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Chapter 1

Our Current Post-Christianity

"It's the usual utopian vision. . . . I mean, like everything else you guys are pushing, it sounds perfect, sounds progressive, but it carries with it more control. . . . And that's what's so scary. Individually you don't know what you are doing collectively."

Dave Eggers, *The Circle*

MOVING PAST GOD

Within the church in the West it is almost universally acknowledged that we live in a post-Christian culture. However, it is crucial that we understand what we mean by post-Christian. Many have understood post-Christianity as a kind of religious year zero, a mass amnesia in which the West has forgotten its Christian past, and in which we have returned to a kind of pre-Christian reality. As we will discover in chapter 3, this assumption can have dramatic effects on how we perceive the task of mission in the West. Post-Christianity is not pre-Christianity; rather post-Christianity attempts to move beyond Christianity, whilst simultaneously feasting upon its fruit.

Post-Christian culture attempts to retain the solace of faith, whilst gutting it of the costs, commitments, and restraints that the gospel places upon the individual will. Post-Christianity intuitively yearns for the justice and shalom of the kingdom, whilst defending the reign of the individual will. Post-Christianity is Christianity emptied of its content, as theologian Henri de Lubac would warn:

> *Forms of atheistic humanism often preserved a number of values that were Christian in origin; but having cut off these values from their source, they were powerless to maintain them in their full strength or even in their authentic integrity. Spirit, reason, liberty, truth, brotherhood, justice: these great things, without which there is no true humanity . . . quickly become unreal when no longer seen as a radiation from God, when faith in the living God no longer provides their vital substance. Then they become empty forms.*[1]

Yet despite such warnings, post-Christianity grows. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks senses this post-Christian, individualist theology in the wisdom and advice given to university students: "They are sent off into this world with the . . . theology ringing in their ears. If you sample some of the commencement addresses being broadcast on C-Span these days, you see that many graduates are told to: Follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams and find yourself. This is the litany of expressive individualism."[2] Sadly such advice can be found not only in the secular college commencement speech, but also in many churches, albeit with the saccharine sheen of a Christianized veneer, as the post-Christian mood affects even Christianity itself.

THE NEW POWERS

To get to the heart of our post-Christian context we must understand how we got here, how the ground shifted. Sometime in the night a

revolution occurred and we did not notice it. So distracted by the phony war between left and right, conservatives and liberals, we have failed to notice that a new power had seized control of both our imaginations and the halls of power. This new power swirls around a small yet widely held set of beliefs:

1. The highest good is individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression.

2. Traditions, religions, received wisdom, regulations, and social ties that restrict individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression must be reshaped, deconstructed, or destroyed.

3. The world will inevitably improve as the scope of individual freedom grows. Technology—in particular the Internet—will motor this progression toward utopia.

4. The primary social ethic is tolerance of everyone's self-defined quest for individual freedom and self-expression. Any deviation from this ethic of tolerance is dangerous and must not be tolerated. Therefore social justice is less about economic or class inequality, and more about issues of equality relating to individual identity, self-expression, and personal autonomy.

5. Humans are inherently good.

6. Large-scale structures and institutions are suspicious at best and evil at worst.

7. Forms of external authority are rejected and personal authenticity is lauded.

Political historian Mark Lilla notes that the simplicity of these beliefs means that they are held by seemingly opposed groups in the West. These beliefs are held dear by groups as disparate as human

rights advocates, pornography producers, free-market economists, leftist anarchists, Internet hackers, gay marriage campaigners, hippies, tech entrepreneurs, and small-government conservatives. Behind much of the rhetoric these views hold sway for much of the left and right. However, most importantly for millions across the West, these beliefs provide the dominant framework for navigating life.

This new cultural outlook is not so much an ideology but something that borders on a religious belief, which for Lilla "sanctions ignorance about the world, and therefore blinds adherents to its effects in that world. It begins with basic liberal principles—the sanctity of the individual, the priority of freedom, distrust of public authority, tolerance—and advances no further. It has no taste for reality, no curiosity about how we got here or where we are going. . . . It has no interest in institutions and has nothing to say about the necessary, and productive, tension between individual and collective purposes." What makes this contemporary outlook almost religious is its unquestioned faith that all we need to do "is give individuals maximum freedom in every aspect of their lives and all will be well."[3]

SOMETIME IN THE NIGHT A REVOLUTION OCCURRED AND WE DID NOT NOTICE IT.

These beliefs have not so much been argued as assumed. They are not enforced; rather they are imbibed. We do not receive them as intellectual propaganda to be obeyed. Instead they are communicated to us at an almost subconscious level through the high priests of advertising and the techno prophets of Silicon Valley. This new cultural mood becomes all the more powerful as the good is reduced to mere individual happiness. We can no longer see beyond ourselves, to learn from history or be concerned about the future. "The result is an amnesia about everything except the immediate, the instant, the now, and the me,"[4] worries media theorist Andrew Keen. The future is not left

to God, but rather a kind of implicit, fuzzy faith that things will simply move to get better. Somehow society will get better. My life will get better.

This faith in progress both societal and personal, which requires little of the individual, whilst promising maximum happiness, is an attractive proposition to many, both outside of the church and within. The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, having found faith at the end of his life, observed and anticipated the post-Christian mood taking hold: "The whole social structure is now tumbling down, dethroning its God, undermining its certainties. And all this, wonderfully enough, in the name of the health, wealth and happiness of all mankind. In the moral vacuum left by this emptying Christianity of its spiritual or transcendental content . . . is its opposite—life enhancement."[5] As we will learn, this emptying of faith of its content and desire for life enhancement is one of the great engines driving the disappearing church. It also is one of the great engines driving a new form of hopeful secularism. A kind of Western disbelief with a religious tone.

THEY LIKE JESUS BUT NOT CHURCH . . . OR DO THEY?

The Sunday Assembly is a hip, contemporary congregation in the heart of central London. It is filled with progressive, passionate, and idealistic attendees. The congregation sings along to contemporary music. There are messages given, social gatherings, offerings, kids clubs, midweek small groups, and social justice projects for the community. The Sunday Assembly, however, is not your typical church. It is a church for atheists.

The Sunday Assembly started as an idea of two Londoners who wanted to enjoy church without belief. The Sunday Assembly distances itself from militant atheists, instead preferring a friendly, accepting culture. While the movement is theology-free, it intuitively

gathers around the values of tolerance, progressive values, and personal development. The London congregation quickly outgrew their three-hundred-seat space. Since 2013, 480 congregations have been planted out of London in key cities across the Western world. The movement has struck a chord with many millennial attendees. Its global conference, called Wonder, features leadership workshops, advice on planting from a former-pastor-and-planter-turned-atheist, and help on growing healthy congregations from the son of a prominent Christian author and speaker, who has moved from being a "progressive Christian" to a humanist atheist.

Spearheading the rationale behind this new kind of atheistic gathering is philosopher and bestselling author Alain de Botton's book *Religion for Atheists*. De Botton argues, like many of the attendees of the atheist church, that contemporary culture is an alienating place. Not that church was alienating, but contemporary culture was alienating. While these congregants disagreed with faith, they felt that contemporary culture lacked the communal and institutional benefits that churches and communities of faith brought. One of the great mantras of church strategy in the West has been that people liked Jesus, but they did not like church. This was a mantra for many who were seeking to make Christianity relevant. Now, this new atheist church movement has turned this maxim on its head. These people did not like Jesus, but they liked church.

While the original congregation in London has stayed strong, its plants across the globe are smaller. Time will tell whether the growth of the atheist church movement has traction. In the nineteenth century the atheist philosopher August Comte launched a movement of unbelieving congregations; however, most of his congregations struggled to last beyond a single generation. The Sunday Assembly faces the same challenge faced by religious communities of disengaged, radical individualism. However, the appearance of the Sunday Assembly points

toward the essence of our post-Christian culture—that is, the desire to retain elements of Christianity while still moving past it.

A HISTORY OF POST-CHRISTIANITY

The idea that Western culture needs to move beyond orthodox Christianity into a post-Christian age can be traced back as far as the thought of the medieval theologian Joachim of Fiore. Joachim hoped for a future epoch of the Holy Spirit, in which the gospel of Christ would be transcended by a new order of love, and the church replaced by a new, spiritualized elite. Hope would not be in the return of Christ but in the arrival of an enlightened future, an idea that is central to post-Christianity. Moving beyond the age of Christ defined by the enfleshed, incarnational contours of the church, the epoch of the Spirit would be the age of the spiritually autonomous individual who has moved beyond mediating institutions, concrete expression, and the sacraments of the church. This is the essence of the idea of post-Christianity: the idea of a purer, less concrete form of Christianity emerging out of Christianity itself.

The political philosopher Eric Voegelin comments on this innovation: "We can recognize, even in this thoroughly Christian context, the first symptoms of the idea of a post-Christian era."[6] We can see also the germ in Joachim's three-part division of history that would grow into the trisecting of history into ancient-medieval-modern. This is the foundation of the belief that Western, developed culture is more progressive, enlightened, and evolved than other cultures. Hope then lies not in God, but in being on the right side of history.

A LIBERAL CHRISTIAN CULTURE

We can see in the trajectory of thought that grows out of Joachim's age of the Spirit the genesis of the notion that the church must emerge and evolve into a higher, purer, and progressed form. The

German philosopher Schelling, building upon Joachim's age of the Spirit, predicted a coming age of perfected Christianity, creating the idea of a liberal or progressive Christianity. The thought that Christianity must change and evolve into a new progressive form is ubiquitous both inside and outside of the church. Anytime anyone complains that the church must evolve its core theology with the times to stay relevant, or that the church's future is found in ditching the structures, institutions, and forms of "organized religion" and embrace a fuzzy notion of "community" or "spirituality," we can detect Joachim's fingerprints.

Reflecting on our current religious and cultural landscape, the cultural critic Joseph Bottum further sharpens our understanding of post-Christianity. For Bottum, our cultural post-Christianity bears a tremendous likeness to liberal Christianity, in particular its Protestant forms. Liberal Christianity grew alongside modernity, attempting to reshape faith and theology around the worldview of the Enlightenment. Miracles, the supernatural, and Scripture were viewed through the lens of skeptical scientism. A more materialist faith was formed, which removed the transcendent elements of Christianity and focused the believer's attention on an achievable kingdom of God that could be shaped by responsible and diligent human hands.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, liberal Christianity won over the leadership of a great part of the Western mainline denominations. These leaders saw liberal Christianity as the correct response to the rise of modernity. However, as countercultural and transcendent elements of faith were removed, liberal churches began to bleed believers. The exact opposite occurred to what many had predicted: the churches that retained countercultural and transcendent elements and maintained orthodox theologies grew, while those who had abandoned central elements of Christian theology declined at spectacular rates.

Over a few decades, once-strong denominations became a pale shadow of their former strength. In the exodus out of these churches, Bottum notes that many made their way into growing evangelical churches and others joined the Catholic Church. Crucially, many simply stopped going to church, and in the process migrated their liberal Christianity into the wider culture. Like a team of suicide bombers who obliterate themselves yet irrevocably change the cultural atmosphere, liberal Christianity has essentially destroyed itself as an ecclesiological, institutional force, yet has won the culture over to its vision of a Christianity reshaped for contemporary tastes.

While cursory glances at our culture's religious hue can give one the impression of atheism, we will soon see its liberal Christian residue. Following liberal Christianity's lead, the majority of Westerners hold to a belief in a pleasant afterlife and a benevolent Christian-esque God. However, the doctrines of divine judgment and hell are ditched as repugnantly retrograde. Concepts of personal morality and the pursuit of virtue are replaced by a desire for the communal good. The dogma of the kingdom of God and the coming New Jerusalem exists, but is reframed as the pursuit and possibility of a perfected, inclusive, civil society. Satan and the possibility of personal evil and sin remerges in a new depersonalized form, as Bottum explains: "Sin, in other words, appears as a social fact and the redeemed personality becomes confident about its own salvation by being aware of that fact. By knowing about, and rejecting, the evil that darkens society."[7]

MANY OF THOSE WHO LEAVE THE CHURCH DON'T IMAGINE THAT THEY ARE THROWING THEMSELVES INTO AN ATHEISTIC SEA.

In this reformulated understanding of sin and evil, salvation is achieved through the gaining of enlightened attitude. For the privileged post-Christian, this realization comes as a kind of revelation

that can be used as a badge of power. Thus those who have gained this enlightened attitude, who see the world for what it is, form a refashioned concept of the biblical notion of the elect. This community of the elect has moved beyond the need for concrete forms of church and association, and instead form a culture based on shared opinion manifested in a language based on a correctness of speech, opinion, and belief.

LEAVING CHURCH

Once we grasp that our post-Christian world is shaped by a liberal Christianity, we can understand better the phenomenon of church-leavers, especially amongst young adults. There have always been those who have left the church over doubts, just as there have always been those who left to pursue pleasure without account. When we understand that post-Christian culture offers a kind of alternative, liberal form of Christianity, we can see that many of those who leave don't imagine that they are throwing themselves into an atheistic sea. Instead, they are retaining their faith, albeit in a reframed form. Half a century ago such people would have probably moved from conservative churches to more liberal mainline ones. Now with the culture reflecting the values of the liberal mainline churches, one simply leaves the church.

If the transcendent elements of faith are ignored or softened, if sin is recast as purely unenlightened attitudes, if evil is viewed as "out there," existent in only structural forms, if the hope of the kingdom is re-imagined as achievable through activism and sound policy, if a culture exists within the church of Christian self-hatred, it is only a matter of time before one discovers that there are moral, happy people outside the church, who are spiritual and who wish for a culture of fairness and inclusion too. One day the penny drops, and one wonders if they can still have what they value about their faith without

the restrictions and prohibitions of creedal, communal Christianity. The cultural mood shudders toward the drive to become good. The individual, in his own power, perhaps with the aid of the cultural tide of progression, must become good.

THE DESIRE TO BE GOOD

J. K. A. Smith detects in this new moral order a return to another ancient Christian heresy, Pelagianism,[8] the belief that salvation can be attained and that human perfectibility is reachable through pure human effort. Pelagianism takes its name from Pelagius, a fifth-century British-Roman Christian theologian who held to the belief that humans could reach perfection through their own efforts. Pelagius taught that evil was a result of humans making bad choices. These choices, and by extension evil, could be removed through the making of good choices, gaining education, and practicing self-control. This was an attractive view to many, and around Pelagius coalesced a group of young believers from the elite strata of Roman society. Historian Peter Brown writes:

> *Pelagianism had appealed to a universal theme: the need of the individual to define himself, and to feel free to create his own values in the midst of the conventional, second-rate life of society. . . . The families, whose members Pelagius addressed, had lapsed gradually into Christianity by mixed marriages and political conformity. This meant that the conventional "good man" of pagan Rome had quite unthinkingly become the conventional "good Christian" of the fifth century.*[9]

Attractive to this young Christian elite was the idea that if sin could be removed through individual effort, the real locus of evil was found in the surrounding pagan society. A surrounding pagan society then could be reformed through the example of a church of virtuous and heroic Christian individuals. Jesus' injunction to practice good

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deeds in secrecy was forgotten as the Pelagians then became grand "virtue signalers," broadcasting their dramatic renunciations of wealth and privilege and their programs of social improvement in an attempt to impress the public into faith.

Pelagianism appealed to those who were accustomed to power, control, and privilege, and who found the doctrine of original sin insulting. At its core, Pelagianism had a Gnostic belief in the individual's potential to control his own salvation. The idea that Adam's sin had corrupted the whole of humanity was rejected by the Pelagians as too binding and restrictive. For Pelagians, the rejection of original sin meant the accepting of the damnation of those who are not able to achieve human perfection.

HELL AS SOCIAL ISOLATION AND SHAMING

For if human perfection is easily achieved through sensible choices and a decorous self-control, the human who fails, sins, lusts, and envies is justifiably damnable. In the Pelagianism of our contemporary post-Christianity—in which perfection and morality can be achieved by adopting the progressive cultural sensibilities—we fear a different kind of damnation. In the post-Christian imagination, to hold the wrong moral opinions will not send one to hell, but it could see you sent to the outer social darkness, to gnash your teeth in social irrelevance.

The North African bishop Augustine was God's man to answer Pelagius's heresy. In contrast to Pelagius's simplified understanding of sin and evil, Augustine saw in Scripture a much more nuanced truth concerning human imperfection. Beneath our sensible decisions to

do right lay a much more complicated subterranean and subconscious sea of discordant desires. The public "virtue signaling" of the Pelagians could seem noble on the surface, but could also disguise a prideful attempt to gain public affirmation. Augustine saw humans trapped in a permanent state of dislocation. This dislocation was driven by the rupturing of their relationship with God, a rupturing caused by human rebellion and pride. If Pelagius was right about sin, then we can all under our own steam adjust our own behavior and achieve perfection. However, if Augustine is correct, that our desires are disordered, running amok, and seeking God in all the wrong places, then only reconciliation with God can save us. For as the Gospels tell us, only Christ can truly see into the heart of man. Salvation does not come as a work of self-improvement, but as a divine shock, an undeserved gift given.

The Pelagian or post-Christian practitioner working toward their own moral self-improvement by seeking salvation by their own hand ultimately can only offer up praise to themselves. By bidding farewell to divinely revealed notions of morality and righteousness, we welcome into our lives the constant worry over our own goodness. The Pharisees parade their piety to be affirmed in their goodness. The post-Christian revolution, by removing God from the throne in preference of the self, cannot look to a transcendent Almighty for a definition of righteousness, morality, and justice. The self must determine what the good is.

The post-Christian robbed of God as a moral standard must "virtue signal" instead to prove their goodness to others, surrounding themselves with others who will mirror back and affirm their goodness, while casting pharisaical accusations and curses of outrage down upon those who do not hold the correct moral line. In reframing Christianity, the post-Christian births a reframed puritanical approach to morality. While our post-Christian age has divested

itself of attaching any morality to sexuality (barring rape and the abuse of minors), it approaches health, food, and the body with a puritanical fervor.

THE BEAUTIFUL WORLD IS WALLED

I am looking at a photo taken where Augustine lived and wrote in the northernmost part of Africa. In the foreground, two women in brightly colored polo shirts and immaculate white pants play golf on an even more immaculate green course. They are self-creating, sophisticated citizens of the beautiful world enjoying life. In the background there is an incredibly high cyclone fence, and perched precariously atop it are at least fifty people, their dark, dirty clothes a complete contrast to the women in the foreground. Behind the fence is not a lush golfing green but dirt. The cyclone fence is the border between Morocco and the tiny part of Spanish territory in North Africa, a legacy of colonialism. The men atop the fence are African refugees waiting for the right moment to climb down into the European Union and attempt to find their place in the beautiful world.

THE "INCLUSIVE" WEST AT ITS CORE IS BUILT UPON EXCLUSION.

The progressive, tolerant, beautiful post-Christian world is increasingly becoming a walled city. Inside the beautiful world, a growing clamor for inclusion attempts to allow its citizens absolute freedom, yet at the same time the borders are secured, keeping the masses of poor and displaced people out. The West congratulates itself on its tolerance and exclusivity; however, our passports, citizenship papers, and armed border guards illustrate the true ethic of inclusion and equality held by the West. The "inclusive" West at its core is built upon exclusion. At its heart it reaches for the kingdom, but falls short.

POST-CHRISTIANITY IS A GRACELESS FAITH

Just as the Pelagians saw themselves as a moral force, advocating and beckoning the church toward moral improvement, so today the post-Christian culture looks down upon the church, beckoning it to lose its "immorality" and evolve toward virtue. However, the moral evolution they beckon the church toward is a religion minus grace. Without an understanding of the primal originality of human sin, post-Christianity is blind to its own control, its own power, its own weaknesses. The rejection of original sin divides us because evil is seen as "out there." The post-Christian society, which denies its own Christian underpinnings, falls into the trap of religiosity. Because it is religious and yet denies its own sinfulness, it must blame the other. The right blames the "illegal immigrant," the left the "uneducated working class" or "unsophisticated rural folk."

THE FREEDOM IN DISCOVERING OUR OWN FALLENNESS

We now as a culture prefer the authentic, the organic, the homemade and homegrown, the approachable, the touchable, the human, and the natural. These things seem to offer us an ethos of goodness minus the boundaries and parameters of traditional definitions of sin. Yet they are impotent in the face of raw evil. The contemporary liberal ethos of not doing something that harms another believes—influenced by materialistic underpinnings—that harm is only physical. To be good news to a world that does not know or acknowledge the full weight of evil and thus cannot treat it, we must again rediscover the full weight and eternal nature of wrongdoing.

The visual representations that amounted to virtue and morality in the Roman world could not be true indicators of rightness with God, for only Christ could truly see into the hearts of humans. Programs of moral self-improvement minus God naturally veer either to love at the expense of justice or justice at the expense of love.

The Pelagians of Augustine's time demanded justice of those who do not love according to their standards, while demanding that they be loved and being blind to the ways in which they deserved to be held to divine justice.

The post-Christian revolution is a kind of Christian revolution minus Christ, in which the enemy is always the other, in which justice is always sought externally. The Christian revolution demanded the death of the king, but not the king that sat in a palace; rather it demanded the death of the kings and queens who ate of the fruit in the garden. However, at the height of the revolution the only good King, the only monarch who ruled with justice and righteousness, who did not deserve to be toppled, allowed Himself to be executed, so that we with all our pretenses of royalty would not have to die for our unjust rule.

The cross held both love and justice together. The gift of grace caused humans to fall at the foot of the cross, understanding that they were sinful, only then to be picked up into the loving arms of Christ to find that they were children of God. The exclusivity of the cross was the doorway to the inclusivity of the kingdom. A kingdom that will not come in fullness through the self-effort of enlightened hands and opinions, but when Christ Himself returns with justice and love. Then we will discover a vision of justice far broader than our narrow contemporary conceptions, one that has answers not just for those inside the cyclone fencing of the beautiful world.