

## CHRISTOPHER DAWSON, 80 YEARS ON



Christopher Dawson (1889-1970) the greatest English-speaking historian of the twentieth century

In the penultimate chapter of his work, *Religion And The Modern State* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1935), Christopher Dawson summarized the evils facing the Western world in Nazism and Communism and showed they had the same source as those of Capitalism, a rejection of the supernatural order and of a natural order founded in the eternal Reason of God. Capitalism was but the economic aspect of “that philosophy of liberal individualism... the religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century... which found its political expression in parliamentary democracy.” Capitalism made “self-interest the supreme law in economics, the will of the majority the sovereign power in the State, and private opinion the only arbiter in religious matters.”

What would he think of the chaos into which the world has descended 80 years on?

Nazism and of Communism have had their rise and fall. The evils of Capitalism remain. Rejection of the natural order by the individual and by society has reached such a pitch that perversion is treated as the norm. The innocent unborn are murdered daily and the sexually deviant are legitimized. What would stagger him, we suspect, was the collapse of opposition to the spread of these evils by the popes and the bishops of Christ’s Church—though not once he understood how their predecessors had betrayed Catholic principle in favour of the values of “sectarian Christianity” and the secular at the Second Vatican Council.

We reproduce his fine analysis below.

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## THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF THE STATE

We have seen that the Christian interpretation of history, the Christian theory of man and society, involve two great principles which superficial observers often regard as mutually exclusive and irreconcilable with one another. The first of these is the principle of Transcendence—the idea of a supernatural order, a supernatural society and a supernatural End of History—which seems at first sight to empty the natural order, the state, and the historical process of significance and value, and to result in a sharp eschatological dualism between “this world” and “the world to come”. And, secondly, there is the principle of the dependence of human society and human law on the divine order : the idea of a law of nature to which all social and individual behaviour must conform and which rests in the last resort on the eternal Reason of God, the source and end of the whole cosmic order.

Now it must be admitted that history shows a certain divergence and conflict between these two principles in the Christian tradition. There has always been a tendency on the part of sectarian Christianity to deny the principle of natural law and to condemn the whole world of nature, state and civilization, as irremediably evil in the interest of a sharp eschatological dualism ; while, on the other hand, the Latitudinarian, the Deist and the Unitarian equally tend to deny the principle of transcendence and to identify the order of nature and the order of grace in the interests of a theological rationalism. Thus the Protestant theory of society and attitude to politics have always fluctuated between two extremes, sometimes identifying religion and politics, as with the old Puritans and the modern social idealists, and at other times relegating religion entirely to the inner world of the individual conscience, as when Luther compares the world to an inn of which the host is the devil and from which the Christian must escape as quickly and on the easiest terms that he can.

It is only in the Catholic tradition that we find both principles insisted on as equally essential alike in the sphere of theology and in that of Christian sociology, and consequently the social teaching of the Catholic Church is at once fuller, clearer and more systematic than that of other Christian bodies. In the great social encyclicals of Pius IX, Leo XIII and Pius XI we have a consistent exposition of Christian social doctrine such as is not to be found elsewhere, and whether non-Catholics agree or disagree with its principles, they can at least find in it an authoritative judgment on the rival social theories of the modern world from the standpoint of Catholic tradition and Christian philosophy.

Nor is this judgment confined to the region of abstract theory. The more one studies the encyclicals of Leo XIII the more is one impressed with their grasp not only of moral principles but of social realities. He was not deceived by the apparent prosperity of the capitalist order. He saw where Europe was going. Beneath the self-satisfied optimism of nineteenth century Liberal democracy he saw the growing menace of Communism and Social Revolution. At the very beginning of his pontificate in his encyclicals *On the Evils Affecting Modern Society* [*Inscrutabili Dei Consilio*—21<sup>st</sup> April, 1878] and *On Modern Errors* [*Quod Apostolici Muneris*—28<sup>th</sup> December, 1878] he warned Europe of its danger and pointed out the connection

between Socialism and that wider movement of spiritual revolution which aimed at the destruction of Christianity and the complete secularization of Western culture.

For this social revolution is but the inevitable result of the rationalist propaganda that has been gradually undermining the foundations of the European order for nearly 400 years.

“Hence by a new act of impiety unknown even to the pagans, governments have been organized without God and the order established by Him being taken into account. It has even been contended that public authority with its dignity and its power of ruling originates not from God but from the mass of the people, which, unfettered by divine sanctions, refuses to submit to any laws that it has not passed of its own free will.”

Next God is banished from education and the future life being ruled out, man’s desire for happiness is entirely concentrated on this present life, with the result that—

“tranquility no longer prevails either in private or public life and the human race has been hurried on almost to the verge of ruin.”

Thus wrote Leo XIII more than fifty years ago and subsequent developments have more than justified his warnings. To-day the social revolution is no longer merely an ideal, it is a fact that rules the lives of millions of men and women. Over the considerable part of the globe from the Baltic to the Pacific it has established a new order, an order that denies God and the human soul not in theory but in grim reality.

Now whatever system of government Catholics may favour, it must be one that will protect society from any revolutionary movement that would lead to the establishment of this anti-Christian order. For even a dictatorship which deprives us of our political liberty would be preferable to an order which denies those fundamental spiritual rights without which human life loses its *raison d’être*.

But it does not follow that because Catholicism is absolutely opposed to Communism and Socialism, it is therefore committed to the defence of the capitalist order or the political *status quo*. On the contrary, the capitalist order of society itself owes its origin to the revolt against the Catholic tradition. For, as the present Pontiff has said,

“at the time when the new social order was beginning, the doctrines of rationalism had already taken firm hold of large numbers and an economic science alien to the true moral law had already arisen, with the result that free rein was given to human avarice.” [*Quadragesimo Anno*]

The fact is that the word Capitalism is commonly used to cover two entirely different things and consequently is responsible for an endless series of misunderstandings and confusions of thought. In its strict sense it means the use of private wealth for the purpose of economic production, whether by the individual as in early times, or co-operatively, as in the joint stock company which is the characteristic form of capitalistic organization in modern times.

Both these forms of capitalism are accepted by Catholic moral theory as lawful and just, and in this sense alone it can be said that the Church approves of capitalism. In the current use of the word, however, Capitalism stands for much more than this. Indeed it stands for so much that it is impossible to give an exact definition of it. Broadly speaking it may be described as the economic aspect of that philosophy of

liberal individualism which was the religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which found its political expression in parliamentary democracy.

Now this creed—and the social and economic order which arose from it—is entirely inconsistent with Catholic principles and was in fact the most dangerous enemy and rival that the Catholic Church had to meet in modern times. It is a philosophy of separation and irresponsibility which breaks up the moral organism of society into a chaos of competitive individualism. It denies the sovereignty of the moral law in the economic world, the principle of authority in politics and the existence of an objective divine truth in religion. It makes self-interest the supreme law in economics, the will of the majority the sovereign power in the State, and private opinion the only arbiter in religious matters.

This is the capitalism that we have all known and hated—the system which finds a fitting expression in the nineteenth century manufacturing town with its dark factories, its squalid slums, its mean public buildings and chapels, its gin palaces and music halls and its sprawling and hideous suburbs. Who can blame the victims of such a system if they turn to the only alternative that is offered to them? And who can doubt that Socialism owes its success not to its intrinsic merits but to the fact that it seems to offer the only way of escape from the dingy reality of the Capitalist order?

Actually the Church regards the organized materialism of the Socialist State as a more formidable enemy than the unorganized materialism of Capitalist society, since the former is more exclusive and more intolerant of spiritual independence. Nevertheless this does not mean that she is prepared to accept the Capitalist ideal as legitimate or as morally defensible. Catholicism condemns the Capitalist principle of competitive individualism as well as the Socialist principle of class war. Society is not a mere collection of irresponsible individuals, nor is it a machine for the production of wealth; it is a spiritual organism in which each individual and every class and profession has its own function to fulfil and its own rights and duties in relation to the whole.

This organic conception of society involves, on the one hand, a mutual dependence and responsibility between its members, and, on the other, the principles of hierarchy and authority. To quote the Encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris* once more,

“As the Almighty willed that in the heavenly kingdom itself the choirs of angels should be of different ranks, subordinated the one to the other; and as in the Church God has established different grades of orders with diversity of function so that all should not be ‘Apostles, nor all Doctors, nor all Prophets,’ so also He has established in Civil Society many orders of varying dignity, right and power. And this to the end that the State, like the Church, should form one body comprising many members, some excelling others in rank and importance but all alike necessary to one another and solicitous for the common good.”

This principle is, of course, diametrically opposed to the liberal democratic ideal of absolute equality which ignores the very idea of status and regards society as a collection of identical units. But the result of this denial of status is not to make men really equal but only to leave them at the mercy of economic forces. A man is judged not by what he is but by what he has, and since the worker has nothing he has no real share in the Capitalist State. Against this, Catholic social philosophy maintains that a man's rights depend not on his wealth but on his social function. The State is a

functional organism or a graduated hierarchy of corporate groups, and, as Pius XI has said, the re-establishment of these corporate institutions must be the first aim of a sound social legislation. The true cure for class conflict is not Socialism which exalts the principle of class war systematically, but the restoration of a corporative social order by the institution of "vocational groups which bind men together not according to the position they occupy in the labour market, but according to the diverse functions that they exercise in society." (*Quadragesimo Anno*) Now this is nothing else but the Corporative State and there seems no doubt that the Catholic social ideals set forth in the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI have far more affinity with those of Fascism than with those of either Liberalism or Socialism.

In the same way it is clear that Catholicism is by no means hostile to the authoritarian ideal of the State. Against the Liberal doctrines of the divine right of majorities and the unrestricted freedom of opinion the Church has always maintained the principles of authority and hierarchy and a high conception of the prerogatives of the State. The ruler is not simply the representative of the people, he has an independent authority and a direct responsibility to God. His primary duty is not to fulfil the wishes of the people, but to govern justly and well, and so long as he fulfils this duty any resistance on the part of the people is a grave sin. And these ideas correspond much more closely at least in theory with the Fascist conception of the functions of the "leader" and the vocational hierarchy of the Fascist State than they do with the system of parliamentary democracy and party government where the government is simply the representative of a shifting combination of political interests and is usually under the control of a caucus of party politicians.

Nevertheless it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the political ideals of Catholicism and Fascism are identical or that Catholics can support the Fascist programme without reservations. There still remains a wide gap between the Catholic and Fascist ideals of the State, though both of them are authoritarian and hierarchical. To the Fascist, as to the Socialist, the State is the one social reality which absorbs and replaces all other forms of social organization. It is its own absolute end and it knows no law higher than that of its own interest. To the Catholic, on the other hand, the State is itself the servant of a spiritual order which transcends the sphere of political and economic interests. Nor has it any right to absorb the whole of human life or to treat the individual simply as a means to its ends. The individual, the family, the Church, and the religious community all have their own autonomous spheres of activity and their independent rights. Even the economic unit of the corporative State—the syndicate or vocational group—ought not, as Pius XI points out, to be a mere creation of the State, but a free and autonomous association.

Thus the hierarchic and authoritarian character of Catholic political philosophy does not exclude a real liberal and democratic element. It is true that Christian liberty is not that of the professional Democrats and Liberals. It does not rest on the will of the majority or right of men to do what is good in their own eyes. It consists rather in the constant adhesion of man to the divine order that rules the world. As Leo XIII writes,

"It is manifest that the eternal law of God is the sole standard and rule of human liberty, not only in each individual man but also in the community... Therefore the true liberty of human society does not consist in every man doing what he pleases, for that would simply end in turmoil and confusion and bring on the overthrow of

the State, but rather that through the injunctions of the civil law all may more easily conform to the prescriptions of the eternal law. Likewise the freedom of those who are in authority does not consist in the power to lay unreasonable and capricious commands upon their subjects which would equally be criminal and would lead to the ruin of the commonwealth, but the binding force of human laws consists in this— that they are to be regarded as applications of the eternal law and as incapable of sanctioning anything which is not contained in the eternal law, as in the principle of all law.” (On Human Liberty—*Libertas praestantissimum*—20<sup>th</sup> June, 1888)

This conception of the sovereignty and transcendence of Law is the basis of that tradition of liberty which has played so great a part in our history and which distinguishes the societies of Western Europe from those of Russia and the Orient. But the modern world has lost its faith in this higher law, and consequently its ideals of liberty and the Rights of Man have become hollow abstractions that grow emptier and more unreal the more they are talked about. Democracy has swelled itself out with hot air and high phrases until it has burst like the frog in the fable.

Consequently when the Fascists, and the Communists also, abandoned the democratic myth in the name of reality, they were left with nothing but the naked reality of power and no higher principle of moral order on which to base it. The Communists, as we know, fell back on the class war, and made class interest the supreme moral criterion. In Lenin’s words, “The State is simply the weapon with which the proletariat wages its class war, a special sort of bludgeon, nothing more.” The Fascists, for their part, had to invoke some higher principle than that of class interest, and accordingly they fell back on the idea of nationality, either in its political form, as in Italy, or as the expression of racial unity, as in Germany.

Now there is nothing objectionable from a Christian point of view in the idea of nationality, so long as it is regarded as a social fact and not as an exclusive ideal. Just as the different social orders or vocational groups go to make up the Corporative State, so the diversity of National States and national traditions constitutes the wider unity of Western civilization which is a community of peoples, inheriting the same spiritual traditions, acknowledging the same moral principles and sharing in the same intellectual culture. Catholic principles demand not only a Corporative State but also a corporative civilization, each member of which has its rights and duties towards the rest and admits a common and supernatural standard of justice. If the National State regards itself as the ultimate and absolute social reality and refuses to admit any moral responsibility towards other nations, it is obeying the same anti-social and separatist impulse which it condemns in the Communist and the Individualist. We escape from class-war and social revolution only to find ourselves faced with the equally destructive alternative of militarism and war between nations. Catholicism stands for Unity : Unity in the nation, by the Corporative State : Unity in the civilization, by the restoration of the spiritual community of Christian peoples : Unity in the world, by the moral leadership of Christian civilization.

This is the weak point of Fascism, and it is such a serious one that it goes far to neutralize the constructive tendencies in the Fascist movement. Unfortunately, however, it is not a vice that is peculiar to Fascism. It is also to be found in Democratic and Capitalist States and it was above all the Liberal cult of national self-determination combined with the economic nationalism of the post-war States that has been responsible for the present state of European tension and the virulence of

the feuds between the nations. It may well seem that the fanatical racial idealism of Nazi Germany is the final blow to any hope of European peace. On the other hand, the situation is already so intolerable that drastic action is unavoidable, and the more obvious is our danger the more inducement there is to act.

A Europe divided among twenty-four nations each determined to decrease its imports and to increase its armaments cannot survive. What we need is not a suicidal nationalism that ignores the spiritual community of civilization, nor a cosmopolitanism which ignores historic realities and treats every "nation" as an equivalent unit, whether it be a pocket republic like one of the Baltic States, or a world power like Soviet Russia that stretches from the Baltic to Manchuria and from the Arctic ice to the sands of Oxus. Some form of European organization is necessary and we can only attain it if we return to the old traditions of Christian Europe and recognize a higher spiritual loyalty than that of blood or class.

The European tradition is a much wider thing than that of nationalism, or liberalism, or socialism; it is the tradition of Christian civilization. All those ideals, which we regard as typically Western—the supremacy of law, the recognition of the moral rights of the individual and the duty of society towards the poor and the oppressed—are not the invention of modern democracy. They are ultimately products of the Christian tradition and find their only true justification in Christian principles. Either these elements must be salvaged from the wreck of Liberal idealism by being brought back to their natural basis in the Christian tradition, or they will be eliminated by the reconstitution of society on purely materialistic foundations as a closed order in which human nature is entirely subordinated to the needs of the state machine.

Thus the issue is not simply one between two rival economic or political systems; it involves a spiritual issue that is deeper and more complex. It is the choice between the mechanized order of the absolute State, whether it be nominally Fascist or Socialist, and a return to spiritual order based on a reassertion of the Christian elements in Western culture. The principles on which such a restoration must rest were clearly laid down fifty years ago in the great social encyclicals of Leo XIII. They are not the private opinions of a modern political theorist. They are the opinions which St Thomas drew from the ancient wisdom of the *philosophia perennis*. Indeed, they are as old as human civilization itself. The greatest minds of the human race have always recognized that the social order does not exist merely to serve man's needs and desires. It is a sacred order by which human action is conformed to the divine and eternal law.

For as Plato wrote in *The Laws*, God, not man, is the measure of all things, and holds in His hand the beginning and the middle and the end of all things.

"Justice always follows Him and punishes those who fall short of the divine law. To that Law, he who would be happy holds fast and follows it in all humility and order; but he who is lifted up with pride or money or honour or beauty, who has a soul hot with folly and youth and insolence, and thinks that he has no need of a guide or ruler, but is able of himself to be the guide of others, he, I say, is deserted of God; and being thus deserted he takes to himself others who are like him, and jumps about, throwing all things into confusion, and many think he is great man. But in a short time he pays the penalty of justice and is utterly destroyed and his family and state with him." (*Laws* iv, 716)