

to that Chapter at Hinckley just a hundred years ago, when three men held the future in their hands, or back further to that old and ailing priest at Leeds, where two of those Dominicans had received their first religious training. Fr Underhill's epitaph in the church at Hinckley was nearly worn away in 1863 when Fr Palmer tried to copy it. Perhaps it should read: *Ut sapiens architecton fundamentum posui.*

MR DAWSON AND CHRISTENDOM

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AMONG the historians of Christian culture alive today, two stand out with particular distinction: M. Etienne Gilson¹ and Mr Christopher Dawson.² They are both prolific writers, and neither is always equal to his own standard; but their best work is of a very high quality indeed. These qualities differ, however, and it is interesting to compare them. Both men are scholars through and through, and both possess to a very unusual degree the real historian's gift of generalising from particular data. But their points of view differ, and their data. M. Gilson is a connoisseur of ideas; of other men's ideas, in studying which he discovers his own. He knows much about many human minds, precisely in so far as these minds have become articulate in conceptual thought, and expresses this thought in words and writing. An expert in philosophies, he is scrupulously careful to respect his documentary data; but he wrings all he can out of it. For he makes it his business to discern and define what is individual and original in each thinker he studies; to study therefore each case in and for itself before passing on to another one. Then, having so treated a number of cases, he

1 *Etienne Gilson: Rencontres* (Blackfriars; 10s 0d).

2 *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*. The Gifford Lectures for 1948 (Sheed and Ward, 15s 0d).

pauses to consider interconnections; and so draws up patterns of intellectual transmission and differentiation. All his work is a study of minds in their expressed ideas; with a view, first, to discovering originality and then to tracing derivations.

Mr Dawson's very different work is harder to characterise. His range is of course wider, materially, but it is less abstract. He is called a philosopher of history, but he is hardly a historian of philosophy. Though his work teems with individual testimonies he never, or scarcely ever, pauses long to consider an individual. He describes ideas historically; he rarely stops to consider an idea in the abstract. Hence there is often felt in his work, and sometimes adversely criticised, a lack of precise rational definition. In the *Judgment of the Nations* at least one theological critic found theological terms used too vaguely, and in the latest volume of Gifford Lectures the exacting reader may well be held up, in the Introduction, wondering what precisely is meant by that 'element of spiritual freedom' which, Mr Dawson contends, culture owes to religion and particularly to the Christian religion. As presented here this 'element' seems to operate heretically as well as otherwise; which may be disconcerting for the Catholic reader. But in fact the 'element' is presented as part of the massive social reality of Catholicism, and so as a factor that never, in principle at least, escapes a social control and subordination to the interests of Catholic unity. Indeed this great social and religious reality is the chief protagonist in the thousand-year-long drama described in this book; and of its complexity Mr Dawson is as vividly aware as was Von Hugel. No living English historian, probably, can equal him in this respect. None has stressed more strongly or displayed more richly the interplay of the mystical, the rational and the institutional in the history of the Church. None has upheld more effectively the historical necessity, so to say, of the institutional factor. But in this volume his primary stress falls on the special importance, in the history of the West, of the dynamic factor of personal impulse. And he sees this as an impulse to action springing straight out of religion, and a particular sort of religion: out of a 'faith' which, looking 'beyond the world of man and his works. . . . introduces into human life an element of spiritual freedom', but which, just because it is Christian, is 'a spirit that strives to incorporate itself in humanity and to change the world'. If 'the changing of the world became an

integral part of (the) cultural ideal' of Western man, the historical reason for this is Western man's conversion to the faith of Christ and incorporation into a missionary Church. This point is repeated and emphasised: 'What distinguishes Western culture (i.e. from that of India or China) is its *missionary character*—its transmission from one people to another in a continuous series of spiritual movements'.

These quotations serve to suggest Mr Dawson's preoccupations. If M. Gilson's gift is the penetration of individual minds, Mr Dawson's is the understanding of epochs and institutions. He works over a wider field than the Frenchman and with a more material, a less intelligible set of data. He need define ideas far less closely because he is not directly concerned with them; but rather with traditions which, being held in common, are, as such, conceptually somewhat confused; with spiritual attitudes and art and manners; with the emerging, the cohesion and the falling apart of the elements that go to make up a social way of life. And this book is a sketch of these phases in the culture of Christendom, covering a thousand years. It is, in some ways, an imperfect sketch—less clear and coherent, surely, than that masterpiece *The Making of Europe*. But it is a master's sketch all the same: one can be educated by it.

It is worth repeating that Mr Dawson is an educator; perhaps the greatest that Heaven has sent us English Catholics since Newman. His range of knowledge is of course immense; his mind (to judge by his writings) is magnificently balanced. He is entirely free from 'cleverness'. His books would be easier reading if they had a grain of this condiment; thank God they have none. Yet their prosiness is often greatly exaggerated, and if we do not profit by them the fault is ours. If it is true that 'probably the best kind of education for any purpose is the study of history. It provides an easy approach to difficult topics . . . and at the same time a check to spiritual and intellectual pride',³ then we who live in the Church, and have to try to serve it at this point in time and understand its mission now, will be fatally handicapped (humanly speaking) without a knowledge of its history. And particularly relevant at this point in time seem to be the two critical periods between which moves the great story surveyed in this volume:

3 A. D. Ritchie in *Civilization, Science and Religion*, p 12. N.B. Prof. Ritchie was trained as a scientist and philosopher.

the conversion of the Barbarians, contemporary with and outlasting the breakdown of the Ancient Civilisation (the fourth century to the eighth century, A.D.) and the breakdown of the Medieval Culture, of 'the World the Church had made', to adapt an expressive phrase of the Rev. Philip Hughes, contemporary with the rise of the Nation States (the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century).

The thought of these periods haunts us today because we are all more or less dimly aware that our lot has been cast in one of the periods of great historic change, that the age which began in the fourteenth century with the decline of medieval culture is ending now and a new epoch beginning. Modern Catholics especially are coming to feel a new sense of kinship with the age that followed the generation of the great Latin Fathers from Ambrose to Augustine, an age of gathering darkness when the Church, salvaging the remnants of the ancient secular culture, took the shock of the barbarian tide. For once again heathenism covers the East and North-East. In lands once Christian the Church is despoiled, stripped of all but the bare essentials. History warns us to prepare, if not for a new Dark Age, at any rate for another missionary age, for the hard, drawn-out, difficult business of taming and christianising and civilising the barbarian. That was the work dared and done by the Church in the Dark Ages. It was possible, broadly speaking, for two reasons: first, because the purely religious motive was strong enough; and secondly, because this motive was embodied, controlled and directed by a sufficiently well-knit social organism, the institutional Church. In the fusion and co-operation of these two factors, the mystical, so to call it, and the institutional, the historian may discern the cause of the Church's success; and the Christian historian, looking deeper, sees here the *digitus Dei*. 'In that age', writes Mr Dawson, 'religion was the only power that remained unaffected by the collapse of civilisation, by the loss of faith in social institutions and cultural traditions and by the loss of hope in life. Wherever genuine religion exists it must always possess this quality, since it is of the essence of religion to bring man into relation with transcendent and eternal realities. Therefore it is natural that the Dark Ages of history—the hour of human failure and impotence—should be the hour when the power of eternity is manifested.'

So it is natural, too, that the chief agents in the work should have

been the monks, the 'religious' *par excellence*, living examples of the fusion of contemplative prayer with life in community. But the monks were not only the missionaries of the Dark Ages; from the sixth century to the flowering of the Cathedral Schools in the twelfth century and of the Universities in the thirteenth, they were the preparatory schoolmasters of Europe also. For implied in the 'fusion' that made them what they were was a recognition, however obscured at times, of the existence of the human reason with its special needs and nobility—a recognition backed by the example of the Fathers of a more civilised age and by a legacy of ancient literature.

Those who think Mr Dawson prosy should read his account (cc. II-V) of these dark and heroic centuries, not forgetting the horrors and perils of our own time. If this does not stir them, nothing will. One lesson stares from the pages: the immense, if terribly gradual fruitfulness of sheer belief in God; even when, or rather especially when, combined with an entire disbelief in man, except as touched and tamed by the Church. And another lesson emerges as the story proceeds into the tenth and eleventh centuries; the lesson of Unity. Out of the 'feudal anarchy' that followed the break up of the Empire of Charlemagne it was once more the monks who led the way; but the initiative of the great monastic reformers would have remained ineffective for the Church as a whole—confined as it was to the monasteries and their environment—had it not, at the right moment, become identified with the reforming initiative of the Papacy. 'The reform of the Church (in the eleventh century) was no longer the aim of scattered groups of ascetics and idealists, it became the official policy of the Roman Church.' The spiritual and institutional factors fuse and are one in St Gregory VII; as indeed they had done five centuries before at the beginning of the first Dark Age, in the first Benedictine Pope, St Gregory the Great. But in the meantime, and largely owing to the direct initiative of the first Gregory, the boundaries of Christendom had been enlarged. Hence the missionary activity of Gregory VII was turned inward rather than outward, bearing more directly upon the Church itself; and with immense results in the event. For that spiritual impulse, whose recurrent emergence in Christian society Mr Dawson loves to trace, now operated, through the eleventh and twelfth centuries, chiefly *within* that society, feeding the roots of

the Christian mind. With St Bernard it stood at the Papacy's right hand. With St Francis and St Dominic, still in the closest association with the hierarchy, it flooded the new urban centres. It was the latent motive of the Christian aristotelianism of the thirteenth century. For how could it feed the will and not the reason, or not invigorate, eventually, the speculative reason as well as the practical? It was certainly the secret spring of the *Summa* which, as M. Gilson has said, is the inner life of St Thomas laid bare—just as the *Divine Comedy* is Dante's.

The heart of Christendom—so Mr Dawson implies—is just this unity, compact of the spiritual, the institutional and the rational. A commonplace? But it is no commonplace to display this historically, even in outline; to make us feel the complexity, the precariousness of the medieval achievement; to touch with so sure a hand its weaknesses and its final failure as well as its astounding grandeur. For Christendom certainly failed; and the turn of the century, from the thirteenth to the fourteenth, the date chosen by Dante for his descent into Hell, is as good a moment as any for dating the clear manifestation of decline. Intellectually the West remained vigorous; in some respects of course it grew intellectually more refined. Petrarch was in some ways more cultured than Dante; and his century had its saints and mystical writers and reformers and some extremely able ecclesiastical rulers. But the heart was failing. The old dualism that had lurked in the West so long, 'the unresolved conflict', as Mr Dawson says, 'between the pagan traditions of the barbarian warrior society and the Christian ideals of peace and brotherly love', reappeared 'in the later Middle Ages. . . . in a new form, in the conflict between the Church and the new sovereign state which was ultimately to destroy the unity of Western Christendom'. How pathetic, in this passage, is the implicit impoverishment of the word 'Church'! The 'Church' appears but a piece of Europe, the clerical piece. That it can seem so inevitably, that to the historian the use of the word in this restricted sense comes so naturally, is symbolic of the medieval tragedy. Even of the thirteenth-century Papacy's effort to employ the new energy of the Friars Mr Dawson has to write despondently thus: 'unfortunately it came too late: the great age of the reforming movement was over, and the Popes who did most to favour and make use of the Friars were not men of the type of Gregory VII or St Bernard, but able lawyers and statesmen

like Gregory IX. . . . and Innocent IV and Martin IV who were preoccupied with the intense political conflict with the Hohenstaufen and the fatal entanglements of the Angevin alliance. . . . The prophetic and evangelical vocation of the early Friars became subordinated to the demands of ecclesiastical power politics, and this produced a rift in the reforming movement from which medieval Christendom never recovered. The Papacy issued from the conflict with the Hohenstaufen victoriously, but with a serious loss of moral prestige. Above all, it lost the leadership of the movement of reform. Henceforward during the later Middle Ages the reformers were predominantly anti-papal in spirit, or supporters of the secular power like William of Ockham and Marsiglio of Padua.'

The *Divine Comedy*, as Mr Dawson goes on to say, reflects—and with such terrible beauty!—this tragic spiritual crisis of a high and complex society beginning to fall apart. But Mr Dawson does not end with Dante, but with that 'voice from the underworld of the common people', William Langland; and this because the ideal that he has traced through a thousand years of history finds in *Piers Plowman* its most directly *Christian* expression. Here the ideal of unity is one with a vision of 'an extension of the life of Christ on earth' into 'every state of life in Christendom'. And surely the vision of the working man

Who comes in with a cross ' before the common people,

Like in all limbs ' to our Lord Jesus,

is as modern as Christianity itself; while, to conclude with Mr Dawson, it is also a proof that a new Christian culture had been born which could and can survive; but only, let us add, within that of which it was said:

And he called that House Unity ' which is Holychurch in English.