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The Generative Role of Christianity in Western Culture

JAMES GASTON

Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Catholic University Press, 2010).

This classic book by Christopher Dawson (1889–1970) first appeared in 1961 and it remains until this day as perhaps the most brilliantly trenchant assessment of the plight of modern education in the West. That he should present such an incisive critique comes as no surprise for Dawson was one of the greatest Catholic intellectuals of his or any time. His life spanned a goodly portion of the 20th century, and his intellectual pursuits reflected his deep concern with this tumultuous period. He bequeathed a treasure trove of over thirty books and 200 articles assessing literally the history of mankind, with an especial focus on the West and the Roman Catholic Church.

In order to appreciate fully Dawson's argument in *The Crisis of Western Education*, it is important to situate it within the broad context of his sweeping and synthetic scholarly vision. Key to this vision was his childhood and formal education because both made him unusually aware of the nature of the radical change in Western culture and the advent of modernity. In Wales as a youth he witnessed first-hand the desultory effects of the changing economic and social order associated with the march of industrialism. At Oxford he was one of the last to benefit from an integrated liberal arts education founded upon the great Western tradition of classical humanism; he relished this excellent education but also clearly grasped its limitations. This same educational experience formed the minds of other great contemporary scholars, such as G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, C. S. Lewis, and Jacques Maritain to name but a few. Common to all of them was the fear that 20th century Europe, and by extension the world, was in a severe crisis, and each investigated the origins and nature of this tragedy in their distinctive manner.

Dawson's view was that the crisis of the 20th century was due primarily to the modernists' failure to appreciate fully the role of Christianity in the formation and character of Europe, and this omission was in turn due to their inability or unwillingness to grasp the integral role of religion in the life of man. Such a unitive vision of culture, which had been partially present in the classical humanist view of man, had been replaced, argued Dawson, by a secular humanist vision often pointedly anti-Christian and abetted by the onslaught of utilitarianism, scientific specialization and technology. All of Dawson's work focuses on some aspect of the importance of religion to man, of Christianity to Europe, and of the multiple detrimental ramifications of modern materialism for the West and the world. But a key concern of his was the central and devastating role of modern education in the malformation of the mind and the advance of the state. A summary of this concern constitutes *The Crisis of Western Education*. He approaches his subject in a tri-partite manner.

In Part One, “The History of Liberal Education in the West,” Dawson renders this difficult and extensive subject in a manner that is both brilliant and incapable of summation. For those interested in this important and complex subject, there is little need to venture to further sources except for clarifying detail. Simply put, there is no better account of the history of liberal education in the West.

In Part Two, “The Situation of Christian Education in the Modern World,” Dawson addresses the real task at hand. The problem, Dawson argues, is that the old humanist educational tradition and paradigm is being replaced by a compulsory state education format, democratic and utilitarian in character, based upon the nation-state model and by the ideal of scientific specialization. The challenge is to find a new method of study that will counteract this erroneous approach. Two recent alternatives have been unable to stem this disintegration, or to offer a more perfected vision of a true liberal arts education. First, the “general study” of Western civilization, signifying a general integrative study of culture, or a “core” of courses, falls short because it fails to acknowledge the Christian vision of the cosmos as the dominant unitive principle of Western culture. As a result it vitiates our attempt to interpret our past because the inherent aversion to the non-material in effect causes such general “subjects” to become “an amorphous collection of alternative courses.” The second alternative, often referred to as a “great books” type of education, is misleading because it is overly attentive to classical humanist sources or too culturally specialized in its focus on “the highest level of cultivated intelligence” (102-04). Dawson argues that the only real alternative is the study of *Christian culture* because Christianity did in fact form Europe, and because culture as a whole constitutes the only true holistic object for the study of man.

For Dawson, culture should be understood as a subject that constitutes the whole pattern of human life and thought in a living society. Culture constitutes a definite historical unity and is much more real and extensive than any political unit, and it alone provides us with an intelligible field of study. Such an approach requires both a sociological and historical perspective. However, he astutely warns us that “[w]hat we need is not an encyclopedic knowledge of all the products of Christian culture, but a study of the culture process itself from its spiritual and theological roots, through its organic historical growth to its cultural fruits. It is this organic relation between theology, history and culture which provides the integrative principle in Catholic higher education, and the only one that is capable of taking the place of the old classical humanism . . .” (105-06). Stated most succinctly, Dawson’s vision is truly incarnational, for he argues that education must embrace the chain of relationships that run from Christ to the Church, to man, to his intellect, and, ultimately, to the cultural expression of his overall vision. It is only in such a series of relations, via religion and culture, that one can discern man in an intelligible manner, and teach him.

In Part Three, “Western Man and the Technological Order,” Dawson laments the sub-religious, pagan and technological character of the modern world. Modern man is dehumanized and, hence, selfish, and the present spiritual and moral vacuum facilitates the rise of a police state under the guise of “the democratic way of life.” Catholic intellectuals and educators must revitalize Western culture by conveying the reality of, and truly good way of life associated with, the Christian religion and culture. In Dawson’s mind, the best hope for such re-evangelization lies in the United States because our Founding principles would engender the rise of centers of educational renewal, such as the present-day *Pontifical John Paul II Institute*.

James Gaston is Associate Professor of History, and Director of the Humanities and Catholic Culture Major, at Franciscan University of Steubenville.

