

# Dawson's Creed

The Catholic historian is all but ignored by today's academics, but his providentially informed work will outlast them all.

By Dermot Quinn

HISTORIANS COME IN ALL different shapes and sizes. The well-known ones, those mass-market storytellers we invite into our homes by way of television or bestseller, display enough variety to suit most tastes. There's David McCullough, courtly and urbane as a Renaissance bishop; Ken Burns, bearded and earnest in the required PBS manner; Michael Beschloss, bronzed and well-coiffed as a matinee star; Simon Schama, smooth and subtle. If the past is a foreign country, these are its friendly, unthreatening ambassadors, anecdotal, unflappable, fairly bursting with middlebrow sagacity. They are the bland leading the bland, and none of us is much worse for their agreeable, undemanding guidance.

Away from the cameras, less glamorous historians play their part in making the past present—graduate students, assistant professors, archivists, librarians. These are the meek who will not inherit the earth but who labor mightily hard to understand it. Not as famous or as well paid as the big shots, they are actually more important. Without them, our civic life would be a wasteland of forgetfulness, a cultural desert. They tell us who we are by telling us where we came from. They unsettle our pieties, question our assumptions. To be sure, strange ideas sometimes circulate when three or four of them get together. Their politics are often more to the Left than the Right. On the whole, though, these are serious people who

demand serious attention. Spare them a thought at Barnes and Noble. They know more than you think.

Why is it, then, that for all the variety, for all the different voices, something is not right with the way we do history in this country today? You can sniff it in the air—the divorce between the profession and the public; the sheer venom of various ideological disputes; the unending battle between naïve readings of American history in which all is white and critical ones in which all is black; the argument, increasingly tiresome, between “history” and “herstory”; the fact that readers want stories and professors refuse to tell them. When Napoleon defined history as “lies agreed upon,” he could not have known, 200 years later, that we would not even agree upon the lies. The chattering classes are chattering themselves to death and, increasingly, no one is listening.

One sign of the problem is that the work of Christopher Dawson is nowhere to be seen in this wilderness of choice. Born in 1889 and dying in 1970, Dawson has disappeared from the historical profession as if he had never graced it, and this says more about it than it says about him. He was, after all, one of those rare figures who bridged the gap between “serious” and “popular” history, a gap he considered insulting and designed to keep the public in its place. He was also, indisputably, a giant in his field: first holder of the Chauncey Stillman chair of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard; Gif-

ford Lecturer at Edinburgh University not once but twice; prolific and powerful investigator of the relationship between religion and culture; editor of the *Dublin Review*. In his day, Dawson's works sold in the hundreds of thousands, and they were serious books for serious people, not the kind of pabulum that is popular today. Along with Chesterton, he was one of the best known Catholic converts of the middle 20th century. His tutor at Oxford ranked him alongside Lord Acton in historical genius. Cardinal Cushing of Boston, admittedly not a member of American Historical Association, called him “one of those rare human spirits who stands back from the world in which he lives and takes the true measure of time and man.”

This Christopher Dawson was a deeper thinker, a more compelling intellect, a more morally urgent voice than almost all of his contemporaries put together. Yet on whose syllabus is he found today? Have our senior professors heard of him? Our undergraduates? Our literary editors? I doubt it. That is their loss, and ours. If the profession were to rediscover him, it might rediscover itself.

Part of his obscurity, to be fair, has to do with his personality. Dawson was an English academic of a certain kind—tweedy, bespectacled, pipe-smoking, shy. His students found him friendly but formidable, impossibly well read and hard to keep up with. His readers

admired his work but found it slightly Victorian, the prose old-fashioned, the high-mindedness daunting, the scholarship monumental. There was a touch of the wing-collar about it. In private Dawson was gentle, humorous, a little melancholy. In print he could be fierce and unforgiving. Like Samuel Johnson, he argued for victory, and like Johnson, he usually succeeded. If he has been forgotten, it is because many of us are embarrassed by his brilliance and unsettled by his zeal. We would rather keep him at a distance than deal with his quietly devastating intellectual honesty.

But there is more to his current demise than that. Dawson's Englishness gives us a clue to his scholarly temperament, and that temperament, in turn, helps us understand his strange neglect. Landscape meant much to him—the Yorkshire of his growing up, the Winchester and Oxford of his early manhood, the “wild moorland country” he returned to as a fledgling scholar and a family man. For years he was a private scholar and country squire working away from the company of others, seeking solace in the stark beauty of the fell. He could see in that wildness a world of myth and legend, a world “half history and half poetry,” a world fully alive. “No one,” he wrote, “could owe more to childhood impressions than I did. It was then I acquired my love of history, my interest in the differences of cultures and my sense of the importance of religion in human life, as a massive, objective, unquestioned power that entered into everything and impressed its mark on the external as well as the internal world.” Churches and tombs and crosses were his first books. Marks on a landscape marked him for life.

His life, in fact, was devoted to understanding those early apprehensions of a powerful and still living past. His books suggest the theme. *The Age of the Gods* appeared in 1928, *Progress*

*and Religion* in 1929, *The Making of Europe* in 1932, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement* in 1933, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* in 1950, *Understanding Europe* in 1952, *Medieval Essays* in 1954, *The Dynamics of World History* in 1957. In *Enquiries Into Religion and Culture*, published in 1933, he spelled it out:

The central conviction which has dominated my mind ever since I began to write is the conviction that the society or culture which has lost its spiritual roots is a dying culture, however prosperous it may appear externally. Consequently the problem of social survival is not only a political or economic one; it is above all things religious, since it is in religion that the ultimate spiritual roots both of society and the individual are to be found.

There you have it in a nutshell—what Dawson believed, and why, perhaps, he is so alien to the historical profession today. The mystery is not so mysterious after all. Religion is the question and, for

TO SOME HISTORIANS, **DAWSON HARDLY SEEMS AN HISTORIAN AT ALL**, BUT, INSTEAD, AN ODD MIXTURE OF **PHILOSOPHER, ANTHROPOLOGIST, SOCIOLOGIST, AND SEER**.

Dawson, the answer. He believed in certain notions that many historians nowadays find hard to swallow—that there is a human nature; that there is a fixed self; that there are moral as well as material differences between cultures and civilizations; that every historical judgment is a form of moral judgment; that man is a profoundly spiritual being whose search for transcendence is more than the mere sacralizing of economic or social necessities. Such views are uncomfortably insistent, full of self-certainty. They also happen to be right.

But plenty of historians take religion perfectly seriously as personal belief or as object of inquiry, devoting their lives to one or other or sometimes both. Why, then, is Dawson discarded by them? The point is that, to some historians, Dawson hardly seems an historian at all, but, instead, an odd mixture of philosopher, anthropologist, sociologist, and seer. His very versatility is a strike against him. By defying categories, he makes it easier for others to dismiss him as a dilettante. He was not that, but borrowing from many disciplines, he arrived at the truth by way of a vast range of scholarship. Nowadays, when “fields” get narrower and narrower—so that they begin to resemble miserable little tufts—there is not much room for renaissance men.

For some critics, though, even those who acknowledge his learning, the more serious charge against Dawson is that he was simply a propagandist. To the otherwise intelligent Norman Davies, Dawson's “Catholic thesis of history” (whatever that is) fails “to illuminate the pluralism of recent centuries.” One wonders if Davies has actually read him. To

the often foolish Hayden White, Dawson prefers the “sedatives” of religion to the certainties of science, an argument so silly as not to be taken seriously. And to other historians, echoing the charge of dilettantism, Dawson was not really an historian at all but a subtle kind of theologian who cloaked his theodicy in a smattering of history to give it pith. None of these criticisms has merit, and some are demonstrably absurd, yet they linger, faintly unpleasant, like last year's scent. Modernists despise Dawson for his anti-modernism, despite the fact that

he was, in certain ways, strikingly modern in his methods. Postmodernists deplore his authorial confidence, never pausing for a moment to listen to their own. Rationalists reject his religion, generally in the most irrational way imaginable.

And it is Dawson's religion, of course, that is at the back of it all—the proof of an intellect seriously compromised, the sign of a good man gone wrong. But there was nothing simple or naïve about Dawson's religiosity, nothing that smoothed away historical complexity, nothing that reduced the past to a simple plot with a happy ending. On the contrary, if you want to hear the multiple voices of the past, the sheer clamor of humanity, listen to man's quest for the divine. For Dawson, that quest was the one, overwhelming fact—the “massive, objective reality”—that gave history its meaning. The spiritual element came first. Everything else followed. Civilizations rose or fell because of it. The Marxists were simply wrong to give priority to economics:

The experience of Mohammed in the cave of Mount Hira, when he saw human life as transitory as the beat of a gnat's wing in comparison with the splendor and power of the Divine Unity, has shaped the existence of a great part of the human race ever since. For a people who has heard thrice a day for a thousand years the voice of the muezzin proclaiming the unity of God cannot live the same life or see with the same eyes as the Hindu who worships the life of nature in its countless forms and sees the external world as the manifestation of the interplay of cosmic sexual forces.

Go back even farther. The ultimate foundation of primitive religion was not belief in ghosts or mythical beings “but

an obscure and confused intuition of transcendent being—an ‘ocean of supernatural energy.’” Early man was not a noble savage because he was not a savage at all:

The ultimate aims which the hunter hoped to secure were no doubt predominantly practical—success in hunting and success in war—but the means employed were of a distinctly religious character—prayer and meditation, asceticism and withdrawal, humility and faith...

There was something more foundational than economics, something deeper than the struggle of the classes. That something was religion, the basis of all culture and ground of every civilization. The heart is restless until it rests in Thee.

Without falling into circularity, Dawson could see this religious instinct at work in multiple ways, many of them unexpected. Even the most indifferent among us, those who think themselves above such things, can succumb to it. That is why people who would never be caught in church will happily stand for an anthem or swear to obey the law or whisper in awe at a parchment or salute a commander in chief. Even Marxists march before their priests. Scientists worship Science. These efforts at transcendence, these attempts to ritualize the ordinary and make it extraordinary, are tributes paid by the secular world to the sacred. If you can't have true religion, you make do with a false one.

And there are, of course, plenty of false religions to go around. Dawson identified at least three—Democracy, Socialism, and Nationalism:

Democracy bases its appeal on the sacredness of the People—the consecration of Folk; socialism on the sacredness of Labour—the conse-

cration of work; and nationalism on the sacredness of the Fatherland—the consecration of place. These concepts still arouse a genuinely religious emotion, though the emotion has no basis in transcendent religious values or sanctions. It is a religious emotion divorced from religious belief...

Marxism, of course, was a fourth. “Behind the hard rational surface of Karl Marx's materialist interpretation of history ... there burns the flame of an apocalyptic vision.” The bearded prophet of the British Museum borrowed freely from ethical principles of a Christianity whose metaphysical principles he thoroughly despised. And then, completing the theft, he turned the Dictatorship of the Proletariat into the Second Coming. If you want an opiate, try reading *Das Kapital*.

Dawson was thus a superb historian of religious emotion and religious belief. He knew his Marx and his Mark. That is why we need to reread him. If nothing else, it might moderate our desire for modern messiahs. And those messiahs do not flourish only in Moscow or Beijing. They can crop up anywhere. Historians for Obama—and Obama for Obama—please note.

We need, though, to do more than reread Dawson. We might also acquire some of his moral sensibility. Dawson's critics were half-right. He did have a preference for the Middle Ages. He did think, along with Goethe, that Christianity is the mother tongue of Europe. He did regret many features of modernity—its vulgarity, its hubris, its individualism, its greed. He did think that the age of the masses was worse than the age of the Mass. He knew, above all, that everything we thought would make us happy has made us sad. “No one can look at the history of western civilization during the present century without feeling dismayed at the

spectacle of what modern man has done with his immense resources of new knowledge and new wealth and new power," he wrote in *Understanding Europe*. "Not only have we failed to realize the ideals of the nineteenth century, we are all more or less conscious of worse dangers to come—greater and more destructive wars, more ruthless forms of despotism, more drastic suppression of human rights." And, he concluded, "whatever may be the ultimate cause of this crisis, it is certain that it is a spiritual one, since it represents the failure of civilized man to control the forces he has created."

These were not the complaints of a crank or an elitist. To the contrary, they were grounded, as was all of Dawson's work, on a compelling vision of man as a material and spiritual being, a natural and supernatural creation, a citizen of this world and the next. His admiration for the great English poet William Langland makes the point:

For Langland, the other world is ever present in every human relationship, and every man's daily life is organically bound up with the life of the church. ... He realized more clearly than the poets and more intensely than the philosophers that religion was not a particular way of life but the way of all life, and that the divine love which is 'the leader of the Lord's folk of heaven' is also the law of the life upon earth...

This is not "scientific" history. This is not "objective" history. This is not, in a way, history at all. But it is a statement about the past, and the present, that happens to be true.

And so, in the end, Dawson does have a "Catholic thesis of history," a distinctive, even denominational, point of view. But it is not the thesis his critics think. He was not claiming, as a Catholic, to know more about the ways of God than

his critics. He was claiming to know less. What he did not understand about the past was more significant than what he did understand. At the heart of it, he said, was an "irreducible element of mystery." "All our destinies are interwoven," the theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar wrote, echoing an idea from St. Augustine, "and until the last of us has lived, the significance of the first cannot be finally clear."

Dawson was such an Augustinian. He knew that in its deepest sense History is a meditation not about the meaning of the past but about the nature of Time. The historian without metaphysics is no historian at all. He is a person with only half a language—all words and no grammar, or all syntax and no sense. Eternity makes him feel uncomfortable. He

would rather deal with the causes of the First World War.

That is why Dawson needs to be rediscovered—and will probably not be. He makes too many demands. He tells us what we do not want to hear. He reminds historians, in every possible way, of their limitations as well as their strengths. But if we are serious we should give him a second look. When the McCulloughs and the Beschlosses have disappeared, Dawson will still be there, reminding us of the words of his contemporary, Father Bede Jarrett: "Life is eternal, and love is immortal, and death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing save the limitation of our sight." ■

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# New War Order

How Panama set the course for post-Cold War foreign policy

By Ted Galen Carpenter

FOR A FLEETING MOMENT 20 years ago, the United States had the chance to become a normal nation again. From World War II through the collapse of European communism in 1989, America had been in a state of perpetual war, hot or cold. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall, all of that could have changed. There were no more monsters to destroy, no Nazi war machine or global communist conspiracy. For the first time in half a century, the industrialized world was at peace.

Then in December 1989, America went to war again—this time not against Hitler or Moscow's proxies but with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. Tensions between George H.W. Bush's administration and Noriega's government had been mounting for some time and climaxed when a scuffle with Panamanian troops left an American military officer dead. On Dec. 20, U.S. forces moved to oust and arrest Noriega. Operation Just Cause, as the invasion was called, came less than a month after the Berlin Wall fell, and it set America on a renewed path of intervention. The prospect of reducing American military involvement in other nations' affairs slipped away, thanks to the precedent set in Panama.

How real was the opportunity to change American foreign policy at that point? Real enough to worry the political class. Wyoming Sen. Malcolm Wallop lamented in 1989 that there was growing pressure to cut the military budget and that Congress was being overwhelmed by a "1935-style isolationism." But the invasion of Panama signaled that Washington was not going to

pursue even a slightly more restrained foreign policy.

That the U.S. would topple the government of a neighbor to the south was hardly unprecedented, of course. The United States had invaded small Caribbean and Central American countries on numerous occasions throughout the 20th century. Indeed, before the onset of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy in the 1930s, Washington routinely overthrew regimes it disliked.

During the Cold War, however, such operations always had a connection to the struggle to keep Soviet influence out of the Western Hemisphere. The CIA-orchestrated coup in Guatemala in 1954 and the military occupations of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Grenada in 1983 all matched that description. Whatever other motives may have been involved, the Cold War provided the indispensable justification for intervention. And for all the rhetoric about democracy and human rights that U.S. presidents employed during the struggle against communism, there was no indication that Washington would later revert to the practice of coercing Latin American countries merely, in Woodrow Wilson's infamous words, to teach those societies "to elect good men." Thus the invasion of Panama seemed a noticeable departure. Odious though he may have been, Noriega was never a Soviet stooge.

The motives that President Bush cited for the Panama intervention foreshadowed the rationales for nation-building and so-called humanitarian missions that would recur frequently over the next two decades. Among other goals,

the president said, the invasion aimed to "defend democracy in Panama." He expressed hope "that the people of Panama will put this dark chapter of dictatorship behind them and move forward as citizens of a democratic Panama." Bush emphasized that "the Panamanian people want democracy, peace, and a chance for better life in dignity and freedom. The people of the United States seek only to support them in pursuit of these noble goals"—apparently with U.S. troops, if necessary.

Questions immediately arose in the media and elsewhere as to whether the Panama mission was an isolated example—or whether it was a template for a new American global strategy. *Time* correspondent George J. Church asked the question that was on many minds: "Does this suggest a new post-cold war foreign policy that casts the U.S. as a different kind of global policeman, acting to save democracy rather than to stop Soviet expansionism?" He noted that administration officials "affirm that Bush is showing a new willingness to use American military power to further U.S. interests that have little or nothing to do with communism."

The worrisome question was how those "U.S. interests" would be defined. An answer came less than a year later, in an area far removed from the Western Hemisphere, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The Bush administration's initial reaction seemed surprisingly restrained. Secretary of State James Baker reportedly quipped to his cabinet colleagues that it "appeared that the sign on the [Middle East] gas station