingship is emphatically connected to the Christian ideal of just authority—thus, it is within the coronation ceremony that the legitimization of a ruler is bestowed. From the fifteenth-century onwards, the consecration of supposedly secular rulers is only legitimated by the Christian ceremony of coronation. This development of the secular state, writes Dawson, was "disguised by the religious prestige which still surrounded the person of the ruler and which was actually increased during the age of the Reformation by the union of the Church with the state and its subordination to the royal supremacy."²⁹⁷ Take, for instance, the following passage, utilized by Dawson, from Bossuet's *Politique tiree des propres paroles de L'Ecriture Sainte*:

The power of God [he writes] makes itself felt instantaneously from one end of the world to the other, the royal power acts at the same time throughout the kingdom. It holds the whole kingdom in being, as God holds the world. Should God withdraw His hand, the world would fall back into nothingness and should authority cease in the kingdom, all would be confusion...

Bossuet continues:

To sum up the great and august things we have said concerning the royal authority. Behold an immense people united in a single person; behold this sacred power, paternal, absolute; behold the secret cause which governs the whole body of the

²⁹⁷ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 258.

state contained in a single head; you see in the king the image of God, and you have an idea of the royal Majesty.²⁹⁸

The process of change from the medieval world into modernity is not marked by an immediate break with the past. In fact, the seventeenth-century is alive with religious fervor and it is Hobbes and Locke who compose a radical minority. The apparently dominant ideologies of the period, namely materialism and nationalism—to Dawson—are cloaks for an intensely religious culture undermined by the directors of intellectual culture. It is a mistake, he writes, to consider the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries a secular age, for the mass of public opinion did not belong to the grandiose thinkers, but rather, to the local clergy.²⁹⁹

Dawson further rejects the "European view of history," specifically those theories espoused by Machiavelli and Hobbes, which empty history of its moral character. Reducing history to a chronicle of "the straightforward expression of the will to power" subordinates it to a quasi-scientific process with its own laws and axioms. The subjective, amoral character of this type of historical thinking further caused alarm even among its contemporaries for its shocking inability to form any standard of judgment.³⁰⁰ The Idealists, however, are not much better in their assessment of the past. Their idealization of the state as the product of divine

²⁹⁸ Bossuet, *Politique tiree des propres paroles de L'Ecriture Sainte*, Book V., Article IV, Proposition I, as found in Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), 10.

²⁹⁹ An example of this can be found in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 2005), in which a discussion of different conceptions of Purgatory are examined. In this case, it is not some form of official orthodoxy, but localized adaptations of orthodox thinking that prevail. This illustrates the power of the local vicar or parish priest who represented the Holy See, and in later years, the Christian mainstream.

³⁰⁰ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 258.

providence inspired generations of thinkers to embrace an ideology that society is progressively moving toward ultimate perfection.

Ultimately, Dawson sees Christianity as the only true source of cultural unity because it is the only world religion that possesses an unbroken lineage to ancient times. Unlike the purely spiritual religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Shamanism, Christianity retains an innately historical character—which is distinct from merely being old—that is rooted in the deep patrimony of the Jewish faith. Even Islam, itself rooted in a historical enterprise, is devoid of a truly historical character in that there is no specific relationship between God and man except in a purely spiritual sense. The Christian view of history is intimately connected with the concept of time, and accordingly, no other world-religion possesses its unifying ability. The meaning of history, for the Christian, is to be found in the development of time in the “womb” of eternity. The Christian view of history is not an ideology, and it does not find ultimate triumph in the temporal world.³⁰¹

Early Christianity was itself challenged by the spectre of a purely spiritual philosophy while developing into its current framework. The Oriental heresies of Gnosticism and the Manicheans—in a trait shared with Islam—denied the importance of the material world and placed its faith in the idea of pure spirit. The Church, however, steadfastly combated these forces and showed the importance of humanity by stressing the importance of the body, consecrated by

³⁰¹ Christopher Dawson, “Christendom and the Ideologies,” unpublished notes for a lecture given at Mainz, Germany, 1955, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 9.

Christ's Incarnation and crucifixion. In doing this, the early Church demonstrated the importance of the unique historical character of Christianity that is rooted in revelation, and secured by the sacrifice at Calvary.

This was the great stumbling-block to the Oriental mind, which readily accepted the idea of an avatar or of the theophany of a Divine aeon, but could not face the consequences of the Catholic doctrine of the Two Natures and the full humanity of the Logos made flesh. This conception of the Incarnation as the bridge between God and Man, the marriage of Heaven and Earth, and the channel through which the material world is spiritualized and brought back to unity, distinguishes Christianity from all the other Oriental religions, and involves a completely new attitude to life.³⁰²

The Christian view of history differs from its other eastern rivals in that it requires more than metaphysical contemplation of a higher being, or in modern times, the idealization of a material state, to achieve salvation. When the mind is removed from practical matters so that the highest expression of human achievement is a divorce of intellect from matter, the whole world will fall to anarchy and order is a distant hope. What Dawson thought of as the Oriental view, in its contempt for almost anything material, fails to capture the essence of history as something intertwined with man. The normal course of human activity is conducted in the physical world, and to possess contempt for knowledge beyond the limits of spiritual worship is to withdraw from the reality of human existence and to ignore fundamental aspects of our nature.

The Christian, and specifically for Dawson, the Catholic historian, sees the importance of the material world and its union with eternity as an essential part of understanding the past. Human

³⁰² Christopher Dawson, *Christianity in East and West* (LaSalle, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Company, 1959, 1981), 27.

rationality and the scientific process are intimate parts of the human mind, and for the Christian, these cannot simply be set aside, but yet they must be held in check. The responsibility to bridge this gap between the eastern idealization of the spirit and the western progressive's worship of the material world falls to the Catholic Church. For Dawson, the Church is the medium between these two extremes, and at once embodies both views, while not completely lending itself to either one. It is the Church that brings man into relation with his spiritual nature and allows him to bring the "transcendent reality of the divine Logos into relation with the tangible and visible facts of human experience."³⁰³

What saved, it must be asked, the early Church from sinking into some abstract form of spiritualism that was very much a real part of its fellow eastern traditions? Dawson points to the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (c. A.D. 96), in which there is a clear argument for the hierarchic organization of society that reflects the eternal law of the universe. Like the Roman military, there must be organization within the Church—God at the apex, his apostles, saints, and bishops beneath—so that moral discipline and social order prevail.³⁰⁴ The primitive Church survived the dangers of schism through appeals to the apostolic tradition such as those advocated by St Irenaeus in his polemics against Gnosticism.³⁰⁵ Thus, there is an inherent tradition within Catholicism of a social order that is based on the authority of the apostles, who gain their authority directly from Christ.

³⁰³ Dawson, *Christianity in East and West*, 28.

³⁰⁴ Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1954, 2003), 39-40.

³⁰⁵ Dawson, *The Making of Europe*, 40.

The rise of the Western world, then, is due to two corresponding ideas that are embodied in this duality of body and spirit. From its earliest foundations, the West has achieved a high degree of cultural unity through its unique recognition of the religious and scientific aspects of life. In the Oriental tradition, the spirit is paramount; in the secular West, materialism is the creed. Thus, in Christianity, and especially in the Catholic Church, we see the meeting place of the eternal and the ephemeral—a tangential relationship between matter and spirit.

For Dawson, the Catholic historian is the "heir" to a universal tradition. The Catholic historian sees the past differently than any other type of historical thinker because he sees himself as freed from provincialism and narrow parochialism. He is not confined to nationalist interpretations of history, for the true Catholic historian is striving to be a member of the City of God.³⁰⁶ He sees the uniqueness of the process of history, and in contradistinction to Hume and the rationalists, he sees the mystery of divine will and possesses an apocalyptic vision of human affairs.³⁰⁷ Catholic historians are not content with the economic and political interpretations of history practiced from the seventeenth-century to the present. For such understandings, Dawson argued, neglect the dynamic elements of cultural change. The political and economic happenings of a particular period do not necessarily reflect historical causes, but are often themselves the product of historical change.

³⁰⁶ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, c.1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 1.

³⁰⁷ Dawson, "History and the Christian Revelation," *Dynamics of World History*, 269.

Dawson's vision of the past was marked, not by a naïve faith in progress, or in the triumph of justice in the material world, but by a distinct hope. Like St Cyprian, Dawson sees that although the material world may rest in chaos, there is hope in the world to come that is found by understanding the spiritual dynamic of world history.³⁰⁸ Although the forces of the modern world are often set against that understanding, it is the Catholic historian's duty to remember the consequences of a pagan culture. The lessons of antiquity, of the medieval world, and of the fight against Communism in the twentieth-century, are all relevant to the Catholic historian's argument on behalf of a spiritual interpretation of history that understands the role of the transcendent reality in human affairs.

Dawson was too astute, however, to believe that a Catholic culture could ever become the dominant order of modernity. The seduction of the West by material and intellectual forces is too imbedded in its society to ever be completely erased.³⁰⁹ As James Hitchcock writes, Dawson's optimism was not lurid idealism, but a recognition of the historic reality of the world in which we live. A political party system based on Catholicism was a bad alternative, for Dawson shared Acton's contempt for history's most incompetent and self-centered "betrayers" of the Church, such as Cardinals Wolsey and Richelieu.³¹⁰ This does not, however, mean that political systems should not take Catholicism into account when developing

³⁰⁸ Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, 65.

³⁰⁹ Christopher Dawson, "Christian Unity and the New Order," in *Sword of the Spirit* no. 13, 18 January 1941: 2. Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 98.

³¹⁰ James Hitchcock, "To Tear Down and Build Up," *Christianity and Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993, 1995), 64-65.

their platforms, and particularly, the natural law tradition as expressed in many recent encyclicals are exactly the type of religious expressions that a properly functioning government should take seriously.

To Dawson, the Catholic historian's submission to divine will makes him well-equipped to deal with unpredictability, and he embraced this as an essential part of his historical understanding. The secular historian, writing in the first-century A.D., could never have imagined the immense impact of a small religious movement in the province of Judea. Dawson writes:

All that Roman world with its power and wealth and culture and corruption sank into blood and ruin—the flood came and destroyed them all—but the other world, the world of apostles and martyrs, the inheritance of the poor, survived the downfall of ancient civilization and became the spiritual foundation of a new order.³¹¹

Christianity did not challenge the authority of Caesar, nor did it call for any specific system of political organization. Nevertheless, in God's time, Caesar's throne turned out to be an ephemeral institution, while Christianity became the basis of the new world order. Dawson is careful to remind his students that it is not the duty of the Christian to revolutionize mankind through the creation of a new paradigm. Christianity fulfills a different function than the State, but their relationship is occasionally symbiotic. It is not the duty of a Christian to build a world of perfection or absolute peace, but it is his task to spread the word of God, and to transform the human spirit so that it can look beyond the temptation of temporal bliss.

³¹¹ Dawson, "History and the Christian Revelation," *Dynamics of World History*, 271.

The mysterious nature of Christianity, and especially Catholicism, is found in its apocalyptic view of history. For the Christian, there is a spiritual purpose in history, and it is not the task of the historian to fully understand it; rather, it is his duty to understand that it exists as an unknowable aspect of our reality. As Dawson writes, "the Christian order is a supernatural order...Its victories may be found in apparent defeat and its defeats in material success."³¹² It is around the profoundly historical life of Jesus by which the Christian historian is called to find unity in his world, and it is with this historical reality by which many of the other world religions have found their dynamism.

Dawson argues that Islam, the Protestant Reformation, and the Liberal Revolution are each "abortive or partial manifestations of the spiritual power which Christianity brought into history."³¹³ In some ways, each of these spiritual institutions draws its energy, and its historical character, from the older Christian tradition. Christianity, as we noted earlier, is not all spirituality, but is distinctively bound to the material world. It is wrong for the Christian historian to possess an absolute hostility to the temporal order, for that, says Dawson, is the nature of heresy. The Christian historian, as well as the faithful, must be formed by faith, but he must not deride the existence of the material world. After all, Christ came to this world in the body of a man when he could have come in any form He chose. The Christian historian sees the temporal order as a means of achieving salvation. Although the

³¹² Dawson, "Christianity and Contradiction in History," *Dynamics of World History*, 279.

³¹³ Dawson, "Christianity and Contradiction in History," *Dynamics of World History*, 280.

means of achieving political or economic perfection will elude the Christian statesman, he need not view the end of history as an end, but as a beginning.³¹⁴ To the Christian, and particularly to Dawson, the world is always ending, "and every historical crisis is, as it were, a rehearsal for the real thing."³¹⁵

III

Shirley Jackson Case observed in her seminal book *The Christian Philosophy of History* that there is a crisis of understanding in the historical profession that is caused by the confusion of metaphysical and historical ends.³¹⁶ This is, of course, the result of a belief in the epistemological subordination of historical knowledge to philosophy. While history is incapable of providing a philosophical system it is through history that metaphysical truths can be substantiated in time. There is no true subordination of history to philosophy, for they are different disciplines concerned with different ends, but participating in one endeavor to reach an understanding of human affairs. The distinction of philosophy, and its place with respect to history, is important because there is a third, often-neglected element that must be considered—theology.

Case's title itself reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of history's place within the Christian tradition. A "philosophy of history," enlightened by the Gospels and the Grace of God, is a strange contradiction that is rendered impossible by the constant

³¹⁴ Dawson, "Christianity and Contradiction in History," *Dynamics of World History*, 281.

³¹⁵ Dawson, "Christianity and Contradiction in History," *Dynamics of World History*, 282.

³¹⁶ Shirley Jackson Case, *The Christian View of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 200-201.

interposition of Christ in history. The term "philosophy of history" evokes a sense of historicism and mechanization—it does not account for mysterious forces and otherworldly factors, nor does it provide explanations for simple breakdowns in human psychology or plain forgetfulness. A philosophy of history entails the idea that history is a process that can be intimately known, and even more alarming is the contention that it affords man the ability to use the past as a source of foreknowledge. Dawson and most Catholic thinkers believe that a "theology of history"—a history based on the Incarnation—offers a more complete understanding that is true to human affairs precisely because it involves man's interaction, not only among his own kind, but also with the spiritual world of the eternal. Every culture is a reflection of its spiritual beliefs, and to the Christian, the dynamics of world history are inextricably linked to the coming of God into time.

Thus, for the believing Christian, there can be no philosophy of history; rather, there must be a theology of history, and plainly, a Christian history. To Dawson, what we see in history is only a "partial manifestation" of the spiritual activity that forms the basis of human activity. Although we can fully study the material aspects of society through scientific methods, we are unable to ascertain the full-details of spiritual values.³¹⁷ This does not render comparative studies of culture impossible, but it shows why the modern historian is so likely to abandon such elements in his own work. Since the time of the Enlightenment, the concentration of history on material causes has been the result of

³¹⁷ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

this failure to come to terms with religion as something that is different in every culture. Nevertheless, there are certain underlying forces that are common to each of them, and each of these religions shapes the entire outlook—philosophically, spiritually, and historically—of that culture.

The traditional vision of the Christian historian is that the outer-dynamics of material transformation are mere reflections of the inner-world of spiritual change. The true meaning of history, then, is not to be found in the varied stories of powerful empires and political regimes, for they are only means, not ends, in the development of God's people on earth. C.S. Lewis said that the present is that point at which time touches eternity, and Augustine said the same about history.³¹⁸ The significance of these statements lies in their reliance on the coming of God into the lives of man, through the Incarnation, as a means of giving true life to humankind. On this reading, it is necessary to be a Christian to understand the Christian view of history, and to accept it as a valid belief. Other religions possessing an incarnation theology lack the originality found in the birth of Christ because His coming, to recall the argument of Origen, was a one-time event that removed man from the wheel and placed him on a track toward eternal salvation.³¹⁹ Thus, the coming of Christ is the pivotal point of human existence and the starting point for all men in their quest for grace and everlasting life.

³¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Harper Collins, 1959).

³¹⁹ Incarnation theology in non-Christian, Eastern religions always possesses some element of repetition as in the case of Buddhism.

The Christian historian is unique in that he possesses an acute understanding of God's everlasting love for creation, and uses that knowledge to develop a vision of history that is at once full and mysterious—it captures the essence of our being, while refusing to cave to the pressures of materialism, historicism, and the arrogance of historical omniscience. The Christian historian is one who allows space for the mysterious forces of God—forces we are not always permitted to see. Dawson's insistence that we must capture the inner-dynamics of the spiritual world to understand human history further reflects this deep understanding that mankind was not made to serve material ends. Men of the Cross, although blind to the wishes of God, are not blind to the fact that God does not answer to man. So history becomes the "dynamic process in which the divine purpose is realized."³²⁰ This is a central reason why the life of the saint is so immensely important to Dawson. Additionally, the medieval synthesis of the material and spiritual in one dynamic unity represented the unique greatness of the culture that arose in the years following the fall of Rome. To Dawson, the saint was the manifestation of history "transcending itself" and becoming a part of the "eternal world of faith." Not incidentally, the medieval world was the world of the saint.

The cult of the saints, Dawson believed, was perhaps one of the most important aspects of the medieval world because the saint was seen as being present in both this world and in Heaven. People prayed at the tombs of saints for intercessions on their behalf, for the saint represented the joining of Heaven and earth. Peter Brown

³²⁰ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 251.

observes that from end of the sixth-century onward, the saint was seen as an active part of Christian life. For instance, Gregory of Tours was not decaying in the ground, but rather, he was at once present at his tomb, yet still in Heaven.³²¹ Accordingly, relics became objects of immense value, and they were often sold and traded as market commodities. The saints were a spiritual presence in a material world—a gateway to the eternal.

In later years, the names of saints became fixtures among the names of newborn children, for a "Christian name stood for a new identity associated with a new birth."³²² A patron saint could be called upon as an earthly protector—one who walked this earth like any other, but is possessed of an intimate relationship with Heaven. They were seen as Heavenly intermediaries who could serve as solace in world of discord and confusion. Saints could also be called upon to help cure illness, for the suffering of the martyrs, brought the favor of God upon those associated with them, and with this favor could come healing.³²³ For Dawson, this concept of intimacy with the saints is an integral part of understanding the life of medieval people because it strikes directly at the heart of the genuineness of the Christian people. The Christian faith exhibited by medieval man—especially the peasant—was genuine and deep. Dawson points to the irony that saints and prophets, like Jeremiah, are often social outcasts, whose "action is only felt creatively by the spiritual

³²¹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3-4.

³²² Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 58.

³²³ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 80-81.

elite."³²⁴ They do, however, form an important cultural dynamic that is fundamental in determining the shape of history.

The Christian view of history is something that "corresponds with time" and covers the whole of humanity. At base, it is an understanding of time and eternity and how they relate to one another in a cooperative development. Man is not merely an economic being, nor is he the "Superman" of idealistic utopians. If he is willing to limit himself to an animal-like existence, and processes only that which appears on the surface of everyday affairs, then the "higher values" of life gradually disappear.³²⁵ Dawson explains the nature of man with great care:

He is an animal that is conscious of his mortality and consequently aware of eternity. In the same way the end of history is not the development of a new form of economic society, but is the creation of a new humanity, or rather a higher humanity, which goes far beyond man as man himself goes beyond the animals.³²⁶

Dawson can be accused of being arbitrary here, but it is a conscious and genuine attempt to reach for the truth at a sophisticated level. His assumption that man is "aware of eternity," and his second assumption that the end of history is not economic, but the "creation of a new humanity," requires more attention than he is willing to give. In this, it seems that Dawson is writing to an audience of people who already believe—he is attempting to reach out and help his "base" to understand their faith and its relationship to the temporal. His interdisciplinary approach to the study of both primitive and advanced cultures is the key to understanding why

³²⁴ John J. Mulloy, "Compilation of Christopher Dawson's words from letters, interviews, etc.," Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 15.

³²⁵ Christopher Dawson, "The Nature and Destiny of Man," *The Dawson Newsletter*, Spring 1994.

³²⁶ Dawson, "The Christian View of History," *Dynamics of World History*, 261.

Dawson believes these ideas to be something more than mere assumptions. If religion is the common denominator, then economics and material circumstances become secondary causes. If these are secondary causes, then they naturally become secondary ends. This was Dawson's conception of the relationship between the temporal world and history.

Men are not defined, Dawson argued, by their acquiescence to the law of animal nature, but in their steadfast refusal to submit to every appetitive desire.³²⁷ The Church is the steady guide in helping people to understand that it is in transcending the appetitive to achieve the moral by which our nature is most fully realized. To that extent the Church is the "guardian" of the secrets of history because it is the membrane through which the human soul can find redemption. The Church may not be able to fulfill the same material cravings targeted by modern ideologies, but it does offer Truth: the truth that history possesses unpredictable elements that are themselves part of the past. Faith in Christ entails a hope in the coming of new life, but the Church does not—rightfully—offer the naïve optimism that human life is always "improving" or "progressing" toward an infinite good. "At the devil's booth, all things are sold," goes the maxim—and it is at the devil's booth that history is offered as something wholly in our possession. Human beings are possessed of free choice, but choosing the "right" is not enough for salvation. The basis of all of humanity is love, and it is through love that we can choose to come to know God and understand His creation.

³²⁷ Dawson, "The Nature and Destiny of Man," *The Dawson Newsletter*.

The power of the Catholic view of history that attracted Dawson's attention is found in the belief that Christ is alive in our daily lives and is an active participant in the direction of human affairs. Augustine's view of the two cities, running parallel in history, yet constantly intermingling with one another, is the classic example of this symbiotic relationship between time and eternity. The injection of the Incarnation into our daily lives and a "contemplation of the divine interposition in time," is the crux of Catholic historical thinking.³²⁸ Those things that historians see in rationalist terms are only manifestations of the divine in temporality, and accordingly, there must be a large degree of mystery incorporated into any account of the past. A historian concerned with telling the truth must account for the unaccountable and not make his subject a slave to scientific methods.

The problem of secularization in the West has presented a unique conundrum for Catholic historians. Dawson was convinced that Western secularization was based on its own quasi-spiritual idealism, which was really a "transposition of Christian moral idealism to a purely this-worldly end."³²⁹ Naturally, the intellectual roots of this dilemma can be found in the failures of the medieval period, but they began to explode with the liberal idealism of John Stuart Mill and the thinkers of the nineteenth-century. Secularization gave rise to a certain type of class structure that was at once urban and monotone.³³⁰ With Maritain,

³²⁸ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 22 August 1953, Christopher Dawson Papers, Notre Dame, Box 1 of 1, Folder 2.

³²⁹ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 25 February 1954, Christopher Dawson Papers, University of Notre Dame, Box 1 of 1, Folder 4.

³³⁰ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, 17 May 1954, Christopher Dawson Papers, University of Notre Dame, Box 1 of 1, Folder 4.

Dawson agreed that the Christian conception of society was at once pluralist and united, while the urban, democratic idea of society was its polar opposite. Dawson believed that the unity of the modern world was found in the spiritual dynamics of a fading Christian culture. He further believed that Newman's identification of Western culture with "civilization in the absolute sense," was an over-simplification, but that it showed how much Christianity—as it defines the West—penetrated to every part of the globe like no other culture in history.³³¹

Dawson does not wish to set Christianity, which is inexorably tied to its view of history, against civic responsibility or good citizenship. In understanding the idea of civilization as a high degree of social development, and not mere "civic security," Dawson believes that the artist, philosopher, and spiritual leaders are the best exemplars of society because they are among its most sophisticated contributors.³³² Thus, civilization is a material achievement fed by its cultural underpinnings. Civic responsibility nurtures and secures the underlying culture that is the real source of dynamism. Christianity, then, is the power behind everything it touches, unwittingly or not.

The view of history espoused by Dawson is uniquely Catholic in its attempt at universality. Perhaps it was his distinctly Protestant upbringing, and his deep English roots, that gave Dawson such a spectacular vantage point from which to develop an understanding of history that is deceptively simple, but

³³¹ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 July 1954, Christopher Dawson Papers, University of Notre Dame, Box 1 of 1, Folder 4.

³³² Christopher Dawson to the Editor of *The Tablet*, 6 August 1946, Christopher Dawson Collection, University of St Thomas, Box 2a, Folder 2.

sophisticated in its argumentation.³³³ Unlike Belloc, with his intense cradle Catholicism, Dawson was able to fully engage and contemplate the eccentricities of Catholicism, and at one point, the limits of *Christian* theology, from an outsider's perspective. Dawson did not want to suggest that Christians should come together and do whatever it takes to impose Christianity on the secular world, but he did believe that a Christian unity would restore a "spiritual center" to a new world order that could "provide new life for our civilization."³³⁴ This new life would possess a distinctively historical element and shape our view of history. Essentially, to the Christian, history is the meeting place of time and eternity—a great mysterious incorporation through which, as the Gospel of John says, the Word of God becomes flesh, and is inserted into the life of mankind so long as the human race persists.³³⁵

Dawson is aware that there are some limitations to the scope of Christianity's claims, and he is further aware that there exist large assumptions in arguments that Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, is the true model by which history is universally unfolding. The Christian duty to seek the truth, and to embrace that which is correct over that which is not—these virtues translate to every part of life, including historical inquiry. This is why Christianity at once exists within history and out of it. In addition, there is the obvious limitation that all people are not Christians. Dawson presents his readers with an almost inexplicable

³³³ Carl M. Davidson, review of *The Judgment of the Nations* in *The Christian Advocate*, 25 March 1943, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 114.

³³⁴ Christopher Dawson, "Christian Unity and the New Order," *Sword of the Spirit* no. 13, 18 January 1941: 239. Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 98.

³³⁵ John 1:1.

conundrum in that it is impossible to accept the Christian view of history without being Christian, yet he claims it is, in truth, the universal paradigm. Developing out of the ancient Jewish tradition, Christianity "transformed into a universal religion which conquered the Roman Empire." It kept the Jewish literary tradition, as well as its doctrine of God, while it simultaneously adopted the Hellenic tradition of liberal learning.³³⁶ It became a transforming cultural force on an international level because of its ability to incorporate local customs within the context of a larger, universal organization. In this view, it is impossible to understand the true dynamics of world history without a spiritual commitment. Those who do not believe in the risen Christ are not condemned, in Dawson's view, but they do possess an incomplete historical vision. This view may never be an acceptable explanation to the historical profession, but it does not disqualify Dawson from a position of scholarly prominence.

Dawson's Christianity is never hidden, and he is aware of the difficulties and "deficiencies to be found in various periods of Christian culture."³³⁷ Nevertheless, he saw in the Church the foundation of European culture in both its spiritual and material character. The secularization of European culture, Dawson believed, coincided with a burst of material progress and spiritual fragmentation. This new dynamic lacked a "unifying religious force" or "intellectual synthesis" and left Europe heading toward social

³³⁶ Christopher Dawson to John J. Mulloy, "Memorandum," 11 July 1959, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 14.

³³⁷ Philip H. Ashby, "Review: *The Movement of World Revolution*," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 39, No. 4, October 1959, 283-284.

anarchy.³³⁸ It soon becomes clear that Dawson's task is not historical in the strictest sense, but cultural. He has an agenda, but it is not fixed upon an abstract idea, an ideology, or some form of fanaticism. He is a historian and a Catholic apologist—but an apologist in the best sense of that term. Never dogmatic, and always open to whatever evidence becomes available, Dawson sees in history the unfolding of a grand epoch ordained by God. In his view, Christ is the "norm" of history and everything that occurs is just one part of a divine plan.

A committed Catholic, Dawson arrived at his faith through a search for transcendent truth. Dawson the sociologist and Dawson the Catholic, as William McNeill writes, "often speak a rather different language," and in this assessment he is largely correct, but he fails to see this as a matter of degree.³³⁹ Dawson's role as a historian is characterized by his dedication to reality, but this reality finds its norm in Christ. Nurtured by an immense faith in the risen God, his historical imagination is informed by theology, buttressed by sociological data, and open to the idea that God constantly intervenes in the life of man. The non-Christian observer will, no doubt, object to Dawson's identification of a "transcendent reality" as being a function of Christ's divinity, but this was something Dawson anticipated. To him, one must be a Christian to accept the Christian view of history. Other historical visions, he believed, were not wrong, but somewhat incomplete.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Fitzgibbon, "The Cyclical Theory of Christopher Dawson," *American Catholic Sociological Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1941, 38.

³³⁹ William McNeill, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," 257.

³⁴⁰ Frederic W. Henssler, "Review: *Dynamics of World History*," 204.

In Dawson, the tension between a sociological and theological understanding of the past is hampered by each discipline's claim of universality. This problem is resolved, however, by the understanding of the cosmos as a unified whole in which science is not the enemy of religion, but one element in an overall conception of the universe. Religion should not contradict science, but it should provide it with reinforcement and an ethical dimension. To Dawson, science is a tool, and not an end. It is in understanding the limits of technological advancement, he maintained, that we can chastise science to serve humanity, and not be its slaves. When science and technology become ideologies, he believed, they fail to stay within their boundaries and betray their true ends.³⁴¹ Thus, in Dawson, there are two complementary approaches working in harmony to form a unified vision of history and culture.

Dawson's historical imagination is inextricably linked to his vision of Christianity as the basis of the world order. To him, the coming of Christ forever changed the direction of man from one centered on the material and the mystical, to one focused upon living for the greater glory of God. Christ became the "norm" of history upon His divine incarnation, and his crucifixion at the demand of the Sanhedrin fulfilled a prophecy whose beginnings, although not always explicitly realized, reach to the foundations of time itself. Dawson did not see a need to separate his faith from his vision of the past because the two were so intimately connected. With Bergson and his disciples, and the European Thomists, Dawson

³⁴¹ Christopher Dawson, Unpublished notes for lecture given at Mainz, Germany, 1955, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 1a, Folder 9.

believed that intuition was a true source of religious knowledge, and this knowledge could be used to inform history.³⁴²

To some degree, Dawson's Christian writings have a definitive polemical purpose. Dawson realized that his writings could be broken into two distinct categories: history and Catholic advocacy. Nevertheless, his polemical writings serve to illuminate his historical vision as one informed by an intense, orthodox Christianity. This does not jeopardize his historical judgments because he is very clear about what books are meant to persuade versus those meant to find understanding. They did, however, participate in forming a single, coherent vision of culture.³⁴³ There is an inherent tension that cannot be resolved, but this is a paradoxical vision that requires both an understanding of reality based in theological belief and a reconciliation of these beliefs with the tangible signs of God's creation. In essence, Dawson's historical imagination is enlivened by a moral imagination of Christian origins. This makes history an ethical, teleological, and intelligible process that is ordained by God, and not wholly revealed to man.

³⁴² John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversations with Christopher Dawson," 18 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

³⁴³ John J. Mulloy, "Recollection of Conversations with Christopher Dawson on the formation of an Institute for Christian Culture, 28 August-2 September, 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1 Folder 1.

Conclusion

The legacy of Christopher Dawson as a major cultural historian remains undecided as the new century dawns, but there is a growing swell of compelling evidence to support the claim that he is a significant force in the historical debate. The power of Dawson's work is not found in formulaic methods—for he really did not possess any single "method," and shunned the idea of a "historical method" as a whole—nor is it the result of some linguistic enterprise or polemical mission. Dawson's strength lies in his approach to history as a cultural unity that, although fragmented, can be recovered through a reinvigoration of religious values and a renewal of spiritual energy. Dawson sets the standard high.

In the first chapter, history was discussed as something that is intimately tied to the idea of culture and Dawson's interdisciplinary approach was introduced. For Dawson, a culture is most accurately defined as a moral order based in specific religious traditions.³⁴⁴ A culture is a moral enterprise, he explains, because it

extends downwards to the most primitive forms of social life and upwards to the higher ethical systems. And all cultures from the lowest to the highest are similar in their essential structure. That is to say they all depend on religious or spiritual sanctions; they are all rooted in particular material circumstances—economic, geographical, and biological, and they themselves represent the patterns of social and moral behaviour by which these two factors are coordinated.³⁴⁵

Theology and comparative religion are paramount to a historical study, but additional disciplines are required to reach a fuller

³⁴⁴ Christopher Dawson, unpublished notes for the Christian Culture Symposium (July 8-11, 1959), Harvard Divinity School, notes dated 27 May 1959, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 11.

³⁴⁵ Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 30 November 1956, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

understanding. This means that any study of history must be informed by sociology and anthropology, and the subsequent methods such sciences entail. Science as a method of historical scholarship, Dawson cautions, must be a means, not an end. Additionally, science is a partial means because not all of history can be understood through the techniques of the scrupulous scientist. Material causes and their effects—observable things—are the subjects of scientific investigation, but where this fails to fully capture the essence of historical scholarship is that the past is not always so accessible. This lack of accessibility goes beyond a search for lost or destroyed evidence, data, and relics. The character of history, as Dawson tells his readers, is one of mystery and unexpected revelation. The temporal is subject to both natural and spiritual factors, which cannot always be accounted for in a purely material rendition of the past. This is the flaw of rationalist historians who attempt to recount the whole human drama in terms of economics, politics, and quantitative analysis.

The study of political economy and various parts within a larger society are warranted endeavors, but it is when these studies claim absolute authority in explaining the past that extreme caution should become the law. Man has never been satisfied to be led, contrary to what Buckle would have us believe, by practical and material ends, for he has continually placed his faith in a transcendent reality, illuminated by spiritual dynamism and moral rectitude.³⁴⁶ For instance, the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime can be attributed to any number of material causes—economic

³⁴⁶ Christopher Dawson, "The Nature and Destiny of Man," *The Dawson Newsletter*, Spring 1994.

instability, the evolution of a political vacuum, or a desperate attempt to recover a heavily injured national pride. The first two conditions, while indisputable, cannot alone explain the rise, or the specific actions, of the Nazi party. Of course, economics was a major factor in the seizing of power in a heavily destabilized system, but it is the recovery of national pride—the filling of a spiritual vacuum—that becomes the most provoking. Dawson believes that culture is the most basic unit of man in his function as a social being, and thus, it logically follows—based on Dawson's definition of culture—that his spiritual instincts must be served. Two options become clear: either fulfill this spiritual need through some form of transcendent religious belief, or find satisfaction by substituting it with various forms of material gratification that are cloaked as spiritual endeavors. Many times, these imposter religions take on a dimension that extends beyond the individual self, thus allowing the practitioner to believe that this "false creed" is justified because it reaches past his own personal interests. This is the result of sentimentality, or in more modern terms, the humanistic spirit. False gods are found in national pride, material equality, obsessive egalitarianism, and sentimental humanitarianism, and when they rule alone—because they are purely earthly ends, supported by earthly means—they become tyrannical, unnatural forces of cruelty, wantonness, and destruction. Indeed, culture is a spiritual corporation even if society refuses to recognize it as such, and replaces the genuine objects of adoration with things of this world. This understanding was the foundation of

Dawson's work and the base for his attack on ideology in the sixteenth through twentieth-centuries.

The ends of historical scholarship are widely understood to be a kind of understanding of the past. The past cannot be reconstructed, nor can it be captured as a frozen relic. Of course, artifacts survive, first-hand accounts of particular events and people are saved from destruction, and stories are passed from one generation to the next; however, these "sources" are only capable of giving historians a brief glimpse of the past as opposed to a complete picture. Seeing the past as it was is an impossible task, but what we can capture, as was Ranke's intention, is the *essence* of the past. We can come to an informed understanding of history if the historian understands his own limitations and the limits of his discipline. This was the fatal flaw of Hegel who understood history to be the highest form of knowledge, and this misapplication of his subject produced dangerous ideologies followed by grave social and spiritual consequences. History understood as the primary object of knowledge—especially in the materialist view—is dangerous because it fixates our attentions on this world, and leaves no room for the unexpected and the unknowable.

To Dawson, God was not the object of human knowledge, but this is only because we cannot fully know God. God is, however, the center of our source for understanding everything in existence. In Dawson's view, and to the traditional Christian, we can know God on a personal level, but we do not possess the power to know Him in any measure of wholeness. Because Dawson, following in the tradition of Catholic teaching, shunned William Paley's idea of a "clockmaker"

Creator, God plays an intimate part in the life of man, and through grace, participates fully in creation. Thus, we can never fully know the will of God, nor can man ever attempt to circumvent His intentions. Materiality, in this understanding, takes a secondary place to the spiritual forces enacted by God. It is up to man to accept or reject them, to include them in his life or to live for the ephemeral sensations bestowed by a purely temporal existence.

Dawson's understanding of history is completely informed by theological insights, but it is simultaneously grounded in the temporal. To Dawson, God is the ultimate reality, and thus the exclusion of God from an inquiry into the nature of reality must become an abstraction. God, and accordingly, theology, must be part of the *actual*. Nevertheless, Dawson understood the importance of scientific method as something contributing great truth to the historical discipline and believed that the methods of the scientist must, to a large degree, be incorporated into any proper study of the past. The incorporation of a tamed sociology into the historical imagination was necessary to come to an informed understanding of human affairs.

These scientific techniques, however, are subordinate to the theological framework under which history operates. Scientific method is only able to explain the physical, and at the very most, the quantifiably empirical. Even in certain material elements, science gives little or no explanation. Chemical imbalances and past experiences explain much in psychology, but it is almost impossible to explain all psychological impulses in terms of solid evidence. Additionally, what is the materialist historian to make

of plain forgetfulness or of a shift in an individual's spirituality? Surely, these cannot be classified as psychological abnormalities. Dawson is clear in his assertion that the political historian of fourth-century Rome could not have seen the coming of the end of his empire given the material and military strength it possessed, for he was unable to see the immense spiritual power possessed by growing numbers of Christians. History, then, is not subordinate to scientific method, but science is in many cases subordinate to history. Disciplines must not work as independent units, separated by pathetic rivalries, because they participate in one common task—coming to an understanding of man and his place in the cosmos.

The second chapter assessed Dawson's understanding of the idea of progress. Antiquity viewed movement as something cyclical in nature, and it was not until the coming of Christ that man was "taken off the wheel" and placed on a straight path. To the Christian, this path is an apocalyptic one that leads to final judgment at the end of time. Thus, the coming of Christ, at the moment of Incarnation, was the entering of eternity into time. To the Christian, the coming of Christ gave meaning to human life, and our existence—in an instant—became a teleological enterprise. Progress, then, possesses a special meaning to the Christian.

Progress, as a term of eighteenth-century sociology, is the belief that civilization is consistently improving as it moves toward some unknown goal of ultimate perfection. The problem with this understanding is that it is purely relativistic and narrow. The rationalists viewed progress exclusively as material progress

coupled with abstract morality that was largely based on intangible objects such as equality. To Dawson, progress is something more dynamic than material advancement because it entails a degree of existential, overall improvement, and not just advancement in a single area. Cultural progress, to be more precise—and as a function of Dawson's definition of culture—is the advancement of the soul in its relation to God. When men's souls are genuinely ordered to something higher than this world, the effects on temporality are often positive in any so-called "objective" sense.

Much of Dawson's writing is focused on critiquing a form of progress that has degenerated into a type of god. To a large degree, Dawson's conception of progress can be framed as a movement from the time of the Incarnation of Christ to the end of history when all men will be judged. It is more of a cultural dynamism than a specific formula for social improvement or the aspiration to achieve some unknown perfection. Dawson believes in progress, but where he differs from many of his predecessors is in his understanding of the supposed "laws" of progress, and with Karl Popper, he eschews the idea that history is governed by various inevitabilities. There is poverty in historicism because it is reductionism in its most culturally vicious form. In coming to understand the causes and effects of everyday events—with some causes being out of our perceptual reach—Dawson subscribes to a Thomist view of human nature, with its acute understanding of our place in the cosmos. In this way, he believes that every person is subject to the will of God, but free to choose his own path, make his own decisions, and be subject to the responsibilities his

choices entail. Human events are not the result of abstract laws of history, in this sense, but the result of human actions in participation with God. It is the Catholic view, *par excellence*, and Dawson is its most eloquent expositor, if not since the time of St Augustine, at the very least in his own age.

Dawson keenly understands that history cannot be judged by its material successes, or failures. Some of history's greatest triumphs have been the result of a material loss, while some of its most significant defeats are the result of material "progress." The limits of progress become clear in these terms, and understanding these limits was a principal task for Dawson. The decline of spirituality in the modern world leaves man craving some form of otherworldly satisfaction, and this is fulfilled—in our own age—by ideology in the form of political-economy. Christendom's final gasp of unity in the sixteenth-century further propelled this faith in the rational to irrational ends. With the Reformation, the unifying bonds of Christian culture were forever dissolved and ideology filled the void that was left by a previously vibrant, spiritual society.

The rise of scientific rationalism as the prism through which society is both organized and understood provided a spirit quite contrary to the one that extended throughout the West since the time of the late Roman Empire. Dawson admires science and many of the great achievements in technology, but he cautions against placing faith in such abstract institutions. The threat to modern culture is not necessarily a blind faith in progress—although Dawson sees this as a means to improper ends—but an unyielding belief in

technology. Liberalism is a key part of western culture, but it must be tamed to prevent it from becoming an avenue to its own destruction—a destruction caused by unrestrained belief in a technoculture. The god of progress easily mutates into the god of technology—in essence, whatever ephemeral “good” is occupying the thoughts of man becomes the object of his worship. To Dawson, this was more than an inconsistency in logic and a misrepresentation of the definition of God; it was something inexorably corrosive to the soul and destructive to the greater order of society.

Dawson’s historical thought is immensely Catholic in its universalism and orthodoxy. This is not only shown in his philosophical writings on history, but in his actual treatment of it. Two volumes of Gifford Lectures on the role of religion in culture, both primitive and Western; a history of the “Dark Ages”; a critique of the French Revolution; and an extensive treatment of the “dividing of Christendom,” all combine to create a sophisticated vision of the past that transcends any one ideological system to form a historical unity that is absent from any previous treatments by “world historians.” Dawson’s work is not a history of the world, *per se*, but it is a history of culture that is sensitive to the bonds that hold people together as the children of God. Western culture, like all others, is driven by a spiritual engine that must be maintained if it is to function as a coherent, ordered unit that is capable of interacting with other cultures and civilizations.

Two overarching ideas dominate the work of Dawson: religion and cultural unity. It is through these two related concepts by which Dawson understands the dynamics of history as an unveiling of

divine mystery that is shaped, although not exclusively, by human actions. History is the unfolding of a divine plan and the responsibility of understanding the limits of this discipline is the *modus operandi* of the proper historian. To Dawson, religious belief and spirituality are forces that cannot be separated from the idea of culture, and as such, they play an immense role in determining the structure of progress and the vitality of a people.

Dawson contends against the heirs of Enlightenment history by providing a lens through which the past can be seen as a spiritual enterprise, and not just as a rational sensation or emotional journey. To Dawson, every Christian mind is one that is alive with hope and potentiality as long as it is a "living mind"—that is, not "enervated by custom or ossified by prejudice."³⁴⁷ The role of the Church is to produce men of high intellect, but even more importantly, men of high spirit. It is in this way that the true "Superman" is realized and that culture is given life. If Christianity loses its spiritual dynamics, as it is in constant danger of doing, it will abdicate its ability to make any impact or be an agent of cultural change. For Dawson, echoing his great teacher, Augustine, the true choice to be made by humankind is between the City of God and the City of Man. The danger with choosing the latter is that it will be taken away by time, while the choice to be a citizen of the former is the choice of everlasting life.

In Dawson's vision, the Catholic Church is a medium that stands between material culture and the eternal world. The danger

³⁴⁷ Christopher Dawson, *Christianity and the New Age* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 1985), 103.

with modern ideologies is that they fulfill the spiritual needs of man without delivering the spiritual substance that is truly required. This was the danger of the "new humanists" in the early-twentieth century, just as it was with their predecessors in the eighteenth and nineteenth. T.S. Eliot, writing about his own teacher, Irving Babbitt—whom he refuses to undermine—shows his hesitation with such false religions:

My chief apprehension about "humanism" has been lest the teachings of Mr. Babbitt should be transformed, by a host of zealous disciples, into the hard and fast dogma of a new ethical church, or something between a church and a political party.³⁴⁸

The key word in Eliot's language is dogma. When an ideology becomes so hard, omnipotent, and indiscriminant—that it becomes the voice of a new creed with misdirected ends—it develops into something dangerous to the soul, and consequently, dangerous to the wider culture. In Dawson's work, this is a reoccurring theme, and one that highlights the important place of the Church in history. Not only is it the bridge between the spiritual and the temporal, it is the shepherd that keeps a mischievous flock in order. Thus, relegating God to some quiet corner in a culture based on material achievement is not a sign of social progress, but as Peguy said, it is a sign of social decay.

The great religions of the world have not been the result of an auxiliary development within the civilizations in which they reside. Historically, the opposite has been the case: those civilizations themselves are the product of the great religions and owe their foundations to the spiritual activity that extends

³⁴⁸ T.S. Eliot to the Editor of *The Bookman*, 31 March 1930, Paul Elmer More MSS, Princeton University, Box 3, Folder 3.

throughout the whole of culture. To Dawson, "a civilization which has lost its religion becomes sooner or later a society which has lost its culture."³⁴⁹ This is why a rejuvenation of spiritual energy is necessary in the West if any degree of cultural unity is to be achieved.

The ancient religions of the East transcend every aspect of culture, and in this there is a major difference with the West, which possesses a secondary element: the scientific tradition. In reality, the West is really an alloy and not an element like its Eastern counterparts. The beauty of the western tradition is in its balance of religious and secular elements that combine to form a unique synergy. Since the Reformation, in Dawson's mind, a steady trend has arisen of turning to the secular. This is the dilemma of the West. To Dawson, the creation of a perfect synthesis of material and spiritual values—a culture, which was most closely achieved in the Middle Ages—is a practical impossibility. Nevertheless, the spiritual foundations of culture must be recovered and reanimated if our culture is to remain dynamic. The life of the West is slowly slipping away, and for Dawson, the only chance of survival is predicated upon rediscovering our primeval faith in the risen Christ. The unity of the West, and specifically of Europe, is founded upon, as Francesca Murphy argues, the *Christianitas*—the Christian "folk," and as long as Christendom is divided among believers, non-believers, and competing factions of Christians, the idea of the West is nothing more than a formless abstraction. The

³⁴⁹ Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 180.

body of Christ must be a single organism, united by the love of God, and under the protection of His sanctifying grace.

Dawson believed that the unity of mankind extended beyond the "borders" of individual cultures and embraced all. Although those who know Christ have an obligation to live under His law and in His love, those who do not are not denied His affection, esteem, or protection. Dawson's understanding of history shows that a unity of the human race is possible because we are all participants in a life created by God, and under His direction. Although it is necessary to be a Christian to accept this exact interpretation as truth, one need not be a devout follower of Christ to comprehend the idea that we are one people, produced by the same creator, and participating in the same cosmic order. This does not mean that all cultures are equal in their intellectual, material, spiritual, or psychological development, but this understanding intrinsically demands that each person be treated as a child of Christ.

It is in this universalism that Dawson's strength as a historian and as a social thinker is most fully realized. This is where the Catholic understanding of history—its theology of history—comes to full fruition and is conceived as a universal endeavor in which God is the central figure in all of existence. It is in the "fullness of time," as St Paul tells us, that we will come to know the mysteries of our existence and the unending love of God. The Catholic view of history, as Dawson understands it, is the most complete understanding of history that man can possess because it embraces the unknown and the mysterious, the unexplainable and the unimaginable. The pledge of secular ideologies, the seductive tonic

of materialism, and the false promise of rationalism—as alluring as they present themselves to fulfill the demands of the present age—are ephemeral institutions that are as fleeting as time itself. It is only when the mind is concentrated toward the Resurrected Son that it radiates its true being, and as a consequence, serves the interests of men in time. This was the humble beauty of Dawson's understanding of man and history, and the reason it will, like that of his mentor, Augustine, transcend the ages.

Appendix: Biographical Sketch, Conversion, and Introduction to Major Writings

Christopher Dawson is an enigmatic character in the history of Western thought. No scholar of his generation was a greater champion of the idea of a united Christian culture, yet no scholar was so simultaneously aware of the problems such a unity entailed or the complications presented by the existence of other peoples.³⁵⁰ Though his influence, much like T.S. Eliot's, declined in the years immediately preceding his death, Dawson is experiencing a revival in both academic and popular circles as his sagacity is more widely recognized and his writings appear in new editions.³⁵¹ Unlike other "committed" historians of his generation, Dawson does not approach his subject from the backdrop of his own religion; instead, like John Henry Newman, he comes to his faith as a consequence of his scholarship. His conversion would be as much an intellectual awakening as it was a spiritual transformation.

Born at Hay Castle, in the Wye Valley, on the border of Herefordshire, to an Anglo-Catholic family in the waning years of Victoria's reign, Christopher Dawson spent his most formative years among the ancient ruins of the Yorkshire countryside. No doubt inspiring, this setting provided Dawson with the imaginative quality of mind that would serve his scholarship throughout his life. Wandering through ancient abbeys and castles provided countless hours in teaching the young Dawson to appreciate the past, not as an object of distant sentimentality, but as a reality in which we can

³⁵⁰ Dawson cautioned against too closely associating the "West" with Christendom in the absolute sense, and he is especially critical of John Henry Newman's willingness to use the terms almost analogously. Christopher Dawson to Leo Ward, 20 July 1954, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 4.

³⁵¹ Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," *American Scholar*, 119.

attempt to find meaning. For Dawson, the past came alive in the gothic architecture of medieval Europe, and when the family moved to those ancient lands in the Yorkshire Dales upon which his father would build Hartlington Hall, Dawson found himself steeped in religious and cultural traditions dating back to a time beyond recent memory. It was this upbringing that led him to see the virtues of country life and instilled in him a dislike of urban environments. This distaste for the city would echo throughout most of his important writings.

Dawson's unique intellectual background, steeped in the romantic serenity of Northern England, as well as his early-conversion to Roman Catholicism, are both central components of understanding his thought and legacy. Dawson was, first and foremost, a Catholic thinker, and he firmly believed that a Catholic scholar benefits his Church only if he seeks Truth with an open-mind—for Truth serves the Church just as much as falsity causes it immense harm. Dawson's desire to show parallels between the Christian patrimony and the heritage of non-Christian cultures underscores this strong conviction.³⁵²

First, however, a brief account of Dawson's early life will show how his mind was formed into a powerful and imaginative intellect that would consistently show itself in all of his later scholarship. Christened at Hay Parish Church by his grandfather, Archdeacon Bevan of Hay Castle, on 18 November 1889, Dawson began his journey as a Christian in much the same manner as would any infant of his lineage. Although a stuffy, Victorian picture shows

³⁵² Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture: 1947 Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of Edinburgh* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958).

him to be a robust baby, Dawson grew to become a sickly child, and like many children who grow-up with medical complications, he was extremely precocious. Hay Castle was a medieval estate built by the Norman de Braose family in the twelfth-century, but extensively remodeled during the Tudor era. According to Dawson's daughter, Christina Scott, Celtic legend holds that the castle's origins stretch back much farther and associate it with "a figure called Maude of St Valery, mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Chronicles*."³⁵³

This house—although recently gutted by fire, and now the site of the largest second-hand bookshop in the world—was quite the place for a young child to develop an intensely active imagination. Thankfully, much of the original structure endured the recent blaze and the castle's exterior looks as it did when Archdeacon Bevan called it home. The young Dawson lived at Hay Castle for six impressionable years, exploring its haunted tower, its secret passages, and the ivory covered walls within which he lived with his family. Hay Castle was a magical place, not only because of its mythological foundation and its aesthetic charm, but also because of where it was situated geographically. Here a mix of English and Welsh traditions illuminated an already mystical, culturally vibrant landscape.³⁵⁴

Dawson's father was an officer in the British Army and had no home of his own. Thus, the young Christopher was raised in his mother's ancestral house—filled with a feeling of antiquity, warmth,

³⁵³ Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 12-13.

³⁵⁴ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 14.

and continuity. Burke's concept of the "unbought grace of life" is alive in such great houses, and Dawson's understanding of the generations at such a young age would have pleased that noble statesman as much as if he had been the heir of Cawdor or Traquair. Dawson's love of his heritage was not an actively intellectual enterprise, but it was a trait developed by his surroundings and encouraged by his family. At Hay Castle, the present was alive with the memories of the past, and each successive generation laid chapters to its winding history. Here, shadows lingered, and Dawson was completely enveloped by the feeling of belonging to something beyond the mere moment. An unconscious realization it might have been, but it was nonetheless an intimate part of his heritage and his life.

Dawson inherited from his mother—a Welsh woman of exceptional competence—a love for the Welsh countryside, along with its people, literature, and most of all, its saints, on which subject she was fluent. Dawson's later understanding of Christian culture as something inextricably linked to the cult of the saints—especially in the Middle Ages—must have developed in this period. Mary Bevan Dawson was a descendant of an ancient Welsh family whose origins stretch so far into the distant past that their tale is often "more colorful perhaps than credible."³⁵⁵ Dawson's grandfather, however, was not as Welsh as his mother, for he had the temper of a Victorian churchman, and was the vicar of Hay for fifty-six years. His education at Hertford College, Oxford, was followed by his ordination and subsequent assignment to the congregation at Hay.

³⁵⁵ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 16.

While he never prospered from his ecclesial position, the Archdeacon did leave a substantial estate upon his death; yet, the Bevan children were reared in the manner typical of upper-middle class Victorians—"half an egg was considered quite adequate for a child's breakfast for instance, while butter and jam were never allowed together."³⁵⁶

The Archdeacon's unflinching character was only matched by his penchant for scholarship. He was, according to Dawson's mother Mary, a gifted linguist not only in Latin and Greek, but also in French, German, Dutch, Norwegian, and, strangely, Walloon. It is reported that before he died he had begun to study Hebrew while he took his breakfast.³⁵⁷ Additionally, two books he had written on ancient and modern geography became standard textbooks and were used extensively at public schools such as Eton. The country life, and all of its benefits to scholarship and clean-living, were paramount to the Archdeacon's development and on his influence over his grandson, Christopher.

In 1886, Mary Bevan married Henry Phillip Dawson, a member of the Royal Artillery, whom she had met several years earlier. Both were approximately 36, and possessed of similar academic interests. Captain Dawson was more of an explorer than a soldier, and the closest he ever came to actual combat was behind the front-lines in the Franco-Prussian War, where he was an officer with his cousin, later Lord Kitchener of Khartoum.³⁵⁸ He had, however, been sent all over the world to exotic places such as Cuba and on a circumpolar

³⁵⁶ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 17.

³⁵⁷ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 17.

³⁵⁸ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 20.

expedition where he was stationed at Fort Rae on Great Bear Lake. Although Henry Dawson was sent to this region to take magnetic readings, he spent much of his time conducting sociological studies of the Eskimos and local Indian cultures. Especially important in his research was his treatment of their religion and its role in primitive culture. In 1896, the War Office ordered Henry Dawson to the command in Singapore—a prospect he loathed. Instead of taking his family to what he considered an unhealthy and unfriendly part of the world, he retired from military service—at which point he was promoted to Colonel—and moved the family to his ancestral land in Yorkshire.

The land upon which Colonel Dawson would build Hartlington Hall had been in the Dawson family for over two centuries. Although the ancient house that had been on the property was demolished in the mid-nineteenth-century, the site was the perfect place for Colonel Dawson to move his growing family. Situated on a hill above the River Wharfe in an area known as Craven, it lay between Burnsall and Bolton Abbey, which played an important role in young Christopher's development. Colonel Dawson intended to build a small country home that would, for his son—in later years—be the setting for many fond memories.³⁵⁹ He wished to establish a country seat that could be loved by the generations—for Colonel Dawson obviously believed in the "great mysterious incorporation of the human race," where the living, the dead, and the unborn are brought into communion with one another. Tradition and family were paramount.

³⁵⁹ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 26.

Here, Christopher discovered the value of legends and the immeasurable worth of ancient myths. Most important, however, was the family's example in all things religious. With his sister, Gwendoline, Christopher began his day with prayers led by their father. At these daily gatherings, the entire family was present, and these prayers closely resembled the daily Office of the Catholic Church—not typical in English Victorian households. To Dawson, religion became bound with the natural world of the elements, and Christopher's mystical romanticism was laden with Scriptural parallels.

Dawson saw what he perceived to be fatal flaws in the Protestant service in which religion seemed to be a moral system emptied of its spiritual elements. The young Dawson was drawn to the idea of religion as a spiritual force that is alive and active in daily existence. Even more striking was his understanding that history and religion are closely linked. He later wrote:

Bolton Priory which lies a few miles from Hartlington down the Wharfe, always seemed to me the perfect embodiment of this lost element in the northern culture—a spiritual grace which had once been part of our social tradition and which still survived as a ghostly power brooding over the river and the hills.³⁶⁰

Dawson's father was an Anglo-Catholic, who was involved in the Church Union party, and was a close acquaintance of Lord Halifax. Although his mother harbored deep anti-Catholic prejudices—most likely from her upbringing as a conservative Anglican—Christopher was taken by his father's keen interest in Roman Catholicism. He developed a deep affection for Dante, whom he thought to be the most

³⁶⁰ Christopher Dawson, "Tradition and Inheritance," in *The Wind and the Rain* (1949); reprinted with an introduction by John J. Mulloy (St Paul, Minnesota, 1970), 26.

perfect poet in history, and whose genius exceeded the talents of Shakespeare and Milton. He was also attracted by his father's intellectual pursuits, which were broadly Catholic. Christopher found great dynamism in the traditions of the Roman Church and especially in its liturgy and its ancient literature and art. Years later, Dawson would discover the power of Catholic theology, and would become a great champion of its dogmas. Yet, at this early stage, Dawson's love of Catholicism was brewing, not out of spiritual devotion, but out of an intellectual awakening. Dawson knew that religion was something more than an empty moral system and the Catholic faith's apparent spiritual character provided an attractive alternative to the asceticism and rigidity of the protestant service. This began a process of conversion that would take several years to complete, culminating with his entering the Church on the Feast of the Epiphany in 1914.

At the age of ten, Dawson was sent to public school at Bilton Grange, near Rugby. His frail demeanor and "secluded childhood" were major disadvantages to him at a school that was fairly rough and full of germs against which he had never built immunity.³⁶¹ Dawson never held it against his parents that they sent him away to school, for he knew that they believed it to be a central part of his education if he was expected to grow as an intellectual and a gentleman. Because of his ill health, Dawson's academic success at Bilton Grange was limited. An exceptional student in history and English, he achieved poor grades in mathematics, which consistently impaired his overall record. Especially repugnant to Dawson was the

³⁶¹ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 31.

school chapel, which was strangely different in style and custom from the Anglo-Catholic tastes that he developed throughout the years. He left Bilton Grange in 1903 to enroll at Winchester, rather than Harrow—his father's school—and although they did not meet, Dawson was a schoolmate of Arnold Toynbee.³⁶² And then, much to his delight, and contrary to the darkness of Bilton Grange, there was Winchester Cathedral.

Dawson's mind was at once developing into an eclectic mix of Baroque and English tastes, and he was cultivating a strong historical consciousness that was fed by the aesthetics of that ancient place of worship. He would later write:

I learnt more during my schooldays from my visits to the Cathedral at Winchester than I did from the hours of religious instruction in school. The great church with its tombs of the Saxon kings and the medieval statesmen-bishops, gave one a greater sense of the magnitude of the religious element in our culture and the depths of its roots in our national life than anything one could learn from books.³⁶³

It was at this time, too, that Dawson began to read and collect books on a large scale. As he wrote years later in a letter to his good friend E.I. Watkin, he had "got nothing from school, little from Oxford, and less than nothing from post-Victorian urban culture."³⁶⁴ What he did learn he learned from independent study, visits to various places, and from his life in the countryside with his scholarly family.

Dawson met Edward Watkin at Bletsoe when he was sixteen, just before going-up to Oxford. Watkin would become the person who exerted the most influence over Dawson during his university years,

³⁶² Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 33.

³⁶³ Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (London & New York: 1952), 245.

³⁶⁴ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 33.

and it was Watkin who would eventually sponsor Dawson's entry into the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, Dawson went through a brief period of agnosticism, and this made his initial meeting with Watkin—an enthusiastic Anglo-Catholic—"hardly auspicious for a future friendship." Upon meeting for the first time, both men entered into a conversation that turned violent. The polemical exchange exploded in a burst of physical confrontation when Watkin smashed a garden chair over Dawson's head.³⁶⁵ But in the end, it was Watkin who helped guide him back to the Christian faith. This agnosticism may have provided the impetus for Dawson to become a Catholic, for it was the confusion of authorities in the Anglican Church that led Dawson to briefly abandon his faith. He had written in a journal, in a moment of Cartesian doubt, that the only thing he could be sure of was his own existence.³⁶⁶ Anglo-Catholicism had proven to be weakest, for Dawson, where it had claimed to be the strongest: there was a lack of central authority and a small group that lacked any power of enforcement determined all matters of orthodoxy. By 1908, however, Dawson "resolved his doubts" and returned to Christianity. He and Watkin would remain close friends.

Much of the impetus behind Dawson's return to Christianity came from a sense that he could not "acquiesce altogether in a view of life which left no place for religion."³⁶⁷ The absence of religion left a "gap" in his personal life that Dawson could not permit. Although the lack of authority in Anglo-Catholicism drove Dawson to harsh skepticism, he found it necessary to find some

³⁶⁵ Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 39.

³⁶⁶ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 39.

³⁶⁷ Christopher Dawson, "Why I Am A Catholic," *The Chesterton Review* Vol. XI, No. 2., May 1983, 111.

spiritual satisfaction that speaks to a higher level than the pure life of the intellect. From the time Dawson was a young teenager, he had known the historical realities of Catholicism, but he did not know it as a spiritual enterprise. He had slowly developed an appreciation for it as such, but it did not come into maturity for several years. His early exposure to the lives of the saints, medieval mysticism, and ancient lore had left him wanting some spiritual satisfaction—but the young boy did not yet have the sophisticated spiritual energy to fill the void.

Dawson traveled to Rome when he was nineteen. Overcome by the power of Baroque culture, he had found an overwhelming atmosphere that was conspicuously absent in all English churches.³⁶⁸ In Rome, Dawson realized that Catholic culture was not merely a relic of the Middle Ages, and even more importantly, he became aware of a resurgence of Catholic culture throughout the world. The world of the counter-Reformation became alive in Dawson's mind, and he turned to the literature of St Theresa and St John of the Cross, both of whom Dawson believed to be of higher quality than any of the great non-Catholic, religious writers.³⁶⁹ To a large degree, this is the period to which Dawson directed much of his energy and his sympathies.

It was through a study of St Paul and St John by which Dawson came to a real understanding of the unity of the Catholic faith. He came to understand the significance of the trinity and the Incarnation, and more importantly, the sacraments and how they

³⁶⁸ Christopher Dawson, "Why I Am A Catholic," 111; additionally, John Mulloy recorded a conversation with Dawson in which he claimed that the beauty of Baroque culture is captured by its sympathy for a monarch fulfilling a sacred office. Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

³⁶⁹ Christopher Dawson, "Why I Am A Catholic," 112.

provided a unity to the whole Catholic tradition. For Dawson, the life of the saint became more than a mere account of mysticism or an individual achievement of moral righteousness. The life of the saint became the exemplar of the "perfect manifestation of the supernatural life which exists in every individual Christian, the first fruits of that new humanity which it is the work of the Church to create."³⁷⁰ Dawson's earlier skepticism was removed by his coming to understand the "doctrine of Sanctifying Grace." The New Testament's revelations, enlivened by the commentary of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, led Dawson to the realization that the Catholic Church was the only "true" path. For Dawson, Christianity was not an "esoteric religion," as it served as a universal spiritual force that is the life of man. This spirituality he took to be most fully embodied in the Roman Catholic Church.³⁷¹

While at Oxford, Dawson did not especially love the standard curriculum in modern history. Although he failed to secure a Brackenbury Scholarship at Balliol, he continued at the insistence of his tutor, and "achieved one out of Trinity."³⁷² At Trinity, Dawson was "painfully shy and unsure of himself socially," as had no particular place in the Oxford social scene. Although he was from a public school and was a member of the land-owning class, Dawson had no time for the snobbery of Oxford or the pettiness of the Etonians who were there for their "gentleman's degree." Dawson's tutor was the former Balliol man, Ernest Barker, a scholar of "strongly

³⁷⁰ Dawson, "Why I Am A Catholic," 113.

³⁷¹ Dawson, "Why I Am A Catholic," 113.

³⁷² Hilaire Belloc had been a Brackenbury Scholar at Balliol at an earlier time.

individualist character" and of diverse interests.³⁷³ Barker was unusual at Oxford because he encouraged his students to depart from the standard history curriculum of Hallam and Stubbs, and encouraged them to focus on the larger philosophical dimensions of the subject. Dawson's unusual brilliance was recognized by Barker who would later claim that he only had begun to learn history the day Dawson became his student.³⁷⁴

Part of Dawson's conversion was his reading of the liberal-Catholic writings of Baron von Hugel.³⁷⁵ Here Dawson solidified his interests in comparative religion—which would stay with him his whole life—and found an appreciation for the "infinite" and mysterious nature of Christianity.³⁷⁶ The European Thomists who, in Aquinas, saw a belief in intuition as a legitimate means of religious knowledge further influenced his Christian vision.³⁷⁷ It was, however, the writings of St Augustine, and particularly the *City of God*, that had the most significant effect upon his development.³⁷⁸ Catholicism soon became a living faith for him, and Dawson, who had little active interest in becoming a Catholic, found himself drawing closer to the Faith. Watkin, his close friend, had

³⁷³ Sir Ernest Barker (1874-1960) was a prominent political scientist and historian. He taught at Oxford, the London School of Economics, and Cambridge, where he was Professor of Political Science. His books include *Reflections on Government* (1942) and *Principles of Social and Political Theory* (1951).

³⁷⁴ Ernest Barker's review of *The Judgment of the Nations* in *The Spectator* vol. 170 (1934), 152.

³⁷⁵ Baron Friedrich von Hugel (1852-1925) was an influential Roman Catholic philosopher and writer. Austrian by nationality, he spent much of his life in Great Britain. His books include the famed *Reality of God*, and he is credited by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th Edition) as being responsible for the founding of the London Society for the Study of Religion. William Butler Yeats mentions him in the final stanza of "Vacillation."

³⁷⁶ Christopher Dawson, undated, "Manuscript Notes: Tradition and Inheritance," Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 4, Folder 94.

³⁷⁷ John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversation with Christopher Dawson," 18 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

³⁷⁸ Other significant intellectual figures in his conversion, according to his unpublished notes are R.H. Benson and F. Burdett, S.J. Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 4, Folder 94.

already converted during his first year, and Dawson's time was approaching. His decision in 1913, to "go over to Rome," was not easy, and it is eerily similar to the circumstances surrounding the conversion of John Henry Newman.³⁷⁹ Like Newman, Dawson believed that the Protestant faiths are irreconcilable with good history in that they lacked a unified structure. It was an acceptance of the Christian past that led Dawson to whole-heartedly accept Catholicism. Newman's view reflects Dawson's:

There were but two paths—the way of faith and the way of unbelief, and as the latter led through the halfway house of Liberalism to Atheism, the former led through the half way house of Anglicanism to Catholicism.³⁸⁰

To a large degree, Dawson's conversion to Catholicism is illustrative of his distaste for revolutionary ideas. As he would later write, the Protestant Reformation was a "classic example of emptying out the baby with the bath." He continued:

The reformers revolted against the paternalism of medieval religion, and so they abolished the Mass. They protested against the lack of personal holiness, and so they abolished the saints. They attacked the wealth and self-indulgence of the monks and they abolished monasticism and the life of voluntary poverty and asceticism. They had no intention of abandoning the ideal of Christian perfection, but they sought to realize it in Puritanism instead of Monasticism and in pietism instead of mysticism.³⁸¹

Upon leaving Oxford, Dawson was unable to pursue military service because of poor health, and instead, spent the next fourteen years reading as wide an array of literature as possible. The intellectual and spiritual energy required for his conversion, combined with his engagement to Valery Mills, almost caused Dawson

³⁷⁹ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 62.

³⁸⁰ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: 1846, 1878), 8, 97.

³⁸¹ Christopher Dawson, "Religion and Life," in *The Dublin Review*, vol. 142 (1933), 9.

to have a nervous breakdown.³⁸² Valery's mother did not fully approve of their marriage on account of Dawson's frail nature and this caused even more stress for the young scholar. Similarly, Dawson's mother and sister—both devout Anglicans—did not approve of his new, Catholic wife, and this issue was never fully resolved. As a consequence, he delved deeper into his work. Valery was living far away with her mother at Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire, and Dawson was able to devote all of his energy to his scholarship.

Although the family made their permanent residence in Exeter, where Dawson was associated with the local university, every summer they would spend about two months at Hartlington with his parents. Christina Scott writes that her father was always very approachable, except during his working hours. Dawson loved to take the children for long walks and rock climbing in the nearby countryside that so heavily influenced his own early development.³⁸³

Dawson rarely held formal academic positions, and in that way, he is one of the last men of letters in the tradition of Samuel Johnson, although unlike Johnson, he found use for the term "civilization." He was, between 1925 and 1933, Lecturer in the History of Christianity at the University of Exeter—a position that was unfulfilling in itself, but nonetheless allowed Dawson the ability to concentrate on his writing and research. Fourteen years passed before Dawson published his first major work, *The Age of the Gods*, in which he began his historical inquiry into the nature of

³⁸² Valery Mills married Christopher Dawson in 1916. She was the daughter of an Oxford architect and would mother two girls, Christina and Juliana, and a son, Christopher. She managed the Dawson household and bore a great deal of the burden's resulting from her husband's poor health and occasionally depressed demeanor. A "cradle-Catholic," she was never fully accepted by Dawson's mother and sister.

³⁸³ Scott, *A Historian and His World*, 80.

religion and culture. It was this book that laid the foundations for all of his subsequent work. In fact, Dawson planned to write a series of books on the history of culture called *The Life of Civilizations*, but this was never fully realized. Nevertheless, several of his intended projects did come to full fruition. *Progress and Religion*, which is widely considered to be his most brilliant and enduring book, was meant to be a summary of the whole project. Other books included the proposed "third" titled *The Making of Europe*, while the last—a posthumously published examination of the French Revolution—was called *The Gods of Revolution*. It was Dawson's opinion, however, that his Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh, and later published as *Religion and Culture* and *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, most fully illustrated his understanding of history and culture, and in that way, exceeded all his other works.

The secluded nature of Hartlinton Hall, which he inherited upon his father's death in 1933, combined with poor health, finally forced Dawson to move his family out of Yorkshire to Boars Hill, near Oxford. He spent four years in America as the first incumbent of the Charles Chauncy Stillman Chair of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard University—a five-year appointment—but he unexpectedly resigned after four due to compounding medical complications. Harvard, after finding no suitable American for the job, wanted him.³⁸⁴ The dean of the divinity school wrote to him with great pleasure and enthusiastically offered Dawson the position: "You, sir, are the man we want to be the first to fill this chair. Even

³⁸⁴ John Courtney Murray, SJ, was offered the position but was unable to accept due to other commitments.

if you would wish to make the term much shorter than five years, we should still want you."³⁸⁵ The Archbishop of Boston was no less excited at the prospect of having Dawson fill this prestigious post.

Horton wrote:

We appeal to you as a son of the Church. Never before in the history of the United States has there been anything resembling this professorship—a chair in Roman Catholic Studies in a university divinity school Protestant in tradition and Protestant in outlook. Archbishop Cushing of Boston has approved the new departure, and we really expect that future historians will look back upon it as a new beginning, after centuries, of an era of happier relationships between the two great groups.³⁸⁶

Dawson decided to rise to the challenge and leave his beloved England, but responded to Horton's request with a note of combined caution and optimism:

Of course I do not feel that I am competent to cover the range of studies that you outline in the third paragraph of your letter. But for some years now I have been feeling that there was a need for a fuller study of Christian culture than has hitherto been found in our higher education.³⁸⁷

He was himself excited at the prospect as he thought that the battle for Christian culture was shifting from Europe to America. It was in the United States, he believed, that the fate of Christianity would be decided. Although America was the seat of technological culture, it was also the home of a vibrant Roman Catholic renaissance—particularly situated on the Atlantic coast—that gave hope to the prospect of a growth in spiritual dynamism that would

³⁸⁵ Douglas Horton to Christopher Dawson, 6 February 1958, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 164.

³⁸⁶ Douglas Horton to Christopher Dawson, 6 February 1958, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 164.

³⁸⁷ Christopher Dawson to Douglas Horton, 25 February 1958, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 164.

naturally combat materialism and the ideologies driven by unyielding technological advance.³⁸⁸

Throughout his life, Dawson maintained numerous literary friendships. Perhaps the most important was that between himself and Watkin, but other significant relationships are worth noting. T.S. Eliot was greatly influenced by Dawson, and his ideas are found sporadically in his writings especially in *Murder in the Cathedral*, as well as in the "Four Quartets," and possibly, in the *Wasteland*. Eliot was so impressed by Dawson, and particularly his knowledge of Catholicism, that he requested he begin contributing to the *Criterion* and in the development of special projects. Eliot was particularly interested in having Dawson write about marriage and morals, and the Catholic conception of sex.³⁸⁹ Additionally, it is likely that C.S. Lewis's understanding of the Tao in the *Abolition of Man* is the result of Dawson's discussion of natural law in *Progress and Religion*.³⁹⁰

Like Eliot and Lewis, Dawson believed that the West was headed toward some major cataclysm. He thought that the best way to stave off such a catastrophe was for the West to return to a sort of unity based on its Christian patrimony—its organic heritage. Here, the Catholic possesses a particular responsibility.

They are not involved in the immediate issues of the conflict in the same way as are the political parties, for they belong to a supranational spiritual society, which is more organically united than any political body which possesses an autonomous body of principles and doctrines on which to base their judgments. Moreover, they have an historical mission to

³⁸⁸ Christopher Dawson, "On the Occasion of my 70th Birthday in America," Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 16.

³⁸⁹ T.S. Eliot to Christopher Dawson, 10 December 1929, Dawson MSS, University of St Thomas, Box 14, Folder 120.

³⁹⁰ John J. Mulloy, Unpublished "Record of conversation with Christopher Dawson," 21 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

maintain and strengthen the unity of Western culture which had its roots in Christendom against the destructive forces which are attempting its total subversion. They are the heirs and successors of the makers of Europe—the men who saved civilization from perishing in the storm of barbarian invasion and who built the bridge between the ancient and modern worlds.³⁹¹

The overarching theme in Dawson's writing is unity. The world, to Dawson, is not an artificial place that can be created, and recreated through abstract planning. This was the root of his problem with both revolutionaries and people who place their faith in technology. Dawson, like de Maistre before him, distrusted those who believed they could dismantle generations of organic cultural growth and swiftly replace it with some "better," rationally constructed system.³⁹²

Dawson believed the Second World War to be the result of cultural forces that had been compounding for centuries. He wrote "tirelessly" in support of the Allied cause, and found himself in the unusual position of polemicist: he was, for a short time, editor of the Catholic journal, *The Dublin Review*, and was vice-president of the Sword of the Spirit—a movement formed by Anglican Bishop George Bell, as a cooperative spiritual endeavor to rejuvenate a decimated culture in the wake of the war. In this, all Christian denominations would have to participate, and Christianity would have to become a unified body of believers.³⁹³ Dawson hoped that his solid stance against Nazi ideology would awaken his readers to the

³⁹¹ Christopher Dawson, "Editorial Note," *The Dublin Review*, July 1940, 1.

³⁹² Dawson was particularly fond of Joseph de Maistre, especially in his ability to "see the hand of Providence even in historical catastrophe and misfortune." Especially admirable was de Maistre's ability to maintain hope, even in the face of certain defeat. John J. Mulloy, "Record of Conversation with Christopher Dawson," 22 August 1953, Dawson MSS, University of Notre Dame, Box 1, Folder 2.

³⁹³ Hitchcock, "Christopher Dawson," 115.

prospect that the crisis was not merely political or economic, but the result of a spiritual vacuum. In *The Judgment of the Nations*, Dawson attempted to enliven the debate by insisting that something beyond the political was at stake. In *Religion and the Modern State*, Dawson raised the discussion to the next level when he suggested that "biblical Israel," which was both spiritually strong and materially weak, could triumph through its obedience to God. The attempt to build a "New Jerusalem," a heaven on earth—the goal of the Nazi's—was the cause, he argued, for the unwitting creation of a terrestrial hell.

The death of Dawson's close friend and ally, Arthur Cardinal Hinsley, Bishop of Westminster, meant the end of his participation in the *Sword of the Spirit*, and the conclusion of his duties as editor of the *Dublin Review*. Dawson remained undeterred, however, and increased his writings to include the important *Understanding Europe* (1952), and *The Movement of World Revolution* (1956). Turning away from politics, he spent the remainder of his years dedicated to educational reform. Dawson was convinced that religious believers were also succumbing to the pressures of secularization and that the only remedy was to put them into direct contact with their cultural patrimony. In 1961, he published his well-known study, *The Crisis of Western Education*, in which he maintained that the most effective way to combat secular ideology was through a reaffirmation of Christian principles through a program of Christian studies.

Throughout his life, Dawson was a tireless defender of religion, but he was never dogmatic. His Catholicism was intellectually central, but it was informed and open. The prospect

of a secular culture daunted him, and he saw in the political crisis of his day a more profound cultural failure—a failure of the spirit. Dawson's historical imagination was enlivened by a sense of mission and a dedication to the principles of a transcendent reality that governs all things. He understood this world as a constituent part of a larger, supernatural community, and most importantly, he believed that love and hope were the most effective agents of cultural regeneration.

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