

The next Christian century

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

This Magazine has been a friend and a resource for me for 35 years. It has stimulated my thinking, encouraged me professionally and personally, challenged my assumptions, introduced me to new movies, books and authors, pricked my conscience, made me smile and, on occasion, made me angry. Come to think of it, my Christian Century subscription has been one of the best bargains around.

Like many readers, as soon as the Century arrived at my desk I checked to see what James Wall had to say about what's going on in the world and then turned immediately to the back to read Martin Marty's weekly gift of wry wit, wisdom and grace. Happily, they both will continue to write for our pages.

Since I am now personally invested in this enterprise, I have been wondering what the people who so confidently called their magazine the Christian Century in 1900 would think at the end of the 20th century. Many of them believed that the world would be Christian by the year 2000, and that the U.S. would be a nation shaped, formed and informed by what we now know as the liberal Protestant vision. We live, as this journal regularly reminds us, in a very different place than our forebears anticipated.

The issue for us is not how to organize and sustain a thoroughly Christian culture, but how to relate to a global and national culture that is thoroughly pluralistic. To put the question another way: How shall those of us who identify with the old mainline religious institutions relate to a culture that no longer always agrees with us and increasingly doesn't know what to make of us?

In his review in the February 3-10 issue of James Tunstead Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, Ralph Wood commented that the "effort to build up a great unified American civilization-indeed, to usher in the Christian century whence this journal takes its name-produced a huge unintended irony. The old-line universities where Protestant liberalism was once the established faith became so all-inclusive that they not only lost their Christian identity, they eventually excluded Protestant

liberalism." Burtchaell's description of what happened to Christian colleges and universities applies to much of the culture.

How to be Christian in a pluralistic society? How to be faithfully Christian in a world of competing truth claims, many of them vigorously winning adherents? One way, of course, is to hunker down, strengthen the walls, bar the gates, and prepare for a future of increasing cultural ambivalence and, eventually, hostility. Another approach, and the one that will characterize this journal, is to continue to engage the culture, issue by issue-and to be a place where Christians engage one another across the entire front of issues: theological, biblical, political, economic, social, aesthetic, ethical. And if we're not quite as confident about the outcome of our efforts as were our forebears, we're determined to be every bit as engaged in the world around us as they were.

There is some precedent, after all, for plunging ahead without knowing where the journey is headed, for setting off on a pilgrimage without a sure sense of what is around the next corner. At the heart of the faith we share is our trust that God is up to something in history-grand and small; global and personal-which we can't quite see or understand yet. And therefore there is a strong reason to keep calling this journal exactly what it has been called for 100 years, the Christian Century.

John M. Buchanan