

Dawson, Natural Theology, and the “New Atheism”

Arguments from *Religion and Culture*¹

Gerald J. Russello

In 1994, German archeologist Klaus Schmidt described the importance of a huge complex in southern Turkey. It is the oldest known example of religious architecture, built thousands of years before the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. As described in *National Geographic*, its construction would have required “more people coming together in one place than had likely occurred before,” and the complex was built before the development of writing, and before the development of techniques such as pottery or even the wheel.²

The discoveries have revolutionized early archeology because Gobekli Tepe is apparently almost solely a religious site; there are no habitations nearby and no signs of permanent settlement. Whereas until about thirty years ago many archeologists had assumed religion was a byproduct of other events, such as the rise of agriculture or the settling of nomadic populations into more pastoral settings, Gobekli Tepe seems to demonstrate that religious institutions preceded and indeed may have caused these other phenomena, which led ultimately to the rise of civilization. As Charles C. Mann writes, “the construction of a massive temple by a group of foragers is evidence that organized religion could have come *before* the rise of agriculture and other aspects of civilization. It suggests that the human impulse to gather for sacred rituals arose as humans shifted from seeing themselves as part of the natural world to seeking mastery over it.”³ In other words, as an anthropologist is quoted as saying in the *National Geographic*

article referenced above, the idea that human civilization was shaped by environmental forces, which then generated cultural symbols and rituals to explain it, is backward; rather, "I think that what we are learning is that civilization is a product of the human mind."⁴

Christopher Dawson learned that lesson decades before Gobekli Tepe was excavated. Already, in 1929, Dawson in *Progress and Religion* obliterated the secular progressive theory that religion was simply a byproduct of material forces. Dawson recognized that "[m]odern writers on anthropology and primitive thought have tended to assume that religion is a secondary phenomenon and that man's earliest attitude to reality was a kind of empirical materialism."⁵ A student of the then-new discipline of anthropology might note the practice of sun worship among an agricultural people and conclude that the sun was worshiped because people did not know how to guarantee good crops years after year. In compensation, they sought to supplicate something they saw as beyond their power to control. Dawson contended instead that religion was not some "natural" outgrowth of primitive culture or an unsophisticated understanding of physical processes. Dawson turned the argument around. Religion was natural, to be sure; but it was a core human experience, from which culture, society, and even developments such as agriculture proceeded. It deserved to be analyzed in and of itself and not as a byproduct of something else. Dawson contested the then-common opinion of peoples like the Eskimo or Bushmen, whom the theorists of progress considered completely dominated by their physical surroundings. In fact, these cultures were the result "of a free and intelligent activity, and it expresses itself in an art and a folk-lore far richer and more original than that of many more advanced peoples."⁶ The spiritual resources of vibrant cultures, Dawson thought, enabled them to transform physical and social limitations to accord with a transcendental vision.

Our own culture again is wrestling with questions of the "source" of religion and whether it has any ultimate or absolute meaning. A series of books over the last decade, written by authors

such as Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, have articulated what has been described as the “New Atheism” that challenges the conclusion that writers such as Dawson made concerning religious faith.⁷ For the New Atheists, religious faith either is meant as a tool of oppression for use by some groups over others or reflects some earlier development in human evolution that can now be safely discarded. As in centuries past, these New Atheists root many of their arguments in modern science, claiming, for example, that religion developed as a cooperative mechanism or is the evolutionary cue of parental obedience misplaced to a divine father figure.

Dawson did not, of course, have these New Atheists in mind when writing his work. But he was contending with their intellectual ancestors, the anthropologists and sociologists of his own day, such as Sir James Frazer, who thought that the social sciences explained away religion, much as the New Atheists believe the harder sciences do today. As Dawson wrote in 1931, “[a] theory is not regarded as ‘scientific’ unless it explains religion in terms of something else—as an artificial construction from non-religious elements.”⁸ Instead, Dawson advocated the uniqueness of religious thought and life and attempted to disentangle the threads of religious experience from those that could be explained by geography, history, or environment. He did not dispute that these factors existed or that they could have an effect on religious and cultural development. He simply denied that material factors alone could be collapsed into, and completely explain, a general theory of human society. Instead, he explored the sense of the transcendent that he found as a common factor across varied groups and time periods and derived from this the conclusion that religious experience cannot be distilled from a set of physical or environmental factors but represented another form of experience.

The Gifford Lectures: *Religion and Culture*

Religion and Culture sets out what is perhaps Dawson’s most famous thesis: “Religion is the key of history.” The book started as a

set of ten lectures that were presented in 1947 at the University of Edinburgh as part of its prestigious Gifford Lectures. The Gifford Lectures, endowed in 1885, were explicitly meant to address the subject of “natural theology,” without reference to “or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation.” Dawson later presented a second set of lectures (a rare honor) from 1949 to 1950 that resulted in his book *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*. The first set of lectures, *Religion and Culture*, can be divided into three main sections. The first three lectures address the question of natural theology and its relation to the study of religion as a social or cultural phenomenon. The second part of the book applies Dawson’s argument to specific cultural elements as sources of religious knowledge: prophets and divination, priesthood and sacrifice, and kingship. Finally, he turns to the relationship between the divine order in culture and the social order and concludes with a lecture on religion and cultural change. The book, as is the case with much of Dawson’s work, proceeds along a twin track: Dawson at once argues for both the reality of religion as a distinct category of human experience, which is mostly a philosophic argument, and also that religion has had a unique place in human culture, which is developed as a historical argument.

In a sense, Dawson was continuing in the Gifford Lectures the critique of modern anthropology he began in 1929. In her introduction to a new edition of *Progress and Religion*, the prominent British anthropologist Mary Douglas gives some sense of Dawson’s achievement: Dawson “artfully stages a dialogue between the eighteenth-century philosophers, Condorcet, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, and the people they thought of as primitive.”⁹ Religious faith takes on a different perspective if examined from the point of view of these people themselves and not through the prism of anthropological theory. “The thin rationalism [of modern anthropology], which proceeded by arbitrarily separating one level of experience from the next, grossly distorted the subject matter and made a mockery of its pretensions to objectivity.”¹⁰ These thinkers saw what they wished to see and ignored the brute fact that “an

obscure and confused intuition of transcendent being" was present in and influenced every so-called primitive culture.¹¹

Dawson sets the terms of the debate in his penetrating first lecture, "Natural Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion." The first question Dawson addresses is whether what he calls (following Blaise Pascal) the followers of the god of the philosophers can speak to the followers of the God of Isaac and Jacob. Dawson notes that the presuppositions of the Gifford Lectures—"the existence of a science of Natural Theology which is competent to study the nature of the Divine Being and the relations of man and the universe to him"—is an assertion that "would be denied to-day by most modern philosophers and many modern theologians."¹² Natural theology, Dawson asserts, is the theology of humanism, and the two were joined from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, during the "centuries when Western Christendom was so profoundly divided by controversy and sectarianism, by religious wars and religious persecutions, it was Humanism which was the chief unifying element in European culture, since it provided the only ground on which the members of the different nations and the different churches could meet on equal terms."¹³

Natural theology was *rational* in that the principles of theology were thought reasonable, intelligible, and demonstrable to others without the articles of a particular faith. Therefore, one need not believe in miracles or transubstantiation, as these were not reducible to neutral explanations evident to normal human reason. Thus, Hume, in the section on miracles in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, argues that miracles by definition violate "the laws of nature" and that those laws of nature are learned from experience of the material world. Because natural theology was rational, its proponents thought it could bridge the divisive sectarian controversies in post-medieval Europe.

Further, natural theology was *dependent* on the longer Christian tradition, although this did not become clear until later. For so long as natural theology maintained its connection with Christian culture, it was able to serve that unifying role that Dawson

identified. But natural theology was open to two attacks: for "in so far as it made God not only the author of Nature but the medium of our understanding and the guarantee of our empirical knowledge, it profoundly changed the traditional character of natural Theology and exposed it to a two fold attack."¹⁴ In the traditional view, God was not, or not only, natural. There was a God who was revealed in nature but also one who fills hearts and minds with spiritual wisdom. But insofar as this new God was simply a guarantor of empirical reality, rather than a participant in that reality, orthodox Christians could attack the aridity of this conception of God. Religious skeptics, too, found this unsatisfactory; they now had free reign to sever the connection between revealed and natural religion. The result of that separation was, initially, Deism, the clockmaker God who had little relation to His creation. But as Dawson notes, this move undermined the very reason for the existence of natural theology, which was to explain God in the light of reason. However, "as soon as Deism broke the vital contact and attempted to make Natural Theology the autonomous principle of a purely rational religion, it was powerless to withstand the disintegrating criticisms of the sceptics."¹⁵ And indeed, the next generation of thinkers, the heirs of Voltaire, Bayle, and Hume, determined one could dispense with God altogether in constructing a rational system for understanding the universe.¹⁶

Dawson argued that the influence of natural theology faded in the early nineteenth century. New knowledge "came pouring into Europe from the East, from India and Persia, from Egypt and Babylonia, from China and the Far East as well as from Central America and Polynesia." This was the death knell for natural theology because it could not construct rational religious principles based on the wild profusions of religious forms around the world. So instead history, and in particular the comparison of different religious histories, took a more significant place. Now "the only true Natural Theology was the philosophy of history. The great task of the philosopher was to construct an intelligible synthesis in which the successive spiritual achievements of the great world epochs and world religions were shown as stages in the progressive

self-revelation of the Absolute Spirit." In some sense, this construction of religion moving through various stages to reach perfection resembles some nineteenth-century philosophies of history, where the historical process itself reflects the gradual unfolding of a "world spirit." But Dawson takes us in another direction, that of anthropology and comparative religion. These new fields of inquiry enforced a separation of "the facts of man's religious development," while they "abstain[ed] from theological and philosophical judgments."¹⁷ Objective religious scholarship in the modern sense was born.

To phrase this transition in another way, the old natural theology was abstract, seeking a divine universal in nature. The new natural theology instead focused on the details of particular religions as a way to discover a hidden, common religious truth; Dawson found the fullest expression of this new interest in the field of comparative religion. If the true spirit of religion could be found in the history of individual religious faiths rather than the book of nature only, then all aspects of faith should be analyzed and compared. The new knowledge "led men to pay attention to the more obscure and non-rational aspects of religion which the theologians of the Enlightenment had despised and neglected."¹⁸ There were no useless superstitions or useless excrescences; all were subject to inspection, cataloguing, and comparison. The inclusion of mystical, extra-rational experience was not exactly new; it too had its intellectual antecedents. In his 1933 collection *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*, Dawson asserts that modern rationalism divided into two tracks. On the one path were the scientific materialists, who grounded their rejection of religion in what they considered unassailable scientific principles. The other path was that followed by those Dawson termed the idealists, typified by Rousseau. "[W]hile the Natural Religion of the Deists was the rationalization of an intellectual tradition, that of Rousseau was neither rationalist nor intellectualist: it was a religious faith based on a non-rational intuitive experience which was half mystical and half emotional."¹⁹ The rationalist revolution, in other words, required more than the negative criticism of a Voltaire, for

example, but needed the “romantic humanism” of a Rousseau to effect real social change.

But the putative objectivity of comparative religion was ultimately unworkable. Over the last thirty years, the so-called “post-modernists” have attacked the very idea of objectivity in the human sciences. Every way of explaining the world is a mere “narrative,” none more correct than any other. Of course, this is not true; reality exists outside our perception. Nor is postmodernism necessarily correlative with a view of morality that is relativistic or nihilistic; some traditional forms of thought may be quite compatible with postmodernism.²⁰ Yet the argument that analysis in the human sciences of a set of facts and judgment about them are “objective” and correlate with certain objective conclusions is one that Dawson himself presciently rejected. Of the new comparative religion project, its “programme of philosophic neutrality proved to be impracticable. Both the comparative method and the concept of evolutionary development [of religion] involved judgments of value which had philosophic implications,” usually deriving, Dawson found, from Hegel or Auguste Comte.²¹ Indeed, without such underlying judgments, comparative religion becomes simply a jumble of unrelated facts.

Thus, both natural theology as initially understood and comparative religion suffered for Dawson from the same flaw despite their different emphases. “Both of them were equally rationalistic and reduced the deepest problems of human consciousness to superficialities. The Natural Theology of the Enlightenment reduced the Living God of Christian tradition to the celestial engineer of the cosmic mechanism, while the science of comparative religion created a museum of dead cults and anthropological curiosities.”²² To remedy this flaw, Dawson invoked the philosopher William James and his study of “religious phenomena in their experiential actuality.”²³ Dawson wanted the study of religion to encompass the reality of religious experience that natural theology and comparative religion leave out of their system-building. Traditionally, “the bridge [between reason and religious experience] was built by authority—the collective social guarantee of a supernatural

revelation,” a situation that still exists with respect to the world religions. But natural theology and comparative religion, as heirs to the Enlightenment, address only one side of this analysis and ignore the other.

Dawson, therefore, takes a slightly different tack than, say, his contemporary G. K. Chesterton, who in his 1908 book *Orthodoxy* and elsewhere criticized the goals of comparative religion. Chesterton argued that comparative religion was looking only to the externals and assuming then that the substance was the same. This, for Chesterton, was not in fact the case. Different religions “agree in machinery; almost every great religion on earth works with the same external methods, with priests, scriptures, altars, sworn brotherhoods, special feasts. They agree in the mode of teaching; what they differ about is the thing to be taught. Pagan optimists and Eastern pessimists would both have temples, just as Liberals and Tories would both have newspapers. Creeds that exist to destroy each other both have scriptures, just as armies that exist to destroy each other both have guns.”²⁴ Dawson is not unaware that different religions have different teachings, and he is not positing some equivalence among different faiths. Indeed, books such as his *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* were meant to illustrate exactly how particular religious teachings can change culture. However, his goal in these lectures was to contrast religious with nonreligious modes of experience, not to address differences among those experiences. Indeed, his critique of comparative religion echoes Chesterton’s main concern: that it is a dead end because the field focuses only on superficialities in the hopes of a false unity.

Having set the stage, Dawson devotes the next set of lectures to trying to recreate the bridge between rationalist proofs of divinity and the lived religious experience based on a wide-ranging assessment of religion and its role in cultural development and how this role cannot be reduced to simple conclusions that religion is a form of “mass delusion” with no objective truth or validity. The archaeological realities of Gobekli Tepe demonstrate that religious experience and communal belief created cultures, not the other

way around.²⁵ Among other things, what is striking about the middle lectures is the sympathetic and learned understanding of the religious and cultural traditions of other cultures. There is little, if any, extended discussion of Western culture. Instead, Dawson takes his examples mainly from the people of North America and Asia, especially the Indian Vedas and classic Buddhist texts, for which Dawson obviously has great respect. There is little here of Dawson as the caricatured Christian apologist but rather a disciplined social scientist taking seriously what the religious texts and traditions of other cultures say about their experience of the divine. In these chapters, Dawson outlines two central subjects. The first subject is an exploration of the sources of religious knowledge and whether it is different from other kinds of knowledge. The second traces, in a more abbreviated way than in some of his other works, the rise of the “world religions,” as he calls them, such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which superseded the local, polytheistic cults.

Unlike the prior, polytheistic or animist cultures in which new gods or spirits were incorporated into the old gods, sometime under new names, the world religions instead posited a universal religious experience. Old gods needed to yield to the new (although as Dawson notes in the case of India, there are nuances even there), but these world religions share with natural theology the conclusion that “the elements of religious truth are common to the human race and accessible to every rational creature.”²⁶ The world religions, in other words, stand apart from (Dawson uses the word “transcended”) individual cultures to create “spiritual unities,” each representing a different spiritual principle and each mutually exclusive of the others, until recently, when the last fruits of the Enlightenment—the technical and scientific revolutions beginning in the nineteenth century—threatened to overwhelm them all.

Each of the three religious phenomena he discusses—prophet, priest, and king—is meant to assist in bringing human culture in line with divine reality. The prophet is the figure who calls a people to the divine and has direct experience with the transcendent.

Prophet and priest exist in a symbiotic but not fully stable relationship, as the former represents the radicalism of God while the priesthood provides “the authoritative, regulating principle in religion and the institutional bond between religion and culture.”²⁷ And the king represents the divine on Earth, perhaps most fully realized in the sun worship of ancient Egypt, where the association of Pharaoh with the Sun-God was most complete. Each of these cultural institutions, Dawson implies, provides a way of knowledge not recognized by natural theology or rationalism.

The argument of *Religion and Culture* challenged the secular outlook of the social sciences, which assumed that religious knowledge was used to explain the unexplainable forces of nature, dreams, premonitions, and similar phenomena. The secular outlook held that man has conquered nature—and in light of the diverse religious customs arising out of our primitive heritage—such religious experience can be revealed for what it is, simply a struggle by early humanity to comprehend the inexplicable universe. In contrast, what Dawson calls the “reality and autonomy of religious knowledge,” which rests in the “recognition of a superhuman Reality of which man is somehow conscious and towards which he must in some way orientate his life,” is precisely the experience that is being contested by secularists of every age.²⁸

The secular view may be superficially appealing, for it appears to give humanity control over the natural and supernatural worlds—“for the religion that we find as a historical reality ... [is] man-made religion.”²⁹ But it is not the religion of the philosophers because religious experience is mixed not only with reason but also with human hopes and fears. But that does not make it any less real nor deny it a separate category of human experience, because these primitive beginnings captured a truth that human experience is not defined solely by reason, and so the civilizational construct of modern life is “on a relatively superficial level of existence and consciousness.” This contention picks up a theme Dawson uses throughout his work, which is that modern society is only one form of human organization, and it must recognize that other forces are at work that it cannot completely control. Some of those are

mechanical or scientific, such as the forces modern society itself unleashed, but others are those that lay at the core of our existence as humans.

Dawson uses the findings of comparative religion to argue that what the great world religions have in common is a feeling and experience of transcendence and that this transcendence is not a cultural or evolutionary byproduct. He recognizes that the “philosopher and the scientist may question the probative force of this experience,” but Dawson claims it was the base of the historic religions, indeed as “one of the ultimate and absolute sources of historic religion.”³⁰ Indeed, Dawson spends much of the chapter titled “God and the Supernatural” defending the mystical traditions of various world religions. In his view, the expression of deep human knowledge by which “man attains a consciousness deeper than that of his discursive reason but no less real” has persuasive force because it “appears to be a universal human experience.”³¹ In contrast, the New Atheists assert that mystical religious knowledge is simply not knowledge at all.

The New Atheists

Controversy over why humanity has always sought the divine has revived recently, as evidenced by work from the New Atheists such as the late Christopher Hitchens. Their arguments range from the familiar (religion is a mass delusion) to the seemingly sophisticated (genes made us religious), but they are wrestling with the same questions raised by Gobekli Tepe, that is, the relation of the divine and the spiritual in human culture. Taken together, the answers they pose are premised on the same assumptions: God is not “out there,” and some technique, such as economics, biology, or particle physics will either explain God or explain Him away.

In some sense, these writers are the heirs of the natural theology debate that Dawson outlines in *Religion and Culture*. The debate pits those who believe religion is a different path of knowledge than the scientific and therefore deserving of study and those who seek to define religious experience as either mistaken or reducible to another form of knowledge. While the eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century thinkers thought to diminish revealed religion in favor of empirical proof of the divine presence by using reason, the New Atheists argue that reason itself shows that there is no basis to believe in a divine presence at all. And insofar as they adopt a comparative approach, they discount the features Dawson identifies as elements of a true religious culture and treat almost all characteristics of the world religions as errors, evil, or accidents. Thus, Sam Harris writes that religion distorts whatever clear ethical lessons it may be trying to teach:

“[I]t is not enough that Jesus was a man who transformed himself to such a degree that the Sermon on the Mount could be his heart’s confession. He also had to be the son of God, born of a virgin, and destined to return to Earth trailing clouds of glory. The effect of such dogma is to place the example of Jesus forever out of reach. His teaching ceases to be a set of empirical claims about the linkage between ethics and spiritual insight and instead becomes a gratuitous, and rather gruesome, fairy tale.”³²

Others, such as Dennett and Dawkins, rely explicitly on advances in natural science, particularly biology, that they say make religion superfluous or even harmful. Like Dawson, Dennett refers to William James but reverses Dawson’s approach. Whereas Dawson invoked James as a way of bringing back some experiential perspective to religious experience, Dennett does the opposite, rejecting James in favor of a “wide-ranging biological and social telescope.”³³ In a now famous example, Dennett likens religion to a “meme,” a packet of cultural-social practices and beliefs that is transmitted between people and propagated presumably so long as it confers some advantage. What that advantage may be, however, is never quite explained, leading some evolutionary theorists, such as the late Stephen Jay Gould, to argue that religion is a side effect of the true evolutionary advantages afforded the large human brain. And as Christopher Beha explains in a lengthy essay on recent New Atheist literature, they have yet to explain why or how

we should live in a way that does not descend into nihilism or parody.³⁴

In his book *The Evolution of God*, Robert Wright tries a Marx-like materialist analysis of religious belief that differs little in its overall argument from those Dawson confronted eighty years ago. The argument in the book would have been recognizable in Dawson's day as a form of materialist anthropology. Wright argues that historical religions share such common features that there must be a natural evolutionary process joining all religions together. That process includes certain moral features that obscure individual differences in religious tradition. Wright writes that particular religions are converging on a higher moral sense that transcends every particular religion. Although not unsympathetic to the need for people to express their belief in a moral order as emanating from a transcendent, personal God, for Wright that impulse is ultimately "natural selection's way of steering us toward fruitful relationships."³⁵ (Coincidentally, this higher understanding largely coincides with the moral sense of a former Christian living in Princeton, like Wright himself.) As one reviewer noted, Wright's argument is basically "creationism for liberals," and it commits the same mistake that Dawson identified in the secularists of his time.³⁶ The mistake is to understand religious expression solely as the byproduct of other causes and not as an experience in itself. The proponents of secular understandings do not really believe that people really believe what their faith teaches. So to them religion must be an explanation for something else, and any "progress" must be in the secular-liberal direction.

Yet their sole reliance on empirical science is also misplaced, as Dawson noted in his own essays. Scientific analysis is no more necessarily objective than any other, and praise of the scientific method is not equally coterminous with the rational or reasonable. Moreover, science, in the abstract, does not and cannot have a teleological perspective because it "is purely instrumental and concerned with means [and] can never take the place of religion which is essentially concerned with ends."³⁷ Dawson compares the modern rationalists with Lucretius, who used his materialism not

“in the modern fashion as an instrument of the conquest of nature but as a means of moral purification and a preparation for a good death.”³⁸ Ancient rationalism differs from modern in that the modern variant, joined with technological success unknown to the ancient world, is closely “associated with a faith in social progress and with moral optimism.”³⁹ Thus, for example, for thinkers like Hitchens and Dennett, progress and secularism go hand in hand; to eliminate religion is simply another stage to a secular utopia. However, this “secularization thesis” has lost much of its descriptive force in light of new findings, even as Gobekli Tepe supports Dawson’s core contention about the intertwining of religion and societal development.⁴⁰

Religion and Culture closes with a consideration of the effect of the unification of the world cultures under “scientific knowledge and technique.” Dawson notes that, by themselves, scientific advances come with no political program or agenda. That makes them all the more dangerous when separated from their founding relationship with Western political and religious culture. “The new scientific culture is devoid of all positive spiritual content” is a statement as true today as it was when Dawson wrote that scientific methods are “no culture at all in the traditional sense—that is to say it is not an order which integrates every side of human life in a living spiritual community.”⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI developed a similar theme in his 2006 Regensburg lecture. He cautioned that the scientific method—which judges the validity of statements only insofar as they conform to mathematical or empirical tests—necessarily exclude religion. But to do so does not liberate human reason; it imprisons it. For then ethical or moral questions must be decided simply:

on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matters of religion, and the subjective “conscience” becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter. This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity, as we see

from the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason that necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it. Attempts to construct an ethic from the rules of evolution or from psychology and sociology, end up being simply inadequate.⁴²

The difficulty with the analyses offered by Hitchens, Wright, and the others is that there is no real comparison between a religious culture and a historical nonreligious culture. To Hitchens, religion “poisons” everything and is a “multiplier” of somehow natural or preexisting tribal conflicts. But to Dawson’s point, there has been no culture, let alone a higher civilization, that has existed without a religious sentiment that is both overarching and deeply embedded in the culture itself. But, to be clear, there has never been a “religious” culture, in the abstract, that is, a culture that can be separated from the human and material factors of its surroundings. As Dawson so carefully shows here and elsewhere, there are specific religious faiths that interact with particular cultural contexts. It is therefore impossible to say what the history of a particular society would have been absent religious belief. David Bentley Hart has addressed this point, in a critique of Dennett’s work, in *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. Hart writes that the supposedly shocking argument of the New Atheists that religion is “natural” is in fact something painfully obvious, but that does not mean natural phenomena cannot themselves convey divine truth. Moreover, “religion in the abstract does not actually exist.... Rather, there are a very great number of different beliefs and practices ... and very few of them depend on some fanciful notion that religion itself is a miraculous exception to the rule of nature.”⁴³ Perhaps the clearest example of societies that tried to do without any specific religious faith at all are either explicitly atheistic societies such as Soviet Russia, which have been disastrous, or the Western scientific culture, which, although perhaps neutral in its methods, is susceptible to being overtaken by equally dangerous ideologies.

Conclusion

The current crop of New Atheists, like perhaps some of the audience for Dawson's lectures, may not believe that a spiritual reality exists over and above the natural one. When Dawson writes that the shaman in primitive cultures is able to "transcend the limits of ordinary knowledge and to attain that deeper level of consciousness which we have described already as the natural basis for religious experience," the disciples of Hitchens and the rest are likely to scoff.⁴⁴ Yet the social and hard sciences cannot substitute for religious experience. God is not "in or out" of our ability to discern Him. As Terry Eagleton noted in a review of Dawkins, in traditional Christian theology, God's existence is the baseline for our own; His transcendence and simplicity are features of divinity, not scientific hypotheses that can be proven through empirical methods. We therefore cannot reason our way to understand the Divine Nature, and our analogies must always be incomplete. Thus, Hitchens's assertions that God's omnipotence is like a celestial North Korea simply fails to address how God has typically been understood. Nor is the science of Dawkins, Dennett, and the rest as absolute as they would like it; as authors such as Raymond Tallis have shown, scientific assertions as to whether biology "causes" morality, or eliminates free will, often depend on assertions as unproven as any religious claim, and moreover that such claims ignore humans as "purposive" animals that construct reality as much as obey it.⁴⁵

Dawson's work as a whole, and this book in particular, can make a substantial contribution to current debates. First, Dawson explains how the religious element in society is enduring, no matter the particular physical or environmental factors forming that society. It is a separate experience from, say, the experience of mathematical discovery or appreciation of art. Therefore, human societies will always need a religious outlet. Even some atheists are beginning to recognize that this feature of human life is not disappearing, even in a supposedly enlightened developed world. Alain de Botton, for example, imagines a purely invented religion, with "Agape tables" and bits of scripture as substitutes for the historic

world religions.⁴⁶ The modern science of religion did a great service in untangling the patterns of cultural and religious change. However,

this rational simplification is not enough; we also need the help of a true natural Theology to interpret the supercultural and purely religious elements that are contained in the hieroglyphs of ritual and myth. This was the older tradition of the science of religion ... and although it was discredited by the absence of a true method of historical inquiry and a lack of psychological and philological techniques, it was more true in principle than the rationalism of nineteenth century comparative religion, since it did attempt to explain religious phenomena in terms of religion—theologically, not anthropologically.⁴⁷

Second, Dawson stands as an example of a religious believer who recognizes that religion and science are not antithetical but are different parts of a healthy culture. Dawson was hopeful for a new unity between scientific civilization and a spiritual community. His argument in *Religion and Culture* was to place back into conversation an understanding of natural theology that could once more serve as a bridge between the secular and the religious, the scientific and the transcendent. Although Dawson was providing a descriptive account of the development of natural theology, both historically and philosophically, the outlines of what such a revived natural theology might look like are present. This new natural theology would recombine what had been sundered during the wars of religion. It would respect the natural sciences and their power to plumb the mysteries of the natural world, while recognizing that they cannot, alone, explain religious intimations of the transcendent. As a historical matter, this approach would recognize that although the temple-complex of Gobekli Tepe and similar structures may have only historical interest today, for the people who built them such monuments represented a participation in the divine life of the universe.

It was vital for Dawson that the two be rejoined in some way because science without culture was, candidly, dangerous to human life, while culture without scientific inquiry was sterile and, in the modern era, impotent. Dawson cited Ernst Renan on this point. Renan, once known as a famous debunker of Christianity but who later in life feared that the loss of belief in the supernatural would lead to moral decline, contended that science could not supply what was lacking.⁴⁸ Physics, as scientist Steve Talbott has noted, cannot explain *meaning*; and biologists are learning more and more deeply that substance—the stuff of reality—is “a bearer of meaning” that cannot be reduced simply to scientific explanation.⁴⁹

Endnotes

1. A different version of this essay has appeared as the introduction to the new edition of *Religion and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).
2. Charles C. Mann, “The Birth of Religion,” <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2011/06/gobekli-tepe/manntext>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Christopher Dawson, *Progress and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 70.
6. Ibid.
7. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Twelve Books, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) and *Letters to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2007); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.)
8. Christopher Dawson, *Christianity and the New Age* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931), 40.
9. *Progress and Religion*, xxiii.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 77.
12. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 3.
13. Ibid., 4.

14. Ibid., 8.
15. Ibid., 9.
16. Christopher Dawson, *Enquiries into Religion and Culture* (Sheed & Ward, 1933), 149. For Dawson, Voltaire was in whom “modern rationalism first obtained complete self-consciousness.”
17. *Religion and Culture*, 16.
18. Ibid., 15.
19. *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*, 150–51.
20. See, for example, Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).
21. *Religion and Culture*, 17.
22. Ibid., 18.
23. Ibid.
24. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 333–334. See also Chesterton’s discussion in his 1925 book *The Everlasting Man*, especially part I, chapter 4, “God and Comparative Religion.”
25. Dawson intimated at such discoveries in an essay titled “Religion and the Life of Civilization,” in which he stated that it was “even possible that agriculture and the domestication of animals were exclusively religious in their beginnings.” See Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. John J. Mulloy (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 113–114.
26. *Religion and Culture*, 211.
27. Ibid., 84.
28. Ibid., 25.
29. Ibid., 28.
30. Ibid., 31–32.
31. Ibid., 35.
32. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 204.
33. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2007), 11.
34. Christopher R. Beha, “Reason for Living: the Good Life without God,” *Harper’s* (July 2012): 73–78.
35. Wright, *The Evolution of God*, 455.
36. Jerry A. Coyne, “Creationism for Liberals,” *The New Republic* (Aug. 12, 2009), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/creationism-liberals>.
37. *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*, 154.
38. Ibid., 144.
39. Ibid.

40. See, for example, Rebecca R. French, "Lamas, Oracles, Channels, and the Law: Reconsidering Law and Social Theory, *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 10 (1988): 5605–5635; and Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
41. *Religion and Culture*, 215.
42. Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to München, Altötting and Regensburg (September 2006), <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/papal-address-at-university-of-regensburg>.
43. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Despisers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010): 7–8.
44. *Religion and Culture*, 39.
45. See Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (London: Acumen, 2011).
46. Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Use of Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 48.
47. *Religion and Culture*, 61.
48. Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: 1863).
49. Steve Talbott, "What Do Organisms Mean?" *The New Atlantis* (Winter 2011): 24–49.