

Additional Questions on Christopher Dawson's *Progress & Religion* (1929)

"The only way to desecularize culture is by giving a spiritual aim to the whole system of organization, so that the machine becomes the servant of the spirit and not its enemy or its master. . . . In fact the mechanization of human life renders it more sensitive to spiritual influence, in some respects, than the old unorganized type of culture: at the present time this response is most evident where the forces in question are most evil, but clearly this cannot be the only possibility, and the great problem that we have to face is how to discover the means that are necessary to open this new world of apparently soulless and soul-destroying mechanism to the spiritual world which stands so near to it."—*Judgment of the Nations* (1942)

Global Exploratory Questions

- Is it possible to know what happened in the past? Is it possible to know why it happened?
- Does history have discoverable, and therefore, predictable laws? Can we predict the future on the basis of what has happened in the past?
- Are things getting better? If so, can we expect them to continue to do so?
- Are human beings religious and/or spiritual in nature?
- What makes something religious as opposed to secular?
- What is a religion, anyway? What makes one distinctive or authentic?
- Is Christianity a cultural, religious, and/or historical entity? If so, is it special or unique in any way?
- Can Western civilization be said to have anything special or valuable about it?

Chapter 1, "Sociology and the Idea of Progress"

1. Why does Dawson argue that the Idea of Progress, as well as the material, technological success of Western civilization, is an historical unique development rather than a product of historical and/or evolutionary laws?
2. From what cultural factors did early sociology arise? Was it religious in nature?
3. How did the motivations of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Julian Huxley, and Bertrand Russell differ from each other?

Reflection Questions

- Is growth in mechanistic know-how a guarantee of progress? Why or why not?
- Can one develop a science of human social groupings?
- Does it matter that sociology arose out of utopian, evolutionary, and anti-religious beginnings?

Chapter 2, "History and the Idea of Progress"

1. What made the German Enlightenment different than its French or English counterparts?
2. What sources of ideas brought together German views of history, nation, race, and culture?
3. What makes Oswald Spengler's life-cycle vision of history essentially relativistic?
4. Why does Dawson insist on the syncretistic nature of historical ideas?
5. Contra' Spengler and R.G. Collingwood, what is Dawson's definition of culture and religion?

Reflection Questions

- Do cultures and/or nations have life-cycles?
- How would you define a culture? Do you find Dawson's model convincing?

Chapter 3, “Anthropology and the Theory of Progress”

1. Why does Dawson prefer the sociology of Frederick Le Play to that of anthropologists such as Tylor, Maitland, Smith and Perry, Graeber, and so on?
2. What does Dawson see as the relationship between material geographic conditions and the development of culture, even race? Do you find him convincing?
3. What factors, according to Dawson, lead to cultural decay and failure? Why does he think that Western civilization is now threatened?

Reflection Questions

- Is anthropology inherently evolutionary? Why or why not?
- Are cultures influenced by their material and cultural factors? Why?
- Did Dawson in the 1920s prove to be wrong and/or right about Western civilization?

Chapter 4, “The Comparative Study of Religions and the Spiritual Element in Culture”

1. Why does Dawson see tool-making as a human art rather than just an evolutionary adaptation?
2. According to Dawson, what is the relationship between material and intellectual/spiritual factors in a human culture?
3. What aspects of theories about “primitive” religions in his own day does Dawson find convincing?
4. What common spiritual or religious insight do such religions have?

Reflection Questions

- Are intellectual and/or spiritual factors detachable from their original material or cultural base? Why or why not?
- Are myths different from religions? Are such differences classifiable?

Chapter 5, “Religion and the Origins of Civilization”

1. According to Dawson, what makes a shaman different from a priest? Is this an important difference culturally?
2. What characterizes the “Great Mother” religions?
3. Why does Dawson hold that the breaking of ritual and priesthood leads to cultural decline?

Reflection Question: How dependent is Dawson’s history dependent upon models of human evolution? Does it matter if they are?

Chapter 6, “The Rise of the World Religions”

1. According to Dawson, what did the new world religions arising around 1000BC have to offer that the older religious systems did not?
2. Trace the new internal orders and critical transcendence that each offers: Confucianism, the Indian Rita, and the Greek Dike.
3. What is one-sided or wrong about the developments in the Upanishads, Buddhism, Taoism, and certain Greek aesthetic philosophies?
4. Why would concepts of the Great Year not lead to modern views of science and Progress?

Reflection Questions

- Provided there is a category called “religions,” are world religions comparable in any significant manner?
- Is it possible to draw such large-scale lessons as Dawson does from belief systems?

Chapter 7, “Christianity and the Rise of Western Civilization”

1. According to Dawson, what made the conditions and beliefs of Israel’s religion different from other world religions?
2. How did Christianity develop from these differences, especially in its understanding of history?
3. What makes the Greek development of Christianity more authentic than the oriental version? How is Islam a development of the later?
4. What makes the Western form of Christianity different? Why is Augustine’s notion of two cities so significant?
5. Trace the importance to Dawson of the following developments in medieval history: the Benedictines and the papacy, the Peace and Truce of God, the monastic reforms, the Franciscan and Dominican movements, and Thomism’s understanding of nature and grace.

Reflection Questions

- Is the Jewish and Christian understanding of God and history unique?
- Does Dawson think Western Christianity is superior to the Greek form? Why or why not?
- Dawson’s picture of medieval history is one of tension between body and spirit. Do you find this convincing?

Chapter 8, “The Secularization of Western Culture and the Rise of the Religion of Progress”

1. Dawson sees the split of the Reformation as mostly being along Latin and Gothic lines. Why does he find this significant?
2. How does he characterize the changes brought by the Renaissance, early modern science, and the Post-Reformation wars?
3. How do the Enlightenment views of God, ethics, and history act as “ghosts” of Christianity?
4. How does Dawson see Rousseau’s followers and the French Revolution as seeking to build a new foundation for post-Christendom?
5. How does the German Enlightenment differ in its treatment of Christianity?

Reflection Questions

- Would Western history have been better off without the Reformation? Explain.
- Is it fair to characterize the development of the 17th to 19th centuries as ghosts/children/ heresies of Christianity? Why or why not?

Chapter 9, “The Age of Science and Industrialism, The Decline of the Religion of Progress”

1. What does Dawson see as the English contribution to industrialism? Why was Puritanism so important to it?
2. What are some of the faultlines in modern capitalism and Euro-American hegemony?
3. What does Dawson see as the particular danger of modern urbanization?
4. Why did deism fail to provide the spiritual foundation needed by modern science?

5. Which expressions of modern science have most failed to recognize the inherent fatalism in modern materialism?
6. What does Dawson fear will happen to the religious impulse in Western culture?

Reflection Questions

- Was Dawson correct about industrialism, capitalism, or modern scientism?
- Were Marxist revolutions religious responses?

Chapter 10, "Conclusion"

1. How does Dawson analyze the status of the scientific tradition in the West? Does he think that a religion of science is really possible?
2. Why does the modern age reject otherworldly religions?
3. Why does he think that various attempts at an evolutionary religion or claims that religion is an evolutionary adaptation are bound not to fill the void left by Europe's abandonment of Christianity?
4. Why can only Christianity solve the time-eternity problem? Likewise, why is it finally not a world-denying religion?

Reflection Questions

- Is Christianity compatible with the modern world? Why and/or why not?
- Is it a world-denying religion?

"These three forms of activity—the consecration of place, the consecration of work, and the consecration of the social bond itself—are the main channels through which religion finds social expression and acquires a sociological form, and the greater their share in the religious development, the greater is the possibility of sociological prevision. Where religion transcends the categories of Place, Work, folk, as it does in its most profound manifestations (e.g. in the essential religious experience of the mystic), the role of sociological prevision is almost negligible. In other words, the more completely a religion is identified with a particular culture and the more closely the religious and social life of a people is unified, the more room there will be for sociological prevision. But where a religion is divorced from social life, as with a new religion that has not yet achieved social acceptance, or with a new religion that has not yet achieved social acceptance, or with an old religion that has lost it, the possibilities of prevision are proportionately restricted.

Now this is the situation with regard to our own culture, which has been growing progressively more secular during the last five or six centuries, and which now seems to be without any organic relation to any definite form of religion. In such a case, however, the old channels of socio-religious activity are not entirely closed. They have lost their primary religious character, but they continue to exert a secondary influence of quasi-religious kind: Place, Work and the Folk are no longer consecrated by being brought into relation with a transcendent religious principle, as in the case of a living religion, but they retain a kind of inherent sacredness which they have acquired from ages of religious association." —*The Christian View of History* (1951)