

Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, eds.
The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000.

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A collection of articles stemming from a 1997 conference of the History Group of the Missiology of Western Culture Project, this volume explores aspects of the historical decline in Western Europe, not so much of Christian identity, belief, and practice, as of Christendom, the notion and effective reality of a society characterized by Christian institutions, world view, and self-conceptions. The idea of secularization therefore significantly informs the book, but in insisting on the distinction between Christian religion and Christendom, the authors wish to enter into a critical dialogue with that term rather than looking at the matter as a simple alternative of religious decline or vitality. As has been the case with previous attempts to get beyond the secularization thesis, the outcome of this one is also somewhat ambiguous, but the different studies nonetheless offer considerable insight into the complexity of the issue, into the reasons that the thesis is both empirically obvious – at least in Western Europe – and theoretically unsatisfying.

After Hugh McLeod's introductory essay on the factors involved in the decline of Western European Christendom and the history of scholarship on the issue, the book consists of four parts offering respectively analyses of the current situation, narratives of the decline in different countries, examination of decline in terms of key themes once imbued with Christian understandings (death, technology, and language), and overview reflections.

There is a sense in which two chapters set the tone, bracketing the collection at the beginning and near the end. Callum Brown throws down the gauntlet, as it were, in the opening essay, arguing as he has done elsewhere that the 1960s marked the beginning of "real" secularization, the "permanent decline" of religion in the form of the churches and "pervasive Christian culture" (29). Where previous secularizing trends were halting, uneven, and incomplete, this latest episode marks the definitive end of Christendom in Western Europe. Somewhat in contrast but also oddly resonant, in the second last piece, Jeffrey Cox adopts an equally categorical tone to argue that the pervasiveness of the secularization thesis in modern scholarship on religion owes less to its empirical persuasiveness and theoretical clarity than to the fact that no alternative "grand narrative" has been worked out to challenge it. He is convinced that the elements of an as yet inchoate alternative are beginning to form but, as if to underscore his argument, he does not give it a name lest it appear to be just another way of saying "not secularization".

Although the other contributions to the volume are certainly more than mere responses to these two, the latter do have the effect of contextualizing them. Thus Eva Hamberg and Yves Lambert, in different ways, suggest that there may be countervailing possibilities or trends to post-1960s secularization. Hamberg argues, in religious market theory fashion, that pluralism and competition may lead to a certain religious revitalization; and Lambert uses recent survey data to suggest that European Christianity has taken a non-otherworldly, "ultra-modern" shape that includes as a significant characteristic a highly individualistic and diffused spirituality. Neither, however, denies Brown's

basic contention. Their arguments are possible important qualifiers; they do not constitute a substantially different interpretation.

Four essays supply necessary historical perspectives on the central question. David Hempton makes the intriguing argument that the Church of England's success in spreading religious knowledge to a broad population during the 18th century prepared the ground for the rise of dissenting movements, who took advantage of this knowledge base to help create a much greater religious plurality and a 19th century English culture imbued with Christian orientation and understandings. Yet the passage from communal to associational religious form eventually resulted in the decline of religious knowledge as no organization had the power and motivation to maintain it, resulting in sharp religious decline during the later 20th century. In somewhat similar fashion, Peter van Rooden traces the historical passage in the Netherlands from the dominance of a Protestant public church in the 17th and 18th centuries, to the eventual construction of the pillarized society of the later 19th and 20th century, to the highly secularized country of today. Here as well, a very long period of dominance by one Protestant branch but with toleration of other forms of Christianity led to the emergence of a sort of pluralistic Christendom which then more or less collapsed over the past half century. While the Irish situation described by Sheridan Gilley is in many ways quite different, not least because one is dealing by contrast with a strongly Roman Catholic country, here again a similar pattern of the rise of a 19th and 20th century Christendom repeats itself. Yet in this case, the melding of "devotional" and "nationalist" revolution produced a very non-pluralistic version which, however, according to the author, has eventuated in a gradual secularization process since the 1960s. The last of these four chapters, by Martin Greschat focusses on the 1947 German Protestant *Darmstädter Wort*, a church document that criticized what it saw as "Christendom" in the form of a too close identification of German Protestantism with the established order of the Nazi and pre-war eras. In the context of this book, however, Greschat's cogent essay is somewhat jarring. The framework here is more the "two cities" theology of Augustine and Karl Barth than the idea of secularization. One gets the impression of an internal debate among churchmen, albeit with the post-war political prominence of the Christian Democrats in the background. Situated among essays in which the *decline* of Christendom is almost a given, this German debate almost begs the question of whether anyone outside the circle was even listening.

A key aspect of the idea of Christendom is that religious understandings pervade all aspects of social life. Its decline would therefore include the elimination of this pervasiveness. Three essays undertake this task. Thomas Kselman documents the dechristianization of death in France, tracing the passage of the dead after the 1789 revolution from the central churchyard to the quiet and largely secular suburban cemetery. Michel Lagrée balances the picture somewhat by showing that, despite negative responses on the part of some religious leaders, technological advances in 19th and 20th century France were eventually positively appropriated by the Catholic church, from the use of electric lighting in the churches to papal resort to electronic media for communication with the faithful. Technology and Christendom were not inversely related. Finally, Lucian Hölscher examines shifts in the meaning of words related to religion, showing that such recent transformations in the understanding of concepts like "religion", "atheism", "religiosity", and "confession" can be seen to document pluralization, compartmentalization, and privatization of religion in the Western European sphere.

Werner Ustorf's "missiological postscript" rounds out the collection through a consideration of how the modern Western European Christian experience has been a very particular appropriation of Christian religion, not to be seen as in any sense normative for other parts of today's Christian world. The implication is that "decline of Christendom" is a descriptive term for the peculiar Western European religious situation of the past two centuries, not a teleological projection as hard versions of the secularization thesis would have it. In the process, Ustorf points to the true value of this book. It is a volume that puts meat on the skeleton of contemporary debates about religion and secularization, concretizing them, situating them, and underscoring the need to avoid simplistic reversals – if secularization is inadequate, its opposite must be true – when confronted with the insufficiency of our understandings.

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