

WHY WE NEED CHRISTOPHER DAWSON¹

• Glenn W. Olsen •

“It is not just Dawson’s ideas about culture in general, and Christian culture in particular, that continue to be fertile, but his ideas about how specifically the West was formed.”

Historians have a rather short half-life. Whether one views historical writing as a branch of literature or as a kind of science, it is based on documentary research. As this advances more evidence becomes available by which to understand the past, making earlier narratives to that extent dated. Add to this the inevitable changes in perspective brought about by history itself, carrying the historian with it, and modifying ideas about what in earlier times is most valuable and important, and we find every generation rewriting the past. Even the historian most devoted to philology, that is to avoiding anachronism by using words and ideas only as they were used in the period he wishes to study, must begin with words and ideas as they are presently defined and laboriously work back to earlier meanings—and the present usage with which he must begin is itself shifting. The upshot is that few historians are read by many beyond their own times. If they are, it is because they are a Thucydides or a Gibbon, that is, historians of such great stature, intelligence, style, or insight as writers—in the case of Gibbon, so amusing and incisive—that we cannot lay their histories down. No matter that we

¹Special thanks are due to Adrian J. Walker, who in ongoing discussion has asked many probing questions and made many suggestions incorporated here.

may strongly disagree with the interpretive framework of a Gibbon, he draws us into his web, and we can always make allowances for the limitations of his perspective.

So why should we continue to read Christopher Dawson (1889–1970), now dead for more than a generation? Truth be told, some in the historical community, having asked that question, have suggested that Dawson is *passé*, an interesting and important writer in his own day, but now either not sufficiently up-to-date, or embodying perspectives once plausible, but now less so. We will consider one such critic below, but first we need to address the question at hand: why should we continue to read Dawson?

Probably most would agree that his greatest historical contribution was his writing of history around the idea of Christian culture, an innovation which in turn expressed his conviction that culture is embodied religion.² At the heart of culture lies religion: Dawson's genius lay in his working out of this insight in a series of books and essays. These all, in one way or another, dealt with the idea of culture, but perhaps it is fair to say that, once having defined the relation of religion to culture, he was more interested in using this idea to write history than in pursuing its final philosophical foundations. This latter is the goal toward which we move here. The claim is that Dawson is still worth reading not just because he was an illuminating historian and a fine stylist, but because his organizing ideas, true in themselves, continue to provoke reflection on the nature of culture. At the same time, this reflection should be useful even for historians, inasmuch as it points to the need to make room for, and give priority to, apprehended meaning as the *causa causarum* in history.

Dawson's great merit was to combine the Romantics' approach to form with the new sociology of his day,³ which also

²Many of Dawson's books deal with the idea of culture as embodied religion, but see especially *Religion and Culture* (New York, 1948), *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (Garden City, N.Y., 1950), *Medieval Essays* (New York, 1954), and *Religion and World History: a Selection from the Works of Christopher Dawson*, ed. James Oliver and Christina Scott (Garden City, N.Y., 1975).

³Though I will be indicating some limits of Romanticism in what follows, I use the word as a historical label, not a four-letter word.

sought to understand societies as cultures, commonly under some such language as “world views.” What held a society together was its shared ideas about and attitudes toward the world, and its shared practices. One could argue that Dawson’s most memorable books are written in pursuit of the overarching shared vision of life of this or that society as it evolved over time, and then of the subcultures that composed each society, its doctors, warriors, or chiefs. The merit of this approach might be illustrated by comparing it with the outline of history still present, despite the inroads of subjects such as World History, in the curricula of most history departments in the United States. Typically, while denying that they are Eurocentric, these divide the history of the world into three epochs derived from the periodization of European history: ancient, medieval, and modern, probably with some residue of the Petrarchan equation of ancient with “Golden Age,” medieval with “decline,” and modern with “return to or progress along the right path.” As a schema, this does little more than replicate with a slight Western flavor what Mircea Eliade judged the most basic pattern of mythical thought across the world religions, the loss of a “once upon a time” (Eden) in a sad present (history), but with an Eden of possible recovery shining before us (utopia or, on a slightly less grand scale, a world made safe for democracy).⁴ How much better to use the approach of Dawson, who despite attacks coming from the historical community on the metaphors used in the grandiose views of an Oswald Spengler or Arnold Toynbee, did not disdain to use a kind of biological metaphor to talk about the history of cultures.

Dawson consciously decided on “culture” as a better word than “civilization” to speak of his interests. “Civilization,” as derived from *civitas*, had too urban and intellectual an association for him. If he was to talk globally about human communal life, a good deal of which had not centered on cities, the better word was “culture,” for,

⁴In addition to my “Problems With the Contrast Between Circular and Linear Views of Time in the Interpretation of Ancient and Early Medieval History,” *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* 1 (2001): 41–65, see the most recent of my studies of a specifically Christian form of Golden Age thought, the idea of the “Primitive Church”: “The *Ecclesia Primitiva* in John Cassian, the Ps. Jerome *Commentary* on Mark, and Bede,” in *Biblical Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Claudio Leonardi and Giovanni Orlandi (Florence, 2005), 5–27. The idea of progress was a minor theme in ancient and medieval thought, and does not fit well with a pattern of Golden Age, loss of Golden Age, recovery of Golden Age.

coming from *cultus*, this could designate any habit of being or shared pattern of life, urban, rural, nomadic, agricultural, familial, or monastic. It also suggested that life, like *religio*, is typically tied to the gods, that is, that human communities commonly are part of a larger community of God and man. This is why culture is embodied religion. Only those of us who have inherited the prolonged attempt of recent centuries to undo the ties between religion and culture, to separate God from man, to marginalize religion, cannot see this. Man's usual situation for most of history has been within a religious community composed of gods and men.

That said, Dawson thought the best way to study any culture was over its life-cycle, from origin to maturity, the latter being the point at which its form was most realized (here he was closest to the Romantics), to decline and afterlife. Few cultures actually die, most pass on something of themselves after their moment of greatest flourishing to successors, and in a sense live to the present. Homer and Sophocles are still read today. Thus it makes little sense to speak of a Roman period simply succeeding a Greek period. Rather, after a kind of fulfillment in the so-called Classical period of the fifth century B.C., Greek culture continued to develop in the Hellenistic period and was central, for instance, to the articulation of Christian theology.⁵ Strands of Greek culture passed eventually into many cultures and still live on today, though no longer in the best of health. The same in turn may be said of Roman culture. Indeed, so far as Western civilization is concerned, Rémi Brague, whose view of Europe as an open-ended series of appropriations of earlier civilizations is in important ways a continuation of Dawson's views, has argued that the West remains Roman in the sense that Rome was for it the gathering and transmitting culture, the point of reference for later thought and action.⁶

Though Dawson knew a great deal about and wrote about many of the cultures of the world, arguably he most fully illustrated

⁵I note that the view of the importance of Greek philosophy for Christian theology found in Dawson was articulated in similar terms by Benedict XVI in his widely-reported Regensburg lecture of 12 September 2006, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections." See below, n. 15.

⁶Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: a Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, Ind., 2002). Also see my "The Two Europes," to be published in the *Actas* of the Ninth International European Culture Conference, Pamplona, Spain, and in *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 14, no. 1 (2009).

his idea of the formation of culture in his studies on Christian culture. This he saw as foreshadowed by Israel, formed around the figure of Christ, and facilitated by the Roman Empire; then under the influence of Greek philosophy as passing into a kind of intellectual and spiritual maturation in the patristic period, followed by the bringing of entire peoples to Christianity in the middle ages, along with further cultural innovations, such as the *chansons de geste*, Gothic architecture, and scholasticism. This culture, called Christendom by the time of Charlemagne, was divided in the sixteenth century and subsequently laid under siege, especially by modern nationalism, but again, in certain respects continues to the present.⁷

This innovation of writing history around the idea of the formation of Christian culture or Christendom, the latter which he insisted was in essence a spiritual rather than political entity, seems to me Dawson's greatest historical contribution. The masterful pages in which he delineated his views about Christian culture remain a principal reason for reading him today.

Some elaboration is in order. Dawson lamented the fact that, though many could see that Greek and Roman culture had had their own integrity and could be studied as forms of life that had a life history, even Christians had not seen that Christian culture might and should be treated in the same way. Of course, in a medieval or even an early modern context Christians might miss the obvious, that they were living in the midst of the Christian culture which had succeeded Greece and Rome and was sufficiently distinct to have its own label, perhaps Christendom, perhaps Europe.

In an influential study Jean Leclercq noted that at least until the twelfth century, monks, at that time still the principal authors of historical works, tended not to see themselves as separated from the ancient world by some unbridgeable chasm:⁸ that was an idea waiting

⁷The books which perhaps best communicate Dawson's understanding of the development of the stages of Christian culture are *Medieval Essays* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959) and *The Making of Europe* (New York: Meridian, 1958), and see also on Christendom, *The Formation of Christendom* (New York, 1957).

⁸Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine

for the Renaissance to discover it. In the twelfth century learned people, rather, tended to see themselves as in a culture still in continuity with the ancient world, pagan and Christian. In such a situation it was difficult to see Christian culture as something new or distinct, a subject in its own right. The opinion of Petrarch and his humanist successors from the fourteenth century, that indeed they were separated from their beloved ancient world, could have led to a clearer perception that Christian culture was a subject worthy in itself of study; but of course, in spite of his deeply divided psyche in the matter of Christianity, Petrarch's point was that in the time of Christian ascendancy the world had lost much that was valuable: this was not a likely point of departure for promoting the study of Christian culture in its own right.

From his to our time, what in fact happened was that the Christian story was broken down into segments dictated by the Renaissance triad ancient-medieval-modern. That is, the main story was about how the achievements of the ancient world had been lost and regained, and the Christian story would have to be fitted onto that framework. Instead of recognizing that something as equally distinctive as Greek or Roman culture, Christian culture, had succeeded these cultures, even Christians accepted the historical narration developed in the Renaissance. The Protestant Reformation simply extended this tripartite division to include an ecclesiastical imitation of this story, with the Primitive Church as the Golden Age of Christianity, the middle ages as the time of loss of this Golden Age, and the Reformation as the time of recovery of authentic Christianity.

So powerful was the sway of classical culture over the Western imagination that when the Christian humanists, Protestant or Catholic, re-founded studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially when they continued the Renaissance attempt to develop a program of pre-university studies and founded the colleges that were to dot the landscape of early modern Europe, they assumed that the college curricula should be formed around the classical heritage.⁹ Thus the Jesuits, though including many Christian

Misrahi (New York, 1982).

⁹Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education*, with specific programs for the study of Christian culture by John J. Mulloy (New York, 1961), is excellent, but of more recent scholarship and for a different view one might consult John

elements in their program of studies, gave the (pagan) classics a certain pride of place. Ancient Christians such as Sts. Basil and Jerome had wondered what a curriculum built around Christian (in their case, biblical) texts might look like, but few in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries seriously proposed that, say, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* might better prepare lay students for a Christian life and understanding of the world than Cicero.

Dawson did not propose, and neither do I, that the pagan classics should have been abandoned, which, after all, would be tantamount to a denial of one of the key features of Christian culture as an ongoing recapitulation in a Christian key of the classical heritage. What Dawson did propose, though, was that, for instance, the *ratio studiorum* of 1599, the Jesuits' program of studies, in spite of much that was laudable, should have conveyed a better sense of what the still living, incarnate, Christian culture of Christendom had been and was about. The best way of doing this would have been, in addition to the teaching of things such as rhetoric and philosophy, to have selectively read the lives of the saints, Wolfram, Dante, and then contemporaries such as Cervantes and, a little later, Lope de Vega, along with the ancient classics; to instruct Christian students in the successive Christian architectural styles; and to teach them the musical tradition from Gregorian chant to the great contemporary Christian composers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁰ Presumably this largely was not done because of the way sixteenth-century learned imagination was in thrall to the classics and to the ancient world, though the "obviousness" Christian culture itself enjoyed as it continued on past the middle ages through the Renaissance and the Baroque might also account for what, from our point of view, looks like a curious lapse.

O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), and *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley et al. (Toronto, 1999). For pre-university study in the Renaissance, see Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore, 1989).

¹⁰“Christopher Dawson and the Renewal of Catholic Education: the Proposal that Catholic Culture and History, not Philosophy, Should Order the Catholic Curriculum,” an unpublished lecture given 13 March 2008 at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, Calif., treats the strengths and limitations of Great Books programs organized around study of philosophy in a way parallel to Dawson's treatment of study of the classics in early modern Europe.

In any case, Dawson proposed that, so far as the history of Christianity is concerned, our basic historical schema should be the stages of the development of Christian culture. This leads to a re-thinking of still current assumptions about the relation between Christianity and Western history.

First of all, the so-called middle ages, viewed as a stage of the development of Christian culture, was not just a middle period between two times of high achievement, a period so lacking in distinctive characteristics that it was to be labeled “middle.” Rather, the medieval stage of the formation of Christian culture was to be seen as the time of the first great missionary expansion of Christianity, when, against great odds, whole peoples had been joined to Christendom and the Church had in fair measure communicated a sense of the faith. It was a time when the Christian literary and artistic imagination blossomed.

Moreover, the so-called Renaissance (if ever the characterization of a period has taken the part for the whole, it is in regard to the Renaissance), was not in general a time of de-Christianization, though that might, especially according to geography and social class, have been one’s experience. As such fine historians since Dawson’s time as Augustine Thompson have now shown for the early Italian Renaissance, this was a time when—say in the great cities of Italy—life continued to be lived according to a Christian, liturgical, rhythm.¹¹

Finally, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation were in important respects attempts to form the most thoroughly Christian society yet, in which, as a stunning book by Brad Gregory on the

¹¹Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: the Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125–1325* (University Park, Pa., 2005). See also, from the numerous relevant publications of Maureen Miller, “Urban Space, Sacred Topography, and Ritual Meanings in Florence: The Route of the Bishop’s Entry, c. 1200–1600,” in *The Bishop Re-Formed: Studies in Episcopal Power and Culture in the Central Middle Ages*, ed. John S. Ott and Anna E. Trumbore [forthcoming, Ashgate]. I have long thought the chapter on towns in *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* the weakest pages Dawson wrote on the middle ages, giving town life a “Romantic” presentation (in the pejorative sense) worthy of the Gothic revival, but Thompson’s book goes some way to make Dawson’s views a bit more plausible. *Medieval Towns: A Reader*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski (Peterborough, Ontario, 2006), is a very useful collection of translated materials through the fourteenth century, and *The Town in the Middle Ages*, editor not given (Turnhout, 2006), is a good sampling of recent scholarship.

willingness of early modern Christians to die for their faith has shown, the Christian hold on Europe continued to develop (W. H. Lewis long ago suggested that the seventeenth was the most Christian of centuries).¹² Certainly an argument can be made that the Baroque, Catholic and Protestant, represents the most distinctly Christian and European art form ever conceived, finding the Christian, incarnate, God in all things and seeing the world as a stage on which the Christian drama plays out. And so it goes.

The point, then, is that overly to separate the various stages of Christian development into too-distinct periods obscures the fact that they were all part of a living and continuing entity, Christendom or Christian culture. Patristic, Medieval, Renaissance, Reformation and Counter Reformation are all stages of the Christian culture which grew out of Israel, Greece, Rome, and the cultures of the north. Only with the Enlightenment—and there are now historians who would dispute even this, stressing, for instance, the presence of Christianity in both the Enlightenment itself and in the nineteenth century—do we arguably get a real de-Christianization of life and perhaps a decline of Christianity.

Dawson was by no means locked into the idea that a great culture eventually had to decline and, more or less, disappear. That was simply a description of what had happened in the past. Christian culture was for him still alive in the twentieth century, and in an earlier article in this journal, I tried to show that, though Dawson viewed Christianity as long under siege and thought that most Christians themselves had never really appreciated the idea of Christian culture, he thought also that it was now up to Catholics to defend this idea.¹³ I understand this to be one of the purposes of *Communio's* "Retrieving the Tradition" articles. Dawson, who argued that education should be about more than preparing students to support and function within a single national culture, thought Catholicism particularly suited to cultivating an idea of membership in a universal spiritual community. This could include certain forms of universalism, such as human rights, supported by many outside the

¹²Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); W. H. Lewis, *The Splendid Century* (New York, 1953).

¹³Glenn W. Olsen, "American Culture and Liberal Ideology in the Thought of Christopher Dawson," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 702–20, at 718–19.

Church, but at heart Dawson thought people need a contemporary form of Christian culture, that is, initiation through education into the full patrimony of Christianity. As I write these lines I sit in my office in Austria while teaching in a Catholic program of studies which lays great weight on introducing American Catholics to the broad and long patrimony of European Christian culture.¹⁴ Dawson, surely, would have approved.

Presumably Christopher Dawson would have been dismayed over the protracted discussion in 2005 and 2006 that resulted in the European Union refusing any explicit reference to Christianity as the spiritual and cultural foundation of European identity in its draft constitution. The issue is not dead, and both before and since his becoming Pope, Benedict XVI has called Europe back to its Christian faith. In a controversial Regensburg lecture of 12 September 2006, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Benedict presented Europe in a very Dawsonian way, as not just an accidental accumulation of the detritus of earlier cultures, but as a providentially formed synthesis in which Greek philosophical inquiry in union with Christian faith had accomplished its God-given task of clarifying the nature and relation of faith and reason.¹⁵ In spite of the eastern origins of Christianity, Benedict said, this had nowhere been done as fully as in Europe, and this makes Christianity essential to understanding what Europe is and what it has accomplished. This is but one example of how the idea of Christian culture may illuminate our contemporary situation. In the following section, I will show that this idea had nothing to do for

¹⁴I thank one of my former colleagues in Austria, Nicholas Healy III, now returned to the United States, for clarifying discussion of the present article.

¹⁵If I may throw my two cents into the controversy occasioned by this lecture: if Muslims wish to take offense at it, I would suggest that they pay more attention to Benedict’s oblique (*a la Romana*) implications 1) that the Qur’an has irreconcilable things to say about the religious use of violence, advocating both “no compulsion in religion” and holy war. This has been said in scholarly literature, but not much in public venues. 2) that the more Muslims are faithful to a notion of God’s transcendence that allows Him the freedom to do the opposite of what He has done, the less they are suited to dialogue with anyone, for their view of God undermines the possibility of philosophical discourse across the religions, freeing God as it does from any requirement of even an analogical adherence to reason. I suppose you can only gore so many bulls at one time, but Benedict hardly noted that the Islamic problem with transcendence is virtually the same as classical Protestantism’s.

Dawson with what is called reactionary nostalgia for some sort of dubious “constantinianism.”

As already noted, Dawson has had his critics. These by no means have been simply wrong-headed. To reply to each and to separate the wheat from the chaff in what each has had to say would take more than a single essay. One example, taken from recent criticism of Dawson, must suffice.

Dawson has been criticized by Catholics such as the patristics specialist Robert A. Markus, who desires a radical critique of society by Christianity, for laying “much stress on the Church’s role in creating a ‘Western Civilization,’” and in this failing “to see the cost to the Church in becoming thus identified with a culture largely of its own making.”¹⁶ This seems part of a critique forming from the 1960s, whose real target has often been Western Civilization itself, or the shape Western Civilization historically has taken.

There can be little doubt that Dawson was a man of the post-World War II period in that, having lived through the two great World Wars, he shared widespread hopes for a new, more democratic and law-abiding, Europe re-founded on the highest ideals of “Western Civilization” as these were understood and advocated by, for instance, the post-war continental Christian Democratic parties: constitutionalism; cooperation among nations and an end to imperialism; international rights; democracy; and individuals, religions, and cultures freed from the control of oppressive and totalitarian states.¹⁷ The end of Nazism and a containing of Soviet power did not spell the end of concern over the

¹⁶Robert Markus, “Church Reform and Society in Late Antiquity,” in *Reforming the Church before Modernity: Patterns, Problems and Approaches*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto and Louis I. Hamilton (Burlington, Vt., 2005), 3–19, at 17. Brague, *Eccentric Culture*, offers a very different perspective, claiming: “No culture was ever so little centered on itself and so interested in [others] as Europe” (134).

¹⁷The best biography of Dawson is by his daughter, Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson, 1889–1970* (London, 1984). James Hitchcock is preparing a volume which will more substantially deal with Dawson’s thought. My “American Culture and Liberal Ideology,” deals with Dawson’s political views.

fragility of liberal culture. The Christian Democratic parties commonly thought of their individual countries and of Europe as Christian, and indeed viewed European unification as an antidote to the nationalism which had produced the two Great Wars. They had much in common with a still surviving “Austrian idea,” embraced by such an apolitical writer as the secular Jew Stefan Zweig (1881–1942): the multinational, multiethnic life of Austria-Hungary was a symbol of a human fellowship transcending national frontiers, in which one’s first home was Europe, in Zweig’s words, “our sacred home, cradle and Parthenon of our occidental civilization.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, Markus’ idea that Dawson failed “to see the cost to the Church in becoming . . . identified with a culture largely of its own making” seems to embody multiple misunderstandings or mis-readings of Dawson.

First, in spite of Zweig’s usage cited above, “Western Civilization” was not then a traditional expression, but it came to be a phrase increasingly used after the War, in part to define the “Western” values under attack as the Cold War commenced. Especially in the United States after World War II, “Western Civilization” was packaged in many ways: “Western Civ.” courses proliferated along with Great Books courses centered on lists of books which claimed to define the West and associate it with the best of human thought.¹⁹ In part this proliferation of Western Civilization courses was in response to the threats the first half of the twentieth century had presented to that civilization, but more centrally they were a way of “boiling down” to a course or two the much more extensive and classically centered elite programs of study of many of the pre-war colleges in the light of the large numbers of

¹⁸Quoted by Joan Acocella, “Beware of Pity,” *The New York Review of Books* 53, no. 12 (13 July 2006): 17–19 at 18.

¹⁹I have explored these developments in “Deconstructing the University,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 226–53; “The University as Community: Community of What?” *Communio* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 344–62, and in a longer form in *Ideas for the University*, ed. Ed Block, Jr. (Milwaukee, 1995), 29–60; and “The Changing Understanding of the Making of Europe from Christopher Dawson to Robert Bartlett,” *Quidditas* 20 (1999): 159–70. “Western Civilization” and “Christendom” are not completely interchangeable terms, but for many the former better suited the times and carried less specifically Catholic connotations.

men returning from the War and flooding the schools on the G.I. Bill.

Second, whatever could be called “Western Civilization” in Dawson’s vision, he himself never thought of it as something largely of the Church’s making. His repeated emphasis, as we saw above, was on the plurality that had made the West: Judaism, Greek learning, Roman ideals of government and law, Christianity, and the Celtic and Germanic cultures of the North. Of these Christianity was very important, but Dawson did not have the rationalist and mono-causal view not uncommon among historians which sees some person or institution (but not God) as “making cultures.”²⁰ That is, he was not in the habit of seeing anything so complicated as “Western Civilization” as “largely” of anyone’s making.

Third, Dawson did not exactly hold that the Church (simply) identified with the cultures it helped make. Certainly he understood that it sometimes did this, though arguably more in the modern period than earlier. Since Dawson understood culture to be embodied religion, there had to be a sense in which the religion that had inspired a culture identified with it. But the fact that one takes pride in one’s children does not mean that one does not also criticize them, or see the dangers of too close an identification. Especially in the early middle ages, the Church often assumed the posture of a teacher, teaching both Christian and Roman ways to barbarian peoples; but it also often criticized these same “students.” There are few periods in which the Church has not engaged in cultural criticism, sometimes in relentless cultural criticism, and Dawson’s books relate much of this. He repeatedly shows the Church criticizing cultural developments it had had a hand in.

For instance, there is no theme more basic to Dawson’s treatment of the middle ages than the centuries-long struggle between what he called the peace culture of the Mediterranean and the war culture of the North of Europe. The point of his narration was that each of these cultures profoundly influenced the other, so that in the end syntheses emerged that were quite different from

²⁰Glenn W. Olsen, “Christian philosophy, Christian history: parallel ideas?” in *Eternity in Time: Christopher Dawson and the Catholic Idea of History*, ed. Stratford Caldecott and John Morrill (Edinburgh, 1997), 131–50 (a slightly different version is published in *The Catholic as Historian*, ed. Donald d’Elia and Patrick Foley [Naples, Fla., 2006], 81–96, 225–26).

anything initially present in either culture. An example would be the intermingling of the war and peace themes in the monastic military orders that originated in the Crusades, which present the paradox of “fighting monks.”²¹ According to Dawson’s argument, all through the middle ages an ideal of peace, coming from the Mediterranean and the Roman world, contended with the war ideals of northern, Celtic and Germanic, society. The first might be exemplified by Virgil’s hope, expressed in Book I of the *Aeneid*, that the Romans would bring a reign of unending peace, of law and order; and the second might be exemplified by Tacitus’ description in the *Germania* of the warrior ethos of Germanic societies, their admiration of the male ideals of victory in battle and comradeship and fidelity among warriors. That Dawson centered his narrative on the continuing struggle between war and peace, seeing the Church for the most part as the bearer or teacher of peace, is clear evidence that he did not think of the Church as typically identified with the cultures that were coming to compose Christendom. Rather, most commonly for him the Church stood in some degree of adversarial relation to these cultures. For Dawson to structure his tale along the lines of an ongoing collision between the war and peace cultures suggests that he had no illusion that, for instance, the papacy was in control of European developments. It was just one, important but rather weak, player in these developments.

Fourth, I would have thought that Dawson’s portrayal of things like the Reformation and the dividing of Christendom thereafter are testimony to his lively sense of the tragic in history, of how one does not necessarily reap what one sows, or more likely, that one both does and does not reap.²² The dividing of Christendom is an example of the fact that often in history problems emerge beyond anyone’s solution. Dawson’s treatment of the earlier Gregorian Reform of the eleventh century certainly embodied a sympathy for the radical critique of traditional Germano-Christian society into which the Gregorians entered, their insistence that the Church should be free from lay and royal control. We might say in this regard that, to the degree in which he shows the Church

²¹A translation of St. Bernard’s “In Praise of the New Knighthood” is found in *The Crusades: A Reader*, ed. S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt (Peterborough, Ontario, 2003), V, 49.

²²*The Dividing of Christendom*, Foreword by Douglas Horton (New York, 1965).

identifying with various cultural phenomena, Dawson very clearly saw the cost of these identifications and of the Church's various "triumphs," limited and passing as they might have been. The great historian of philosophy, Étienne Gilson, in regard to his study of St. Bonaventure, observed that what might in the short run seem a success, say the founding of the Franciscans, might in a longer run seem, if not failure, more muted and cross-grained. The charism of the founder is not exactly lost, but mired in dispute and institutional decline. Dawson would have agreed with such a perspective and presumably with the idea that "success breeds failure."

In sum, Markus seems to assume especially an early medieval Church and papacy more in control of European development and more triumphant than ever it was, and this becomes the basis for his not particularly accurate description of Dawson. Markus seems to be unaware of much recent scholarship on the early middle ages which stresses how much human experience varied across the continent, and how diverse Europe was.²³ So far as the middle ages were concerned, Dawson's ideas actually anticipated the views of some of the much more secular or laicist historians of the generation following him, men like Georges Duby, who also made the story of the middle ages center on continuing conflict, especially the struggle of certain pre-Christian ideals tenaciously maintained by the lay aristocracy against the attempts by the Church to change old understandings and practices of things like marriage. I have catalogued these struggles in some detail elsewhere.²⁴

Markus tends to view the period of the Constantinian settlement and the middle ages—in some ways all Church history until Vatican II—as a time of the triumph of a Church led by a strong papacy. This undifferentiated view, not unlike that of those today who view Jewish history always with an eye to the Holocaust, is fundamentally misleading in being teleologically driven by a fixed idea that radically underestimates the resistance through the centuries of all kinds of social structures to "manipulation from above," and then blames the papacy for all its failures to criticize radically such

²³See as an example of the new scholarship, Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History, 500–1000* (Oxford, 2007).

²⁴"Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court: Fifth through Eleventh Centuries," in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York, 2001), 146–212 at 165–68.

things as the presence of slavery in Christian society.²⁵ In the case of Jewish history, while no one should deny a persistent Christian anti-Judaism, this does not ineluctably lead to any particular result, let alone the Holocaust. Determinative are the actual circumstances of each age, what this or that particular party did to manipulate an always-there anti-Judaism. In the case of Christian history, no one particular person or institution is responsible for the deeds of “Western Christendom,” good or bad. Markus is absolutely right that the papacy has a special responsibility to engage in social criticism, but it takes hardly any knowledge of Church history to see that it has very frequently fulfilled this responsibility, just as it has frequently failed to extirpate this or that evil from society.

It is rather odd for Markus to write that “Late Antique Christianity had no legacy of reforming ideas to bequeath to a Church confident in its ability to mould secular society to serve its needs and purposes.”²⁶ There is a sense in which such a statement can be justified, if it means that the elaborate reform terminology and ideas of an Augustine, centered on the idea of *reformatio in melius* (“reform to the better”) as delineated by Gerhard Ladner, was lost in the early middle ages.²⁷ But the Carolingian period of the late eighth and ninth century was in fact full of a language of reform, now under the heading of *correctio*, used to promote all kinds of educational, legal, moral, and liturgical reforms.²⁸ Dawson details a good bit of this. And Christian leaders such as Alcuin (not discussed by Dawson in this regard, though he certainly could have been on Dawson’s principles), certain that religion must be freely chosen,

²⁵I use David Nirenberg’s searching criticism of a teleologically driven presentation of Jewish history in my “Setting the Boundaries: Early Medieval Reflections on Religious Toleration and their Jewish Roots,” *Hebraic Political Studies* 2 (2007): 164–92. Of the articles used in my study, the closing pages of an otherwise very interesting essay by Caroline Bynum, with their loose language about the sins of “Western Civilization” and Christianity in regard to the Jews, seem of the order of Daniel Goldhagen’s writings: See Bynum, “The Presence of Objects: Medieval Anti-Judaism in Modern Germany,” *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004): 1–32.

²⁶Markus, “Church Reform and Society in Late Antiquity,” 18.

²⁷Gerhard Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, rev. ed. (New York, 1967).

²⁸See my “St. Boniface and the *vita apostolica*,” *The American Benedictine Review* 31 (1980): 6–19.

took on the great Charlemagne in the matter of the forced conversion of the Saxons. For Markus to write, “[t]he emergence of an increasingly centralized ecclesiastical structure dominated by the Roman see deprived the Church of an element of an internal self-criticism that had been encouraged under its earlier condition” seriously fails to convey a sense of the weakness of the papacy both before and after the time of Gregory VII (1073–85), and the degree to which reformers like Alcuin, and later such reformers as the founders of Cluny, depended on what support the papacy could supply, even if largely moral. Dawson was in fact much more clear about such things than a critic such as Markus. It is almost bizarre for Markus to write that, in the early middle ages after the time of the rise of Islam in the seventh century, “The Western Church was deeply marred . . . by its triumph.”²⁹ This was a time when no European government, including the papacy, functioned very efficiently. Markus perhaps reveals his own agenda—and certainly his deeply flawed notion of an unchanging triumphant papacy—in the further comment that “The marks of triumph became permanent features of its entire future until the 1960s.”³⁰ That is, according to him pre-Vatican II history was of a piece until finally the Church was liberated from its monochromatic past by Vatican II. Dawson never descended to such simplicities.

★ ★ ★

So much for one recent critic of Dawson’s allegedly triumphalistic notion of Christian culture. Other criticisms have been made, including by myself. I do think that the social history practiced by the last two generations of historians has often achieved a richness in the portrayal of aspects of past times quite beyond that found in Dawson’s works. One may fault much of this newer history

²⁹Markus, “Church Reform and Society in Late Antiquity,” 18.

³⁰Ibid. Markus goes on to write that “[t]he tragedy of Western Christendom was its inability to find and its reluctance to seek . . . an external norm by which its triumph might be judged” (19) without specifying what such a norm might be. I am not at all denying that over the centuries many times the papacy failed to be sufficiently self-critical, but it is difficult to see how such a stance as Markus’ does not involve the Church being judged by the age, which has often resulted in the opposite of self-criticism, a Church conformed to the world.

for its often materialist premises, its disregard of high culture in favor of study of “daily life,” and its mis-description of matters intellectual and religious, but nevertheless we know much more about “total history” because of the rise of social history than we did before. The same may be said of such relatively new genres as sex, gender, and family history.³¹ That said, I still stand by my suggestion, in a comparison of Dawson’s *The Making of Europe* with a book of the same title written fifty years later by Robert Bartlett, not only that each book may be used as a foil for the other, but also that Dawson himself was always open to the study of what today is called “material culture,” and might well have appreciated Bartlett’s new interests in “society from the bottom up.”³²

In one respect, of course, the limitations of Dawson’s historiography are due simply to the differences between the work of a brilliant generalist and of more limited specialists. Nevertheless, in another earlier study I suggested that, though Dawson intentionally tried to separate himself from certain aspects of Romantic historiography still popular when he was a young man, in important ways he continued to think in Romantic categories.³³ I meant this as merely a descriptive comment, but found that in some quarters, “those are fighting words.” They do not need to be. In fact, one of Dawson’s permanent contributions may be precisely that he forces us to rethink our reflexive anti-Romanticism and to retrieve what is still viable in the Romantic project, albeit in a more sophisticated way that takes account of the sorts of objections I will be laying out here. This is a complicated question, and some elaboration is necessary.

Dawson’s early study of the work of the sociologists, precocious for a historian, left him with a permanent interest in the “Schau der Gestalt,” in his case the forms of society. His genius in

³¹In addition to my “Progeny, Faithfulness, Sacred Bond: Marriage in the Age of Augustine,” in *Christian Marriage*, ed. Olsen, 101–45, see my “Marriage, Feminism, Theology, and the New Social History: Dyan Elliott’s *Spiritual Marriage*,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 343–56.

³²Subtitle: *An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (New York, 1952), on which see Olsen, “The Changing Understanding of the Making of Europe.”

³³“The Maturity of Christian Culture: Some Reflections on the Views of Christopher Dawson,” in *The Dynamic Character of Christian Culture: Essays on Dawsonian Themes*, ed. Peter J. Cataldo (New York, 1984), 97–125.

being able in brief compass to delineate these “forms” resulted in a style of presentation that could be taken in by almost anyone. His idea was that the study of history should center on the study of culture, but in a quite specific sense. Usually, for obvious reasons, the presentation of history has been chronological. Especially the German-speaking Romantics tended also to believe that history can be divided into ages, each with its distinctive form and spirit. From their time until Dawson’s day the two ideas, the chronological and the Romantic, commonly combined so that a series of ages resulted: Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Romantic, Modern, and, if one now wishes to give shape to the void, Post-Modern. This approach has one great strength and several possible limitations. The strength is its association of the idea of form with the idea of culture, and we turn to this first.

On Aristotle’s definition of history as “the narration of singular events,” which admitted that poetry was more philosophical than history, fidelity to the singular often led nowhere philosophically, even though, arguably, the narration itself is a universal of a certain “artificial” sort—an idea that I will exploit below. The more singular a singular was, the less it could be compared to anything or any lesson drawn from it. The Romantic idea, which was that each age had its “spirit” or *zeitgeist*, followed Thucydides in looking for the universal in the particular, in contrast to a method based more on Aristotle’s definition of history. The great merit of this use of form in regard to culture is that it points us in quest of universal ways of understanding things embodied in the concrete.

I would stress that there was nothing new in the Romantic idea of “form.” What was new was its application to history and culture, and even this was not completely new. Many philosophies had employed an idea of form before the Romantics, but these philosophies generally had applied the term to individual objects, as “the form of the chair,” or used it as a synonym of “idea,” as in “the form of beauty.” But other, not fully developed, ideas of form, or rather of the subjects which might be understood to have form, long had been present. Presumably when an ancient Greek called a non-Greek a “barbarian,” he was defining that non-Greek negatively against Greek culture, and thus more speaking of what the barbarian was not than what he was. Still some minimal notion of cultural form must have been present. A somewhat fuller notion of cultural form is present in Herodotus’ treatment of the Egyptians and Persians. Though Herodotus’ interest usually was in specific cultural

practices, say in the areas of sex or religion, he does seem to have practiced a kind of “ethno-history” not completely dissimilar from what sociology would eventually consider to be the study of culture. Again, when in the twelfth century Abelard tied his intellectual quickness to his being from Picardy, a kind of cultural characterization was present, faulty though it may be as an explanation. When about the same time many noted the Germans’ love for drinking, an observation at least as old as Tacitus had become a commonplace claiming to describe a whole people.

A number of the examples just given describe popular or “low” culture, practices of daily life which a people share without necessarily reflecting on them, or even being aware of them. So we might say that long before the Romantics some idea of cultural form(s), high and low, had been present. What was quite new about the Romantics was their sustained attention to cultural “form” or *Kultur*, mostly high but sometimes low, to describe the characteristics of periods and cultures in a more than passing way. In this they actually anticipated the sociologists, so that when Dawson sat at the feet of the sociologists he was also taking in the thought patterns of the Romantics.

Of course, there is an obvious problem with understanding Dawson as in any way a Romantic, since he more than once attacked the Romantic historiography of his day, especially as it had treated the middle ages. He did not, for instance, like a marked tendency of his times to treat Church history as (simply) the history of popes and councils, that is, as another form of the history of high culture or the history of ideas. He insisted on the fact of “Christian culture,” one specific form of his general idea that culture is embodied religion. If for instance the subject is Christianity in the middle ages, the historian has to engage not simply in drawing up an ecclesiastical narrative of popes and councils, a kind of updated form of ancient political history, but in delineating all the forms Christianity had historically taken at this time (all the ways it had been embodied), architectural, artistic, liturgical, literary, legal, material, social, even geographic or topological (the ways Christianity had changed the land- or urban-scape).³⁴ This Dawson had learned from

³⁴Starting with the age of Constantine, all parts of the middle ages are now being studied with a view to how Christianity impacted especially the form of cities: see above, n. 11.

the sociologists. “World-view” is expressed more in the objects, intellectual and material, a society produces than in a narrative of its history. The point then is that it is nothing against the argument that Dawson shared important commonalities with the Romantics to point out that he also criticized their traditions. This is not to say, of course, that these commonalities are simply a bad thing: otherwise, we would have to reject Dawson’s key notion that religion is embodied culture. Romanticism is alive to the presence of the universal in the particular, and that is a helpful intuition. Nevertheless, a retrieval of this intuition must deal in an appropriately sophisticated manner with the following difficulties.

First, to say that each person has his own biography or way of being an individual is something of an understatement. In fact, I agree with one person on this matter, another on that matter, a third person on a third matter. If, in the manner of modern logic diagramming classes of objects, we were to draw circles to show what each figure in a society shares with some other figure, the diagrams would become so complicated, the circles so numerous, that soon summary of all the overlapping relations would be impossible. Even if our “society” consisted of only a hundred people who agreed on a large number of things, we would shortly find it impossible to plot out all the subgroups formed by the things only some of them agreed about. Time might be money for the merchants, but not for the monks, in our sample. Even if we look at a matter of material culture, say how a society builds its houses, which we might suspect “gives itself away” more than its ideas of truth or beauty do, we will find common but probably not universal patterns, especially as we descend in our descriptions through what the various social classes build.

Not surprisingly, the typical temptation in writing cultural history has been a kind of fudging in which, even if the historian acknowledges the difficulties present in generalization, he nevertheless goes beyond his evidence. For example, it has been suggested that when Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, he put into words the fairly inchoate views of many. With the *Comedy* before them, these people recognized in it things they had been trying to say. The *Comedy* represents a moment of clarification for the society as a whole, or for a sizeable portion of it: Dante’s work “gave form” to his society. Of course one can debate whether this is really true, or how far it is true. Similarly, it has been suggested that though the word *natura* had a great variety of meanings in the ancient world,

there was nevertheless a widespread and widely-understood “natural law” teaching, found in one form in St. Paul’s discussion in Romans 1–2 of “the law written on your hearts,” which if not precisely Stoic, expressed a kind of popular Stoicism. Again, one can debate whether this is really true, and suspect that references to the natural law were as confusing or unclear to most then as they are today. There actually is evidence that this suspicion is well grounded.³⁵

It is no wonder then, that those in an English empirical or nominalist tradition tend to be deeply suspicious of what they regard, with some justification, as the seeping generalizations of a good deal of Germanic thought, which to the empiricists tends to co-opt everything under forms more general than what actually characterizes the people of a society, failing to acknowledge the great variations between individuals. It is not that there are no shared ideas or practices within any society that could be used to describe it as a culture; it is that, whatever the idea or practice, it almost certainly does not in fact state something universally and identically present as such in every member of a society, only something commonly found in it.

The empiricists have a point, inasmuch as Romanticism as a matter of fact did often demand a type of unity, system, pattern, and intelligibility of the world and history that these cannot give. At some point the honest man, especially if he is a historian, stops with “fragments of philosophy,” the things that clearly can be established. Though he values system and internal coherence, he prefers “I don’t know” to synthesis that ignores or destroys some of the evidence. He wants to speak of such things as “German national character” or “the Renaissance view of the world,” but if too many exceptions pile up, he desists, or acknowledges that, though there may have been subcultures, it is difficult to speak of one overarching cultural form. In sum, there is nothing intrinsically wrong about the Romantic instinct to delineate *Kultur* and to find what views groups shared, but this instinct must be practiced ascetically in great sobriety. Rarely has this happened, but arguably Dawson had a good sense of limits. He was capable of delineating complicated matters in a clear way without habitual over-generalization. Where does this leave us?

³⁵For what is said about the natural law see my “The Natural Law: The First Grace,” forthcoming in *Communio*.

We have just seen that the typical temptation of the Romantic view of history is to make too many people hold too similar things. One tendency of historical writing since Dawson's death has been to criticize terms such as "the Enlightenment" as giving false concretion, resulting in this case in an under-appreciation of the variety of eighteenth-century thought.³⁶ All the categorizing terms used by Dawson—Renaissance, Reformation, Romanticism—are open to such criticism. Nevertheless, I do think the exploration of cultural forms worthwhile. In one sense, all we can do is note this typical temptation to reify and in the process to too quickly brush away the great variety of difference of actual life: generalization at the level of cultural forms often—though not necessarily—involves fudging about the complexity of any actual society. At the same time, though, we must refrain from concluding that there is no "whole" to be grasped, only commonalities: however difficult something like cultural form may be to discern in any given case, in principle a case can be made for its existence and its transcendence of nominalistic categories.

Once in discussing the question of how far apart the worlds of the medieval peasant and aristocrat were, Marion Montgomery suggested to me that we must assume that, as in the American South as Montgomery understands it, the peasants (slaves), though probably not able to articulate their lords' (masters') world-views fully, would have largely assented to these views. At the time of my conversation with Montgomery this in fact was a burning question in medieval studies. On the one side was the first generation of social historians, drawing a firm line between the world of high culture and that of low culture, and arguing that these hardly touched. Obviously such historians would not have been taken with Montgomery's claim. Today medieval social historians are more likely to be sympathetic to the views of John Van Engen, who stresses the ways in which all the social classes lived in the same world in the middle ages, speaking to one another and coming into contact with each other. I think by analogy of my own times, to, for instance, the difference between the discussion found in a *Communio* editorial board meeting, and the

³⁶Already discussed in my "American Culture and Liberal Ideology," 705. I go on to suggest that when Dawson used such terms as "the Enlightenment," he often went on to specify principles or ideas that he was intending by these terms, as the ideas of limited government and natural law.

talk at the local tavern (until, of course, the editors show up). Although I am inclined to Van Engen's views, the theoretical issues they raise are enormously complex. Keeping in mind that such questions are never definitively resolved, I would like to address some of these issues in what follows.

★ ★ ★

I would like to suggest a way of thinking about cultural form which, though not explicitly found in Dawson's writings, and heavily indebted to *Communio* forms of analysis, seems to me true to Dawson's fundamental aspiration while taking the problems raised in the last section into account. Hopefully this discussion will illustrate the possibilities in continuing exploration of Dawson's thought, his enduring worth.

The situation with culture seems parallel to the situation with the preeminent expression of culture, language. Just as within a single linguistic area usage can be mapped so that one can see the various shadings a single word can possess, shadings which nevertheless do not prevent one from seeing also what is common in a word's usage over the entire linguistic area, one might think of "cultures" as artificial (artificed) universals in which man's social nature is historically expressed in a given time and place. These artificial universals are conventional, but in the special way that language is. Though *which* language we use is the result of history, *that* we use language is a result of our having a human nature. So it is with culture. Culture is always conventional, but its artificial universality is quasi-natural, just as writers from Aristotle to Aquinas had spoken of a habit being so rooted as to have become "second nature."

There will inevitably be a complex set of reciprocal relations between a culture and the sub-cultures which compose it. These relations will, to a certain extent, be in principle susceptible of a genetic analysis (e.g. how "hip-hop" moved from the ghetto into the mainstream). That said, genetic analysis will always presuppose apprehension of something like a form at every level of the analysis, hence, at every level of "sub" (e.g., one will have to be able to recognize "hip-hop" as a distinctive style). This "form" is a meaning at least implicitly acknowledged by whoever happens to belong to the relevant (sub)culture ("hip-hoppers" in this case). The point is

that this meaning has a certain causal valence discernible in the plausibility or persuasiveness of this meaning, to its being accepted within a group as an account of what makes the group distinctive. Note that, whereas when we were discussing the English empirical approach to history above, our stance was implicitly outside the phenomena to be described, here what we are looking for is a group's understanding of itself.

As in any linguistic field, change is constantly occurring in culture. By definition this cannot be so great that no one is able to recognize or characterize the cultural or sub-cultural forms one wishes to analyze. The best way of understanding this change is in terms of tradition, that is, of discontinuity and continuity in their complex interplay: it is not so much meaning by itself that changes as it is the position of the group/members of the group vis-à-vis meaning that gets revised over time. Cultural innovations spread by imitation, but this imitation rarely, if ever, works in a purely linear fashion, but involves a curious kind of simultaneity that seems best understood in terms of a shared perception of the persuasiveness of a given meaning. Perhaps the best way to account for this is by thinking about how cultural innovation as such is a structure of human nature, so that, while no innovation is simply identical with "what is natural," any innovation is likely to capture something of human nature in its concrete unfolding.

Some elaboration is in order. Though we have already agreed with the English nominalists that there is in Romanticism a danger always present of too great generalization, we must not concede too much to the nominalists. Neither should we say that Dawson was essentially compromised by false generalization. The patterns history and culture take are not simply "in our heads." Even when the research methods of one generation introduce considerations not before contemplated, any increased differentiation must imply retention of a distinction between whole and parts. The new differentiations can only be seen if viewed at least implicitly against a background or sense of the whole. This in turn involves two things, a nature which is the whole in relation to which new differentiations are placed, and a viewer who shares a human nature

with all other viewers, and thus can communicate its discoveries to them.

It is natural for man to have a culture. This does not mean that any person's *de facto* culture is identical with nature, just that it is one configuration nature might take or be shaped to. All culture exists in the interplay between two poles, the constants which define any man (human nature), and the specific forms that define this man, the specific culture(s) to which he belongs and the identity which he has. Interesting things follow from the existence of this polar interplay. First, though there is a tendency to individual variety, this cannot be endless, or we would not have any actual *de facto* culture. There must always be a context formed by the interplay of material constraints and meanings, in which individual varieties become recognizable as varieties. Again, the situation of culture is like that of language. The unity of a language does not demand that exactly the same language exist everywhere, or that everyone speak exactly the same form of it. It is sufficient that a speaker recognize the language as "his," that speakers of the language recognize it as "theirs." It is the same with culture. To say that various individuals share a culture does not mean that they participate in it in exactly the same way. Just as the Chinese peasant may recognize that the Chinese scholar is speaking Chinese, but not a completely familiar form of it, so the Austrian laborer may not be familiar with the whole range of Austrian literature, but still think himself "Austrian." Such a way of understanding the relationship of the individual to culture helps avoid the nominalism which may still be present in my earlier use of the diagrams of modern logic to classify objects in search of the existence of sub-cultures. We do not want to know simply what views various people share, but how they understand themselves in relation to their context or surrounding culture(s).

To be initiated into a culture or sub-culture is to be initiated into its shared narrative or meanings, into a context which gives me meaning. This meaning cannot be wholly arbitrary or invented, that is, there must be something natural in culture which speaks to my human nature. Even if the culture I am contemplating joining is the Hells Angels, there must be something about it which appeals to me as a human, perhaps the very fact of belonging to a group. Thus every culture has its constructed aspects, but also its natural aspects. Although causal relations may flow back and forth, nature must have a certain priority here, for ultimately (unless we are forced to belong to a culture, and over much of history there was a large measure of

compulsion in all this) we must find this or that cultural pattern attractive or persuasive or we would not join it or identify with it. Human nature or the *forma humana* has its own *telos*, and this can not respond if the forms of culture are simply random, that is below the threshold of intelligibility, not fit to man: they must express something intelligible and persuasive. All this is to say that a strict empiricism is always wrong, because without trans-individual form historical research loses its object.

This emphasis on nature, of course, does not mean that the form of which we speak is “Platonic,” if by that we mean a form derived from another world which dictates how historical development is to be, just as it cannot be “nominalist,” if by that we mean a form (here, “generalization”) raised on heaps of facts, which form in no way is actually present in those facts. We need to find a view that avoids both extremes without vacuous compromise. Such a view, I believe, consists in seeing that nature and culture are always linked. To say that nature and culture are always linked, moreover, is to say that nature and freedom constitute an inseparable polarity. Finally, culture is as it were what that interplay looks like in action. Culture indeed is the manifestation of the *logos* of nature as at once prior and posterior to freedom, which is itself inseparable from that *logos*. There is cultural form precisely because nature is historical, even as history is also anchored in nature. Let us spell out a bit more what this means.

★ ★ ★

Culture manifests the *forma humana* as at the same time supra-temporal and temporal, at once preceding human freedom “and” waiting to be fully revealed in freedom’s full flowering, as itself a dual unity of the perennial and the novel. The simultaneity of the already given and the not yet is summed up in the word “finality” or *telos*. Nature informs by at once preceding freedom and depending on freedom for its manifestation, which is always novel. Culture is just what that preceding-cum-being manifested-by looks like in the concrete. Culture is how nature precedes and is manifested by freedom, and so culture is a form that informs, but by being as much something that depends on freedom as it is simultaneously the form structuring it. Nature and freedom, nature and culture are not two

things that we have somehow to relate, but one thing existing in the interplay of inseparable though distinct poles.

What this implies, then, is something like the following. Form is prior enough to inform inventiveness and variety and posterior enough to account for the “unscripted” nature of inventiveness and variety, without reducing that “unscriptedness” to mere chance. Rather, the unscriptedness of things is itself part of how form informs by liberating freedom. Though in obvious ways we are here using a *Communio*-like language—notice the increase of hyphens—to elucidate the nature of the culture-embodiment-religion which is Dawson’s subject, this approach does not require an appeal to Providence. It works with intra-worldly causes (=human nature), it does not entail any progressive sense of the March of History, and it does not call for downplaying the role of evil or chance, though evil and chance cannot in this view be the *per essentiam* source of anything. What all this unpacks is that Dawson’s notion of Christian culture depends on the possibility of meaning exercising historical causality and, therefore, on the possibility of formal analysis of cultures. Dawson’s method, updated and laid bare in the manner done here, is a most salutary challenge to the kind of nominalism found everywhere in the historical profession, and not just in England.

To close by returning to the question of why we need Dawson, let me integrate what has been written here into what I have written elsewhere about other aspects of Dawson’s thought which seem to me also to be of permanent value. First, it is not just Dawson’s ideas about culture in general, and Christian culture in particular, that continue to be fertile, but his ideas about how specifically the West was formed. Thus we have mentioned that one of France’s premier contemporary thinkers, Rémi Brague, in important ways continues Dawson’s views.³⁷ Brague’s idea that Western Civilization is essentially Roman, both formed as Rome was through an open-ended series of appropriations of earlier civilizations and also taking Rome as a point of continuing

³⁷See above, n. 6.

comparison, is very much in agreement with Dawson's observation of the layered nature of European culture, the way in which Europe or Christendom appropriated and put to new uses the various cultures it came in contact with, which, we might say, came to compose ever-developing, ever-changing Europe itself.

Second, if we truly understand Dawson's way of viewing culture, what he has to say about education gains depth. It is not just that he desires an education which communicates the nature of Christian culture. He wants an education which, by concentrating on the idea of culture, deepens our sense of education as an attempt to "know thyself," the self here being one formed in the dialogue with nature which forms culture.

Third, the study of the sweep of Christian culture enables us to see our own "little" American culture more clearly. Without the study of history we are almost inevitably provincial, taking our part of world history as somehow definitive or "all one needs to know." Only by study of history as culture can we come to understand the specific assumptions behind, say, the American liberal sense of what desirable Church-State relations look like.³⁸ Dawson thought the United States in one sense to be a distillation of what the West had become since the Enlightenment. By this "he seems quite consistently to have had . . . in mind a set of principles as they stood in the late eighteenth century: the doctrine of natural law and natural rights, the idea of limited or constitutional government, and that at which both aimed, the liberty of the individual to organize his own life."³⁹ The separation of Church and State had in America been intended to ensure religious freedom, and was addressed to America's peculiar composition from the beginning of a number of religions trying to live in close proximity. But humans are by nature religious animals, and tend to think of proper religion as filling all life. Thus in an obvious sense it is somewhere between difficult and impossible to create a neutral

³⁸I have treated this subject in such studies as "The Meaning of Christian Culture: An Historical View," *Catholicism and Secularization in America: Essays on Nature, Grace, and Culture*, ed. David L. Schindler (Notre Dame, Ind., 1990), 98–130, and "Separating Church and State," *Faith and Reason* 20 (1994): 403–25, and it is one of the topics treated in a book manuscript I have prepared, "The Turn to Transcendence: The Role of Religion in the Twenty-First Century."

³⁹Olsen, "American Culture and Liberal Ideology," 705.

ground between religion and politics. The result of this, Dawson clearly saw, was a secularization of life in which “reason” becomes the sole possessor of the public sphere and religion is pushed to the margins. I have worked his analysis of such matters out in various earlier writings, and need not repeat this here. But one of the things American history is about is acceptance of or opposition to this logic of secularization, about which Dawson wrote many pages of enduring analysis. Only by the study of history, ideally with Dawson as one of our guides, can we understand such processes and come to imagine alternatives to what otherwise we, because immersed in our own culture, might take either as “the way things are,” or “the way things ought be.” □

GLENN W. OLSEN is professor of history at the University of Utah.