CHRISTOPHER DAWSON  
(1889 – 1970)  
Historian of culture & 
Intellectual Architect of Campion College

Biography:

Christopher Dawson was a renowned cultural historian whose writings registered a formative impact on Western minds during the 20th century. T.S. Eliot, while lecturing in America in the 1930s, declared that Dawson was the most powerful intellectual influence in Britain at the time.

Dawson was born in Wales and educated at Winchester School and Oxford University (Trinity College). In 1913 he converted to Catholicism. He held a number of university posts in England, delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh on two successive occasions (1947 and 1948-49), and was the first occupant of a Chair of Catholic Studies at Harvard University (1958-1962).

But in the main he was an independent scholar who worked privately, devoting a lifetime of study to the profound relationship between religious belief and cultural life and change.

He wrote over 20 books and numerous journal articles. Among his best-known works are: Progress and Religion (1929), The Making of Europe (1932), Religion and the Rise of Western Culture (1950), and Dynamics of World History (1956).

In 1961 he published The Crisis of Western Education which proposed the historical study of Christian culture as a basis for understanding and sustaining a Christian identity in a secularist culture. This book formed a major inspiration and guide for the Liberal Arts program developed at Campion College.

To a large extent, Christopher Dawson was the intellectual architect of Campion College.
‘The central conviction which has dominated my mind ever since I began to write . . . is the conviction that the society or culture which has lost its spiritual roots is a dying culture, however prosperous it may appear externally.’

(Enquiries into Religion and Culture, 1933)

---

A SAMPLE OF DAWSON QUOTES

- ‘Only a dying civilisation neglects its dead.’ (The Gods of Revolution, 1972)

- ‘It is no more possible for society to live by bread alone than it is for the individual. Technology and material organisation are not enough. If our civilisation is to recover its vitality, or even to survive, it must cease to neglect its spiritual roots and must realise that religion is not a matter of personal sentiment which has nothing to do with objective realities of society, but is, on the contrary, the very heart of social life and the root of every living culture.’

  (Enquiries into Religion and Culture, 1933)

- ‘[The] spiritual alienation of its own greatest minds is the price that every civilisation has to pay when it loses its religious foundations, and is contented with a purely material success. We are only just beginning to understand how intimately and profoundly the vitality of a society is bound up with its religion.

  ‘It is the religious impulse which supplies the cohesive force which unifies a society and a culture. The great civilisations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by-product; in a very real sense, the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilisations rest.’ (Enquiries into Religion and Culture, 1933)

- ‘What then is to be the fate of this great modern civilisation of ours? A civilisation which has gained an extension and a wealth of power and knowledge which the world has never known before. Is it to waste its forces in the pursuit of selfish and mutually destructive aims, and to perish for lack of vision? Or can we hope that society will once again become animated by a common faith and hope, which will have the power to order our material and intellectual achievements in an enduring spiritual unity?’ (Enquiries into Religion and Culture, 1933)
Christopher Dawson on Education

‘The Church lives again the life of Christ. It has its period of obscurity and growth and its period of manifestation, and this is followed by the catastrophe of the Cross and the new birth that springs from failure.’ (Beyond Politics, 1939)

Christopher Dawson on Education

‘One of the chief defects of modern education has been its failure to find an adequate method for the study of our own civilization. . . . The old domination of classical humanism [centred on ancient Greece and Rome] has passed away, and nothing has taken its place except the scientific specialisms which do not provide a complete intellectual education. . . . A scientific specialist or a technologist is not an educated person. He tends to become merely an instrument of the industrialist or the bureaucrat, a worker ant in an insect society.’

‘We cannot [allow] higher education to degenerate into a chaos of competing specialisms without any guidance for the student except the urgent practical necessity of finding a job and making a living as soon as his education is finished. . . . Some kind of cultural education is necessary if Western culture is to survive. . . . [and thus] I have made my suggestions for the study of Christian culture as a means of integration and unity.

‘[T]he educated person cannot play his full part in modern life unless he has a clear sense of the nature and achievements of Christian culture: how Western civilization became Christian and how far it is Christian today and in what ways it has ceased to be Christian: in short, a knowledge of our Christian roots and of the abiding Christian elements in Western culture. . . .

‘The vital problem of Christian education is a sociological one: how to make students culturally conscious of their religion; otherwise they will be divided personalities – with a Christian faith and a pagan culture which contradict one another continually. . . . Thus the sociological problem of a Christian culture is also the psychological problem of integration and spiritual health.’ (The Crisis of Western Education, 1961)
CHRISTOPHER DAWSON – A SELECTION OF MAJOR WORKS

- *The Age of the Gods* (1928)  A study of prehistoric cultures, shedding light on human culture as a common way of life, not only reflecting man’s adjustment to his natural surroundings and economic needs, but also the religious basis of culture.

- *Progress and Religion* (1929)  An examination of the idea of Progress as a pivotal belief in Western culture in recent centuries, and its serving as a substitute faith, performing for Western civilisation the function normally supplied by religion.

- *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (1932)  An analysis of the historical roots of

- *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement* (1933)

- *Enquiries into religion and culture* (1933)

- *Religion and the Modern State* (1936)

- *Beyond Politics* (1939)

- *The Judgment of the Nations* (1942)

- Gifford Lectures 1947–49
  - *Religion and Culture* (1948)
  - *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (1950)

- *Understanding Europe* (1952)
• *Medieval Essays* (1954)

• *Dynamics of World History* (1957). Edited by John J. Mulloy

• *The Movement of World Revolution* (1959)

• *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (1960)

• *The Crisis of Western Education: With Specific Programs for the Study of Christian Culture* (1961)

• *The Dividing of Christendom* (1965)

• *The Formation of Christendom* (1967)

• *The Gods of Revolution* (1972)

• *Religion and World History* (1975)

• *Christianity and European Culture: Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson* (1998). Edited by Gerald J. Russello
CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

Intellectual Architect of Campion College

A talk to Campion College students, Orientation Week, February 2011

by Karl Schmude

Who was Christopher Dawson? For us at Campion College, he is a figure of huge importance. He was a major inspiration in the development of this institution – not personally (as he died some years before Campion was established), but in terms of intellectual impact and the kind of college this is.

Dawson was, in fact, the major intellectual architect of Campion College - a founding father of the college you have just joined.

Let me begin with a picture – a snapshot of Christopher Dawson in a particular year, 1940. This was a critical time in his life in the midst of the enormous upheaval of the Second World War.

We might conjure up in our imaginations Dawson’s personality and demeanour. He was a quiet and reserved Englishman – something of a recluse, an intellectual hermit, we might say. Not a man who would readily engage in public action. He was not a ready-made media personality. The impact which he had during his life was mainly through the power of his mind – and as a result of his extensive writings, which still convey that intellectual power to us today.

Dawson was a distinguished Catholic scholar; very learned, enormously well read in all the subjects that make up our program here at Campion (notably, history, philosophy, theology and literature).

Now, how did this man fare in the year 1940? At that time, Europe – and soon the whole world - was convulsed with war. This was only 20 years after an earlier, terrible conflict, the First World War. In 1940, Dawson was serving as editor of a small journal in London, a Catholic journal called the Dublin Review. How remote this must have seemed from the violence that was engulfing the people of England - and of Europe. We think of the London Blitz and the devastating bombing of so many cities in England and Germany
and elsewhere; the Holocaust of 6 million Jews in Hitler’s death camps, and many other instances of almost unimaginable savagery.

Yet in those years, Christopher Dawson – through the power and depth of his writings - inspired a new and deeper understanding of the Second World War. He drew on his vast knowledge of history, and - as I hope you students will manage to do while you are at Campion - he penetrated to the spiritual and cultural heart of what was happening at that time. He didn’t look just at the military conflict and the strategies of war and politics, however important they were. He dug much deeper. In his first editorial in the Dublin Review, he wrote:

‘England and the whole world are passing through a terrible crisis. We are fighting not merely against external enemies but against powerful forces that threaten the very existence of our culture. . . . For the present conflict is not just a material struggle for markets and territory, it is a battle for the possession of the human soul.’

In the years of World War II, Dawson took part in this crucial battle for the human soul. It was a battle that called for a different set of resources - intellectual and spiritual resources – the resources of the mind, the resources of a higher faith, and not simply of military armaments.

In using these spiritual and intellectual resources, Dawson was primarily an historian, a student of the past - but he was not a conventional one. He was not an academic specialist. Most working scholars – and you will be exposed to the best of them during your years at Campion - focus on a particular period of history or an individual personality. But Dawson was, as one of his friends put it, an interpreter first and last; an interpreter of human culture in general, but more particularly of Christian culture – the way of life of a Christian people.

By 1940, Dawson had established a substantial reputation in his field as a cultural historian. He was widely praised by various leaders of Western culture. For example, a major poet and critic whom you will study here at the College, T.S. Eliot, was asked, while he was lecturing in America in the 1930s, who was the most powerful intellectual influence in England at that time - and his answer was: ‘Christopher Dawson.’ On another occasion, a scholar, interpreting The Lord of the Rings and other works of J R R Tolkien, suggested
that Dawson influenced the theological ideas and underpinnings of Tolkien’s imaginative novels.

The atmosphere of the Second World War, a massive global war, was intense, even hysterical, and yet Dawson showed no sign of panic. On the contrary, his writings, while they carried a note of dramatic urgency, were calm and purposeful. They brought poise and perspective to the prevailing frenzy of the time.

In all this, there was a great contrast between Dawson’s upbringing and the challenges he now faced – between the peacefulness of his boyhood and the turmoil of war.

Let me sketch for you, briefly, Dawson’s background before I go on to highlight some of his ideas. I’d like to illustrate how Dawson’s early experiences helped to guide and strengthen him for his wartime mission – and also for his lifelong vocation as an historian of religion and culture, a role in which he had such a great influence on the founding of this college.

Christopher Dawson grew up, as I’ve mentioned, in an environment that contrasted sharply with the chaos of a continent at war. He was born fifty years before the Second World War began – in the year 1889 – in a village in Wales called Hay-on-Wye. Hay-on-Wye lies on the River Wye, in the borderland between Wales and England. This location was symbolic, for Dawson lived intellectually all his life in the borderlands – studying the overlapping borders, the links, the rich interaction, between religion (the life of faith in God) and culture (the way of life of a people).

Dawson was able to blend the insights of various studies, so as to produce a balanced picture of historical and contemporary realities. This blending of knowledge and insight is a major feature and aim of our teaching program here at Campion. We take the various disciplines – of history, philosophy, theology, literature, language and science – and synthesise them; bring them together so that they give our students a coherent view of life, an integrated understanding of reality. This is very different from the average academic program you would study (or have studied) at other universities or colleges.
They tend to give you a wide range of subjects to choose from, but offer no coherent understanding, no vision of the principles of truth and meaning by which you can form a picture of reality. Dawson embodied this integrated approach in his own background – and in the way he approached the study of history.

From his family, he inherited a powerful religious tradition grounded in English culture. He believed the English way of life was built on the natural foundations of the family and the land, and on the supernatural foundations of a religiously inspired culture, and all of these influences shaped his attitudes and sensibility.

His early upbringing took place in the land of his birth, Wales; but some years later, he moved to Yorkshire in northern England. A vital part of Dawson’s sensibility was his love of the land, his love of landscape. He cherished a lifelong memory of the harsh beauty of the Yorkshire countryside. He enjoyed taking long walks, and from the earliest years he showed an exceptional awareness of the natural world. In a memoir he wrote on his childhood, he said:

‘Yorkshire was a new world and the whole aspect of the country with the stone walls climbing the hills and the naked rock thrusting itself out in great scars and promontories, like sea cliffs, was entirely unlike anything I had seen before.’

Thus Dawson experienced at first hand the pervasive importance of religion – and he realised that it was not, as he put it, ‘simply concerned with the pious moralities which held such a prominent place in Victorian books for children, but stood close to that wonderful non-human world of the river and the mountain which I found around me.’

Reinforcing this religious culture was a rich blend of parental influences. From his father, he imbibed an appreciation of mysticism (which is an experience of God that surpasses normal human understanding), and an appreciation of philosophy and the classics. From his mother, he received a love of poetry.

At the age of 10, Dawson went to a preparatory school, and then to Winchester College, one of Britain’s oldest public schools [‘private’ schools in our
terminology. At Winchester he experienced a strong religious tradition and a sense of communal purpose which reinforced his home background and, at the same time, extended it.

Dawson was devoted to books from an early age, and he read extensively. His interests were diverse - spanning Greek philosophy and Christian mysticism, poetry and art, and modern novels. In short, he was exposed to the great variety of literature which students are able to experience whilst at Campion College.

This lifetime practice of constant reading was supported by the habit of collecting books, and Dawson gradually built a personal library of many thousands of volumes. When he was later appointed to a Chair at Harvard University in America, he transported a significant part of his library to his campus residence in Massachusetts. His publisher, an Australian by the name of Frank Sheed, pointed out that Harvard already had a vast library, to which Dawson simply replied: ‘Books are my tools.’ As a good carpenter, Dawson needed, as Sheed put it, ‘a full kit of books.’ vi (Frank Sheed, by the way, is the man after whom the Public Speaking Prize at Campion College is named. Sheed was a famous public speaker – in places like the Sydney Domain - as well as an author and a publisher.)

Dawson’s personal library highlighted something of crucial importance about him – and that was, that the main adventure of his life was intellectual. Dawson inhabited above all the world of ideas. His life was marked by a continuing breakthrough of ideas, which led to a continuing flow of books. ‘He lived,’ as Frank Sheed, commented, ‘more wholly in the mind than anyone I ever met.’ vii

For Dawson, a special benefit of attending Winchester College was the opportunity to visit the nearby cathedral, Winchester Cathedral, and experience its religious radiance. (Winchester is located on the southern coast of England.)

‘I learnt more during my school-days from my visits to the Cathedral at Winchester than I did from the hours of religious instruction in school. That great church with its tombs of the Saxon kings and the mediaeval statesmen-bishops gave one a greater sense of the magnitude of the
religious element in our culture and the depths of its roots in our national life than anything one could learn from books. 

This highlights for us how much we can be influenced by concrete experiences even more than by abstractions – even though we need both for our intellectual development. Dawson could see the value of a culture – a way of life, with various things contributing to it:

- a philosophy that informs it and explains it, and a morality that guides it;
- various customs that characterise it, and occasions that are celebrated;
- symbols that give a hint of the higher realities which inspire it;
- art and architecture that capture in pictorial form the values of the culture – what it believes in, what it stands for;
- music which animates the culture and expresses its rhythms.

So a culture highlights the fundamental truth of the Christian religion – the Incarnation, the mystery of the Word made Flesh, of God taking on material form, through His son, Jesus Christ, and not confining his Revelation to human prophets and abstract principles. Yet a culture can also highlight another fundamental truth of the Christian faith – the Resurrection – and how this is reflected in the long history of the Church. As Dawson put it:

‘The Church lives again the life of Christ. It has its period of obscurity and growth and its period of manifestation, and this is followed by the catastrophe of the Cross and the new birth that springs from failure.

As he grew older, Dawson saw this religious culture at work both in England and the continent of Europe. He attended Oxford University, for example, and this exposed him to the historical and religious environment of the ancient colleges, and to the beauty of the city and the surrounding countryside. Over the years I have visited Oxford from time to time and, despite the changes which have taken place (for example, of industrialisation – there is a major car production plant in Oxford), it retains a great sense of its historical origins. Have any of you seen the TV detective series, Morse, or its successor, Lewis, both of which are set in Oxford? They evoke the abiding atmosphere of historical value and beauty in this university city.
Oxford had an inspirational effect on Dawson’s own religious faith, and played a key part in his conversion to the Catholic Church. His family heritage had, of course, nurtured this faith, but during his teenage years he went through a period of doubt and wavering. By the time he reached Oxford, however, Dawson had recovered his Christian faith – and it soon deepened, partly due to his becoming more familiar with a major movement of Christian revival in the 19th century, the Oxford Movement, and especially the writings of John Henry Newman who was the leader of the Oxford Movement; and partly, also, as a result of a visit he made to Rome in 1909 during an Easter vacation from Oxford.

In 2010, several Campion students won prizes here at the College to go to Rome – one in relation to preparations for the 2011 World Youth Day, and two others for the canonisation of Mother Mary McKillop in October 2010. They found quite overwhelming the experience of visiting the ancient city of Rome, the Eternal City, as it’s often called – the capital of Catholic culture.

Dawson’s first experience of Rome had a similar impact. It came, he said later, ‘as a revelation’ to him. It unfolded for him ‘a new world of religion and culture.’ Reflecting on his conversion to the Catholic faith, he realised, he said,

‘... for the first time that Catholic civilisation did not stop with the Middle Ages, and that contemporary with our own national Protestant development [in England] there was the wonderful flowering of the Baroque culture. . . .

‘To me at least the art of the Counter-Reformation [of the 16th century] was a pure joy, and I loved the churches of Bernini and Borromini no less than the ancient basilicas. And this in turn led me to the literature of the Counter-Reformation, and I came to know St Teresa [of Avila] and St John of the Cross, compared to whom even the greatest of non-Catholic religious writers seem pale and unreal.’
Another factor in the deepening of Dawson’s faith at this time was St Augustine’s great book, *City of God*. This supreme work exerted a powerful influence on Dawson’s mind – particularly on his religious ideas. In Dawson’s judgment, Augustine was ‘a profoundly original genius.’ He changed the history of his time, and left for later generations an immense philosophical heritage, which covered the Christian interpretation of history as well as other vital areas - such as Western mysticism and ethics.\(^\text{x}\)

Part of Augustine’s appeal for Dawson, I think, was the age in which he lived – and his position between two historical ages. He was a bridge between the classical world of Greece and Rome that was passing and the new medieval order which was struggling to emerge. You will study both these periods of Western history during your studies at Campion.

In his reflections on Western culture in our time, Dawson characterised it in similar terms. He saw an old order disintegrating, and he imagined a new culture yet to be born. It was a crisis in which he found the faith and understanding of Augustine to be uniquely instructive – and uniquely helpful.

So, in Europe, Dawson saw the *integrated* life of a religious culture. He saw at first hand the intermingling of a popular culture of spiritual devotions and social practices with [what we might call] a ‘high’ culture of intellectual understanding and artistic expression. At Campion, you will hopefully come to see how these two worlds of religious culture are connected and inter-dependent – the world of ordinary religious practices anddevotions and the world of intellectual penetration and aesthetic flourishing.

We think, for example, of the great Gothic cathedrals, not only of Europe but also of our country, such as St Mary’s Cathedral in the city of Sydney, and they can have the same profound impact on our imaginations as Winchester Cathedral did on Dawson’s. In these places we see the expressions of faith - in the soaring height of the ceiling, reflecting the transcendence of God; in the stained glass depictions of Christ and His saints, which are the Bible brought to life; we notice ordinary people in the pews, quietly absorbed in prayer, and all these features are combined with the rationality of science - in the engineering feat of a huge building structure - and with the spiritual quality of beauty,
which, with the interplay of light and shadow within a great cathedral, can be quite haunting in its effects.

So, when Dawson, after this childhood experience of religious culture, came to analyse intellectual movements in history, the impact of ideas in our past, how they shaped the course of history, he was conscious of the spiritual and social traditions which nourished them – the river of popular life, we might say, that flowed beneath the surface of higher culture. For example, he once commented on a great Catholic revival which took place in the 19th century – a revival of faith which was shown in new religious orders, in the resurgence of Christian education and Christian philosophy, and in a major expansion of missionary activity in various parts of the world, including our own region (Asia and the Pacific). Dawson emphasised that all this was made possible because of what he called ‘the survival of a living Christian tradition among the masses.’ It was this popular base, the existence of this soil of religious tradition and energy, that enabled the cultural and institutional revivals to be so fruitful – and so widespread.

Dawson’s early experience of religious culture had another, very important effect. It helped to prepare him for a massive change which took place in his lifetime, and which influences us even more enormously today – and that is, the secularisation of society. What is ‘secularisation’? It is a social condition in which religion is kept private and not allowed public expression – not allowed to have any influence in the public square. It is the alienation of religion from social life and public expression. This is the cultural condition which Dawson was to explore so keenly throughout his life. He sought to understand the great divorce between religion and culture in the contemporary West - between what he called ‘the spiritual life of the individual and the social and economic organisation of modern culture.’xii, and his insights into this condition are a fundamental reason why he is so relevant for us today.

Religion, and especially Christianity, naturally expresses itself in culture, and to find that it can’t – or that the social barriers to doing so are so great – is a peculiar and frustrating condition. (One of our lecturers at Campion, Dr Susanna Rizzo, has a major research interest in secularisation, so no doubt you will hear more about this phenomenon during your studies.)
Let me now touch on a few of Dawson’s most important books, including ones relevant to the character of this College and the courses it offers.

In 1928, he published his first book, *The Age of the Gods*, a study of prehistoric cultures. This book set the scene for more than 20 books that were published during his lifetime. Next came *Progress and Religion* (1929), a remarkable work of historical synthesis in which Dawson showed the idea of Progress as a substitute faith, performing for Western civilisation the function normally supplied by religion. As he wrote:

> ‘Every living culture must possess some spiritual dynamic, which provides the energy necessary for that sustained social effort which is civilization. Normally this dynamic is supplied by a religion, but in exceptional circumstances the religious impulse may disguise itself under philosophical or political forms. . . .

> ‘Moreover, the fact that religion no longer finds a place in social life does not necessarily involve the disappearance of the religious instinct. If the latter is denied its normal expression, and driven back upon itself, it may easily become an anti-social force of explosive violence.’

As so often with Dawson, we see an example of prophecy at work – a mind that was deeply attuned to reality and could foreshadow events, not necessarily in detail but in broad outline. Dawson wrote this last passage in 1929. By that time, the great – and destructive - ideologies of the 20th century, Communism and Nazism, had only just begun to develop or take root. Communism as an ideology based on class - on class conflict as the main driver in human history – had been operating in Russia for a decade. Within a few years (in the 1930s), Hitler would come to power based on an ideology of race – of racial purity and superiority serving as a key driver of Nazism.

Communism and Nazism were, as I say, the two most potent ideologies of the past century, and they exemplified Dawson’s insight – that the religious instinct in society does not disappear. If it is denied its normal expression, it will
become abnormal and distorted – ‘an anti-social force of explosive violence’, as he put it.

So, Dawson’s aim, in all his studies, was to penetrate the inner life of a culture; not to ignore or underestimate its outer life, its material form and the importance of forces like politics and economics, but only by understanding the inner life of a culture – what makes it tick - could a full and proper picture of humanity be drawn.

In 1932, Dawson produced a major work – in fact, one of his greatest books, *The Making of Europe: an Introduction to the History of European Unity*. The book qualifies as ‘great’ because it was an original analysis of a period long neglected or dismissed by historians, namely the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ (the centuries following the Fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century).

Dawson’s book was original in a number of ways. Firstly, he emphasised the importance of the barbarian peoples of Northern Europe in these centuries. He showed that it was the barbarian peoples who provided the raw material of European unity – what brought Europe together as a cohesive culture - and who also contributed the element of native, and later national, loyalty which was to prove so significant in later centuries, right up to our own time (when nation states are the most common form of political organisation).

Secondly, Dawson saw the continuities in history, as well as the changes. He could see through the chaos of those early centuries and understand that there was a new purpose and order forming below the surface. He made clear, for example, that the Roman Empire was a kind of preparation for the Christian religion. Secular Rome had a universal mission, extending all over the known world at that time. Regardless of what part of the Empire you lived in, you could say: ‘I am a Roman citizen’. So this universal political reality harmonised with the missionary ideals, the spirit of evangelisation, of the new Christian religion. Dawson quoted the Christian writer Prudentius, who said that ‘the Roman peace . . . prepared the road for the coming of Christ,’ So here, Dawson is revealing the ways in which an earthly development provided a providential preparation for a spiritual advance; the natural seedbed of political loyalties formed the basis of a higher, and deeper, supernatural loyalty – the love of God.
Finally, Dawson brought together the different threads of cultural life in the ancient world. He looked at the Greek and Roman traditions (which were so varied - intellectual, social, institutional and organisational), and then the contributions of the barbarian peoples; and then he showed how the Catholic Church supplied the spiritual dynamic and direction for the birth of a new culture - a new cultural synthesis (which became so powerfully evident in the Middle Ages).

*The Making of Europe* has proved to be a book of enduring significance and value. It has been frequently reprinted and translated into various languages. It’s a book of Dawson’s which is in our College Library and I would highly recommend it – *The Making of Europe*.

Let me mention now, in closing, three other books of Dawson which I think you might like to know about. One is a book of essays called *Enquiries into Religion and Culture*. The essays are tremendously varied, but I’ll just note, briefly, two themes that he addressed in these essays. One was the relationship of sex to culture, and particularly to the family. Dawson argued that the sexual license which was already evident in the 1920s was essentially an attack on the family, and he thought that the increasing use of contraception – long before the Sexual Revolution of our time and the advent of the contraceptive Pill – would have a profoundly weakening effect on marriage. In short, it would encourage widespread promiscuity and threaten the solidity of the family- and the fidelity of family members. Dawson even predicted the demographic decline of present-day Europe – a ‘population implosion’ which is taking place in Europe, not a ‘population explosion’, in which the older population strains are ceasing to reproduce themselves and are giving way to migrant peoples.\(^{xv}\)

A second theme is Dawson’s analysis of Islam – not only his essay on Islamic mysticism in this book called *Enquiries* but also chapters on Muslim culture in *The Making of Europe* and later books. These have a remarkably contemporary ring about them. They reveal his understanding of a major world faith that carries heightened urgency for the 21\(^{st}\) century. Dawson analysed the affinities between Christianity and Islam, including the significance of a tradition of sacred learning – in the Bible and the Koran – and the primacy of religious rather than political citizenship in both cultures. These were characteristics
which have found expression in the poetry of each faith as well as the lives of their respective saints. But he also identified the differences, citing Islam’s lack of a sacramental system and of a belief in a personal mediator between God and man.\textsuperscript{xvi}

A second book of Dawson’s – two books really, since they form twin volumes – which I’d like to mention arose from a set of prestigious lectures which he gave in the 1940s at the University of Edinburgh. They are called the Gifford Lectures, and they are still being offered by scholars on an invited basis. For example, a Scottish Catholic philosopher, Professor John Haldane, who came to Campion College to speak in 2009, delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in 2003. In Dawson’s case, these lectures crystallised his central themes of, first, the general relationship between religion and culture, published as \textit{Religion and Culture} (1948), and secondly, the special relationship of Christianity and Western culture, issued under the title of \textit{Religion and the Rise of Western Culture} (1950).

There is a key passage in the book, \textit{Religion and Culture}, which gives a compelling statement of why Dawson saw religion as such a central reality in history:

\begin{quote}
‘\textit{Religion is the key of history. We cannot understand the inner form of a society unless we understand its religion. We cannot understand its cultural achievements unless we understand the religious beliefs that lie behind them.}

\textit{In all ages the first creative works of a culture are due to a religious inspiration and dedicated to a religious end. The temples of the gods are the most enduring works of man. Religion stands at the threshold of all the great literatures of the world. Philosophy is its offspring and is a child which constantly returns to its parent.}’\textsuperscript{xvii}
\end{quote}

Dawson was, of course, writing for people living in today’s society, which has largely lost an awareness of the historical impact of religion on cultural life. So he stressed that the complete secularisation of social life in our age was a relatively modern and a very unusual phenomenon. A society’s attempt to
conduct its life without reference to any higher laws or powers, he said, ‘seems as irrational as for a community to cultivate the earth without paying any attention to the course of the seasons.’

Let me turn now to the final book I’d like to highlight today. From the point of view of Campion College, it is the most crucial book Dawson ever wrote. Its title is *The Crisis of Western Education* (1961).

Dawson had begun thinking about the basic themes of this book many years earlier. During World War II, he had come to realise that the preservation of a Christian culture – of the Christian life, with its traditions and values - was critically dependent on education. And he turned to the practical solution of educational reform.

This insight of Dawson’s, this growing awareness, on his part, about education helping to build, or even make possible, a Christian way of life – this proved vital to the establishment of Campion College.

Dawson began publishing on this theme during World War II by examining the distinctive features of education in Western culture. The sources of this tradition were diverse. They were Greek and they were Jewish. They were based on the classics and on the Scriptures, and the essential tradition of Western education was quite distinctive – it was a tradition of Christian humanism – *of a belief in man within the context of God*.

Dawson had a great power of summary, and he captured this synthesis in Western education in a single sentence:

‘As humanism initiates man into the community of culture and opens to him the treasures of the thought of the past, so Christianity introduces man to the society of the Spirit, the City of God, and opens to him the divine promise of the future.’

In the years leading up to his appointment as a professor at Harvard, Dawson advocated the study of Christian culture as a new kind of educational program – and yet founded on an ancient tradition. Dawson believed that such a program
should be an *integrated* one. It should be inter-disciplinary, bringing together the key subjects in the Liberal Arts (in particular, history, philosophy, literature and theology) – and this unifying educational experience, this new synthesis of ideas and experiences, would help to prepare us to live in present-day secular culture, and influence it for good.

This vision of Christopher Dawson’s has been decisive in shaping the kind of program we have here at Campion.

How does such a program, in practice, help us to live in today’s society? Dawson believed that a comprehensive Liberal Arts education, which brought human reason and religious faith together in a dynamic and intelligent way, would awaken in the minds of students an awareness of their own cultural traditions as Catholics and Christians – the traditions, the experiences, the beliefs and ideals, which make us Catholics, make us part of a Christian people - and in this way they would strengthen our sense of Catholic identity, our sense of what it means to be a Catholic, in the midst of a culture that had lost its spiritual roots and its sense of spiritual realities.

Dawson’s great hope was that Catholics would learn about their own cultural traditions and develop a deeper understanding and love of their own identity; and that this would be a gift, as he put it, to ‘a secularised and spiritually ignorant world as a remedy for its wounds and sicknesses.’

It’s important to ask the question - what is the special value of a Christian culture? I believe that it lies in this - that, by trying to *imitate Christ*, and to *extend* what God Himself did in taking on human form, it makes religion visible and tangible. And, in doing that, it makes belief in spiritual realities more accessible, more credible, for ordinary people (most of whom are not particularly devout, or particularly interested in religion as such). It also makes moral behaviour more practicable, more achievable, because the supports of law and customs, and the inspiration of higher expressions of culture (such as music and art and architecture), exist to foster virtue and discourage evil. So, a Christian culture brings the benefits of God’s grace within the orbit of ordinary lives – and makes it easier to believe, and to behave.
In the years following Dawson’s retirement, two more books appeared. The first was *The Dividing of Christendom* (1965), which elucidated the period from the 16th century Reformation to the 18th century Enlightenment, and the second was *The Formation of Christendom* (1967), which treated of the sources of Christianity and the development of Christian culture during the Middle Ages.

These last books reflected what E.I. Watkin later stated – that Dawson’s most fervent hope was that Catholics would learn about their own cultural traditions and develop a deeper understanding and love of their own identity; and that this would be a gift to ‘a secularised and spiritually ignorant world as a remedy for its wounds and sicknesses.’

It was long my hope that Dawson’s ideas would have an impact on our universities and other institutions of higher education. In the years following his death in 1970, there was, in fact, a revival of Catholic liberal arts education in America. This led to the establishment of several colleges – such as Christendom in Virginia and Thomas Aquinas in California – which reflected Dawson’s ideas in varying degrees, though they were not explicitly conscious of his proposals. Here at Campion, we have strong links with these colleges and are in regular contact with them.

Campion College is a further testimony to the value and importance of Dawson’s ideas and insights. Its creation in 2006 was inspired, on the one hand, by his historical and educational vision, and on the other, by the institutional models of Catholic liberal arts initiatives in America which I’ve mentioned.

**The Dawson Legacy**

Let me conclude with mention of Christopher Dawson’s death.

He died just over 40 years ago, in 1970 – on the 25th May, following what one of his friends described as ‘a long crucifixion of illness.’ It was fitting, I think, that this was the feast day of St Bede, the first English historian whose
most notable accomplishment was to shed light on the life of the English people during the Dark Ages – as Dawson did more broadly twelve centuries later.

On the eve of his death he lapsed into a coma, but at one point he rallied and stared at a painting of the Crucifixion across from his bed. He had been unconscious for some time and could not have known what day it was. With his eyes wide open, he said simply: ‘This is Trinity Sunday. I see it all [he said] and it is beautiful.’ And with that he died.

Well, he hasn’t died at Campion – and the very existence of this college is a sign of the enduring value of his thought. And while I wouldn’t want to compare Campion with the vision of paradise which Dawson glimpsed as he was dying, I certainly think that ‘Campion is beautiful’!

I hope that you experience this beauty during your time at Campion – and that you have the chance to discover the riches of Christopher Dawson’s writings as well. For the two are very closely connected.

Endnotes


v Ibid., p.20.

vi “Frank Sheed Talks with Christopher Dawson,” Sign (USA), December 1958, p.34.

vii Frank Sheed, The Church and I, 1974, p.124.

viii Understanding Europe, 1952, p.245.

ix Ibid.

x “Why I am a Catholic,” Catholic Times (London), 21st May 1926, p.11.


xii Enquiries into Religion and Culture, 1933, p.v.
xiii *Progress and Religion: An Historical Enquiry*, 1929, pp.viii, 228.

xiv *The Making of Europe*, 1932, p.17.


xvii Religion and Culture, 1948, p.50. Gerald Russello has noted that anthropological scholars such as Rebecca French and David Hollinger have made clear that religious interpretations of the world remain the dominant way in which people understand reality. See Gerald Russello, “The Relevance of Christopher Dawson: a review of *Progress and Religion*,” *First Things*, April 2002, p.48.

xviii Ibid., p.49.

xix Ibid., p.ix.


xxiii Scott, *op.cit.*, p.207.