



Where in the World Are We? • Douglas John Hall

My two lectures will not be about young people in the church, in any specific way. They will be about the church as a whole—for whose future you, as younger members of this Christian movement, have and will have increasingly great responsibility. If I have any function here, I think, it is simply in passing on to you something of what I think I have learned as a member of an older cohort of Christians about this movement's past, and something of what I hope for its future.

Christianity throughout the Western world today finds itself in a state of unprecedented confusion. It would even appear that the more secure the churches have been in the past, the more confused they are now about their situation, their status within their host cultures, their message, and their mission. Whether we are Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, United Church, Roman Catholics, or members of other denominations that not long ago enjoyed a privileged status in our societies, the sensitive among us feel ourselves to be living today on the cusp not only of change but of an ill-defined crisis of survival. While some denominations are more self-assured than others, we all face losses—losses of material resources, of membership, of social prestige and influence, of confidence and enthusiasm—losses that only the unthinking can ignore. A century ago, when the nineteenth century after Christ was giving way to the twentieth century, the hopes of the churches for a rather glorious future were running very high; the new century, it was said, would be in fact “The Christian Century,” and a journal so named was launched to attest to that happy prospect. Today, while that kind of optimism may be entertained in certain newly prominent religious circles in this

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country and elsewhere, there is among the older, once-most-established denominations of the West a kind of religious “future shock.” We had become so accustomed to “being-here”—a permanent and prominent feature of the cultural landscape, like schools and banks and government offices—and we were so certain of our continuation, with generation after generation filing into the pews of their forebears, that the prospect of diminution and decrease—possibly even of extinction—shocks us profoundly.

Our alarm manifests itself in two ways, neither of which is helpful. One response to our changed status (I suppose it could be called the Chicken Little or Henny-Penny syndrome) rushes about excitedly crying that something terrible is happening and that we must act immediately to stop it. The other response, which in my opinion is a great deal more problematic, is some version of that well-practiced human habit universally referred to as “the ostrich approach” to reality: in the face of any kind of trouble, thrust your head into the sand and believe that the trouble is illusory or will vanish if it is ignored long enough. Sometimes, as I move about in the churches of North America, I fear we are being held captive by these two strange birds, manic chickens on the one hand and repressive ostriches on the other!

Over against the panic of those who cry that the sky is falling and the forced and unconvincing calm of those who believe the storm will blow over, those of us who are seriously searching for a way into the future feel that we must begin with an honest assessment of the Christian past and present. What is wanted is perspective, and the only way of gaining a perspective on what is happening here and now is by reflecting on how we got to the here and the now. Many young people may find history boring; but in the church today historical reflection is the essence of Christian responsibility. How, as a religious faith, did we arrive at this point in our sojourn? What were our expectations? Were they legitimate expectations in the first place, given the beliefs and assumptions with which our movement began? To what extent is our present dilemma the consequence of false hopes or misleading conceptions of our mission? And so on.

These are the kinds of questions that have occupied my thinking for many years now, and they have led me to develop a broad historical generalization that I want to share with you in this lecture. We may call this a historical overview, or simply...

The Big Picture

Christianity in our time, I believe, is passing through one of the two really immense and far-reaching transitions in its two-thousand-year history. To exist in time is, of course, by definition to exist “in transition,” and there have been many highly significant changes in the life of the Christian movement since its inception—including such momentous events as the split or schism between Eastern and Western Christendom, the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the subsequent and ongoing division of the church into countless and often mutually suspicious “churches,” denominations, and sects. But, particularly when we consider the relation between Christianity and the world or social context in which it exists, there seem to me to have been only two truly imposing and far-reaching changes. I call them *metamorphoses*, for they are quite literally changes in the shape or form (*morphe*) of the church.

The first of these two great changes began to occur in the fourth century, as Christians measure time. Ostensibly as a result of his victory over his rivals for the imperial throne in the year 312 (the Battle of the Milvian Bridge), the young emperor Constantine (he was then only twenty-five years old) issued, in the following year, the so-called Edict of Milan. This pronouncement of religious tolerance was particularly important for the Christians, who, prior to it, were an illicit and often persecuted minority, but who now began to be the favored religion of the empire. James Carroll, in his book *Constantine's Sword*, writes of Constantine's apparent “conversion” to Christianity, his mother's faith, thus: “In a way, this is the second-greatest story ever told, at least concerning what we think of as Western civilization. After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Constantine may have been the most implication-laden event in Western history.”¹ For it was the effective beginning of “Christendom,” namely, of that particular form of the Christian religion that consists of a strong alliance of Christianity with political and social power, sometimes amounting to the practical identification of Christianity with the dominant forces of the society in which it finds itself.

By the end of the fourth century, what had begun under Constantine as official recognition of the Christian religion had become, under the Emperor Theodosius the Great, a matter of Christian establishment. Theodosius not only made Christianity (as practiced by the imperial court) mandatory for Roman citizens, but he effectively outlawed all other faiths, calling them in some documents simply “insane.” Thus, within the space of about seven decades (one lifetime), the Christian religion went from being a

countercultural, minority faith—a religion, chiefly, of the lower classes and a few intellectuals—to being the only licit religion of the greatest empire to date.

And after that, as I do not have to tell you, Christianity in its most powerful Western expressions continued to be the religion of empire, one empire after another—the so-called “Holy Roman Empire,” the Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, British, and other European peoples who either were or aspired to be preeminent. And then last, but by no means least, the American Empire, which in many ways is the last bastion of Christendom in the Western world. (I know that Americans are usually loath to regard their republic as an empire, but that is how America is perceived by the rest of the world today, and the way in which the Christian religion is represented by this only remaining superpower must be the concern of every serious Christian—especially those who are themselves Americans.)

This first great metamorphosis in the history of our faith, then, was (as we may phrase it) its adoption by empire—its recognition and promotion by the most influential elements of its host society. The process begun by Constantine resulted in the association of the Christian faith with the richest and most powerful peoples of the planet; in short, the transmutation of Christianity into “Christendom.”

Christendom has never been without its critics. The monastic movement grew in the post-Constantinian centuries partly as a result of the absorption and domestication of Christianity by the majority culture: “If Christianity is now everybody’s religion, officially,” thought many serious Christians, “those of us for whom this faith is something all-embracing and life-changing must find another way of living it.” Or again, at the time of the Reformation, the radical reformers (Anabaptists and others) struggled to avoid the co-opting of the faith by political power, which, rightly or wrongly, they felt was the fate of the mainstream of the Reformation.

So there have always been minorities that protested against the identification of Christian faith with the ways of the dominant culture and the policy-making classes; but something new has taken place during the past half century or so. Apart from Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and a few like-minded souls, it is really only recently that, within Western Christendom itself, significant minorities in all of the mainline Christian traditions have begun to explore in depth what the birth of Christendom in the fourth century and beyond has really entailed.

These minorities (and I would like to be thought one of their number) believe that the alteration in the shape or form of the Church (its *morphe*) that began with the Edict of Milan is to be seen not only at the level of ecclesiastical polity and property and social status but also at the level of Christian theology. We remember that the great decisions of the early church concerning the Trinitarian nature of the godhead and of the dual identity of the Christ (the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon) were taken by the church after its establishment. At very least, the post-Constantinian social status of the Christian faith elicited from its sources and representatives a general tone or mode or complexion quite different from the way in which the early church presented itself and its message to the world. Clearly, the new political and cultural functioning of Christianity after Constantine made it necessary for Christians to emphasize some aspects of their foundational story and to de-emphasize others.

Constantine and his imperial successors throughout the ages have not been fools! They have all known the power of religion to keep their always-fragile empires from falling apart. Christianity, with its strong emphasis on unity under one God (an emphasis that it shares with Islam), can seem an almost natural ally of empire—unless, of course, the prophetic-critical dimension of the biblical tradition, which the Jesus of the synoptics certainly represented, is allowed a hearing. But as the history of Christology in the West easily demonstrates, after the establishment of Christianity, the prophetic office of the Christ, based not only on Jesus' teaching but (even more so) on his suffering at the hands of power, was definitely subdued in favor of his priestly and kingly offices. Triumphant peoples, successful peoples, possessing peoples—empires!—do not want crucified criminals as their chief cultic symbol, especially not when they themselves are the crucifiers...as they regularly are! Empires want eagles and other symbols of power—risen, glorious, heroic figures—ensconced at the right hand of heavenly power to undergird and legitimize the earthly powers-that-be. The crucified Christ has never been a popular symbol for imperial forms of the Christian faith—unless the cross is presented as a kind of necessary prelude to the great triumph of Easter. Historically, Christianity has shown itself very adaptable when it comes to making alliances and working arrangements with powerful societies.

But Christianity paid—and, wherever this applies, still pays—a high price for its covenant with imperial peoples. For the limited and largely superficial power that it is reluctantly granted by its imperial host, the church

pays dearly in credibility. Its working arrangement (*modus vivendi*) with worldly power contradicts—and often contradicts flagrantly—its gospel of the suffering love of a God who has compassion for the weak and vigilance for the victims of power; a God who, as the Liberationists remind us, manifests “a preferential option for the poor.” And this contradiction is by no means hidden from the world. It is especially visible to those who are made to suffer on account of the alliance of the Christian religion with powerful civilizations, races, classes, or genders. For instance, Jewish scholar Leon Wieseltier wrote this illuminating statement in *The New Republic*: against many of his own people who said they found the Christian symbol of “Jesus on the cross” as such “repugnant.” Wieseltier, with greater sensitivity to the prophetic traditions of Israel that is the background of Jesus’ cross, wrote, “No, Jesus on the cross is not a repugnant symbol to me.” But then he added the yet more damning critique, not of the crucified Christ, but of Christendom: while the cross is not repugnant, he said, “the sight of it does not warm my heart either. It is the symbol of a great faith and a great culture *whose affiliation with power almost destroyed my family and my people.*”²

As the Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez reminds us, this first great metamorphosis of the Christian religion (its morphing into Christendom) has by no means spent itself. To this day, the way of a power-seeking, success-oriented, numbers-conscious Christianity has its advocates, its lobbies, and its worldwide missions. In the United States it has become particularly noisy in the past two or three decades. Having captured (almost) the religious communications industry, militant, world-conquering Christianity of the most unabashed variety can seem to many North Americans normative Christianity. If Christendom is in its death throes, as it seems to me to be, it is following the pattern of many dying institutions that, precisely in their decline, make extraordinary efforts to appear alive and vibrant. These efforts may well continue for a century or more.

All the same, the second great change—the second “metamorphosis”—has long since entered the scene of history. It is nothing less than a reversal of the process of Christian establishment begun in the fourth century; that is, it is a process of disestablishment. This effective disestablishment or (as some call it) de-Constantinianization of Christendom has been washing over us in the West, like a great tidal wave, for at least two centuries. Indeed, it may have had its genesis in the breakdown between faith and reason that effectively ended the Christian Middle Ages. Certainly by the eighteenth

century it was conspicuous, and for those who were unable to appreciate the Enlightenment's dismissal of biblical religion, the French Revolution (and in a more subtle sense the American Revolution) made the twilight of Christendom plain to even the nonreflective, at least among perceptive Europeans.

Of course, the great change of which we are speaking is a process: it does not happen quickly, and it has not happened evenly all over the formerly Christendom territories. Even Christianity's establishment, begun with Constantine, required centuries to be brought to fruition, and it was ordered (so to speak) from the top down. So it is not surprising that our disestablishment, which is largely a movement of the grassroots, implies an even longer period. The long process of what has been called the "sidelining" of Christianity may, as I said, require another century or so, but the ax has long been chopping away at the roots of this tree—also for us in North America.

In our case, to be sure, this second great transformation in the shape of the Christian movement is complicated. For in the first place our establishment was never a legal one. In the earlier days of the European settlement of this continent, legal establishment was desired by some in both Canada and the United States—for instance, in my birth-province of Ontario (or Upper Canada, as it was then called), certain influential Anglicans attempted to make their church the established church. But this kind of arrangement was not conducive to the spirit of the new world. Many Christians among our pioneer forebears (including my own) had fled to these shores precisely to escape Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and other forms of European religious establishment. So apart from certain privileges granted to recognized churches (such as nontaxation of ecclesiastical properties), the legal establishment of the Christian religion in the United States and Canada did not take root on this soil.

Instead, what occurred was what has been termed "cultural establishment," that is, the close association of Christianity with the predominant mores, values, and goals of our culture as a whole—our "way of life." That is to say, Christianity has been "established" in the United States and Canada, in a non-legal, informal sense. Traditionally, we have thought ourselves Christian countries, not only because the majority of us were in some way associated with Christian institutions, but because it was felt that our way of organizing ourselves and of conducting our life both privately and publicly was "Christian."

Perhaps ironically, this *de facto* or cultural establishment of Christianity in North America has conspicuously outlasted the legal establishments that still

pertain, to some extent, in several European countries. It seems that legal arrangements—as we note in the case of marriage on this continent today—are more easily undone than informal liaisons, like friendship. At any rate, the close association of Christianity with our way of life has persisted well beyond the breakdown of legal establishments in Britain and the European continent, especially in the United States. Particularly since the end of the Civil War, according to Sydney Mead, whom many regard as the dean of American church historians, Christianity and “Americanism” have been nearly inseparable concepts.

I experienced the entrenched character of this identification of Christianity and American culture in certain U.S. contexts rather dramatically a few years ago. At the end of some lectures on the theology of stewardship that I was giving at a public forum in Idaho, a gentleman rose, obviously irate, and declared that he had never heard such “un-American stuff” in all his life. I said to him, “Sir, as a Canadian, I am unsure how to respond. Can you explain what you mean by ‘un-American’ in this charge?” “Easy,” he quipped, “it just means un-Christian.” American equals Christian; so un-American means un-Christian.

I do not have to tell you that this kind of equation of Christianity and America is one that is still being exploited by powerful segments of the population of this country. And by comparison with both European and Canadian statistics, Christianity in the United States is indeed still very popular. But this does not alter the fact that the second great metamorphosis—the disestablishment of Christianity in the Western world—has been occurring also in the United States. As I hinted earlier, it is particularly visible in those denominations that, prior to about 1950, were clearly the most “established”—culturally established—forms of the church in this country. All these once-dominant denominations have been touched by the general “humiliation” of Christendom, as the Dutch theologian Albert van den Heuvel has called this process. All—some more than others—suffer losses in membership and church attendance, in finances, and above all in influence in high places or even popular respect. Nearly all are plagued by big or little scandals, by divisions over hotly debated moral questions, or by a great uncertainty about the role and mission of the church in a world that is not only secular but, increasingly, militantly multicultural and religiously pluralistic.

Today, since these older, once-clearly-established denominations no longer represent the religious majority, or at least the most vociferous form of Christianity, they are not often called upon to perform the priestly offices of

the state. When The Interchurch Center—the so-called “God-Box” on Riverside Drive in New York City—was opened in the early 1960s, the president of the United States himself came to do the honors. When, after September 11, 2001, Washington needed a preacher for its highly and even militantly Christianized memorial service, it did not knock at the door of the old, once-established denominations to find a preacher. Ironically, the biblicist and fundamentalist groupings that constitute “the Christian Right”—elements frequently referred to in my student days in New York City as “the lunatic fringe”—have taken over the function formerly performed by the old, historic denominations, that of chaplain to political power. And the growth and power of those elements is obviously related to their strange readiness to assume just such a function—a “strange” readiness, I mean, in view of their earlier reputation for strictly distinguishing themselves from the dominant culture.

To sum up: Though the process is uneven and varies in intensity from place to place, yet in one way or another, to one degree or another, Christians of the mainstream of historic Christianity in the Western world today find themselves being edged toward the periphery of their host cultures. Our whole history from Constantine onward has conditioned us to assume and expect that we would and should play the role of the official cult of the official culture—that Christianity and culture, the dominant culture, would always exist in tandem. With few exceptions, nothing in our past has prepared us for life on the edges of the majority culture and of political power—on the edges of empire. Yet our world seems no longer ready to allow the Christian religion to occupy the center stage, religiously speaking, in its unfolding drama; and we ourselves, most of us, know by now that attempts at forcing ourselves on our world, where they are not futile, are fraught with potential for conflict and violence. We seem, then, to be caught between two conflicting visions of our faith: on the one hand, that of a victorious and world-conquering religion, fifteen and more centuries in the making; on the other hand, a religion that must share the spiritual nurture of the world with many other faith traditions and that must learn to live without social props and political favors. This, or something like this, is the source of our great confusion.

The Choices

It seems to me that until we have realized that we are caught up in some such dilemma as this, however it may be spelled out concretely, all our plans and visions and actions will be hampered by a basic confusion about our

identity and our mission. I suspect that nothing will offset the crisis of confidence that characterizes especially these old Protestant denominations of ours until we have achieved a greater and more reflective level of historical, biblical, and theological understanding than, as churches, we have managed to date.

The fact of our effective disestablishment after fifteen or sixteen centuries of being the established religion in the Western world confronts us, it seems to me, with four basic alternatives, with variations on the four themes. I will just quickly characterize these here, and in my second lecture I will expatiate on the fourth alternative, which I feel is the only viable and faithful one.

The first response to the challenge posed by our effective disestablishment draws heavily on the “ostrich” syndrome: Deny it, or just look the other way, as long as possible. This is a very popular alternative, especially where a church’s economic circumstances and reserves of personnel permit a period of inaction and business-as-usual. But most of our denominations are clearly running out of time. Especially in rural and inner-city areas, many congregations experience such losses that they have grave difficulty surviving. I know that the Canadian situation is more dramatic than the American in this regard, but in my city of Montreal, once the center of a huge and powerful Roman Catholic majority culture, more than fifty large church buildings, many of them cathedral-size, are for sale. The repression or suppression of reality works only as long as reality is held at bay for a little while by factors extraneous to the actual problem—like a financial nest egg on which, in its extremity, the church may draw.

The second approach to the great change through which we are passing could be described in this way: Blame the decline of the church on lukewarm—perhaps “liberal”—leadership, and set out to reverse the trend. This is the approach chosen by many self-styled “evangelical” bodies and by most megachurches, whether liberal or conservative. People inspired by this vision do not appear to notice that the way of quantitative success and world-conquering mission was tried for about 1,500 years; and particularly they do not notice that it could only be carried on now, in our religiously pluralistic society and planet, by expecting and tacitly approving an exponential increase in the violence that militant forms of Christendom perpetuated throughout most of history.

A third approach that has become newly interesting to some people is to look for the continuation of Christendom elsewhere. The Christianity of the

West, it is argued, has been watered down, corrupted, secularized, and in other ways rendered ineffectual. Perhaps it is simply part of the general decline of the West that Oswald Spengler heralded in 1918. But meanwhile, it is said, Christendom has moved elsewhere to hang its hat. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Christianity is strong and growing. By 2025 or so, argues Philip Jenkins in a book with the revealing title *The Next Christendom*, “50 percent of the Christian population will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17 percent will be in Asia. Those proportions will grow steadily.”³ This kind of statistic, combined with the knowledge that much of this non-Western or “new” Christianity is theologically and morally very conservative, is oddly comforting to the minds of some North American Christian conservatives who, disillusioned with our prospects, turn to the so-called developing world for evidence that Christendom is still viable and seemingly victorious. As Jenkins writes, “The moral and sexual conservatism of Southern [Hemisphere] believers is music to the ears of North Americans or Europeans who find themselves at odds with the progressive leaderships of their churches. When they suffer an ideological defeat at home—when, for instance, a...denomination approves of same-sex marriages—conservatives are tempted to look south and to say, in effect, ‘Just you wait!’”⁴

But even recognizing the vibrancy of much Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere, it is hard to see how the increase of Christendom in that part of the world can resolve any of the theological, moral, and ecclesiastical problems in the West. We cannot ignore our own history and development—for instance, we cannot go back behind the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century to embrace a worldview that people in our culture could only experience as prescientific and retrogressive. As Principal John Simons of the Diocesan College in Montreal has argued in an excellent review of Jenkins’s book, “Many of the practices that constitute modern Western society are hard won, and perhaps even gracious, achievements. The liberal democratic state, for example, though a bastion of secularity, might well be viewed as a Christian invention.”⁵ We could discuss this further, but looking for Christendom’s continuation elsewhere seems to me a very inappropriate way of dealing with the end of Christendom in the West! Even the phrase “the next Christendom” seems historically naive and theologically unsound. To all who think that another “Christendom” could or should be pursued elsewhere, I am tempted as a Western Christian to say, “Been there, done that!” Western Christendom has failed, not because of bad secular people who ceased believing in God, but

because of certain flaws in the Christendom “form” (*morphe*) of the church from the outset—flaws that have become visible at this point in time, when Christendom is challenged by other religious, quasi-religious, and nonreligious alternatives to itself.

This leaves a fourth approach and to my mind the only authentically Christian way of meeting the challenge of this second great metamorphosis in the form of the Christian movement. I would characterize this approach as follows: first, frankly and openly admit the reality of the humiliation of Christendom; second, resist the temptation to regard this great change in purely negative terms, as though the failure of a form of Christianity meant the failure of Christianity itself; and third, try to give the process of our disestablishment some positive and meaningful direction, rather than simply allowing it to happen to us.

The elaboration of that directive will be the substance of my concluding lecture, “Finding Our Way into the Future.” For the now, I wish to leave you with a quote from a recent book by Richard Holloway, retired Anglican bishop of Edinburgh. Commenting on the Council of Nicaea, which was convened by the Emperor Constantine himself in 325 A.D., Bishop Holloway writes,

Historians have traditionally seen this event as the final triumph of the Church and the beginning of its long dominance of European history. It established dogmatic Christianity in a long partnership with the world of political power that became known as Christendom, and only in our day is it in its final stages of dissolution. So glorious and powerful was the institution of Christendom that it was almost impossible to see through it to the man who stood behind it, the peasant from Galilee who had refused to cringe before the very powers that crucified him and was later, officially, to deify him. The fascinating thing about our day is that, as the political and theological structures of Christendom crash down before our eyes, we can see once again, through the rubble and dust of the centuries, a clearer picture of the prophet of Nazareth.⁶

In my next lecture, I shall try to elaborate on this provocative thought by asking about the role of theology in helping Christian leaders and people to move out beyond Christendom.

Notes

1. James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 171.
2. Ibid., 15. [my italics]
3. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 202.
4. Ibid.
5. John Simons, "The Next Christendom: Prospect and Challenge," in a pamphlet of the Diocesan College of Montreal.
6. Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What Is Left of Christianity?* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), 172.