

# Undistracted philosopher

Historian Christopher Dawson spurns publicity for the quiet life of the mind

Although as the first Catholic in the Harvard Divinity School Christopher Dawson is a legitimate object of news, no photograph or piece of information is ever wrung from him without a keen struggle. It isn't the publicity Professor Dawson seems to mind so much as the distraction — and publicity can be almost as distracting as television. (For a short while last year, he attempted American television, and was quite partial to Westerns, but has given it up because it threatened to interfere with his reading.) Presumably on the same theory, he

discourages the wits out of interviewers and photographers.

Professor Dawson gives one lecture (on the early Church) to a handful of students, and one or two seminars a week at the Harvard Divinity School. For recreation between times, he replenishes his mind with books; for exercise, he reads.

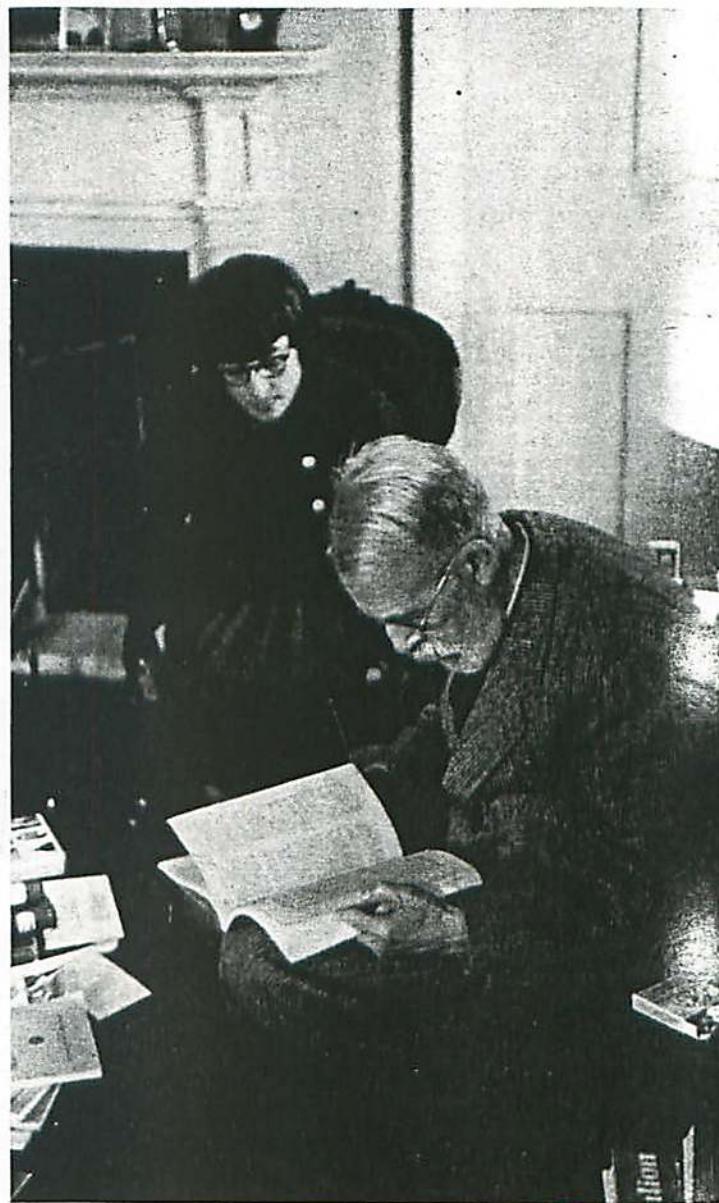
Here, JUBILEE makes a rare visit to Professor Dawson in his home (where he is seen with Mrs. Dawson and Marietta Bisson, his secretary), and obtains a rare interview.

✓ input

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“ It is necessary to make people more conscious of our cultural predicament — of the existence of this deadening blanket of secularist conformity which is stifling the spiritual and intellectual life of modern culture. This is not a political question, it is one which can be dealt with by the thinker and the writer. It is not a denominational issue. Catholics are no doubt involved to an exceptional degree. But it is essentially a struggle for spiritual freedom which affects us all. The old-fashioned liberal sees religion and above all the Catholic Church as the great enemies of freedom. But he is living in the past. The modern world has seen the coming of a new threat to human freedom which is more far reaching and profound than anything the past has known. ”

## religious education in America

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL NOVAK

D: American Catholicism is stronger today than most Europeans realize and it is bound to have a profound influence on American culture. On the other hand, I feel that American culture has become so strong and so deeply committed to its own way of life, which is a purely secular one, that it is becoming more and more difficult for Catholicism to find any place.

Q: *Then our society is not really pluralist?*

D: No, I do not think it is. Certainly it was pluralist. This was perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Constitution as its founders planned it. But it has long ceased to be so. Viewed externally it is an immense technologically organized unity; viewed from within it is equally unitary, owing to the social and economic pressures which are forcing the individual into common patterns of behavior. In fact, modern American society is a behavioristic monism.

Q: *But how has this revolution come about? Our legislators have always been deeply concerned to defend religious and intellectual freedom.*

D: That is the great paradox of American history. The separation of Church and state which was intended to protect religious freedom has become the constitutional basis of the secularization of American culture. The First Amendment was intended to *limit* the powers of the Federation from any interference with religion—not to extend them. The powers of the Federation were strictly limited by the rights of the individual, the churches and the individual states. Indeed if you had talked to an American in those days of 'the separation of Church and state,' he would have thought that you were talking about the position of the Episcopalian Church in Virginia or the Congregationalist Church in Connecticut. But these questions did not concern the Federation. Congress had no power to deal with them, and this was the real meaning of the First Amendment.

Q: *Why do you say that the First Amendment has become the constitutional basis of American secularism?*

D: Because with the coming of a universal national system of public education, in the later nineteenth century, this principle was applied in the educational field. Religion was banished from the common school, and since the common school was also the school of citizenship and the great unitive force that welded the diverse elements of American society into a common culture, that culture was inevitably a secular one.

Q: *How has education been surrendered so easily to monism?*

D: This total rejection of the religious element in education as a *divisive force* in the formation of the American

culture owed a great deal in the last generation to the late John Dewey who had such a wide influence on educational thought through his long period of teaching in Columbia Teachers College. No doubt his influence is a thing of the past, but the principle for which he stood has become victorious and has become an almost universally accepted dogma—it has become hypostatically united with the First Amendment, as an article of faith which no loyal American can question.

Q: *On some campuses, Catholics are not even allowed to meet together in Newman clubs—for fear of divisiveness. But Catholic schools suffer from the pressures of conformity too.*

D: What it all amounts to is that Catholics are being forced to pay double for the right of freedom of education and still are not getting their money's worth; when they have done all and more than all that they can, their schools will be less well equipped and their teachers less well paid than those of the state. This is an obvious injustice and a denial of the principle of religious freedom. Yet any attempt to remedy it is invariably blocked by an appeal to the First Amendment which has become a bulwark of secularist dogma.

A: *But don't you think that the secular humanist thinks of himself as the heir of the Enlightenment, and of religion as obscurantist; and hence looks on the First Amendment as a wall against religion? He thinks HE is defending freedom.*

D: But in fact, as I said, this secularist interpretation rests on a misunderstanding. Official policy as stated, for example in the North West Ordinance of 1787, lays down the general principle, "Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." In other words, churches and schools had their own independent spheres of action and it was the duty of the government to protect and encourage them, but not to restrict or control them in the free exercise of their proper function.

Q: *But would it be politically wise to make an issue of this?*

D: Not a political issue, but an educational and intellectual one. I think educated opinion is becoming alive to the injustices and inequalities of the present system. For example, I noticed an article here in the *Crimson* on Wednesday which could not be called in any way pro-Catholic, but which was quite outspoken in its recognition of the injustice of taxing the Catholic to pay for an education from which he is practically excluded.