

The Greatest Christian Hero, Philosopher, and Poet: Christopher Dawson's Italian Trinity

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Christopher Dawson

Christopher Dawson (born 1889), a Catholic scholar and renowned philosophical historian, spent his academic life exploring the relationship of religion, sociology and culture. He believed that without an understanding of religion it is impossible to comprehend the culture of humanity or peoples. His magisterial work, Religion and Culture, established him as an historian's historian. He ended his days as Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard Divinity School, the first Catholic to occupy a chair there.

To follow the history of Italy through the centuries is to penetrate to the very heart of western civilization. The artists, thinkers and statesmen of this small, but complex and vital country are part of our own past and have helped to make the present world what it is. What was achieved by the legions of Rome more than two thousand years ago has remained a powerful influence on history ever since. The cultures of ancient Greece and Israel took their dominant position in our western heritage through the medium of an Italian translation. Christianity was propagated from Rome, the fifteenth century Renaissance from Florence, and the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in great part from Padua. European history would have been very different without the work of Columbus and Galileo in discovery, Raphael and Michelangelo in art, Aquinas and Vico in philosophy, St Francis and a long list of Popes from Gregory the Great to John XXIII in religion. Italian museums and churches contain what must seem a disproportionate number of the greatest masterpieces of human creativity. This single country often appears to be one great museum of the past, and yet it is far from being only, or mainly a museum. Italy is a dynamic country which, whether wielding world power or reduced to political insignificance, has at many

periods of history been the architect, the initiator, the pace-setter of processes which extended far beyond her own frontiers and became the common inheritance of all humanity.

Christopher Dawson corrects our tendency to dwell primarily on Roman and Renaissance Italy by calling our attention to Medieval Italy. There has never been an age, for Dawson, in which Christianity attained so complete a cultural expression as in the thirteenth century: 'Europe has seen no greater Christian hero than St. Francis, no greater Christian philosopher than St. Thomas, no greater Christian poet than Dante'! The Italian 'Trinity' of Francis, Aquinas and Dante represents the quintessence of Christian Italy at a time when, more than at any other in the life of our civilization, European culture and the Christian religion were in a state of communion: the highest expressions of medieval culture, whether in art, in literature or in philosophy, were religious, and the greatest representatives of medieval religion were also the leaders of medieval culture.

The Roman Church at the time of Francis, Thomas and Dante had a real affinity and sympathy with the traditions of the civilized Latin world, and despised the Germanic Empire as an alien barbaric power. The sense of being Italian as opposed to German under the impact of the 'Teutonic fury' (*furor teutonicus*) of the imperial invasions can be traced back to the time of Barbarossa (1123—1190). A good example of the Italian sense of superiority is found in Bonizo of Sutri (c.1045—c.1090), one of the leading Italian canonists and a supporter of the Gregorian reform. Bonizo professed a real admiration for the Empire, not the Empire of the Carolingians and their successors, but the Empire of antiquity. He regarded the Roman Empire as a gigantic monument, erected by ancestors who have spread the glory of Italy far and wide, and opposed this glory to the state of the Empire in his time, ruined by the deplorable anarchy into which its German masters had allowed it to fall.

The influence of Italy had never been greater than under the Roman Empire, and the legacy of ancient Rome made itself felt in every period of later Italian history. The sense of belonging together and the pride of achievement indispensable to national consciousness, were nourished on these imperial memories in generation after generation as school children were brought up on the Latin classics and patriotic tales of the Punic wars. Artists in the Middle Ages were continually confronted with relics and exemplars of classical architecture and statuary. This helps to explain why the work of Andrea Pisano and Giotto was so much more sophisticated and fruitful than that of their contemporaries in northern Europe. The words *Aurea Roma* and *Caput Mundi* recur on medieval coins and in documents even when Rome was reduced to being little better than a village in the middle of a malarial marsh. And in 1341, when no pope dwelt in Rome, Petrarch (1304—1374) was crowned with a wreath as poet laureate by the Roman Senate on the Capitoline hill.

Ancient Rome represented not nationalism but universality, not Italy

but an Empire. It stood for all humankind, for the enfranchisement as Roman citizens of vast numbers of non-Italian people all around the Mediterranean; many of the Emperors were non-Italians, coming from Spain, Africa or Dalmatia. Not only was Rome international, but Latin was an international language and was to remain so. Dante regarded Latin as the normal written language of communication, whilst Petrarch claimed to despise those of his own poems which had been written in the vernacular.

A distinct characteristic of Italian history has been that loyalties were local quite as much as, and usually more than, national. This is not to deny a strong consciousness of 'Italianateness' as early as the time of Barbarossa, when a bitter opposition to the foreign *barbari* who pursued their own private battles on Italian soil is evident. However, these feelings were consistent with, and indeed much less marked than, the internal divisions and different regional traditions and interests which struck every observer. The consciousness of *italianità* was cultural and geographical long before it was introduced into the world of national and international politics.

Francis of Assisi (1182—1226), the patron saint of Italy, was the son of Pietro Bernadone, a wealthy cloth merchant. At the age of twenty-three he underwent a radical conversion of life. On hearing the text of Matthew 10:7ff. at Mass on the feast of St. Matthias 1209, he embraced a life of evangelical poverty in obedience to Christ's words. Christ's freely chosen poverty was for him a revelation of the humility of God. His writings and prayers are full of adoration of the Triune God and a burning love of Christ our Brother. He writes 'How glorious ... it is to have a Father in heaven ... How holy and beloved ... it is to have a Brother like this who laid down his life for his sheep.' Francis founded an evangelical reform movement committed to brotherhood and poverty, and pledged to preaching peace.

The movement which had the greatest influence on medieval religion and medieval culture was not the speculative mysticism of the Dominicans, but the evangelical piety and devotion to the Humanity of Jesus that found its supreme expression in the life of St. Francis. This was preeminently practical, affective and human, owing nothing to learned tradition or metaphysical ideas, but springing directly from the heart and personal experience of God's love. The greatest religious achievement of the Middle Ages, according to Christopher Dawson, is not to be found in the imposing edifice of its ecclesiastical organization, or in its work of intellectual synthesis, but in its deepening of the spiritual life by a new type of religious experience which had a profound influence on Western Christianity. Jesus, for Francis, is no longer merely the model to be imitated, the guide to be followed, but he is the interiorized friend who acts with and within the human heart. In this new development of the religious tradition of the West, which had earlier made its appearance in the twelfth century with St. Bernard (1091—1153), the Humanity of Jesus acquired a new significance. In place of the severe figure of the Byzantine Christ, throned in awful majesty as the ruler and judge of mankind, Bernard and Francis preferred to dwell on the human likeness of Jesus, the human suffering of his Passion

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and the human weakness of his Infancy. In St. Francis this new spiritual culture bore its final and most perfect fruit.

Francis is the embodiment of the new spirit of Western Christianity. Dawson affirms that although Christianity had previously been the great formative power in Western culture, it had been a foreign power that was still, as it were, something external to the nature of Western humankind. Its real centers of life were in the monasteries. With Francis, for the first time Dawson sees Christianity breaking through the barriers of race and social tradition and achieving an organic and complete expression in Western life. There is no longer any conflict or inconsistency between religion and culture, between faith and life. The whole person is Christian, and the Christian spirit is united with the Western nature as intimately and inseparably as the union of soul and body.²

Nothing, for Dawson, could be more spontaneous, less artificial and 'cultured' than the genius of St. Francis, yet he is the final fruit of a long process of spiritual cultivation. He marks the coming of age of Christian Europe and the birth of a new consciousness, giving rise to a new Christian art and poetry. The ideals of his fraternity were founded on those of romantic chivalry, the courtly ideals of courtesy, joy, generosity and loving service. The life of St. Francis was the perfect manifestation of these ideals in the service of love.³

Pope Innocent III gave oral approval to Francis' way of life in 1209—10. Later in the *Rule of 1223* St. Francis identified the rule and life of his friars with observing the gospel: to be a brother was to be related in Christ to all creatures and to observe meekness towards them all. He called every creature his brother or sister, even death was his sister. This was no mere nature mysticism, but an expression of his belief in the fatherhood of God the Creator and in the gift of unity in Christ.

St. Bonaventure (1221—1274) saw in St. Francis the herald of a new age 'when the city of God will be built up and restored as it was in the beginning in the likeness of the Heavenly City and when the reign of peace will come' (In Hexaemeron, xvi, 30). St. Bonaventure's death coincided with a last triumph of the ideals of Catholic universalism and spiritual reform. Gregory X, perhaps the best, if not the greatest, of the thirteenth-century Popes, had dedicated himself to the cause of peace, and had ended the long feud with the Empire, summoning the greatest of all the medieval councils to Lyons in 1274. He hoped to restore the unity of Christendom by healing the still older schism with the Greek Church whilst carrying on the work of ecclesiastical reform with the help of the greatest thinkers of the age. St. Thomas died on his way to the Council, while St. Bonaventure died during it, after having taken part in the final negotiations with the ambassador of the Byzantine emperor. Nevertheless, the promise of a new age of Christian unity and progress was doomed to disappointment. The age of St. Francis and St. Louis became the age of Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair. Christians felt, with Dante, that they had lost a great opportunity and had made a great refusal; they were no longer able to find a rallying point that

would reunite them in the common cause. The fourteenth century was an age of transition in which the new forces that were to destroy the medieval order were already active. From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries the movement of European culture under the urge of a powerful religious impulse was centripetal, towards unity and towards the ideals of Catholic universalism. From the beginning of the fourteenth century this tendency was reversed and a centrifugal movement set in which ultimately culminated in the complete destruction of the religious unity of Europe.

Francis (1182—1226), Aquinas (1225—1274), and Dante (1265—1321) belonged to the Mediterranean world. 'Western civilization', Dawson affirms would have had a very different meaning then from that it has today. It would not have been specifically European, since Europe hardly existed as a historical or geographical concept. It was still, no less than in the days of the Roman Empire, practically identical with the Mediterranean world. This world possessed a relatively uniform type of cosmopolitan culture, seen at its best in the intellectual cooperation among Moslem, Jewish and Christian scholars which bore fruit in the flowering of Arabic science and philosophy, a period in which Constantinople and Cordova and Cairo were the three foci of Western civilization⁴. The scientific renaissance of the Middle Ages, was far from being the unaided work of Western thinkers, rather it had its origins in the mixed culture of the Western Mediterranean, a world Dawson finds strangely neglected by the historian, but which is a key to the understanding of later medieval culture. It was here, in Sicily and Spain, in the trading centres of the Italian and French Riviéras, and at the feudal courts of Provence and Catalonia, that the Christians first met the Arabs and the Jews on equal terms, and came under the influence of the brilliant civilization that had developed in Western Islam from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. It was here that the eyes of Western scholars were first opened to the riches of Greek and Arabic learning and to their own scientific backwardness; and it was here, at Palermo, and Toledo, and Barcelona, Salerno and Montpellier, that Christians put themselves to school with Arabs and Jews and laid the foundations of the new scientific culture of the West. The activity of the translators and adaptors, above all of Gerard of Cremona, who worked at Toledo until his death in 1187, is—Dawson writes—almost incredible. In the space of little more than half a century the main tradition of Greek and Arabic learning, both philosophical and scientific, was transmitted to the Latin world—Euclid, Avicenna, al-Farabi, Ibn Gabirol—and, above all, Aristotle, whose figure dominates the scientific tradition of both Greeks and Arabs, as it was also to dominate that of the medieval West.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the Neapolitan pupil of Albertus Magnus, was the true creator—according to Dawson—of the Aristotelian-Christian synthesis, through whom the mind of Western Christendom finally succeeded in completely incorporating the intellectual heritage of the Aristotelian tradition: 'He was no child of the Gothic North, like Albert or Abelard, but a native of that strange borderland of Western civilization

where feudal Europe mingled with the Greek and Saracen worlds. He sprang from a family of courtiers and troubadours whose fortunes were intimately bound up with the brilliant half-oriental, half-humanist court of the great Hohenstaufen emperor and his ill-fated successors—that court which was at once the cradle of Italian literature and one of the main channels through which Arabic science reached the Christian world.⁶ With Thomas the Western mind emancipated itself from its Arabic teachers and returned to the sources. Dawson affirms that in St. Thomas there is a real intellectual affinity to the Greek genius: 'More than any other Western thinker, medieval, or modern, he possessed the tranquil lucidity and the gift of abstract intelligence that mark the Hellenic mind'.⁷

St. Thomas interpreted the thought of Aristotle to his age without either forcing it into the mould of an alien mentality or disregarding the autonomy and transcendence of the Christian faith. He was able to combine the Peripatetic tradition in philosophy and the patristic tradition in theology without falsifying either of them. His philosophy marked a complete break with the old Augustinian and neo-Platonic idealism that had hitherto dominated the intellectual development of the West. He applied the cardinal principles of Aristotelian physics to human nature, teaching that matter is the principle of human individuation, and that the soul is the form of the body. Hence the human person is not, as the Platonists believed, a spiritual being temporarily confined in the prison of the flesh, a stranger in an alien world; rather, the person is a part of nature—that dynamic order which embraces the whole series of living beings from the human being to plants, as well as the things that are without life; consequently, the human intelligence is not that of a pure spirit which exists only for the contemplation of absolute reality. It is consubstantial with matter, subject to the conditions of space and time, and it can only construct an intelligible order out of the data of sensible experience, systematized by the scientific activity of reason. St. Thomas represents the beginning of the distinctively Western ideal of a philosophy which recognizes the dependence of human knowledge on sensible experience without excluding it from the world of spiritual reality and religious truth. His intellectualism, according to Dawson, is equally remote from an absolute idealism and a rationalist empiricism, from the metaphysical mysticism of the ancient East and from the scientific materialism of the modern West.⁸

Dante Alighieri, father of the Italian language, composed his *Vita Nuova* in the Tuscan vernacular; his *Divine Comedy* established Tuscan as the literary vernacular of Italy. His *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is a defence of the vernacular, written in Latin. Dante entered public life in 1295, but was exiled from his native Florence after the Black Guelphs seized power in 1301 never to return. Between 1310 and 1313 his political hopes were fixed upon the Emperor Henry VII; his *Monarchia* reflects his 'imperialist' position. Dante agreed with the philosophy of St. Thomas which provided a solid intellectual foundation for the ideal of an autonomous State which does not transcend its proper sphere by theocratic claims. Dante was led to his scholastic

justification of the universal sovereignty of the emperor out of desperation at the faction-ridden condition of Italy. He considered that only strong imperial authority could rectify the disorder and bring peace. Dante saw in one world community the perfect means of keeping peace. He argued for a single universal monarchy, as one monarch is better able than a number of rulers to secure and protect what is common to all. The Roman Empire was the only historical figure of a political society that would encompass the whole human race. Such a universal community would be both natural and rational; it would be neither established nor created by anything other than the natural human tendency to live communally with others in pursuit of a common aim, the highest form of which is the human happiness that comes from wisdom. The political community, in short, develops out of this natural tendency: there is no need to search for any foundation outside that. Dante, in line with St. Thomas, emphasised the natural and rational character of the political community and therefore its autonomy.

Though Dante was profoundly Christian and Catholic it was not to the Church that he looked for his ideal of a universal human society. For Dante, the ideal unity was not that of the Church but of humanity, and the Roman Empire was its divinely predestined servant and instrument. The State—at least that ideal and universal State which was the Roman Empire—had not merely an independent foundation in natural right, it had a providential mission towards the human race which was analagous in the natural order to the mission of the Church in the order of grace. Dante's Messianic idealism found its earliest and clearest expression in the Fourth Treatise of the *Convivio*, where he set forth the high mission of the Roman people, which rested not on force or conquest but on divine vocation and election. 'For since,' he writes, 'there never was nor ever shall be, a nature more sweet in the exercise of lordship, more firm in its maintenance nor more subtle in acquiring it than the nature of the Latin folk (as may be seen from experience) and especially that of the hallowed people in whom the high Trojan blood was infused. God chose that people for such office.'⁹

Dante's exaltation of the State as such, with its idealization of ancient Rome and its intense Latin patriotism, was almost unique in medieval literature. His political hopes were fixed on the universal Empire of the past and not on the national monarchy of the future. By an unfortunate fatality the country of St. Thomas and Dante, the one country of medieval Europe which was far enough advanced in culture to acquire complete political self-consciousness, lacked the historical conditions for national self-determination, and consequently Dante's intense Italian patriotism was forced to ally itself incongruously with its natural enemy, the alien power of Germanic imperialism. On the other hand, Dawson observes,¹⁰ where historical conditions were favourable to the rise of the national monarchy, as in France and England, the state of culture was not sufficiently advanced for the Church to disentangle itself from her political commitments and for the State to fulfil its own proper functions without the Church's help.

Dante's *Divina Commedia* represents, for Dawson, the achievement of

a final synthesis of the literary and religious traditions of the Middle Ages, a synthesis that embodies all the vital elements of medieval culture. Christian theology and the science and philosophy of the Arabs, the courtly culture of the troubadours and the classical tradition of Virgil, the mysticism of Dionysius and the piety of St. Bernard, the Franciscan spirit of reform and the Roman order, Italian national feeling and Christian universalism—all find their place in the organic structure of Dante's thought and in the artistic unity of his work. Yet, at the same time, Dante's great poem also faithfully reflects the crisis of the later Middle Ages and the failure of medieval Christendom to overcome the centrifugal forces that were about to destroy its unity. Dawson considers that Dante stands for the ideal of Catholic universalism against the territorial and ecclesiastical self-assertion of the new national monarchies¹¹, but Dante no longer looked to the Papacy as the representative of Christian universalism and the leader of the movement of Catholic reform. The Papacy had itself become compromised in his eyes by secularism and by its subservience to the French monarchy; consequently it was to the Empire rather than to the papacy that Dante looked for the realization of a universal Christian order and the delivery of the Church from its state of bondage.

Among the outstanding Italian men of the Church who preceded Sts. Francis and Thomas we find the same Christian universalism. St Benedict of Norcia in Umbria founded the Benedictine Order, giving it a rule which prevailed in western monasticism for centuries and was remarkable for its characteristic Roman balance and moderation. His Roman universalism was implicitly recognized when the Church made him a patron of Europe, together with Sts. Cyril and Methodius.

The Church in England too, owes its structure to two Italians: Lanfranc of Pavia and Anselm of Aosta. Lanfranc (1005—1089) moved from Pavia to France to teach Roman law and there he became head of the Benedictine monastery at Bec in Normandy. William the Conqueror chose him as adviser and he became the first Norman archbishop of Canterbury. He was Norman, in the sense that he followed William the Conqueror; still he was Italian. he possessed great organisational skills and was the first to affirm that the Archbishop of Canterbury prevailed over all the other bishops of England, a supremacy which is maintained to this day. St. Anselm (1033—1109), who succeeded Lanfranc at Canterbury as he had followed him at Bec, was not a lawyer but a theologian and philosopher. He was the founder of scholasticism and the originator of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Lanfranc and Anselm brought from Italy the knowledge of Roman and canon law, as well as a contemporary theology and philosophy. They were not regarded as foreigners but as Normans in a period prior to nationalism. They were among the first Italians to become Anglicized, even if they had been preceded in their posts by another Italian, Augustine of Canterbury, a Roman Benedictine prior, who was consecrated first Archbishop of Canterbury in 598 A.D.

From St. Anselm to St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, the most

eminent exponents of scholasticism—with few exceptions—were Italians, even though the University of Paris was the centre of the movement. Rome, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance manifest the truth that the vitality of Italy in every sphere of human endeavour has always been commensurate with its universalism. Don Luigi Sturzo, one of the founding fathers of Italian Catholic Action, implicitly recognized this truth when he repudiated fascism for betraying the triple universality of Roman law, Christian faith, and Italian culture.

An allocution of Pius XII, delivered on March 23, 1958, to the Roman residents from the Marches, captures the Christian universalism of Italy's St. Francis, St. Thomas, and Dante, in terms of the historical mission of Italy within the universal mission of the Church:

Situated in the middle of the sea, at the crossroads joining three great continents, Italy is in a certain sense the geographical centre of the world. This is especially true because of the many peoples that have continually passed through Italy and contributed to a universal, comprehensive, open character (such as is rarely found in any other nation). We may truly, then, affirm that Italy does not belong to Italians alone, but to all peoples. This has been Italy's past and shall be her future.

Roman law is the patrimony of humanity; Thomistic philosophy, the most universal of philosophies which presents and sheds light on the entire hierarchy of being, was born in Italy; the Divine Comedy is both national and universal, just as that supreme expression of Michelangelo's genius which bears witness to the entire human race reunited in trepidation for the Universal Judgment. Greco-Italian culture initiated European culture, and, therefore, that of the modern world.

Italy, conceived and willed by God as the land in which His Church should be centred, has been the object of His special love and extraordinary Providence; because no other people has, as the Italian people, its destinies so closely united with the work of Christ.

... Precisely because Italy is the heart of the Church, we easily foresee that the enemies of God will employ every means to impede her universal Christian mission. This is the very betrayal of Italy herself ... and the destruction of her true grandeur.¹³

1 Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Essays* (New York, 1959), p. 164.

2 *ibid.*, pp. 99—101.

3 *ibid.*, p. 160.

4 *ibid.*, pp 107—9.

5 *ibid.*, pp. 126—8.

6 *ibid.*, p. 133.

7 *ibid.*, p. 134.

8 *ibid.*, p. 136.

9 cited in *Medieval Essays*, pp. 84—5.

10 *Medieval Essays*, p. 86.

11 *ibid.*, p. 163.

12 Luigi Sturzo, *Italy and the Coming World*. (New York, 1945), p. 257.

13 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, L (1958) pp. 219—30.