

Historical Generalizations, Aldous Huxley

HISTORICAL GENERALIZATIONS

Mr. Dawson calls his study* of the Dark Ages 'an Introduction to the History of European Unity.' The words ring a trifle ironically in the ear. That mediaeval unity of culture and religion to which Mr. Dawson's period led up never prevented good Catholic Europeans from cutting one another's throats. Christendom may have been one; but it was in a chronic condition of civil war. What is the value, we may ask, of such a purely platonic unity? What, indeed, is the meaning of the term? To some extent, at least, historians must be behaviourists.

If at any given epoch men behave as though they were not united, then surely the society which they constitute can hardly be called a unity. Can the spiritual substance of unity possess reciprocal throat-cutting as one of its accidents and still remain itself? It is a nice question.

We may be at one with Mr. Dawson in 'feeling once more the need for spiritual or at least moral unity,' we may be dissatisfied with 'a civilization that finds its unity in external and superficial things and ignores the deeper needs of man's spiritual nature'; but we must also bear in mind that political and economic unification, though 'external and superficial,' are of equal importance with cultural and spiritual unification.

Indeed, the latter cannot be said to exist (except in a platonic and Pickwickian sense) without the former. The unity of mediaeval Christendom never manifested itself as an observable fact of experience; throat-cutting and political disunion made the manifestation impossible.

Mr. Dawson's title-page has delayed me too long. It is time to consider his book. This is quite admirable. Following Mr. Dawson's light, the unspecialized reader finds himself able to thread his way through those obscure corridors of time which extend from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Norman Conquest. The Dark Ages lose their darkness, take on form and significance. Thanks to Mr. Dawson's erudition and his gift of marshalling facts, we begin to have a notion of what it is all about.

The book is short, the period long. Mr. Dawson has had to select, compress and generalize in order to carry us through the centuries at the required speed. For the most part, he generalizes with a sobriety and a caution worthy of the highest praise. We meet, in his pages, with none of those 'deep' metaphysical hypotheses, in terms of which some modern German historians have so excitingly and so unjustifiably interpreted the course of past events. Mr. Dawson is an intellectual ascetic who conscientiously refrains from indulging in such delicious but dangerous extravagances. For this he deserves all our gratitude.

Occasionally, it is true, Mr. Dawson makes a generalization with which I find myself (with all the diffidence of an unlearned dilettante) disagreeing. For example, 'the modern European,' he says, 'is accustomed to look on society as essentially concerned with the present life, and with material needs, and on religion as an influence on the moral life of the individual. But to the Byzantine, and indeed to mediaeval man in general, the primary society was the religious one, and economic and secular affairs were a secondary consideration.' In confirmation of this Mr. Dawson quotes, among other documents, a passage from the writings of St. Gregory Nazianzen on the interest universally displayed by his fourth-century contemporaries in theology.

'The money changer will talk about the Begotten and the Unbegotten, instead of giving you your money, and if you want a bath, the bath keeper assures you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing.' What Mr. Dawson does not mention is that, in another passage, this same Gregory reproaches the people of Constantinople with an excessive interest in chariot racing—an interest which, in the time of

Justinian, a century and a half later, had become so maniacally passionate that Greens and Blues were murdering one another by hundreds and even thousands.

Again we must apply the Behaviourist test. If men behave as though they took a passionate interest in something—and it is difficult to prove your devotion to a cause more effectively than by killing and being killed for it—then we must presume that that interest is genuine, a primary rather than a secondary consideration. The actual facts seem to demonstrate that some Byzantines were passionately interested in religion, others (or perhaps they were the same) were no less passionately interested in sport.

At any rate, they behaved about both in the same way and were as ready to undergo martyrdom for their favourite jockey as for their favourite article in the Athanasian Creed. The trouble with such generalizations as that of Mr. Dawson is that they ignore the fact that society is never homogeneous and that human beings belong to many different mental species.

This seems to be true even in primitive societies displaying the maximum of 'co-consciousness' on the part of their members. Thus, the anthropologist, Radin, well known for his work among the Red Indians, has come to the conclusion that monotheistic beliefs are correlated with a specific temperament and so may be expected to crop up with a certain specific frequency, irrespective of culture. If this is true (and it is in accord with our personal experience of civilized life and with the results of anthropological research among primitive peoples), then what becomes of a generalization like Mr. Dawson's? Obviously, it falls to the ground. You can no more indict an age than you can a nation.

At every epoch some people are primarily interested in the things of the other world, some in the things of this world. The chief difference between a religious and a non-religious epoch would seem to be this: that in a religious epoch those whose main interest is in secular affairs tend to justify that interest in terms of theology (the Greens would hate the Blues for being unorthodox, and vice versa) and to find transcendental motives for sublunary action.

In a non-religious age, this-worldly people are free to believe that the things in which they take an interest are intrinsically valuable, while naturally religious people are driven to look for this-worldly justifications (social and political) for their other-worldliness.

Sociologically considered, the superiority of a religious to a non-religious epoch lies in the fact that people have more and more powerful motives for action. The trouble is that you can never be certain whether the action undertaken for religious reasons is going to be good or bad. A characteristic example of mixed action undertaken for religious motives is provided by the pious Mgr. de Belzunce who distinguished himself during the great plague of Marseilles as much by his acts of heroic Christian charity as by his revolting sectarian intolerance.

It took the Lynds and their assistants eighteen months of intensive personal investigation to bring together the materials for their classic study of a modern industrial community, 'Middletown.' This community, as it happened, was a particularly homogeneous one; the Lynds' researches showed that anyone born in Middletown with unusual abilities took the earliest possible opportunity of going somewhere else.

Nevertheless, even in this more than ordinarily homogeneous town, the investigators met with many distinct human types, many fundamentally different attitudes towards the problems of life. There existed, of course, a behaviour pattern which was, statistically, normal. But the departures from the norm were considerable. After reading 'Middletown' one becomes more than ever suspicious of the generalizations of historians about the character and mentality of the men and women of past ages.

For upon what are these generalizations based? Upon an originally inadequate documentation further reduced by the ravages of time to a random collection of literary and archaeological odds and ends. As statements about the past, such generalizations are therefore of dubious value. They must always be taken with a grain of salt; at best they are only half or three-quarter truths. If they have value, it is as stimulants to make us think about the present. Generalized history is a branch of speculation, connected (often rather arbitrarily and uneasily) with certain facts about the past. Circumstances alter, each age must think its own thoughts. Not until there is a settled and definitive world order can there be such a thing as a settled and definitive version of human history.

The Making of Europe, by Christopher Dawson. London, Sheed and Ward, 1932. 12s. 6d.

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