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Swords of Honor: The Revival of Orthodox Christianity in Twentieth-Century Britain

Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief
by Joseph Pearce
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Upon learning in 1928 of T. S. Eliot's conversion to Christianity, Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister:

> I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.[1]

Woolf's dismissal of belief in traditional Christianity as a distressing obscenity was typical of British intellectuals' attitudes during her era. From G. B. Shaw to H. G. Wells, from Bertrand Russell to

Arnold Bennett, a common supposition among the day's cultural leaders was that dogmatic religion was so much shameful hidebound superstition that people must be liberated from for the sake of their own well-being and society's progress. Although such sentiments had been growing steadily among the British *literati* throughout the nineteenth century, a number of trends converged in the late-Victorian and Edwardian ages to accelerate this secularization of British high culture. Evolutionism had already destroyed the idea of providential design for many thinkers; and these epochs' greater attention to the dark side of Darwinism, with its stress on struggle and randomness in nature, weakened further whatever hold the notion of nature's ultimate benevolence still had on modern minds. Moreover, biblical higher criticism simultaneously posed a radical challenge to traditional understandings of Christianity and the authorities behind them, even as scholarship in comparative religions questioned customary conceptions of Christian uniqueness. Finally, certain traditional Christian teachings—particularly the Atonement and Hell—were increasingly judged immoral. Hence, as Adrian Hastings notes, by the late 1910s and 1920s, "the overturning of Christianity effectively achieved by the previous generation could be, and was, openly accepted as a fact of modern life," making this period's predominant mindset an unprecedented "confident agnosticism." In short, "Modernity simply had no place for religion in general or Christianity in particular."[2]

Yet Eliot's action was not as anomalous as it may seem initially. Despite this hostile cultural atmosphere, a substantial number of prominent thinkers reared in the late-Victorian and Edwardian epochs still chose to become Christians—and Catholic Christians—as adults, especially during the century's unpropitious early decades. Even more strikingly, in view of its longstanding minority, persecuted, and oppositional status in British society, is the fact that a disproportionate number of these converts migrated to the Roman Catholic Church: those eventually so drawn included G. K.

Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, Eric Gill, Ronald Knox, Edith Sitwell, Sigfried Sassoon, David Jones, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, Maurice Baring, Frederick Copelston, Malcolm Muggeridge, and E. F. Schumacher. Add to this muster "cradle Catholics" Hilaire Belloc and Barbara Ward, "cradle convert" J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Anglo-Catholics Eliot, C. S. Lewis, and Dorothy L. Sayers, and one has a roster of some of the age's most accomplished public intellectuals. Orthodox Christianity's ability to attract such a large portion of these generations' leading minds into its ranks at a time when antithetical attitudes were at their apex is thus one of the central phenomena of twentieth-century British culture.

It is one, however, that has received little collective treatment from scholars. While studies of individual writers and particular genres abound, few critics have explored this revival of orthodoxy as the formation of a common community of discourse. In 1935, Calvert Alexander called attention to this growing trend in British letters in *The Catholic Literary Revival*.[3] But it would be more than six decades before similar, updated syntheses emerged. With the recent appearance of Patrick Allitt's *Catholic Converts* (1997) and Joseph Pearce's *Literary Converts*, though, scholars at last have thoughtful, well-researched primers of this vital movement in British thought.[4] Indeed these two studies are helpful complements, for if Pearce includes figures (like Jones and Schumacher) whom Allitt passes over, Allitt's attention to their American counterparts adds a useful comparative dimension, even as his more probing analysis helps substantiate Pearce's alert narrative. Though each volume would have benefited from greater conversance with the vast theoretical literature on conversion, taken in tandem these two works are excellent introductions to the modern British renascence of orthodox Christianity and an indispensable groundwork for more detailed collective studies of these thinkers, the contexts in which they worked, and the various heritages to which they belonged.

They also provoke reflection on what spurred this countercultural revival of orthodoxy. The sketches provided by Allitt and Pearce, plus deeper study of the authors they treat, make clear that it was precisely traditional Christianity's dissent from modern, post-Christian norms that made it appealing to this network of minds. Despite coming from widely different backgrounds, working in diverse genres, and being driven by deeply personal feelings and experiences, these writers' spiritual journeys shared common landmarks: they sensed that the day's dominant cultural trends were imperiling cherished beliefs that were grounded in decisive personal, frequently youthful, episodes; that orthodox Christianity offered an intellectual and spiritual framework for upholding these ostensibly threatened ideals; and that this faith would resist modern movements unwaveringly on behalf of its ancient convictions and mores that seemed a truer, more resonant explanation of life and thought. They were persuaded both by rational arguments in favor of orthodoxy and by the personal example of Christian acquaintances and mentors. Similarly, their belief in Christianity shaped not only their theologies, but also their views of human nature, society, and politics. Anchored in what they considered the truth about God and man, these authors faced confidently a culture governed by contrary convictions and the frequently angry and astonished reactions of their friends and families. Specifically, they countered modern secularism, subjectivism, individualism, belief in progress, and cultural fragmentation with a Christian stress on supernaturalism, objectivity, authority, tradition, a tragic view of life, and cultural integration.

Initially, the literary Christians challenged their secularist peers' understanding of religion and its effect on thought and art. Against the prevalent assumption that traditional religion was a superstitious relic that diminishes human dignity, the Christians claimed that recognition of life's supernatural element was necessary for a genuine humanism and vital art. Greene argued that "human beings are more important to believers than they are to atheists. If one

tells oneself that man is no more than a superior animal, that each individual has before him a maximum of eighty years of life, then man is indeed of little importance."[5] To Greene, though, such "unimportance in the world of the senses is only matched by his enormous importance in another world," making characters with "the solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose" the stuff of lasting literature. He thus chided the likes of Woolf and E. M. Forster for creating characters who "wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin," due to these writers' loss of "the religious sense," as "with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act."[6] Waugh agreed with this assessment, holding that "you can only leave God out by making your characters pure abstractions," a view he conceded was "unpopular." Yet (like Greene) he regarded this dissent from modernist principles as an affirmation of a deeper appreciation of human destiny. To him, to represent "man in his relation to God" was to "represent man more fully" (235–36).[7]

The orthodox Christians also rebutted what they saw as another central element of both literary and theological modernism: subjectivism. They maintained that truth is not the product of particular minds that varies from thinker to thinker, but is an objective reality that exists apart from individual inquirers and is meant to be discovered by them. Arnold Lunn felt that "personal experience . . . has no validity as an argument for those who do not share this experience" (177), and Knox contended that if something is true, "it would be true if every human mind denied it, or if there were no human minds in existence to recognize it" (316). Such authors were drawn to orthodoxy precisely because it seemed to possess this objective validity. Religion as "an objective reality far transcending one's private experience"[8] had impressed Dawson from his childhood, and was fulfilled for him in the Catholic Church, "a society which possesses no less objective reality and juridical form than a state, while at the same time its action extends to the very depths of

the individual human soul."[9] Belloc similarly found Catholicism to be "the exponent of *Reality*. It is true. Its doctrines in matters large and small are statements of what is" at both the temporal and spiritual levels (95. Emphasis in original.).

Yet the Christians recognized that these doctrines could be misunderstood or misapplied by imperfect minds and wills. They thus determined that some definitive means of preserving and promulgating these truths about reality was necessary. In search of what Chesterton called a "truth-telling thing," the Roman Catholics were impressed by the Church's *magisterium* and its claims to binding authority in matters of faith and morals. As Greene put it during his instruction, "It's quite possible after all to believe it at this early stage, because the acceptance and belief in the Church as a guide includes faith in everything I've still got to be taught."[10] Even those, like Eliot, Lewis, and Sayers, who were troubled by this Roman Catholic assertion of authority still found orthodox Christianity a compelling ordering principle for the mind, soul, and polity, and they defended staunchly the normative force of the traditional creeds and the teachings of the Four Ecumenical Councils.

Similarly, it was in part because they foresaw disorder resulting from defiance of these traditional truths and their teachers that these writers opposed modern individualism. To abjure these Christian standards in the name of personal freedom, they felt, was to go against the very grain of being and to leave the will-to-power as the sole arbiter of meaning and value. In such a scenario, Lewis claimed, "we thus advance towards a state of society in which not only each man but every impulse in each man claims *carte blanche*" (275). The end result would be either chaos issuing ultimately in tyranny or a nihilistic cultural suicide, "the abolition of man." To prevent this decay of liberty into license, the Christians argued, freedom needed to be governed by dogma. Sayers asserted that "If I am free from *all* bonds, even the right to bind myself, I am not free to believe in anything definite, to make any definite decision . . . because there is

no paramount claim to bind the will to a single course."[11] But binding the will to the fixed course of the perennially valid body of verities provided by Christianity gives one the grounding in reality necessary to explore it positively and profitably. As Chesterton put it, "Catholics know the two or three transcendental truths on which they do agree; and take rather a pleasure in disagreeing on everything else," making dogmatic Catholicism the foundation of "an active, fruitful, progressive and even adventurous life" of the intellect and spirit.[12] In allowing Christian teaching to set the lines of excellence rather than drafting them themselves, people are empowered to exercise their vital powers in ways that ennoble human nature rather than degrade it, because their behavior is in harmony with reality instead of in discord with it.

The Christian intellectuals' belief in the prescriptive wisdom of their religious heritage and their sense of the perils that befall those who disregard it combined to shape a deep disquiet with the modern belief in progress. Against those (like Wells and Russell) who asserted that men could be like gods if they let the new winds of science and social change sweep away orthodoxy's outdated implausible teachings and stifling morality, the literary Christians contended, with Eliot, that the way forward is the way back. The Christian authors felt that those who equated sequential advance with substantial improvement were guilty of what Lewis called "chronological snobbery," and charged that such a cosmology closed one's mind to all but the ascendant prejudices of his own day. To them, the Christian assertion of a long-standing, persistently vital, heritage of worship, thought, and art supplied a permanent standard for, and fundamental alternative to, any temporarily regnant outlook; and they regarded the content of this legacy as truer, richer, and deeper than what they deemed the radically truncated vision of anthropocentric materialism prevalent in their time. As Eliot noted, this stress on tradition was a chief attraction of Catholicism to writers who chose it, in either Anglo or Roman form, as adults:

> It is always the main religious body which is the guardian of more of the remains of the higher developments of culture preserved from a past time before the division took place . . . Hence it is that the convert . . . of the intellectual or sensitive type is drawn towards the more Catholic type of worship and doctrine.[13]

Although they clashed over which church had the most direct succession from the Apostles and was thus the purest legate of the Catholic tradition, both groups saw Catholic Christianity as the best conservator of Christendom's religious and cultural patrimony.

The Christians also rebutted belief in progress on anthropological grounds. They thought that this outlook was rooted in a conviction in the temporal perfectibility of human nature, an assumption they felt both the doctrine of original sin and past and present historical experience refuted abundantly. Yet they found this mistake about man not only false but dangerous. To premise plans for social reengineering on it, they warned, was to invite great cruelty, as such programs would demand more of fallen humans than they were capable of and their ensuing failure would precipitate mistreatment of people as incorrigible subhumans or malicious traitors for their inability to become the ideologues' dream of demigods. Attempts to build New Jersualems out of the crooked timber of humanity could only end in the Babylon of Belsen. Sayers voiced the tragic view of life shared by her peers cogently in 1943:

> For the last two hundred years or so we have been trying to persuade ourselves that there was no such thing as sinfulness—that there was nothing intrinsically unsatisfactory about man as such. But isn't there? I am sorry for the Humanists—they trusted in man so blindly, and now they are bewildered by the present condition of the world. All this science and education and toleration of opinions, and enlightenment and so forth, issuing, not in peace and progress, but in frustration and

> reactionary violence. But it isn't surprising if one recognizes that the inner division is still there, and that increased knowledge and science and power have only enlarged the scope and opportunity for both good and evil, not altered man's nature, which remains what it was—capable of choice because its will is free; capable of and indeed inclined to make, the wrong choice, because it centres itself on man and the relative rather than on God and the absolute.[14]

These theological and philosophical objections to modern thought helped mold the literary Christians' view of their day's political beliefs and systems. For instance, although some (like Chesterton and Dawson) found political liberalism's stress on limited government appealing, they and their peers saw its philosophical basis as a merger of the Progressive scorn for tradition and belief in temporal perfectibility with an atomic individualism and a lack of teleology that affronted deep human needs for community and a meaningful order and purpose in life. Liberalism's economic counterpart, industrial capitalism, was almost universally condemned by the Christians. They thought that it was based on a mechanistic metaphysic, exploited labor by treating it as a commodity, and despoiled the natural world rather than providing opportunities for human creativity that mirrors that of the Creator in whose image and likeness men are made and promoting stewardship of His other creatures. This critique makes the Christian thinkers part of a broader heritage in British letters of religious and romantic rebellion against industrial modernity, one they made a distinct contribution to by articulating their dissent in an orthodox Christian idiom.[15]

Yet the chief twentieth-century rivals to liberalism and industrialism were no more satisfactory to these Christian protesters. As their judgments of industrialism suggest, many were sympathetic to Marxist criticisms of capitalism, and they respected Communism for being teleological, but (unlike many of their secularist peers) they felt it offered an inadequate diagnosis and prescription for modern

ills. Because of its atheistic and materialistic premises, they thought, Communism posited the immanent perfectibility of mankind, and was hence insufficiently sensitive to the human capacity for evil; and they also held that its progressive dynamic made it a participant in the modern denigration of tradition. Even Greene, who yearned for a rapprochement between Christianity and Communism, deemed traditional Christian humanism a more realistic and compassionate response to suffering than Marxist hopes for qualitative temporal transformation. Arguing that "it is not possible to create a New Man, so all we can expect is a change in conditions so that the poor are less poor and the rich are less rich,"[16] Greene concluded in 1988 that "as the Church becomes more concerned with poverty and human rights the Marxists become less concerned with poverty and there's nothing to show they are concerned with human rights."[17] To him, and to his Christian counterparts, the Marxists' certain trumpet blew a siren's song.

Many of Greene's peers had a similar attractive-repulsive relationship with Fascism. Of the viable political systems of their time, this one seemed at first the most patient of Christian baptism due to its hatred of materialism, and its ostensible respect for tradition and Christianity's role in cultural life; and the likes of Chesterton, Dawson, and Jones were thus willing to investigate the possibility of a *modus vivendi* between it and Christianity. But their explorations quickly convinced them that there was no sound common ground for Fascism and Christianity to stand on, judging this ideology to be a surrogate religion of race-hatred that professed a neopagan morality and promised a tribalist utopia. As Chesterton put it, far from being opposed to modernity, this "wild worship of Race" actually was stamped by "heresy, license, undefined creed, unlimited claim, mutability, and all that marks Modernism."[18] Even most of the numerous Christian intellectuals who supported Franco in the Spanish Civil War did so not from sympathy for Fascist principles. Rather, they thought the Nationalists alone could prevent a Communist takeover

and appeared ready to safeguard Christians' cultural and religious rights, which the Republicans had been quick to violate. If some minor members of the orthodox revival had deeper Fascist affinities, then, most of its leading lights had, at worst, a temporary or tactical attraction to this ideology and some of its representatives. The not uncommon labeling of, amongst others, Chesterton, Dawson, Eliot, Jones, and Waugh as Fascist sympathizers is hence an unjust calumny.[19]

Indeed, most of these thinkers saw Fascism and Communism as species of the more fundamental political evil of totalitarianism. To them, this form of government was unique and qualitatively different, for it sought to manufacture a normative political teleology, and to make its presence in the polity pervasive, so as to control not merely people's behavior, but also their thoughts and feelings. Dawson (the most precocious and thorough Christian analyst of totalitarianism) voiced the fears of many of his peers when he argued that totalitarianism's assertion of an all-encompassing, politicized teleology makes it a necessary rival of organized religion: "the moment that a society claims the complete allegiance of its members, it assumes a quasi-religious authority,"[20] and hence becomes "a competitor with the Church on its own ground."[21] Consequently, he warned, proponents of these "exclusive dogmatic anti-religions" desired not to imitate past persecutions of Christianity, but to eradicate it entirely, along with the traditional mores of Western culture, so as to clear the ground for undivided devotion to the new secularist Caesers of race, class, or simply the will-to-power.[22] Nor did Dawson and his counterparts consider this peril confined to Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union. Many of them thought that Britain's gradual adoption of a welfare state heralded the possible advent of a more benign-sounding, though ultimately equally dangerous, form of totalitarianism in their post-Christian homeland, as they saw power being steadily centralized and liberty being increasingly abridged in the name of social security, even as secular norms

became more widespread and animated these policies. Belloc and Chesterton sounded this alarm in the century's early years; and their successors echoed their admonitions consistently, particularly after World War II, as the likes of Dawson, Greene, Sayers, and Lewis became more and more concerned that Britons were becoming (in Lewis's phrase) "willing slaves of the welfare state." Such anxieties set them apart from the postwar "consensus" in favor of expanding the welfare state, but were consistent with their overall conclusion that all modern political systems are potentially totalitarian.

Yet these Christian writers were not simply nay-sayers. With varying degrees of interest, participation, and sophistication, most of these authors subscribed to certain core beliefs about the components of a positive alternative to modern social and political orders. For instance, most of them upheld the ideals of decentralized government and widespread, small-scale ownership of productive property that were crafted and elucidated by distributists like Belloc, Chesterton, Gill, and (most famously) Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*. Moreover, these thinkers generally favored the corporatist vision of society as an organic community governed by belief in God, in spiritual solidarity, and in work as a vocation, with a consequent accent on promoting human creativity, that Dawson (and to some extent Eliot and Sayers) advocated most trenchantly. Yet within this broad range of agreement, important differences still existed.

For example, although (with the exceptions of Waugh and Eliot) these authors tended to adopt populist stances in defense of the common sense and common things of common people against the scorn and schemes of secularist fellow intellectuals, few shared Chesterton's wholehearted, almost mystical faith in the common people and popular culture. Instead, several (such as Lewis, Sayers, Jones, and Muggeridge) concurrently expressed grave reservations about democracy's potentially leveling effects on culture, the rise of mass society, and the potentially pernicious influence of media like tabloid journalism, advertisements, and, later, television. Moreover,

while Dawson and Tolkien admirably avoided populism's darkest side in their consistently resolute eschewal of anti-Semitic bromides, the record of many of their counterparts (including Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Eliot, Muggeridge, and Sayers) is more chequered; and this topic demands more clear-eyed treatment than either accusers or defenders usually supply. Additionally, if some distributists (such as Gill and Vincent McNabb) had a neo-Luddite view of technology, most of the Christians had a more hopeful attitude. If it had been unquestionably misused by modern men devoted to *scientia* and controlling nature (as epitomized for many of the Christians by the development of nuclear weapons), these intellectuals believed that an order dedicated to *sapientia* and understanding nature could make humane and fruitful use of applied science. As Chesterton wrote, virtue or vice are "in a man's soul and not in his tools."[23] Furthermore, while most of these thinkers were persistently skeptical of the United States as the supreme avatar of post-Christian materialism, a minority (notably, Chesterton, Dawson, and Waugh) felt that American culture could be baptized by Catholic Christianity, and that assumption of this orthodox ethos would enable America to use its global power to revitalize the Western heritage and defend it against the gathering storm of modern ideological tyrannies. Yet, however significant their divergences on specific issues, the literary Christians' overall attitude toward modernity was clear: if they were all conservatives for wanting to reroot their culture in orthodox Christianity and traditional morality, they were simultaneously radicals for wanting to uproot modern mores completely.

The variety in unity displayed in the Christian writers' social views also suggests their final challenge to modern thought. To these authors, the diversity present in their community of discourse was permissible and productive because it was integrated by their common commitment to orthodoxy. Post-Christian culture, though, seemed hopelessly fragmented to them, as it no longer had the centrifugal force of faith—or an adequate replacement—to make the

centripetal pressures of diverse ideals, ethics, politics, and aesthetics cohere; and modernist art seemed to portray this splintering as desirable, or at least inevitable. Sayers, however, articulated the darker, yet more hopeful, assessment of many Christian writers: "If the whole fabric of society is not to collapse into chaos, we must either submit to an artificial uniformity imposed by brute force, or learn to bridge for ourselves these perilous gaps which sunder our behavior from reality" (225). For Sayers and her peers, assent to orthodoxy was the bridge to reality, for it fostered both spiritual and cultural unity grounded in transcendent truth.

Initially, the Christian intellectuals upheld orthodoxy's claim to be universally valid. Because it is the exponent of reality, they reasoned, Christianity's tenets have a currency that crosses borders and ages. However different its settings and expressions, then, this set of beliefs can potentially unite all people because it tells the unchanging truth about human nature and destiny. In Waugh's terms, "the Church is not, except by accident, a little club with its own specialized vocabulary, but the normal state of man from which men have disastrously exiled themselves" (259). Those thinkers who ended this isolation by coming inside the Christian church felt rewarded with a sense that they had joined their discrete gifts to a global, age-old community that professed the same beliefs and practiced the same rites regardless of where in the world or at what point in history it was situated.

The Roman Catholic writers found particularly palpable confirmation of this continuity in the Latin Mass. Initially, they thought, the use of Latin among the present-day faithful symbolized the Church's ability to harmonize heterogeneous humanity in adherence to a common faith. As Dawson put it,

> The existence of a common liturgical language of some kind is a sign of the Church's mission to reverse the curse of Babel and to create a bond of unity between the peoples. The nations that are still divided from one another by barriers of race and

> language leave their divisions and antipathies at the door of the Church and worship together in a tongue which belongs to none and yet which is common to all.[24]

Moreover, many thinkers felt that the Church's consistent use of this rite made the transcendent bond between current Catholics and their foregoers in faith tangible. Waugh held that the Latin Mass he attended was "the Mass for whose restoration the Elizabethean martyrs had gone to the scaffold. St. Augustine, St. Thomas Becket, St. Thomas More, Challoner, and Newman would have been perfectly at their ease among us; were, in fact, present there with us" (334). Hence, when the Church began to alter this liturgy in ways that seemed to disrupt these crucial continuities during the 1950s and 1960s (especially by vernacularizing the Mass), many of the Catholics were dismayed. Not only did they mourn the loss of the sensual connection to their coreligionists throughout the world and across time, but some (including Dawson, Waugh, Greene, and Jones) feared that these changes might auger a deeper, if unwitting, accommodation of modern norms like a disregard for tradition and a utilitarian, anti-sacramental mindset. What had begun as a necessary and proper attempt to find a modern idiom for the Church's permanent wisdom appeared to be ending with traditional truths and their ritual expression being eroded by false, yet fashionable, ideas about God and man. Although none of these authors left the Church over this issue, or had their fundamental faith in Christianity shaken, many echoed Waugh in finding the liturgical changes "a bitter trial."[25]

Yet if these mid-century developments seemed inimical in some ways to the ideal of unity, a contemporaneous phenomenon was more conducive to that cause. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, British Christian intellectuals began to devote more attention to ecumenism. Faced with the confident agnosticism of a post-Christian society and rival surrogate faiths like fascism and communism, numerous authors deemed it essential to focus on the shared con-

victions of all orthodox Christians. They hoped that doing so would galvanize such believers against their common secularist antagonists, and would make Christianity more appealing to people attracted by its doctrines but repulsed by its internal divisions. Lewis formulated his famous notion of "mere Christianity" at this time to great popular interest, and upheld it staunchly thenceforth. Sayers similarly advocated articulation of a "Highest Common Factor of Consent" on dogma that all orthodox Catholics could espouse based on the teachings of the Four Great Councils, and hoped to popularize it through a tract—"the Oecumenical Penguin"—that ultimately failed to materialize.[26] While ecumenism was not encouraged among Roman Catholics until the Second Vatican Council, some Catholic writers were driven by their readings of the signs of the times to enter this field precociously. As early as 1930, Waugh claimed that "the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on the one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and Chaos" (230), and Dawson echoed this cultural rationale for ecumenical action two decades later: "our position today is no longer that of a Catholic minority in a Protestant society, but that of a religious minority in a secular or neo-pagan civilization . . . we have to deal not with the validity of Anglican orders but with the existence of the human soul and the ultimate foundations of the moral order."[27] Indeed, Dawson had been at the forefront of the most ambitious British Roman Catholic ecumenical effort of the pre-Vatican II era, the Sword of the Spirit. Founded in 1940 by Arthur Cardinal Hinsley (under the goading of Dawson, who became its vice president, and Barbara Ward), the Sword sought to institutionally unite all people of good will against the totalitarian threat to traditional Western ideals. Its early days were filled with promising successes, culminating in a two-day interdenominational meeting on social and international issues that was held in May 1941 under the joint patronage of Hinsley and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Although such interdenominational collaboration soon foundered on

the opposition of both Catholic and Protestant rigorists, its ebbing did not diminish Dawson's dedication to ecumenical orthodoxy as a counterweight to totalitarian tyranny.

As Dawson's support for ecumenism and leadership of the Sword of the Spirit suggests, he, like many of his orthodox peers, regarded traditional Christianity as a source of cultural, as well as religious, unity. One of Dawson's signature themes was his belief that religion is the basis of culture and, consequently, that a society that loses its religion eventually also loses its culture. He, and most of his fellow Christian thinkers, feared that the post-Christian West was so imperiled. If most of them rejected Belloc's crude identification of Europe and the Faith, they did assert that Christianity had been a crucial shaping influence on Western culture, and hence that abandoning that formative faith would eviscerate their society. As Waugh argued in 1930, "It is no longer possible . . .to accept the benefits of civilization and at the same time deny the supernatural basis upon which it rests" (167). Dawson spelled out what many Christians considered the implications of this denial five years later. He maintained that "the new social ideals and secular forms of cultures themselves represent partial and one-sided survivals of the Christian social tradition," as modern ideologies and institutions like democracy, nationalism, liberalism, socialism, humanitarianism, and progress were all secular surrogates for Christianity that had been fostered by it and were rooted in it. But since secularism "did not create these moral ideals, so, too, it cannot preserve them. It lives on the spiritual capital that it has inherited from Christian civilization, and as this is exhausted something else must come to take its place." As Christianity disappeared, he cautioned, so would the virtues celebrated in its secular substitutes. Rather than having more liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, and social advance without Christianity, Europe would decay into some type of "'totalitarian' secularism."[28]

Dawson and his like-minded peers hence concluded that only a renewal of orthodoxy could give Western culture the cohesion and

spiritual depth and energy it needed to resist the hegemony of the irreligious ideologies emanating from East and West. They argued that plans for European unity must satisfy the soul's needs as well as the body's, and therefore that political and economic unity were insufficient without agreement on the deeper cultural mores that mold public policy, what Eliot called the "pre-political" sphere. They felt further that only overarching adherence to a catholic faith would provide a suitably broad and transcendent source of unity to allow distinct Western societies to balance their legitimate desires for political and cultural autonomy with their membership in this integrating European order and culture-heritage. As Eliot (who was greatly influenced by Dawson's views on religion and culture) summarized, "no political and economic organization, however much goodwill it commands, can supply what this culture unity gives," and "the dominant force in creating a common culture between peoples, each of which has its own distinct culture, is religion…without a common faith, all efforts toward drawing nations closer together in culture can produce only an illusion of unity." And, Eliot stressed, the common faith that would be the foundation of this hoped-for common European home with many mansions must be the traditional Christianity that was currently unfashionable: "I am talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is . . . It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until recently—been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance" (263–64). The stone rejected by the builders of post-Christian Europe was thus the cornerstone of the Christian intellectuals' hopes for a renewed Christendom.

What, then, is the legacy of these thinkers who sought to make what they deemed the ever-ancient wisdom of the Christian heritage ever-new? Some (particularly Dawson, Jones, and Sayers) have received shamefully inadequate recognition of their achievement, yet others (especially Lewis, Tolkien, Greene, Waugh, and Eliot) remain

both widely popular and seriously studied; and these authors generally tend to eclipse their putative successors among modern British Christian writers.[29] Although their vision of a restored Christian faith and culture was persistently unpopular and remains far from realization presently, this pragmatic measure misses the intellectual and historical significance of the twentieth-century revival of orthodox Christianity. Indeed, it was these authors' very willingness to swim against the modern mainstream that defines their contribution to British and Christian thought. In contesting modernity's core principles, and in doing so from an identifiably orthodox Christian perspective, these thinkers used their considerable skills to obtain a hearing for ideals that were increasingly at odds with the tenor of their time. In fields ranging from journalism to fiction to poetry to history to social criticism, they offered a radical alternative to their era's ascendant precepts, and made their interpretations of a supposedly superseded faith a constituent element of their age's climate of opinion. Even if the modernist (and postmodernist) worldview remains dominant, posterity will be incalculably impoverished if it ignores a considerable proportion of these literary Christians, for they pose a challenge to that outlook that its defenders disregard at the price of a truncated understanding of their own standpoint and of the genres in which they work. Surely Chesterton, Dawson, Eliot, Jones, Greene, Waugh, Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers have a permanent claim on the attention of serious minds.

Whatever the future holds, though, students of Britain's past will have the record of a movement that confronted modernity at its roots, one that blossomed in an atmosphere more hostile to traditional religious growth than at any previous point in British history; and one that hence made orthodox Christianity part of twentieth-century British culture to an extent that could scarcely have been predicted when this revival germinated. Eliot's eulogy of Chesterton thus also suits himself and all these authors: Eliot argued that even if Chesterton's ideas

> appear to be totally without effect, even if they should be demonstrated to be wrong—which would perhaps only mean that men have not the good will to carry them out—they were *the* ideas that for his time were fundamentally Christian and Catholic. He did more, I think, than any man of his time…to maintain the existence of the important minority in the modern world.[30]

A character in George Orwell's *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* (1936) labels the Catholic Church "a standing temptation to the intelligentsia." Although hostile himself to orthodoxy, Orwell was an astute observer of its widespread appeal to other intellectuals, an acumen that historians are at last beginning to share. As Allitt and Pearce have demonstrated, understanding why so many twentieth-century British thinkers could not resist what they deemed this good temptation is necessary for comprehending that epoch's intellectual milieu fully. In embracing a religion radically unlike the ideologies predominant in their day, these men and women discovered what they considered an authoritative source of both personal religious meaning and moral imagination; and this faith also provided a transcendent, tragic, traditionalist teleology that they proposed as an alternative public doctrine when opposing their era's regnant norms. To them, orthodox Christianity was a more holistic and realistic explanation of life, one promising order, respect for human dignity, cultural coherence and vitality, and the assurance that however foolish their own age was, the species is wise. The dreams of avarice and power propounded by modern ideologues that enchanted so many other intellectuals seemed passing flights of fancy by comparison with the permanent sense of reality that the Christians felt they had found in orthodoxy. Believing (with Yeats) that their days were dragon-ridden, these self-styled guerrillas of grace sharpened the swords of the spirit and of imagination, many of them on the rock of Peter, hoping that what they considered their contemporary crusades would make them swords of honor.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, 11 Feb. 1928; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 457–58.
2. Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920–1985* (London: Collins, 1986), 221–22, 224.
3. Calvert Alexander, *The Catholic Literary Revival* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1935).
4. Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that Mr. Pearce and I corresponded twice in 1996 about *Literary Converts*, when he was researching it. We have not communicated since then, though.
5. Marie-Francoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations With Graham Greene* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 152.
6. Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 91–92.
7. All parenthetical references are to Pearce, *Literary Converts*.
8. Christopher Dawson, *Education and the Crisis of Christian Culture* (New York: Henry Regnery Co., 1949), 12.
9. Christopher Dawson, *Christianity in East & West*, ed. John Mulloy (1959; reprint, Peru, Ill.: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1981), 217.
10. Greene to Vivien Dayrell-Browning; quoted in Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene, Vol. I: 1904–1939* (New York: Viking, 1989), 259, who estimates this letter's date as early December 1925. Even as Greene later questioned numerous authoritative Church teachings, he continued to insist on the importance of dogma, claiming as late as 1979: "I'm not in opposition to Rome . . . There are certain points of reference which cannot be abandoned, otherwise one might as well go and become a Buddhist or a Hindu. I believe in the necessity of a minimum of dogmas, and I certainly believe in heresy . . . If one considers oneself a Catholic there are a certain number of facts which have to be accepted . . . So long as differences between the churches exist, these differences ought to be upheld. . . ." Allain, *Other Man*, 158–59.
11. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Vol. 2: 1937–1943: From Novelist to Playwright*, ed. Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society/Carole Green Publishing, 1997), 425. Emphasis in original.
12. *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Vol. 3, *The Thing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 265, 299.
13. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), 155.
14. *Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, 2: 402–3.
15. The best treatments of this tradition's tenets are Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit: 1850–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain:*

Romantic Protest, 1945–1980 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Veldman's book is especially valuable to students of modern British Christianity, as she devotes extensive attention to Lewis, Tolkien, and Schumacher, and also discusses Chesterton and Belloc.

16. Greene quoted in Dinesh D'Souza, "Beyond Marx and Jesus," *Crisis* 2 (May 1988): 21.
17. Greene quoted in Maria Cuoto, *Graham Greene: On the Frontier* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 213–14.
18. *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, Vol. 5, *The End of the Armistice*, ed. Frank Sheed (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 585–86.
19. The response of British Christian writers to Fascism has been the subject of lively debate recently in *The Chesterton Review*. See, especially, the entire February and May 1999 issues of the *Review*; and Christina Scott, "Christopher Dawson's Reaction to Fascism and Marxism," *The Chesterton Review* 25 (August 1999): 405–7.
20. Christopher Dawson, *The Modern Dilemma* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1932), 95.
21. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935), 44.
22. Christopher Dawson, "English Catholicism and Victorian Liberalism," *The Tablet*, 1950; reprinted in *The Dawson Newsletter* 11 (Fall 1993): 9.
23. G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, 5 June 1920.
24. Christopher Dawson to Col. Ross-Duggan, 18 June 1953; quoted in Christina Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1984), 206.
25. In an earlier article in these pages, I sought to limn the countercultural objections to these liturgical alterations in the thought of Greene, Dawson, and Jones ("'I Thought the Church and I Wanted the Same Thing'," *Logos* 1:4 [Fall 1998]: 36–65.). In the course of those remarks, I argued that discontent with these changes diminished the faith of those authors and their loyalty to the Church. Rebuttals of my analysis by (among others) Christina Scott have convinced me that my judgment on this matter was mistaken. I wish to take this opportunity to correct my error and indicate my agreement with Mrs. Scott's position, that "it is entirely legitimate to oppose cultural aspects of liturgical reform, and such opposition has no bearing whatever on spiritual life and faith." (Christina Scott, "The Meaning of the Millennium: The Ideas of Christopher Dawson," *Logos* 2:2 [Spring 1999]: 81.)
26. See Giles Watson, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Oecumenical Penguin," *Seven: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 14 (1997): 17–32.
27. Dawson, "English Catholicism and Victorian Liberalism."
28. Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State*, xxi, 64–65.
29. In a 1997 survey of readers by Waterstone's Booksellers (which Pearce mentions), for instance, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was named the premier book of the twentieth century. *The Hobbit* also made this ranking of 100 hundred titles, as did volumes by Lewis, Waugh, and Greene. In America, groups as different as the Modern

Library and *The Intercollegiate Review* agreed that Eliot's *Selected Essays* was one of the ten most important nonfiction books of the century; and the *Review*'s ranking of fifty volumes also listed works by Lewis, Dawson, Chesterton, and Copelston.

30. T. S. Eliot, *The Tablet*, 20 June 1936; reprinted in *G. K. Chesterton: The Critical Judgments*, ed. D. J. Conlon (Antwerp: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius, 1976), 531–32. Emphasis in original.