

“Had we but time to think”

Christopher Dawson and the Religious Basis for a Friendship of North American Cultures

Premise of the work: The relation of Christopher Dawson’s thought to the following epigraph:
“How to Co-Exist and Prosper Together as Friends Today: Towards the Pursuit of a North American Civil Discourse and Friendships”

ABSTRACT: How might cultures exist in a state of mutual friendship? A solution lies deep within the praxis of pre-political thought and might be surprising to many. The answer to this complex and poignant question is to be found within the depths of religious and cultural experience which form properly the *a priori* source of man’s identity and therefore the source of his ability to embark upon friendship: religion and by extension culture. Informed by the thought of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, the 20th century Oxford Historian Christopher Dawson addressed this topic in a lecture to the University of Edinburgh which became the basis for his seminal work *Religion and Culture*. This present paper will examine the thought of Dawson, several related thinkers, as well as primary influences like Augustine and Aquinas in answering the question “How can North American cultures co-exist and prosper together as friends today?” The answer which emerges is one which will challenge each reader to reconcile himself to a diminished nationalism, a renewed respect for religious expression of culture, and a transcendent and Thomistic view of friendship applied to an inter-national scale.

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Culturarum Amicitia...

A friendship of cultures. Such a phrase might rightly strike the hearer as an odd turn of words. How can *amicitia*, or the quality of friendship which we commonly predicate of a person *qua* person relation, exist between the markedly different bodies of people that we call individual cultures? In a classical sense, *amicitia* denotes the special character of relation in which each participant views his fellow participants as “other selves.”² This formal character can exist, therefore, only when each participant values his fellow participants not through a lens of utility but rather for who they are in essence, or in a Thomistic understanding, for the aspects of the Divine which they embody.³ Applied to a cultural context, this understanding creates a unique framework through which a concord of cultures can come about.

Throughout the preceding two centuries, it has been *de rigueur* for Americans to view cultural interaction through a lens of utility, if not outright hostility. But, for the cultural historian Christopher Dawson, this approach is directly opposed to a sustainable framework for cultural relations. In Dawson’s mind, the former classical/Thomistic approach was correct, rather than the latter which America, and by extension the West, has embraced over the past few centuries. Rectifying this misunderstanding, for Dawson, is of grave importance for the health of ongoing future relations between cultures.⁴

Dawson formalized his thought on the matter most fully in a 1947 lecture delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Speaking just two years after the conclusion of the Second World War, Dawson’s exposition was imbued with a righteous urgency, and the tenor of his prescriptions mirrored his tone in delivering them.⁵ Across the nearly 80 years since his initial presentation, Dawson’s ideas have gained little traction. Simultaneously, the quality of friendship among North American cultures has declined precipitously, noticeably so throughout just the current and prior American presidential administrations.⁶ Our time therefore seems an opportune one to revisit Dawson’s framework and suggestions.

² See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 23, a. 1, ad 3. Also see Aristotle, *Ethica Nichomachea* IX, 4, and St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I, 27–28.

³ *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 25, a. 1. Aquinas writes, “In each thing we love what is proper to it; and in man this is the participation of the divine good. Hence it is clear that we ought to love more in a man what he has from God than what he has from himself.” Applied to a cultural context, we come to love another culture for those aspects of God which each other culture embodies. A cultural concord, therefore, comes about when a homogeneity of religious belief among friendly cultures is established. Cf. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 211. Inversely, when cultural conflict arises, according to Dawson, it is always due to “a conflict of different spiritual principles, in other words a conflict of religions, and it usually becomes such in fact since the differences of culture and social tradition tend to ally themselves with differences of religious doctrine.” *Religion and Culture*, 208.

⁴ As Dawson Scholar Bradley J. Birzer explains, “A culture without a common faith may linger for a while, but eventually it must dissolve, for all other bonds between men, especially political bonds are tenuous at best without a common faith. In other words, there is no such thing as a culture that is secular. A secular culture would, by definition, mean the absence of culture.” From *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson*, 77.

⁵ See *Religion and Culture*, 218. (Quoted at length on page four of this paper).

⁶ Cf. Allan L. Kagedan, *The Politics of Othering in the United States and Canada*, 149–159.

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In order to understand Dawson's conclusions, we must comprehend first his presuppositions as well as his overall social mereology. For Dawson, all cultures are at some level expressions as well as outgrowths of religious belief and practice. As Dawson scholar Bradley J. Birzer explains, within the Dawsonian conception,

"At the root of every society lies the *cultus*, defined as the group of people... who band together to worship the same deity or deities. From the beginning the social way of life, which is culture, is deliberately ordered and directed in accordance with the higher laws of life which are religion. Culture is essentially a vital phenomenon; a way or order or pattern of social living... a "network of relations," in the Burkean sense, connecting person to person, in and across time. Economics, politics, and law proceed [therefore] from the culture."⁷

For Dawson, therefore, culture is something which is everywhere, and at all times, religious. This is not to suggest that the notion of culture is inherently tied to a specified body of dogmas, but rather that all cultures by definition exist according to frameworks of principle which by their nature constitute expressions of religion --- either rightly or wrongly explicated.⁸

If one is willing to accept Dawson's framework for understanding culture, the remainder of his prescriptions follow concisely as a series of ordered sub-arguments. Granting that the basis of cultural organization is religious, and following this paper's initial observation that friendship is predicated of (a) similar qualities between the friendly parties which are (b) the higher and more enduring to the degree that they embody aspects of the Divine, it can be concluded that the highest and most enduring basis for a friendship of North American cultures is therefore to be found within an homogenous religious expression.⁹

One may rightly question what manner of religious expression this ought to be. The answer -- at least for Dawson --- is simple: Christianity, the particular manifestation of which can be found in the Catholicism which is common in its prominence throughout the development of the three most dominant North American cultures: Mexican, Canadian, and American, and present in an immutable and crystallized form in every North American culture. The *cultus* of Catholicism is therefore the agent by which a friendship of North American cultures can most effectively and most enduringly come about.

To this proposal, which is relatively unfamiliar to the modern ear, a number of criticisms can be raised, which given the scope and constraints of this paper must be condensed into the following objection: Would this not lead to a diminishment of individuation among cultures and the persons who compose them? To this contention an appeal can be made within the Dawsonian framework to

⁷ Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson*, 76. Quotation edited slightly due to space constraints. See also: Christopher Dawson, "The Relationship Between Religion and Culture," *Commonweal*, vol. 49 (25 February 1949), 489.

⁸ See Bradley J. Birzer, *Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson*, 75-6, as well as Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, 56, 106-7, 197.

⁹ See Aybike Çağlar, "Christopher Dawson and the Making of Europe: An Approach Through Christianity," *The Journal of Marmara Social Research* vol 18, p. 62. What Dawson held to be true regarding post WW-II Europe rings only truer when considered in the context of North American cultural relations.

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the Catholic development of the Roman Imperial ideal of *civis universalis*, or the ‘universal citizenship’ of which Cicero speaks, through which men of varying cultures and identities share a common aspect of identity which is both definitive and Divinitive of them, in the sense that it imparts to their relation both a sharable character and a perfective quality.¹⁰

This conception, which made possible the great spiritual likeness and yet vast cultural and individual sub-differences which defined the notion of Christendom, is uniquely possible within the framework of Catholic *cultus*. For, as Dawson’s contemporary T. S. Gregory explained, the Church constitutes in this sense, “a body politic. She breeds in her children a spiritual solidarity, a pride of house without a self-conscious fanaticism of race, a strong sense of home which mixed blood and divergent interests cannot disturb.”¹¹ Within a friendship of cultures premised upon a shared Catholic *cultus*, a healthy individuation can not only exist but flourish within an overarching framework of social and salvific principles which, when embraced rightly, create the conditions in which the genuine good of individuation can be embraced without detriment to the overall *tranquillitatis ordinatio*.¹²

Having treated at length of the nature of culture, friendship, and the basis for a friendship of North American cultures, in closing, let us consider the concluding prescriptions that Dawson himself gave in Scotland so many decades ago. “The recovery of moral control and the return to spiritual order have now become the indispensable conditions of human survival,” he wrote.¹³ “But,” Dawson continues immediately, “they can be achieved only by a profound change in the spirit of modern civilization.”¹⁴ In North America, economic, political, and legal solutions have all been tried and found wanting. Perhaps it is time we consider a solution which is pre-political, pre-economic and pre-legal. Perhaps we should return our gaze to the more fundamental, to that which is at the very root of cultural expression itself: *cultus* and its resulting culture. “Had we but time to think,” Dawson pleaded eight decades ago.¹⁵ Time for cogitation has since evaporated. Ours is a time for conscious action.

¹⁰ Cf. *De Officiis* I, 12–17.

¹¹ Theophilus S. Gregory, *The Unfinished Universe*, 32. Quotation tenses modified to the present for clarity to the reader.

¹² Cf. *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 81, a. 1.

¹³ *Religion and Culture*, 218.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 218.

¹⁵ *Religion and Culture*, 21. The full quotation from Dawson, which follows, is stunning in its crystallization of the situation at hand: “Had we but time to think --- if we are granted a reprieve from the enormous perils we have incurred so thoughtlessly --- there is no necessary reason why the dualism of which I have spoken [the modern bifurcation between rationalist politicisism and religious commonality] should not eventually be overcome.”

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