

# *Christopher Dawson:*

## *His Interpretation of History*

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CHRISTOPHER HENRY DAWSON has been called "the greatest English-speaking Catholic historian of the twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> He was also a profound conservative critic of contemporary Western culture and his indictments were based on a synthetic interpretation of the history of mankind which is one of the most impressive ever produced. His analysis of the decline of the West must be considered an important contribution to conservative thought. Yet Dawson has been strangely ignored by American conservatives, to our disadvantage. Now and then one finds passing reference to Dawson, but seldom any serious recognition of his contribution. As a typical example of this neglect, although Dawson held a chair at Harvard from 1958 to 1962, he is mentioned only once in Nash's history.<sup>2</sup> Patently we would do well to become better acquainted with Dawson's thought: He combined two points of approach in his synthesis of history: the belief that cultures rather than nations are the basic units of history; and the development of what he called the Christian view of history.

Dawson would have us examine history from a cultural perspective. "Modern history has usually been written from the nationalist point of view. . . . In the course of the nineteenth century this movement permeated the popular consciousness and determined the ordinary man's conception of history. . . . And the result is that each nation claims for itself a cultural unity and self-sufficiency that it does not possess."<sup>3</sup> The national point of view is actually dangerous; it was "one of the great predisposing causes" of World War I. We should adopt

instead the cultural conception of history "which goes behind the political unit and studies that fundamental unity which we term a culture."<sup>4</sup>

A culture Dawson defined as "a common way of life—a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs." Four main components serve as the basis for culture: "(1) race, *i.e.*, the genetic factor; (2) environment, *i.e.*, the geographical factor; (3) function or occupation, *i.e.*, the economic factor," and (4) "thought or the psychological factor."<sup>5</sup> The first three affect the life of any living thing; the fourth is distinctively human. These four elements were identified in one of Dawson's earliest works. In one of his latest, a slightly different analysis is given, still containing four factors: "(1) the sociological factor, or the principle of social organization; (2) the geographical or ecological factor—the adaptation of culture to its physical environment; (3) the economic factor—the relation between man's 'way of life' and the way in which he 'gains his living'; and (4) the moral factor—the regulation of human life in conformity with some system of values and standards of behavior."<sup>6</sup> Dawson has also used an analysis limited to two elements, intellectual and material, of which the intellectual is the more important since it "gives a culture its specific form. . . . Essentially the intellectual element consists in a common set of values which serve to unify the various activities of the group. Such values find expression pre-eminently . . . in a society's religious beliefs."<sup>7</sup>

Dawson believed religion to be the key to history, because it is the key to culture. A

religion is not simply a theology. Religion must be expressed in sociological ways as well for it "can never escape the necessity of becoming incarnated in culture and clothing itself in social institutions and traditions, if it is to exert a permanent influence on human life and behavior."<sup>8</sup> The manner in which religion becomes embodied in temporal society establishes the form of a culture.

A religion may be introduced into a society in one of three ways. The religion may grow up "as it were naturally, with the life of a people" and inseparable from it. This is the normal process in primitive cultures, and has occurred in more advanced civilizations as well, as in the Greek and Roman. Second, a religion may be fully formed outside a culture and then be introduced into it, as Buddhism entered China or Islam Persia. Finally, a fully formed religion may enter a culture still in the process of formation, "thus itself becoming one of the constituent elements of the new culture that is growing up," as happened with early medieval Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

A people may also lose its religion and become secularized. Without a religion, however, a culture cannot long survive. Secularization is inevitably a sign of "social decay;" since religion provides the principle of inner cohesion for a society, a secular society will sooner or later disintegrate:<sup>10</sup>

The loss of the historic religion of a society is a sign that it is undergoing a process of social disintegration. . . . We cannot . . . assume the possibility of a culture continuing to preserve its unity and to persist indefinitely without any religious form whatsoever. When the process of secularization is completed, the process of social dissolution is consummated and the culture comes to an end.<sup>11</sup>

Secularization is precisely what Dawson believed was happening to the contemporary West.

Once established, a culture tends to become static. However, cultural change may be induced in several ways. Dawson delineated five major types of social change. First and most basic, a people develops a particular relation-

ship to its original environment. When a workable way of life has been attained, it will persist. Second, for some reason a people may come into a new geographical environment and adapt its culture to fit the new area. Third, two different peoples may mix, usually as the result of conquest, and a new culture must be formed. Dawson considered this the "most typical and important of all the causes of culture change;" it has been "the origin of practically all those sudden flowerings of new civilisation which impress us as almost miraculous."<sup>12</sup> As the two peoples begin to fuse themselves into a new people and form a new culture, they pass through a fairly regular cycle. First there is a period of several centuries of "silent growth during which a people lives on the tradition of the older culture, either that which they have brought with them, or that which they found in the land."<sup>13</sup> Next there is a period of "intense cultural activity, when the new forms of life created by the vital union of two different peoples and cultures burst into flower."<sup>14</sup> Finally the culture reaches maturity "either by the absorption of the new elements by the original people and its culture, or by the attainment of a permanent balance between the two, the stabilisation of a new cultural variation."<sup>15</sup> The fourth type of cultural change results when a society adopts some material element which another people has developed. Such material changes may alter the whole system of social organization. Yet, being the result of purely external factors, this kind of change very often leads not to social progress but to social decay, for "as a rule, to be progressive change must come from within."<sup>16</sup> Finally, the fifth type of change is induced when a people modifies its culture because of the adoption of some new knowledge or belief.<sup>17</sup>

A culture tends, especially after the higher level of civilization has been reached, to expand. A civilization attempts to become a super-culture extending over a large area, dominating or absorbing other less advanced or less powerful cultures.<sup>18</sup> Thus a higher civilization almost always contains at least two separate traditions which may provide the tension that causes social progress and cultural achievement.

Dawson's judgment of the expansive tendency of a civilization changed over the years. He first regarded territorial expansion as something achieved at the expense of the quality of a civilization, but later his judgment was reversed. "The *normal* process is quite the opposite, e. g., the great age of medieval culture was also the age of the territorial expansion of the Franco-Norman culture, the great age of Spanish culture was the age of Spanish territorial expansion and the latter ceased before the former by a generation or two."<sup>19</sup> On a larger scale, the entire history of the world may be seen as a process of increasing integration based on the tendency of civilizations to expand.<sup>20</sup>

While a culture may change in many ways, it is not infinitely malleable. "Precisely because change is something out of the ordinary and interferes with the previous mode of a culture's functioning, there is a limit to the amount of change of which a society is capable without breakdown."<sup>21</sup> There is also a qualitative limit: "Only so long as change is the spontaneous expression of the society itself does it involve the progress of civilization."<sup>22</sup> Sometimes changes are introduced into a culture that are not assimilable into the "spontaneous expression of the society itself." If the culture is strong enough, it will sooner or later reject the alien elements that have been thrust upon it. If, however, the alien elements are accompanied by a superior technology, they will usually destroy the culture into which they have been introduced.<sup>23</sup> The former possibility may be illustrated by the Islamic world's attempt to assimilate Greek science. The result was "an internal conflict between the scientific and religious traditions [which] proved incapable of solution."<sup>24</sup> Islam rejected Greek science, and the Moslem world consequently is now technologically inferior to the West. The latter possibility is illustrated by the reactions of primitive peoples to contact with Western civilizations and the changes being wrought in Asian nations by Western technology.<sup>25</sup>

Dawson viewed history from a Christian perspective. He believed that Christianity has a concept of history inherent in it, for it is a uniquely historical religion. It is "essentially

the religion of the Incarnation, of the divine intervention in history at a particular time and in a particular social context and of the extension and incorporation of this new spiritual creation in the life of humanity through the mediation of an historic institutional society."<sup>26</sup>

Dawson was a Catholic convert and his Catholicism pervaded his writings. Yet his Christian view of history includes much that a Protestant could accept; it goes much deeper than a simple Catholic notion of the Church. Belief in divine providence is basic: "the Christian is bound to believe that there is a spiritual purpose in history—that it is subject to the designs of Providence and that somehow or other God's will is done."<sup>27</sup> In the ancient world, the dominant conception of history was one of constant, senseless change; with the coming of Christianity "man first acquired that sense of a unity and a purpose in history without which the spectacle of the unending change becomes meaningless and oppressive."<sup>28</sup>

Dawson believed it necessary to combine the Christian view of history with his analysis of cultures if one would understand Western history. At various times he discussed the components that make up European culture, concentrating primarily on the intellectual ones. At one point he considered four factors: political existence based on the Roman Empire, the Christian religion, the Hellenic literary tradition, and the German barbarians as a new racial stock.<sup>29</sup> Normally, however, he listed two components basic to European culture: Christianity and the classical tradition. These elements are not, of course, entirely compatible; indeed, there has always been tension between them "which shows itself in the conflict between the extreme ideals of otherworldly asceticism and secular humanism. Yet the coexistence of both of these elements has been an essential condition of the Western development, one which has inspired all the great achievements of our culture."<sup>30</sup> One or the other element may have dominated at any moment in the past, but both have always, from their origins to this day, been present. When they combine, interact "in living and fruitful contact with one another," the result is a period

of great cultural achievements. In the eighth, twelfth, and fifteenth centuries Dawson believed such a process occurred.<sup>31</sup>

A consequence of our intellectual heritage is that Western society has never remained static for very long; it has never achieved an equilibrium beyond which no change would occur. The dynamic West is, in this respect, very different from the "unchanging East" and the reason is to be found in religious differences. Christianity is uniquely capable of combining with the classical tradition precisely because it is an historical religion. For the Christian, "deliverance is to be obtained not by a sheer disregard of physical existence and a concentration of the higher intellect on the contemplation of pure Being, but by a creative activity that affects every part of the composite nature of man."<sup>32</sup> Christianity has always resisted attempts to introduce into it Gnostic elements which regard the material world as intrinsically evil. On the other hand, there is an unworldly, transcendental aspect to Christianity which necessitates a paradoxical attitude toward the world. The tension between these two elements has given Christianity "its characteristic power to change society and to create new cultural forms."<sup>33</sup> Christianity has provided the dynamism in Western culture, a force no other religion provides, save perhaps Judaism. Dawson believed this spiritual dynamism is so important for our culture that, if its source is long removed, it will bring "the progressive movement to a full stop, and thus bring about a static society which has mastered social change to such a degree that it no longer possesses any vital momentum."<sup>34</sup>

In tracing Christianity's sociological manifestations, obviously the Church is one of the most important institutions on which to focus attention. Dawson divided the history of the Church into six ages, each lasting for three or four centuries and each following a roughly similar course:

Each of them begin, and end, in crisis; and all of them except perhaps the first, pass through three phases of growth and decay. First there is a period of intense spiritual activity when the Church is faced with a new historical solution and begins a new aposto-

late. Secondly there is a period of achievement when the Church seems to have conquered the world and is able to create a new Christian culture and new forms of life and art and thought. Thirdly there is a period of retreat when the Church is attacked by new enemies from within or without, and the achievements of the second phase are lost or depreciated.<sup>35</sup>

The First Age of the Church began with Christ and the life and death struggle of the new religion with the Roman Empire and pagan civilization. In the second phase the Church faced its most important change: the extension from a purely Jewish to a Gentile environment. The third phase hardly existed as the last great persecution threatened to destroy the Church but ended in its triumph.

The Second Age began with the conversion of Constantine and extended for 330 years until the Moslem conquest of Jerusalem. The period of intense spiritual activity witnessed the greatest of the Fathers and the development of monasticism. In the second phase, the age of Justinian, there was a flowering of art, architecture and liturgical poetry. The third phase saw the retreat of subject nationalities from the Byzantine Church, forming their own national churches, and ended with the rise of Islam.

The Third Age, during which the Church was threatened by Moslem power, began with the Christian expansion into northern Europe. There the Church was the sole representative of higher culture, possessing a monopoly on education which made the relationship between religion and culture closer than in any other period. The high point of achievement was reached in the Carolingian Renaissance. The age ended with a relapse caused by the new barbarian invasions of the ninth century.

The Fourth Age began with a spiritual reaction against the secularization of the Church as it had been absorbed in feudal society. First came the monastic reform in Lorraine and Burgundy, which eventually extended to the papacy itself and reached a climax in the life of St. Francis. The Church then retreated in the face of the new national monarchies which tended towards the disintegration of the inter-

national unity of Western Christendom, and which brought the papacy to the low points of the great schism and the secularized Renaissance Popes.

The Fifth Age began with a crisis that threatened the unity and existence of Western Christendom. Both the Protestant Reformation and the lay culture of the Italian Renaissance challenged the Church which reacted with its own reform movement and the establishment of new religious orders. The Church confronted secular society with a new form of Christian humanism and expanded into newly discovered territories through intensive missionary activity. This was the age of Baroque culture which, however, was dependent on the Catholic monarchies and when they declined, it declined with them. Finally, the Catholic monarchy of France was destroyed by the Revolution and the Church was a victim of the change.

The Sixth Age has seen such a revival of Catholicism that the Church was in a far stronger position by 1850 than it had been a century before. This age, of course, is the one in which we live and is still in progress.<sup>36</sup> (Dawson did not speculate on which phase we are now in.)

A great deal of Dawson's work applied his analysis of culture and cultural change in detail to two periods of Western history, medieval and contemporary. The Middle Ages were singled out as "the outstanding example in history of the application of Faith to Life: the embodiment of religion in social institutions and external forms and therefore both its achievements and its failures are worthy of study."<sup>37</sup> While religion is vital to a society, it may be more or less closely related to the external life of a given society; in the Middle Ages the relationship was especially close:

There has never been an age in which Christianity attained so complete a cultural expression as in the thirteenth century. Europe has seen no greater Christian hero than St. Francis, no greater Christian philosopher than St. Thomas, no greater Christian poet than Dante, perhaps even no greater Christian ruler than St. Louis. I do not maintain that the general level of reli-

gious life was higher than at other times or that the state of the Church was healthier, still less that the scandals were rarer or moral evils less obvious. What one can assert is that in the Middle Ages more than at other periods in the life of our civilization the European culture and the Christian religion were in a state of communion: the highest expressions of medieval culture, whether in art, in literature or in philosophy, were religious, and the greatest representatives of medieval religion were also the leaders of medieval culture. This is not, of course, an inevitable state of things. It may even be argued that the dualism of religion and culture that existed under the Roman Empire, and more or less generally in modern times, is the normal condition of Christianity. Nevertheless, the other alternative, that of a co-operation and collaboration between religion and culture, is undoubtedly a more ideal system, and from this point of view the medieval achievement remains unsurpassed by any other age.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, Dawson believed that the West today is characterized primarily by its secularism. The Western world has become almost completely secularized, thus has lost any sense of direction and threatens itself with destruction. Even the most basic needs traditionally fulfilled by religion have been taken over by profane pseudo-religions, first by the creed of progress,<sup>39</sup> and then by political ideologies such as communism or nationalism.<sup>40</sup> However, as faiths by which to direct the incredible power science has made available, these pseudo-religions are dangerously inadequate.

Secularization threatens to destroy our culture because it eliminates the spiritual principle which has served as its unifying force in the past. Christianity has provided the West with "a transcendent spiritual end which gave Western culture its dynamic purpose."<sup>41</sup> Once the spiritual principle is gone, self-destructive forces take over, for we are left with only the raw will to power exercised by competing special interests. "Christianity is the soul of Western civilization, and when the soul is gone the body putrefies. What is at stake is not the

external profession of Christianity, but the inner bond which holds society together, which links man to man and the order of the state to the order of nature. And when this has gone nothing remains but the principle of brute force which is essentially unreconcilable with a pluralist society like the European community."<sup>42</sup>

Within each state, this will to power manifests itself in the constantly expanding power of government. The secular state is not content to rule in limited areas but tends to expand into every aspect of our lives and to demand total obedience.<sup>43</sup> These tendencies are manifest throughout Western culture. While they have reached monstrous proportions in Communism and Nazism, they operate equally in Anglo-Saxon countries. In 1936, Dawson predicted, "We may not have a Totalitarian State in this country of the same kind that we find in Germany or in Italy. Nevertheless . . . the same forces that make for governmental control and social uniformity are at work here [England] also and in the U.S.A., and it seems to me highly probable that these forces will result in the formation of a type of Totalitarian State which bears the same relation to Anglo-Saxon political and social traditions, as the Nazi State bears to the traditions of Prussia and Central Europe."<sup>44</sup> The paternalistic state with its infinity of governmental regulations and social services is the Anglo-Saxon equivalent which may become "a collective despotism which destroys human liberty and spiritual initiative as effectively as any Communist or Nazi terrorism."<sup>45</sup>

Dawson believed that once before the West faced a similar destruction of its civilization by secularization:

The Roman Empire was faced by the same vital problem as Europe to-day. Its relatively high standard of material civilization had become a source of vital degeneration rather than of social progress. The life was passing out of the old City-State and its institutions, and in its place there had arisen a standardized cosmopolitan civilization inspired by no higher motive than mass hedonism. The State-provided pleasures of

the baths, the circus and the amphitheatre gave the majority the luxuries that had formerly been the privilege of the few, and compensated them for the loss of civic freedom and honour.<sup>46</sup>

The Roman Empire and its Hellenistic civilization had become separated from any "living religious basis" and, although Augustus attempted to restore that basis, he was unsuccessful. In spite of the high material and intellectual culture, "the dominant civilization became hateful in the eyes of the subject Oriental world," and indeed its own greatest minds were alienated from it, a "price that every civilization has to pay when it loses its religious foundations, and is contented with a purely material success."<sup>47</sup>

Western civilization now faces a grave spiritual crisis at the very time when it has, by conquest and technology and trade tended to unify the entire world.<sup>48</sup> If our culture is to survive it must obtain some religious roots, either by conversion back to Christianity or by finding some new spiritual principle. Dawson was no fatalist; he believed either alternative possible if men would seriously make the attempt. Naturally, he thought the more desirable would be to return to Christianity. Thus the challenge is issued to Christians:

The new Babylon is threatened by an even more catastrophic and suicidal end than any of the world empires of the past. Thus we find ourselves back in the same situation as that which the Christians encountered during the decline of the ancient world. Everything depends on whether the Christians of the new age are equal to their mission—whether they are able to communicate their hope to a world in which man finds himself alone and helpless before the monstrous forces which have been created by man to serve his own ends but which have now escaped from his control and threaten to destroy him.<sup>49</sup>

Dawson proposed a first step towards solution of the problem of secularism. He believed that higher education should be of most concern to the Christian. "It is in this field that the

secularist danger is most formidable . . . [for] if [Christianity] loses the right to teach it can no longer exist." Moreover, education is also the weak point of secularism: "The only part of Leviathan that is vulnerable is its brain."<sup>50</sup> Dawson devoted one of his last books to the proposal to institute, in private, Catholic colleges, a program for the study of Christian culture.<sup>51</sup> It is a proposal that strikes one as hopelessly inadequate, at least in the United States, in view of the increasing problems private colleges have in merely surviving. But those difficulties do indeed point to the immediacy of the issue for our churches; their right to teach is being rapidly eroded away.

The central focus of Dawson's works is his profound belief that the underlying disease our

culture suffers from is not political or economic but spiritual. Dawson was, of course, concerned about the political and economic issues confronting all contemporary conservatives. He opposed the increasing power of modern governments, their constant encroachment upon individual freedom, and the ossification of society as "a centralized bureaucratic control" is substituted for "the spontaneous activity of normal social life."<sup>52</sup> But he would have us always remember that these are but the superficial symptoms of a much deeper malaise which must be cured before our civilization can become healthy again.<sup>53</sup> Otherwise, all conservatives' efforts devoted to political and economic issues will go for naught, even if they are temporarily successful.

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Callahan, et al., "Christopher Dawson," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973), 167. <sup>2</sup>George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), p. 308. William F. Buckley, Jr. includes an essay by Dawson in his *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970.) <sup>3</sup>Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956; first published, 1932), p. 20. <sup>4</sup>Dawson, *The Age of the Gods* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933), p. xiii. <sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xiii f. <sup>6</sup>Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 40. <sup>7</sup>Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History*, ed. by John J. Mulloy (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), p. 431. The quotation is from Mulloy's closing essay. <sup>8</sup>Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958; first published, 1948), p. 54. <sup>9</sup>Dawson, *Medieval Essays* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959; first published, 1954), pp. 53f. <sup>10</sup>Dawson, *Progress and Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933), pp. 233f. <sup>11</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 105. <sup>12</sup>*Age of the Gods*, p. xvii. <sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xviii. <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xvi ff. <sup>18</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 392. <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 407. Italics in original. <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52. <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 438. The quotation is by Mulloy. <sup>22</sup>*Progress and Religion*, p. 64. <sup>23</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 442. From Mulloy's essay. <sup>24</sup>*Progress and Religion*, p. 172. <sup>25</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 442. From Mulloy's essay.

<sup>26</sup>Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 63. <sup>27</sup>Dawson, *Beyond Politics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1939), p. 121.

<sup>28</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 266. <sup>29</sup>*Making of Europe*, chapters 1 through 5. <sup>30</sup>Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 122.

<sup>31</sup>Dawson, *The Movement of World Revolution* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), pp. 91f. <sup>32</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 187. <sup>33</sup>*Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, p. 77. <sup>34</sup>*Movement of World Revolution*, p. 109. <sup>35</sup>*Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, p. 47. <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 48-57.

<sup>37</sup>*Medieval Essays*, p. 15. <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 163f. <sup>39</sup>*Progress and Religion*, p. viii. <sup>40</sup>*Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, p. 24. <sup>41</sup>Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960; first published, 1952), p. 203. <sup>42</sup>Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), p. 144. <sup>43</sup>*Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, p. 97. <sup>44</sup>Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), p. 54. <sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 106. <sup>46</sup>*Beyond Politics*, p. 88. <sup>47</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 131. <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 455. From Mulloy's essay. <sup>49</sup>*Historic Reality of Christian Culture*, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 87f. <sup>51</sup>*Crisis of Western Education*. See, for a summary, Leo R. Ward, "Dawson on Education in Christian Culture," *Modern Age* 17 (1973), 399-407. <sup>52</sup>*Dynamics of World History*, p. 221. <sup>53</sup>*Religion and the Modern State*, p. xii.

# Sir John Fortescue on Organic Politics

BRUCE W. COGGIN

CONSIDERING murder and incestuous marriage, Shakespeare's Richard III complains that his "kingdom stands on brittle glass" unless he carry out those criminal plans. The metaphor is an apt one to describe life at the top of the English heap in the mid-fifteenth century. Political arrangements came and went on a thin and treacherous crust, the fires of dynastic ambition and partisan struggle crackling just beneath the surface. It was an age we usually characterize as conservative, producing no new politics to handle urgent realities, its restless tumult only the chaotic backdrop for the English renaissance under the Tudors. Since we know the age saw feverish political struggle, one might expect a large deposit of writing to chronicle the changes. This is not, however, the case. In fact only one political writer of the age is notable, and he is more descriptive than theoretical. From the writings of Sir John Fortescue, however, the reader can extract a complex and sophisticated analysis of the medieval grasp of the organic unity of society, a unity being lost in England even as Fortescue wrote.

The facts of Fortescue's life have been set forth in detail on the usual occasions: in the introduction to Plummer's edition of *The Governance of England*; in the editor's essay in the Chrimes edition of *De Laudibus Legum Angliae*; and in the standard biographical references. To sketch his career briefly will suffice for the present purpose. He was born

around 1395, the descendant of a Norman conquest family. He may have been educated at Oxford, though this is not clear. He was enrolled at Lincoln's Inn to learn law, and in 1429 he was made a Serjeant-at-Bar. A decade later he was a Judge of Assize (1440-1441), and the next year saw him the "King's serjeant." In 1442 he became the chief justice of the realm, and in that office he was knighted. He became intimately involved in royal politics as a Lancaster partisan. That cause failing, in 1461 Fortescue was exiled to Scotland, then to Paris, but he soon gained pardon and the remission of attainder from the King—a reward for a pamphlet defending Yorkist claims! He spent his later years enjoying his large estate and died around 1479.

Similarly his works and pseudepigrapha are set out in the lists in Chrimes' edition of *De Laudibus*. Three major pieces deserve mention. *Opusculum de Natura Legis Naturae et caetera* appears to have been written in Scotland, 1461-1463. The immediate purpose of the *Opusculum* was to determine questions of succession, but the work goes much beyond such matters to discuss the natural law and its theological bases, the types of kingship, and the theory of kingship as a public office. It is not the best known of the corpus, but Chrimes finds it the most valuable.<sup>1</sup> *The Governance of England* is a late work (1471-1476) and broaches no new subjects, but is rather a prac-