

THE MAKING OF EUROPE*

IN his study of the Dark Ages, Mr. Dawson has done a difficult thing with entire success. What is nearly as interesting is the apparently effortless way in which he has achieved his end. Instead of as a formless waste of barbarism and decay, such as is often presented by the merely secular historian, the Dark Ages are viewed as the essentially formative period of European history, when the foundations were being slowly and painfully laid. Though superficially the period lacks the attractions of what are usually considered the great epochs of history, yet the age that saw the laying of great foundations of European culture has an interest that is all its own. Foundation-stones, if less showy, are more necessary than flying buttresses.

The political existence of Europe depends on the Roman Empire; it has little, if any, geographical warrant. A society of city states, the inheritors of the Hellenistic culture, was welded together by the military dictatorship of the Roman tradition. It is no mere figure of speech to call Caesar and Augustus the founders of the European polity, for the barbarians, though possessed of valuable cultural traditions, were of themselves incapable of producing a higher civilisation. It was Rome with her genius for constructive and sustained toil which was to bring this to pass. *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem.*

But if it is to Rome that Europe owes political existence, it is to the Catholic Church that it owes spiritual unity. In any discussion of the Catholic Church it is important to emphasize this fact, that her origin

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was Jewish, and not merely oriental. It was largely from Judaism that the Church drew that sense of solidarity and historical continuity which has so constantly marked her out among the shifting orientalisms and changing heresies that both opposed and imitated her. Only the other day, a critic in *The New English Review* complained of 'the Hebrew-like pride and exclusiveness of the genuine Catholic mind.' It is true that the Church did not attempt to replace the Roman Empire as a political organism; but her attitude was certainly not one of acquiescence. She transferred the fundamental idea of the classical culture—the idea of citizenship—into the spiritual order. She was an ultimate and autonomous society, and this profoundly modified the existing situation.

Mr. Dawson considers that the Church owed her victory, in the main, to three things: Christianity was 'a protest not against material injustice, but against the spiritual ideals of the ancient world and its whole social ethos.' It was this attitude that was ultimately to give her a victory which a policy of social reform alone would have been powerless to achieve; the Roman Empire—like our modern empire of Finance—was to a great extent morally bankrupt, and the Church provided a rallying-ground for all the rising forces of moral hostility and condemnation. The ideal of martyrdom provided a driving force to this protest, and proved that Catholicism was 'the one remaining power in the world which would not be absorbed in the gigantic mechanism of the new servile state.' Lastly, there was that ideal of hierarchic authority, whose ultimate guarantee was the See of Rome, which welded Christianity into a disciplined whole and enabled it to defeat the disintegrating forces of Gnosticism and heresy. It also secured the Church against the collapse of the civil order. When the Empire fell, the Church remained. Islam, on the other hand, showed

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from the first an internal tendency to disrupt : it could expand only at the cost of cracking. In our own day, the Orthodox Church has been paralysed by the collapse of the Tsardom.

The third of the fundamental principles of European unity is the Classical Tradition. For two thousand years Europe has attended the same school and been taught by the same schoolmasters. The concordat achieved between the Church and the Classical Tradition was thus fraught with momentous consequences. Although Tertullian could exclaim : ' What has Athens to do with Jerusalem ? ' the Fathers were essentially Christian rhetoricians ; and St. Jerome, in whom biblical learning and the classical tradition were united, could console himself with the example and fate of Cicero : ' If such a man as Cicero could not escape criticism, what wonder if the dirty swine grunt at a poor little man like me ! ' Had he not been afraid of being ' a Ciceronian and not a Christian, ' he would have been merely a rhetorician, and Christendom would not have had the Vulgate. It is, moreover, to the classical tradition that Europe owes a type almost unknown to other cultures, the man of letters who addresses himself to the educated public in general. The inheritance of the rhetorical tradition had, however, certain drawbacks. In particular, it failed to preserve the scientific and metaphysical achievements of Greek thought : ' The true responsibility for the failure of mediaeval culture to preserve the inheritance of Greek science rests not on the Church but on the rhetoricians. '

These were the three great formative influences. It was left to the Barbarians to supply the material on which they were to work, a material that was not merely passive, since the new nations possessed cultural traditions of considerable value.

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In the chapters on the Awakening of the East, the Rise of Islam, and the Expansion of the Islamic Culture, Mr. Dawson handles brilliantly three intricate and difficult subjects. The antecedents of Islam and the flowering of its culture are of interest, not only for their own sake, but because without an understanding of them any true appreciation of the Middle Ages is impossible. The chapter on the Awakening of the East and the Revolt of the Subject Nationalities is, in many ways, the most illuminating part of the whole book.

The Carolingian Empire is placed in its right perspective (chap. xii). Its material achievement was small, but its historical importance is very great. Charles the Great was that almost unique thing in history, a barbarian warrior with ideals and universal aims. Moreover, the Carolingian Empire provided Europe with a genuine, if slight, Renaissance, which 'had no less importance for the development of European culture than the more brilliant movement of the fifteenth century.' Modoin, the Bishop of Auxerre, was not entirely ridiculous when he wrote: *rursus in antiquos mutataque saecula mores; aurea Roma iterum renovata renascitur orbe.*

One of the many attractive aspects of the book is Mr. Dawson's knack of correcting popular—and intensely irritating—misconceptions without losing his equanimity. Thus, of the Anglo-Saxons he says: 'The popular conception of the Anglo-Saxon as a kind of mediaeval John Bull is singularly at variance with history. On the material side Anglo-Saxon civilisation was a failure; its chief industry seems to have been the manufacture and export of Saints, and even Bede was moved to protest against the excessive multiplication of monastic foundations which seriously weakened the military resources of the State.'

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Considered as a piece of historical writing, *The Age of the Vikings* (chap. xiii) is probably the best in the book. For so vast a subject it is a miracle of compression, and yet the author never gives the impression of being either hurried or restricted. There is in this chapter—and indeed in the whole book—a quality for which it is difficult to find a name. If the word ‘charm’ had not been ruined by overwork, it would serve as well as any.

Finally there are the nice pages of the Introduction. They should be read carefully at least twice before the book itself is attempted, and they should be read again as an epilogue. After this the reader may ponder the frontispiece.

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