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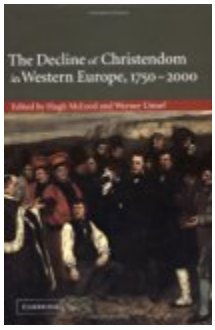

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Current Approaches to the Study of the Role of Religion in Western Europe

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"We are still dealing with Christendom: with Christendom in ruins, but with Christendom." Hilaire Belloc's words in the early 1930s would seem inapplicable today, yet the contributors to this collection of essays would not entirely disagree. While Werner Ustorf or Thomas Kselman assume the dissolution of Christendom, Martin Greschat or Peter van Rooden point to its pervasiveness in the later part of the twentieth century–the former through a detailed examination of the debates between German Protestants after World War II, the latter arguing for the existence of "various kinds of Christendom" which have succeeded each other in the case of the Netherlands (p. 113). The answer is not an easy one. This collection of essays represents a significant input to this far-reaching and still somewhat obscure process.

The contribution of this volume must be placed within the context of the promising new historiographical direction that has opened up in modern European history, first in the 1950s-1970s with the "new cultural history," and continued in the present time by historians, theologians, and sociologists who point to the continuous importance of religion in the lives of Western European peoples. These show concern, not so much with the expressions of social or economic structures or established churches, but with alternative ways in which religion may express itself. The key is believed to be in the study of popular religious behavior and, one may add, not with the essence of Christianity itself, but with the way it is experienced. Thus, the central focus is the religion of the people, rather than that of political and religious elites. This volume examines the much-neglected change from Christendom, where Christianity had a prominent role, towards a society in which the main churches have had to adapt to a situation where they no longer hold a privileged role. Progression or regression? Rather than dismissing the replacement of Christendom for Christianity as a negative or positive turn in Western European history, the authors of these essays, with chapters on most European countries, point out the complexities and vicissitudes that should be taken into account before making such a judgment of value, thereby contributing to the wealth of new perspectives on the complexity and striking tenacity of religious belief and practice. It seeks to examine this process of increasing pluralism, which has accelerated dramatically since the 1960s, and its implication for the future.

There are thirteen chapters, most focusing on a particular European country, thereby emphasizing the unitary element of the experience of decline. Divided into four sections, it seeks to examine the situation of Western Europe at the end of the twentieth century, the reasons why and how Christendom has declined through an emphasis on narrative, and the situation of religion through key themes such as technology, death, and language. The final part of the book looks at the future and asks how

Christianity should respond to the end of Christendom.

With few exceptions, every country of Western Europe experienced changes of the same kind and around the same time: the 1960s. But most importantly, no linear path toward dechristianization and secularization can be traced from the French Revolution into the twentieth century, for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe has experienced unpredictable religious revivals that scholars are still trying to explain.

If there is a common view among the authors, it is that the "master narrative" of secularization is inadequate. Callum Brown and Jeffrey Cox note that concepts such as "secularization" and "decline" are problematic, because they fail to take account of alternative ways in which religiosity is expressed. The problem is that "the secularization story is too complex and many-sided to be 'verified' or 'falsified'; it can only be compared in its persuasiveness to another story, or other stories. As long as secularization is presented as the only story, one cannot say it is the best story" (p. 209).

One recurrent theme, as the fine introduction by Hugh McLeod points out, is that what marks the radical break with the past, especially in the period after 1960, is not so much "that the precepts of Christian morality were being ignored in practice, but that alternative principles were being openly advocated" (p. 13). Thus, Eva H. Hamberg explores the situation of Sweden to argue that what causes religious indifference is not a pluralistic society, but a monopoly on religion. As she states, "what appears to be a low level of demand for religion may be a low level of demand for the available forms of religion" (pp. 58-59). In other words, the important factor is quantity rather than quality. Moreover, the case of Sweden, she argues, shows that the rise of material welfare does not necessarily involve decline of religion.

Yves Lambert, providing one of the best essays in this collection, argues that secularization is only one among several aspects of the contemporary situation. Rather than dismissing the process as wholly "secular," he maintains that Christianity has adapted well to modernity, yet at a high price: "the abandonment of what rendered religion absolutely indispensable: the reaching of eternal salvation" (p. 77). Can we still speak of Christianity in Western Europe when the basic element ceases to be important? He does not answer the question, but contends that, in order to understand the present situation, we need to take account of the main features of modernity and the transformation that those changes have brought about.

The complexity is also explored by Lucian Holscher through a study of the semantic structures of religious change in Germany, to emphasize another recurring theme in these essays, namely, there is no one way to view religious change. Furthermore, the study of those changes helps us understand historical change. David Hempton analyzes the complex relationship between established churches and evangelical dissenters in England since 1700.

Thomas Kselman uses his study of death in modern France to argue that one must be cautious in making judgments about the process of dechristianization and must have, in turn, "a generous standard when establishing Christian identity." Thus, in the case of France, he argues, we must "consider the possibility that the continued insistence on Catholic identity and Christian symbols represents an authentic form of Christianity," something which merits further reflection (p. 158). Sheridan Gilley studies the way in which religion contributed to the formation of cultural identities in the case of Ireland, an important theme that merits further reflection in the new Europe. Moreover, the relationship between modernity and religion is examined by Michel Lagree through the impact of technology on Catholicism, concluding that "technology is not inevitably the main agent of the world's disenchantment" (p. 179).

If one is interested in knowing the current approaches to the study of the decline of Christendom, this book is a must. If one, however, is looking for actual reasons for its decline, he will be disappointed, for he will not find them here. Instead, the complexity and the diversity of the process of religious decline are offered, while recognizing that many of the conditions discussed are specific only to Western Europe.

Further lines of inquiry would do well to integrate themes that are absent in the present volume, and address questionable assumptions that are present here as well. Two absent themes, for instance, are intellectual history and that of gender. As to questionable assumptions, further research would be enriched by questioning the main definition of Christendom as a society in which Christianity was "the dominant religion and this dominance has been backed up by social or legal compulsions" (p. 218). Thus, the argument goes, the most important difference between religion under Christendom and under modern secular societies is that in the former, it was imposed from above or adhered to because of peer-pressure, dominated by coercion, control, and domination, whereas in modern societies religion is free and

voluntary. If the main definition of Christendom is a civilization that was imposed from above, how can one explain its endurance and pervasiveness in history? This question is left unanswered.

The present volume attempts to examine the transformation of religion in modern European history without, as Werner Ustorf notes, "imprisoning it in one's views and tradition, likes and dislikes" (p. 220). This indeed is a laudable enterprise, yet it is still doubtful how or whether it can be achieved. The tendency of many of the contributors of these essays is to lower the standards of Christianity so that it can be accepted by all. Werner Ustorf's solution is for Christianity to free itself from its cultural, institutional or doctrinal restraints. With this statement, he is already imprisoning Christianity in his own "views and tradition, likes and dislikes."

Despite its setbacks, this book is an important and timely resource for further reflection on such a complex and multifaceted issue as the significance of Christianity in today's culture and its role in history.

The value of the present volume lies not in solving enigmas, but in pointing to questions and problems that must be answered through further research.

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