

REVIEWS

The Nature of Progress

IT MAY seem paradoxical to suggest that the starting-point of human progress", says Mr. Dawson in his present book,* "is to be found in the highest type of knowledge—the intuition of pure being; but it must be remembered that intellectually, at least, man's development is not so much from the lower to the higher as from the confused to the distinct." This statement, from the current sociological standpoint, is revolutionary. But the author backs it up with a firm array of facts. The *essence* of primitive religion is not a belief in ghosts or magic or myths. It is not animism or pantheism or polytheism. It is "an obscure and confused intuition of transcendent being". When this intuition has been educated by long eras of experience and by great centuries of culture it becomes, as in Plato and St. Thomas Aquinas, the clear summit of human knowledge. But from the first it is present, since human nature in all times is radically the same, and it is the ultimate motive of human progress.

This intuition gave rise to Shamanism. The Shaman or primitive Messiah was venerated by the tribe, not primarily as a magician and not at all as the representative of a particular god, but, above all, as a person peculiarly in touch with supernatural life and being. He was succeeded by the organized priesthood and the elaborate myths of the cults of fertility. This cultus

* PROGRESS AND RELIGION by Christopher Dawson (SHEED & WARD. 254 pp. \$1.50).

may well have been the originator, as it was certainly the inspirer and director, of the art of agriculture, the *sine qua non* of human civilization. Each of the great archaic cultures, from the Egyptian to the Mayan, consisted of a ritual order based upon the agricultural year and embracing the whole life of society. The ritual order was a reflection of the cosmic order on the one hand and, on the other, it was man's organized effort to master his environment, physically and spiritually. It was thus that man found his true position and purpose between the heavens and the earth.

In the archaic cultures the sense of transcendent being was by no means lost, though obscured, and it was brought again to the foreground by the great religions and religious philosophies that rose in south-eastern Europe and southern Asia during the first millennium B.C.—Platonism, Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism. They represent “a change of thought rather than a revolution of material culture”, and they “have laid a permanent foundation on which our own intellectual and religious tradition is based”. For Christianity emerges from that wonderful period as the chief synthesis and fulfillment of its efforts, drawing together the genius of Europe and the genius of Asia. Broadly speaking, Asia has always tended to lose Nature in the search for God while Europe has tended to lose God in the search for Nature. But Judaism, rising in the borderland between the two continents, conceived of God as indeed transcendent and yet as working out his purposes through human nature and human history. This conception was carried on and developed by Latin Christianity. The “world process” was seen to be a “divine drama”. And “the Absolute and the Finite,

the Eternal and the Temporal, God and the World were no longer conceived as standing over against one another in mutual isolation. The two orders interpenetrated one another, and even the lower world of matter and sense was capable of becoming the vehicle and channel of the divine life." Hence Christianity, aided by Greek thought, could embody "a genuine spirit of humanism". And the great Catholic synthesis of the thirteenth century was animated by "the desire to show the concordance in difference of the two orders". Aquinas, emphasizing "the autonomous character of natural activity, the province of Reason as distinct from that of Faith, the moral law of Nature as distinct from that of Grace, the rights of the State as distinct from those of the Church", laid the mental groundlines of modern civilization.

The modern doctrine of progress, first clearly formulated by the Abbé de St. Pierre in the early eighteenth century, is a narrow and debased offshoot from Catholic teleology. Inspired by the Christian belief in the high destiny of man, it was able to obtain a wide hold upon Occidental society, conjoining sentimental and mechanistic elements that in themselves are hopelessly contradictory and instable. Today it is clear that "the religion of progress" has run the full gamut of its limited possibilities. Meanwhile it has brought about an abnormal and unprecedented secularization of culture, so that Occidental society has well-nigh lost its inner cohesion.

"Since a culture is essentially a spiritual community", says Mr. Dawson, "it transcends the economic and political orders. It finds its appropriate organ not in a State but in a Church, that is to say a society which

is the embodiment of a purely spiritual tradition and which rests, not on material power, but on the free adhesion of the individual mind." At the same time the "church" must exert a fostering and controlling influence upon the other "orders". And just as the archaic "churches" were designed to exert that influence upon agriculture, so Christianity was designed to exert it upon the modern utilization of Nature. "For the progressive intellectualization of the material world which is the work of European science is analogous and complementary to the progressive spiritualization of human nature which is the function of the Christian religion. The future of humanity depends upon the harmony and co-ordination of these two processes. . . ." In short, the "religion of progress" needs to be reabsorbed and repurified in the religion of Christ. Occidental society can be really reintegrated only through the Church which created it—that is, traditional Western Christianity.

Unfortunately, however, the great religious schism of the sixteenth century resulted in Christianity's becoming sectarianized and culturally impoverished. And Mr. Dawson's treatment of that fact is quite inadequate. In dealing with the archaic and ancient cultures he points out that at the very height of their ritual order and intellectual achievement they began to decline through a failure of moral vitality. But he omits this consideration when he comes to the decline of mediaeval culture after the thirteenth century. He passes over that decline. A frank criticism of Roman as well as of Protestant Christianity would have strengthened the total effect of his book. So would a consideration of the efforts of recent theologians on both

sides of the line to redefine the Christian "revelation" in a sense at once Catholic and sublimely "natural". That frank criticism and that redefinition are pre-essential to the reunion of Christendom.

So also is the effort that is being made (notably by Irving Babbitt) for a distinct revival of humanistic ethical standards. But Mr. Dawson consistently underestimates the value of ethics as distinct from religion, for example in his treatment of classic Buddhism and Confucianism. He intimates that one who values "the active moral life as an end in itself" is "an Americanist". But alas, the Americanist cannot fully deserve this ironic tribute unless the word "moral" be omitted from it. Moreover, the Americanist values the active life—outward work—not as "an end in itself" but for the sake of emotional excitement and the sense of material power. Whereas American academic humanism is advocating inward work, not as "an end in itself" but for the sake of temperate happiness and the sense of peace. . . . From Mr. Dawson's view of the philosophy of Aquinas, cited above, it would seem to follow that, in succession to the reign of scientific naturalism, a distinct revival of "the moral law of Nature" would now be in order. Without such a revival, the Catholic Christianity of the future which Mr. Dawson hopes for would not be adequately catholic.

However, his book is important and interesting. It is an extraordinarily compressed, clear, and vivid story of human civilization. Its distinction is that its thesis, our rising need of traditional Christianity, is based not on pious conviction but on sociological principles and wide-ranging investigation. Its attitude, apart from the limitations noted, is remarkably catholic. G. R. ELLIOTT

Mark Twain Misconstrued

THERE is abundant justification for a new life of Mark Twain. But Stephen Leacock's *Mark Twain** is not a full-length portrait based upon all the available information; it is only a rough thumb-nail sketch, that could have been written as well ten years ago as today. Mr. Leacock has relied almost entirely upon the compendious but uncritical biography by Albert Bigelow Paine, and the interesting but highly imaginative "psychograph" by Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. He has, apparently, not even consulted any of the recent research in the background of American frontier life, or of American humour; research that should change greatly our present conception of Mark Twain as a thwarted artist. It may be, for lack of time, that Mr. Leacock could not have consulted De Voto's excellent study, *Mark Twain's America*, but he could easily have familiarized himself with the many earlier studies that De Voto used so intensively.

The results secured from compounding Paine's personal biography and Brooks's attempt at psychoanalysis are at times startling. Mr. Leacock presents Mark Twain, according to the conventional present-day view, as a fine novelist and humourist who was, at the same time, a frustrated artist. The real man, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, appears but rarely, and that man might have said momentous things to a world sadly in need of them, had he not been stifled by American Victorianism that was far more deadly than the original. The man was swallowed up in the legendary Mark

* MARK TWAIN by Stephen Leacock (APPLETON. \$2.00).