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Evangelical Theology and the Future: Some Modest Proposals for the Agenda

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The viability of evangelical theology rests with its willingness to venture into the future rather than to reside in the present and take comfort from the past.

Ray S. Anderson¹

At the beginning of this third millennium, Peter Brierley published an analysis of his own 'English Church Attendance Survey' with the gloomy title, *The Tide is Running Out*. His conclusions were sobering: the level of attendance at Sunday worship had continued a steep decline throughout the 1990s and the alienation of young people from the churches was occurring at ever lower age-levels. Reviewing his own statistics, Brierley likened the phenomenon to which they pointed to 'a haemorrhage akin to a burst artery' and he noted that the country was full of people 'who used to go to church but no longer do'². A year later another book appeared from a very different source bearing the title *The Death of Christian Britain*. The author, social historian Callum Brown, found that during the second half of the twentieth century the British people had abandoned the churches in 'unprecedented numbers' with the result that the 'cycle of inter-generational renewal of Christian affiliation' had been 'permanently disrupted' and 'a formerly religious people have entirely forsaken organised Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition'³.

Doubtless there are legitimate questions to be asked concerning the methodologies and conclusions of both of these researchers, but I will here assume the essential correctness of their findings and treat them as witnesses to a massive change occurring in British culture. Callum Brown's work is especially important since, while he recognises the enormous influence of the Evangelical movement on British culture throughout the modern era, he concludes that 'Christianity is becoming Britain's past, not its present'⁴. Assuming that these findings reflect contemporary religious and social reality, what implications do they have for Christianity in general and for Evangelical theology in particular?

Surprisingly, such questions often go unasked as Evangelicals continue to feed on the diminishing capital of their glorious past. When compared to the

era of the great revivals and the golden age of what has (rightly) been called 'the Evangelical century', it is easy to understand why contemporary Christians might avert their gaze from the dismal scene described above and slip into a state of *denial* in relation to what is clearly a great loss. However, the negative consequences of such evasion are serious, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon suggest: 'Like an aging dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and peniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continue to think and act as if we were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid'⁵. These writers are, of course, describing the North American context, a fact which suggests that the problem under discussion here extends beyond the British Isles and can be described as the crisis of *Western Christianity*. The inauguration of an American president with a clear 'moral agenda' is unlikely to avert this crisis even though newspaper headlines declare 'Bush Embraces Evangelical agenda'⁶. The danger is that such announcements may serve only to entrench the 'aging dowager' in her delusion that nothing has really changed in the world and she and her children may yet recover control of the city.

New Frontiers for Christian Theology

My thesis is that we are passing through a change of such magnitude that it can be viewed like a bookend marking a fundamental transition point in Christian history. The opposite end of this era was marked by a comparable process of historical change located in the fourth

century⁷. At that time Christianity accepted the immense task of providing a religious and moral foundation for European culture and so began a process through which it became the established religion of the peoples of the Western world. The precise nature and the consequences of this change have been debated endlessly, but what is surely beyond dispute is the fact that it transformed the self-understanding of the Church and set a new agenda for Christian theology in which internal, pastoral concerns related to the building and defence of a 'Christian culture' inevitably eclipsed the missiological priorities of the pre-Constantinian churches. The construction of Christendom thus led to a form of the Church which brooked no rivals within its European heartland and, since it remained for centuries confined within that geographical region, provided the *normative* shape of Christian identity in the world. When put in these terms, one begins to grasp the enormity of the change involved in the ending of this phase and it is not surprising that Christians living through such a transition should experience considerable spiritual and psychological turmoil. Indeed, Alan Roxburgh has drawn an interesting and suggestive parallel between the struggle in which modern Christians are engaged as they seek to move beyond the familiar form of the church, and the sense of alienation and rootlessness which anthropologists have categorised as 'the experience of *liminality*' in rites of passage practiced in traditional societies⁸.

How then does this situation relate to the future tasks of Evangelical theology? If the analogy being drawn here between the paradigm shift that occurred in the

fourth century and the changes facing us now is a valid one, then it becomes clear that we need nothing less than a revolutionary change in theology. This is the conclusion of Andrew Kirk who argues that Western theology has been constructed on intellectual foundations that are no longer credible and is, therefore, 'palpably inadequate to the task that faces the Christian community worldwide at this time'⁹. What is crucial in this context, I suggest, is that we move beyond viewing our place in history in terms of *decline* and *loss*, and see it in biblical-theological perspective as a divinely-given *opportunity* for the redefining of Christian identity and purpose in the world. As long ago as 1949, Herbert Butterfield pointed out that, for the first time in fifteen centuries, it was becoming possible to say that people were Christians not because of political compulsion or social conformity, but by choice and conviction. This fact, he said, 'makes the present day the most important and the most exhilarating period in the history of Christianity for fifteen hundred years'. With the disintegration of the *Corpus Christianum*, Western Christians were realising that they were 'back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity...'¹⁰.

Truth is Stranger Than it Used To Be

The crisis confronting Western Christianity is, however, only one side of the coin. The other side is the emergence of what has come to be known as 'World Christianity'. Consider the case of China: in the middle decades of the twentieth century academic research in the West dismissed Christianity as irrelevant to Chinese studies since 'its ineradicable foreign connections' meant

that it 'was doomed slowly to die out in China'¹¹. History has demonstrated such conclusions to be spectacularly wrong and churches in China are now known to have grown tenfold since 1949. Daniel Bays, who admits to having once been among the doubters, concedes that the evidence 'shows how thoroughly Christianity has become Chinese, and part of the Chinese social scene'¹². Parallel evidence could be cited from India¹³, Africa¹⁴ and Latin America¹⁵, all pointing to the conclusion that the normative shape of Christianity in the future will not be determined by its interaction with Western culture, but rather will result from its astonishing emergence as a global faith with its heartlands located beyond the historic borders of Christendom.

Whatever this may imply for the precise agenda of Evangelical theology in the future, the primary need is, I suggest, for an adjustment in its fundamental perspectives in relation to this new context. Or, to express it in another way, there is an urgent need for an *epistemological* shift which moves us beyond the modernist worldview within which we have been operating for so long (with considerable success), and takes proper account of the new world within which we are called to mission and witness. Without such a shift, Western Christianity will be in danger of being reduced to functioning as a civil religion justifying a global system of dominance and oppression. The alternative, and it is one full of promise and hope, is the growth of a truly global church in which theologians from around the world become partners in hermeneutics, 'seeking to understand Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit', discussing the problems

they face in their particular contexts, and being frank and honest in challenging each other's cultural biases¹⁶. No one should imagine the way ahead will be easy, nor is it possible to predict what entering such uncharted paths might involve, but those motivated by the biblical faith cannot but be excited at what can already be glimpsed in this new territory.

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- 6 *The Guardian*,. 29 January 2001
- 7 Alan J Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International/Gracewing, 1997) p. 7
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- 11 Daniel H Bays (Ed), *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. vii
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- 13 Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1975)
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- 15 Bernice Martin, 'From Pre- to Postmodernity in Latin America: the Case of Pentecostalism' in *Religion, Modernity*, Paul Helm (ed) 1998
- 16 Paul G Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*, (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999) p. 113

For Further Reading

All of the books cited in this paper are warmly recommended for further reading.

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