

EDITORIAL

Anglicanism and the End of Christendom: The Secular, Fifty Years On

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A secular specter has been haunting Europe, and is making its presence felt even in the apparently more religious United States.² It is the end of Christendom. Disengagement from religious belief and practice in the West is now obvious, but still unfolding, and has implications for the Church that go beyond mere statistics. The Church may not have much control over its changing size or influence, but it faces fundamental choices about how to shape itself in response. Christendom ending is not just a decline in numbers, but a challenge to ecclesial identity.

Having begun life in the form of an established church, Anglicanism faces uniquely pointed questions now.³ While the Church of England is unusual in its formal ties to the state, historically its evangelistic endeavors elsewhere were framed by colonial projects, so that the Church functioned in the colonies as chaplaincy to the invaders as well as missionary to the subjugated. An ideal, if imagined, form of relationship with civic institutions is manifest in Anglican cathedrals from Hong Kong to Cape Town, where Gothic grandeur and geographic centrality speak not just to English cultural and religious influence, but to lasting if often implicit ideas about the relationship between the Church and state.

If the fact of decline and its implications for influence and prominence are or should be obvious, how the Church responds to these is less so. Anglicans around the world now have different versions of encounter between their socially engaged ecclesial history, and a relentless but multiform secular present. Does the present or coming triumph of the secular mean that, for Anglicanism, a continued strong engagement with civil society triumphs over traditional forms and beliefs, or does the end of the traditional nexus and privilege promise or demand a renewal of Christian distinctives?

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²The term 'secular' in this essay is being used in two related but not identical senses; first in reference to the decline in religious belief and observance, and second in the sense (in some accounts independent of the first) of separation or independence of belief from civil and political structures, where it may remain as an option of largely personal significance; see further Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 1–3.

³Bruce Kaye might remind us that 'Christendom' has had more than one manifestation; see *The Rise and Fall of the English Christendom: Theocracy, Christology, Order and Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Confronting Christendom

The problem of Christendom is much older than the emergence of secularization, and is a theological as well as a sociological one. Reform movements and prophetic figures of the Christian past have often proclaimed and embodied resistance to cozy alliances between Church and state or society, or at least to their abuse. Søren Kierkegaard often takes credit for proclaiming a conscious rejection of the notion of Christendom itself, and of establishment in particular.⁴ His influence was to flow through those like Barth and Bonhoeffer who responded critically to the specific distortions of Christianity in Europe of the 1930s, and to the wider theological movements of liberalism and accommodation that had enabled them.⁵

There was also an empirical side to critical commentary on Christendom from the early twentieth century. Industrialization, and specific events like the Great War, provided observable crises; so too the rise of Marxism and then of fascism meant there were new competitors in the realm of ideas and of associational loyalty, so that former assumptions about the centrality or hegemony of Christian ideas in Western societies could no longer hold.

Anglicans at first tended to respond to the gravity of such ideological challenges, and to the aftermath of the war, in terms of defending or reviving Christendom rather than abandoning it. On the two sides of the Atlantic, William Palmer Ladd and Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, among the leading commentators of their time on Church and society, could both see the renewal of Christendom (even by that name) as a means to the post-war improvement of the wider society, and not just of the Church.⁶ Christendom was in trouble, but its future was a matter of hope or necessity for all. While their diagnoses and proposals may have fallen on deaf ears, these voices exhibit something characteristically Anglican in a desire for positive engagement with the world and a sense the Church has a contribution to make beyond itself; they speak in tones similar to those of William Temple, in the famous attributed quip that ‘the Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members’.⁷

Twentieth Century Voices

By the 1960s and with another war having come and gone, there was increased pessimism about whether Christendom itself could survive, or whether the churches could retain either their notional adherents or their influence in the West. Theologians across traditions were not just predicting, or discerning, but actively responding theologically to a disruption in religiosity, calling Christians to prepare

⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom* (repr.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁵See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 98–99.

⁶William Palmer Ladd, *Prayer Book Interleaves: Some Reflections on How the Book of Common Prayer Might Be Made More Influential in Our English-Speaking World* (ed. Ailsie Taylor Ladd; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 43; Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy, *I Believe: Sermons on the Apostles' Creed* (English original *Food for the Fed-Up*; New York: George H. Doran Co., 1921), pp. 228–29.

⁷Susan Lucas, ‘The Temple Legacy Today: Beyond Neoliberalism’, in Stephen Spencer (ed.), *Theology Reforming Society: Revisiting Anglican Social Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2017), p. 108.

for or acknowledge a fundamental change, and to accept (or sometimes even embrace) secularization.

Josef Ratzinger's observation about the coming Church, originally in a German radio broadcast from 1969, is bracing:

She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision.⁸

This Roman Catholic prognosis had its close Anglican parallels, being aligned with the assumptions of the ecumenical liturgical movement of the early and mid-twentieth century, which by drawing on ancient Christian sources was at least implicitly providing a script for Western churches that might have to play the part of a minority again. Changes to Roman Catholic initiation rites to make the adult convert the norm at baptism instead of the infant were one clear example of this symbolic shift, a change echoed in many Anglican rites around the Communion, along with a trend to embed administration of baptism in public worship. For Anglicans, the renewed centrality of the Eucharist in many national Churches was a further step anticipating a distinctive ecclesial existence, given the commitment implied by eucharistic participation, relative to the easily negotiated Morning Prayer of earlier Sunday mornings. Whether in theological discourse or liturgical texts, these imaginings of a different ecclesial world certainly had some impact.

Ratzinger's protestant compatriot Jürgen Moltmann was also reflecting on how the Church had to change in the light of history, including sacramentally. Like Ratzinger, Moltmann foresaw a new emphasis on free decision for or against faith, and saw the initiation of adults rather than infants as a new norm; but for him a trend away from infant baptism was also driven by a critical perspective on Christendom, not so much as a response to social facts as to theological ones:

The practice of infant baptism is also an open political problem connected with the form of the church in its particular society. Infant baptism is without any doubt the basic pillar of the *corpus christianum*, the 'Christian society' which acknowledges – or at least does not reject – Christianity in the widest sense of the word as its tradition. Infant baptism is the foundation of a national church.⁹

Moltmann's focus is 'eschatological', and on the 'messianic' renewal of the Church rather than on retrieval of a particular ante-Nicene model, but the background of secularism is his context too:

The model of partnership, of mutual limitation and complement, between the church and the secular order functioned as long as there was a 'Christian

⁸Josef Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (reissued; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), p. 116.

⁹Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 229. The German original was published in 1975.

world'. But since the secular order has increasingly emancipated itself from the Christian world, the limiting and complementing function of the church has ceased to work.¹⁰

Anglicans paid attention to these trends, but were often more cautious about them and slower to abandon claims to positive influence in civil society. Ratzinger's and Moltmann's observations were made while Michael Ramsey was Archbishop of Canterbury. The UK as well as other English-speaking countries were facing questions of secularization, both in the sense of ecclesial decline, and of separation or renegotiation of old alliances and assumptions for the Church.

Ramsey's own reflections exhibited the established Church's assumptions about its influence and duty, but also acknowledgement of a changing reality. As one commentator puts it, 'it became educated common sense to describe contemporary England as a secular society'.¹¹ Ramsey had been interviewed by the *Church Times* when taking up office, and was later to quote his own interview in the widely read book, *The Christian Priest Today*. It recorded a voice that combined theological hope with a hint of pessimism for established patterns of Church life:

People ask me, sometimes, if I am in good heart about being Archbishop . . . My answer is 'Yes' . . . But the phrase 'in good heart', gives me pause, because after all, we are here as a church to represent Christ crucified and the compassion of Christ crucified before the world. And, because that is so, it may be the will of God that our church should have its heart broken and perhaps the heart of its Archbishop broken with it.¹²

This suggested not so much a Church marching into a secular future, as one having its hands tied and being led where it wouldst not. Yet, just as for Ratzinger's predictions, there was a degree of self-fulfillment involved. Ramsey may actually have been part of the movement to normalize the idea of the secular.

It was John Robinson's *Honest to God* that defined this moment and grasped it more positively for many English-speaking readers, and for many Anglicans. What distinguishes Robinson's work most from Ratzinger's and Moltmann's reflections are its more accommodating assumptions. However 'radical' Robinson was seen to be, his address to scepticism was a sort of apologetic, a quest for relevance in the secular world rather than a distinctive view of a Church over against it. While he too noted the apparent demise of Christendom explicitly, Robinson imagined that the Church itself would undergo a sort of reinvention, parallel to that of the 'Christian society', rather than being renewed apart from it:

We are just beginning to get used to the idea that 'Christendom' may be a historically conditioned phenomenon . . . But can we – should we – accustom

¹⁰Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 168.

¹¹S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 293–94 (294).

¹²*Church Times*, 9 June 1961; quoted by Ramsey in *The Christian Priest Today* (repr.; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), p. 99.

ourselves to think of ‘Christianity’ itself, as an organized religion, in the same sort of terms?¹³

This view was as striking as Ratzinger’s but almost its reverse. Robinson hints that the Church would continue to mirror and engage society, and hence have its form and meaning radically revised for the sake of the continued engagement. Christendom might end but the Church would follow. Sacramental life, the focus of a renewed identity for Ratzinger and Moltmann, was no barrier; Robinson’s critical reflection on the Eucharist contrasts the interiority of pious individualism with an understanding newly and fully open to the secular, without considering the possibility of a sacramental practice both communal and distinctive, as his hero Bonhoeffer certainly did in predicting a renewed *disciplina arcana*.¹⁴

Ends of Christendom?

Predictions about Christendom and the secular from half a century ago have the inevitable mixture of strengths and quirks, when read decades on. None of them of course quite captured what was actually to take place. Yet the positions taken in those reflections were influential in what was to follow, and still have force for Anglicanism.

Ratzinger’s brief in 1969 had been to consider the Church as it would be in 2000, and as often for science-fiction, reality moves more slowly and on different paths than the imagination; but while a process of decline and disengagement from Christendom’s patterns has been real, even twenty years after his imagined endpoint there is no new ‘Church of the martyrs’. While there has typically been a renewed emphasis on churches as distinct gathered communities in the West, with some important consequences, not all the results have been positive. Some communities have grown; this is most evident in evangelical circles perhaps, where there was already a sort of gathered-church ecclesiology ready to deploy. Martyn Percy (drawing on Dutch sociologist of religion Mady Thung, who was writing closer to Ratzinger’s time) suggests, however, that especially when taken up in diocesan and national leadership, such a turn inward and a consequent ‘organizational-activist’ form of Church life, predicated on a distinct and gathered sort of community, may actually have accelerated aspects of decline.¹⁵

The liturgy itself offers some awkward examples. While the ‘organizational-activist’ turn was aligned with the liturgical movement in many respects, and its ethos is reflected in the revised rites of the late twentieth century, subsequent experience of

¹³S. Brewitt-Taylor, ‘The Invention of a “Secular Society”? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961–4’, *Twentieth Century British History* 24.3 (2013), pp. 327–50.

¹⁴*Honest to God*, pp. 85–87; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 363 etc.

¹⁵Martyn Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 154. Thung’s book was *The Precarious Organisation: Sociological Explorations of the Church’s Mission and Structure* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

liturgy and sacraments has been ambiguous at best. Anglicans may have to admit a mismatch between their revised liturgies that envisaged the converted as the baptized, and the communicant as the committed, and a quite different and oddly persistent pastoral reality. In fact the infants of the tentative and the tradition-minded are still the most common recipients of baptism in many parts of the former Christendom, even if there are fewer of them. Percy suggests that the new norms around baptism, such as its performance exclusively in public worship, are actually (and contrary to the now-received wisdom) more privatized – not in the family that is, but in the voluntary association of the ‘organizational-activist’ Church.

On the other hand, efforts indiscriminately to offer rituals that had previously been signs of voluntary and specific commitment, like imposition of ashes (and in some places even the Eucharist), may reflect a disconnect between liturgical theology based on distinctive identity, and a deep-seated tradition of worship as public engagement, not to mention the amorphous set of ideas now lurking under the term ‘missional’. These inconsistencies may yet prove either to be early signs of Moltmann’s ‘messianism’, or just the last ritual gasp of Christendom. Only time will tell.

Percy holds out hope for the alternative, ‘institutional-contemplative’ model, at least in the Church of England. This is not quite what John Robinson had hinted at, but shares its world-affirming view, if not its secularized ecclesiology. Here the vehicles or vessels of charisma are actually the physical and traditional, the rituals and places that have shaped and been shaped by Christian history, with which members of a wider public can engage on a variety of terms, and not merely via commitment and membership. While the Church of England can point readily to such resources, and its Cathedrals in particular have had surprising success in recent years, this may not be so easily replicable in all other places. In the USA, where membership-centered views of Anglicanism had prevailed long before secularization became so evident, it may take more effort to identify and make effective use of such adaptive understandings of Church life, and to get past the idea that membership is the sole end point of mission. Yet reworkings of tradition could still be a positive legacy of Christendom, if and when creative memories are put to fresh use.

These Western stories do not reflect all Anglican settings, particularly given growth in Christian numbers outside Europe and North America. The expansion of these churches has even been described as a ‘Next Christendom’, a label which might be as fearful as hopeful, if it were appropriate. Lamin Sanneh, however, has suggested that ‘World Christianity’ would be a better concept for the variety of forms of Christian life in society that might be springing up globally now, in contexts where there was ‘no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the Gospel’.¹⁶ Christendom really is over, he argues, not just as an historic project of the West, but even as an interpretive concept.

Given global mobility, however, it may no longer be enough to imagine even a diversity of local traditions, as though scattered but autonomous; the growth of African Christianities in Europe through migration, for instance, is simultaneously

¹⁶Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 22–28 (22).

a boost to the Church, and a challenge to Christendom.¹⁷ Anglicans, including their thought leaders, can influence these outcomes, but not control them. These multiple futures, with different retrievals of the tradition as well as new forms of gathered community, will give rise not to one single outcome, but to a variety of forms of life even within Anglicanism, and in the wider reality of Christianity.

¹⁷See Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).