

Jude P. Dougherty

An Indispensable Guide

*Christianity and European Culture:
Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*
edited by Gerald J. Russello. The Catholic University
of America Press, Washington, DC, 1998.

For students of Western culture, Christopher Dawson is an indispensable guide. His opera omnia would number more than twenty-five volumes if brought together in a uniform edition. Absent that, Gerald Russello provides in these selections a valuable collection that can only whet one's appetite for further texts. His introduction to the volume is excellent and in itself worthy of Dawson for its lucidity and vision. It could not have been easy for Russello to draw from the author's extensive writings those best and most representative examples of Dawson's work on the theme of Western civilization.

Although Dawson was most productive in the first half of this century, there is a timelessness about his writing. One is also tempted to say "timely," since much of his writing is prescient in forecasting the consequences of the rapid secularization of Western culture. Known primarily as an historian, Dawson enjoys credentials that would qualify him equally as a theologian, philosopher, sociologist, and economist. He brings to any topic a wealth of knowledge gained by extensive research in the relevant discipline. Above all he can integrate this knowledge from a vantage point

which may be called Greco-Roman. This ability is evident whether he is describing the introduction of Christianity to the West, the rise of Islam, or the forces that inspired Karl Marx. Perhaps because he never held a university post until late in life, Dawson was able to avoid academic jargon and the superficial trappings of scholarship and to write in a clear prose style accessible to the layman.

The overarching question which Dawson forces one to confront is this: "Can Western civilization survive without Christianity?" Dawson is convinced that the vital, creative power behind every culture is spiritual. No culture, he maintains, can retain its vitality without religion. Thus, Dawson dates the decline of the West to the Enlightenment and its repudiation of crown and miter. The Enlightenment's doctrine of progress, he thinks, is largely responsible for the secularization of modern civilization, as if ignoring or repudiating the inherited constitutes betterment.

In Dawson's judgment, during the last period of the nineteenth century and first

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years of the twentieth, a phase of Western civilization came to an end. The old capital was exhausted, and there was nothing to take its place. The goal of the Liberal Enlightenment and Revolution had been reached. The post-Enlightenment hegemony of similarly disposed Western intellectuals had robbed the culture of the spiritual and moral resources without which barbarism is inevitable.

Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) was educated at Winchester and Trinity College, Oxford. He was a private pupil of the eminent Swedish economist Gustav Cassel for a year. In 1914 he was received into the Catholic Church. For about 12 years he was a lecturer at University College, Exeter, where he was able to continue his own research, after which he began to publish. He held the position of lecturer in the philosophy of religion at Liverpool University, 1933-1934, and in the history of culture at University College, Exeter, in 1935. Only late in life did he receive his first major university appointment, to the Stillman Chair at Harvard, in 1958. Beginning in his Oxford years, Dawson made a special study of the interplay of religion, sociology, and culture. His most widely read books include: *Religion and Culture*, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (The Gifford Lectures of 1947 and 1948), *Progress and Religion*, *The Making of Europe*, *Beyond Politics*, *The Modern Dilemma*, *The Judgment of Nations*, and *Understanding Europe*.

A posthumous publication, *The Gods of Revolution*, looks first at the ideological antecedents of the French Revolution, then at the Revolution itself, and finally at its aftermath. In one sense at least the last part of the book may be said to end with a question mark, for the impact of the Revolution continues to this day. In a supreme paradox the Revolution's act of deposing the ancient regime opened the way to what

Arnold Toynbee has called an "atavistic return to a pre-Christian religion, the worship of collective human power which had been the religion of the pagan Roman Empire."

Selections from many of the works noted above appear in this collection. Russello appropriately regards the centerpiece to be *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, written in 1960. Here Dawson construes culture to be "a common social way of life—a life with a tradition behind it, which has embodied itself in institutions and which involves moral standards and principles." What specifies a Christian culture? Certain forms of moral behavior, Dawson answers, are regarded as typically or essentially Christian, but these alone do not specify it. "The only true criterion of a Christian culture is the degree in which the social way of life is based on the Christian faith." Yet Dawson does not hold for any permanent link between Christianity and European culture; Christian culture can emerge anywhere on the globe.

It is unfortunate and perhaps tragic that the link between Christianity and European culture was severed in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. "The psychological break with the old European Christian tradition is a much more serious thing than any political or economic revolution, for it means not only the dethronement of the moral conscience but also an abdication of the rational consciousness which is inseparably bound up with it." It is indeed doubtful if Western society can survive the change.

To a largely secular academic sector Dawson suggests that the alternative to this suicidal rejection of inheritance is not only to accept the existence of Christian culture as an objective historical fact but to try to understand it according to its own ideas and judge it by its own standards, just as classical scholars have judged the culture of the ancient world.

Christian culture is not likely to be understood if viewed through the eyes of a materialist, just as Byzantine culture is not likely to be understood through the eyes of an eighteenth-century rationalist. Western Christian culture deserves to be studied from a Christian point of view as a way of life that was brought into Europe more than nineteen hundred years ago when St. Paul set sail from Troy to Macedonia.

Dawson wrote before the forging of the European Union and its attempt to create a common market and a common currency—artificial economic bonds that would be foreign to his outlook. “Europe is not a political creation. It is a society of peoples who share the same faith and same moral values. The European nations are parts of a wider spiritual society.” Thus, one should not be surprised to find that concomitant with the attempt to create a unified Europe, there has been a shift to world socialism. Today the governments of France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy are predominantly socialist. Christian moral principles no longer prevail as legislation favorable to divorce, abortion, and the secularization of education is enacted. Social services, once a manifestation of Christian charity, are now entitlements created by legislation and administered by secular hands in accord with socialist principles.

The renewal of education, which Dawson thought indispensable, seems a distant if not unattainable goal. The absence of moral principle is all too evident in the behavior of youth, from the “projects” of suburban Paris to the streets of America’s inner cities.

Dawson forces one to raise the question: Is moral education possible apart from a religious context? In *Religion and Progress*, Dawson wrote, “Every living culture must possess some spiritual dynamic which provides the energy necessary for that sustained social effort which is civilization. Normally this dynamic is supplied by a religion, but in exceptional circumstances the religious impulse may disguise itself under philosophical or political forms.” At the time Dawson was writing this, the American philosopher John Dewey was giving a series of lectures, later published as *A Common Faith*, attempting to articulate a secular alternative to Christianity. Although Dewey exercised considerable influence on public education in the United States and to some extent abroad, there is still today no evidence that his pragmatic naturalism or secular humanism has resulted in an effective moral code or has inspired moral behavior of the sort normally associated with those who take their lead from the Mosaic code. Dawson’s final judgment may remain: Unless Western civilization acknowledges its roots and embraces the spiritual force which gave its birth, it will disintegrate into barbarism.

As valuable as Dawson’s work is, one should not read him uncritically. At times the reader may rightly desire greater precision or wish that Dawson had marshaled further evidence in support of a generalization. Yet one remains confident that Dawson, if challenged, could support every observation or claim. The net effect is to encourage the reader to explore further the terrain he has broadly sketched.