

A Christopher Dawson Overview

“These three forms of activity—the consecration of place, the consecration of work, and the consecration of the social bond itself—are the main channels through which religion finds social expression and acquires a sociological form, and the greater their share in the religious development, the greater is the possibility of sociological prevision. Where religion transcends the categories of Place, Work, folk, as it does in its most profound manifestations (e.g. in the essential religious experience of the mystic), the role of sociological prevision is almost negligible. In other words, the more completely a religion is identified with a particular culture and the more closely the religious and social life of a people is unified, the more room there will be for sociological prevision. But where a religion is divorced from social life, as with a new religion that has not yet achieved social acceptance, or with a new religion that has not yet achieved social acceptance, or with an old religion that has lost it, the possibilities of prevision are proportionately restricted.

Now this is the situation with regard to our own culture, which has been growing progressively more secular during the last five or six centuries, and which now seems to be without any organic relation to any definite form of religion. In such a case, however, the old channels of socio-religious activity are not entirely closed. They have lost their primary religious character, but they continue to exert a secondary influence of quasi-religious kind: Place, Work and the Folk are no longer consecrated by being brought into relation with a transcendent religious principle, as in the case of a living religion, but they retain a kind of inherent sacredness which they have acquired from ages of religious association.”

—*The Christian View of History* (1951)

General Overview

Christopher Dawson was nearly always on the periphery of British academia, though he did offer occasional lectures at the parochial University College, Exeter, and would receive appointment at the end of his career as the first Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard University in the United States. Most of his vocation was spent in independent publications through the Catholic publisher Sheed and Ward, as editor of *The Dublin Review* for four years, and in the yearly grind of various articles and books in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles. This hardly kept his work from being known by the larger public, as the invitation to deliver the Gifford Lectures in 1946-47 revealed. Indeed, his work was much read by more well-known figures of the period.

Born into a committed Anglican family amidst lush surroundings, Welsh on his mother’s side, Dawson lived his first six years at Hay Castle, his maternal grandfather’s home, while Dawson’s father served in the army. After Colonel Dawson retired, the family settled at comfortable Hartlington Hall in the rural North Yorkshire Dales where Christopher grew up with access to his Anglo-Catholic father’s extensive library. Dawson was baptized as a Roman Catholic in 1914, following an intensive study of the patristics the year before. In 1920, he became a founding member of LePlay House, a Catholic sociological think tank; part of the Catholic Order Men, a group of writers on cultural topics; and in future years he would become one of the key voices in the Third Spring, the Roman and Anglo-Catholic Renaissance in Britain, France, and the United States that lasted from the 1920s through the 1960s.

Dawson would also be an important voice in the Catholic-initiated ecumenical movement, The Sword of the Spirit, which during WWII sought to bring various Christian communities together in common cultural work. Even after this movement ended and Dawson suffered a period of exhaustion and doubt before being revitalized by the invitation to deliver the Giffords, he

continued to be committed to ecumenism, and his last works still have this as one of their motivations.

Dawson's long-term project was a history of Western culture, and in practice his scholarly work was metahistorical, heavily drawing from anthropology and sociology in order to shape his conclusions about the wide arc of the European and Christian past. At the same time, he was a staunch cultural critic, and some of his most respected works operated in that vein. It too built upon his historical work. The last decade or so of his life, he was increasingly committed to a Christian ecumenical curriculum that was written in response to his cultural critical concerns and which continued to draw from the wider history of the West he had studied.

The global history project is mostly worked on in the 20s and 30s, though *Medieval Religion* is expanded in 1954 to the much stronger *Medieval Essays. Progress and Religion*, arguably one of his most important books, forecasts the whole project and represents his strongest attempt at an overall overview of what that history could have looked like if completed. The Gifford lectures, *Religion and Culture* and *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, act as a kind of restatement of the main works from the 20s and 30s, though he wisely expands them with new insights. *The Gods of Revolution*, while not published until after his death, is mostly material from the 30s with a few changes adapted for WWII.

The period of cultural criticism is made up of numerous essays, including the projects associated with *The Order* and the Sword of the Spirit movement, as well as the series of essays for *The Christian News-letter*. The key four books-- *Christianity and the New Age* (1931), *Religion and the Modern State* (1936), *Beyond Politics* (1939), and *The Judgment of the Nations* (1942) represent most of the fruit of that.

The two/three geo-political books in the fifties, *Understanding Europe* and *The Revolt of Asia*, which is included in the third, *The Movement of World Revolution*, admittedly don't easily fit into the second category, though they don't entirely represent the curriculum project, either. The opening chapters of *Understanding Europe* do set out succinctly the importance of understanding historical Christian culture, including Christian education, if one is to understand Europe's social unity.

The published Harvard lectures, *The Dividing of Christendom* and *The Formation of Christendom*, along with the unpublished notes toward *The Return to Christian Unity*, and the other published books of the 60s, *Historical Reality* and *Crisis of Western Education*, all reflect the goals of the ecumenical curriculum, and thus, though they cover similar ground as some of the history from the 20s and 30s, they focus in on the specific historical knowledge Christians would need to understand their divisions and to overcome them. The reader *Dynamics of World History* also fits this project, too, though John J. Mulloy clearly intends it to be an assessment of Dawson's oeuvre.

[See Appendix A for a more complete list of his works.]

Key Concepts

“In reality sociology and history are two complementary parts of a single science—the science of social life,” yet they differ in method: “sociology deals with the structure of society, and history with its evolution”—“Sociology as a Science” (1934)

“History is not to be explained as a closed order in which each stage is the inevitable and logical result of that which has gone before. There is in it always a mysterious and inexplicable element, due not only to the influence of chance or the initiative of individual genius, but also to the creative power of spiritual forces.”—*The Making of Europe* (1932)

“Culture as a common way of life is inseparable from culture as a common tradition of language and thought and a common inheritance of knowledge, and this in turn involves an organized attempt to coordinate human action with the transcendent divine power which rules the world and on which man’s life depends”—*Religion and Culture* (1947)

One could argue that Dawson’s whole life-mission was to understand the dynamic process of the past so as to intuit the divine work amidst repeated human failure. Of course, such a claim is perhaps too simple, but I would defend it. Dawson was driven by both an investigative and a prophetic set of impulses.

An Augustinian Analysis of History

For Dawson, history and sociology are complementary disciplines that examine social life; sociology examines it structurally, while history does so chronologically. According to Dawson the Christian understanding of history, of anthropology and sociology has two important principles: **transcendence** (“the idea of a supernatural order, a supernatural society, and a supernatural End of History”) and **dependence** of human law and society upon the divine order. For Dawson, this meant that a true history of a culture would pay attention to both the material conditions of a culture’s creative existence and its creative religious experiences and beliefs. Social structure, then, is based on physical geography, economic function, but also upon the “spiritual superstructure which embodies the higher cultural values.” The human being, too, is both material and spiritual, the former shaping some aspects of human life with necessity, the latter according creative freedom.

[See Appendix B for one formulation of his sources and methodology.]

The temptation of the Christian faith is to drift to one pole or the other, e.g. a condemnation of natural law or a deist or Unitarian denial of the miraculous. The specific power of Western Christian culture has been its energetic tension between the spiritual and prophetic call to reform and the material order’s push toward stability. The Christian believes that Providence is at work in history, but this does not mean that human beings can rationally work it out. History is neither the higher rational order of the transcendent powers nor the lower order of passions and desires used by such powers.

A Sociological Approach to History

Dawson did not put great faith in quantifiable sociology’s claim to predict human action, but he does think sociology can provide qualitative expectations as to how cultures will act, specifically if they are fairly stable entities. For Dawson, **every living culture has a religious center** at its

heart that drives its economic, political, and legal ideals, as well as many of its artistic and educational values. When a culture's religion is settled and diffused within its social, economic, and localized aspects, then one can make reasonable predictions. However, if the culture's religion is unstable or at odds with its cultural self, then anything like sociological prevision [prediction] is much more difficult. If a culture begins to reject its religion, it can linger for a season, living off the cultural capital of its past, but it must eventually return to its religious wellsprings or adopt a new faith, though there may be a period of conflict and transition. This is because religion is not equivalent to a culture. Religions and cultures operate in a two-way exchange influencing each other. Religions have both conservative and revolutionary aspects to them, though religions tend to be resistant to change unless the impetus for change comes from some transcendent factor within the religion itself.

As a result, Dawson believed a comparative phenomenology of religion was possible, at least in terms of the manner in which people in cultures experienced the transcendent, yet this was not the same as revealed dogma. Religion in the former sense could be seen as a bridge between the material and spiritual, but not equivalent to Christ and the Church. In a sense, religion can be a natural response to the transcendent that prepares the way for divine grace which turns it towards true salvation. Every culture has a piece of the truth that can open it to fulfillment in the gospel.

Dawson himself valued highly the theories of French sociologist Frédéric le Play, who has some affinity with Darwin. Le Play defined a culture as a long-term adaptation to an environment, and his stress on "Place, Work and Family or People" corresponded to the biological categories of "Environment, Function and Organism." Drawing from Le Play's work, Dawson described an indigenous culture as something like an artist who intimately corresponds and interacts with her materials. The shaping of a culture is bi-directional, meaning that the culture determines its material conditions as much as it is wrought by them. The complete social isolation of a culture is rare, so the stability of a culture is subject to outside ideas and other cultures. A "living culture" can assimilate ideas and tools from other cultures either through eventual fusion or through creative new discoveries. At the same time, a culture can implode, collapse from within, or become parasitic on its agricultural base, leading to its eventual downfall.

This, Dawson feared, was what is happening to modern Europe, though its degeneration was not inevitable. Dawson divided up the process of civilization growth into three basic cycles:

1. Period of Growth: Old synthesis in ancient civilization has stability.
2. Period of Progress: Breakdown of the synthesis opens room for new models.
3. Period of Maturity: Rise of new synthesis which includes the possibility of diffusion to other "daughter" cultures.

Liberalism and Communism had both worked to displace traditional religion, though both had many of the signs and attitudes of religion. Sociology should not be carried away by a false analogy with the natural sciences; it should not seek to be reductive and deny the category of the spiritual, neither should it attempt to offer anti-metaphysical pronouncements. Theology and philosophy, at the same time, need to pay attention to sociology and learn from its social analysis.

A Catholic Worldview and History

In an early essay, "The Nature and Destiny of Man" (1920), Dawson set out clearly how a Catholic (and Christian) worldview shapes his reading of history. While he would nuance things

differently as the decades advanced, his essential framework for historiography can be found here. It begins with a stress that the Catholic view of human nature is of **a being that is a compound of both spirit and matter held in tension with one another yet interpenetrating** as well. In this, the Catholic position rejects both extremes of a world-denying asceticism and of a monistic materialism that denies the supernatural. Humanity is the point of contact between the animal world of natural desire and the supernatural realm of aspiration.

Human civilizations also find themselves faced with this composite dichotomy. Most reasons that people offer for their actions are only justifications for their instincts, yet human consciousness in the past has come to terms with the supernatural, and mature civilizations in becoming more aware of themselves strive for a civic life that is beyond the instinctual: “Civic life can only satisfy when the society itself subserves a spiritual end.” Along these lines, Dawson explored the growth and cultural dead-end of Eastern material-distrust, whether Buddhism (spiritual nihilism); Vedanta (spiritual monism), or Manichaeism (spiritual dualism). He argued that each system leads finally back to a static world-weariness or to a symbolism created to cover indulgence.

By contrast, the Catholic worldview unites the human person, body and soul, with the new Man who is Christ, the one who restores the human division with a new nature and new kind of life within the world. The whole person will be transformed into a supernatural being, and this is the destiny of the human race. Dawson stresses that Christianity is not Oriental or Western in origin, but Jewish. He traces the development in the prophetic message of Messianic hope and the primitive Christian tension between the kingdom in seed and the kingdom in fruit, which is not the same as a Manichean dualism. Dawson traces the growth in patristic thought about **charity and grace through Augustine’s two cities, the city of the Man and the city of God**. His discussion culminates with a stress on how the supernatural crowns the natural: “The supernatural is not the contradiction of nature, but its restoration and crown, and every faculty of man, whether high or low, is destined to have its share in his new supernatural life.” The relentless struggle with sin is part of Catholic teaching in regard to the human social order. The life of the Church is to be a source of renewal in the world.

Here, Dawson admits that only the saints achieve a purity of intent and example; the rest of us struggle to live somewhat differently over time. Each age has had a fresh manifestation of this struggle and renewal. Our physical bodies and our material existence await the complete telos of theosis. The Incarnation of Christ is central to this everlasting renewal.

A Civilization-Wide Analysis

The category of comparative religion enabled Dawson to map out a wide history of the West, though this differed in the details as his career advanced. Here is one example from 1925 (“Religion and the Life of Civilization”):

1. Rise of Ancient Civilization—He cites the examples of Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt.
2. The Decline of Archaic Religion-Culture—He looks at these regions becoming more problematic and critical in their religious faith, ca. 2500BC and following, with some signs of world religion.
3. The Coming of the World Religions [like Karl Jaspers’ Axial Age]—Growing awareness of a great cosmic essence that transcends cultures, first in India, later with Buddhism and Hellenic

Greece (e.g. Plato). A move from acquiescence to ascetism, to new universal religions and principles.

4. The World-Religions and Material-Progress—All the cultures associated with the great religions have to struggle with the old and new ways adjusting to each other. Some such as in India seem to make a way for the old over against the new; others such as Islam refuse almost any dualism. Extreme types such as Manicheanism are not able to do so. [This period would seem to extend into the late medieval period.]
 5. The Rise of the Modern Scientific Culture [in the West]—Here he touches on its stress on experiment and applied science and the 18th-century push towards secularism.
 6. Progress and Disillusionment the Meaning of Modern Social Unrest—Material development without spiritual integration. The rise of quasi-religious social ideologies in the nineteenth-century, Socialism, Marxism, etc. But these are destructive impulses that finally turn against civilization in frustration. [He mentions imperial Rome as an analogical example of a period with growing secularism and frustration, so this would suggest that these periods are working models of patterns that are more complicated.]
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Select Readings

“T. S. Eliot on the Meaning of Culture” [1949]
(*Dynamics* 109-118)

Dawson distinguishes different uses of the word “culture” and shows that Karl Mannheim is more interested in the sociological meaning, while Eliot is more focused on social tradition and cultivation. He also stresses his own difference from Eliot, namely that religion and culture are separable, if not so easily before modernity.

- Would you agree that Dawson has understood Eliot, and in turn that Eliot has understood Dawson?
- Are they that different in their views? Explain.
- Does Dawson’s difference reflect his anthropology? (See discussion above under Catholic Worldview and History.)

“The Christian View of History” [1951]
(*Dynamics* 245-262)

Dawson begins by arguing that 19th Idealism and German liberal Protestantism have confused the issues, which is why even conservative Christians such as C. S. Lewis have come to distrust any attempt at historicism. Dawson insists that the Christian view of history is Hebraic in origin and only makes sense if one accepts its basic claims about Christ and Church. It thus has a fundamental beginning in the Old Covenant, a middle in Christ, and an end in the eschaton. At the center of sacred history is the paradox of the suffering Messiah. It combines an apocalypse of the world empires with the salvation of the people of God which gradually becomes an inward spiritual change.

- Dawson overviews the most important stresses in Augustine’s two cities, including the ordering of the loves, the nature of the human will, the individual at the center of history,

and thus, a history that is personalist and dynamic. Would you agree that a Christian view of history must include the personal and the dynamic? Why and/or why not?

- Dawson also traces a number of changing views of history: Bede as an example of a church history, Dante's sense of the comprehensive, the Spiritual Franciscans' view of spiritual history, and the new historiography that arises with the Renaissance and with Progress. Do these represent changes in religion or spirituality, too? Explain.
- Dawson argues that Rousseau and Marxism represent two approaches that are quasi-religious in how they borrow ideas from Christianity. How important is the Christian past to even secular or anti-Christian views of history now?

"History and Christian Revelation" [1935, from *Christianity and the Modern State*] (*Dynamics* 263-274)

According to Dawson, while Marxism and Christianity share a comprehensive and eschatological vision, Marxism is the product of a single thinker as opposed to Christianity which goes all the way back to the covenant made with Israel at Sinai, and how Israel's hope grew out of this and was further clarified through the centuries as the people faced upheaval and exile and return. The Gospels do have a close tie with the apocalyptic aspects of Judaism. Dawson argues that the Catholic view of history is the Augustinian one: neither millennial literalism nor gnostic denial of history but a middle ground of universal significance: "Eternity had entered into time and henceforward the singular and the temporal had acquired an eternal significance. The closed circle of time had been broken and a ladder had been let down from heaven to earth" in order to escape the cycle of karma or fate.

- What distinguishes the Marxist and Christian views of history? Are they important distinctions? Why and/or why not?
- How large of a role does the apocalyptic play in a Christian view of history?
- Likewise, how essential is the Incarnation of Christ? How would the meaning of geo-political or socio-economic history change without it?

"The Kingdom of God and History" [1938] (*Dynamics* 283-299)

Dawson holds that Christianity does not itself create the historical sense. It only supplies the "metaphysical and theological setting for history," and in trying to create a theory of history, it generates an argument for God's divine purposes, such as Augustine's *City of God* or Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica*. Dawson makes the argument that culture and history are tied together, understanding the past requires making sense of a culture extended across time, thereby understanding its traditions and practices. He also argues that a universal history is impossible, so the best we might do is a history of a civilization. Christianity stands out among world religions because it is tied to sacred history, especially to Christ's historicity.

- Why does Dawson think that historicism is not a problem for Christians, but really just a response to multiculturalism?
- Dawson traces a number of Christian responses to history, beginning with Augustine's two cities, Odo of Cluny and Otto of Freising, Dante's, the shift during the Protestant Reformation back to models of the apocalypse and the chosen people, and finally liberal

Protestant desacralization and Catholic rigidity's desire to safeguard the Incarnation.
 What does this history of history tell us about the Christian faith?

- Would you agree with Dawson that universal history is impossible? Explain.

“Sociology as a Science” [1934]

(*Dynamics* 12-34)

In this essay, it is clear that Dawson has some confidence in sociology, not as a positivist science of law, but as a measured set of observations about human societies. Sociology is practical in its gathering together of data; it need not attempt to make philosophical claims or try to subsume theological truth. It can make sociological judgments about either as ideologies in society, but it is not empowered to make metaphysical truth claims. Social structure is based on physical geography, economic function, and on the “spiritual superstructure which embodies the higher cultural values.” The human being is both material and spiritual, the former shaping some aspects of human life with necessity, the latter affording creative freedom.

- What does Dawson think are the strengths and weaknesses of Le Play's approach?
- Why does Dawson reject not only Marx and Hegel's, but also Durkheim's approach?
- Why should sociology not try to imagine or create utopias?

“The Problem of Metahistory” [1951]

(*Dynamics* 303-310)

Here Dawson focuses on the meaning of the term “metahistory” and why some distrust the idea entirely. He uses the term in the most comprehensive manner, for it encompasses history's nature, meaning, and the significance of change. Defined in this manner, Dawson can include not only theorists of cyclical development like Spengler and Toynbee, but also Hegel and Croce, and Dawson groups R. G. Collingwood with the latter. He also argues that Toynbee has certain merits but that he fails because of insufficient material.

- What is it about Idealism that Dawson distrusts?
- Likewise, why does Dawson distrust (mostly) models of cyclical history?
- Dawson is clear that metahistory is not a universal history, yet sociology plays a large role in history. Why does he hold up Alexis de Tocqueville as a good example of a sociologically-minded historian?

Appendix A—Dawson's Oeuvre

A History of the West

Progress and Religion (1929)
The Age of Gods (1928)
The Making of Europe (1932)
Enquiries into Religion and Culture (1933)
Medieval Religion / Medieval Essays (1934/54)
The Gods of Revolution (post.1972-material mostly from the 30s)
The Spirit of the Oxford Movement (1933)

Religion & Culture (1948)
Religion and the Rise of Western Culture (1950)

Cultural Criticism

Christianity and the New Age (1931)
Religion and the Modern State (1936)
Beyond Politics (1939)
The Judgment of the Nations (1942)

Global Geo-Politics

Understanding Europe (1952)
The Revolt of Asia/ The Movement of World Revolution (1957/59)

Christian Curriculum

The Historic Reality of Christian Culture (1960)
The Crisis of Western Education (1961)
The Dividing of Christendom (1965)
The Formation of Christendom (1967)
Mission to Asia (1955/66)

Essays on Foundational Principles

Dynamics of World History, edited by John J. Mulloy (1957)
 "Sociology as a Science" (1934)
 "Sociology and the Theory of Progress" (1921)
 "Religion and the Life of Civilization" (1925)
 "The Kingdom of God and History" (1938)
 "T.S. Eliot on the Meaning of Culture" (1949)
 "The Christian View of History" (1951)
 "The Problem of Metahistory" (1951)

"Catholic Principles and Economics" *Blackfriars*
 "The Land" *Blackfriars*