

A Vision to Regain? Reconsidering Christopher Dawson (1889—1970)

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When, in the mid-1930s, T.S. Eliot was asked whom he considered the most influential English writer, he replied: 'Christopher Dawson'. Such a statement may cause surprise, if not disbelief. For Christopher Dawson, whose centenary is celebrated this month, is today a largely forgotten figure and his once influential books seem everywhere to be gathering dust. The reasons for this will be better understood by considering Dawson's work in the wider context of his intellectual development. Only then will it be possible to reassess the strength of his scholarship and to highlight the relevance that his vision might still hold today.

Dawson is frequently associated with that group of writers and intellectuals who continued the tradition of Chesterton and Belloc to mark the English Catholic 'revival' of the 1930s. To some extent this tendency is understandable, since much of Dawson's work was in fact aimed at making Catholicism intellectually accessible to a largely Protestant or secularized audience. But his association with Chesterton and Belloc can also be highly misleading, for, unlike the latter's militant and prolific writings, there was nothing apologetic or polemic about Dawson's work. Indeed, its fairness and serenity came as a breath of fresh air to the Catholic scholarship of the twenties and thirties, even inviting the respect and praise of non-Catholic contemporaries like Dean Inge, Sir James Marriott and H.A.L. Fisher.

Dawson's comparatively broad outlook was no doubt linked with the uninterrupted continuity of his own intellectual development. Born in Hay Castle, Wales, on 12th October 1889, Dawson was from his earliest days immersed in a society marked by a complete unification of religion and social life: a kind of Anglican theocracy, which in later years he saw as a tremendous influence on the development of his 'sense of the importance of religion in human life, as a massive, objective, unquestioned power that entered into everything and impressed its mark on the external as well as the internal world.'¹ During a boyhood which, albeit 'solitary and secluded', was nonetheless 'extremely happy', Dawson grew aware that religion was not 'merely concerned with pious moralities ... but stood close to that wonderful world of the river and the

mountain which I found around me.² Alongside this natural and spontaneous religious faith went the intellectual nourishment it received from a huge library, which Dawson could use in complete freedom and which had been well-stocked with Catholic spiritual literature by his father, a man who rated Dante high above Shakespeare or Milton.³ It was thus that from his earlier days Dawson developed a deep interest in poetry and mysticism, which he saw at the root of all natural religion and as common to all ages and all faiths.

When in 1908 Dawson went up to Oxford to read Modern History at Trinity College, he was certain that religion was a real force which could not be explained away as illusion, the widely-shared assumption of current intellectual trends. His faith, however, was still based on personal and mystical intuitions which lacked an adequate intellectual foundation. His Anglo-Catholic sympathies inclined him favourably towards the thought of the then still Anglican group represented by Ronald Knox, C.C. Martindale, Vernon Johnson and E.I. Watkin, his greatest friend. But his interest in the movement was half-hearted and he felt no particular urge to become a Catholic. It is true that at this time he was deeply influenced by the writings of Cardinal Newman and Baron von Hügel and that, after his visit to Rome during the Easter vacation of 1909, he fell in love with the Baroque and became an avid reader of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. But ironically it was the liberal Protestant Adolf Harnack who eventually convinced him that Luther had rejected the whole, not just the medieval, ideal of Christian perfection; and ultimately it was his study of Scripture, and especially of St Paul and St John, that led him to the conviction

that the Incarnation, the sacraments, the external order of the Church and the internal work of sanctifying grace were all part of one organic unity, a living tree whose roots are in the Divine nature and whose fruit is the perfection of the saints ... This fundamental doctrine ... as revealed in the New Testament and explained by St Augustine and St Thomas ... removed all my difficulties and uncertainties and carried complete conviction to my mind.⁴

Thus by the time of his reception into the Catholic Church on 5th January 1914, Dawson's religious outlook can be said to have been fully formed. For his conversion was not the expression of any deep or significant change of opinion, but rather the culmination of a gradual intellectual progression in the course of which his former Anglicanism and even a mild agnosticism could be integrated rather than outrightly rejected. His change of allegiance was marked by the same serenity and sympathy that was later to characterize his work, an attitude which became manifest in his support for the cause of Christian unity and the ecumenical movement, and in his dislike for the growth of parochialism, censorship and institutionalism, which he detected in many of his Catholic contemporaries. Therefore, rather than as a successor to

Chesterton and Belloc, or as an intellectual peer of C.C. Martindale, Martin D'Arcy or Jacques Maritain, we can best appreciate Christopher Dawson as one of the last representatives of the earlier tradition of Newman, Hügel and Acton.

Dawson's life work found its ultimate inspiration in a central and dominant theme: that religion is the dynamic element in culture. Now, by 'culture' Dawson understood an organized way of life, based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment. This logically involved a common view of life, common standards of behaviour and common standards of value. Accordingly, Dawson defined culture as a 'spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought far more than to any uniformity of physical type.' If it was true that from a modern perspective a common view of life could be conceived in purely secular terms, to Dawson this seemed a very unusual—almost unique—development. For culture, which was the 'social way of life', had throughout history been directed in accordance with religion, which was 'the higher law of life', in such a way that for a community to direct its affairs without reference to the divine powers had always seemed as irrational as for a community to cultivate the soil without reference to the course of the seasons.⁵

Consequently, Dawson thought it impossible to understand a society's inner form and cultural achievements without understanding its religion and the religious beliefs that lay behind those achievements. For him, religion was both a conservative and a dynamic force that stood at the threshold of all the great literatures, philosophies and social institutions. It had always constituted the 'great central unifying force in culture.' As the 'guardian of tradition, the preserver of the moral law, the educator and the teacher of wisdom', religion was, as Acton had written, 'the key of history'— the elucidator of the most fundamental and significant of human events.⁶

All the same, however, Dawson was aware of the influence of the material side of life on the formation of religious belief. 'At the root of all cultural development,' he wrote, 'there still lies the life of a human group in its primary relations to its environment and functions, and the study of these relations remains the first task of the anthropologist or sociologist.'⁷ Despite religion's unifying and dynamic role, therefore, Dawson argued that cultures were first and foremost conscious adaptations of human life to the external environment and to the order of nature. All cultures were thus rooted in nature and all human life and action had a natural material basis, to such an extent that, in countless examples, religion seemed so bound up with the culture of the community that it appeared as a mere psychological reflection of the way of life of particular peoples in particular environments and to possess no religious significance apart from its social background. Even the more 'universal' and 'spiritual' religions could never escape the need to

become incarnated in culture and clothed in social institutions and traditions.⁸

Dawson was therefore as critical of those who sought to 'spiritualize' religion as of those who sought to 'materialize' culture. He pointed out that the relation of religion and culture was always two-sided, with the way of life influencing the approach to religion as much as the religious attitude the way of life. But at the same time he argued that no matter how earthbound and socially conditioned they might appear, all religions naturally looked toward some supernatural reality to which worship was directed. In this way, the culture process was always open to change from either direction:

any material change which transforms the external conditions of life will also change the cultural way of life and thus produce a new religious attitude. And likewise any spiritual change which transforms man's views of reality will tend to change their way of life and thus produce a new form of culture.⁹

It was with this thesis as a central thread that Dawson set out to write a history of culture which he planned to entitle *The Life of Civilizations*. Although the work was never finished, it is possible to discern what the final outcome would have looked like. *Progress and Religion*, which appeared in 1929, arguably his most brilliant work of synthesis and interpretation, was conceived as an introduction and summary of the whole design. The first volume was *The Age of Gods*, subtitled 'A study in the origins of culture in pre-historic Europe and the Ancient East', which appeared in 1928. It was to be followed by a study covering from 1200 to 300 BC, entitled *The Rise of the World Religions*, which was never written. A general outline of it can be discerned from the relevant sections of *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* (1933). The third volume was *The Making of Europe*, which appeared in 1932 and immediately established itself as a classic study of the neglected period known as the Dark Ages, one which even today has not been entirely replaced. A fourth volume was to cover the period from the late Middle Ages to the Enlightenment; parts of it are to be seen in *Medieval Religion* (1934), *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950) and *The Dividing of Christendom* (1965). The final volume was to cover the period from the Enlightenment to the Modern Age, and some illuminating sections of it appeared in a posthumous publication entitled *The Gods of Revolution* (1972).

The reasons why Dawson abandoned his original project are not far to seek. It was not a mere coincidence that they concurred with a change of editor and with the crisis of the 1930s, which eventually led to the Second World War. Dawson's decision at this time to leave Sir John Murray, who had already published *The Age of the Gods*, and to join the group which formed the nucleus of Sheed and Ward's first authors, highlights the need that he saw for a wider audience which he would

approach in works of a more urgent and less academic nature. With the exception of *The Making of Europe, Medieval Religion* and to a lesser extent *Progress and Religion*, all the works published at this time—*Christianity and the New Age* (1931), *The Modern Dilemma* (1932), *Enquiries* (1933), *Religion and the Modern State* (1935), *Beyond Politics* (1939) and *The Judgement of the Nations* (1943)—pointed to the fact that the crisis that Europe was undergoing was not essentially political or even cultural, but primarily spiritual. He believed that Catholics had a special responsibility, as heirs of the makers of Europe, to stress the importance of unity by transcending the division of opinion into Right and Left. ‘There was’, he wrote,

some justification for the distinction when the Left stood for the freedom of the individual and the Right for the authority of the State. But today when the totalitarians of the Left deny freedom and the totalitarians of the Right reject Law, the old distinctions have become meaningless and Catholics are obliged to unite in order to defend principles far more vital ...¹⁰

These principles were of course those which stood for European unity, which according to Dawson could only find a realistic basis in a spiritual reintegration of European culture along the lines of the ideal of medieval Christendom. This ideal was not a romantic exaggeration, as some of his critics claimed. For Dawson never asserted that Medieval Europe had ever possessed, nor even that it had been close to possessing, a social or cultural homogeneity. He argued instead that Christendom had incorporated and overlaid several distinct and earlier traditions which tended to express themselves in the formation of separate national cultures. At the same time, however, he believed that the ecclesiastical organization of Christendom as a supranational unity had united Europe’s cultural diversity in a common faith, a common intellectual education, a common moral law and a common system of organization. It was thus this spiritual unity (as opposed to a cultural, political or economic one) which was ultimately responsible for the cultural vitality of medieval Christendom.

From this it followed that the division of Christendom in the 16th century was the ultimate cause of the disunity of modern European culture and that, however indirectly, it was also at the root of its secularization. For the doctrinal hardening that took place on both sides of the confessional front after the Reformation, combined with the ensuing wars of religion, eventually led to a reaction against mysticism and religious ‘enthusiasm’ which in turn weakened religious convictions before the self-confident rationalism of an emerging lay intelligentsia. As the new movement of rational enlightenment gathered strength and joined forces with the movement of romantic nationalism, it succeeded in breaking down the traditional order of Church and State in both Protestant and Catholic Europe, thus constituting the main cause of the process of secularization.

Dawson regarded this movement as a kind of second Reformation, which carried the revolt against tradition and authority from the sphere of theology to the realm of secular culture. Although the Church still bore the brunt of the attack, by the end of the 18th century the state and the social order were no longer immune. Every institution and every accepted belief was subjected to criticism and dismissed if deemed unreasonable or devoid of social utility. The traditional social and religious order of Christendom was seen as an antiquated Gothic structure which had to be demolished and replaced by a new edifice built on simple rational principles.¹¹

It was clear to Dawson that if religion was the dynamic element in culture, the advance of secularization logically amounted to the devitalization of culture. So too, any attempt that sought a solution to the state of cultural disunity without taking into account the spiritual disunity that lay at the roots, was doomed to failure. Accordingly, Dawson repeatedly emphasized the need to recover the spiritual unity that had been lost with the Reformation. During the war, as editor of the *Dublin Review* and *Sword of the Spirit*, he pioneered what was probably the first Catholic attempt to found an ecumenical movement in England, endeavouring, as he wrote to George Every, to do everything in his power 'to keep at least one independent Catholic review going with a cultural programme and not a sectarian one,'¹² and inviting freedom of expression in the urgent need for a return to Christian unity. So too, with the marginal exception of his more academic Gifford lectures of 1947 and 1948 (published in 1948 and 1950 as *Religion and Culture* and *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*), all of Dawson's post-war writings, from *Understanding Europe* (1953) to his lectures on Christendom given while holding the Stillman Chair of Catholic studies at Harvard (1958–1962), were aimed at the recovery of this spiritual unity. In this sense, Dawson was a clear precursor of the ecumenical movement and the Second Vatican Council, since he looked to a universal spiritual society capable of transcending schisms and heresies which, in the last analysis, were the result of 'the collision between the spirit of the age and the spirit of God.'¹³

That Dawson's diagnosis of the ills of modern culture should have been met with a high degree of scepticism is not difficult to understand. For in the light of modern scholarship Dawson's synthesis of the forces that brought about the process of secularization tend to appear antiquated and even flawed. As we understand it today, the theme of secularization was invented by the faculties of social science, not by the faculties of history. After Durkheim, looking back to Comte, accepted that religion was one of the foundations of social and moral life and that the religious ideas of a society were related to their ultimate social values, the old historical theories which had seen decline in religion as the result of intellectual causes were severely weakened. Whereas historians had traditionally explained that secularization had been the result of the

spread of better (or worse) knowledge that rid men of irrationality (or religion), Durkheim proved that men were very far from having rid themselves of either irrationality or religion. Thus the study of the history of ideas moved into a new phase. The movement of minds could no longer be explained by seizing only upon the articulate and formal propositions of the educated élites. Ideas were now thought to be inextricably entangled with deeper movements of men's minds which were part of a larger 'collective consciousness' of which intellectual propositions were more the result than the cause. Naturally historians tended to move away from élites and to seek the sources of ideas and values in the lives of ordinary men and women. Any link of the problem of secularization with the Enlightenment was thus treated as deeply suspect, for it was now clear that the Enlightenment only affected the few, while secularization had spread outward to the rest of society.

Although Dawson was aware of this trend, he seemed reluctant to take part in it. His account of the process of secularization was strictly historical. And he wrote not only as a historian who was not afraid of ideas, but as one who was profoundly convinced of their power to revolutionize and transform cultures. 'The unity of a culture', he had written, 'rests not only in a community of place (the common environment), a community of work (the common function) and a community of blood (the common race), it springs also, and above all, from a community of thought.' And this community of thought was not, as Durkheim maintained, a purely collective one in which the individual consciousness was merged in that of the crowd. For, according to Dawson, it was impossible to exclude the factor of individual thought and leadership from any stage of cultural development. Even those primitive cultures which appeared to have become fixed in a Byzantine rigidity of ritual formalism must have passed through a formative stage in which they received the impress of individual creative minds. 'In this way,' Dawson continued,

the intellectual factor conditions the development of every society. It is the active and creative element in culture, since it emancipates man from the purely biological laws ... and enables him to accumulate a growing capital of knowledge and social experience, which gives him a progressive control over his material environment.¹⁴

Consequently Dawson could not separate the process of secularization from its intellectual roots in the Enlightenment, and since he attached to the intellectual factor an importance which had become increasingly unfashionable, his account tended to be classed as belonging to the old discredited history of ideas and as out of touch with current scholarship and academic debates. Yet Dawson was too well read in sociology and anthropology to allow himself to fall into the intellectualistic trap. In *Progress and Religion* he had found the intellectualism of R.G. Collingwood to be even less satisfactory than the

anti-intellectualist relativism of Spengler precisely because it made a complete divorce between history and science and left no room for the contribution of sociologists and anthropologists. To Dawson, therefore, the idealist attempt to see in history only Hegel's 'glory of the Idea mirroring itself in the history of the world' fared no better than the optimism of Dr Pangloss and called forth 'in the manner of Hegelian dialectic that opposite and complementary view of *Candide*, which looks on history as an irrational welter of cruelty and destruction ...'¹⁵

Far from providing a mere intellectual account, therefore, Dawson was perfectly aware that the revolution of ideas had not been an all-encompassing or even a democratic movement. It was in fact the work of a small minority who looked to the nobles and to the princes rather than to the common people, and there was an immense gulf between the ideas of Voltaire and the opinions of the average man. The liberalism of the Enlightenment was like 'a hothouse growth which could not be easily acclimatized to the air of the open fields and the market place', and the apparent triumph of the cause of secularization which emerges from the available literary evidence well before the French Revolution itself, was merely a 'superficial triumph, which affected an infinitesimal portion of European society.' All the forces that have united the modern world—industrialism, mechanical transport, journalism, public education, universal military service—did not exist, said Dawson, and society was made up of regional units where the Church maintained its power over men's minds and where its festivals and pilgrimages were still an integral part of daily life.¹⁶

On the other hand, because of its close alliance with the state, Dawson argued that the Church's internal resources were rendered vulnerable to any attack from above. And consequently, with the substitution of Enlightened despotism for Baroque absolutism during the age of Joseph II of Austria, Choiseul in France and Charles III of Spain, the Church was deprived of its traditional method of social action and its activities were virtually neutralized for two generations. It was during this crucial period that Dawson located the culmination of the revolutionary movement that was subsequently responsible for the secularization of western culture. The neutralization of the Church led to the growing need for a force capable of filling the spiritual void that had been created and able to provide an outlet for the religious impulses that were everywhere being stifled by the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In other words, if the liberal, secular message was to penetrate beyond the privileged and to make its influence felt upon the masses, it had to appeal to the psychological forces found beneath the rational consciousness by transforming itself from a mere ideology into a living faith, from a philosophy into a religion.

It was, in these circumstances that, according to Dawson, Rousseau could become not merely a popular ideologue who brought the ideas of the Enlightenment down to the level of the populace, but

primarily the founder and prophet of the new 'religion of democracy'. It seems in fact a bitter irony that the strength and dynamism of Rousseau's message lay precisely in its advocacy of the social principles laid down by the Catholic Church, to which his own secular religion was so virulently opposed. For Rousseau's anti-bourgeois and anti-commercial tendencies were in perfect tune with the Catholic doctrine on usury and the rights of the poor. But whereas the Church's implementation of these principles had been rendered inefficient by its close links with the state, Rousseau's liberalism came as the opposer of both the Whig proclamation of the rights of property and the Enlightenment support of financial capitalism. Like Mably, he was no less hostile to Voltaire and the apologists of luxury than to Turgot and Smith and the representatives of economic liberalism. Thus, he was not only on the side of the conservative critics of the Enlightenment, like Linguet and Mirabeau, but still more of the champions of Catholic orthodoxy, like the Abbé Prigent and Père Hyacinthe Gasquet. His message came as a breath of fresh air in the losing battle that the traditionalists were hopelessly waging against the acquisitive and competitive spirit of the new commercial society. In the same way that the traditional Catholic order had idealized poverty and limited freedom of commerce by binding industry within the narrow frontiers of the corporation or guild, Rousseau's economic ideal was the agrarian distribution of peasant society inspired by the traditional Christian ideals of charity and mutual aid. For these reasons, Dawson described Rousseau's revolution not as a political or economic one, but as a spiritual one. And his message only needed to find a concrete echo in the new democratic state that was coming into existence across the Atlantic to be turned into the basic inspiration of modern, secular, revolutionary idealism.

Now, it is likely that if Dawson were writing today, he would pay careful attention to more recent social and economic studies of the Revolution and that his assessment of the influence of Rousseau would be somewhat more measured. But this does not mean that Dawson was unaware of the complexity of the issue. Indeed, he was fundamentally in agreement with Karl Marx in that men did not need Rousseau to tell them that they were hungry, but that it was because they were hungry that they decided to listen to Rousseau. As we have seen, as much as any Marxist Dawson was aware that material advance influences the nature of society, which in turn influences the generation of ideas that allow for stability and progress. But at the same time Dawson refused to accept that a movement in the opposite direction was impossible, arguing that without the intellectual enquiry the social historian was as fated to crash as were the intellectual historians who asked no questions about the social structure in which ideas were generated. If emphasis on the intellectual aspect is now unfashionable, this is emphatically not because the influence of ideas has been disproved. One needs only to contrast the more recent accounts of the process of secularization given by Alasdair

MacIntyre and Vernon Pratt to realize that the debate is far from over. Whereas MacIntyre seems convinced that it was the social process that caused the intellectual one, Pratt has no doubt that the cause lay in ideas and better logic.¹⁷

If Dawson's account is still of relevance to modern scholarship, this is no doubt due to the way in which it transcends the debate. Its basic contention is that the influence of ideology or social structure in the process of secularization had in fact been far less important than the influence of religious dynamism. Like all the great movements that have revolutionized or transformed cultures, Dawson claimed that the progress and eventual triumph of the forces of secularization were ultimately dependent on a religious inspiration. The reasons why this influence had tended to evade most analysts of the process were twofold: on the one hand, the secularized majority themselves had been so deeply affected by the process of secularization that they found it difficult to see that process in an objective manner, while, on the other, the religious minority had been pushed into an attitude of defensive opposition that was equally unfavourable to dispassionate study. Yet Dawson, who himself belonged to the religious minority, had an unusual capacity to understand and sympathize with ideologies that differed markedly from his own. It was this sympathy which allowed him to penetrate the most disparate minds and to see in, for example, Robespierre's Feast of the Supreme Being, not merely a pompous display of official pageantry, but 'a solemn religious act which in the eyes of every good Jacobin seemed to consecrate the triumph of the cause of humanity.'¹⁸ So too, he pointed out with staggering lucidity that the liberal ideology, which was the principal dynamic force behind the process of secularization, was a profoundly religious movement which owed its strength to the elements that it had derived from the religious tradition that it attempted to replace. Consequently, in so far as it succeeded in secularizing culture, liberalism undermined the foundations upon which its own existence depended. The liberal-deist compromise that had attempted to found a natural religion broke down because

it was the result of a superficial synthesis, which only succeeded in uniting the etiolated ghost of historic Christianity with the phantasm of a pseudo-scientific rationalism. It claimed to be the religion of Nature, when it was as abstract and artificial as any metaphysical system. It professed to base itself on purely rational grounds, when it really drew its spiritual vitality from the religious tradition that it rejected. It was neither truly religious nor completely rational, and consequently it was rejected alike by the most living religion and by the most serious scientific thought of the age.¹⁹

After this failure, the liberal idealism that had inspired the free trade movement gave way to the fiercely competitive economic nationalism

and colonial imperialism which marked the end of the 19th century, while the opposing forces of revolutionary change likewise abandoned the spiritual ideals of their predecessors and turned to power politics and the use of force. It is no accident that the greatest representative of the extreme tendencies of the later 19th century and the most powerful and original thinker of the age, Friedrich Nietzsche, should have announced the passing of Christian and humanist values while urging the need to assert the Will to Power.

During the course of the 20th century, Nietzsche's diagnosis came close to acquiring the strength of prophecy. Yet his new superhumanity failed to emerge and the needed restoration of western cultural unity has been seen to be beyond the reach of practical power politics.

To Dawson this was no mystery. He had realized that it was upon the moral and spiritual unity of a culture that its external life ultimately depended. The loss of this spiritual unity bore the responsibility for the cultural disintegration of modern culture. For if something characterized modern secular culture, according to Dawson, it was the lack of a common conception of reality capable of unifying the different intellectual activities and disciplines.

The result is that the modern world has been inundated by a shallow flood of universal literacy which destroyed the old traditions of popular culture and increased the mass mindedness of modern society without raising its cultural standards or deepening its spiritual life.²⁰

Even philosophy had irremediably lost its former hegemony: 'like a discredited political leader, it is continually offering its services as a mediator between the opposing parties, only to be disavowed by both sides and left to bear the responsibility for their blunders.'²¹

Dawson saw no solution to this state of affairs outside a spiritual reintegration of western culture on the basis of a realist philosophy. It need not surprise us that his proposal should have met with indifference. For realist the conception of a continuous stream of historical influences and of a universe where the individual, albeit a mere part, can within limits comprehend the whole and recognize the truth is currently eclipsed by a relativistic vision of that universe. Yet the epistemological crises and intellectual dead-locks that such an approach has encouraged are more and more being denounced by philosophers and social scientists. In this respect Dawson's thought is at one with the work of such modern thinkers as Alasdair MacIntyre, who sees no possibility of a common morality without the existence of a common moral authority and no possibility of a common moral authority without the existence of the common European cultural tradition that the Enlightenment attempted to destroy. So too, Milan Kundera recently lamented the failure of Europe to record the disappearance of the 'central European cultural centrum', stating that such failure was due to the fact that 'Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity.' 'What then is the substance

of this unity?' writes Kundera:

In the middle ages it was based on a common religion. In the modern epoch, when the God of the middle ages became a *Deus absconditus*, religion surrendered its place to culture ... It seems to me that in our century a certain change is setting in, a change which is as significant as the change which separates the middle ages from modern times. In the same way as formerly God gave way to culture, culture itself is now surrendering its place. But to whom and for what purpose? In which sphere can a supreme value capable of uniting Europe be implemented? In the sphere of technological feats? In trade? In the media? Will a journalist replace a great poet, perhaps? Or in politics? ... Or will the *Deus absconditus* return to take the place which has become free and so visible?²²

If it is true, as Kundera supposes, that the absence of God has become visible and that religion is one of the forces capable of bringing about a cultural unification, then Dawson's thought is clearly in need of reassessment. One of the reasons why his work so soon lost favour with professional historians and academics was that Dawson was never himself a professional historian in the strict sense. He was an independent scholar, fortunate to have the economic means to enable him to pursue his wide-ranging interests undisturbed by the worry of contemporary fashion or taste. His enormous erudition and the mastery with which he could sweep across centuries and cultures with a lucid and vigorous style, were not apt to win the love of a generation of specialists who, under the shadow of Namier, were urging the need for more detailed and factual investigations. Additionally, Dawson was always blatantly sincere about his religious views during a time when there still reigned a generalized, and to some extent understandable, scepticism about the intellectual integrity of Catholic thinkers. Nowadays, however, when Catholic scholarship has been largely redeemed and when academics are increasingly denouncing the limitations of extreme specialization, Dawson's message can be seen in a new light which in some ways makes his work more immediately relevant than when it was first formulated.

Although Dawson never denied the importance of specialized techniques of historical criticism and research, he maintained that 'the mastery of these techniques will not produce great history, any more than the mastery of metrical technique will produce great poetry.' He pointed out that in the work of great historians, like Tocqueville, Ranke or Acton, there was always a larger vision, which was more akin to the nature of religious contemplation, lying very close to the sources of their creative power.²³ I do not think it an exaggeration to apply the same judgement to Dawson's work. Perhaps the time is near when, as David Knowles once wrote, 'the silent majority, here as elsewhere, will feel kinship with a great historian who saw the development of Europe steadily and saw it whole.'²⁴

- 1 Christina Scott, *A Historian and his world. A Life of Christopher Dawson*, (1984), p. 15.
- 2 Ibid, p. 28.
- 3 Ibid, p. 29.
- 4 Ibid, p. 64.
- 5 *Religion and Culture*, (1948), pp. 48—9.
- 6 Ibid, p. 50.
- 7 *Progress and Religion*, p. 52.
- 8 *Religion and Culture*, pp. 131, 53—4.
- 9 Ibid, p. 59.
- 10 Letter to *The Catholic Herald*, 30th September 1945.
- 11 Dawson did not write a single account of this process, but it can be pieced together from the relevant sections of *The Movement of World Revolution* (1959), *The Dividing of Christendom*, *The Judgement of the Nations* and, especially, *The Gods of Revolution*.
- 12 Scott, op. cit., p. 133.
- 13 From unpublished notes. Quoted by Scott, p. 150.
- 14 *Progress and religion*, pp. 74—6.
- 15 Ibid, pp. 44—6.
- 16 *The Gods of Revolution*, pp. 32—3.
- 17 See A. MacIntyre, *Secularization and moral change* (1967) and V. Pratt, *Religion and secularization* (1970).
- 18 *The Gods of Revolution*, p. 105.
- 19 *Progress and religion*, p. 243.
- 20 *Understanding Europe*. Quoted in Scott, p. 166.
- 21 *Progress and religion*, p. 218.
- 22 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', *New York Review of Books*, April 1984.
- 23 'The Problem of Metahistory', *History Today*, I, 1951, pp. 9—12.
- 24 David Knowles, Introduction to Dawson's *The Dividing of Christendom*, (1971).

I wish to thank the editor for his useful suggestions to an earlier draft, and Dominic Scott for kindly reading the proofs and suggesting some stylistic improvements.

Response

The Psychologisation of the Church: Michael Doyle's July/August critique of a book review by Jack Dominian

I am grateful to Michael Doyle's short article on the psychologisation of the Church. A full reply would need several books. Indeed, many such exist, and I have written three—an early one, *Psychiatry and the Christian* (Burns & Oates); *Authority*; and *The Capacity to Love* (both Darton Longman & Todd).

The Christian faith is based on a relationship with an unseen and unknown mystery of God who has revealed Himself at various times, and in particular in His son, Jesus Christ. I would maintain that, in order to have such a faith, dependence on psychology is essential and that, instead of having too much psychology, we have too little.

Here I want to illustrate briefly my reasons for emphasising the importance of psychology.