

Christopher Dawson's "Institutional Forms Of Christian Culture" and Opus Dei

By Dr John Gay

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A central tenet of Christopher Dawson's thought is the fundamental role of religion in the creation and survival of human societies and civilizations. The idea of the dependency of culture on religion provided the original inspiration for his life's work, which he conceived as a monumental synthesis of the history of Christian culture. The Marxist teaching that religion is a by-product of society and a tool of oppression in the class struggle was for Dawson an inversion of the truth that culture is itself the product of religion and that Christianity is a liberating force in human society. Religion is "the great creative force in culture"(1) while culture itself is "above all a moral order and involves a community of values and standards which provide its internal or moral principle of unity."(2) Nor is the importance of religion limited to the formative stages of the life of civilizations, since,

"in the last resort every civilization is built on a religious foundation: it is the expression in social institutions and cultural activity of a faith or vision of reality which gives the civilization its spiritual unity. Thus the great world cultures correspond with the great world religions and when a religion dies the civilization that it inspired gradually decays". (3)

Christian culture "is the Christian way of life. As the Church is the extension of the Incarnation, so Christian culture is the embodiment of Christianity in social institutions and patterns of life and behaviour". (4) In his essay, *The Institutional Forms of Christian Culture*, Dawson distinguishes three variations of the relation of a religion to the culture in which it expresses itself. Religion may be so embedded in culture as to be virtually indistinguishable from custom, and thereby become static and lifeless. The polar opposite is a religion which denies any value to the temporal realm and is wholly concerned with the transcendent. While such religions "often possess considerable dynamic energy their appeal is a negative one, so that they are revolutionary and subversive forces". (5) The cultural expression of Christianity is situated between these poles, since it combines otherworldly asceticism with an affirmation of the value of creation and human society.

Dawson identifies the liturgy as the primary social expression of Christian culture; from this common source flow music, art and drama. But it is in a second mode of cultural expression, monasticism, that "religion and culture attain their most complete fusion"(6) since the monasteries are self-contained autonomous Christian communities defined by a Rule which integrates the lives of the monks. These outposts of the Church were "islands of Christian culture in a sea of barbarism"(7) whose influence permeated in varying degrees the barbarian societies in which they were planted. Dawson distinguishes four successive types of Christian monasticism spanning 1450 years, from the original oriental version of St. Pachomus in Egypt, through Benedictine monasticism and its variants to the friars and finally the Society of Jesus. "The dissolution of the Jesuits in 1763 marks the end of the era of distinctively Christian culture".(8) Dawson qualifies this view by acknowledging that,

"in reality no age has the right to call itself Christian in the absolute sense: all stand under the same condemnation. The one merit of a relatively Christian age of culture - and it is no small one - is that it recognizes its spiritual indigence and stands open to God and the spiritual world; while the age or culture that is thoroughly non-Christian is closed to God and prides itself on its own progress to perfection".(9)

Nevertheless, this period is the source of contemporary secularized culture, which cannot be understood without reference to it and which "lives on the spiritual capital that it has inherited from Christian civilization".(10)

The end of a recognizably Christian civilization in the 18th century does not, of course, signify the disappearance of the institutions (like monasticism) in which the Church expresses itself and through which it continuously strives to extend the Incarnation to the whole of society. In fact, new variants of the institutional forms of Christian culture continue to appear. One of the most vigorous and certainly the most original of these is Opus Dei, an "institutional form" born in the 20th century.

The originality of the Opus Dei has been obscured for many contemporary Catholics by a natural tendency to consider it as a development or variant of monasticism, representing the "fifth stage" of religious life, and the heir and successor of the Society of Jesus. Since both religious life and Opus Dei are means of sanctification for their members, the confusion is the more understandable. This view, however, completely misrepresents the nature of Opus Dei which cannot be understood as "another link in the evolution of the religious state or its underlying spirituality. Rather, it is a totally different phenomenon ..." that "leaps over the centuries to join up with the first Christians, with those, Jews or Gentiles, who received the apostles' preaching and brought it into the ordinary framework of their lives".(11) Whereas the religious life, with its vows of poverty, chastity and obedience represents a renunciation of, and separation from, the world- understood not only as "what is fostered by the three lusts but also the state of life, the interests, work and occupations ... of the other faithful who do not have this special vocation"(12), Opus Dei is conceived as the mirror-image of the religious state. Its founder put this succinctly:

"We can say that ascetically, the terms are reversed: what in religious life is an obstacle to following Jesus Christ according to that vocation, in the Work becomes the way... Precisely what hinders the religious from fulfilling his aim, is for us the sine qua non, the sole means for carrying out a specific apostolate and to sanctify ourselves ... Work is for us the axis on which must turn all our efforts to achieve Christian perfection ... The special character of the spirituality of Opus Dei is in the fact that each one ought to sanctify his own profession or occupation, his ordinary work; to sanctify himself precisely in this professional task; and through this task to sanctify others".(13)

The religious seeks to transform society from without, Opus Dei from within. Its members are fully integrated in the life and activity of society, from which they are not separate or distinguishable by any vow or mark. The strength of Opus Dei as a culturally transforming force derives from this lack of separation. Ordinary work is the very means by which its members sanctify themselves and this precludes any separation. Opus Dei is thus an "Institutional Form" which cannot be understood in terms of liturgy or monasticism, and therefore constitutes a third cultural expression of Christianity.

Dawson saw clearly the cultural dislocation which Opus Dei seems destined to repair when he wrote in 1952 that

"today... it is obviously far more difficult to find a pathway from the surface world of specialized work and mechanized amusement to the deeper level of reality on which the life of our civilization depends".⁽¹⁴⁾

That work itself, transformed into prayer, is this pathway is precisely the dominant idea of Opus Dei. This solution to the sickness of Western civilization was in fact glimpsed by Dawson and expressed in words which strongly evoke the thought of Blessed Jose Maria Escriva:

"To live for eternal truths, to possess the first fruits of eternal life, while facing every practical responsibility and meeting the demands of the present moment and place on their own ground-that is the spirit by which a Christian culture lives and is known. For Christian culture involves a ceaseless effort to widen the frontiers of the kingdom of God - not only horizontally by increasing the number of Christians but vertically by penetrating deeper into human life and bringing every human activity into close relations with its spiritual centre".⁽¹⁵⁾

This penetration can no longer, as with previous Catholic revivals, depend upon reaching a surviving vital Christian tradition among the mass of the population, since the progress of the secularism has largely obliterated the Christian roots of society, and Dawson concludes that,

"our position is more like that of the Christians under the Roman Empire when the Church had on the one hand to convert the pagan masses in the great Mediterranean cities, Antioch and Ephesus and Rome, and at the same time defend its bare right to exist against the crushing weight of an all powerful world state which recognized no limits to its authority".⁽¹⁶⁾

This analysis recalls Fuenmayor's location of the roots of Opus Dei through "leaping over the centuries" to the early Church. The conclusion that in Opus Dei, the third "Institutional Form", the Church has been given a tool precisely fitted to the task confronting it in the historical circumstances of the 21st century, would seem to be inescapable.

ENDNOTES

- (1) Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History* , Sheed and Ward (1957) p 108.
- (2) Christopher Dawson, *Formation of Christendom* , Sheed and Ward (1975) p 44.
- (3) Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* , Sheed and Ward (1952) p 23.
- (4) Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* , Franciscan University Press (1989) p 150.
- (5) Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* , Rutledge and Kegan Paul (1966) p 77.
- (6) Christopher Dawson, *idem* p 73.
- (7) Christopher Dawson, *idem* p 74.
- (8) Christopher Dawson, *idem* p 75.
- (9) Christopher Dawson, *Religion and The Modern State* , Sheed and Ward (1936) p 120.
- (10) Christopher Dawson, *idem* p 64.
- (11) A. de Fuenmayor, V Gomez-Iglesias and J.L. Ilanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Sceptor, Princeton N.J. (1989) p303.
- (12) Bl. JoseMaria Escriva, *Letter* , 25 January 1961, cited in A. de Fuenmayor p 311.
- (13) *ibid* p 311.
- (14) Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* , Sheed and Ward (1952) p 234.
- (15) Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* , Sheed and Ward (1959) p 20.
- (16) Christopher Dawson, *The Movement of World Revolution* , Sheed and Ward (1959) p 66.