

Introduction

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Christopher Dawson's *Medieval Essays* may seem at first glance a rather modest work. Dawson originally published six essays, delivered as the Forwood Lectures at Liverpool University, in 1934 under the title *Medieval Religion*. Twenty years later in 1954, he added six more essays to the collection, two of which had been published elsewhere, under the title *Medieval Essays*. In spite of the modest title and the circumstances of composition and compilation, *Medieval Essays* is not a loose and eclectic collection. It is a work of signal importance not only for those interested in the thought of Christopher Dawson but for anyone with a serious interest in the Middle Ages.

Dawson surely intended such a modest title for the new collection. The original title of *Medieval Religion* was simultaneously too ambitious and too narrow. The Middle Ages was a period of several religions,¹ and the essays are concerned principally with one of them, Christianity; at the same time, each essay reaches well beyond any conventional understandings of medieval religion. Other possible titles, such as *Medieval Culture*, would have made claims beyond Dawson's intention. Thus, the volume is titled simply *Medieval Essays*. Nonetheless, these essays form a compelling, organic whole in which one of the twentieth century's foremost historians of religion and culture turns his attention to a period of daunting scope. However modest the title, this volume remains unique in its breadth and insight.

The rediscovery of the Middle Ages by the Romantics is an event of no less importance in the history of European thought than the rediscovery of Hel-

1. In describing the three phases of religious development in the Middle Ages, Dawson says, "Moreover, we must also remember that in none of these periods was Catholicism or any form of Christianity the only European religion . . ." (p. 85).

lenism by the Humanists. It meant an immense widening of our intellectual horizon. . . . I believe that the discovery of the Romantics was a genuine discovery and that there really is something in medieval culture essentially different from anything that is to be found either in the ancient or the modern world, and that we can never understand medieval history unless we discover what it is. (P. 184)

Many of us who teach the Middle Ages settle too readily for extrinsic description. The Middle Ages is more or less the thousand years from A.D. 500 to 1500 in what is more or less geographically modern Europe. But is there something distinctive to be found in those years in that place? For Christopher Dawson the answer is yes. *Medieval Essays* is an attempt to discover and articulate that distinctiveness.

Medieval Essays is not a narrative of medieval history. Dawson assumes the contours of that history, and one cannot help but be struck by his command of it. His task is to understand it, and for Dawson that means understanding the culture in which it takes place. So the question returns: Just what is it that the historian studies when he studies the culture of the Middle Ages? Can we describe it in an adequate way so as simultaneously to articulate its uniqueness (the insight of the Romantics) and yet not lose it by falsifying oversimplification? One might wonder if the question is a false start. Is not the Middle Ages—even limited to the Christian Middle Ages—many cultures? Keenly aware of this question and its suggestion of reductionism, Dawson nonetheless thinks that something unique is to be found in the Middle Ages. The period is not simply not antiquity and not modernity; it is positively something, and something more than merely the cultural aggregate of the peoples who populate it.

These essays are part of Dawson's much larger intellectual project, the study of Christian culture. In the initial essay, "The Study of Christian Culture," Dawson articulates the principles that govern his analysis and point to the significance of medieval culture. Dawson takes as his starting point a principle he has developed and defended at great length in his writings: religion is the key of history. "It is impossible to understand a culture unless we understand its religious roots" (p. 5). Religion is not the sole basis for understanding culture, but it is a nec-

essary one; it is a key that opens up an essential reality of a culture by which one can come to some intellectual grasp of its history.

Such a starting point might suggest that the historian's interests are reduced to theology. Dawson rejects any such reduction.

In order to understand the religion of such an age, it is not enough to study it theologically in its essential dogmas and religious principles; it is also necessary to study it sociologically with reference to the changing complex of social traditions and cultural institutions into which it became incorporated. The social form of a religion depends not only on the inner logic of its moral doctrine but on the type of culture with which it is united, and also on the way on which its union with the culture is achieved. (Pp. 50-51)

The starting point, far from narrowing the traditional scope of the historian, entails its expansion, especially as that traditional scope was understood by Dawson's contemporaries. He considers not only religion and theology, but also philosophy, church and state relations, science, literature, and manifold sociological factors. These are in constant interplay throughout the work; for example, much of "The Feudal Society and the Christian Epic" is a sociological study of the *chanson de geste*. In his breadth, Dawson anticipates and exemplifies the more ambitious and substantive aspects of medieval studies as they developed in the twentieth century, even though he would, I suspect, make no claim to be a medievalist.

More important still, such a starting point, with its focus on religion and culture, situates the Middle Ages within something much larger: Christian culture. As a Christian culture, the Middle Ages is an instance of something that transcends it both temporally and geographically. Dawson ranges widely, well beyond the usual scope of the medieval historian, because if medieval culture cannot be understood apart from Christian culture, then one needs to have some grasp of that larger reality of which it is a part. Here is perhaps Dawson's most controversial historical claim, namely, that "the main stream of Christian culture is one and should be studied as an intelligible historical unity" (p. 5). Even a superficial reading will make it clear that Dawson does not think that Christianity can be identified with one particular cultural instantiation, for example, the Latin West or Byzantium. His

understanding is subtler, namely, that when Christianity encounters a culture and enters into that culture, it produces something new, something that can make the claim to being Christian, for that culture is now something different from what it was before, if only in its struggles with a new and alien religion. That something new is an historical reality. Though it is new in relation to the culture it enters, it nonetheless remains one with the larger reality of Christian culture. Because "the main stream of Christian culture is one," particular instances, such as the Middle Ages, must be seen in a larger frame, the frame of Christian culture as "an intelligible historical unity." The task of the historian is to describe and articulate that intelligibility.

In Dawson's interest in the interplay between religion and culture we find another carefully articulated focus of the essays. These essays deal neither with the whole subject of Christian culture nor with the entirety of the Middle Ages as an instance of Christian culture. Instead, they consider "particular aspects of the formative process of Christian culture" (pp. 5-6). Throughout these essays, as indeed throughout all his writings, Dawson is interested in the dynamic character of culture. Culture as a human and temporal reality changes, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes obviously, sometimes dramatically, always significantly. The points of "formative process" most interest Dawson and give these essays their intellectual substance and unity. Dawson looks to critical points of cultural development, change, evolution, and decline and attempts to describe and account for what is happening. Although the essays are broad, the limitations and focus are precise.

One of the appeals of the Middle Ages is the clarity with which one can see the interplay of religion and culture in general and the formation of a Christian culture in particular. "There has never been an age in which the transforming power of religion manifested itself so universally in so many different fields" (p. 13). This is an historical claim, not a theological or apologetic one. "I do not maintain that the general level of religious life was higher than at other times or that the state of the Church was healthier, still less that the scandals were rarer or the moral evils less obvious. What one can assert is that in the Middle Ages more than at other periods in the life of our civilization the European

culture and the Christian religion were in a state of communion" (p. 159). This communion, sustained over time in a period of substantial historical record, provides a relatively clear object of study for the historian. Vernacular literature, for example, provides a rich instance of the formative process. In speaking of the "gradual process of interpenetration between the barbaric society of the young peoples of western Europe and the Christian culture of the later Roman Empire," Dawson argues that "nowhere do we see this process so clearly as in the history of medieval literature" (p. 143).

The paramount focus on formative process is seen in the ways in which Dawson breaks history into periods and the ways in which he characterizes the standard periodic divisions of history. The first and principal division Dawson introduces is threefold, corresponding roughly to patristic, early medieval, and late medieval. His characterization, however, is significant. He speaks of three phases of the evolution of Christian culture corresponding to three different cultural situations. Immediately in play is the consideration of formative process seen in the light of Christianity's encounter with culture. In the first phase, Christianity comes as a new religion into an old culture. In the second, Christianity encounters the barbarian world not simply as Christianity, but as the bearer of a higher culture, which it has adapted from classical civilization. Finally, in the third phase, "Christianity inspires a new movement of cultural creativity, in which the new life of the new peoples finds a new expression in consciously Christian forms" (p. 8; cf. p. 11).

Dawson works to disentangle the various cultural threads that contribute to the movements and tensions within each period. In considering, for example, the Late Roman Empire of the fourth century, Dawson speaks of three elements so powerful as to be characterized as three distinct societies. "There was the new religious society of the Christian Church, with its tradition of independent spiritual authority; there was the city-state, with its Hellenistic traditions of intellectual and material culture; and there was the Empire itself, which more and more was coming to represent the oriental tradition of sacred monarchy and bureaucratic collectivism" (p. 44). These are surely broad

strokes, but necessary to the task of understanding the essential factors that account for the developments and changes within late Roman culture seen as a whole.

Although the particular sequence of the formation of Christian culture is most prominent, other developments are at play throughout the essays. Perhaps most notable is the rise of Moslem culture and especially the high civilization of Moslem Spain. Especially in "The Moslem West and the Oriental Background of Later Medieval Culture," Dawson attempts to understand not only the ways in which this civilization influenced Christian culture, but also to understand its own internal dynamics of growth and decline.

Because Dawson defines periods principally by points of cultural transition, they are necessarily fluid; and because his understanding of culture is by analogy with a living organism, it is impossible to date precisely. The pinpointing of transition or growth is a difficult task indeed. We may be confident that a person is at a given point in time a child and then at a later point in time an adult; we can be far less confident when the transition took place; or better, we would be correct in stating a period of years and would be simply mistaken in stating a specific year. For ease, we might choose to say that a person becomes an adult at the age of twenty-one; but it would be an odd science of man that would insist on its correspondence to reality. The processes by which cultures mature and decline are similarly extended, and it is to describing these that Dawson's considerable analytic skills are set.

Historical periods are not the only categories to be simultaneously adopted and reconsidered in *Medieval Essays*. Geographical terms also come into play. The reader of *Medieval Essays* may feel frustration, for example, with Dawson's use of "Western" or "Europe." Dawson avoids strict definition. The reason is surely his sense of the way historical and cultural realities develop. "Europe" is, even as a geographical term, tricky; "West" even trickier. But, of course, the terms mean more than location on a map.

In "The Christian East and the Oriental Background of Christian Culture," Dawson speaks of West, East, and Europe in a variety of

ways as he attempts to trace the components that come to constitute the historical reality of the emerging Christian culture. In considering the period from A.D. 200 to 1000, Dawson notes that "the leadership of world civilization passed to the East, and the vital influences that affected Western culture were predominantly of oriental origin. Consequently it is impossible to explain the rise of medieval culture in purely European terms, since we have to look outside Europe to find the source of many of its characteristic institutions and ideas" (pp. 15-16). The Byzantine Empire, "which throughout this period remained by far the greatest European power and the chief surviving representative of higher culture in the West" (p. 16), is an example of the shift eastward. Dawson articulates a "double aspect" of Byzantine culture: on the one hand, it is "the last phase of that great movement of conquest and colonization which had carried Greek culture far into the heart of Asia and had founded Greek cities on the banks of the Indus and as far as Balkh and Khojend;" on the other hand, it is "the result of a process of orientalization which had profoundly transformed the character of the Roman Empire and the Greek culture" (pp. 16-17).

The fluidity of geographical language is illustrative of Dawson's thinking. Just as he is interested in those points in time that are points of significant change, so too he is interested in those geographical locations that are points of cultural meeting and influence. For the modern western historian, this will often be where West meets East. Where that point is as a cultural reality will shift over time. Byzantium figures prominently in just this way. It has elements reaching back to the city states of ancient Greece. It also has elements for which classical Greek culture and its development cannot account, but instead have their origin in cultural forms still further East. As Dawson traces oriental influence on Byzantium in the form of monasticism and of certain types of sacred monarchy, he all but redraws the lines of East and West. "Throughout the early Middle Ages and the preceding centuries the frontier between East and West was not the frontier between the Eastern and Western Churches in the modern sense; it ran far to the east and south—in Armenia and Mesopotamia, in Syria and in Egypt. . . . Here the Eastern Empire was an alien intrusive power, whose relations

to the conquered peoples were not unlike those of the modern European colonial powers in the East" (p. 19). The three different senses of "east" in this one passage suggest, if not a certain playfulness, at least a delight in the fluidity of such terms, in so far as they speak of cultural "frontiers," of those places of cultural exchange and influence.

Dawson's sense of the cultural character of geographical terms shapes his answer to the question: What would a disinterested observer of Europe in A.D. 1000 have seen?

To such a one "Western civilization" would have had a very different meaning from what it has today. It would not have been specifically European, since Europe hardly existed as a historical or geographical concept. Western civilization in the tenth century was still, no less than in the days of the Roman Empire, practically identical with the Mediterranean world. Three great powers dominated and shared this world: the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans and Asia Minor, the Fatimid Khalifate in Africa and Syria, and the Spanish Khalifate in the far west; and their capitals—Constantinople, Fustat (Old Cairo) and Cordova—were the three foci of Western civilization. (Pp. 104-5)

In seeing the powerful civilizations surviving in the Mediterranean, Dawson works to dislodge a common Northern European prejudice. More important, Dawson recognizes that these civilizations give shape and form to the civilization emerging to the north. These are not closed civilizations, but civilizations in a fundamental relation to one another. Thus Spain is particularly dear to Dawson as a critical junction of cultural influence. He speaks of it here in the context of the Spanish Khalifate, but also sees it as part of Europe. In a remark that many might still find arresting, Dawson describes the Spanish Moslem philosopher Averroes as "the most influential European thinker of the age" (p. 86).

Dawson's appreciation of the complexity of culture, his interest in the process of cultural development, and his encyclopedic knowledge of particulars all feed an underlying appreciation of the possibilities of history. Dawson is neither determinist nor progressivist. He is as often interested in the discontinuities as the continuities. "The history of the early Middle Ages is remarkable for its discontinuous character; indeed, at first sight it seems to consist of a series of false starts" (p. 103).

The history of the relationship of culture and the natural sciences is similar. "For the history of science is not that of a simple continuous development. It takes a different form in every culture, Babylonian, Greek, Moslem and Christian, and until a culture has created a scientific ideal that is in harmony with its own spirit, it cannot bear scientific fruit" (p. 137).

Dawson never falls prey to the fallacy of the inevitability of the actual. His articulation of alternative possibilities often serves to set in fresh relief the realities of history. He describes the Armenian efforts to form an alliance with the Mongols against Islam and the Franciscan missions to the Mongols and then beyond into China in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Various instantiations of Christian culture—the ancient Armenian, the newly flowering Latin, the emerging Far Eastern—are joined briefly through the cultural and commercial link of the Mongols. What shape would history have taken if this increasing penetration of Christianity to the East had developed, if the missions to the Mongols had been successful, if the alliance with Armenia against Islam had been cemented? But Armenia is betrayed and the Mongols are converted to Islam. The result is a deep rupture in Christian culture, more appreciated in considering the possibility of "a channel of Christian intercourse across the Old World from Paris to Canton" (p. 27). The pressure of Islam in the East is now all the greater, and Europe's attention is increasingly to the West and to the Atlantic; the implications for subsequent history are manifold.

Strikingly contemporary in Dawson's essays is his appreciation of perspective in the work of historians. Racial and geographical categories have all too often been primary in considering world cultures, such as Christian culture, which do not, however, find their commonality in race but in religious faith (p. 7). It is precisely for this reason that Dawson must continually test and stretch the usual understandings of temporal and geographical categories that are all too easily translated into falsely narrow cultural categories.

Both in the North and South, on the Baltic and in the Western Mediterranean, the frontiers of Christendom cut across the geographical and racial frontiers, so that the pagan Lithuanians and the Moslem Spaniards belonged to different

cultural and spiritual worlds. While on the other hand, the Christians of Asia, however remote they might be in speech and behaviour, were felt to be in some sense fellow-citizens in the great society of Christendom.

This sense endured longer in the East than in the West. Armenian poets were still composing elegies on the destruction of the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem when the descendants of the Crusaders themselves were destroying Christendom in the interests of power politics; while at the extreme limit of the Christian world, the little kingdom of Karthli still fought a lonely crusade against overwhelming odds and maintained the tradition of Christian chivalry down to the age of Voltaire. (Pp. 7-8)²

The nationalist perspective, especially among European historians, has posed serious problems in appreciating the Middle Ages. Dawson notes how much of the early historical work on the Middle Ages tended to have, implicitly or explicitly, the celebration of the nation in its modern configuration as its object. This made for particular kinds of distortions. "Historical continuity is conceived primarily as a continuity of national development" (p. 104). Such a perspective downplays or underestimates the universalist elements of both Church and empire in the culture. Modern nationalist concerns also tend to distort history even within a nation. Dawson does not deny that something of first significance is happening on levels analogous to national culture. He sees an essential expression of medieval culture in the emergence of vernacular literatures. The nationalist perspective fails to recognize not its own national developments but the broader component of Christianity that both transcends and infuses vernacular and cultural particularities. Because the Church was an already constituted society and ubiquitous among the new barbarian peoples, Christianity provided a profound cultural basis of unity. This universal character of Christian culture gave rise to any number of peculiarities and tensions within any given particular national or vernacular culture. It is this defining tension and reality that geographical, racial, and nationalist perspectives fail to see.

2. Consider as well footnote 2 at the end of this quotation: "The great martyr queen, St. Kethevan, suffered at Shiraz in 1624 and the author of the last heroic epic or *chanson de geste*—the *Guaramiani*—survived until the beginning of the nineteenth century."

Dawson also considers the question of contemporary bias at the heart of his own analysis that religion is a key in understanding history, especially medieval history. The reality of modern secularization is not simply that many moderns lack a sympathy with the religious character of culture but that they are positively hostile to it. "The secularist is exceptionally sensitive to the intrusion of religion and religious ideas into the field of education which he regards as neutral ground" (p. 12). The contentious place of religion in our own contemporary western culture renders a study of the place of religion in medieval culture problematic. It also makes such study necessary. "The more secularized a society becomes the more necessary is this study, since without it the thought and literature of the past will become increasingly unintelligible to the modern mind" (p. 12).

Dawson's own religious convictions are often brought to bear in evaluations of his thought. He is described as a "Catholic historian." This does not seem to be a neutral description, serving either as a warning to those of a secular or Protestant leaning or as a commendation to those of a Catholic leaning. The implication is that some apologetic task is afoot. His is not an apologetic task, Catholic, Christian, or otherwise. Yet he is wise enough to make no pretense that religious conviction, or the lack of it, can simply be put aside. The historian brings his perspective, and Dawson's honesty is striking. It is hard to imagine a non-Catholic writing *Medieval Essays*; it is not hard, however, to imagine a non-Catholic reading and appreciating *Medieval Essays*. Dawson's own Catholic sensibility is perhaps most manifest in his considerations of what the Middle Ages might have become under different circumstances. His sense of loss at moments of Christian disunity and betrayal and failure is palpable.

Since the first publication of *Medieval Essays*, medieval studies has flowered. Primary sources across the disciplines have been published. Scholars have deepened our knowledge of many aspects of medieval culture. Medievalists are increasingly specialists, and specialization is a sign of a discipline's intellectual maturity. For the philosopher, literary critic, historian of science, political scientist, or theologian, such specialization permits a clearer focus on his particular interests as they

bear on the Middle Ages. For the medievalist, however, for the person who seeks to understand the Middle Ages itself, who seeks to come to some grasp of the whole, such specialized developments pose a particular kind of danger.

Medieval Essays is, a half century after its first appearance, timely. It provides an invaluable consideration of the big picture. With his articulated focus, his sensitivity to the breadth and fluidity of temporal and geographical categories, and his keen sense of the fitting piece of evidence, Dawson still serves as a model of the grand project of the cultural historian. Specialists may well find in reading *Medieval Essays* any number of particulars with which to quibble; they may, as well, find themselves rethinking their own fields more broadly or in a somewhat different light.

Dawson's work advances the most difficult of questions because it seeks to get at the historical realities of culture. These are difficult questions because the answers are so elusive. But the difficulty of the task is no reason to shy away from it. The clarity, the suppleness, and the boldness of Dawson's thinking make *Medieval Essays* a stimulating work precisely in its challenge to think afresh.

Christopher Dawson



MEDIEVAL ESSAYS