

'Post' Words

Western culture is experiencing a significant culture shift: we appear to be in transition from one era to another. Commentators use words starting with 'post' ('after') to describe this transition phase because, although it is clear things are not what they used to be, it is far from clear what is emerging. 'Post' words are backward-looking, humble, provisional and tentative.

post-modern *post-colonial* post-industrial
POST-SECULAR *post-structural* **post-ideological**

'Post-Christendom' is one of these words, telling us little about what the future holds but suggesting that the Christendom era is drawing to a close. To understand its implications we need first to investigate the meaning of 'Christendom'.

Christendom

Early in the 4th century the Roman emperor Constantine I adopted the Christian faith, issued an edict of toleration that ended the threat of persecution to Christians in the Roman Empire, and brought the churches in from the margins to the centre of society.



Constantine I

He and most of his successors heaped favours and money on the churches, applied increasing pressure on those who held other religious beliefs, and implemented all kinds of political, economic, cultural and social programmes that were justified on the supposed basis of Christian theology.

During the following centuries the system of Christendom took shape – an alliance of church and state, where Christianity took on all the trappings of an imperial religion, the church became associated with power, wealth, status and coercion, and almost all Europeans (except the Jews) were regarded as Christian by birth rather than choice.

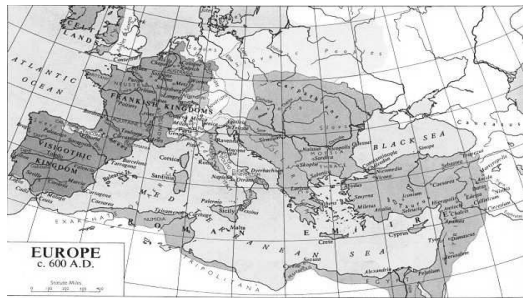


Most Christians welcomed this unexpected development, seeing it as the triumph of Christ over the empire and over paganism, and accepted the compromises required to achieve it. But some were convinced that the church had been domesticated and perverted by this alliance and pointed in dismay to the changes that had occurred:

- Huge nominal congregations replaced the counter-cultural communities of disciples of earlier centuries.
- Mission became first coercive and then obsolete once almost all were assumed to be Christian.
- Christians were now persecuting dissenters rather than being persecuted themselves.
- Justification of warfare superseded the culture of peace that characterised the early churches.

- The cross was transformed from a symbol of suffering love into a military emblem that brought death and destruction.
- Clerical domination squashed initiative and the exercise of spiritual gifts by other Christians.
- The oppressive practice of tithing funded the system but caused huge resentment, especially among the poor.
- Practices derived from Old Testament and pagan sources usurped the example and teaching of Jesus

Christendom was a brilliant culture. European civilisation owes an enormous debt to a system that steered it from antiquity through the so-called Dark Ages into the medieval world and on towards modernity.

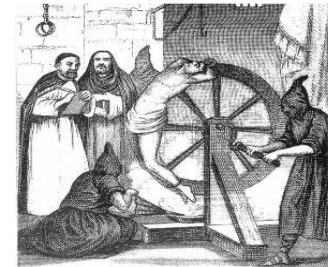


Wonderful developments in art and architecture, music and sculpture, philosophy and scientific discoveries, health care and education, spirituality and theology were nurtured by this culture.



Michelangelo: Sistine Chapel

But Christendom was also deeply flawed. The inquisition, witch hunts, crusades and persecution of dissidents revealed its coercive, totalitarian instincts. Massive corruption allied to inordinate wealth produced an unedifying spectacle and discredited the gospel.



The Spanish Inquisition

Christendom flourished for many centuries and adapted remarkably well to different contexts – from partnership with the fading glory of Rome through the chaos of the next centuries to become monolithic medieval Catholicism. The 16th-century Reformation represented, not the end of Christendom, but an attempt to reform this system. What resulted was a fractured Christendom, as Europe divided into mini-Christendoms (Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican) – each still operating with Christendom assumptions but antagonistic towards each other.

However, it was in this era that the seeds of Christendom’s demise were sown. The Anabaptist movement, heir to the dissident tradition of earlier centuries, was persecuted in all the mini-Christendoms but represented the emergence of churches free from state control. Over the coming centuries, free churches proliferated and eventually even state churches have begun to be disestablished.

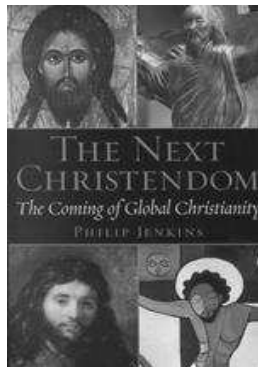
Furthermore, the various mini-Christendoms bequeathed by the Reformation went to war against each other, provoking a reaction against religion and stimulating the Enlightenment and its attempt to base human life on reason. Modernity turned towards secularism and undermined the foundations on which Christendom was built.

The Demise of Christendom

Over the past three centuries Christendom has gradually unravelled. The impact of the Enlightenment and more recently post-modernism has presented serious philosophical challenges and diminished the authority of the church. Huge social and economic changes (such as industrialisation and urbanisation) have disconnected people from the churches. The success of the modern missionary movement that has led to a truly global church has overflowed the boundaries of historic Christendom and demonstrated that Christianity can flourish without state endorsement or support.

Although the vestiges of this impressive system are evident across western culture, Christendom is dying. The church is in serious and sustained decline. Growing churches and networks are in no way offsetting this decline. Thousands are leaving the churches every week. We are struggling to recruit new members or even to hold on to our own children. The church is no longer at the centre of society but back on the margins. Most Europeans no longer believe the big story told by Christianity to explain the way the world works.

This is not to say that Christendom is extinct. The Christendom idea was exported through missionary activity in the colonial period to many other nations and some commentators detect new versions of Christendom appearing in the southern continents.



We can note also its mutation into an unofficial but no less powerful system in the United States of America with its vision of ‘one nation under God.’ Christendom seems to be a tenacious mindset.

But European Christendom is dying. Whatever our assessment of Christendom – a necessary compromise that resulted in a rich and remarkable culture, or a perversion that distorted Christianity for centuries – this era of European history is ending. The pretence of a Christian society is fading. Imposing Christianity has in the long run not worked. The church’s alliance with power, wealth and status is now a stumbling-block. Christianity is widely perceived as passé. The church is regarded as an obsolete and instinctively oppressive institution. Post-Christendom is with us.

Post-Christendom

What is post-Christendom? What is emerging out of the ruins of the Christendom era? We may not be able to look far into the future or pronounce with any confidence on whether European culture will be increasingly secular or characterised by multiple alternative forms of spirituality (different social commentators vary enormously in their assessments), but what are the components of this transitional phase? We might begin with this suggested definition:

Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.

Post-Christendom makes no sense without a Christendom past. In societies where churches have flourished and declined, where the Christian story has been told and has influenced individuals and even the culture as a whole, but where other stories have had a definitive or equal influence alongside the Christian story, post-

Christendom is not an appropriate term to describe the diminished influence of the churches or the story they tell.

The demise of Christendom may be sudden or gradual. It involves both institutional and philosophical changes, for Christendom is both a power structure and a mindset. Sustained persecution may lead to the demise of Christendom (as in some parts of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), or it may result from the official choice of another story (as in the transition from Christianity to Islam in North Africa).

But the demise of Christendom in western culture is the first instance of such a cultural shift occurring without the pressure of persecution or the adoption of a different story. Here the Christian story has not been replaced by another more persuasive story but by scepticism about all explanatory and culture-shaping stories. In this sense, post-Christendom in western culture is different from earlier versions: we really have not been here before.



Post-Christendom is a transitional phase – a twilight zone between Christendom and whatever is emerging within European society. This phase combines many vestiges and legacies of Christendom but also many indications that the long era of Christendom is passing. Transitional phases are unsettling and confusing, requiring careful reflection, ‘bilingual’ communication and provisional conclusions.

Post-Christendom includes the following transitions:

- *From the centre to margins:* in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority:* in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners:* in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- *From privilege to plurality:* in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness:* in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.
- *From maintenance to mission:* in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- *From institution to movement:* in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement.

The first five of these seven transitions are happening regardless of how Christians might respond, and appear to be unremitting and (at least in the foreseeable future) irreversible.

The final two transitions represent choices and challenges for the churches as they come to terms with their position on the margins of a changing culture that they cannot control or dominate. Responses made over the coming years will go a long way to determining how – and even whether – the churches in Western Europe survive this transitional period.

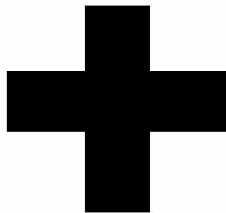
Snapshots of Post-Christendom

There is plenty of research evidence to support the conclusion that Christendom is in terminal decline. Whatever measurements are used – church membership, church attendance, christenings, confirmation figures, church weddings, Christian funerals, etc. – there is consistent and unrelenting, albeit often not precipitate, decline.

The number of people reporting themselves on census forms and in other surveys to be Christians may seem to challenge the conclusion that post-Christendom is here, but closer scrutiny indicates that what people actually believe is steadily moving away from Christianity. It is true that in times of crisis some people still turn instinctively to the churches, but this rarely translates into long-term discipleship.

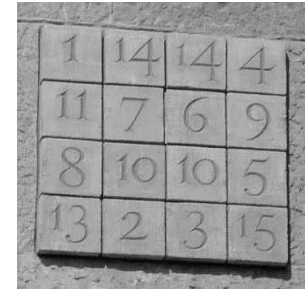
Various anecdotes illustrate this evidence and suggest that there are more and more people who know nothing of the Christian story, do not understand the language the church uses and are unfamiliar with church buildings, personnel and activities. Here is a selection of such anecdotes:

- A young man in London hearing the gospel for the first time was intrigued by it. He asked: ‘So when did all this happen? When did Jesus live? Was it about ten years ago or so?’



- Someone in Sweden looking up at a church building in the centre of town asked a passer-by: ‘Who is that man in front of the plus sign?’ Someone else asked a minister, ‘Why have you got those two sticks on the front of your building?’

- In Australia a bishop went into a supermarket. A woman on the check-out congratulated him on his ‘cool’ purple shirt. He explained that he was a bishop. She asked him what a bishop was. Trying to explain intelligibly he said he was one of the regional managers of God’s outlet business. She nodded her understanding. He pointed to a church building across the road, telling her that this was one of the outlets. She replied, ‘I’ve always wondered what that was.’
- One Sunday in Oxford a man called into a church building to collect something for his partner who worked during the week in a creative-arts project the church ran. He arrived as the morning congregation was leaving and recognised the minister, whom he knew. Surprised, he asked: ‘What are all these people doing here? I didn’t know churches were open on Sundays!’



- A teenager was fascinated by the ‘magic square’ on Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, in which many of the numerical combinations add up to 33. ‘Why 33?’ she asked. ‘Because Jesus died at that age.’ ‘That was young – what did he die of?’

In post-Christendom it will be unwise to assume any knowledge at all of Christianity, any biblical literacy or any familiarity with the rhythms of church life.

Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land

These anecdotes and the research evidence that confirms what they illustrate raise the question: how are Christians to tell the story of Jesus in this new context? The assumptions, language, methods and starting points of late Christendom will be inappropriate in post-Christendom.

Then the churches were mainly attempting to engage with the *de-churched* and *semi-churched*; but these groups are shrinking in size. The pressing challenge now is engagement with the *non-churched* and *never-churched*.

In the Christendom era most people were either active Christians or latent Christians. In the plural culture of post-Christendom there are secularists, spiritual searchers, members of other faith communities and many others who do not identify in any way with Christianity. Post-Christendom is a multiple mission context requiring a cross-cultural mission approach.

Many commentators compare the situation of the church in western culture with the exile of the Israelites in Babylon.



Psalms 137 records the pain, disorientation, anger and confusion of some of these exiles. Taunted by their captors they retort, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' Many Christians in post-Christendom may feel equally dismayed and wrong-footed, unsure

how to worship or witness in this strange new land, but the Israelites learned to be the people of God in exile and it became a period of great spiritual and cultural renewal. Maybe post-Christendom can be the same for Christians in Western Europe.

Responding to Post-Christendom

So the arrival of post-Christendom invites responses from Christians in western societies. There are challenges and struggles involved in this period, but also fresh opportunities and possibilities. What does post-Christendom mean?

- Our story is unknown.
- Our symbols are unfamiliar.
- Our language is incomprehensible.
- Our context is diverse.
- Our history is problematic.
- Our opportunities are immense.
- Our attitudes are crucial.

How are Christians responding? Some understandable but unhelpful responses are:

- Denying that Christendom really is over, digging our heels in and waiting for the good times to return.
- Praying for revival, convinced that our churches need simply to remain faithful rather than facing radical changes.
- Assuming that declining churches will be replaced by new and more dynamic churches that will rise up in their place.
- Accepting that Christendom is over but not working through the implications and making only cosmetic changes.
- Realising that things are no longer what they were and giving in to despair and the inevitability of further decline.

Post-Christendom can easily be perceived as a threat and associated with failure.



The response to the huge challenges it presents may be to burrow ostrich-like into the remaining sand of familiar inherited church culture, scan the horizon for growing churches that claim we can continue doing what we have always done, or clutch desperately at promises of revival or programmes that promise to restore our lost fortunes. Indeed, the more fully we understand the reality of post-Christendom, the greater may be the temptation to respond in such ways: post-Christendom is not an easy environment for discipleship, mission or church.

But there is an alternative perspective, rooted in the conviction that the Christendom era was deeply flawed. While there are real losses to grieve with the demise of Christendom, there is also liberation and new possibilities. This alternative perspective:

- Celebrates the demise of Christendom and the distorting influence of power, wealth and status on the Christian story.
- Grieves and repents of the violence, corruption, folly and arrogance of Christendom.
- Rejoices that all who choose to become followers of Jesus today do so freely without pressure or inducements.
- Revels in an environment where the Jesus story is becoming unknown and can be rediscovered (by Christians and others).
- Welcomes the freedom to look afresh at many issues seen for so long only through the lens of Christendom.

- Anticipates new and liberating discoveries as Christians explore what it means to be a church on the margins that operates as a movement rather than an institution.
- Trusts that history will turn out how God intends with or without Christians attempting to control it.

Jeremiah had three messages for the Israelite exiles in Babylon: do not believe the false prophets who assure you that the exile will be brief and all will be as it was before; settle down and learn to be the people of God in Babylon; and recognise that God actually brought you into exile (see Jeremiah 29). Perhaps his counsel applies just as much to Christians in post-Christendom.

Christendom and Christianity

Post-Christendom offers an opportunity to disentangle Christianity from its imperial past. Celebrating the demise of Christendom does not mean rejoicing in the declining number of Christians or the diminishing influence of the Christian story in western culture. But this transitional period invites us – humbly, patiently, tentatively and hopefully – to return to the roots of our faith and rediscover the gospel for a new era.

This will certainly not be a short or straightforward journey. There are already many questions.

- What does it mean to be followers of Jesus Christ in post-Christendom?
- Is mission obsolete or is there a new strategy for mission that we can adopt?
- What is the good news in a post-Christendom society?
- How do we read and apply the Bible from the margins?
- What shape will worship assume and what kind of spirituality will sustain us in post-Christendom?

- What new forms of church are emerging and which of these fit the new situation?
- Do Christians still have a political role in a society now that we are on the margins and our story is widely disbelieved?



Where can we find resources to help us grapple with such questions?

- The Bible (read from the margins).
- The pre-Christendom churches.
- The dissident tradition during the Christendom era.
- The world church and cross-cultural missionaries.

We are not searching for exact parallels, nor will it help to idealise any of these resources, but we do need conversation-partners on this journey into post-Christendom.

What about the legacy of Christendom? Here we need discrimination and careful reflection. Christendom is a rich but flawed resource. We will need to decide what to bring with us from the past as resources to sustain us on our continuing journey and what to leave behind as baggage that will otherwise weigh us down. We may also consider working for the removal of some of the vestiges of Christendom if these seem inappropriate (or unjust) in a post-Christendom society, or challenging the Christendom mindset wherever this seems unhelpful to those who are struggling to adjust to a changing context.

Further Resources

This booklet offers a brief introduction to a complex and important topic. It raises more questions than it attempts to answer – which is appropriate in a transitional era. It is a production of the Anabaptist Network – a relational network offering resources that draw on the Anabaptist tradition (part of the wider dissident tradition that did not subscribe to the Christendom system). This Network offers further resources for those interested in investigating the challenges and opportunities of post-Christendom.

The ‘After Christendom’ Series

Authors operating from within the Anabaptist tradition are writing a series of books, emerging annually from 2004, which engage with the legacy of Christendom and use the lens of post-Christendom to look afresh at a range of issues. *Post-Christendom*, *Church after Christendom* and *Faith and Politics after Christendom* are already available (published by Paternoster). These and other relevant titles can be obtained from most Christian bookshops or on-line from www.metanoiabooks.org.uk

www.postchristendom.com

The ‘After Christendom’ books are intended as conversation-starters rather than the last word on the subjects they address. One way of participating in this ongoing conversation is via the website that is linked with this series. This website will carry extracts from books already published, news of forthcoming titles, additional material and discussion forums for those interested in engaging in dialogue.

www.anabaptistnetwork.com

For further information about the Anabaptist tradition and about the significance of this tradition for Christians today, you are invited to visit the Network’s website and explore its extensive resources.