

# Post-Christian Confession in Secular Context

LEONARDO DE CHIRICO

## Abstract

Discussions of the “post-Christian” age are wide-spread and also bring an element of anxiety as the Western church confronts present-day challenges. The assumption is that in a post-Christian age, following Christ will be tougher than in the past. While it is important to fully grasp the surrounding cultural milieu in which the church finds herself, and in which she is witnessing, this is only one aspect of the overall picture as far as the task of the church is concerned. Some sketchy lessons and reflections on how to approach post-modernity can come from the way in which Christianity confronted modernity in the nineteenth century or the Roman Empire in the second century. Perhaps the post-Christian challenge is a providential way to re-discover the practical nature of the Christian vision embodied in personal discipline, vocations, church life and practices, and also civic responsibilities.

---

“**W**e live in a post-Christian age.” This is the refrain that is often heard when discussing the present-day condition of the Christian church in the West. Post-Christian culture, post-Christian society, post-Christian ethics, post-Christian values ... are all rubrics under which discussions take place in Christian circles and which try to analyze the contemporary scene. Apart from the intellectual challenges that it evokes, the reference to “post-Christian something” brings an element of tension to the conversation. A sense of loss, a perceived danger, and an impending threat are all associated with concerns about the direction that

the Western world is taking, moving away from traditional Christianity. The challenge of living in a post-Christian century is that things will no longer be as easy or convivial for Christians as they used to. The assumption is that in a post-Christian age, following Christ will be tough, tougher than in the past. The church will need to learn how to live on the fringes as a politically-incorrect outsider, rather than being a stakeholder in the sacred alliance between the altar (or pulpit) and the throne (or power). A spiritual paradigm-shift is needed to transit from the maintenance mood of the Christian era where Christian institutions set the stage for mainstream culture, to a “missional,” adventurous, and unprotected age in which Christians will be alien intruders in an increasingly inhospitable world.

In a word, this is the main narrative in which the expression “post-Christian” is used. In this article I shall seek to examine the appropriateness of defining our generation as “post-Christian.” Then I will try to argue that while it is important to fully grasp the surrounding cultural *milieu* in which the church finds herself and in which she is witnessing, this is only one aspect of the overall picture as far as the task of the church is concerned. After offering some pictorial historical reflections from different ages of the church, I will conclude with some remarks on our present-day task in confronting the postmodern times.

## I. *Post What?*

Beyond what “post-Christian” superficially indicates, a closer inspection is needed. The exact meaning of “post” as suffix of a given word depends on a variety of factors. While the general idea that it refers to what comes “after” something else is sufficiently clear, what “post” stands for in relation to what precedes is debatable. The discussion around the significance of post-modernity can illustrate the point.<sup>1</sup> While the “modernity project” seems to be clearly marked, post-modernity is understood in at least two different ways that can be summarized with two German philosophical words: *Aufhebung* and *Verwindung*. *Aufhebung* is part of the Hegelian dialectical language whereby the new synthesis which comes after the conflict between thesis and antithesis overcomes both while not taking complete leave from them. What comes “post” is a passing from modernity in the sense of being a new stage and phase, a different facet of it. *Verwindung* has

---

<sup>1</sup> This matter is hotly debated. For the sake of the argument, I am using as a guide the book by Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

a more Heideggerian flavor and evokes the idea of a radical breach from modernity. In this nihilist understanding, post-modernity is modernity dissolved, irreversibly dismissed, definitively disbanded.

When we talk about living in a post-Christian age, should we understand it as *Aufhebung* or *Verwindung*? Does the secular world nurture a disenchant-ed view of Christianity while retaining significant elements of it, or does it want to destroy Christianity in order to replace it with its nihilist emptiness? Perhaps, following the analyses of the Dutch Reformed intellectual Groen Van Prinsterer, the ideology of the French Revolution had a *Verwindung*-type of project in its deconstructing impetus and its upfront attack on the Christian heritage.<sup>2</sup> Human autonomy masked by unbelief wanted to get rid of any sense of God in society and culture. Some harsh present-day criticism coming from the New Atheism may have a *Verwindung* bent in its attempt to uproot the whole of the Christian plausibility structure.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, “post” often means “anti,” against Christianity. Other trends in Western society look more like *Aufhebung* attempts to renegotiate chunks of the Christian heritage in a pluralistic society by displacing them from their inherited superior status and relocating them in the *pantheon* of contemporary religions where they are no longer treated as a given. *Aufhebung*, with its milder attitude than *Verwindung*, may lead us, in spite of its criticism, to define our generation as “late” or “ultra” modern, rather than postmodern, i.e., as another intensified phase of an on-going process of modernization.

Either way, any discussion of what it means to live in a post-Christian age should try to unpack what “post” means. In Europe at least, our post-Christian time is still an age in which most topography is replete with Christian names (e.g., Notre Dame, Saint Peter, Saint Paul, etc.), most established churches continue to have a privileged status in society (e.g., receiving funding from the state in some way), the calendar is still shaped by Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter being central in most countries (although with eclectic meanings attached to them). The public space is increasingly hostile to the Christian voice in public discourse or even to its mere presence, but there are still vast areas where it is solidly embedded in the system: Christian schools continue to exist, church buildings mark the

<sup>2</sup> Groen van Prinsterer’s famous lectures, *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (1845–1846), were a penetrating analysis of the “idols” of the French Revolution and its totalitarian religion; English translation: *Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry Van Dyke (Jordan Station, ON: Wedge, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Both the French Revolution and the New Atheism wanted to replace Christianity with another “strong” and “thick” religion: the rule of human autonomy and the rule of “scientific” thought, respectively. In its Heideggerian meaning, *Verwindung* has a deconstructing thrust with a nihilist exit.

territory, new churches are planted, and Christian public witness is often possible, although it is criticized by secular voices. Sometimes the post-Christian attitude has a more institutional dimension whereby the Constantinian settlement (i.e., the majority church has a favored position in society) is challenged and the role of the church is no longer seen as providing civic and universal services. Other times the post-Christian tendency aims at overcoming the Christian moral framework by making individual choice absolute at the expense of ethical limits and constrains that used to be defined by the basic Judeo-Christian values.

Further analysis is necessary in order to grasp our post-Christian *Zeitgeist*. Any simplistic reading of it may reinforce superficial analyses and lead to shortsighted courses of action. Cultural exegesis needs the breath of a cultural hermeneutics shaped by a Christian worldview and nurtured by historical awareness and a comprehensive overview of cultural trends. Anxiety about a perceived threat or parochial perceptions of the problem are not adequate for a mature Christian discernment.

## II. *Post-Christian Conditions*

The West is not uniform in so far as post-Christianity is concerned. There is no single post-Christian condition, but there are several versions and combinations of it. In some Northern European countries, the post-Christianizing process takes the form of an aggressive secularization of society. The basic moral public discourse which took Christian values for granted is undergoing a drastic revision by competing and at times antagonistic moral frameworks. The fundamental societal institutions (e.g., family, school, and church) that received their meaning and place from a basic Christian worldview are undergoing a re-writing of their status, undermining their traditional outlook. While these tendencies do pose a serious challenge, not all post-Christian trends are evil in themselves. The church no longer lives in a protected bubble but is in the free market of religion, so to speak, with many competitors relying on huge resources and attracting a wide audience. Christians need to learn (or re-learn) to be creative and faithful minorities where they used to be part of the mainstream majority.<sup>4</sup> The transition may be painful and difficult, but mere nostalgic longing for a given *status quo* somewhat marked by Christianity will not serve the cause of the gospel.

---

<sup>4</sup> On the opportunities and challenges to be Reformed minorities, see the stimulating reflections by Paul Wells, "Essere una minoranza: sfide e opportunità," *Studi di teologia* 20.2 (2008): 159–81.

In the Southern European context in which I live, most post-Christian moves are welcomed because the form of Christianity that prevailed there tended to be a straitjacket for religious minorities and an obstacle for the flourishing of a pluralistic society. In this context, Roman Catholic Christianity was assumed to be equal to citizenship, putting all non-Catholics in the awkward position of being treated as cultural strangers and second-level citizens in their own homeland. After the still modest impact of secularization on Italian society, minority churches and religious groups are no longer persecuted or harassed by the majority church supported by the state. Religious pluralism and steps towards an “open” society are therefore children of secularization rather than being the legacy of the majority Roman Catholic Christianity. It may seem paradoxical, but there is an element of truth in arguing that post-Christian developments can be more Christian than what Christendom actually implemented in certain contexts.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical Christians in these countries are called to move beyond a victim mentality about a past when they were persecuted and become spiritually and culturally mature minorities, taking advantage of significant openings in their societies.<sup>6</sup>

This simple observation raises a more radical issue. Not all that is identified as a “Christian” heritage in terms of a “Christian” nation, society, and culture was actually an appropriate expression of what Christianity is. What was normally assumed to belong to a Christian heritage was actually a para-Christian version of it (i.e., something seemingly close but fundamentally distant from it). In many cases, it was a deformed version of Christianity based on a long Constantinian trajectory marked by the heresy of confusing and conflating the state and the church, religion and politics, canon law and common law, Christian identity and national identity.<sup>7</sup> Moving beyond this so-called “Christian” settlement is a positive contribution towards defining what Christianity fundamentally is and what Christian witness means in a multi-cultural pluralistic world.

---

<sup>5</sup> While advocating for Christian values in society, the Roman Catholic Church is, generally speaking, prone to maintain its privileged status in majority situations. See John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (2003), where he defends freedom but is not prepared to overcome established unfair systems where the Roman Catholic Church has a favored status over against other religious groups. See my paper “La doctrine sociale de l'Église catholique romaine,” *Théologie Évangélique* 6.1 (2007): 51–66.

<sup>6</sup> As it was well argued for by Samuel Escobar in a recent interview (April 21, 2015), [http://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/542/Samuel\\_Escobar\\_Let's\\_avoid\\_victimhood,\\_we\\_should\\_learn\\_to\\_live\\_as\\_a\\_mature\\_minority](http://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/542/Samuel_Escobar_Let's_avoid_victimhood,_we_should_learn_to_live_as_a_mature_minority).

<sup>7</sup> See Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). I do not agree with his Anabaptist perspective, but Murray has several good points in critiquing the “Christendom” settlement and urging the church to move beyond it, not out of external pressures only but out of a desire to be more faithful to biblical standards.

Contrary to the popular expression coined by C. S. Lewis, there is no such thing as “mere Christianity.” In its historical, doctrinal, and social realizations, there is no single version of Christianity, but different forms of it (e.g., Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox), each shaping a different face of Christianity in relation to the world. In exegeting our post-Christian condition, we not only need to investigate what “post” actually means, but we also have the responsibility to clarify what “Christian” means. Historical embodiments of Christianity are not necessarily defensible versions of it. There is the on-going need to *reform* them in light of Scripture. This post-Christian phase is yet another opportunity for the Christian church to practice the *semper reformanda* call of the Reformation, turning away from idolatrous compromises (and) towards an ever growing biblical fidelity.

Without running the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and with a generous appreciation of the “Christian” history, most Christian eras have actually been para-Christian approximations, something like, but not quite Christianity worthy of its name. Perhaps Christianity is more of an eschatological ambition rather than a historical realization, more of a *not yet* project than something *already* achieved. Christendom has put an emphasis on the *already* side of Christianity, whereas the post-Christian age we live in reminds us providentially of the *not yet* element of our response to the gospel. Rather than sticking to the defensive stance of a conservative mindset, we should seize the opportunity to refine and implement better practices that are more attuned to the Christian message. It is not an either-or task, of course, but a matter of spiritual intelligence in accepting the challenge to explore more faithful and viable Christian actions in our given context, rather than being obsessed by simply maintaining a Christianized *status quo* inherited from the past.

### III. *Nineteenth-Century Options*

The post-Christian era is not the first time that Christianity was faced with a change of the historical tide as far as the place of Christianity in the modern world is concerned. In many ways, the nineteenth century presented similar challenges to those of the present-day. The combination of the Enlightenment and Romanticism with its mixture of rationalism and irrationalism resulted in a powerful assault on the tenets of the Christian faith and the role of the church in society. The French Revolution added ideological and political pepper to the challenge of modernity. In some respects, the post-Christian age is yet another combination of rationalism and irrationalism in a late-modern fashion. As Cornelius Van Til forcefully pointed

out, humanistic thought is always centered on the unstable foundation of human autonomy and always in need of providing new platforms in which rationalism and irrationalism provisionally intermingle in various degrees.<sup>8</sup> The pendulum swings from one pole to another in a dialectical way, going from the more rationalist “anthropological turn” of modernity to the more irrationalist “linguistic turn” of post-modernity. In this sense, post-modernity is nothing but another ideological combination of rationalism and irrationalism in which the basic humanistic framework centered on human autonomy is still reigning. According to Henri Blocher, humanistic thought is always subject to differing *soubresauts*, jolts, movements that seem to change its orientation radically but are nonetheless expressions of its irrepressible instability.<sup>9</sup> The task of the church is to have its biblical seismograph on and to assess the changes that take place in society, trying to come to terms with the wave motion of culture.

Nineteenth-century Christianity responded to the challenge of the modernity project in several ways. The following impressionistic summary aims at opening the windows enough to let in a fresh breeze as we consider our present-day endeavor. To begin with, theological liberalism was basically an acceptance of the plausibility structures of the Enlightenment-Romanticism synthesis. Historical criticism applied to biblical revelation showed its rationalist bias and tried to dismantle any sense of divine super-naturalism by reducing Christianity to a form of morality. On the other hand, the centrality given to feelings in religion opened the way to the irrational whereby the ultimate sense of being dependent was considered the essence of Christian faith without any truth-claims or doctrinal connotations. Liberalism accommodated the Christian faith to the claims of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.<sup>10</sup> Even today, this total surrender to the *never* version of modernity is a temptation for some post-liberal Christians. The post-liberal strategy for addressing the post-Christian condition is to submit Christian claims to those of post-modern culture and to find a residual place for the church that does not question the idols of the post-modern religion.

---

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on Van Til’s analysis of autonomous thought, see William Edgar, “No News is Good News: Modernity, the Postmodern, and Apologetics,” *WTJ* 57 (1995): 359–82.

<sup>9</sup> See Henri Blocher, “Les soubresauts de la pensée humaniste et la pensée biblique,” *Fac-Réflexion* 32 (1995): 4–17.

<sup>10</sup> In his assessment of nineteenth-century liberalism Karl Barth was certainly profound and insightful: *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelische Verlag, 1947); English translation: *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1973). Barth’s own way forward, though, was still marked by an unresolved dialectic between rationalism and irrationalism instead of being grounded in the self-authenticating Trinity and the written Word of God.

Rome had a different strategy in confronting modernity. On the theological level it stressed its own right to absolute power by issuing new dogmas in the face of anti-dogmatic rationalism. The 1854 dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception is an instance whereby the Roman Church elevated an oral tradition to a binding belief with dogmatic status. It was a slap in the face for the Enlightenment mentality. On the more political level, the same church issued the other nineteenth-century dogma, that of papal infallibility (1870). If Revolutionary thought fiercely attacked the authority structure of the church, Rome responded by further hardening papal authority. The French Revolution was able to kill the king, but the pope, the last absolute king of the Western world, came out of the confrontation stronger. The *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemned all the products of modernity, including freedom of conscience and democracy, thus closing the door to the appreciation of modern ideas. The overall strategy was defensive of the church's prerogatives and its status in the modern world. Instead of following gospel teachings and listening to the legitimate concerns of modernity, Rome became even more self-referential and isolated.<sup>11</sup> There is a tendency in certain Christian circles to fight against the post-modern world in the same way: by building battlements of judgment and self-defense that may give the impression of winning the battle but are biblically wrong and self-destructive in the long run.

Revivalism was another nineteenth century answer to the challenge of the modern synthesis of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Revivalism wedded the entrepreneurial, bourgeois spirit of the age with uneasiness towards institutions transmitting revolutionary thought. Charles Finney's confidence in the "new measures" to bring about revival was a form of rationalization of the supernatural work of God. And yet the romantic disposition towards religious feelings matched the revivalist quest for a "deeper" experience of God. Revivalism ended up being a chameleon, fitting the rationalist-irrationalist combination of modernity, not attacking it upfront but implementing survival strategies that made it a very "modern," enlightened, and romantic form of Christianity. The neo-revivalist answer to the post-modern world would be a highly sensual, collectivist but churchless Christianity in which believing and belonging do not necessarily match and experiential participation has priority over doctrinal depth. Global

---

<sup>11</sup> It took almost a century for Rome to change this dismissive attitude. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) issued a "friendly" and welcoming message to the modern world while not giving up any substantial claim of the Catholic Church. For this interpretation of Vatican II, see my "Il Vaticano II, banco di prova della teologia evangelica," *Studi di teologia* 25.2 (2013): 99–125.

Evangelical Christianity seems to follow in the footsteps of nineteenth-century revivalism by offering a *prêt-à-porter* option that finds its niche but does not challenge the arrogant post-modern mindset.

Finally, the Reformed world also provided a response to the challenge of modernity. Thinking of the Reformed camp in a corporate way, the Old Princeton School stressed the need to maintain the credibility and historicity of biblical revelation in an increasingly skeptical age, while being open to scientific academic developments.<sup>12</sup> C. H. Spurgeon also reaffirmed the centrality of preaching the gospel in the context of the local church as the ordinary means of grace for the modern world. The Genevan *Réveil* added to the Reformed doctrinal framework an emphasis on personal conversion, evangelism, and humanitarian concerns, thus paying attention to personal involvement in the Christian faith. The Dutch Neo-Calvinists developed an anti-revolutionary attitude which also had a *pars construens* (constructive element) for Christians to make a positive contribution in a pluralistic society in terms of common grace and Christian responsibility to respond to God's cultural and missionary mandate. Summing up all these voices and others, the Reformed choir confronted modernity apologetically, ecclesiastically, and culturally by trying to provide biblically viable alternatives to the rationalist and irrationalist tendencies of the modernity project. The apologetic concern made it clear that what was really at stake was not the privileged status of the church in society, but the truth-claims of the Bible and the reliability of the Christian narrative. The ecclesiastical concern underlined the importance of the church as the Christian community in the world that listens to God's Word and responds to it. The cultural concern expressed the need for Christians to be faithful to God at any moment of life and in whatever circumstance.

In facing the challenges of the post-modern world, we should be concerned to learn as much as we can from the Reformed stance in dealing with modernity by seeing it as a composite whole. No single Reformed school of thought is sufficient for the task, but the cross-fertilizing of various Reformed traditions may be a way forward as we navigate these post-modern waters. The whole Reformed architecture may well be the infrastructure that provides the best resources for surviving the post-Christian era and consistently promoting the cause of the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> While there are excellent monographs on each strand of the nineteenth-century Reformed tradition or on different regions of the world, the task of writing a family history and theological interpretation of the Reformed tradition as a whole has yet to be done properly.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the architectural metaphor from Peter S. Heslam, "Architects of Evangelical Intellectual Thought: Abraham Kuyper and Benjamin Warfield," *Themelios* 24.2 (1999): 3–20.

#### IV. *The Diognetus Way*

Living in a “Christian” atmosphere is not really necessary for the gospel to flourish. In the first centuries of the history of the church, Christianity lived in a *pre-Christian* setting often marked by anti-Christian paganism, and nevertheless the Christian faith performed pretty well. Christianity does not need to be the state-religion nor the majority religion in order to prosper. Nowadays, the persecuted church lives in a violently *anti-Christian* environment and nonetheless gives the most outstanding witness to the spiritual reality and vitality of the Christian message. So, our post-Christian situation, whatever it may mean, can be an opportunity to go beyond the problematic comfort zone of Christendom and to re-discover the missional calling to be salt and light (Matt 5:13–16) in a crooked and twisted generation (Phil 2:15). The human safety net of being a majority and having central stage in society, though perhaps useful, is not a necessary condition for the mission of the church.

After sketching some nineteenth-century antecedents, it is also fitting to open another historical window in order to see present-day challenges with some historical distance. The *Letter to Diognetus* provides a picture of the dynamics of church life in the second century. If the *Didache* is the first post-apostolic document that presents criteria for admission to the church and the first codification of community life, the *Letter to Diognetus* speaks about the mode and the quality of the presence of the church in the surrounding world. Written in approximately A.D. 150, the document was addressed to a pagan named Diognetus to persuade him to become a Christian.

In trying to interact with the questions of Diognetus, the author explains the nature of the Christian God and the folly of the Greco-Roman idolatrous religions. God is the creator and ruler of the universe while the pagan idols are merely artifacts of human technology. The Christian faith frees people from the illusion and religious tyranny of demonic powers that lurk in idols. Jesus is the Son of God sent to reveal God the Father. He bore our sins, the remission of which is only obtained by faith in him. At this point, after describing the riches of the Christian message and the falseness of paganism, the author argues for the superiority of Christianity by pointing to the moral fiber and spiritual life of the Christian community. In describing the way in which Christians live in a predominantly pagan society, the *Letter* invites reflection on the characteristics of Christian presence and witness in a pagan world (Diogn. 5:1–17).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-lightfoot.html>. On the *Letter to Diognetus*, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 49–67.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life. Nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all. They are ignored, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and yet they are endued with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. They are dishonoured, and yet they are glorified in their dishonour. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect. Doing good they are punished as evil-doers; being punished they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews, and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those that hate them cannot tell the reason of their hostility.

This is a picture of a Christian community in a pre-Christian setting that was increasingly threatening to the church. The Christian presence is described in terms of behavior that, on the one hand, appears very similar if not identical to that of non-Christians, while on the other hand, is radically different in that they are inspired and nourished by the gospel.<sup>15</sup> Christians do not choose to live in isolated enclaves or extra-urban ghettos, they do not use sub-cultural communicative codes that are incomprehensible to others, they do not use special costumes or clothing, nor do they eat special foods. They are citizens like everyone else. Yet they are different. Their particularity is “paradoxical.” While rooted in society, they live as if they were strangers. They get married and build families, without practicing infanticide. They share everything, except the marital bed, leading apparently normal lives, but diffusing the perfume of Christian witness everywhere. They are loyal citizens who respect the law, but their lifestyle morally surpasses the requirements of conventional social behaviors. Their communities are apparently politically harmless and, indeed, seem to be allied to the *status quo*, as they are most respectful of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Similar descriptions of the Christian presence in pagan society are offered by Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 17 (ANF 1:168; PG 6:354) and Tertullian, *The Apology* 42 (ANF 3:49; PL 1:554–59). See D. F. Wright, “Christian Faith in the Greek World: Justin Martyr’s Testimony,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 54.2 (1982): 77–87, and Gerald Bray, “Tertullian,” in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*, ed. B. G. Green (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 64–107.

political order. Yet they have their cultural particularities for which they demand to be respected even if they are radically different from the prevailing cultural standards. In most cases, their conduct elicits a mixture of admiration and astonishment by outside observers. In other cases, it causes indignation that turns into slander and persecution, although the reasons for hatred against the Christians are not rationally justified.

In biblical terms, they are “in” the world but not “of” the world (John 15:19; 17:11 and 16). In terms of the *Letter*, Christians have a *paradoxos politeia*, a paradoxical citizenship (Diogn. 5:4). On the one hand, they belong to the city like any other citizen, with the same rights and duties, without any special distinguishing mark. On the other hand, the Christian citizens are “different” because they are members of a kingdom whose provenance is “in heaven” and whose values are irreducible to those of the other non-Christian members of society. The cost of living out a *paradoxos politeia* in the context of on-going misunderstanding in the wider society was demanding, because the ancient pagan scheme was not generally accustomed to it.

In his *Apology*, Tertullian helps us understand what it means for the early church to be “in” the world but not “of” the world in that particular context. On the one hand, he recognizes the duty of all Christians to pray for the authorities, although they persecute the church, and to ask God to give the emperor a long life, a peaceful kingdom, a faithful senate, brave troops, and so on. Christians are to pray for the prosperity of the Roman Empire and do their duty by participating in the life of society. In this sense, theirs is an active citizenship, positively affecting the *res publica*. At the same time, Tertullian says that Christians do not want and cannot accept that the emperor is divine. This is the limit of their submission to state authority and to the prevailing cultural patterns.<sup>16</sup> “If he be a man, it is the interest of a man to give place to God; let him content himself with the name of emperor, for this is the most majestic name upon earth, and it is the gift of God.”<sup>17</sup> In so doing, Christians are not part of an “unlawful” or “contending faction” that undermines public order.<sup>18</sup> They refuse only immorality and idolatry. They consider themselves, and they are, citizens of the Empire. Their submission, however, is limited by their other citizenship: that of the kingdom of God, which forbids them to recognize any other God apart from the biblical Creator and Sustainer of the world.

These churches are described phenomenologically as Christian communities struggling to find their space in a pagan society. They are invisible as

<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 30–33 (ANF 3:42–43; PL 1:502–11).

<sup>17</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 33 (ANF 3:43; PL 1:509–11).

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 38 (ANF 3:45–46; PL 1:526–31).

far as the architectural structures of their meeting places are concerned, and their real visibility lies in the moral and spiritual quality of their lives. They speak by their words and behavior. Christians want to be included socially without being culturally irrelevant or hidden. Their presence is marked by proximity, not by separation or marginalization. They are neither totally assimilated nor totally opposed to the system: they are present with the tensions that their *paradoxos politeia* implies. Their identity and commitments translate into practices sometimes entirely similar to those of other social groups, but at other times they are strongly countercultural as interpreters of a different worldview.

Using Richard Niebuhr's typology of the relationship between Christ and culture, the church described in the *Letter to Diognetus* is not "over" the world, nor is it "against" the world, and it is not even "parallel" to the world. It is "in" the world with its own spiritually and culturally creative posture but without being absorbed by it. It is certainly "against" sin and its cultural products and "for" the renewal of grace wherever it can be found.<sup>19</sup>

## V. Back to the Post-Christian Issue

The nineteenth-century antecedents and the Diognetus way cannot be simply transferred into our own post-Christian situation and automatically applied to it. They are nonetheless reminders of the same tension that the church has to face in different conditions, whether they be "pre," "anti," or now "post" Christian.

Otherworldly and this-worldly dynamics are always at stake when dealing with how to relate to culture. In David Wells's words,

By its very structure, evangelicalism finds itself both affirming and denying culture, stressing both its continuity with and discontinuity from the world. The pendulum has tended to swing from side to side, touching first one set of antitheses and then the other. The paradox should not be resolved. And it should not be resolved in favor of one set of antitheses over the other. For God's own relationship to the world is steadily and unchangingly bipolar, in part characterized by its continuity with it and in part by his discontinuity from it.

And again, "The Word of God must be related to our own context in such a way that its identity as divine revelation is authentically preserved while its relation to contemporary life is fully worked out."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 227.

<sup>20</sup> David F. Wells, "An American Evangelical Theology: The Painful Transition from *Theoria* to *Praxis*," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 92–93.

Here the paradoxical nature of our citizenship is related to the bipolarity of God's relationship to the world. How to articulate that bipolarity in the post-modern world is the task we face. The Christian age displayed a tendency to try to overcome the bipolarity and solve the paradox by proposing that the church make the kingdom of God present by saturating society with Christian morality and institutions. The post-Christian generation radically questions this result and forces the church to be more humble, more open to self-criticism, readier to rely on God's promises rather than on human success, without losing the courage to be Protestant, whatever the cost.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the post-Christian challenge is a providential way to re-discover the *ordinariness* of the Christian vision embodied in personal discipline and vocations, church life and practices, and civic responsibilities:<sup>22</sup> a more faithful Christian worldview put into practice by a more faithful community of Christians in whatever circumstance and context they find themselves.

---

<sup>21</sup> Borrowing the title by David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).