





When the editor of THE SIGN asked me to Interview Christopher Dawson, I was startled and puzzled. For in the first place, I had never interviewed anybody. And in the second, Christopher Dawson was not the ideal person for me to begin on. In the thirty years of our friendship, we have had hundreds of conversations (they have been a major part of my education); and it is a little difficult to interview a man with whom you have already discussed just about everything there is. Obviously I could not simply sit down beside him, notebook open and pencil sharpened, and say (as was once said to a friend of mine): "And what, Sir, are your principal views?"

My first instinct was to refuse, But you cannot refuse an editor, if he happens to be your friend. So I found myself in Budleigh Salterton, England. It is a small seaside resort in Devon, famous mainly as the home town of Sir Walter Raleigh. He also, like Christopher Dawson, set out from there to visit America. He it was who named Virginia (in honor of Queen Elizabeth). One can imagine that she and he must have had some hearty laughs over that! I found the Dawsons packing,

in preparation for his five-year professorship at Harvard in the newly founded Chair of Catholic Studies, which began this fall. My first shock was to discover that he was taking 2,700 books with him. I mentioned that Harvard had quite a library of its own. His only answer was, "Books are my tools." As a good carpenter, he needs a full kit of tools.

I got the impression that it was only by iron self-control that he got the number down so low. The house is crammed with books, thousands upon thousands of them, in every room, almost on every wall. But he can always go straight to the book he wants, almost to the page he wants. His reading is vast, his memory cavernous—but superbly filled.

I recall one tiny example of his memory. We were talking about Red Indian chiefs—Pontiac, King Philip, Chief Joseph. I remarked that in my school library there had been a book which I always meant to read and somehow didn't, called "When Valmond Came to Pontiac." He said "That was not the Indian chief, it was the place in Michigan." I could not have been more surprised if he had said it was the automobile! I have never

met anybody else who had ever heard of the book, or even of Valmond.

But to come back to my own problem, that of interviewing him. Clearly it could not be done in an hour or two. I spent the night in Budleigh Salterton. We talked in the afternoon, again in the evening, again the next morning. Occasionally, I scrawled notes of what he said. Again and again, he would return to some question I had asked him earlier, qualifying or adding to the answer he gave the first time. He sent on further qualifications by mail.

One final point. The reader must not think of some of the longer answers as pouring out of his mouth in one single jet. I have put them together from things he said in the afternoon or the evening or the morning or by mail. The one thing I remember as coming out instantly was the first part of his answer to my question about T. S. Eliot; the second part I received in a letter.

I have mentioned all these things because I should hate anyone to think that what follows is the work of a masterinterviewer. My cards are on the table.

## What do you read for entertainment?

Before the first War—French Catholic novels and Wells, Kipling, Belloc, and Chesterton. Between the wars, Russian novels both pre-and post-Revolutionary, and detective stories. After the second War, American novels and historical novels.

## Why did you give up detective stories?

They reached their best between the two world wars. Since then they have changed. I think the decline in the detective novel is an index of the decline of civilization in the last fifty years. Half the pleasure of Sherlock Holmes comes from the Baker Street hansom cab background. So too with science fiction. The picture of the Surrey suburban life and countryside in the first third of The War of the Worlds is as good as anything Wells ever wrote.

## How do you compare American detective stories and English?

I prefer the English. Too many of the Americans bring in sexual interest, in a quite unnecessary way. They make sex the spice on the jam. The crime should be spice enough.

Another English author, asked who is the greatest living American prose writer, is reported to have said Erle Stanley Gardner. Would you agree?

No. I don't read him much. And talking of sex as spice, Della Street is awful; though she is not the worst. Taking American literature as a whole, I think Thoreau wrote the best prose. Herman Melville was as good, but only when he chose. I remember how much I enjoyed White Jacket.

Forgetting detective stories, how would you compare modern English and American novelists generally?

I'm inclined to think that American men—Thornton Wilder. Hemingway, and Faulkner—are ahead of English But I think England has rather the better women novelist in mabe that English women have never lost the privilege of having started with Jane Austen. And she was followed by George Eliot, the Brontes, and Mrs. Gaskell.

You have just named three American men novelists. Would you like to name some English women?

Tennison Jesse, who died recently, Sylvia Townsend Warner. Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, Naomi Mitchison, and H. M. Prescott. The Man on a Donkey is a great novel.

The Man on a Donkey reminds me of The Cypresses Believe in God. Have you read it?

Yes, I think it is good, but overpraised. The two novels are not really comparable. The beauty of *The Man on a Donkey* is its historicity and its recapture of sixteenth-century conversation. *The Cypresses* is a contemporary novel. I would, however, compare H. M. Prescott with Hope Muntz whose *Golden Warrior* is a remarkable re-creation of the past.

How long have you been devoted to the study of the relationship between religion and society?

I began it as an undergraduate at Oxford in 1907. I think it was the history of Iceland that started me on that line. I did not find much interest in the question in the university at the time. I just went my own way. St. Augustine's Gity of God affected me most powerfully. So did Harnack, a liberal Protestant, who never knew how much he contributed to the process of my conversion to the Church! He had never heard of me, of course, but I wonder if it ever occurred to him that he might have helped anyone along that particular road.

You joined the Church just after taking your degree. Who, besides Harnack, helped?

I was already an Anglo-Catholic before I went to Oxford. I had been brought up on the Oxford Movement. I was naturally much interested when Ronald Knox, still an Anglican, became Chaplain at Trinity College while I was there; but he did not help in my conversion. Some of the men at Pusey House, the center of Anglo-Catholic life in Oxford, did. From them I learned a great deal of theology and patristics. Catholics who helped were Edward Watkin, whom I had known as a boy and who joined the Church a couple of years before I did: and Father Burdett, then a Jesuit, through whom I came to know Stonyhurst.

Forty years ago sociologists frequently maintained that civilizations produced religion as a kind of by-product. Even then, you were insisting that religion created civilizations. Have you noted any significant change?

The tendency now is toward the view I have held all along. Durkheim influenced anthropologists in this direction, though his ideas of religion were rather odd: so did Weber and Troeltsch. That really great prehistorian, Gordon Childe, though he was so strongly Marxist in his own personal views, gave a big place to religion in his special field. Some of the most remarkable American anthropologists—Ruth Benedict, for example, and Robert Redfield—have seen the importance of religion for the study of culture.

In your book Understanding Europe you state that Western civilization can be saved only by a "common effort which cannot be limited to immediate political ends, but must involve a deeper process of cooperation based on common spiritual principles." What spiritual principles do you think America holds in common with Europe?

When you get down deep, there are no differences between American and European thought. Europe is the fountainhead whence America derives most of what it has—the belief in democracy. American idealism, and the philosophy of natural law; though America has made its own developments in all of these and has remained truer to the last of the three than Europe. Maritain has done much to bring European thought to America. Newman's thought, which had very little influence in America in Newman's own time, is now fully realized there. At the same time there has been a great Protestant recovery of theology in Europe, headed by such men as Karl Barth. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich have made this theological development widely known in America—in fact Tillich is a sort of Protestant Maritain!

What American writers do you consider chiefly representative of the cultural traditions of Western civilization? The great New England writers of a hundred years ago, Emerson and Thoreau especially; Melville was quite extraordinarily traditional. In our own days, Thornton Wilder (his George Brush is one of the great spiritual figures), Edith Wharton, Robert Frost, and, of course, T. S. Eliot,

But Eliot is now an Englishman-

England could not have produced him. It was not England that produced Henry James either; like T. S. Eliot, he became a British citizen.

What American leaders seem to you most truly representative of Western traditions?

The name of Robert E. Lee springs to my mind instantly. He was a genuine Christian and a splendid example of the way Americans kept the higher traditions of Western civilization. Abraham Lincoln, of course, was the great spiritual leader of America, but it would not be fair to put him as an influence from Europe or anywhere else; he was too totally American. No one has ever represented both the America and Europe of his own day better than Thomas Jefferson. Europe, at the time of the Enlightenment, would have been delighted to claim him as its own. No one represents the Liberal ideal at its height better than he.

Is there any American President you would have been happy to see as Prime Minister of England?

The two positions are so totally different that I cannot at a moment's notice transfer the holder of one of them to the other. The President is a democratic monarch; the Prime Minister, the Chairman of a Committee. George Washington, perhaps, could have been Prime Minister of England with complete ease, but then he had grown to maturity as a British subject! Mark Twain could have written a fantasy on Lord Melbourne and Andrew Jackson exchanging their offices.

Do you note the emergence of any significantly great writers in America today?

There has been a great raising of the level of writing without producing any real leader. The general standard of American poetry is very high indeed, yet I cannot feel that it has produced a great poet by world standards. Whether there is such a world figure among American novelists, I should not care to say. But the American novel is having great influence upon the world—Hemingway's, for instance, and Faulkner's.

In your book The Modern Dilemma you say that true democracy is based on the aristocracy of the individual. Do you think that in America there is sufficiently high regard for the dignity of the person to offset dangers of mass culture?

That is a problem of the whole modern world, not confined to the United States. America is as alive to the dangers as we; we are as subject to the dangers as America. Insofar as these dangers are increased by technology, America, being further advanced technologically, is in greater danger. But it still has the resources to produce new initiatives. We are very much under the heel of events; America less so.

In Understanding Europe you say that "American religion has lost its supernatural certitude and American philosophy has lost its rational certitude. What survives is a vague moral idealism and a vague rational optimism." You wrote that before 1950. Would you revise that judgment in view of the so-called religious revival in America?

There has, as I have already said, been a revival of awareness of the great theological issues, but there is not much evidence that it has reached the church-going mass. There has been a most notable increase in the numbers of church-goers, but all inquiries seem to suggest that the motives in those cases are not strictly religious, but rather a generous desire to work together with fellow Christians for the betterment of human conditions generally. The accent seems to be on what Christ called the second commandment—Love thy neighbor as thyself—rather than on the first. Excellent as this is, there still is a great gap between it and religion as it always has been among men—participation in divine mysteries.

At least it is still that for Catholics, and there are thirty-five million of them in America. Don't you think that their enduring traditions in philosophy and their strong supernatural faith must have an effect upon American society?

We are up against the difficulty that, given the condition in which the parents and grandparents of so many American Catholics arrived in the country from Europe, there had, of necessity, to be a long period of building and re-building, with the accent on primary education. Thus, when you speak of enduring philosophical traditions, there are none such of an especially American character.

But they have the philosophical traditions of the Church?

Of course. But these can hardly be widespread or deeply rooted in the soil of American Catholicism. The great intellectual development is a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, given the vast numbers of American Catholics and the great energy they have as Americans, I should expect them to have had a great influence already. But we always seem to hear from America that Catholics are not having the effect they ought to have. This is not my own opinion; it is simply what I constantly hear from Americans. When I have been in the country a few years, I shall be in a better position to answer your question.

Do you see any signs of a Catholic revival in England?

People are joining the Church in considerable numbers. There is, of course, a falling away of Catholics themselves, and one has seen some rather gloomy figures. But we are building new churches all the time and filling them as fast as we build them. One of the notable phenomena of life in England is the very large attendance at Catholic churches—it kills any idea that people might have that the Catholic Church is on the way out in England. The eye is especially caught by conversions among the educated. One is constantly surprised to find so many Catholics in what I may call the New Statesman and B.B.C. world. There are more Catholic professors at Oxford than at any time since the Reformation. The recent conversions of Edith Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon are an example of what I have in mind.

The editor of The Sign wants me to ask you three or four political questions. First, do you think the age of imperialism is on the way out historically?

The old type certainly is—the British Empire, for example. But the totalitarian type is most definitely not on the way out, as we see with China. Is modern nationalism itself not a form of imperialism?—such things as Indonesia claiming New Guinea and Egypt trying to take over the Lebanon?

You have placed great emphasis on the psychological factor in the creation of civilizations. Do you think Communism's psychological drive has spent its greatest force?

It does look as if Communism's drive in Europe is, for the moment at any rate, losing strength. But it is strong in Asia and Africa—these being not so much worried about Communism's assault upon individual freedoms and minority rights, since they have never experienced them. The psychological appeal of Communism to Asia and Africa is of extreme simplicity: it simply presents itself as the enemy of the older Imperialism.

Do you think the current Soviet drive for world empire will embrace Europe before it stops?

If it does embrace Europe, I do not see why it should stop, or how it could be stopped. If Russia held Europe and West Africa, America would be in an impossible position, with submarines operating from Ireland and missiles being hurled from Dakar. The frontiers of America are now on the Elbe and the Adriatic.

Do you think the civilization of the future will shift its axis Eastward?

I should need the gift of prophecy to answer that question. We cannot rule out the possibility that Communism might break down, or alternatively that it might transform itself into a static despotism of the older Asiatic type. But there is no doubt that the sheer weight of Asia and Africa is growing against that of the West.

Do you think the world can long endure as half slave and half free?

Without pausing to discuss the fitness of the two adjectives. I would say that there seems to be no reason—apart from the possibility of one destroying the other by violence—why they should not co-exist. East and West always have been totally different; but Persia managed to co-exist, not always peaceably of course, with the old Roman Empire, and Islam with Europe.

In his book Reflections on America, Jacques Maritain declares that, in his opinion, if a new Christian civilization should ever come about in history, it will find its starting point on American soil. What is your opinion?

Something new should come out of American Catholici-in not only because of its numbers and energy, but more profoundly because it is the one national Catholicism which has reached its maturity in this present age of our culture.

Do you see any present signs in American Catholicism of the emergence of this new thing?

As I have said, the American Church was concerned for a century or more with practical problems—principally how to keep afloat in an anti-Catholic society. Whether or not all American Catholics are satisfied with what has been done so far, there is no doubt whatever that there is a great intellectual awakening; it may not yet have produced outstanding individual figures, but it is a widespread general movement all the same. But, once more, remember that I have never been in America. I have studied the country from afar and have a clear picture of it in my own mind. But I have no doubt whatever that the experience of being here will mean a very considerable re-drawing of my mental picture.