

The End of Christendom

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We are not in Kansas anymore Toto.

Christendom is the combination of two words: Christ and *dominion* (which can be defined as rule, governance or establishment). Christianity existed before Christendom. It was not always linked to governing powers or to the establishment. During the first three centuries of Christianity, the church had a tense relationship with the societies that surrounded it and the ruling powers of the Roman world. Sometimes Christians were persecuted, sometimes they were ignored, but one thing was clear: in those first three centuries, the early church of Christians was not in the driver's seat. That changed in the early fourth century, when Rome's Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and declared the Christian faith to be the official religion of the Roman Empire at which time it became the Holy Roman Empire, reflecting a unity between Church and the Empire.

A subsequent emperor, Charlemagne divided the Holy Roman Empire (what became known as Europe) into geographical regions known as parishes, each with a parish church and a parish priest. All citizens who were within earshot of the church bells of the parish church were considered members of the church because they lived within the area of the parish. The task of the church priest was to see to the religious needs of the people in the parish. The role of the people in their relationship to the church was to support their parish church, their parish priest, and the hierarchy of the church, which was connected to the hierarchy of the Empire.

Mission, instead of being about making disciples and forming new communities of faith as described in the book of Acts, was about territorial expansion: conquering new lands and people and making them "Christian" for Christ the King. Some of the key changes from the early church that Christendom made was: Instead of focusing on congregations, the Christianity of Christendom became a territorial reality. Residents had their local church in much the same way that they had their local market. It was an established social institution with the assigned task of taking care of the religious part of life.

The effects of Christendom can be summed up as: 1. Rather than through conversion, a person was a Christian by virtue of citizenship, birth and residence, i.e. the Christian faith was a social given, rather than a choice or conscious commitment. 2. Christianity no longer found its primary embodiment in congregations, but in territories and nations. 3. "Mission" was understood to be something done by specially designated "missionaries", rather than a characteristic of each congregation. 4. The ministry of the church increasingly was performed by and belonged to religious professionals, whose role was in many ways comparable to that of civil servants or government officials. 5. Society and faith overlapped to such an extent that being a good Christian and being a good citizen were equivalent, and each defined the other.

Christendom wasn't bad or wrong, but it was a significant departure from both the New

Testament and the church of the first three centuries after Christ. Christendom was in many ways an incredible achievement. It built colleges and universities, founded hospitals and welfare institutions, shaped the arts, and influenced the government.

So what happened? It was a gradual change. In 1789, the adoption of the Bill of Rights legally forbid the federal government in the United States from supporting a single national church, which was the practice in much of Europe. Secondly, in the early twentieth century America was perceived primarily as a Protestant establishment, but this changed to include the broader participation of Jews and Roman Catholics, hence a Judeo-Christian identity emerged and replaced the Protestant establishment. Finally, a third disestablishment has been underway since the 1960's when all organized belief was dislodged and replaced instead by the authority of the autonomous individual. This change can be seen in two bumper stickers: "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it" and "Question authority". Another word for this process is "secularization". Today the United States is an officially secular society. This varies somewhat depending on the region of the nation where you live with some regions being more secular than others. Other factors that contributed to the death of Christendom were the immigration of people whose religious faiths and cultural backgrounds are not Judeo-Christian. Today in some areas Muslims outnumber Presbyterians and there are more Buddhist than Methodists. These are facts that would have astonished most of our grandparents.

This movement toward becoming a religiously pluralistic society has been furthered, not only by immigration to the United States, but also by a new menu of homegrown religious and spiritual options. These new forms range from organized institutions, such as Centers for Spiritual life, Unity Churches, Transcendental Meditation Centers, etc. The explosion of spirituality and spiritual seeking reflects the shift from external norms and their institutional embodiments to authority located in individuals and their choices, resulting in a religiously pluralistic society that has many religious and spiritual options on the menu.

In summary, the key factors leading up to the end of Christendom have been: 1. The gradual disestablishment of Protestant Christianity and the emergence of a secular society; 2. The growth in North America of other religions and the emergence of a religiously and culturally pluralistic society; and 3. The infusion of a consumer ethos - and with it, choice - into the area of religion and spirituality, resulting in the emergence of a large and ever-changing menu of spiritual choices. In short, we are not in Kansas anymore!

Years ago, it was not uncommon to ask someone, "What church do you belong to?" It would have been as ordinary a conversation as, "What school do your kids attend?" In Seattle only 13 percent of the population attend a church, temple, or synagogue in a given week. Today if you ask, "What church do you go to?", you would risk misunderstanding, peculiar looks and even suspicion.

Today the purpose of the church has shifted. During Christendom, the purpose of the church included: 1. Being the conscience of the community; 2. Serving as the instrument of aid to the

less fortunate; and 3. Being the center of family and community life. All of these made sense in their time, and they all persist in some ways, but none of them are fully adequate depictions of the purpose of the church in this new time. Today, the purpose of the church is closer to the pre-Constantinian era: the church exists to change lives. We are in the business of teaching and living a particular way of life. The church's purpose is to be and to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world. There is no one way to be a disciple, or follower, of Jesus. We do not have a predetermined outcome or mold, but we do have a direction and a purpose. Churches exist to grow people of faith.

In this post Christendom church, the minister/priest/pastor is no longer the primary or exclusive God-person or God-channel, nor is he or she the chaplain who provides all religious meaning and services to a congregations' members and to the wider community. Every baptized Christian is a God-person or God-channel.

One may ask "So What?" Well, the "so what" is huge. To sum up, let me list the key "so what's". 1. A new and renewed emphasis on life change, transformation, or conversion, as well as ongoing Christian formation. 2. A change in the primary purpose of the church. 3. A shift of mission from "over there" to "right here". 4. No longer thinking of the church as "for us" and mission as "for others," but understanding the church itself as a missional body for the sake of the world that God created and loves. 5. A shift away from over-reliance on professionally trained and ordained clergy as the locus of ministry and channel of grace.

"What, then, shall we do?" asked those who heard Peter on the day of Pentecost. It all began with Peter reframing their experience, giving them new interpretive lenses. (See Acts 2) As Peter enumerated what God had been up to in their history and in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, he was saying, "This is what's really going on!" In the Acts story of the early church, the real issue is not moral failure, but ignorance. In some respects, we in the mainline churches have also been ignorant of, or at least not fully cognizant of, the big picture of what has happened in our culture and Christianity.

A paradigm shift is occurring and there is not a "silver bullet" that will fix it. Real change will demand an adventurous spirit. In order to take action, congregations and their leaders need to first get a handle on what's going on. We need to define reality correctly and as accurately as possible. Moreover, we need to help one another understand not only how it is, but that it is not about us in the sense of blame or failure. It is crucial to understand Christendom and its implications and how it is no longer the sea we swim in. This is a new reality. Where do we go from here?

This article is excerpts from the first chapter of Anthony Robinson's book *Changing the Conversation - a third way for congregations*. The book is a good read for those seeking to understand the religious landscape in our post Christendom world and how mainline churches can better discern a future.

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