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0521814936 - The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000

Edited by Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

Hugh McLeod

In 312 the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire. Thus began the ‘Constantinian’ or ‘Christendom’ era in the history of Christianity. After nearly three centuries of intermittent, but sometimes very severe, persecution by the civil authorities, Christianity was now in alliance with the powers that be. By the end of the fourth century a large part of the Roman elite had converted to Christianity and other forms of religious worship were prohibited. The process by which the mass of the population became fully integrated into the Christian church was much more long drawn out. Equally, a variety of rival religions continued to be privately practised long after they were officially proscribed. But a pattern of relations between church and state and between church and society had been established.¹ It would be repeated as Christianity spread to northern and eastern Europe and, much later, to the Americas. For the next 1500 years most Christians learnt and practised their faith in the context of ‘Christendom’. That is, they lived in a society where there were close ties between the leaders of the church and those in positions of secular power, where the laws purported to be based on Christian principles, and where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, every member of the society was assumed to be a Christian.

Naturally ‘Christendom’ has been challenged by non-Christians, whether in fourth-century Rome or in modern Europe. But it has also been a subject of intense debate between Christians. At most points of Christian history there have been those who have opposed the identity between church and society or over-close links between church and state, or between the church and social elites. From the fourth century onwards there have been Christians who saw these associations as damaging to the church: ‘Christendom’ meant that the church was subjected to state interference, that it was forced to admit into membership those who were not true Christians, and that it was under pressure to condone contemporary customs and values which were unchristian. Since the radical Reformation of the sixteenth century there have always been Christians in western Europe who have insisted, as a matter of principle, that the church should remain independent of the state and that Christians must not use coercion to enforce their beliefs. From the later seventeenth century, religious toleration

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Hugh McLeod*

was being advocated both for pragmatic reasons, and on the grounds of the rights of the individual conscience. With the rise of Liberalism in the nineteenth century the virtues of pluralism, voluntaryism and the free market in ideas began to be argued by many Christians, as well as by religious sceptics. At the same time, members of established churches often remained loyal to the ideal of 'Christendom', even if they accepted that political realities might require some dilution of the ideal. So throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, the relations between church and state and church and society were central political issues, and even today the debate has not ended, though for most people it is no longer of such burning concern.

'Christianity' and 'Christendom' can be separated. There was Christianity for three centuries before Christendom. There are parts of the world, for instance China, where there has never been a Christendom, but where there are many millions of Christians. Christendom is no more than a phase in the history of Christianity, and it represents only one out of many possible relationships between church and society. Yet in western Europe this phase lasted for more than a thousand years, and we are still living in its shadow. There are few people who can contemplate the end of this particular era with detachment. There are some who mourn the decline of Christendom, and some who see it as a cause for celebration, while most, probably, have more mixed emotions. Members of all three groups are to be found among the contributors to this book.

I

In 1999 a substantial majority of west Europeans claimed to be Christians. According to the figures presented by Yves Lambert in this volume, the proportion of the population describing themselves as either Catholic or Protestant was as high as 89 per cent in Ireland, 88 per cent in Denmark and 85 per cent in Portugal. Only in the Netherlands and in the territory of the former East Germany² did the figure fall below 50 per cent, and France was the only other country where it fell below 60 per cent. Relatively impressive as these figures are, they should be compared with the overwhelmingly high levels of nominal Christian affiliation in the early 1960s. Even in East Germany 65 per cent of the population were then Protestant or Catholic, in the Netherlands around 80 per cent. In Britain the figure was 95 per cent, and in Denmark, Switzerland and the Irish Republic it was 99 per cent.³ Up to the 1960s this general recognition of some kind of Christian identity was also reflected in very high rates of participation in the Christian rites of passage, though the popularity of the various rites varied between countries and religious traditions. For instance, the frequency of infant baptism was especially high in Catholic countries, and confirmation was especially widespread in Lutheran countries. Christian funeral

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

rites predominated almost everywhere. In the 1990s the great majority of west Europeans continued to be buried or cremated with Christian rites. But the popularity of the other rites had declined, sometimes quite substantially. In France, for instance, between 1958 and 1990 the proportion of babies receiving Catholic baptism fell from 91 per cent to 51 per cent and the proportion of weddings with a Catholic ceremony fell from 79 per cent to 51 per cent.⁴ This reflected the emergence of a substantial section of the population rejecting any kind of Christian identity, however tenuous, whether because they belonged to another faith or, more often, because they had no religion.

While levels of nominal Christian affiliation and participation in the rites of passage were still very high in 1960, levels of participation in Sunday worship or in communion varied greatly. At one extreme, over 90 per cent of the population were regular church-goers in the Irish Republic, and very high levels of attendance at mass were also found among the rural populations of Brittany, the Basque Country, the Veneto, and other traditionally pious Catholic regions. At the other extreme, weekly attendance fell below 5 per cent in many parts of Scandinavia, as well as in the 'dechristianised' regions of central France. In the 1990s, the highest levels of church-going were still found in Ireland and in some rural regions of Italy and Portugal, but there had been a general levelling down. Quite large drops have been seen in some areas previously known for their piety, whereas there has been a more modest decline in other areas where attendance was already low.⁵

The signs were that belief in various Christian tenets and doctrines declined between the 1960s and the 1990s, though there is insufficient evidence to say whether the figures for the 1960s represent a decline from a higher level at some earlier point.⁶ Admittedly, questionnaires may be too blunt a tool to elucidate some of the complexities and ambiguities of individual belief. For instance, while about two-thirds of west Europeans will say when asked that they believe in God, this does not tell us very much, as conceptions of God vary so greatly. This is even more true of beliefs concerning the after-life, where the findings of surveys often appear to be contradictory. For instance, in a number of countries the proportion of respondents claiming to believe in heaven exceeds the proportion claiming to believe in a life after death.⁷

The area of most evident conflict between established Christian teaching and contemporary practice is that of sexual ethics. Before the 1960s there had often been a wide divergence between the generally recognised rules of sexual morality and what people actually did. But the rules were those laid down by the churches. The 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s opened up all aspects of sex for discussion and debate, and for explicit description in books and films, leading to widespread rejection of the churches' teaching that sex was only morally right within heterosexual marriage. The 1960s and 1970s also mark a turning-point in the relationship between Christianity and the laws relating to sex, marriage and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Hugh McLeod*

the family. Britain set the trend with the liberalisation of the laws on obscenity (1959), abortion (1967) and divorce (1969), legalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults (1967), abolition of theatre censorship (1968), and provision of contraceptives to unmarried couples through the National Health Service (1967). In Britain, Christian opinion on all of these issues was divided. While many of the leaders in the movements for change were themselves secularists, there was also a significant degree of support for these reforms from within the churches. So the forces for change were varied, including growing secularist influence, changes in Christian opinion, and also a realisation that in an increasingly pluralistic society some compromise was needed between the various and conflicting moral standards that were current. Thus the extension of the legally permitted grounds for abortion was opposed by Roman Catholics and by many evangelical Christians, committed to the 'right to life'. But it fell a long way short of granting the 'abortion on demand' for which feminists were campaigning. It was supported by many Christians on the pragmatic grounds that legal abortion was at least preferable to the widely prevalent 'backstreet' abortions. The legalisation of divorce in Italy and Ireland, and of abortion in France, Belgium and Italy, marked more unequivocally a defeat for the church in those countries.⁸

One may ask, therefore, what is left of Christendom in western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁹ A considerable proportion of west European countries retain links of one kind or another between church and state. In Germany and Scandinavia there is the church tax system, which has placed the churches in those countries in a uniquely favourable financial position. In Belgium the state pays the salaries of the clergy. In England twenty-six Anglican bishops have seats in the House of Lords. In Italy the church–state treaty of 1984 contained very favourable terms for the Catholic Church. Maybe there are four other areas in which the remains of Christendom are still visible. First there are the rites of passage. Even in those countries where marriage in church and the baptism of infants have seen a major decline, they remain quite widespread, and are asked for by many couples who seldom go to church at other times. In other countries participation in these rites remains the general practice. And in nearly all countries Christian funerals are heavily predominant – whether or not, as Callum Brown suggests, this is beginning to change. Second there is education. In some countries, such as England and the Netherlands, there are considerable numbers of church schools. In most countries (France being the major exception) religious education is provided in state schools. Though this education may no longer be exclusively Christian, and though there may be an increasing emphasis on 'balance', it inevitably includes a major element of teaching on Christianity, often by teachers who are trained in theology. In some countries, including Germany and Italy, this teaching has a strongly confessional character. A third area is that of welfare and charity.

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0521814936 - The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

In Germany, a major part of the public welfare system is church-based. In every country a large proportion of private charities have religious origins, and religious motivation continues to be important for many of those working for them. A fourth area is the role of 'public conscience' which churches may still perform even in apparently very secular societies. This is perhaps most evident in totalitarian societies, such as East Germany where the Protestant churches were among the very few bodies enjoying some limited degree of independence and where they accordingly became a major forum for the expression of dissent and played an important part in the protest movements culminating in the fall of the Communist regime in 1989–90.¹⁰ But even in democratic and pluralist societies the churches may have a unique role, because of their ability to mount a moral, rather than purely political, critique of government. For instance in the 1980s the British churches mounted a sustained attack on the policies of Margaret Thatcher's administration, to which Thatcher herself felt obliged to respond, and in France the Catholic Church has played an important part in speaking up for the rights of immigrants and combating racism.¹¹

II

The decline of Christendom has been a very long drawn out process, and the historian can distinguish between several distinct stages. First, there was the toleration by the state of a variety of forms of Christianity. Second, there was the open publication of anti-Christian ideas. Third was the separation of church and state. The fourth and the most complex phase has been the gradual loosening of the ties between church and society.

To begin with the rise of toleration:¹² in the wake of the Reformation, the principle was generally adopted that all subjects should follow the religion of their king, whether Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed or Anglican. But even in the sixteenth century there were some states where the application of this principle was not practicable. Several German cities, most notably Augsburg, adopted the principle of 'parity', whereby Catholics and Lutherans enjoyed equal rights. In Poland, the nobility, whose members acted as patrons to a variety of religious communities, agreed in 1573 to a regime of toleration, and this was accepted by successive monarchs.¹³ During the French Wars of Religion in the second half of the sixteenth century, a *politique* party emerged which saw attempts to impose religious orthodoxy as a threat to the peace of the kingdom, and so tried to achieve a *modus vivendi* between Catholics and Calvinists. The wars ended with a Catholic victory, but the Edict of Nantes (1598) allowed partial toleration for the Protestants. During the seventeenth century, Catholicism became increasingly dominant in France and Poland. In France, especially, the rights of the Protestant minority were gradually whittled away, and then abolished entirely by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

Cambridge University Press

0521814936 - The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000

Edited by Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Hugh McLeod*

in 1685. But in various other parts of Europe the seventeenth century saw growing toleration, whether *de facto*, as in the Dutch Republic, or supported by law, as in Prussia (1685) or England and Wales (1689). Scotland followed in 1712. The reasons for this were mainly pragmatic. In Prussia, economic considerations were paramount. In the Dutch Republic, as it emerged from the long war against Spain, only the Reformed Church had the status of a 'public church', but with nearly half the population belonging to other religious communities, the imposition of uniformity would have been impossible. In England the chaotic conditions of civil war in the 1640s and 1650s had led to a huge growth in religious diversity, and subsequent attempts to restore religious unity were a failure. The kind of toleration that European states were prepared to allow in the seventeenth century remained limited. For instance both England and Prussia extended toleration only to certain specified groups, rather than laying down a general principle. And in England, as in the Dutch Republic, religious minorities continued to suffer political disabilities.

However, more radical experiments in toleration were taking place in some of the British colonies in North America. The Baptist founders of Rhode Island and the Quaker founders of Pennsylvania introduced freedom of religion as a matter of principle, and the Catholic founders of Maryland were required by the British crown to allow equal rights to Protestants. In the later seventeenth century important steps were also being taken in the intellectual case for toleration, notably in John Locke's *Letter on Toleration*. The eighteenth century saw the gradual emergence in most parts of Europe of a public opinion which favoured toleration as a matter of principle, though changes in the law were delayed until the 1770s and 1780s. In England and Ireland (1778) first steps were taken towards the abolition of the anti-Catholic Penal Laws. Toleration laws were also enacted in Catholic Austria and France (1781 and 1787) and Lutheran Hamburg (1785).

In a few west European countries, only one form of Christianity was legally recognised until the middle or later years of the nineteenth century. For instance, laws on religious freedom were enacted in Denmark in 1848, in Sweden in 1860 and in Spain in 1869. More generally, however, even those states which had long allowed religious minorities freedom of worship were often slow to grant them full civic equality. The process by which Christian minorities, Jews and unbelievers gained civic equality belongs to a later stage in the history of the dissolution of Christendom.¹⁴

Those countries, England and the Dutch Republic, where Christian minorities first gained the right to worship were also those where the open avowal of religious scepticism first became possible. In England, the abolition of censorship in 1694 was followed by the publication of a number of books advocating Deism. Deists believed in a creator God, knowledge of whom could be achieved by observation of nature and the use of reason, but they rejected all

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

revealed religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the early eighteenth century, Deism was fashionable in England. In countries like France, where a stringent censorship continued at least until the 1740s, books attacking orthodox Christianity were smuggled in from the Dutch Republic, and there was also a growing underground literature. Indeed it was in France, the former stronghold of Catholic orthodoxy, that religious scepticism began to take a more radical turn. The first widely influential advocate of atheism in France was a country priest, Jean Meslier, who died in 1729, leaving a *Testament* which anticipated most of what would become the standard atheist arguments, and which enjoyed a cult status among religiously sceptical French intellectuals.¹⁵

By the second half of the eighteenth century, Deism had become one of the standard religious options for men of the aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie; and atheism, though more daring, and indeed repugnant to many Deists as well as to devout Christians, was a recognised possibility. During this period there is considerable statistical evidence from France and Germany of a decline in various forms of religious observance, especially in the towns and among members of the middle class. For instance, in the first half of the eighteenth century it had been common for German Protestants, both in town and country, to receive communion three times in the year. But by the early nineteenth century this was rare, and there were many who did not go to communion at all. In the towns the fastest decline took place between 1750 and 1800. During that period the ratio of communions to Protestant population fell from 115 per cent to 20 per cent in Hanover, from 150 per cent to 40 per cent in Berlin, and from 100 per cent to 45 per cent in Hamburg.¹⁶ In France, where religious statistics have been studied far more intensively than anywhere else, all the figures seem to have moved in a downward direction around 1750: recruitment to the priesthood and to religious orders, both male and female, was declining; religious books were declining as a proportion both of all books published and of those found in private libraries; the church's teachings on sex were being less widely obeyed; and fewer people wanted masses to be said for their souls after their death. Ralph Gibson, after summarising the French evidence, concludes: 'Each element taken separately is subject to major problems of interpretation, but taken together they form an impressive body of evidence. In nearly every case the middle of the eighteenth century seems to be a turning-point.'¹⁷

A turning to what, though? The most popular answer is that we are witnessing a process of 'secularisation' and 'dechristianisation'. This was the conclusion reached by Michel Vovelle in his pioneering study of wills in southern France, where he used this evidence to argue that major changes were taking place in attitudes to death.¹⁸ Similar ideas have been presented by other historians, who have detected in roughly the same period the emergence of new forms of political, social and scientific thought independent of any religious reference. The best-known example would be the Utilitarianism of Beccaria and Bentham, which

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0521814936 - The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Hugh McLeod*

aimed to devise a science of law and morals based on the principle of ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. Attitudes to deviant behaviour were also changing under the impact of new scientific concepts: Michael MacDonald, in another statistical study, has identified a ‘Secularization of Suicide’ in England between 1660 and 1800, reflected in the increasing tendency of coroners’ juries to decide that those who had killed themselves were suffering from mental illness, rather than acting at the instigation of the devil, as had been previously assumed.¹⁹ On the other hand, as Thomas Kselman argues in this volume, it is equally possible to see these developments as examples of religious change rather than religious decline. By the 1770s the French clergy themselves were bequeathing less money for requiem masses; as Gibson suggests, the most likely explanation is not a massive loss of faith, but that ‘the “baroque” attitude to death that expressed itself in rich ceremony was under attack from eighteenth-century taste, which preferred less extravagant treatment of death’.²⁰ Lucian Hölscher goes much further down this road, arguing that the eighteenth century brought not a decline of Christianity, but a reinterpretation – and one that was entirely beneficial. He claims that ‘the period saw an heroic breakthrough in the development of modern piety’. He mentions, for instance, the shift towards a more personal piety, dependent on individual commitment rather than legal compulsion; the increasing association between Christianity and schemes of social amelioration; and a more tolerant mentality, reflected in better relations between the Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic confessions.²¹

In so far as Christendom depended on conformism and a degree of coercion, these developments were undermining Christendom, without necessarily undermining Christianity. In so far as they made it possible to think about various aspects of the world and various areas of life without having to presuppose the existence of supernatural powers, they potentially prepared the way for a more secular society, but they did not necessarily lead in that direction. In fact, as I shall suggest later, the nineteenth century was, from many points of view, a time of increased religious fervour, and one in which the social significance of the churches grew.

The eighteenth century ended with further important steps in the direction of the decline of Christendom. In 1791 the Separation of church and state was written into the Constitution of the United States, and laws of Separation were also enacted in France in 1795 and the Netherlands in 1796. However, in France church and state were reunited as early as 1801 – though in a novel form, since Protestants and Jews as well as Catholics were supported by and subjected to a measure of control by the state.²² The defeat of Napoleon in 1815 meant that the alliance of throne, altar and château was in power again across most of Europe. But Separation returned to the political agenda in the second half of the nineteenth century, when it became a normal part of Radical and later Socialist programmes. It was enacted in Ireland in 1869, in France in 1905, in Geneva

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

in 1907, in Germany in 1919, in Wales in 1920 and in Spain in 1931. In Sweden this happened as recently as 2000, and in several countries, including Belgium, Denmark, England and several Swiss cantons, no formal Separation has taken place. The question of the formal relationship between church and state has often had great symbolic significance. Secularists and members of religious minorities have seen the Separation as an act of cleansing, while members of established churches have often been passionately committed to retaining a formal connection with the state. But the practical significance of such laws, and the circumstances in which they have been enacted, have varied greatly. In France and Spain, for instance, the proponents of Separation were mainly militant anti-clericals who hoped by crippling the Catholic Church to weaken the forces of political conservatism.²³ In Germany on the other hand, most of the powers and privileges of the Protestant and Catholic Churches were left intact.²⁴ In general the formal relationship between church and state has been less significant than the role given to the churches or to religion in the schools, in the welfare system or in other public institutions. In France in the 1880s, church and state were formally united, but the government imposed a sweeping secularisation of the education system; on the other hand, in Ireland in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, where church and state were formally separated, the Catholic Church was allowed a dominant position in education and welfare, and when bishops intervened in politics, politicians felt obliged to take notice.²⁵

In questions to do with church and state and the role of religion in public institutions, there is no single European pattern, but there have been wide differences from country to country. In a few cases the Separation of church and state has taken a violent form, with the state changing from protector to persecutor. The prototype here was the French revolutionary 'dechristianisation' of 1793–4. One could also mention the killing of thousands of Catholic priests and nuns by the Spanish republicans during the Civil War of 1936–9, and the less violent, but more sustained and comprehensive attack on Christianity in East Germany between 1949 and 1989. But forcible dechristianisation has been the exception in western Europe. Overall the trend has been a gradual movement away from 'Christendom' towards a society whose institutions and laws reflect a pluralism in which a wide variety of religious groups, as well as other people with a more secular orientation, each have their place. Other trends have been for the state to take over functions formerly performed by the church, and for trained professionals to take over roles that once belonged to priests, nuns, or others impelled by a sense of religious vocation. But these changes have often been slow, and are by no means completed even at the present day.²⁶

Questions concerning the role of the church and of religious teaching in the education system were at the centre of political debate in the second half of the nineteenth century, and remained so throughout the twentieth. Although the state assumed control of education in Prussia as early as 1794, and in most

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0521814936 - The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000

Edited by Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Hugh McLeod*

other countries during the nineteenth century, this seldom meant that schooling was in any real sense secularised. Religious teaching was generally provided in state schools; in many countries there were also church schools, partly or wholly funded by the state; and the state in many cases funded Theology faculties in the universities. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were large numbers of teachers who were clergymen or nuns. A striking example of the latter phenomenon was the English ‘public schools’ where most of the rulers of the British Empire were educated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which even today educate a large proportion of those who go on to leading positions in industry, commerce and the professions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the overwhelming majority of these schools were headed by an Anglican clergymen, and still today they have a full-time chaplain and pupils are required to attend regular services in the school chapel.

The classic attempt at introducing an entirely secular system of state education was made by the French in the 1880s. Not only was religious teaching stopped and priests excluded from teaching in state schools, but Catholic schools were refused any form of state funding. Moreover, teaching on ethics and citizenship was introduced to take the place of religion, and many of the teachers were convinced freethinkers. The remarkable point is how few imitators the French system has found. In so far as there has been a ‘decline of Christendom’ within the education system, it has generally happened in more subtle ways. One obvious change has been the recent switch from a religious education designed to strengthen Christian identity and to train future church-members to one intended to provide information about religion and to enable students to make an informed choice as to the kind of religion they might choose to adopt.²⁷ Here the pioneer seems to have been Sweden, where the change to a more ‘objective’ religious education reflected the frequent suspicion of the Lutheran Church among members of the dominant Social Democratic party. More recently the pressure for change has come mainly as a result of the large-scale immigration into western Europe in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from Turkey and from former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. One can also argue that even where the state provides for, or even requires, religious teaching in the schools, the subject is often given a low priority. But there is no unilinear trend. For instance, in England and Wales religious education assumed a higher profile during World War II. It was the 1944 Education Act that for the first time made religious education compulsory and also decreed that the school day should begin with a collective act of worship.

The state has also generally continued to fund chaplaincies in the armed forces and in such institutions as hospitals and prisons. Here again, the main change has been that since the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to the longstanding presence of small numbers of Jewish rabbis, there has also been a growing