

## Navigating the waters of post-Christendom visions

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*“for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest, possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.” (Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass)*

It seems like everywhere you go Christians in one way or another are talking about Christendom. Actually, the word being used most is post-Christendom. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are still in the cloudy shadows of a post-everything society. Postcolonial. Postmodern. Post-Christendom. In most cases, there is no agreement about what exactly is to come. Postmodern thinkers, for example, do not have one agreed upon theory that they are all working out of. The only thing they can agree to is that modernity and its tools of reasoning have failed to deliver what it promised. Similarly, most postcolonial thinkers do not think we have really fully left colonialism behind, and so the future form is still merely pencil sketches. It is no surprise then that there isn't consensus on what it means for us to be going through a post-Christendom shift in western society.

### **Differentiating Post-Christendom Visions**

As I write this, I can imagine at least three different ways that people broadly use the term post-Christendom. I am going to risk being overly simplistic and brief, in what could potentially be a book given the topic, but I hope to differentiate these positions some, so that there is clarity around what exactly is being said. The challenge with words is that people can use the very same words and yet mean or imply different things. I for one have found the language of Christendom and post-Christendom helpful at times, but not always congruent with other people that might think we are sharing concerns. Hopefully with just a little more clarity around our disposition towards Christendom itself, we can create more appropriate partnerships and alliances as our trajectories align. Likewise, we might find that some

partnerships indeed have been faulty and must be dissolved because of conflicting goals. Lastly, I might also add that though I am sketching three approaches, my goal here is not to do so in a manner that advocates for some *'halfies'* middle ground and mediating position between the two radical stances, as some are prone to do. Those hierarchical power games that sketch an artificial center from which one just happens to find themselves in every discrepancy, is not only convenient, but it is deceptive as well. That said, I can't promise that my descriptions are fair or objective, in the sense that those that hold to them will probably differ some on the descriptions. You are welcome and encouraged to descriptively elaborate your own position in the comments if you would like. J

## **The Lamented Shift**

**There are some that talk about post-Christendom shifts as a dreaded moment in Christian history.** For this community Christendom is the way things ought to be. The Church is supposed to control and encompass all of society. That Christianity should be expressed seamlessly from the top-down, through every institution, political body, and social entity, is common sense. Christendom is good. If that is the case then the possibility that we are entering a post-Christendom era is a terrible thing. It is a failure of the Church and a sign that our society is currently on a steady decline. These advocates of Christendom lament that we are losing power and influence in society. Given that this undesirable reality is out of control, the understanding is that we must prepare ourselves for this new grim context that is on the horizon.

## **The Opportunistic Shift**

While some want to hold on to the 1950s era, when Christianity still seemed to dominate the landscape, **others have been much more skeptical and have readily been inviting this new context.** For them Christendom involved a series of co-options, diversions, and missteps for the Church. That was unfortunate in their eyes, but hey, they can see more clearly now, and they can identify how exactly the Church failed in the Christendom era, to live up to its name. It merged with state and governing powers too much. The Church confused the gospel with western culture too much. And it lost a sense of distinctiveness as a Church community. Rather than be sent out, it called people to come in. Rather than disciple people it developed powerful institutions. Rather than yielding to the spirit it yielded to capitalistic and

militaristic forces. This group however doesn't want to judge or take sides against Christendom either, because they are our ancestors and they make mistakes, just as we are likely too. Rather than condemning the past the focus is purely on examining and engaging the new future context, in which a plethora of possibilities reside. These post-Christendom Christians are excited and pumped about jumping ship from the now failing methods of Christendom to the new post-Christendom praxis they are discovering.

## **The Shift of Life and Death**

The difference and conflict of the first two groups are pretty evident, however, it is the second and third groups that probably need the most differentiation and clarity, to decipher if and how they can work together. The final type at times can view Christendom similarly and yet also very differently than the second type does.

**These communities are especially comprised of the Christians that have directly experienced the underside of Christendom, and hence refuse to forget those past memories and present pains.** From this vantage point choosing to ignore the past failures in favor of future possibilities is not an option. The only moving forward they will do flows from their strength to look back and be truthful about where they have come from. For them there is nothing further in its characteristics than Christendom and true Christianity. Christendom is much more than a few missteps and co-options, it is a betrayal of the name of Jesus Christ and the way of life he embodied. Christendom is the mode in which western society religiously justified itself as it dominated and oppressed others. Christendom took on the form conquest and was the engine for colonizing of the global south and its descendants around the world. It also took on the form of white supremacy in the U.S. for 400 years, because whiteness and Anglo-Saxon protestant Christianity at one time were basically interchangeable terms. Slavery, lynching, KKK, white flight, the creation of black ghettos, mass incarceration, and on and on we go, are all the legacy of the further distortions of Christendom in the United States. Christendom was a nightmare, especially for many Christian communities who were courageous enough to hold on to their faith in a non-domineering Jesus who identified and joined with the sufferers of the world, despite the death-dealing violence and oppression they lived under. Post-Christendom is not a decline in Christianity, if anything it is the very possibility of its truthful and organic growth. This posture isn't primarily about new, cool, and more effective practices for the future, rather this has always been about current realities of life and death, and the death of Christendom

inherently means the present possibility for life-giving communities to gather around the Resurrected One who is no longer deceptively being called upon to justify empire.

## **Can We Talk About Post-Christendom?**

So where does that leave us? Can we talk about post-Christendom life without first taking into account the full and often ugly reality known as Christendom? And whose perspective should be privileged in this discussion, those that benefit from it and lament its fading away, those that refuse to fully account for the historical role of the western Church and society's oppressive practices, or those that forged their faith to Jesus within the crucible of suffering at the hands of so-called western Christians?