THE CRISIS OF WESTERN EDUCATION
THE WORKS OF CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

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Christopher Dawson

THE CRISIS OF WESTERN EDUCATION

with an introduction by Glenn W. Olsen

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Christopher Dawson (1889–1970) was of such reputation that when Harvard University established the Chauncey Stillman Chair of Roman Catholic Studies, he was chosen as its first occupant (1958–62). Before teaching at Harvard, Dawson, an English convert to Catholicism, had not previously visited the United States. A mature scholar in his sixties, by this time he had published many books and articles on a wide range of topics, but he was best known for a series of books on the role of religion in world history. While at Harvard he was sometimes asked for his opinion of American education and its prospects, especially of American Catholic education. One result was the present book, published first in 1961 and periodically republished since that time. This book was addressed to all who were interested in the reform of education and was praised by many non-Catholics. On the one hand, Dawson thought the prospects for educational reform particularly promising in the United States; on the other he saw serious problems that would have to be overcome.

Dawson’s analysis began with an overview of the history of education. He immediately advances one of his basic themes, “enculturation.” The idea that culture is embodied religion runs through Dawson’s writings. According to this view, every culture in its origins has religion at its center, and we may speak of culture as a kind of enfleshment of religion over time. Culture is the sum of the ways in which some religion becomes embodied in material forms and patterns of life. Education then is the means by which this social inheritance is communicated to the young, enculturating them in it. It is both “high” and “low,” both idea and folkway.

From the ancient world through the Enlightenment, formal educa-
tion was a privilege of the few, but all were in some sense educated, that is, enculturated, typically through tradition, some form of apprenticeship, religion, or art. More specialized education usually depends on literacy, and in the ancient world literate minorities appeared, engaged in the preservation and advance of their cultures. In Greece education took the form of “liberal education,” the education suited to a free citizen, which prepares him for participation in civic life. This centered on the arts of speech and persuasion.

The full union of Greek philosophic culture and an emerging Christian body of thought only was to be found in Byzantium in the early Middle Ages, but in the West, exemplified by King Alfred of Wessex (the Great, 849–99) there appeared the ideal of a vernacular lay education for all men. Though for centuries education remained largely clerical, from deep in the Middle Ages Dawson offered in Alfred an example of a body of Christian writings, going beyond the Bible, which could stand at the core of a Christian program of study. Dawson’s larger view was that the basic subject of historical study should be “culture,” and that the task of the historian is to show how cultures form, develop a comprehensive world view or form, are carried over time and space to others, and then decline or retreat before some new rising culture.1 Dawson, much influenced by anthropology and sociology, thought too much labor had been expended on historical narratives that centered on great figures and events at the expense of the usually slow development of culture. In the case of Christianity, there had been surprisingly little awareness that Christian culture, a new form of culture, had succeeded the various cultures before it, Jewish, Greek, Roman, German, and others. In essence, what already Alfred in the ninth century saw was that this new Christian culture should be taught to the young, just as Greeks had had to be taught their culture in order to form an identity and pass their culture on to others. Alfred’s list of “Christian classics” leaned to the historical and what later would be called “natural theology,” and this in itself was remarkable, presenting as it did an alternative to the inherited antique curriculum centered on grammar and rhetoric.

Dawson knew that Alfred’s program of studies was an isolated proposal that had had little influence. In Alfred’s day the immediate future lay still with monastic and cathedral schools, and then from the later twelfth century, universities. Though the clergy came from all ranks of society, these institutions were the preserve of a monastic-clerical learned elite, and of the Latin language. Especially in the twelfth century, interest in Platonic and cosmological thought was great, but with the revival of the study of Aristotle in the same century, the study of the ancient literary classics and Platonic cosmology found a smaller place in the schools in the face of study of Aristotelian philosophical works. Elsewhere, especially in royal and aristocratic courts, humanistic or courtly studies and vernacular literature flourished.

In Dawson’s perspective this courtly lay and vernacular culture was of the greatest importance. By it the native European traditions were transformed into various forms of Christian culture. Dawson thought the Western educational tradition in important respects unique. Though it too had some tendency, especially in the medieval and early modern period, to center on a priestly class and a sacred tradition, it was never confined to these. It formed not just the life of an elite but of the whole community. This is perhaps related to a fact remarked on by many, that from the first, Christian culture had a kind of dualism at its heart. Whereas in many cultures all life was integrated into a public whole, often in the hands of a king, sometimes in the hands of priests, the Christian West always had a form of dualism in which the religious aspect (Church) and the political aspect (State) were distinguished from each other.

European and American higher culture has its roots especially in the educational traditions of the Italian Renaissance, a world less of universities than of academies (private associations for the discussion of scientific and literary subjects), learned societies, and eventually Jesuit colleges and the English public school system. Medieval commercial expansion had brought Italy into increased contact with the Eastern Mediterranean and the riches of Hellenic culture, and in late medieval Italy something like the civic culture of antiquity reappeared. In a way that had not been possible in the feudal world, liberal education was again put in the service of the cultivation of effective citizens. Platonic studies flourished, and Dawson saw in the Italian Renaissance a recov-
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ey of the Platonic strain of medieval—especially twelfth-century—
studies which had largely been pushed aside by study of Aristotle. The
universities had centered on scientific disputation and had had relatively
little interest in aesthetic or moral subjects.

Now, in cities like Florence, Renaissance humanism reintroduced
subjects neglected in the medieval universities and their descendants
(though in the fourteenth century the University of Florence estab-
lished a chair of Dante studies, first held by Boccaccio, thus showing an
interest in contemporary “Christian culture,” and witnessing to the fact
that too sharp a line should not be drawn between the interests of the
late medieval universities and the newer Renaissance educational insti-
tutions). The ideal developed of the well-rounded man, of harmonious
development of everything human, body, soul, and spirit. Life was to
be enriched by art and literature. Especially the fifteenth century was a
time of the composition of many treatises on education. Dawson dis-
sented from those scholars who had presented the Italian Renaissance
as “pagan” or “secularizing” and stressed the continuing influence of
Christianity: more recent scholarship has vindicated his point of view.

Dawson advanced the thesis that the one thing which had kept Eu-
roe culturally united from the time of the Protestant Reformation—
allowing Europeans to share in a common culture in spite of serious
religious division—was the humanist education shared by Catholic
and Protestant. Particularly successful was the adaptation of humanist
classical education to the religious ideals of the Counter-Reformation
by the Jesuits in their *Ratio Studiorum* (1599) or Program of Studies,
which was the template of Catholic college education into Dawson’s
own day and was also widely admired among European Protestants.
Into the eighteenth century most Europeans agreed about the value of
study of the double tradition of classical antiquity and Christianity. In
Puritan America the curriculum was narrower and more religious and
practical, with less study of the classical and vernacular literatures than
found in European education.

Dawson saw the early modern impact of science and technology on
Western education as more significant than that of Protestantism. That
is, the combined program of Christian and classical studies formed in
the late Roman world, which though over time shifting in method and
Introduction

content lasted more than a millennium, surviving even the Reformation, was seriously affected by the development of modern science. Many things came together, from the enlarged sense of the world stemming from the age of exploration and discovery of new lands, to the rising esteem of artisanship and the mechanical arts in the Renaissance city.

All were concerned with the application of science to life, and a universal genius such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) much admired. For such a man, untutored, in the sense of having little formal education, the true schools were nature and mathematics. His science, pantheistic and naturalistic rather than Christian, and stemming from contemporary study of anatomy and biology as found at the University of Padua, was different from that of the Middle Ages. In it there was a frank rationalism, skepticism, and contempt for Christianity, the insistence that Faith and Reason never touch, which others have too sweepingly identified with the Renaissance as a whole, but was common in the medical faculties. From this time we have a still continuing majority tradition of Christian humanism, and a newer scientific movement, skeptical and rationalist. Yet even within the scientific community, the rationalists were a minority: most continued to think of themselves as Christian, and indeed the work of the famous seventeenth-century scientists was in continuity with a long tradition of a mathematical ideal of nature going back through such medieval universities as Oxford to the pre-Socratics. That said, with time the scientists, with their passion for exact methods, were increasingly to distrust philosophical speculation.

A man who was hardly philosopher or scientist, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), took it upon himself to broadcast the possibilities of the new science. He was the preacher of a reorganization of study to facilitate the potentials of this new science; and his message was of science’s instrumental nature. Science was a means of obtaining power over the world and transforming life. Past generations had wandered in error, Bacon stated, but now science would lead humankind into a promised land, a technological age of continuing progress. A pious Christian who united a fideist theology with an empirical science, Bacon drew a sharp line between religion and science, which anticipated their later divorce.

Dawson saw the Enlightenment as a coming together of the English empiricism represented by Bacon with the French rationalism of René
Descartes (1596–1650). Though in the universities and colleges scholasticism remained in place, elsewhere the ideals of the new science dominated, and revolutionary ideas of education were preached. For many, mathematics replaced scholastic logic, and religion and metaphysics were dismissed as nonsense. Especially in France, science became the new creed. The use of education was to make humans reasonable and enlightened, free from superstition and the tyranny of priests. The universities, along with the Church and its teaching orders, had to be broken. In many countries the Jesuits, for two centuries the principal educational carriers of Catholic culture, were suppressed.

When the French Revolution came, the universities, along with most of the colleges and secondary schools, were closed. All was in place for a complete reorganization of education, now under the auspices of the state. But though proposals for educational reform abounded, initially little was accomplished and education almost collapsed. Then Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) vigorously set about a complete reorganization of education along political and national lines. Just as the former Church-sponsored education of children had aimed at producing a Christian humanistically educated class, now the ideal was an education in service of the state, producing patriots.

Although Napoleon was not opposed to letting certain religious orders return to education, especially the education of the lower classes, which was not yet the focus of educational reform, by and large the state took over the elite education that earlier had been the province of the Church; and in any case all education was now to be supervised by the state. Teachers were part of the civil service. Still, no early nineteenth-century state was able to exercise the degree of control implicit in such reforms, and a number of private educational institutions survived.

From the later seventeenth century the Protestant and Catholic churches had slowly expanded the catechetical instruction given by their parish schools into various forms of primary education, and this is the direction from which the more popular schools came, aided on the Catholic side by a wave of new religious teaching orders. In Germany many more intellectuals came from the lower classes than in France or England, and in Germany, besides the European-wide concern with both the older humanist and the newer scientific education, more at-
tention was paid to the education of the lower classes and to vernacular culture. Just as French education had become increasingly nationalistic, so did German, but with the difference that well into the nineteenth century Germany was a congeries of principalities, rather than a nation-state. Some could place education in service to the emerging German national state, but others saw it in more universal terms. Learning, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1765–1835) held, was to serve not specifically the state or vocational purposes, but the pursuit of knowledge and development of culture. The University of Berlin, founded in 1810 and a model for the modern universities of Germany and Central and Eastern Europe, aimed at the cultivation of learning for its own sake. From Prussia went forth the reform of German education at all levels. But what had originated in German revolt against the Napoleonic system ended in something similar to France, with education at all levels viewed as preparation for citizenship. This victory of nationalism, of state control over education, became a European-wide story, one generally supported by the professors and teachers.

Dawson viewed Britain and the United States as for a time the exceptions to this pattern of increasing control of education by the state. In these countries a voluntary principle was more powerful, and something more like the medieval pattern of corporative independence for schools survived. From Oxford came John Henry Newman’s *Idea of a University* (1852 and 1858), but from 1870 Britain came more to look like the Continent, with increasing state control of education. The American educational tradition is largely derived from Britain but has developed sufficiently independently of British and Continental models so that Dawson viewed it as a new force in the world. Like all educational systems, it is partly a product of its surrounding culture. Dawson believed that after the Colonial period American culture had developed more rapidly and changed more, especially in geography and population, than any known culture. He wrote of not just four periods of American history, but of four Americas. In the first, Colonial, period, there was no common American culture but a number of provincial cultures based on different religions. In Puritan New England interest in education was from the beginning strong, but, as elsewhere, aimed primarily at the education of clergy, that is, still medieval. In the largely
Anglican South education was relatively neglected into the eighteenth century, this partly because of the disinterest of the Church of England. The coming of the American Revolution put the Anglicans at even greater disadvantage, especially because of the loyalist sympathies of most of its clergy. The educational ideals of the Founding Fathers, especially Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, were largely derived from the French Enlightenment. As in France, plans for a national system of education bore little fruit this early, but in the wake of the American Revolution, a new democratic ideology produced much interest in popular education.

The period from the Revolution to the Civil War comprised Dawson’s second America, and for him was the greatest age of American creativity. The colonial cultures became fused into a national unity at the same time as great territorial expansion took place. The immigrants of the late Colonial period, above all the Irish Presbyterians or “Scotch-Irish,” were at the center of an internal sociological transformation affecting all America and further hindering the spread of Anglicanism, as well as the Congregationalism of New England. The Baptist and Methodist churches spread in the South and West. These represented a new type of Protestantism, characterized by revivalism.

In distinction from Europe, religion was not under the control of the state, so that the chief instruments of culture and education were the denominations, with the Western colleges continuing to be religious in foundation. In the East, especially New England in the time of Horace Mann (1796–1859), the states became increasingly involved in education, especially universal public education and the research university as found in Germany began to be imitated. From the later nineteenth century close ties between church and school tended to be replaced by a system of state supervision. A form of secularization took place in which education was largely placed in service to the formation of democratic moral values and patriotism.

Dawson’s third America stretched from the Civil War to the end of unrestricted immigration in 1921. Post–Civil War America was much richer, stronger, and more populous than before, and the settlement of the West continued. This was the Golden Age of American capitalism and industrial expansion. By the 1920s America was the most urbanized
country in the world. Though this was not an age of special intellectual achievement, it was of education. Churches were replaced as the center of intellectual life by colleges. Dawson—no great believer in “democratic capitalism”—thinks the materialism of the age did not hinder educational institutions in the way it did churches. New wealth flowed into the endowment of higher education. For the most part Americans bought into the faith in science that had overwhelmed eighteenth-century Europe, and faith in scientific progress and democracy tended to take the place of Christian orthodoxy. This is especially true of the most influential American educational theorist, John Dewey (1859–1952), who centered education on socialization into democracy and was an advocate of universal higher education.

The American fourth, contemporary, age, has more realized the ideal of higher education for all than has any country in the world. Although an elite system of education can resist conforming to the society around it, a democratic system cannot, and in the American context inevitably education became oriented toward technology and vocationalism. Dawson thought a great question looming over this fourth, cosmopolitan, urban, age was whether America could continue to develop in the direction it had been, with urban life ever more separated from rural, and this urban life exorbitantly consuming natural resources in a life of “luxury for all.” Could a land in which autonomy and freedom are chief virtues, take up the burdens of history and see itself as, like all the others, implicated in Original Sin?

During most of American history educational freedom was possible because no one institution, secular or ecclesiastical, controlled all, but now, Dawson thought, a further question was whether in the future uniformity imposed by the state could be avoided. Central to this question was the existence of a large Catholic educational system not directly in state control—though undoubtedly more under exterior pressure now than in Dawson’s day. Dawson observed that American education had become almost completely secularized, leaving little place for the study of religion which had once been the raison d’être of the medieval university. In America the doctrine of the separation of church and state had been extended to education, and religion almost excluded from public education.
American Catholics resisted this development and created an alternative system. Dawson saw this development as so important that he could affirm that the Catholicism of the United States, though a reaction to the dominant Protestant form of American culture had paradoxically become more important for the world’s future than the Catholic cultures of South America. This was almost completely the result of Catholic, especially Irish, immigration. The Irish in Ireland had already learned to survive under Protestant rule, and they transferred what they had learned to the United States. While Protestants in America were ready to cede much to government, Irish Catholics distrusted it. They commonly felt closer in their poverty to their priests: indeed American Catholicism strikes the visitor as more democratic than that found elsewhere, and Dawson traced this to the close relationship between Irish priest and congregant. While in Europe it was the peasantry which remained most loyal to the Church, in the United States it was the uprooted European peasant populations, learning from the Irish how to adapt to urban life, who constituted the Church’s most faithful members. Though prospering in America, this was a population still the butt of vituperation and misrepresentation, and of modest achievement in cultural matters. But work and sacrifice they had, in the end becoming the best-organized American religion with the most extensive independent educational system in the United States.

From the beginning, most American Catholic leaders had advocated some form of acceptance of American democratic ideals. Probably overly optimistic about the prospects these ideals offered for the progress of the Church, the American Church of the early twentieth century still lacked a historical and theological learning sufficient to understanding its own newness. But one of the reasons Dawson had high hopes for American Catholic education was that in roughly the twenty years before he was writing, both Catholic education and intellectual life had significantly improved. There was a dawning sense of the need for a Catholic culture.

Dawson had no delusions about the quality of American education, secular or religious, in comparison with the best European education, but thought that a base was in place for an American Catholic cultural flourishing. American Catholics were at a point where they could ab-
sorb the best of Catholic culture worldwide. The world open to the American Catholic was much richer than that open to the American Protestant, and entering this world, Dawson thought, could give Catholicism an increasing place in American culture. The Church as in America a voluntary association will always be at a disadvantage against the state, but thus far there has been a modus vivendi in which, because in America there still is an ideal of the limited state, Catholic education has been able within limits to form its own common mind parallel to the common mind or secular religion of democracy at which public education aims.

Dawson thought it impossible for a minority to maintain rigorous religious practice in a secular culture. Within the religious minority there would be constant “leakage,” with only a minority of a minority actually living and understanding their religion. Therefore it was not possible for Catholics long to live in a ghetto. They constantly had to address the enveloping culture, and their constant effort should be to encourage the growth in the secular culture around them of those things which make a Catholic way of life viable, especially the teaching of an objective form of the history of Christian culture in the public schools. Dawson thought this reintroduction of religion into secular study, from which he saw such practical benefits as a better understanding of the genetic relation between past and present, best begun at the university level.

In Part Two of his text Dawson presented arguments for grounding education in the study of Christian culture, rather than, on the one hand, Western civilization, or, on the other, world history. Dawson saw the study of Christian culture to be primarily sociological and historical in character and does not equate it with reading a list of Christian classics, though such would be read. The goal is to understand the process by which a culture and its institutions are built up. In Part

Three Dawson presented an analysis of the relation between Western man and technology. Three Dawson presented an analysis of the relation between Western man and technology. He makes many shrewd observations here, such as that whereas in Europe the coming of the Enlightenment began an age of criticism, in which all was called into question, in America it began an age of faith, faith in a body of common truths grounding the American way of life.

Well before Alasdair MacIntyre said much the same thing, Dawson observed that from the beginning a liberal ideology had been the foundation of American common life. But Dawson, living through both world wars, thought that liberalism had proved itself incapable of dealing with central problems of the age, and that if anything could do this, it would be some form of recapturing the orientation toward transcendence found in the historic religious civilizations. Only affirmation of a transcendent spiritual and moral order by which things such as technology could be judged could save modern man from himself. To the extent that the study of Christian culture should serve any practical purpose, this is it.

Some things have shifted significantly since Dawson wrote. The subjugation of democracy to a technological order which he so feared has continued apace, and no form of education or religion has been able significantly to control the development of technology, though one wonders whether growing interest in ecology and environmentalism does not mark a reaction to what the boosters of progress had promised. Again, in the United States there seems to have been a significant political realignment because of the question of abortion. The Democratic Party, once a kind of natural ally of the immigrant Catholic population, has become a hostile opponent to Catholicism on many social issues. One wonders whether this will not block the increasing place for Catholicism in American culture for which Dawson hoped. Controversy over the so-called life issues has shown how far from fulfillment is Dawson’s hope that growing contact with Catholic culture would lead the larger American culture to increased understanding of

3. In The Turn to Transcendence: The Role of Religion in the Twenty-First Century, to be published by the Catholic University of America Press, I consider the relation of religion and technology.
Catholic points of view. But one must wonder what the significance of the new immigration, especially of Hispanics, will be.

Dawson was simply wrong in thinking that the Protestant inability to understand Catholicism is “ancient history.” As mainline Protestantism has transformed in America into a liberalism at the center of which is the autonomous individual, the larger American community is even less prepared today to understand Catholicism. The increasing displacement of the study of Western Civilization with the study of World Civilization in the public schools has left most students even less familiar with Catholicism as a religion or with the culture Christianity has produced than they were in Dawson’s day. Dawson insisted that the function of any educational system was to create a common world of moral and intellectual values, a common memory which helped a given culture maintain itself. To say that such a common educational tradition has now largely disappeared is to say that our culture is under threat of dissolution. What is today called multiculturalism, that is, the idea that a society can be built around a plurality of cultures, with no single one of them dominating, presumably for Dawson would be a prescription for cultural disintegration, and one question is whether in any respect he would be wrong.

Dawson seems to have been too optimistic in his belief that Catholics could adapt to the American way of life without sacrificing their own traditions. Most do not seem to have been able to do this. Dawson thought that Catholics everywhere should think of themselves as Christians who happened to live in this or that country, but in America probably most Catholics think of themselves as first Americans, and only then Catholics.

Most significantly as far as the present book is concerned, the system of classical studies still existing at the time Dawson was educated has largely disappeared, but some Catholic schools do attempt the study of Christian culture he desired.\(^5\) Probably it is fair to say that, in the wake of Vatican II, there was a marked tendency for those Catholic institutions which thought of themselves as progressive to distance them-

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5. I attempt a critique of current options in “Christopher Dawson and the Renewal of Catholic Education: The Proposal that Catholic Culture and History, not Philosophy, Should Order the Catholic Curriculum,” to be published in *Logos.*
selves from the teaching Church. Those which did not simply lose their Catholicism in the process have often since reconsidered, wanting to become “more Catholic.” Whereas almost universally for a whole series of practical reasons this in an educational context can not mean return to a pre-Conciliar situation in which philosophy ordered the Catholic college curriculum, it must mean looking elsewhere for a new architectonic frame for study. Dawson’s idea of Christian culture could provide this frame, and indeed a number of schools are now looking to the notion of Catholic culture in Dawson’s sense, rather than philosophy or theology, as providing the organizing principle of their curricula. Those people will find much to ponder in the present work.
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