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REVIEWS

The Rediscovery of the Middle Ages*

THE movement called the Enlightenment, growing out from the Renaissance and culminating in the eighteenth century but still widely alive today in its multifarious after-effects, has for its reverse side the *Endarkenment* of the Middle Ages. Those two phenomena are two sides of one thing. Without the Endarkenment as background, there would have been in the foreground a notable luminescence, indeed, but not *the* Enlightenment. If it had not been for the modern break with the mediaeval mind, the rejection of it as irrational and darkly unprogressive, modern rationalism could not possibly have seemed brightly rational nor modern progressivism wonderfully progressive. The immense submission of philosophy during the past three centuries to the concepts and methods of physical science — surely an outstanding episode in the history of human superstition — could not have appeared enlightened if the meaning of thirteenth-century thought had not become fully endarkened.

Accordingly, the lightening of the Endarkenment has proceeded in equal pace, since the end of the eighteenth century, with the darkening of the Enlightenment. The latter has descended stage by stage from the Wits of the aristocratic age to the populace,

* MEDIAEVAL RELIGION AND OTHER ESSAYS by Christopher Dawson (SHEED & WARD. 195 pp. \$2.00).

and to populace-minded writers, of the present time it has sunk from a flare of select spirits to a "gloomy light much like a shade" of widespread dying embers. For the beacons of the Enlightenment turned out to be mainly brilliant bonfires. After usefully destroying much accumulated rubbish, they bequeathed to the nineteenth century a sinking spiritual twilight. Already, however, the rediscovery of the Middle Ages had begun. The history of this movement will some day be written, from its first Romantic gropings to its culmination in (perhaps) the twenty-first century. But if the story is fully told it will have to be two-sided. It will show the descent of Rationalism from Hume, let's say, to Professor Dewey and Earl (Bertrand) Russell, and the rise of spiritual reason from the shadowy haze of Coleridge to the daylight of A. E. Taylor, Von Hügel, and Maritain.

Among the distinguished thinkers who in the twentieth century are retrieving the meaning of the Middle Ages with a fullness of enlightenment not possible before, Mr. Christopher Dawson, if not the most powerful and penetrating, is the most comprehensive and to use a popular term, the most "social-minded". Competent in many fields of learning, he brings all his knowledge to bear on the problem of society: he studies the origin and growth, the values, sins, and prospects, of Occidental culture. And for him the chief crisis in the plot of the whole complex drama occurs in the height of the Middle Ages; i.e., the period from the tenth to the thirteenth century. For it was just then, he claims, and not under the Roman Empire, that Europe first became Europe. It was only then that she achieved a cultural pattern sufficiently

comprehensive to bring into fruitful co-operation all her great inheritances, racial, political, religious, and intellectual. And though that harmony was transient in its outward form, the lesson of subsequent history, according to Mr. Dawson, is that the essentials of the mediaeval pattern must now be restudied, resumed, and carried on if Europe is again to achieve anything like a real unity. The extraordinary vitality of Europe in the past four centuries, the very energy which has produced those assertive sectional interests which now threaten to destroy or debase her civilization, was generated by *Europe as a society*, and can be maintained and controlled only if that society is reconstituted in modern form.

Mr. Dawson's present book, consisting of six essays on various aspects of mediaeval culture, should be read as a transition from his *The Making of Europe* to a work on the Middle Ages which, so his publishers announce, is still in preparation. Here he makes clear that the Middle Ages, so far from being "the ages of Faith in the sense of unquestioning submission to authority and blind obedience", were a period of spiritual struggle and incessant mental and social change. The restoration of contact with the main tradition of Greek thought—which had been lost in the Dark Ages, not through the working of Christianity but because of the internal decay of Roman civilization—is not only one of the chief mediaeval achievements: "It is a turning-point in the history of world civilization, for it marks the passing of the age-long supremacy of Oriental and eastern-Mediterranean culture and the beginning of the intellectual leadership of the West." The quick absorption by the West of

Graeco-Arabic science in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is an extraordinary event. The "modern errors" of the new thinkers were loudly condemned by traditionalists and there was a real danger that Western culture would be sacrificed, like the culture of Islam, to a conflict between theology and science. This was prevented, however, by "the eagerness and intellectual courage" of the contemporary leaders of Christian thought.

But Mr. Dawson knows that the greatest achievement of the Middle Ages was not intellectual synthesis, much less ecclesiastical organization: it was a "deepening of the spiritual life by a new type of religious experience". This grew out from a fusion of the lofty mysticism of the East with Western religious humanism and found its concrete expression in what may be called, as the author says, "the passion of the humanity of Christ". This acme of the mediaeval cultural harmony is all too briefly treated by the author. And the reader is surprised to find him declaring in his chapter on "The Romantic Tradition" that if we wish to find "the quintessence of the mediaeval spirit, we cannot do better than to follow the example of the Romantics and look for it in the age and country of the Troubadours". He shows elsewhere that the courtly idealism of the Troubadours, Arabic in its origin, was essentially materialistic and anti-religious in its spirit; which mediaeval Christianity, by reason of its catholic scope, was able to attach and to transmute in a manner that looks miraculous. Why, then, call the Provençal idealism "the quintessence of the mediaeval spirit"? Apparently because Mr. Dawson is here anxious to demonstrate that "the

rediscovery of the Middle Ages by the Romantics is an event of no less importance in the history of European *thought* [the italics are the reviewer's] than the rediscovery of Hellenism by the Humanists" of the Renaissance. However, his book culminates in an excellent essay on *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, a poem deeply typical of the Middle Ages just because it is dominated by "the passion of the humanity of Christ". Mr. Dawson does not say, but he leads the reviewer to say, that that religious experience, re-animated in modern form and again guiding philosophy, would be the chief light to enlighten our darkened Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment, though rooted in the Renaissance, grew rapidly away from the best spirit of that period. There is a deep gulf between the Cartesian rationalism and that catholic philosophy, achieved in the Middle Ages but not yet fully and imaginatively humanized, which underlies the great art of the Renaissance — the poetry, for instance, of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Now, in various passages of Mr. Dawson's works he shows a disposition to deny the distinctiveness of Renaissance humanism, to merge it into the rationalistic humanitarianism which was its bastard offspring. To lose the spirit of the Renaissance in regaining that of the Middle Ages would be most unfortunate. And the root of the trouble (it plainly appears in his present book) is that he has not yet discerned a thoroughly *internal* cause of the decline of the mediaeval harmony as distinct from subsidiary factors — a deficiency comparable with those inherent causes of decline which in his previous books he discovered in previous civilizations. Consequently in his

view the mediaeval culture seems so very exceptional that it quite overshadows the Renaissance, wherein the sources of decline are very patent to him. But fortunately Mr. Dawson's thought is still in process of development and may fill in its lacunae. And his present book is packed with vital facts and ideas which Americans, in particular, stand very much in need of. For the stream of American civilization — rising in the decline of the Renaissance and cut off from the mediaeval spirit except in its narrow Puritan form, then suddenly broadening out in the later eighteenth century — has been exceptionally shallowed and darkened by the Enlightenment. Our great universities, in New York and elsewhere, which unlike Oxford and Paris have no mediaeval "foundations", may perchance brighten and deepen their wide-flowing radiance if they foster within their walls the study of Mr. Dawson's works.