

Christianity and Western Civilization

An Introduction to Christopher Dawson's *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*

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The Christian faith is a unique cornerstone of Western culture. It presided over the decline and collapse of the Roman Empire, from the migrations, invasions, and demographic shifts of the early medieval period, to the rise of urban centers and organized commerce. Through its many institutions, missionary activities, monasteries, religious orders, and universities, the Christian faith formed European culture and introduced a universal religion that would forever change the world. Many today, however, especially within the West, have begun to doubt Christianity's importance to Western civilization. There is no better time to take a step back and reassess the vital role of Christianity in forming our cultural inheritance. Thankfully we have the work of Christopher Dawson to assist us. Dawson, who has been called "the greatest English-speaking Catholic historian of the twentieth century,"¹ analyzes the enormity of the contribution of Christianity to the West while questioning the value of secularism.² For Dawson, the West can neither survive without the transformative qualities derived from the Christian faith nor be properly understood apart from its Christian foundations.³

This article does not seek to break new ground but to introduce the reader, approaching Dawson's thought for the first time, to *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, the substance of Dawson's Gifford Lectures of 1948–1949. What originated as a series of lectures has now become a classic text in the history of ideas and represents Dawson's pivotal engagement with his

subject.⁴ The picture that I paint traces the main thread of Dawson's discussion throughout these lectures. Although I focus primarily on *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, I frequently reference several of his other essays and books in order to situate these lectures within the broader context of his work. This is no easy task, but I will achieve my aim if I encourage a few readers to delve further into Dawson's work.⁵

Why and How to Study Western Culture: Challenges and Opportunities

Dawson begins *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* from the observation that Christian culture is "the culture to which we all in some sense belong."⁶ Christianity is the foundation of our civilization and forms a shared history that helps to connect generations to one another.⁷ Familiarity, however, breeds contempt and self-forgetting. In his 1956 essay "Civilization in Crisis," Dawson laments:

[w]e have become accustomed to taking the secular character of modern civilization for granted. We have most of us never known anything else and consequently we are apt to think that this is a natural and normal state of things, so that whatever our own beliefs may be, we do not expect modern civilization to pay much attention to religion, still less to be *based* upon a religious conception of existence.⁸

Indeed, according to Dawson, we today have forgotten how past civilization "was *not* just a highly organized form of social existence with its industry and art and scientific technique, it was *both* social *and* religious."⁹ Yet our modern secular "civilization has cut adrift from its old [religious] moorings and is floating on a tide of change."¹⁰ As civilization becomes materially richer and more technologically advanced, it tends to become spiritually impoverished and increasingly more secularized. A decline in religious culture, however, leaves a spiritual void no secular alternative can fill. According to Dawson, the modern goal to transform secularization into a poor

“substitute for religion” is one such failure.¹¹ But no modern political alternative—be it nationalism, liberal Capitalism, or Marxism—can satisfy man’s deepest spiritual nature, which Dawson understands as “a free personality, the creature of God and the maker of his own destiny.”¹² Consequently, Dawson argues that without a religion, a secular society is destined to collapse sooner or later:

The loss of the historic religion of a society is a sign that it is undergoing a process of social disintegration.... We cannot ... assume the possibility of a culture continuing to preserve its unity and to persist indefinitely without any religious form whatsoever. When the process of secularization is completed, the process of social dissolution is consummated and the culture comes to an end.¹³

As Bradley J. Birzer points out, by the late 1940s, “Dawson believed two things were necessary if the West was to survive. First, [Dawson] believed that the [contemporary] world” is on the verge of forgetting “the principles of Christendom and Western civilization,” and is, therefore, in need of a spiritual renewal. “Second, that ... Christendom would only be rebuilt through education.”¹⁴ For Dawson, the task of Christian education today is to retrieve our religious heritage and “to restore contact between religion and modern society—between the world of spiritual reality and the world of social experience.”¹⁵ The study of our Western religious heritage, then, is at its deepest level an attempt at cultural renewal rather than a mere antiquarian exercise. As Dawson puts it in a public speech in 1961, “I believe that Western civilization can only be saved ... by redirecting the whole system (of education) towards its spiritual end.”¹⁶ And the aim of the “Christian College, therefore, must be the cornerstone of any attempt to rebuild the order of Western civilization.”¹⁷ In other words, we study the past not only to learn *about* it but also to learn *from* it and to renew our spiritual well-being.

Dawson situates his approach to the study of Western Christian culture in relation to the fragmented specializations characteristic

of modern historiography, the humanities, and the social sciences. The specialized methods of “the scientific historian has concentrated” largely on the “criticism of sources and documents” on the one hand, while “the student of Christianity has devoted himself to the history of dogma and ecclesiastical institutions.”¹⁸ As a result, “we have a number of highly developed separate studies—political history, constitutional history, and economic history, on the one side, and ecclesiastical history, the history of dogma, and liturgiology on the other.”¹⁹ Specialization, however, has created academic silos among the disciplines “that we have to unite and bring together” if we wish to gain an adequate knowledge of Christian culture. Moreover, the “vital ... creative interaction of religion and culture in the life of Western society has been left out and almost forgotten, since from its nature it has no place in the organized scheme of specialized disciplines.”²⁰ In his essay “Civilization in Crisis,” Dawson bemoans how we have forgotten “that all civilizations have always been religious—and not only civilizations but barbarian and primitive societies also.”²¹ As he puts it in *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, history is “the cumulative results of a number of *spiritual* decisions—the faith and insight, or the refusal and blindness, of individuals.”²² For Dawson, the task of the historian is to bring the relationship between a religious way of life and academic study together in order to understand Christian culture as living, spiritual community.²³ In his essay “The Recovery of Spiritual Unity,” Dawson puts it this way:

[I]f we are to make the ordinary man aware of the spiritual unity out of which all the separate activities of our civilization have arisen, it is necessary in the first place to look at Western civilization as a whole and to treat it with the same objective appreciation and respect which the humanists of the past devoted to the civilization of antiquity.²⁴

Specialization is only one obstacle to our cultural renewal. The rise of conflicting political ideologies and ideological theories in the last several centuries have clouded our vision of the past and have

also provided dangerous and violent dictatorships with powerful theories of history, such as the use of Marxian doctrine of historical materialism to justify social engineering and political activism of a wide variety. Modern totalitarian states attempt to use "history, or a particular version of history, for social ends, as a means to change men's lives and actions."²⁵ The quest for the social engineering of human behavior through a pretense of social justice has armed new totalitarian states with powerful ideas and means to "create historical myths as a psychological basis of social unity."²⁶ As a result, "history and social philosophy are being distorted and debased by political propaganda and party feeling."²⁷ As James Ambrose Raftis points out, Dawson clearly saw "how national history became the theology of nationalism, and the historian the theologian of nationalism."²⁸ As such, Dawson's approach to history is at odds with nineteenth-century historiography, which, according to Dawson,

has been written from the nationalist point of view ... [and] are often manuals of nationalist propaganda.... In the course of the nineteenth century this movement permeated the popular consciousness and determined the ordinary man's conception of history.... And the result is that each nation claims for itself a cultural unity and self-sufficiency that it does not possess.²⁹

The politicization of the study of history and culture is the inevitable result of an increasing awareness on the part of the general public to the significance of history and culture toward social cohesion. According to Dawson, however, "it is of vital importance that the gap between the popular political interests in these questions and the scientific and philosophic study of them should not be too wide."³⁰ Why should this be? For Dawson, the result of this growing politicization of history has been that "no one is left to criticize the official ideology which is imposed on the community ... by the bureaucratic control of education, information and publicity."³¹ Increased specialization within higher education creates a dangerous situation in which intellectual and religious

freedom within both academia and society is threatened by government control. In a passage worth quoting at length, Dawson issues the following warning:

It would be a strange fatality if the great revolution by which Western man has subdued nature to his purposes should end in the loss of his own spiritual freedom, but this might well happen if an increasing technical control of the state over the life and thought of its members should coincide with a qualitative decline in the standards of our culture. An ideology in the modern sense of the word is very different from a faith, although it is intended to fulfill the same sociological functions. It is the work of man, an instrument by which the conscious political will attempts to mould social tradition to its purpose. But faith looks beyond the world of man and his works; it introduces man to a higher and more universal range of reality than the finite and temporal world to which the state and the economic order belong. And thereby it introduces into human life an element of spiritual freedom which may have a creative and transforming influence on man's social culture and historical destiny as well as on his inner personal experience. If therefore we study a culture as a whole, we shall find there is an intimate relation between its religious faith and its social achievement. Even a religion which is explicitly otherworldly and appears to deny all the values and standards of human society may, nevertheless, exert a dynamic influence on culture and provide the driving forces in movements of social change.³²

In other words, whereas ideology and faith fulfill the same sociological functions of transforming social change, faith is otherworldly in its ultimate goals and its influence on society is secondary to its spiritual mission. The focus on a transcendent realm beyond the finite and temporal secular concerns of politics and economics nevertheless exerts a rich and dynamic influence on

culture that has been one of the hallmarks of the activity of the Western Christian mind: "For, side by side with the natural aggressiveness and the lust for power and wealth which are so evident in European history, there were also new spiritual forces driving Western man towards a new destiny."³³ As a direct result of this long process of education, the Western synthesis between philosophical and religious life produced a great ferment of change in the Western world, but such a tension has also resulted in the widened capacity of human intelligence and the development of new forms of genius and ability that have enabled the West to "enlarge the bounds of human life," while providing "Christian civilization power to unite the world."³⁴

The Religious Origins of Western Culture: The Church and the Barbarians

So far we have sketched Dawson's introduction to his topic and the importance he placed on reconnecting with our Christian heritage, and we have brought to light a few of the challenges he saw along our path toward spiritual renewal. With his opening framework established, Dawson then launches his series of lectures from the beginning (so to speak), where he locates "the beginnings of Western culture ... in the new spiritual community which arose from the ruins of the Roman Empire owing to the conversion of the Northern barbarians to the Christian faith."³⁵ It is here that a new spiritual community centered on the Christian Church "came to the barbarians as the bearer of higher civilization, endowed with the prestige of Roman law and the authority of the Roman name."³⁶ The breakdown of the political organization of the Roman Empire created a political and social-organizational void, "which no barbarian king or general could fill, and this void was filled by the Church as the teacher and law-giver of the new peoples."³⁷ It was through its monasteries that the Christian Church's "spiritual initiative of the individual became embodied in a corporate institution which in its turn became the centre of a new movement of transmission."³⁸

The barbarians who had destroyed the Empire invaded the Church and grew more vicious and corrupt. In the age of Gregory

of Tours, a climate of “violence and corruption in which rulers set an example of injustice and contempt for the law” prevailed, “and even the barbaric virtues of loyalty and military honor were no longer preserved.”³⁹ Although moral standards were at an all-time low, Dawson points out:

religion was able to maintain its power only by the awe inspired by its supernatural prestige and the spiritual violence it opposed to the physical violence of barbarism. The fear of the wrath of God and the vengeance of the saints was the only power capable of intimidating the lawless ruffians who were so common among the new ruling class in the semi-barbarous Frankish state.⁴⁰

The Church functioned as a spiritual asylum where all the oppressed—slaves as well as criminals—could find safe haven in the supernatural and spiritual protection the Church offered along with its message of divine judgment and salvation. Protection and hope, along with a moral way of life, provided the faithful with a powerful alternative to corruption and hopelessness.

The Monks of the West and the Formation of the Western Tradition

It was the Church and its monks who preserved and spread the tradition of classical and Christian culture, philosophy, and theology between the fifth and sixth centuries. The monastic schools became the repositories of classical learning and the chief organs of higher intellectual culture in Western Europe. As Dawson puts it in *Formation of Christendom*, each monastery “provided an oasis of peace in a land of war, a cell of Christian culture in a barbarous and semi-pagan world.”⁴¹ Indeed, the great social institution by which the Church carried out the work of Christian acculturation and which dominated the whole development of early medieval culture was the *monastic community*.⁴² As a result, the monastic spiritual community rose to prominence within the Church and formed a kind of self-contained free society, “independent of external control and based on voluntary membership.”⁴³

In the West at the time of St. Benedict (c. 480–547) and St. Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), the monastic life fostered highly disciplined and tireless habits that enabled monks to re-cultivate lands that had been deserted and depopulated in the age of the barbarian invasions. As John Henry Newman observes in a well-known passage quoted by Dawson:

St. Benedict found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, not professing to do it by any set time, or by any rare specific, or by any series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often till the work was done, it was not known to be doing.... There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning and a city.⁴⁴

One of the greatest contributions of the Christian monks to the Church and to the development of the West was the phenomenon of missionary expansion. Northumbria became a center of evangelism and learning and, before it fell to the Viking invasions of the ninth century, Northumbrian culture succeeded in “implanting the seeds of a great revival of religious life and Christian culture on the Continent.”⁴⁵ In this sense the achievement of the age was “a true renaissance and the starting point of Western culture as conscious unity.”⁴⁶ The monks not only spread the faith but also served the vital function of preserving classical culture and, therefore, helped to civilize Europe, for “as the darkness deepened over Western Europe it was in the monasteries rather than in the cities that the tradition of Latin culture and the patterns of Christian life were preserved.”⁴⁷

The Medieval State and the Expansion of Christendom

The medieval state evolved into a new empire that was essentially a theocratic institution that embodied and reflected “the new conception of Christendom as the ultimate social unity, and the

sacred character of the ruler as the divinely appointed leader of the Christian people.”⁴⁸ Charlemagne (c. 742–814) had formed a bond between the Papacy and the Frankish monarchy that ultimately led to the end of the Lombard kingdom and

the destruction of the Byzantine sovereignty over Rome and Ravenna and the recognition of the king of the Franks as the patron and protector of the Holy See. In return, the Pope accepted the control of the Carolingian monarchy over the property and personnel of the Church, and the way was prepared for the establishment of the new Western Empire, which gave constitutional form and ritual consecration to the new relation between the Papacy and the Frankish kingdom.⁴⁹

Implicit in the elaborate ritual and symbolism in the coronation rite, “which was gradually worked out in the evolution of the medieval state,” was the conception of “the king as a sacred representative figure, the head of the Christian society, standing between God and the people, bound by reciprocal bonds of loyalty and fidelity to one and the other.”⁵⁰ As crucial ministers of the same Christian society, both the priest and the king were consecrated by God to serve: “the one to teach and offer sacrifice, the other to rule and judge.”⁵¹ The result of this powerful combination of Church and state relations was that the “kingdom of the Franks became the centre towards which all the living forces of Western culture converged: the meeting place of Latin and German elements, and of Mediterranean and Atlantic influences.”⁵²

The Carolingian Empire attempted to actualize a vast program of social and cultural reconstruction but was constrained by limited “material forces and no technical equipment” and was consequently set back by constant barbarian invasions even more deadly than those of the fifth century.⁵³ By the tenth century Western Christendom “had become surrounded by a rising flood of barbarism and the leadership of Western culture had passed to Islamic Spain which was then at the height of its prosperity under the

independent Khalifate of Cordova.”⁵⁴ The monasteries that had contributed so much to the formation of the Carolingian culture and had been the centers of Western culture were particularly exposed and vulnerable to barbarian attacks. The eventual collapse of the Carolingian Empire resulted in the end of the great Celtic Christian culture. The rulers descended from Charlemagne were no longer able to defend Europe against raiders from Scandinavia and North Africa. The task of defending Europe fell to local rulers, such as “Eudes, the Count of Paris, in France, Arnulf in Germany, Rudolf in Burgundy, and Guy of Spoleto in Italy. These kings derived their authority from their military leadership and their power to protect their country from inroads of the barbarians.”⁵⁵ This period inaugurated the beginning of feudalism and marked the end of any hope that the Christian West might have had of reestablishing a centralized government such as the Romans had achieved. Caught up in whatever means necessary to survive, Europe’s dream of bringing back some golden age was dashed.

Although the Scandinavians were at one point a serious threat to Western Christendom, they were eventually converted to Christianity by the “culmination of the process of expansion and cultural interchange which had accompanied the Viking movement.”⁵⁶ As a result, the “mixed culture of the Christian Viking states across the seas reacted on the culture of the Scandinavian homelands alike in religion and politics ... and seemed for a time as though the whole of the Nordic culture area from the British Isles to the Baltic would be united in a northern Christian empire under the sovereignty of the Danish king.”⁵⁷ This new formation of national unity gave birth to a new wave of “Scandinavian mercenaries and Icelandic poets” who “brought the Northern lands for the first time into real contact with the international life of Western Christendom.”⁵⁸ Indeed, it was, above all, “in Iceland that the scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries ... founded the great school of vernacular historiography and archaeology to which we owe so much of our knowledge of the past.”⁵⁹

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the conversion of Russia resulted in Christian culture taking root in Eastern Europe, which

paved the way for Christianity and the new Christian Eastern Europe to become “the meeting place of two independent currents of Christian culture; and while Byzantine influences were spreading northwards, Western Christendom was expanding eastwards through Central Europe, and new Christian states were arising in the valleys of the Elbe, the Vistula and the Danube.”⁶⁰ The continent became a Christian *orbis terrarum*. This same age saw both the revival and expansion of the Byzantine Church along with a rebirth of the tradition of Carolingian imperialism under the new Germanic Empire of Otto I and his successors, who contributed to the spread of Christianity.

The Reform of the Church in the Eleventh Century and the Medieval Papacy

After the breakdown of the Carolingian Empire, the most serious threat to Christendom was the “internal disintegration due to the exploitation and secularization of the Church by the leaders of the new feudal society.”⁶¹ Abbeys and bishoprics lost their special social status and were treated in the same way as lay fiefs and were “appropriated by violence; they were bought and sold or used as rewards for successful military adventures.”⁶² Once again, however, “as in the fifth and sixth centuries, Christianity showed its independence,” resilience, and “power to create new organs of spiritual regeneration.”⁶³ A new movement arose from within the monasteries in the midst of the feudal society to meet the new threats of feudal secularization of the Church.

At first, this movement was purely monastic and ascetic. It took the form of a total renunciation of worldly concerns and public life in favor of the isolated life of the desert and the cloister, “a repetition in different circumstances of the first great movement of Western monasticism.”⁶⁴ The new spiritual monasteries were formed by feudal princes or converted nobles, like Cluny in Burgundy (c. 910), “Brogne and Gorze in Lorraine and Camaldoli in Tuscany (1009),” who laid the foundations for a new monastic movement that would spiritually reform and transform the medieval Church.⁶⁵ The monks returned to the observance of the

Benedictine Rule. They “were not mere self-centered ascetics, but prophets of righteousness who defended the weak and oppressed and spoke boldly against the evil in high places.”⁶⁶

This new movement gained momentum and continued well into the eleventh century, during which it had attained its maturity “and began to affect every aspect of Western culture.”⁶⁷ The key players and leaders of this age were the great abbots of the movement, such as St. Odilo of Cluny (994–1019), St. Poppo of Stavelot (977–1048), and St. William of Volpiano (990–1031), who, as the dominant figures of the age, “exercised an immense influence on contemporary rulers.”⁶⁸ As the new monasteries gained power, so too did Christianity. The sense “of the new unity of Christendom was stronger than ever and demanded a new institutional expression,” which the reformed Papacy was able to provide “more effectively than any political institution could have done, since it transcended national and territorial rivalries and possessed in the hierarchy and the Canon Law the necessary instruments for its realization.”⁶⁹

The emancipation of the “Papacy from its dependence on the Empire and the separation of the spiritual authority of the bishop from his secular obligations” meant that the Papacy had become an autonomous center of authority liberated from the feudal hierarchy.⁷⁰ As a result, it became necessary for the Papacy “to reconstruct the whole order of ecclesiastical administration and jurisdiction as an organized unity.”⁷¹ Consequently, the reformed Papacy transformed the structure of the Western Church along with the character and spirit of Western Culture.⁷²

The Feudal World: Spiritual Revival and the Crusades

The movement of reform in the eleventh century was no longer limited to the monastic life “but had become the inspiration of a wider movement of spiritual change which transformed the order of the Western Church and the spirit of Western culture.”⁷³ The center of political life in medieval society was not the kingdom but the new feudal states that had arisen out of the “ruins of the Carolingian state by rebellious vassals or successful military

adventurers.”⁷⁴ Although these states had been formed by war for the purpose of war, they became an important source for social activity. A revival of religious, intellectual, and artistic expression soon followed. For example, Northern France “had achieved a new fusion or synthesis between the Christian and the barbarian elements in medieval culture.”⁷⁵ Although Christian and barbarous warrior elements had coexisted, “they did not form an organic unity. They remained two separate worlds—on the one side, the peace society of the Church, which found its centre in the monastic life and culture; on the other, the warrior society of the Western barbarians, which remained pagan at the heart in spite of the external and partial acceptance of Christianity.”⁷⁶ Now, by contrast, we witness “the translation into specifically Christian forms of the spirit of the old Northern warrior tradition, so that the dualism which had been characteristic of Western Europe during the last four or five centuries was at last transcended.”⁷⁷

Characteristic of the literary expression of these new feudal states were the *chansons de geste* (songs of heroic deeds), which were based on genuine heroic historic times and dealt with historic persons. The subject matter of epic *chansons de geste* was mainly the celebrations of the war of the Christians against the infidels.⁷⁸ The poetic sentiments expressed in the new epic genre were religious rather than political or patriotic, since their appeal was not related to any existing state but to “the wider society of Christendom as a whole, and thereby it introduces a new spiritual element into the barbarian warrior culture.”⁷⁹

The new feudal relationship between the religious and warrior elements also transformed the notion of the knighthood. The social bond between the knight and his lord was moralized by attributing higher religious motives to the knights, who were now detached from their barbarian and pagan backgrounds and integrated into the social structure of the Christian culture, “so that [the knight] was regarded as one of the three indispensable organs of society, like the priest and the peasant, each of whom ... needs the services of the other as members of one body.”⁸⁰ Emancipated from their pagan warrior backgrounds, these knights now became consecrated

warriors who swore allegiance to their Christian lords. Their obedience and code of conduct became the ideals of chivalry that formed Christian knight-warriors who served to protect and defend the Church and its followers.

The new warrior spirit was too powerful and prevalent in medieval society to be suppressed. The Church sought "to find a new outlet for the warlike energies of feudal society by turning them against the external enemies of Christendom."⁸¹ The proclamation of the crusade for the recapture of Jerusalem by Urban II at the council of Clermont in 1093 generated "a wave of religious enthusiasm which was none the less real because it also appealed to the natural instincts of the unregenerate feudal warrior."⁸²

The Crusades had for the first time in the history of feudal society created a purpose that transcended local parochialism, which in turn "united Western Christendom in a common enterprise under the leadership of the Church."⁸³ The wave of popular excitement of the Crusades ignited religious fervor and marked "a turning point in the history of the West: ending the long centuries of weakness and isolation and cultural inferiority and bringing the new peoples of Western Christendom back to the old centres of Eastern Mediterranean culture."⁸⁴

While religious ideals continued to find expression in Western culture, there also arose a courtly secular culture that was "a kind of anti-crusade, a propagandist movement for the development of a new secular aristocratic culture, which travelled in the opposite direction of the Crusades."⁸⁵ By the second half of the twelfth century, this new countercultural movement found expression in the music, romantic poetry, and literature that "arose at the Angevin court and in the courts of Northern France and Flanders and the western and southern German lands."⁸⁶ This new courtly poetry, a direct contrast to the religiously inspired *chansons de geste*, celebrated the virtues of courtesy and love that paved the way for a new hedonistic way of life that gained influence over society as "the secularization of chivalry was increased both by the loss of the crusading ideal and by the increasing wealth and luxury of Western court life."⁸⁷

The Medieval City: Guilds and Universities

The rebirth of the medieval city from the twelfth century onward transformed the economic and social life of Western Europe. The medieval city of this period, however, was a new creation unlike the cities of antiquity or those of modern times: "this new type of European city had considerable influence on the religious development of Europe during these formative centuries."⁸⁸ Indeed, "it was the medieval city which first provided the favourable conditions for a thorough-going Christianization of social life."⁸⁹

It was in a new atmosphere of economic renaissance and the expansion of commercial life that the new medieval city produced a new taste in art. Although the new medieval city depended on a revival of commerce and industrial activity, the new art of this period was also inspired by a new spiritual revival that to a considerable extent predated the economic revival. The rise of a growing merchant class and economic opportunity and wealth fostered personal freedom and a flowering of religious culture which found expression in Gothic architecture, since it was the growing religious merchant class that helped to finance the monks who had an important share in the early development of building.⁹⁰ Structures such as cathedrals, churches, castles, and public buildings were the supreme achievements of the new style, like the city temple of the civic life in antiquity.

The Mediterranean cities were "one of the greatest social creations of the Middle Ages."⁹¹ They were commonwealths and centers of communal life that existed outside the hierarchy of the feudal state. Citizens were bound together in a free association of "religious confraternity of charity under the patronage of a saint for mutual aid" both religiously and materially.⁹² This free association of individuals "was the seed of the great flowering of communal life in the merchant and craft guilds which were the most striking feature of medieval urban society."⁹³ The integration of "corporate organization, economic function, and civic freedom" enabled these cities to become the "most complete embodiment of the social ideals of the Middle Ages."⁹⁴

Changes to the intellectual and educational world of Western culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries ensued. The rise of

the medieval city during the Benedictine age of Western culture witnessed the continuity of the higher culture of learning in the monasteries and abbeys. The Benedictine abbeys were centers of learning and literary production.⁹⁵ A revival culture and literary activity fostered new ideals of education and set off the development of ecclesiastical humanism, the primary tradition of higher education and learning in Western culture.⁹⁶

During the thirteenth century, Paris and Bologna exemplified the spirit of the university movement and transformed the educational and intellectual classes that dominated Western culture. The Friars were the primary teachers and leaders of the universities and were at the center of the intellectual life and mission of the Church. It was the creation of universities and the formation "of new religious Orders alike [that] formed part of the far-reaching design of the medieval Papacy for the intellectual organization of Christian civilization, which is one of the most remarkable examples of the planning of culture on a large scale that history has ever seen."⁹⁷ For nearly two and a half centuries the Church, through religious reformers like St. Hugh of Cluny, St. Gregory VII, St. Anselm, and St. Bernard, "inspired the revival of Western learning and philosophy and the creation of universities which were founded as international centers of higher study for Western Christendom as a whole."⁹⁸

However, the second half of the thirteenth century, generally regarded as the high point of medieval culture, also marks a turning point and crisis. For three centuries the development of Western Europe had been moving in a direction of a "unity of Christendom and the creation of an intellectual and spiritual synthesis."⁹⁹ By the second half of the thirteenth century, however, this movement reversed "and a centrifugal process [began] which continues throughout the later Middle Ages until it culminates in the religious division and social changes of the sixteenth century."¹⁰⁰ From the end of the thirteenth century the international unity of Western Christendom had begun to collapse. During the last two centuries of what Dawson calls the Fourth Age of the Church, this disintegration revealed itself "in the defeat of the Papacy by the new

national monarchies, like that of Philip IV of France, and in the rise of new revolutionary movements of reform, like the Wycliffites and the Hussites, and finally by the Great Schism in the Papacy itself.”¹⁰¹ The decline of the unifying energy of medieval culture resulted in “the end of the crusading states and the destruction of the great crusading Order,” as the crusading ideal had been “discredited and secularized by its use as a political weapon against Christian states like the Empire and the Kingdom of Aragon.”¹⁰² According to Dawson, however, the destruction of the Templars by Philip IV “was far more serious, since it marked the complete victory of the temporal power of the new monarchy over the international elements of medieval society.”¹⁰³ As he puts it:

The imposing structure of medieval Christendom which had been built up by the idealism of the reforming movement, the organizing power of the Papacy, and the devotion of the religious Orders proved powerless to withstand the determined attack of a handful of unscrupulous officials like Guillaume de Nogaret and Pierre Flotte, who were the servants of the new monarchy and understood how to exploit the new techniques of power in a ruthlessly totalitarian fashion.¹⁰⁴

These and many other developments, such as the attempt to overcome the Great Schism by the Conciliar movement, inaugurated what Dawson refers to as the Fifth Age of the Church, a period of crisis that threatened the unity and even the existence of Western Christendom.¹⁰⁵ The Church and Christendom came under the direct attack of both the theological and ecclesiastical challenge of the Protestant Reformation and by the cultural challenge of the new lay culture of the Italian Renaissance, “which had replaced the theological and philosophical traditions of the medieval universities.”¹⁰⁶ The Church’s counter reaction to the Protestant Reformation and the secular humanism of the Renaissance produced the Catholic Baroque culture and Counter-Reformation, which resulted in a new form of Christian humanist culture and

education. These new developments peaked in the first half of the seventeenth century and launched the age of Baroque culture “which dominated the artistic and intellectual life of Europe.”¹⁰⁷ The success of the Baroque culture, however, was short lived. It was too dependent, like the Catholic revival itself, on Catholic monarchies, such as the Hapsburg monarchies in Spain and Austria. When these monarchies declined, “the Baroque culture declined with them,” and when the Catholic monarchy of France was destroyed by the French Revolution, “the Church was the first victim of the change ... [and] the established order of the Catholic Church was swept away.”¹⁰⁸ Here is how Dawson sums up this dark period:

As the armies of the French Revolution advanced through Europe ... the monasteries and universities were destroyed, church property was confiscated and the Pope himself was deported to France as political prisoner. In the eyes of secular opinion, the Catholic Church has been abolished as a super annuated relic of the dead past.¹⁰⁹

Thus began what Dawson refers to as the Sixth Age of the Church, a period of time in which the Church found itself in an atmosphere of defeat and crisis. Everything from the religious orders and the monasteries to the Catholic universities and missionary activities had to be built up from the foundations, as each “had been destroyed or reduced to poverty and impotence.”¹¹⁰ Yet, despite being “associated with the unpopular cause of political reaction and the tradition of the *ancien regime*,” the Church did recover and a Catholic revival of Catholicism finally took place, so that by 1850 the Church was in a stronger position than it had been a hundred years before.¹¹¹ While the revival began in France during the French Revolution, “the exiled French clergy contributed to the creation or restoration of Catholicism in England and America.”¹¹² For Dawson, the entire history of Catholicism in the United States “belongs to this sixth age and is in many aspects typical of the new conditions of the period.”¹¹³ At present, according to

Dawson, Catholicism in America rather than the European pattern is “the normal condition of the Church everywhere.”¹¹⁴ Catholicism in the United States is essentially urban, whereas Catholicism in Europe was firmly rooted in the peasantry. Moreover, from the very beginning Catholicism in the United States has been entirely and vigorously independent of the state “and has not been restricted by the complex regime of concordats which was the dominant pattern of European Catholicism in the nineteenth century.”¹¹⁵ The story of the Church, however, is far from over. As Dawson states:

I have spoken of the Six Ages of the Church—there may be sixty before the universal mission of the Church is completed. But each age has its own peculiar vocation which can never be replaced, and each, to paraphrase [Leopold von] Ranke’s famous saying, stands in a direct relation to God and answers to Him alone for its achievements and its failure. Each, too, bears its own irreplaceable witness to the faith of all.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Dawson concludes *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* with a vernacular poem by William Langland (“Piers Plowman”), written during the Hundred Years’ War, a time of great political and social upheaval in the Catholic Church. For Dawson, Langland’s poem describes the triumph of spirituality in the common life of the Christian and sums up the medieval ideal of the essential fusion of religion and culture. In Langland’s poem, Dawson stresses, we see how “religion was not a particular way of life but the way of all life.”¹¹⁷

Interpreting the rich images of Langland’s poem, Dawson observes, “Christianity is the labour of love to which every man is called according to his personal gifts and his social vocation, and the Church is the community of love—the house of unity into which the harvest of humanity is brought.”¹¹⁸ According to Dawson, Langland’s poem points to how the labor of the Church brought a

vital spiritual inheritance to the West. Langland's poem is "itself a proof that all was not lost; that the labour of seven hundred years has not been in vain."¹¹⁹ The external order the centuries of Christianity created or attempted to create pale in significance when compared to "the internal change which can never be entirely undone except by the total negation or destruction of Western man himself."¹²⁰

The vital fusion between religion and culture profoundly shaped medieval history and modern Western identity. From the modest beginnings of missionaries and monasteries, to the papal reform, religious revival, and the Crusades, to the rise of guilds and universities, time and again Christianity survived and reshaped Western civilization. Religious motivations and expressions of piety were vital forces that brought about the progress and change in society that have become an integral part of our identity and have formed the inner life and character of the Western mind. Christianity's contribution to our development as a people bequeathed a rich and immense tradition. Any attempt to reconnect with our heritage must begin with a serious study and meditation on our shared common Christian heritage and must accompany a careful analysis of the relation between religion and culture. There is no better place to commence this intellectual journey than the work of Christopher Dawson.

Endnotes

1. Daniel Callahan, "Christopher Dawson," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 167.
2. This is a major theme that runs throughout Dawson's work. See Christopher Dawson's essay "Civilization in Crisis," in *Christianity and European Culture: Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*, Gerald J. Russello, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 65–83.
3. Christopher Dawson, "Editorial Note," *Dublin Review* 207 (1940): 1. For an extended treatment of this theme, see Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 2007), 187–204.

4. Dawson authored almost two hundred books and articles. In addition to his *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, which concerns us herein, some of his more famous books include *The Formation of Christendom*; *Religion and the Modern State*; *The Judgment of the Nations*; *The Age of the Gods*; *The Making of Europe*; *Medieval Essays*; and *Progress and Religion*. For a helpful bibliography of Christopher Dawson's books and articles, see Claude Locas, "Christopher Dawson, a Bibliography," in *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 177–206.
5. For a study of Dawson's life, see Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992). See also Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) for a treatment of Dawson's intellectual development within the context of a generation of English intellectuals during the twentieth century who converted to Catholicism. See also Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005). Schwartz's comparative analysis of Dawson situates Dawson's thought within the beliefs of Chesterton, Greene, and Jones and within the British Catholic revival of the twentieth century, during which period British Catholicism underwent a crucial intellectual and literary renewal. See also Dermot Quinn, "Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History," in *Eternity in Time: Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History*, Stratford Caldecott and John Morrill, eds. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1997).
6. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Christopher Dawson, "Civilization in Crisis," in *Christianity and European Culture*, 65. Emphasis added.
9. Ibid., 66. Emphasis added.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 68.
12. Christopher Dawson, "The Future of National Government," *The Dublin Review* (1935), 250–251.
13. Quoted in John R. E. Bliese, "Christopher Dawson: His Interpretation of History," *Modern Age* 23 (1979): 260. Original quotation is from Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, John J. Mulloy, ed. (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), 105.

14. Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World*, 214. Birzer places Dawson's thought within an Augustinian framework.
15. Dawson, "Civilization in Crisis," *Christianity and European Culture*, 75.
16. "'New Apostolate of the Intellect' Is Urged by Christopher Dawson," *Catholic Messenger* 79 (1961): 8.
17. Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1989), 150.
18. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 12–13.
19. *Ibid.*, 13.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Dawson, "Civilization in Crisis," *Christianity and European Culture*, 65.
22. Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture: A Way to the Renewal of Human Life* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 20. Emphasis added.
23. For a critique of Dawson's approach to history, see Hayden White, "Religion, Culture and Western Civilization in Christopher Dawson's Idea of History," *English Miscellany* 9 (1958): 247–287.
24. Christopher Dawson, "The Recovery of Spiritual Unity," *Christianity and European Culture*, 238.
25. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 13.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. James Ambrose Raftis, "The Development of Christopher Dawson's Thought," *Chesterton Review* 9 (1983): 117.
29. Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1968), 8.
30. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 14.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
33. *Ibid.*, 17.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 26.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 20.
39. *Ibid.*, 32–33.
40. *Ibid.*, 33.
41. Christopher Dawson, *Formation of Christendom* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), 171.
42. *Ibid.*

43. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 47.
44. Ibid., 53. Original quotation is in John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Historical Sketches, Vol. II* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 210.
45. Ibid., 61.
46. Ibid., 65.
47. Ibid., 43.
48. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 79.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 82. In his book *The Divine Right of Kings*, John Neville Figgis argues that “it is in the gradual rise of Papal claims to universal supremacy, that are first put forth those notions which form the basis of all theories of Divine Right.... With two powers within the State in the relative positions of Pope and Emperor, it was inevitable that sooner or later there should arise between them a struggle for supremacy.” See John Neville Figgis, *Divine Right of Kings* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), 45.
51. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 79.
52. Ibid., 75.
53. Ibid., 84.
54. Ibid., 84–85.
55. Ibid., 87.
56. Ibid., 95.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid. See also Christopher Dawson, “The Expansion of Christianity,” *Communeval* 69 (1959): 378–380.
59. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 100.
60. Ibid., 114.
61. Ibid., 120.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 121.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 122.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 126.
68. Ibid., 127.
69. Ibid., 134.
70. Ibid., 138.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 140.
73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 142.
76. Ibid., 142–143.
77. Ibid., 144.
78. Ibid., 145.
79. Ibid., 146.
80. Ibid., 147.
81. Ibid., 149.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 150.
85. Ibid., 155–156.
86. Ibid., 156.
87. Ibid., 159–160.
88. Ibid., 161.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., 169.
91. Ibid., 164.
92. Ibid., 170.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid., 171.
95. Ibid., 181.
96. Ibid., 184.
97. Ibid., 197.
98. Christopher Dawson, “The Six Ages of the Church,” in *Christianity and European Culture*, 40–41.
99. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 217.
100. Ibid.
101. Christopher Dawson, “The Six Ages of the Church,” in *Christianity and European Culture*, 41–42. The “Six Ages of the Church” is a lecture in which Dawson defines the distinctive periods that characterize each age during the centuries the Church dominated. In each age, a problem facing the Church is solved only to give rise to another. In short, the Apostolic Age (first), the Age of the Fathers (second), the Dark Ages (third), the Middle Ages (fourth), the Protestant and Catholic Reformations (fifth), and the Modern Age (sixth) constitute what Dawson refers to as the “Six Ages of the Church.” I have limited my discussion of these ages to a brief consideration of the fourth, fifth, and sixth and only insofar as these relate to the main thread of *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*.

102. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 216.
103. Ibid., 216–217.
104. Ibid., 217.
105. Dawson, “The Six Ages of the Church,” in *Christianity and European Culture*, 42.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 43.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid.
112. Ibid.
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid., 43–44.
115. Ibid.
116. Ibid., 45.
117. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, 222.
118. Ibid., 223.
119. Ibid., 224.
120. Ibid.