

Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* Part II

Three Key Sources of Tension and Creativity (93-95)

1. Classical Culture—tendency towards the extreme of (secular) humanism
2. The Christian Religion---poles of both mysticism and material culture
3. Varying Traditions of the European Peoples—nationalist impulse, including fascism and Communism, leading to ethnic self-assertion and violence

“But these elements were kept in check in the past by common spiritual loyalties and by the discipline of an objective intellectual tradition. In fact, the history of Western culture has been the story of the progressive ‘civilization’ of the barbaric energy of Western man and the progressive subordination of nature to human purpose under the twofold influence of Christian ethics and scientific reason” (94-95).

Elements in the Study of Western Culture (107-109)

It should include Christian philosophy, Christian literature (i.e. Great Texts, including theology), and Christian culture.

It proceeds from two directions:

- 1) Christendom as one of the four world civilizations (the West, China, India, and Islam)
- 2) The specific Christian culture of peoples shaped by Christianity

It includes a general education in all six eras of Christian culture with a detailed study of one:
[compare with “Dawson Period Coverage” handout]

1. Primitive Christianity (1st-4th century AD)
2. Patristic Christianity (4th to 6th century AD)
3. The Formation of Western Christianity (6th to 11th century AD)
4. Medieval Christendom (11th to 15th century AD)
5. Divided Christendom (16th to 18th century AD)
6. Secularized Christendom (18th century AD to present)

Four Aspects of the Christian Conception of History (124)

1. The extension of the Incarnation: how humanity is transformed and recreated by the gospel
2. The theory of world ages as “progressive stages of revelation”
3. The expanding Kingdom of God, including the enrichment of the various cultures as they accept Christianity (including those beyond the West)
4. Preparation of those cultures for the reception of the gospel

Definition of Civilization (114-115): a “superculture” (largest recognizable cultural unit) and a way of life (i.e. common standards of behavior, including that of a moral order); Dawson is assuming that this may be marked by tensions and developments and may be threatened, lost, or regained.

Definition(s) of “the Christian way of life” (115):

- “a cosmos of spiritual relations uniting heaven and earth”
- “uniting the order of social and moral life with the order of divine grace” (i.e. nature and supernature)
- “an extension of the Incarnation” i.e. “the embodiment of Christianity in social institutions and patterns of life and behavior”
- “both sacramental and liturgical”

Three Interrelated Fields of Study (116, 123)

1. The (Jewish and) Christian way of life
2. The Pre-Christian and Non-Christian ways of life it interacts with
3. The resulting cross-fertilization and creation of new forms of culture

Some Possible Curricular Forms (118)

- Courses in various subjects (literature, art, the classics, philosophy, theology, education)
- Graduate-level institutes
- Upper-level undergraduate study

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you find Dawson’s theological basis for his proposals convincing? Explain.
2. Can Dawson’s proposed analysis apply to global Christianity?
3. Dawson himself did make some study of border cultures (those that exist between large civilizations): How necessary should these be to what he is proposing?
4. Is it possible to speak of world/global civilizations? Why and/or why not?
5. If you had to focus on only one of Dawson’s possible curricular forms, which would it be and why?
6. Likewise, if you had to focus on one of the six periods of Christian culture Dawson lines out which one would it be and why?
7. How related are Christianity and Christendom? Where do they differ?