

JUNCTION OR TERMINUS? CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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At the beginning of this century the writer Arnold Bennett published a novel with the title *Anna of the Five Towns*. The story concerns a young woman who seeks, without success, to experience religious conversion in the context of traditional Methodist revivalism. Bennett describes how, in a desperate search for a personal experience of God, Anna attends evangelistic meetings only to find that the preacher's appeals leave her cold and unsatisfied. In a passage which probably reflects his own alienation from the evangelical religion of his parents, Bennett depicts Anna trying to imagine what it might be like to be converted, or to be in the process of being converted:

*She could not. She could only sit, moveless, dull and abject ... In what did conversion consist? Was it to say the words 'I believe'? She repeated to herself softly 'I believe, I believe'. But nothing happened. Of course she believed. She had never doubted or dreamed of doubting, that Jesus died on the cross to save her soul, her soul, from eternal damnation ... What then was lacking? What was belief? What was faith?*¹

Bennett's novel was published in 1902 and it contained an implicit warning that traditional Protestant religion was losing contact with a changing culture. However, this warning went largely unheeded; chapels were still well filled and although a few children of believers might, like Anna, go the way of the world, it remained possible to suppose that well-tried methods of evangelism were adequate to secure a continuing harvest of converts. Indeed, by the end of the first decade of this century the delegates to the great missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910 could speak with confidence of 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'.

From our vantage point, nearly one-hundred years after Bennett wrote the words just quoted it seems clear that, with the sensitive antenna of a great artist, he had correctly detected the condition of the British churches even before the cataclysm of 1914–1918 changed the world for ever. The problem for the churches today is no

¹ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (London: Methuen 1925), 71.

longer how to respond to a relatively minor slippage in relation to the children of the chapels, *the chapels themselves have gone, or are in the process of going*. The stark reality of the situation facing institutional Christianity at the present time is expressed in the haunting words of a poem entitled 'The Chapel' by the Welsh writer R.S. Thomas. The poem describes the isolated and ugly nonconformist building that had once been ablaze with revival fires but now simply settles 'a little deeper into the grass'. The closing lines recall the religion of those whose amens once rang out from the building, people who were 'narrow but saved; In a way that men are not now'.²

Many theologians and sociologists now warn us that the crisis confronting institutional religion in the western world is one of truly massive proportions. Here is David Mills, an American Episcopalian, who uses almost apocalyptic language to describe the plight of Anglicanism: not only has the fat lady sung

*but the cleaners have left, the security guards have turned out the lights and locked the doors, and the wrecking ball waits outside for tomorrow's demolition work. But even so, a few men and women in purple shirts ... still huddle together in the now dark stalls, chatting excitedly of all the great operas they are going to stage.*³

This prediction of ecclesiastical meltdown is endorsed by the New Zealander, Michael Riddell who says bluntly in a recent book: 'The Christian church is dying in the West'. Believers, reacting as bereaved people often do to a great loss, may deny this reality, bolstered by 'small outbreaks of life', yet it is beyond doubt, says Riddell, that Christianity in the West is afflicted by a terminal sickness.⁴

Now it might be argued that the experience of Christians within the evangelical tradition does not match this kind of gloomy diagnosis. It may be the case that mainline denominational religion is facing crisis, but an Evangelicalism enlivened by the fires of charismatic renewal can point to empirical evidence that contradicts the generally negative assessment of religion in the West. The success of the Alpha Course; the surge of new churches in many parts of Britain; the growth of the Spring Harvest event; or the rise in 'born again' religion in the United States are all indications that a robust Evangelicalism seems to be immune from the trends toward decline and secularisation afflicting more traditional forms of institutional Christianity. Or so the argument goes.

² R.S. Thomas, *Selected Poems* (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), 81. Thomas's work constantly explores the interface between faith and modernity and wrestles with the problem of doubt. See also *No Truce With the Furies* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995).

³ I regret that the source of this quotation has been misplaced. It was included in an analysis of Anglicanism circulated by the REFORM Group within the Church of England.

⁴ Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the Post-Christian West* (London: SPCK, 1998), 1.

I am afraid I view such claims with considerable scepticism. The late Klaas Bockmuehl, himself an Evangelical and a shrewd and wise observer of contemporary cultural trends, said that Christians in general had given very little thought to the challenges posed by secularisation and he noted that Evangelicals were often content 'if they add to their numbers even when the overall state of Christianity deteriorates'.⁵ In fact, the born-again phenomenon in America suggests that it is possible for very considerable numbers of people to profess conversion without such a movement resulting in any significant change in the surrounding culture. In the words of the American theologian David Wells,

The vast growth in evangelically-minded people in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s should by now have revolutionized American culture. With a third of American adults now claiming to have experienced spiritual rebirth, a powerful countercurrent of morality growing out of an alternative worldview should have been unleashed in factories, offices and board rooms, in the media, universities and professions ... But as it turns out, all this swelling of evangelical ranks has past unnoticed in the culture ... The presence of evangelicals in American culture has barely caused a ripple.⁶

The reason for this I suggest, is that American evangelicalism no longer possesses an alternative worldview to that which operates at the heart of Western culture. At the beginning of the 1960s the sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, argued that American churches had become prosperous precisely because they provided religious support and sanction for the secular values which dominate everyday work and life in society. In a striking passage Berger observed that a child growing up in a suburban, church-going family in modern America bore 'an uncanny resemblance to the young Buddha whose parents shielded him from any sight involving human suffering or death'. In such a situation, Berger said, the prophets or poets who point to 'the darkness surrounding our clean little toy villages' are regarded as 'candidates for psychotherapy'.⁷

I suggest that the fundamental question evangelicals must consider concerns the core beliefs and values which define this tradition. Has the term 'evangelical' been gutted of its original meaning? Has it become a mere slogan, divorced from the truths and values derived from the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it the case, as David Wells claims, that evangelicals are among those who are on the easiest of terms with the modern world and so have lost their capacity for dissent?

To raise questions like these is to suggest that evangelicalism is not isolated from the grave crisis confronting Christianity throughout the western world. It must face the fundamental questions which should

⁵ Klaas Bockmuehl, 'Secularization and Secularism - Some Christian Considerations', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 10/1, 1986, 50-51.

⁶ David Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 293.

⁷ Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 48.

be on the agenda of all Christians today. Have the churches of the West, despite a long history in which they have shown the power of the gospel to transform human culture, become a spent force? Is Christianity now doomed to a cultic role, rendered powerless to a challenge a dominant culture that is in the grip of hideous idolatries? *Does Christianity in the West face a junction or a terminus?*

A Sociological Perspective

Sociological analysis of religion in the context of modernity confirms the view that it is perfectly possible for religious movements to experience significant numerical growth without this affecting the dominant values and ethos of a secularised culture in the slightest way. Thousands of people may claim to be born-again, yet business goes on as usual. Jesus may be praised as Lord in lively and joyful celebrations on Sunday, but the counter-cultural values of the kingdom he proclaimed seem to be non-transferable when it comes to the realms of education, the media, advertising, business and commercial activity. The term used in sociology to describe this change in the function of religion in modern societies is *privatisation*. We have already noted the work of Berger with regard to religion in America; according to the Oxford sociologist Bryan Wilson, modern religious revivals

*have no real consequence for other social institutions, for political power structures, for technological restraints and controls. They add nothing to any prospective reintegration of society, and contribute nothing towards the culture by which a society might live.*⁸

This may seem a harsh and negative judgement, but it compels us to ask whether there are grounds for hope that Christianity might be capable of transforming and renewing modern culture? What is the concrete evidence which might suggest that the churches of the West can discover the spiritual and intellectual strength required to challenge the fundamental values of a deeply secular society? With regard to the evangelical movement, is it conceivable that this tradition might resist and destroy the monstrous idols that extend their control into every aspect of our economic and social life? And can we really believe that it might be capable of offering the world at the dawn of the third millennium a radically new and hopeful vision of human existence, shaped by beliefs and values that would lay the foundation for a culture characterised by love, compassion, justice and life lived within limits? I suggest that it would be a bold person who answered these questions affirmatively. On the basis of present evidence we might as easily anticipate that churches will survive in Europe only through an increasing syncretism with Western culture which requires them to abandon the possibility of ever again being a force able to transform the world for the glory of God.

⁸ Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 96.

The Question of Culture

Protestant Christianity has been deeply committed to cross-cultural mission throughout the modern period with the result that the faith of Christ has been successfully transmitted and translated into hundreds of cultures around the globe. Indeed, this has resulted in one of the major transformations of our times in which Christianity has become a world faith with its heartlands no longer in Europe or North America but in those regions of the world once identified as 'mission fields'. Two hundred years ago William Carey and his colleagues were determined to ensure that churches resulting from the cross-cultural transmission of the Christian faith should take recognisably Indian form. Their insistence that the gospel should be *contextualised*, that Indian believers should be encouraged to express both the form and the content of their faith in ways that were clearly Asian, led to tensions between the missionaries and their supporters in Britain. Few Christians today would deny the wisdom and validity of Carey's approach to mission and it is generally recognised that (to quote the Lausanne Covenant) churches should be 'deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture'.⁹

However, while assent may easily be obtained for this principle when it relates to churches in other cultures overseas, the issue becomes problematic and painful when we ask the question: *to which culture do our churches relate?* Or, to put the issue another way, can there be a valid contextualisation of the gospel for Western culture at a point at which that culture is passing through dramatic and far-reaching change? The problem with the chapels described in the poem with which we began is precisely that they seem to belong to another age, to a world that has passed away. William Storrar, describing the challenges faced by the Church of Scotland, suggests that our cultural context is one in which people are:

bewildered by shifting patterns of family and household living, short-term and part-time unemployment, the global media and information highways ... seven day shopping in cathedral-like shopping malls ... and a myriad of other cultural trends.

In this situation, he says, 'the local parish kirk can seem as anachronistic as the traditional high street grocer's shop, the Edwardian music hall or the nationalised coal mine, a relic of another age'.¹⁰

I think in this connection of the church in which I grew up and was nourished in the Christian faith. The building in which we worshipped was erected in the 1880s and was called the Baptist Tabernacle, although anything less like a tabernacle would be

⁹ The phrase is from chapter 10 of the *Lausanne Covenant*. See J.D. Douglas (ed.), *Let The Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: Worldwide Publications, 1974), 6.

¹⁰ William Storrar's comments were made in a lecture delivered at the University of Aberdeen and published by the Divinity Department. He has developed the theme further in a special issue of the journal *Theology in Scotland* devoted to an analysis of the subject of 'The Future of the Kirk'. See Occasional Paper 2, March, 1977.

difficult to imagine. It was certainly not intended to be portable, a movable sanctuary for a pilgrim people. On the contrary, those who built this enduring tabernacle were not moving anywhere; they had just arrived as respected and valued members of bourgeois society. Today this listed building is overlooked by a massive shopping mall and as consumers pour into the 'Harlequin Centre' every Sunday it is just possible that they may glance at this striking example of our national religious heritage. This building, like so many others, erected in an earlier time to the glory of God, has become a huge obstacle to mission in a post-modern world. Stranded at the edge of a car park serving the consumerist temple which now dominates the skyline, the Tabernacle symbolises the immobility of the church and its captivity to cultural forms perceived as outmoded and irrelevant.

I suggest that the challenge which this cultural context presents to Christian mission is one of the greatest and the most dangerous ever to have faced the church. On the one hand, it should be possible for churches possessing two centuries of accumulated experience and expertise in cross-cultural missionary endeavour to discover faithful and creative ways of ensuring that Christ becomes a living option for a generation shaped by post-modern culture. This is the concern of people like Dave Tomlinson, John Drane and William Storrar who argue that Christianity in the Western world has been so closely wedded to the culture of modernity that 'it is being left behind by the pace of change, and is finding it increasingly difficult to be taken seriously by the new, emerging mainstream Western culture'.¹¹

On the other hand, while a fearful retreat to the ghetto is not an option for faithful Christians, no-one should underestimate the daunting nature of the missionary challenge presented by the Western world today. Frankly, I worry about Christians who treat post-modern culture on very easy terms as though it were a neutral context likely to prove immediately hospitable to the message of Christ. On the contrary, the West increasingly takes on the appearance of a vast cultural swamp which threatens those who wander into it without due regard to its dangers with suffocation and death. The Christian mission has never been a merely human enterprise and those who have struggled to bring Christ into the heart of another culture know well the pain and the perils of this task. Those Christians who rightly take the need to relate the Gospel to the changing culture of the modern West seriously, must also pay attention to the history of mission if they are to avoid being sucked into the bog of a materialist and relativistic worldview. Perhaps it must also be said that, assuming a re-evangelisation of Europe is possible, this cannot be achieved by an evangelistic quick fix employing new technologies; rather it is likely to be a work of generations, perhaps even centuries.

¹¹ The quotation is from John Drane, *Faith In A Changing Culture* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1997), 44. The reference to Dave Tomlinson relates to his controversial proposals in *The Post-Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1995). The issue is also discussed in detail in David Hillborn's *Picking Up The Pieces: Can Evangelicalism Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).

Lessons from History

Surveying the long history of the Christian movement, Andrew Walls observes that it reveals that local and regional churches can wane as well as rise: 'Areas where Paul and Peter and John saw mighty encouragement are now Christian deserts. The Christian heartlands of one age can disappear within another'.¹² The church in Jerusalem provided the first launching pad for cross-cultural mission, yet it was quickly eclipsed by a new centre of dynamic spiritual life and, retreating to a mono-cultural expression of the faith, it rapidly became marginal to the purposes of the Holy Spirit. Or consider the case of North Africa, a region once home to some of the most significant theologians in the history of Christianity is today identified as being at the centre of the so-called 10/40 window, the least evangelised part of the globe.

Thus, history warns us that no particular local tradition of Christianity is guaranteed survival. The same Christ who declared that the gates of hell cannot prevail against his universal church, warned local churches in Asia Minor that he would remove their candlesticks and terminate their existence if they ignored his call to repentance. The conclusion is unavoidable: if Christianity in the West loses contact with the gospel and becomes blind to its captivity within a secular culture then it will be found to be suffering a sickness unto death. In fact, the perplexity experienced by many European Christians today is related to the struggle to come to terms with the fact that the real centres of Christian life and growth are now located in the non-Western world. Long established habits of thought and practice based on the assumption that the churches of the West occupy centre-stage in the purposes of God must be abandoned in the light of this new reality. We now find ourselves standing in the wings, witnessing others take the lead in God's still unfolding drama of redemption. Believers in the Southern Hemisphere are well aware of this change and often enquire whether we really understand its significance. For example, the Chinese theologian Choan-Seng Song has asked a series of questions of us: What will the future of Christianity be in the West? How will believers in Europe 'recapture the power of the gospel'? And how will they relate to Christians in the Third World who will surpass them in numerical strength?¹³

Biblical and theological principles

It would not be an exaggeration to say that a fundamental concern of the great prophets of Israel was to challenge the complacency and pride which resulted from a distorted understanding of divine election and to warn the chosen people that they, no less than the surrounding nations, would experience God's judgement if they

¹² Andrew Walls, 'Christian Expansion and the Condition of Western Culture' in *Changing The World* (Bromley, Kent: MARC Europe, n.d.), 14. This is a quite brilliant discussion of this subject.

¹³ Choan Seng-Song, *The Compassionate God* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 7.

continued to violate the conditions of the covenant. Consider, for example, the bombshell dropped in Jerusalem by Isaiah at the start of his prophecy. He addresses the self-confident citizens of a place regarded as holy and indestructible as 'you people of Gomorrah' and declares that God could not bear their 'evil assemblies' since they concealed godless lives and hard hearts beneath a cloak of religious respectability. (Is. 1:10-17). Much later, when the judgement has fallen, Ezekiel has to confront the insane optimism of people who still live with the illusion that the troubles are temporary and will soon be over. To the exiles who refused to accept reality and tried to comfort each other with the assurance that everything would quickly return to normal, Ezekiel is told to say simply: 'The end has come! The end has come!' (Ezek. 7:1).

The same kind of language is found on the lips of Jesus. Standing in the prophetic tradition he cuts through the façade of religious pretence and warns his hearers that neither centuries of tradition, nor strict adherence to the external duties of religion, can provide protection against the Living God who demands of those who profess to know him love and obedience. Nor are such warnings directed only to the religious establishment. Jesus tells his most intimate circle of followers that whenever a religious tradition becomes lifeless and powerless then, however hallowed and loved it might be, the end is near. 'If the salt loses its saltiness ... it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men' (Matt. 5:13). At the end of the New Testament, after Calvary and Pentecost, the glorified Christ utters exactly the same warnings to Christian congregations beginning to settle down in the world and making their peace with the dominant culture of Rome. The church at Ephesus, for example, brought to birth a generation earlier in what might be called the fires of revival, is called to repentance and told that it faces a terminus: 'If you do not repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place' (Rev. 2:5).

There is one passage in the New Testament which, it seems to me, speaks to Western Christianity today with peculiar power and relevance. In the letter to the Romans, Paul wrestles with the mystery of the purposes of God in human history and, in particular, the problem of the relationship between fallen Israel and the Gentile church. The language used suggests that Paul realises, even at this early stage in Christian history, that age-old tendencies toward religious pride and an unlovely arrogance toward other people were surfacing among non-Jewish believers. In a text that has received less attention than should have been the case, Paul says to the Gentile church: 'Do not be arrogant, but be afraid ... Consider the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, *provided that you continue in his kindness* (Rom. 11:17-24).

All Change Here!

Where then does this leave us? Are we at a junction or a terminus? Is Christianity in the Western world beyond hope, beyond genuine renewal? Viewed from certain angles the crisis we face seems to be

of such huge proportions that none of the remedies offered in the past promise a solution. Michael Riddell, speaking about New Zealand, says, 'I have lost count of the number of revivalist movements which have swept through my homeland promising a massive influx to the church in their wake. A year after they have faded, the plight of the Christian community seems largely unchanged, apart from a few more who have grown cynical through the abuse of their goodwill, energy and money'.¹⁴

However, the Christian faith bears a message of hope and the God worshipped through Jesus is astonishingly patient, kind and gracious. Jonah had a second chance to respond to this missionary God by recognising the radically new thing that Yahweh was about to do beyond the confines of the elect; Peter had three opportunities to withdraw his protest note against the disturbance caused to his religious world by the missionary priorities of the risen Christ. Moreover, the biblical texts mentioned earlier suggest that in the mercy of God, endings are followed by new beginnings. Beyond the agonies of loss and exile, Israel hears the word of the Lord which says 'Forget the former things ... See I am doing a new thing' (Isaiah: 43:18-19). At the point at which the people of God finally accepted that there was no way back to things as they had been, they were able to receive the divine revelation of something radically new. Is this perhaps the situation in which we find ourselves today? The long era of Western Christendom is over and we live amid the remnants of that period, trying to make sense of our situation and confused and disoriented by the complexity of the changes occurring both in society and in the church. Yet even as we grieve over the fragmented and weakened condition of the churches, can we begin to catch the indications that God is inviting us to participate in something new?

In 1978 Malcolm Muggeridge delivered two lectures at the University of Waterloo in Canada under the title 'The End of Christendom ... But Not of Christ'. The lectures were full of the wit and wisdom that made Muggeridge such a superb communicator and his concluding statement is worth quoting:

*... it is precisely when every earthly hope has been explored and found wanting ... when every recourse this world offers, moral as well as material, has been explored to no effect, when in the shivering cold the last faggot has been thrown on the fire and in the gathering darkness every glimmer of light has finally flickered out, it's then that Christ's hand reaches out sure and firm ... So, in finding in everything only deception and nothingness, the soul is constrained to have recourse to God himself and to rest content with him.*¹⁵

These words offer hope to individuals floundering in a collapsing culture, but what if we replace Muggeridge's reference to the individual soul and apply his analysis instead to the church?

¹⁴ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, 14.

¹⁵ Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 56.

Might it not be that the present stage of transition and deep uncertainty concerning Western Christianity provides a providential opportunity for believers to rediscover Christ and the gospel and, in the light of this, to find quite new ways of being the church today? There is a growing body of opinion across all denominational boundaries that the present crisis does indeed offer an unprecedented opportunity to rediscover the true nature of the Christian church and to return to first principles. Might we go even further and suggest that with the collapse of what was regarded as 'Christian civilisation' we may also recover *what it actually means to be Christian*? Jacques Ellul once said that 'Christendom astutely abolished Christianity by making us all Christians' and he went on to claim that in such a culture 'there is not the slightest idea what Christianity is'.¹⁶ The concern to distinguish between 'real' Christianity and its counterfeits in various types of culture-religion has been a central feature of the Evangelical movement, which suggests that this tradition has an important role to play if indeed we are at the edge of a situation in which Western Christianity can recover an apostolic vision of the calling of the people of God in this world.

A Few Modest Proposals for the Renewal of Christianity in the West

Even allowing for the use of the word 'modest' in the heading of this final section of this article, it might seem incredibly arrogant for me to propose some of the steps which might lead toward Christian renewal in the modern West. Let me make it clear that I claim no prophetic insight. Indeed, I struggle constantly to understand the times within which we are called to live and to discover Christian responses that are both faithful and contextually relevant. I confess that this age has more and more seemed to me to be a time when God has withdrawn his presence – which is of course precisely the situation sought and desired by many of the people who shaped Western culture. At such a time as this it may be that the language of the Old Testament psalms of lament can enable us to express and process our feelings of confusion and loss. For example, Psalm 74 is an anguished cry to God at a point at which he appeared inactive and remote – in contemporary language, it was as though God had died so far as his influence at the social and cultural level was concerned. Thus the psalmist cries: 'We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, *and none of us knows how long this will be*' (Ps. 74:9). This sense of aloneness, confusion and of uncertainty as to when the tide might turn again seems to parallel our experience perfectly and (if the analogy is valid) it means that the task of Christian reconstruction cannot be a merely intellectual or academic project; theology in the twenty-first century will need to be done not only in the study or the pulpit, but on our knees with the cry 'Lord, How Long?' on our lips.

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 36.

However, what does strike me as significant is the fact that more and more voices are heard today outside the church expressing their own laments at the condition of the culture of the West. For example, Michael Ignatieff wrote a preface for the programme for the 1999 series of BBC Promenade Concerts at which some of the greatest works in the classical tradition were performed – among them Beethoven's Choral Symphony and Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony. Ignatieff noted that these works are expressions of the faith of their composers in what he called 'the modern myth of the Ascent of Man – the belief in human progress as the powers of reason were brought to bear 'against the forces of ignorance and the cruelty of fate'. And yet, Ignatieff confessed, 'we are no longer certain that we can believe such stories'. The barbarism around us seems to make nonsense of the claim that our species is marching along a path toward civilisation, with the result that 'it is easy to feel that (in hearing these works) we are listening to the music of our lost hopes and illusions, reaching us like the last light from extinguished stars'.¹⁷

I have mentioned the Psalms of Lament as speaking to us with peculiar power; another passage that appears to have an extraordinary resonance in this context is the parable of the Prodigal Son. We have often read this story in terms of personal lostness, repentance, and reconciliation, but what if it is read in relation to our culture? Is it not the case that our collective experience of life in a far country, with as much distance between the hated father and us as possible, is mirrored here? And might it be that we are approaching a point at which the prodigal 'comes to himself' and begins to devise strategies of return? In 1994 a conference took place on the Island of Capri at which some of Europe's leading philosophers met to discuss the subject of religion. Their conclusions were published in a book edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. According to Vattimo, the 'the dissolution of the great systems that accompanied the development of science, technology and modern social organisation' – in other words, *the end of modernity* – has created a situation in which philosophy must once again give serious and prolonged attention to the subject of religion. European societies, he says, are faced with a situation in which there is a widespread fear 'of losing the meaning of existence, of that true and profound boredom which seems inevitably to accompany consumerism'. Using language that seems to echo the parable of the Prodigal Son, Vattimo says that at this precise point in history something we thought 'irrevocably forgotten is made present again, ... the repressed returns' and ... in the current resurgence of religion we seem to hear 'a voice that we are sure we have heard before'.¹⁸ Is this the prodigal beginning to 'come to himself'?

I suggest that Christians need to respond to this situation in three ways. First, *we must understand our place in history*. Just as secular

¹⁷ Michael Ignatieff, 'The Ascent of Man' BBC Proms Programme (London: BBC Publications, 1999), 8.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 80.

thinkers are recognising that the myths that have provided the foundation for the project of the Enlightenment are losing their credibility in the light of bitter historical experience, so Christians must come to terms with the end of the era in which their faith and practice was shaped by its long assimilation with Western culture. The point has been well made by the Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall,

... the Christian movement can have very significant future – a responsible future that will be both faithful to the original vision of this movement and of immense service to our beleaguered world. But to have that future, we Christians must stop trying to have the kind of future that nearly sixteen centuries of official Christianity in the Western world has conditioned us to covet.¹⁹

Recently it has been suggested that the present experience of Christians in the West is similar to that of people in traditional societies in Africa when passing through rites of initiation which enable them to move from one status to another. The anthropologist Victor Turner used the word *liminality* to describe this experience. A young boy, for instance, separated from his mother and isolated in a camp outside the village where he will be prepared for entering manhood, finds himself in a liminal stage in which the old identity has been lost and the new one is not yet conferred. This is a confusing and frightening experience and the first instinct is to return to the familiar status, to go back home and regain the comforting relationship with his mother! And yet this liminal stage is a necessary precondition for growth, it is the passage through which boys become men and discover a new status with fresh responsibilities and new opportunities in life. Just so, the churches of the West seem to be in a liminal state; the old is dying and must be left behind, but it remains entirely unclear from our perspective just what we shall become. Driven to the margins of our culture, reduced in status and dignity, our instincts, like the initiate in the African village, is to cling to the old and the familiar and to maintain structures and patterns of life that have been established for centuries. But, as Alan Roxburgh points out, however uncomfortable this liminal stage may be, it contains the potential for transformation: 'The decisions that are made in this phase shape the future of the group' and for the churches, liminality brings the possibility of rediscovering what it truly means to be the pilgrim people of God.²⁰

The second response I suggest we must make relates to the evolving of *new models of the missionary church*. I once arrived to preach at

¹⁹ Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Leominster: Gracewing Publications, 1997), ix.

²⁰ See Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 33. Victor Turner's discussion of the concept of the 'liminal' is in his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (New York: Aldine DeGruyter, 1969).

a church and noticed a rusting metal sign attached to the external wall which declared 'All sittings free in this church'. It was of course a historical relic from the Victorian era and I suppose that few people passing by paid it much attention. What was far more serious however, was the discovery that what went on inside the building had, like the notice outside, changed little in a hundred years. Just across the road was a massive leisure complex with ice rink, swimming pool and the usual features of the postmodern entertainment industry, identified in blazing neon signs as 'The Time Capsule'. I could not help feeling that I too had entered a time capsule, only here the journey was one that took us backwards to a sub-cultural world beyond the comprehension of the young people seeking recreation across the road.

The maintenance of long-established church structures and patterns of worship is sometimes justified by an appeal to the need to be faithful. However, faithfulness that is not accompanied by a willingness to take ground-breaking initiatives to ensure the transmission of the message of Christ to ever new hearers is in fact a path to extinction. We are *not* faithful if we ignore Christ's summons to mission and a retreat to the apparent security of a closed community repeats the failure in mission that has characterised the people of God with monotonous regularity from at least the time of Jonah onwards. Tragically, many churches are dying even as their members assure each other of their faithfulness.

The search for new models of church which are indeed faithful to the fundamental principles of the New Testament while relating in dynamic and creative ways to context of Western societies in the twenty-first century is a task that must be pursued with boldness and courage.²¹

Finally, it must be said that our situation may provide a unique opportunity to *rediscover the fullness of the gospel*. Such a claim should neither surprise nor alarm us since it is evident that our knowledge of Christ is always partial and incomplete. The New Testament speaks frequently of growing and developing in the knowledge of Christ and Paul confesses that whatever we presently see is merely a 'poor reflection' of the ultimate reality which lies beyond human grasp in this world. A knowledge of church history confirms all too clearly the limited and partial nature of our human perceptions of the truth of Christ and the gospel. How was it, for

²¹ The books by Roxburgh and Hall cited above are published in a series entitled 'Christian Mission and Modern Culture' edited by Alan Neely, Wayne Pipkin and Wilbert Shenk. These volumes break new ground and the following titles from the series can be warmly recommended: Gordon Scoville, *Into The Vacuum: Being The Church in an Age of Barbarism*; Kenneth Cragg, *The Secular Experience of God* and Jane Collier and Rafael Esteban, *From Complicity To Encounter: The Church and the Culture of Economism*. The series is published in the USA by Trinity Press International and some volumes have appeared in Britain published by Gracewing Publications of Leominster. Another, rather different approach is Meic Pearse and Chris Matthews, *We Must Stop Meeting Like This* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1999).

example, that William Carey's brother ministers failed to recognise the missionary calling of the church and insisted that the Great Commission had been fulfilled by the apostles? The position they defended now seems absurd to us, yet the illustration prompts the question as to *where our biblical blind spots may be?* Can we be so sure that the traditions we have inherited have expressed the gospel in its fullness, or might it be that they provided a grid of interpretation that has actually prevented us from seeing something crucial to the full expression of the gospel story?²²

Perhaps then this liminal stage through which the churches of the West are passing offers us an opportunity for a theological and spiritual renewal beyond our ability to visualise at present. If so, we shall certainly need to listen to sisters and brothers from the southern hemisphere who already offer us valuable critical perspectives precisely because they speak from a vantage point outside the culture of the West.²³ Indeed, I suggest that this is one of our key resources today and that, whatever the problems of our times, we have an unprecedented opportunity to grasp the something more of the dimensions of the unfathomable love of Christ 'together with all the saints' (Eph. 3:18-19).

²² An example of the kind of questioning I have in mind is provided by Richard Heppe, 'The Gospel, Sanctification and Mission' in *Foundations* 42, Spring 1999, p.3-10.

²³ The voices of sisters and brothers from the non-Western world are becoming increasingly clear and challenging. Consider, for example, two witnesses from the island of Sri Lanka: Vinoth Ramachandra's *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996) is a searching critique of western idolatry – and of Christian complicity, while Ajith Fernando is equally searching in *An Authentic Servant* (Singapore: OMF International, 1999). It is worth quoting the latter: 'Christians from the affluent countries may be losing their ability to live with inconvenience, stress and, hardship as there is more and more stress on comfort and convenience ... Might the West soon disqualify itself from being a missionary-sending region? I think we are seeing some embarrassing examples'.