

# Christianity and the Second Religiosity

*"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the prime source of all God's creation: I know all your ways; you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were either hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'How rich I am! And how well I have done! I have everything I want in the world!' In fact, though you do not know it, you are the most pitiful wretch, poor, blind, and naked. . . ."* —Revelation 3:14–18

CHRONOLOGICAL DIVISIONS, abstract and unrelated as they are to the personalities and events of history, are apt, especially when they are millennial, to provoke the most extravagant hopes and fears. Chiliasm exerts such extraordinary persuasive power over Western thought not because of its numerological neatness but because the thousand-year period derives its power from an ancient and pervasive myth which in its origins and consequences is antithetical to Hebrew-Christian conceptions of history. Indeed, one might argue that when millenarianism becomes a powerful force in Christian thought, it does so either in a heterodox system or one which skirts or ignores the adequacy of Christian revelation and tradition. Scripture, to the great disappointment of many, has not been much concerned with the exact computation of time. It would be interesting, at least, to have a historical road map of time nicely divided into thousand-year periods, each with a distinctive character, and each realizing a sacred and providential purpose. Alas, such a hope represents the fallacy of misplaced concreteness as applied to theology and history.

Nonetheless, millenarian numerology

from Virgil through the early Middle Ages, to conceptions of a thousand-year universal monarchy, to Joachim of Flora and finally the dates Archbishop Ussher provided for the King James Bible all underline the importance of these notions for Christian thought.<sup>1</sup>

However, historical time and the meaning it possesses are rarely chronological in character. Change in time is rather biological, psychological, and intellectual. Thus the great turning points in Christian history have little or nothing to do with the year 2000 and everything to do with intellectual and cultural changes which have characterized the last two centuries and particularly the first half of the twentieth century.

Lord Acton could confidently assert in his Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, June 11, 1895, that Christ is risen in the world,<sup>2</sup> by which he meant that the triumph of the principles of Christian ethics was everywhere producing the providential and progressive realization of what nineteenth-century Whigs called "civilization." Only a Whig could have been so hopeful about the prospects of either Christianity or "civilization." Two decades

later the Great War would have washed over Europe, forever dissolving hopefulness in its rivers of blood and lies. Had Acton listened to and read attentively "modern" literature and philosophy he would have heard the heavy sound of the hangman's footstep, but Acton's mind had been formed in another age and the certainties and hopefulness of high Victorianism were nearly antiquarian in 1895.

Thirty years later a German historian of note, Ernst Troeltsch, prepared a lecture, "The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions" to be delivered at the University of Oxford in March 1923.<sup>3</sup> The prevailing nineteenth-century view of the absolute validity of Christianity had disappeared from the thought of Troeltsch. The great divide had been crossed and Christianity was held to be only relatively valid and its meaning historically determined and culturally conditioned. Christianity was only an instantiation of Western civilization, its validity dependent upon the particular nominalistic embodiment of the Divine, one of the many subsumed in the "One." There was the ghost of Hegel in this historical interpretation of man's religious experience, although it lacked the progressivist characteristics of the dialectic. The radical historicist relativization of Christianity had a decisive influence on the place and role of Christianity in the modern world. The translation of Christianity into an artifact of civilization was, as Karl Barth observed, a form of idolatry in which man worshiped as God his own cultural creations.

The first evidence of the impact of the relativization of Christianity was, as Troeltsch himself observed in his lecture, the abandonment of missionary activity. Today the implication of the relativization of Christianity is apparent in the mission fields. Men become missionaries not to convert and baptize but rather to persuade the heathen of the advantages of an ideology of class warfare, as though grace emerged from the muzzle of a gun. The nineteenth century was the century of the Christian mission. No previous century saw the concentration and dedication of

men and resources on such a massive scale to the conversion and Christianization of mankind. As a consequence of the relativization of Christianity two generations were all that were required to dissipate the impetus of the Christian missionary movement.

Troeltsch was not unaware of the consequences of his historical relativism. Gertrude von le Fort, a convert to Catholicism who attended Troeltsch's lectures following World War I, reports in *Der Kranz der Engel* the following exchange with Troeltsch.

I expressed gratitude for his lectures and the inward strengthening I had derived from them.

He replied: "Oh, all I have been able to do for you is that I showed you the sunset of Christianity. When the sun has set, it still glows for a long time."

"Does not the sunset promise a new dawn?" I quickly asked. "You too believe, don't you, that the sun will rise again?"

"I do not know," he said honestly. "No, I really do not know that; but then, we do not need to know everything. What I do know is that it is possible to stay alive with a great sunset."

"But can the sunset last long, I asked."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the problem was not so much one of historical sophistication as it was of the vitality and commitment necessary for belief. As Oswald Spengler observed, "Every great thing perishes if its heirs are petty."<sup>5</sup>

Historical relativism was not alone in the displacement of Christianity as the motive force in Western society. Hand in hand with historicism went what Max Weber described as "demystification." In certain important respects the "demystification" of life and thought was rooted in Christianity itself. However, when the process of demystification was divorced from the engendering and controlling matrix of belief it became the single most transforming influence in Western and now in the emerging unitary world culture. Max Weber recognized the petrifying consequences of a total rationalization of Western culture. He believed it to be an

“iron cage,” and short of the dramatic birth of a new religious spirit, he saw its effects as totally destructive.<sup>6</sup>

One of the essential aspects of “demystification” has been the secularization of Western society and the transferral of many elements and structures in society from the realm of the sacral to that of the secular. Medieval society sought to sacralize every aspect of life and to bring all society within the parameters of sacred space. Modernity has seen as one of its chief tasks the dismantling of the sacral.

It is assumed by many students of secularism that, once society has been demystified, the sacred will wither away and the work of ritual and the attunement to the Divine in prayer will be replaced by science, technology, and entertainment. In fact, that has not been the case. True established religion often mistook the meaning of what was happening in “demystification.” The orthodoxies of Christianity became museum-like curators of the “high and dry” style of religion in which liturgical action, once rooted in the engendering experience of the encounter with the Divine and the mysteries of life and death, became a set of reified and dead gestures. Secularization in many instances did not mean that mankind had lost its religious dimension or found secular surrogates for its religious hunger. On the contrary the religious quest frequently manifested itself in an atavistic return to primitive cults, religiosity, and superstition. The combination of agnosticism and superstition is the perennial response of men who believe both too little and too much.

Historians and sociologists such as Weber, Troeltsch, Spengler, Toynbee, Ortega, Sorokin, and a host of lesser figures recognized that from the eighteenth century onward a decisive change was taking place in Western culture and that this change had something to do with religion and the extraordinary crisis then in progress in Christianity. There was indeed a *Zeitwende* and, except for Spengler, these theorists believed it had little to do with millennial dates. Perhaps

Toynbee came closest to diagnosing the cause when he argued that the cause was a spiritual one due to the failure of Western man to respond from the soul outward to the challenges with which history, in the broadest sense, presented him.

These students of history and historical sociology studied past and present civilizations comparatively. All of them recognized a close link between the spiritual, the intellectual, and the material reality of culture. Indeed, almost without exception they insisted that the religious provides a template for the structures of civilization. All of them point to the striking resemblance between the contemporary Western culture of modernity and the end phases, the “end times” of past cultures, particularly that of classical, Graeco-Roman civilization. A morphological analysis based upon a comparative study of the patterns present in the development of all cultures provides some important insights into religious crisis which Christianity confronts as it enters the third millennium of its existence.

Oswald Spengler gives us the most accurate and detailed analysis of this final phase of cultural development.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on a long tradition of German historical thought which can be traced to Herder, Spengler makes a sharp distinction between culture and civilization, a distinction infrequently made by Anglo-American historians. A *culture* is the creative stage of sociohistorical development during which the spiritual energies of a society give a coherent and characteristic form to the dynamic life potencies of the society. All cultures, even in their most mundane aspects, are the outward manifestation of spiritual energies. As the culture becomes increasingly self-conscious, analytical-rational, and unbelieving, it loses this drive for form. Increasingly the spiritual basis of culture dries up and is dissipated, and organic form and order rooted in the spiritual are replaced by mechanical forms and orders which are functionally perfect but humanly inadequate. Culture is replaced by civilization.

This final stage is one in which tech-

nique reigns supreme (Vico's "barbarism of reflection" and Weber's "iron cage.") All sense of form and style disappears and society becomes increasingly massified and barbarized. The countryside and peasant culture wither away and the great megapolitan conurbations become the dominant social configurations. Social elites lose their attractiveness and the masses refuse to assume the social forms created by aristocracy. Form as such is widely attacked and art becomes anti-art. Political disillusionment is complete and politics become a matter of technical management and brute power. Social alienation and anomie are complete. The body politic can no longer act organically and cohesively. The age of the Caesars has arrived. These creations of a secular soteriology impress on their ant-heap societies a mechanical form and a pseudo-meaningfulness to political life. Evanescent sensate pleasure provides a momentary anodyne for the loss of meaning, purpose, freedom, responsibility, and beauty in a soulless world.

Viewed in these terms alone the processes of demystification and secularization seem to be a one-way street to the capacious "dust-bin of history." We should note once more, however, that secularism and secularization do not lead to the death of religion. On the contrary, the *end time* is a period characterized by what Spengler described as "the second religiosity." For intellectuals the Old Gods may be dead but the need for Gods persists:

Everywhere there is the empty play with myths in which no one believes, the empty taste for cults with which one seeks to fill the interior emptiness. The real faith continues to be, however, in atoms and numbers even though the educated hocus-pocus is necessary to make [such belief] in the long run bearable. Materialism is shallow and honorable, the playing with religion is shallow and dishonorable. The fact, however, that the latter is possible points already to a new and authentic quest which manifests itself at first quietly in civilized consciousness and finally manifests itself in the broad light of day.<sup>8</sup>

It must have struck the reader that what Spengler describes as "the second religiosity" is uncannily like the religious situation of the present time. "New Age" religiousness is simply a rebirth of primitive cults and myths, half, but only half, believed. Boris Pasternak describes how, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, these extravagant myths and cults were a commonplace among Russian intellectuals.<sup>9</sup> The revival of myth in the nineteenth century, culminating in the current misguided popularity of Joseph Campbell, is an erudite example of this quest for a primitive cosmogonic religion. The myths of the symbolists, of the "cosmogonic circle" in Munich between the two wars, of theosophy and anthroposophy are all striking examples of this "second religiosity."

It is important to note, however, that these strange religious enthusiasms, however decadent they may appear to be, are neither evidences of a general collapse of religion nor indications of what Troeltsch described as "the sunset of Christianity." They are evidences of the collapse of "modernity," of the dissatisfaction of mankind with the provisional and alienated lives they lead. The "Fundamentalist" religious movements of the present and recent past are further evidence of the dissatisfaction felt by large numbers of people with an incoherent and atomistic social order and a meaningless existence. This frantic search for meaning is most intense in the burnt-over Communist nations where the attack on religion by materialism and modernity has been most strident.

The "new and authentic quest" of which Spengler speaks constitutes the Pentecostal moment of the present. The consequences of modernity, demystification, and secularization are precisely the opposite of the consequences predicted by the apostles of modernism. It is not religion, and particularly not Christianity, which is passing from the scene, but rather the Western cultural configuration of modernist thought.

Arnold Toynbee has argued, as have

others, that civilization is an outgrowth of religion. The Hegelian-modernist position makes civilization the matrix in which religion develops.

In *Civilization on Trial and the World and the West*, Toynbee concludes:

... If civilizations are the handmaids of religion and if the Graeco-Roman civilization served as a good handmaid to Christianity by bringing it to birth before that civilization finally went to pieces . . . and on this showing, our own Western post-Christian secular civilization might at best be a superfluous repetition of the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman one, and at worst a pernicious backsliding from the path of spiritual progress. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Toynbee goes on to argue with some cogency that Christianity need not suffer the same fate as Western civilization in the general collapse which seems to be in evidence.

... on the theory that religion is subservient to civilization, you would expect some new higher religion to come into existence on each occasion, in order to serve the purpose of tiding over the gap between one civilization and another. . . . So far from that, if our secular Western civilization perishes, Christianity may be expected not only to endure but to grow in wisdom and stature as a result of a fresh experience of secular catastrophe.<sup>11</sup>

The Pentecostal moment of the present is one in which Christianity may at last achieve the Gospel mandate to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . . ." In spite of the decline in missionary activity, in spite of the doubts concerning the absolute validity of Christianity entertained by religious liberals, in opposition to the politicization of the missionary mandate Christianity confronts a Providential opportunity in which it is called at

least to realize its universal mission.

The other so-called world religions are either too narrowly ethnic, too theologically primitive, or too incapable of historical development to offer effective competition to Christianity. They are, however, an important manifestation of the ineradicable religious nature of mankind.

It ought to be added that the essential ingredient of Christianity in the third millennium will be soteriological. It will be a religion of the crucified and risen Christ and not a vapid set of "demythologized" liberal abstractions. It will call men to perfection and community, and its instruments of salvation will be the Grace of God and the works of holiness rather than political enthusiasm and engagement. This can be achieved only if all Christians will that the commanding fact of all historical experience be "Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, All time belongs to Him, and all the ages. To Him be glory and power through every age forever."

—Stephen J. Tonsor

<sup>1</sup>Henri Focillon, *The Year 1000* (New York, 1971), and Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, Eng., 1987). <sup>2</sup>*Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 521. <sup>3</sup>*Christian Thought, Its History and Application*, ed., with an introduction, by Baron von Hugel (New York, 1957). <sup>4</sup>Wilhelm Pauk, *Harnack and Troeltsch, Two Historical Theologians* (New York, 1968), pp. 91-92. <sup>5</sup>*Aphorisms*, trans. Gisela Koch-Weser O'Brien, with an introduction by William Debbins (Chicago, 1967), p. 121. <sup>6</sup>*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958), p. 182. <sup>7</sup>*Der Untergang des Abendlandes, Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Munchen, 1963 [1923]). <sup>8</sup>Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, p. 941 (translation my own). <sup>9</sup>*Doctor Zhivago* (New York, 1958), pp. 42-43. <sup>10</sup>New York, 1958, p. 207. <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 209.