

RELIGION AND CULTURE

MOST primitive peoples are without anything which we should call a theology, and civilised people often know as little about their systematic theology as though they were without it. Such people live their religions, without regarding them also as subjects for investigation. If they do investigate, it is with the intention of showing the truth of their religion, or of being reassured in its truth, or of understanding more of that truth. Religious controversy has always been about other matters than the value of religion, and between people who practise some form of religion this is still so. It does not occur to them that religion has a 'value' or alternatively no 'value' for society; what can be evaluated are particular religious beliefs and practices. The study of religious beliefs and practices, however, has tended to fascinate those who do not practise any religion, and would claim to have none. Mr Dawson¹ has quite naturally found it impossible to ignore such a public, and the literature on which it has been formed and fed.

No man would attempt to write upon the legal system or economic transactions of another society, still less of Society, without first taking stock of his knowledge of such matters in his own country, and without in some way systematising what he supposed to be law and economics at home. Religion, unfortunately, has been served like art, which everyone supposes himself to be versed in, without either the labour of study or the familiarity of practice. For this reason, perhaps, so many dreary and unilluminating works have been written on primitive religion, comparative religion, the psychology of religion, the sociology of religion, and so forth. To study religions it is necessary to be quite sure of what one already supposes about them, what sorts of things one wants to know about them, and what one may reasonably expect to learn from them. Mr Dawson is among the few people who could undertake such a study with these (and especially the last) considerations in mind.

Most anthropological accounts of religion in general, as distinct from painstaking descriptions of religious practices in particular societies, are written by people who suppose from the outset that the *real* ends of religion are other than those which are claimed, by believers, to be the ends of any particular religion. The earlier anthropologists, of whom Tylor was the most distinguished example, assumed that the beginnings of religion were other than those which

¹ Religion and Culture. Gifford Lectures, 1947. By Christopher Dawson (Sheed and Ward, London, 1948; 10s. 6d.)

any believer would have thought of, and considered this to be a profitable matter for speculation. In a hypothetical state of humanity there was thought to be no knowledge or conception of the supernatural, and it became a problem to explain how, by what were thought to be 'natural' means, such as dreams, religious conceptions grew up by a process of mistake and delusion. Few anthropologists now speculate on such matters, and from the hypothetical origins have turned their attention to considerations of the function of religion in society, claiming to show what religion *really* does, as distinct from what any religion claims to do. Such studies are perhaps a profitable reaction against earlier speculative history, in that they depend more upon direct observation, and therefore may be corrected by further observations. Here again, however, there is always a tendency to attempt, not only to show a consistency between certain features of a religion, and of the society of which it forms a part, but to digress into the language of psychology in order to explain the religious beliefs and practices themselves. Malinowski's work is an example of such digression. It is, indeed, inevitable that confusions should arise unless the tasks of correlating specific religious teaching and practice with particular features of social life, and of understanding, as it were inwardly, the motives and notions of religion in other peoples, are kept clearly separate. If we are trying to understand individual religious experience, say of a Melanesian, on the basis of our observation of his religious practices, we are bound to translate his behaviour into terms with which we are ourselves familiar; but, as we cannot expect to give an adequate account of an economic transaction in the language of our traditional theology, so we cannot hope to account for religious experience if we use only the terminology of our economics or our psychology.

It is a relief to turn from accounts of the function of religion in its supposed effect on the individual, and through him on society, to the sort of works of which Mr Dawson's study is one. These attempt to show the part played by religious systems in societies of which they are, in abstraction, one element. It is becoming common now to stress the importance of religion in 'integrating' society, and to suggest that any religion is justified on that account, irrespective of the reality of the supernatural ends to which it claims to be directed. The logical conclusion of such an attitude is the absurdity of the Religion of Humanity of Comte, though if it is not pressed to its logical conclusion it can result in a profitable examination of some aspects of religious practice in relation to some aspects of social life. Mr Dawson, of course, adopts no such

attitude, though the terms of the Gifford lectures make it difficult for him entirely to avoid considerations arising from it. The restrictions of the terms of the lectures to Natural Theology make it impossible for him to use all the knowledge at his disposal in speaking of the revealed religions, and he is bound to concentrate what I consider to be too much attention upon what are supposed to be fundamental religious notions, of cosmic transcendence and intuitions of a Supreme Being. Such matters, though obviously of importance in humanist natural theology, which Mr Dawson himself says is 'a rational superstructure erected on the foundations of the Christian theology of revelation', are too ill-defined and general to form the basis of an adequate account of any religion. It is only by determined effort that Mr Dawson has been able to overcome the difficulty of knowing more about religion than, within the limits of the Gifford lectures, he may be supposed to know. Here too, the literature which he has been compelled to use (for there is little other) on primitive religion, has let him down. I doubt if many anthropologists would now accept the correctness of his emphasis on the fear, awe and trembling of primitive men before the mysteries of their universe and religion, and I doubt in fact if such attitudes are characteristic of any religion which we know. If they are, they are totally inaccessible to observation whereas the familiarity with which primitive people approach their religious rites is not so. If we try to refine upon the nature of religious experiences, as distinct from the form which religious beliefs and practices take, and the sources from which people claim to receive religious enlightenment, we are immediately in a region of uncertainty. With all the resources of revealed religion at our disposal, we may well throw some light upon claims to revelation in other religions, by an additional grasp of the nature of the experience of mystics and prophets. The terms of the Gifford lectures, however, preclude any overt use of the only knowledge which could take us far in the study of such matters. For, as Donne says,

'Reason is that first, and primogeniall, light, and goes no farther in a naturall man; but in a man regenerate by faith, that light does all that reason did, and more; and all his Morall, and Civill, and Domestique and indifferent actions (though they be never done without Reason) yet their principall scope, and marke is the glory of God, and though they seeme but Morall, or Civill, or domestique, yet they have a deeper tincture, a heavenly nature, a relation to God, in them.'

Certainly, the study of the religious experiences of other peoples requires 'a deeper tincture' than is possible within the confines of humanist natural theology.

Mr Dawson has succeeded in showing that religious experiences in all the societies with which he deals take a similar form, and had the information at his disposal on primitive societies been more adequate, I do not doubt that his case would have been strengthened rather than weakened. His is perhaps the only systematic account of religion and its place in society which neither explains religion and religious matters in a language adapted for the discussion of secular matters, nor attempts to suggest that the value of religion in 'integrating' society is in any way a justification for particular religious practices. Humanist natural theology has at least the virtue of establishing as real the ultimate ends to which religious practices are aimed, and thus preventing easy and inadequate 'explanations'. Religious systems other than our own need neither to be justified nor 'explained', for the purposes of study, but simply, like any other feature of social life, to be properly described and understood in their relation to societies to which they belong. It is the virtue of Mr Dawson's work that, while avoiding most of the pitfalls of anthropological literature on this subject, he has equally avoided the dangers of apologetics, which too often and too easily either minimise or else exaggerate, the differences in outward form and practice, between the Christian and other religions. It is interesting to note that the freedom from particular religious dogma which discussion in terms of natural theology might be supposed to make possible, is in fact a limitation, making it more difficult for Mr Dawson to develop his theme according to all the knowledge at his disposal.

R. G. LIENHARDT

OUR CATHOLIC HERITAGE.

WHILE it is generally realised that the vast majority of the ancient churches of England, built by Catholics for Catholic worship, are now in Protestant possession, it is less universally known that there yet remain up and down the country a few old chapels and other buildings which are a legacy from the ages of Faith and still used for the purposes for which they were erected; these include several instances of part possession of a medieval church, as at Arundel (Sussex), Broughton in Craven (Yorkshire) and Mapledurham (Oxfordshire). Others like Buckfast Abbey, Minster, Padley, Salmestone and Shorne (Kent) have been recovered by their rightful owners after centuries of alienation, and it is to be hoped that this process of recovery will continue and be intensified in the years to come.