

Introduction

The Achievement of Christopher Dawson¹

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Guest Editor

An encounter with a book can set a person's face in a direction that deeply influences the rest of her life. When the German-Jewish philosopher Edith Stein (1891–1942) found the *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* on her friend's bookshelf, she spent the whole night reading it. In the morning she pronounced: "That is the truth." She died in Auschwitz as a Catholic nun and a martyr.² But when, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) spent whole nights as a child reading romances with his father,³ or when Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) became fixated on war after finding a picture magazine about the Franco-Prussian War in his father's library,⁴ a person's life can take a destructive turn. Such powerful encounters with books can shape one's whole destiny.

I once met such a book myself. It was more of the sort that Stein read than of romances or war, and it set me on a deeply rewarding pathway that my life still follows. I was nineteen years old then and confused. But I possessed a thirst to know and a fascination with the past and with ideas. It was at that moment of need and desire that I read Christopher Dawson's *Progress and Religion* (1929). Stumbling against a great mind is both frightening and exhilarating. As I struggled to read this book I felt the delight of discovering new intellectual territories and longed to share in this man's broad yet profound view of human culture and history. I wanted his help in reaching my own intellectual maturity.

I was not disappointed. With the aid of an outstanding undergraduate teacher,⁵ the pages of *Progress and Religion* opened a way forward in my intellectual life. There were names I had never encountered together, marshaled and juxtaposed into a startling and grand conversation, such as Plato and Irenaeus and Francis Bacon and Max Weber and many others. The book sketched a landscape in which the social sciences and theology cooperated. It revealed the uniqueness of Christianity against the backdrop of world religions. It was arranged intelligibly and made a forceful argument. The very structure of the book helped form mental architecture that is the foundation of all future learning. It is such architecture that allows one to place new knowledge and to relate it back to the whole. John Henry Newman (1801–1890) wrote in his *The Idea of a University* (1852) that a truly great intellect is not one simply full of facts. Rather, it is one that takes a “connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these one on another: without which there is no whole and no centre.”⁶ It is obvious in *Progress and Religion* that Dawson possessed just such an intellect. In fact, this book was intended as an introduction to a series of books on the life of world civilizations. Though Dawson did not write the projected series as he originally conceived it, surveying the themes of *Progress and Religion* nevertheless serves well as an introduction to his achievement as a scholar.

What Is Progress?

This idea of Progress,⁷ Dawson wrote, has pervaded the European mind since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. At a popular level, it meant “more cinemas, motor-cars for all, wireless installations, more elaborate methods of killing people, purchase on the hire system, preserved foods and picture papers.”⁸ One could simply change the names of these technologies and find a similar popular conception of Progress in the twenty-first century. To question this scientific and technological idea of Progress has long been heresy, Dawson noted. However, he sensed after the Great War, when *Progress and Religion* was published, a new

milieu in which some had begun to doubt the validity of the idea of Progress.⁹

In that new atmosphere of uncertainty Dawson published his book, arguing that unless human progress contained a spiritual and intellectual content along with material prosperity, no true progress could be made. While he shared the pessimism of some, holding that advance in one direction often corresponded with retrogression in another, he nevertheless argued that true progress is not illusory. It should not be conceived in the purely rationalistic and scientific terms of Comte and other secular humanists. Rather, one must look back in order to go forward. In this way, one sees that religion had long been associated with the development of human culture. "Unless men believe that they have an all-powerful ally outside time, they will inevitably abandon the ideal of a supernatural or anti-natural moral progress and make the best of the world as they find it, conforming themselves to the law of self-interest and self-preservation which governs the rest of nature."¹⁰ Unless ethics and a teleological, religious conception of reality give direction—an end above itself—to material progress and human thought, science itself can easily become a tool against humanity and progress.

Though Dawson warned about the misapplication of science against the true good of man, the development of science is an important component of true progress in his book. However, that development should not be viewed as parasitic domination over the natural world. Unless men use their scientific knowledge to live in greater harmony with nature they will undermine the ecological foundations of their civilizations. In fact, Dawson wrote, the more a culture advances, the more fully will it express itself through its material conditions, and the more intimate is the cooperation of man and nature.¹¹

To Walk around the Whole World: Dawson's View of Christianity and Progress

In Part One of *Progress and Religion*, Dawson shows that religion is the great dynamic in social life. True progress rests on that

dynamic and on the coordination of scientific and ecological development. Part Two adds historical detail to the important relation between progress and religion. Here the reader encounters Dawson's electrifying interpretation of Christianity and progress viewed against a backdrop of comparative religion and world history. The English writer G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) wrote the following in his 1925 book *The Everlasting Man*: “There are two ways of getting home; and one of them is to stay there. The other is to walk around the whole world till we come back to the same place.”¹² He explained that in order to understand Christianity it can be helpful to be completely outside it, to view it from afar, as a foreign culture. This Dawson does in *Progress and Religion*. He outlines the earliest stages of the rise of civilizations in Egypt and Mesopotamia and India and China. He shows how the stability of their ritualistic religious cultures underpinned the material development of civilizations. He then covers the religious crisis of the first millennium BC and the rise of the higher world religions that “tended to turn away men's minds from the world of human experience to the contemplation of absolute and unchanging Being, from Time to Eternity.”¹³ This movement tended to devalue history and view time as cyclical, which undermined any conception of progress. There was one important exception to that tendency, however: the religion of the Jews. For them, history possessed a profound value because it had a beginning and an end. It was where Yahweh acted in the life of His people.

This *importance of the historic* was amplified by Christianity. God Himself embraced human nature, entering into history. From the very beginning, Christianity fought the notion of time conceived as cycles. Rather, all of creation would be redeemed through the life of men in history. This gave an extraordinary nobility to man. In this way, progress could be real. It meant not only the transformation of human nature but also the spiritualization of all of nature, through the action of divine grace and the cooperation of human beings. Christianity affirmed both the transcendence of God and the divine-like nature of man. Spirit and matter were no

longer at war but consubstantial in the human person and lived out in the society of the Church.

Dawson shows how Christianity became a dynamic moral and social force in the Western world as a new civilization took shape after the fall of Rome. The medieval achievement—a new focus on the humanity of Christ, the social ideal of uniting faith and life, and the assertion of human reason by Thomas Aquinas and others—served as the foundation for later developments in the arts and sciences from the Renaissance onward.

As Christian civilization divided after the Reformation, secularization thwarted attempts to base society and the state on a religious foundation. The men of the eighteenth century looked for new ideals to unite the people. One of those was the idea of Progress. That idea, which came to function sociologically as a unifying worldview in Western cultures, functioned as a secular religion while retaining certain fundamental Christian assumptions. “Thus the belief in the moral perfectibility and the indefinite progress of the human race took the place of the Christian faith in the life of the world to come, as the final goal of human effort.”¹⁴ The idea of *teleology* (history possesses a direction and thus a meaning) was stripped of its religious origins and secularized to become the idea of Progress.

Dawson suggests that, without Christianity, there is scant support for the idea of meaningful, progressive time within the modern, mechanistic conception of science that subsumes man wholly into the world of nature. Without Christianity, the idea of Progress loses the *theological optimism about existence* that originally gave birth to it.

Structure and Argument

How does Dawson make these arguments concerning progress and religion? That is a question of method and structure, and it is here where Dawson’s interdisciplinary approach comes to light. A subject is described *synchronically* when it is explained by its many facets as it exists at one point in time. A subject is described *diachronically* when it is explained by its development over time.

For example, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940) synchronically studied the culture or way of life of the Nuer, a people of southern Sudan, at a particular point in time, the 1930s.¹⁵ Diachronic study of the Nuer, on the other hand, would study the history of their culture and its changes over time. Dawson's book unites both approaches. He attempts to understand the relationship between progress and religion by studying culture synchronically with sociology and anthropology and diachronically with history. *Culture*, then, studied synchronically and diachronically, is the common object of knowledge that he attempts to understand through theology and the social sciences.¹⁶ *Progress and Religion* is exciting because it connects these disciplines in the reader's mind and harnesses their analytical powers to an immense project of synthesis: understanding the nature of human culture and the relevant factors in cultural development or progress.

The structure of the book shows how this can be done. Part One examines the rise of sociology, history, and anthropology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their contributions to understanding human culture and progress. Dawson argues that culture is a *common way of life*, a four-fold community of place, work, blood, and thought.¹⁷ Behind every civilization there is a vision that affects the intellectual and material sides of culture. Thus, it is intellectual or spiritual change that produces the farthest-reaching changes in the culture of a people. Part Two applies this argument to various stages of world history, from the origin of civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt to the role of Christianity in the development of Western civilization. He concludes the book: "We have followed the development of human culture through the ages, and have seen how at every step the religion of a society expresses its dominant attitude to life and its ultimate conception of reality. Religion is the great dynamic force in social life, and the vital changes in civilization are always linked with changes in religious beliefs and ideals."¹⁸ That conclusion would become one of the central ideas of the many volumes to emerge from Dawson's pen.

The Uses of Dawson for the Scholar and the Teacher

Dawson's work is best understood in the context of intellectual problems that arose in Britain and Europe after the Great War in the fields of sociology, history, politics, and religion.¹⁹ However, the impact of that work continues to be felt in the twenty-first century through the interdisciplinary Catholic Studies programs arising across the United States and the republication of many of Dawson's books.²⁰ Those books are invaluable for the scholar and the teacher. For example, *Progress and Religion* is required reading for my sophomore course "Religion and Culture" because of its succinct, clearly written argument concerning the relationship between religion and culture in history. And it has had a deep influence on the way I teach world history.

Progress and Religion appeared in 1929 at a time when the study of world history first took shape after the close of the First World War in 1918. The old model of historical writing that focused on national political histories was challenged by the horrors of that conflict of nations. A new question arose: How can historians practice their trade while avoiding the nationalistic narratives that had contributed to the war? One answer was to focus not on individual nations but on world history. Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) published the first volume of his *Decline of the West* in 1918, and H. G. Wells (1866–1946) published the *Outline of History* in 1920. The English historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) conceived the outline of his *Study of History* in 1920; the first three volumes appeared in 1933.²¹ Christopher Dawson shared their concerns about finding another way of writing about history that avoided the narrowness of national history.

World history emerged as a distinct academic field in the 1980s. It looks for common patterns that emerge across all cultures. *Progress and Religion* was ahead of its time in uncovering many of these patterns. Dawson's argument emphasizes commonalities in world history: his theory of culture, the six primary nature occupations he discusses in chapter three (miner, forester, hunter, pastoralist, agriculturalist, and fisherman), and the hierarchy of world

religions he discusses in chapters five and six (prophetic, ritualistic, ethical, metaphysical, and theological). I have found that utilizing common patterns such as these in world history class helps students make sense of the historical facts presented in the texts. Common patterns become a set of tools that help students compare and generalize and thus move from mere information to real understanding of the fundamental structures of human life through time. In this way they hopefully begin to develop a mental architecture that is the basis of future learning and of the kind of expansive intellect discussed by Newman.

Despite these valuable contributions to the study and teaching of world history, by the mid-twentieth century Dawson critiqued what he called "ecumenical" world history and reasserted the importance of Europe and the Western historical tradition. He did this in his *Movement of World Revolution* (1959). Ecumenical world history sought to embrace the "whole history of every people from China to Peru without preference or prejudice." This ecumenical view condemned the old European view of history as provincial or "ethnocentric." The ideal of this ecumenical historical perspective was to transcend the tradition of one society and view all civilizations equally in one history of humanity. However, there were problems with this ideal. Until one or two centuries ago, Dawson noted, the "historic world was not an intelligible unity. It was made up of a number of independent civilizations, which were like separate worlds, each of them with its own historical tradition and its own idea of world history." There was very little, if any, contact between vast regions of the world until the "movement of world revolution" started in Europe (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), bringing the entire world into contact through science, technology, and the spread of ideas. The "study of the European past is still relevant to modern world history, since Europe was the original source of the movement of change in which the whole world is now involved and it is in European history that we find the key to the understanding of the ideologies which divide the modern world." Therefore, he wrote, "I believe that it is only by way of Europe and the Western historical tradition that it is possible to

approach that universal world history which has so long been the ideal of the philosophers of history.”²² These are valuable insights when considering the content and pedagogy in world history classes today.

While Dawson’s arguments concerning progress, religion, and world history are persuasive and profound, it is the mold of Dawson’s mind that is so compelling. He takes a position. Even if one does not agree with him, he makes an argument and weaves together facts into a meaningful account. The editor of *First Things* recently wrote that students are often fed a starvation diet of “small, inconsequential truths—facts and theories unrelated to any deeper meaning—because those are the only truths of which we can be sure we’re avoiding error.”²³ Critical thinking and fear of error are important, but so too is the habit of credulity. Belief is the only way for truth to enter into us, when it becomes ours and we can say, “Yes, I know that is true.” It can be dangerous to fear error so much as to become intellectually moribund and incapable of seeking the “rich reward of engrossing, life-commanding truths.”²⁴ Dawson’s work, especially his concise and brilliant book *Progress and Religion*, shows just how far the light of understanding can be cast upon the vast landscape of history when one finds one’s vision on deep-seated truths about the nature of the human person, culture, and the place of religion in human life.

The Symposium on Christopher Dawson

This issue of the *Political Science Reviewer* brings together an important biographical lecture and articles on Dawson’s achievement. Julian Scott, Dawson’s grandson, spoke at the University of St. Thomas in April 2011. His lecture, sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies, was called “The Life and Times of Christopher Dawson” and drew from new biographical material from the family archive.

Khalil Habib does not seek to break new ground in his article “Christianity and Western Civilization: An Introduction to Christopher Dawson’s *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*.” Rather, he seeks to introduce readers to one of Dawson’s seminal

books—the Gifford Lectures for 1948–1949—and hence his article appears first (after Scott’s lecture) in this symposium. Gerald Russello examines Dawson’s other set of Gifford Lectures, *Religion and Culture*. He does seek to break new ground in his argument against the reductionism of the New Atheists by showing how Dawson united the scientific study of religion with an account of religious experience. Lee Trepanier shows in “Culture and History in Eric Voegelin and Christopher Dawson” that while these two thinkers shared many concerns, Voegelin lacked a concept of culture in his work that made it impossible for him to offer a convincing account of historical change, whereas Dawson could. A comparative study of these two thinkers has long been needed. In “Wrestling with the Modern State: Christopher Dawson and the Background to *The Crisis of Western Education*,” Adam Tate forwards a two-part argument: first, that Dawson’s solution to the problem of the modern state was his educational proposal for the study of the history of Christian culture, and secondly that this proposal failed to gain much traction even among Catholics because of the fragmentation of American Catholics and American conservatives during the 1950s and 1960s. Mattei Ion Radu wrote much of “Dawson and Communism: How Much Did He Get Right?” but was not able to finish it because of his tragic death on May 7, 2010. Already at the age of twenty-eight, Radu held graduate degrees in law and history and was a prolific writer of scholarly articles. He was an editor, international traveler, and dedicated activist and speaker in the prolife movement. Though unfinished, his article makes the argument (based on extensive scholarship on Russian communism) that Dawson’s characterization of communism as antithetical to Christianity was factually and demonstrably true. My own article shares Radu’s concerns. It argues that Dawson’s use of “political religion” to describe the nature and appeal of fascism, nazism, and communism has been substantiated by contemporary scholarship on political religion and by evidence from the interwar years.

The final essay of this symposium is by Dawson himself: “The Claims of Politics.” First published in 1939, Dawson here argues

that in the face of the “expansion of Politics” the responsibility of the man of letters is to serve society with intellectual integrity by defending the true end of the state and exposing the ideologies on which political action is based. With such a call to responsibility to intellectuals the symposium comes to a conclusion.

Endnotes

1. A version of this introduction appeared in Portuguese: *Progresso & Religião: Uma Investigação Histórica*, by Christopher Dawson, trans. by Fabio Faria, introduction by Joseph T. Stuart (São Paulo: Realizações, 2010).
2. Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 176.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions* (New York: Modern Library, 2013), 6.
4. Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973), 26.
5. Professor James Gaston at the Franciscan University of Steubenville; Adam Tate of this symposium and I were both Gaston students, though at different times.
6. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Discourse 6, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/discourse6.html>.
7. In this Introduction, “Progress” (capital “P”) refers to the *idea* of progress, to the modern belief in the ideology of progress; “progress” (small “p”) refers to the *fact* of progress. See also Joseph T. Stuart, “The Question of Human Progress in Britain after the Great War,” *British Scholar* I (2008) and “Christopher Dawson and the Idea of Progress,” *Logos* 14, no. 4 (2011).
8. Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 17.
9. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
10. *Ibid.*, 28.
11. *Ibid.*, 54.
12. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993), 9.
13. Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 120.
14. *Ibid.*, 149.
15. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1960).

16. See also Christopher Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," in *Science Today: The Scientific Outlook on World Problems Explained by Leading Exponents of Modern Scientific Thought*, ed. J. G. Crowther and Sir J. Arthur Thomson (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1934); republished as Christopher Dawson, "Sociology as a Science," in *Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002).
17. Dawson, *Progress and Religion*, 66.
18. *Ibid.*, 181.
19. Joseph T. Stuart, "Christopher Dawson in Context: A Study in British Intellectual History between the World Wars," unpublished dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2009.
20. Catholic Studies programs, inspired by Dawson's intellectual legacy, are growing and flourishing across the country, such as at the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul), Aquinas College, Arizona State University, Boston College, and the University of Mary. Catholic University of America has recently republished eight of Dawson's books, including *Progress and Religion*.
21. See Paul Costello, *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth-Century Answers to Modernism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).
22. Christopher Dawson, *The Movement of World Revolution* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1959), 5, 8, 23.
23. R. R. Reno, "Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking," *First Things*, no. 214 (2011): 6.
24. *Ibid.*, 7.