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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

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Mission in post-Christendom: Anabaptist and Free Church perspectives

Ian M. Randall

Ian M. Randall is Tutor in Church History and Spirituality, Spurgeon's College, London, and Senior Research Fellow, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague

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'Post-Christendom' language is in vogue. The idea that the missional context in Britain and elsewhere in the West is a 'post-Christendom' context is increasingly seen as something not only to be acknowledged but celebrated. In 1999 Alan Kreider, an influential Mennonite writer who was then Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, Oxford, wrote: 'The setting for God's mission in the West will be post-Christendom...I believe that the experience of the West indicates that a unitary Christian society cannot be built without compulsion. And compulsion, as a result of our Christendom past, is impossible in post-Christendom.'¹ Stuart Murray, who has worked closely with Alan Kreider, has written important books on church planting and mission, particularly in Western Europe, 'after Christendom' – or 'post-Christendom'.² In his most substantial book, *Post-Christendom* (2004), Stuart Murray expands on his vision of a church freed from Christendom's attempts to impose Christian faith by coercion. He argues that the manner in which the church in Europe over 1500 years (from the conversion of the emperor Constantine onwards) pursued its mission was wrong-headed, although a few movements – the Donatists, Waldensians, Lollards and Anabaptists – are examples to follow. Further, he considers that evangelism today is 'deeply unpopular, within and beyond the churches' and suggests that when people are told about the unattractive side of Christendom's expansion – conversions through domination – they often respond: 'Now I understand why I hate evangelism!'³ This study examines the way in which 'post-Christendom' thinking has evolved, looking especially at the influence of Anabaptist views, and suggests that more attention be given to the Free Church tradition and global experience when thinking about contemporary mission.

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- 1 A. Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 99.
 - 2 S. Murray, *Church Planting* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998); *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004); *Church After Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). He also writes as Stuart Murray Williams.
 - 3 Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 227.

The post-Christendom paradigm

Some of the discussion taking place among those who want to promote 'Church after Christendom' thinking conveys the impression that these ideas are relatively new. However, the term 'post-Christendom' was (as far as I have been able to discover) first used by Paul Peachey, of the Church Peace Mission, in an article in *Interpretation* in 1965 in which he argued that it was the correct way to describe the passing of a particular historical form of Christianity.⁴ Peachey noted that since early in the twentieth century there had been 'here and there' a few 'perceptive souls' who had seen the reality of the end of Christendom. He quoted from Walter Hobbhouse, who wrote in 1910 about the need for the Church to stop 'pretending to be co-extensive with the world'. Peachey did not want to deny the extraordinary achievements of Christendom, nor did he want to 'fall victim to the illusion of primitivism, to the dream of a recaptured pristine purity, as though nineteen centuries of church history had not transpired'. However, he was insistent that if the Church was to be heard in the world – and his concern was particularly with authentic ethical discourse – then it needed to recover its distinct identity as the community of the Risen Lord.⁵ Gradually these ideas spread. In 1985 the Canadian Presbyterian theologian, Douglas John Hall, who was to take up the 'post-Christendom' language, argued for an abandonment of any concept within mission thinking of 'conquering for Christ'.⁶ For him, as for Peachey, 'Christian identity in the post-Christendom world' is clarified when the church is deprived of cultural props and simply confesses its faith in 'God as God is made known in Jesus Christ through the divine Spirit and the testimony of scripture'.⁷

The literature advocating embracing mission 'after Christendom' or mission in the 'post-Christendom' context expanded considerably in the 1990s. Stanley Hauerwas, writing in 1991 in what was to be his widely-known provocative style, explored how the church was to behave 'after Christendom', and in doing so proposed that a Christian nation was a bad idea.⁸ From 1992 to 1997 a study project entitled the 'Missiology of Western Culture Project' drew together leading scholars to discuss the interplay of the Christian churches and their message with the culture of the contemporary West. The History Group within this Project suggested that Christendom might be a useful lens through which to gain a missiological perspective on Christianity in the West, and a colloquium around this

4 P. Peachey, 'New Ethical Possibility: The Task of Post-Christendom Ethics', *Interpretation* 19:1 (1965), 32.

5 *Ibid.*, 32, 33, 38.

6 D. J. Hall, *Christian Mission: The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (New York: Friendship Press, 1985).

7 D. J. Hall, 'Confessing Christ in a Post-Christendom Context', *The Ecumenical Review* 52: 3 (2000), 411; cf. D. J. Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995).

8 S. Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

theme was held in Paris in April 1997. Christendom was defined as a civilisation in which Christianity is dominant, with this dominance backed by social or legal compulsions. Alan Kreider and other members of the History Group brought to the wider Project group of twenty-two scholars (from eight countries) a radical Reformation bias which saw Christendom in a strongly negative light: from the radical perspective it was suggested that 'the coercion, control and domination that were part of the Christendom model of church and mission carry within themselves the seeds of the modern repudiation of Christianity in Europe'. The participants as a whole, however, demonstrated through their diverse cultural, political and historical contributions that the complex and ambiguous issues involved defied simplistic analysis.⁹

The dialogue that took place at this conference in Paris was paralleled by wider debates about how Christendom should be viewed, particularly missiologically. In 1996 Oliver O'Donovan, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, University of Oxford, produced *The Desire of the Nations*, in which he argued for (among other things) locating the Christendom idea as 'an aspect of the church's understanding of *mission*'. He continued:

The church is not at liberty to withdraw from mission; nor may it undertake its mission without confident hope of success. It was the missionary imperative that compelled the church to take the conversion of the [Roman] empire seriously and to seize the opportunities it offered. These were not merely opportunities for 'power'. They were opportunities for preaching the Gospel, baptising believers, curbing the violence and cruelty of the empire, and, perhaps most important of all, forgiving their former persecutors.¹⁰

O'Donovan writes as an Anglican. A similar vision is found in *Christendom Awake* (1999), by Aidan Nichols, a Dominican, although Nichols' work has as its focus his own Roman Catholic community in England. He states (in considering this community's mission) that 'the object of our priestly apostolate can hardly be anything other than the conversion of England', and sees that as including the goal of a Catholic 'public norm'.¹¹ There are voices seeking to rehabilitate aspects of traditional Christendom concepts as a stimulus to and a framework for missional thinking.

As the historic churches in Western Europe continue to decline, however, the possibility that an over-arching role for the church in the new Europe will be

9 H. McLeod, 'Introduction', and W. Ustorf, 'A Missiological postscript', in H. McLeod and W. Ustorf (eds.), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) chapters 1 and 13; see A. Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), for the papers of this conference. One of the participants was Rowan Williams, later Archbishop of Canterbury.

10 O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 212.

11 A. Nichols, *Christendom Awake* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 237-41.

reinstated seems increasingly remote.¹² Indeed some who find it congenial to live 'after Christendom' have taken up with a degree of enthusiasm the concept of the church experiencing life at the margins.¹³ Philip Wickeri has distinguished between mission *at* or *on* the margins and mission *from* the margins.¹⁴ A number of books have been published that speak about mission at the margins, for example A. J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (2002) and J. Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins* (2003).¹⁵ However, Wickeri, a Professor of Evangelism and Mission in the USA, argues that the story of the early church and of the global church today is of mission that moves out *from* the margins. Wickeri quotes Douglas John Hall's statement in *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (1995) that the challenge for the church is to see its relative 'powerlessness' as something that offers 'a creative opportunity for change and renewal'.¹⁶ Wickeri is concerned to help churches in the West see the potential of mission from the margins in a post-Christendom context, but as someone who worked in Asia for twenty years he is well equipped to draw from the Majority world. He speaks of how Richard Shaull, in his book (with Waldo Cesar), *Pentecostalism and the Future of Christian Churches* (2000), 'scandalized many' by suggesting that Pentecostals at the margins of Brazilian church and society might have something to say to established churches and theologians.¹⁷ Marginality and the merits of post-Christendom remain disputed concepts.

Anabaptist attitudes

Although those who see mission in post-Christendom in positive terms come from a variety of ecclesial traditions, an important influence has been the Anabaptist or radical Reformation tradition. For the radicals of the sixteenth century, Christendom's linking of church and state was a monumental mistake, one they believed was being repeated by 'magisterial' Protestants. Rejecting what they saw as the erroneous view that Europe was Christian, the Anabaptists pro-

12 For a discussion of evangelicals and pan-European religious life see I. M. Randall, 'Evangelicals and European Integration', *European Journal of Theology* 14:1 (2005), 17-26.

13 See, for example, S. Murray and A. Wilkinson-Hayes, *Hope from the Margins* (Cambridge: Grove, 1999).

14 P. L. Wickeri, 'Mission from the Margins: the *Missio Dei* in the Crisis of World Christianity', *International Review of Mission* 93(No. 369, 2004), 194-95.

15 A. J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); J. Rieger (ed.), *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

16 Wickeri, 'Mission from the Margins', 197.

17 Wickeri, 'Mission from the Margins', 195; cf. R. Shaull and W. Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of Christian Churches: Limitations and Changes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

moted mission across Europe.¹⁸ The main denominational family today that has its origins in Anabaptism, the Mennonites, takes its name from a leading Dutch Anabaptist, Menno Simons. Baptists in Britain have been among those who have introduced aspects of the Mennonite tradition to British Christians. Baptists and Anabaptists have had a shared belief in the baptism of believers only and in the believers' church. *The Baptist Annual Register* (compiled first in 1790), included a remarkable amount of detail about Mennonite churches in the Netherlands, Prussia, Switzerland, France and Russia.¹⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, the foremost Baptist preacher of the nineteenth century, when issuing a challenge to more adventurous mission, used the example of Menno Simons, as well as Baptist figures.²⁰ Ernest Payne, who from 1951 to 1967 was General Secretary of the British Baptist Union, wrote sympathetically about Anabaptism.²¹ In an essay in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* Payne argued for the crucial importance of both Anabaptist and Baptist witness in such areas as believer's baptism, evangelism and religious freedom, ideas which clearly mark a missionary church.²²

In the 1940s, when Ernest Payne was seeking to introduce Anabaptism to an English readership, North American Mennonites were making fresh efforts to advocate their approach to issues of church and state. An address by Harold Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', delivered in 1943, was to prove a milestone. Its publication in the journal *Church History* and its subsequent circulation as a pamphlet ensured that many beyond the Mennonite world and beyond North America were introduced to Anabaptism. The essence of Bender's argument was that Anabaptism, or more particularly the Swiss Brethren (who emerged in Zurich in 1525), represented 'consistent evangelical Protestantism'.²³ Writing in 1962, Bender said of the early Anabaptists: 'They had heard the call of Christ, "Come and follow me!" In simple faith and complete commitment they went out into the world to follow this call and to bring men to this Christ.'²⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s movements of evangelical and charismatic renewal in Britain stimulated further interest in the Anabaptists. Sources of radical thinking about ec-

18 The most comprehensive book on the radicals is G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1962).

19 J. Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1793), 303-20.

20 *The Sword and the Trowel*, July 1880, 320.

21 See E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Movement in the Reformation and Onwards* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947); *The Anabaptists of the 16th Century and their Influence in the Modern World* (London, 1949).

22 E. A. Payne, 'The Anabaptist Impact on Western Christendom', in G. F. Hershberger, et al, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1957), 312.

23 Harold S. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', *Church History* 13 (1944), 9. More recent scholarship sees unity and diversity within Anabaptism: see C. Arnold Snyder, 'Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology', in H. W. Pipkin (ed.), *Essays in Anabaptist Theology* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 1-33.

24 H. S. Bender, 'The Response of our Anabaptist Fathers to the World's Challenge', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36:3 (1962), 207.

clesiology were being widely explored. The Mennonite Centre in London, founded in 1953, became increasingly influential in the 1970s through the work of Alan and Ellie Kreider. An Anabaptist study group, convened by Alan Kreider and by Nigel Wright, a Baptist minister who became a lecturer at Spurgeon's College in 1987 (and later Principal), met in the 1980s at the London Mennonite Centre. As the challenge of commitment to radical discipleship came to the fore, the writings of Mennonites such as John Howard Yoder and Ron Sider had a shaping influence.²⁵ In 1986 Nigel Wright's book, *The Radical Kingdom*, introduced Anabaptist ideas to a wider evangelical/charismatic audience.²⁶ Other members of the Anabaptist study group included Stuart Murray, who was to examine Anabaptist hermeneutics for his PhD, and Noel Moules, who launched *Workshop*, a leadership and discipleship training programme which has had a considerable impact.²⁷

The specific focus here, however, is the way renewed interest in Anabaptism affected thinking about mission. The key figure is undoubtedly Stuart Murray. In the mid-1980s, when he was a church planter in Tower Hamlets, East London, Stuart Murray realised that his evangelical-charismatic experience did not provide all the resources he needed. He found that Anabaptism offered ways to empower uneducated Christians; started with Jesus when reading the Bible; emphasised building community; made the issues of the kingdom and of peace central; and, crucially for this study, outlined a 'new perspective on mission that comes from rejecting the notion of a Christian nation'.²⁸ Stuart Murray notes in a chapter in *Post-Christendom* on 'Mission' that in the sixteenth century Catholics, Protestant Reformers and Anabaptists 'adopted different perspectives on mission and followed different trajectories'. Catholics engaged in world mission, Protestants were 'maintenance-oriented' and only Anabaptists believed Europe needed evangelising.²⁹ It is important, however, to note something usually overlooked when Anabaptists are held up as an example of a mission-oriented movement. Arguably Anabaptist mission in the sixteenth century gained benefit from precisely the Christendom context its proponents criticised. The society in which they witnessed was one that affirmed the Christian story and there was, in consequence, the possibility of discourse about how to express Christian faith. Discourse which assumes Christian knowledge is, by contrast, generally not possible in contemporary Britain.

25 For example, J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

26 Nigel Wright, *The Radical Kingdom* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1986).

27 For Moules' story see A. Kreider and S. Murray, *Coming Home* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, and Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 2000), 102-04. Stuart Murray's PhD was published as *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000).

28 *Coming Home*, 212.

29 Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 220. For a series of fine essays on Anabaptist Mission see Wilbert R. Shenk (ed.), *Anabaptism and Mission* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984).

The approach to mission in post-Christendom that has been championed particularly by Alan Kreider avoids some of the problems of seeking to bridge over from Anabaptism's Christendom context to post-Christendom. Kreider's emphasis is on the lessons to be learned from mission in pre-Christendom. He has written about this in various places, most recently (in 2005) in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, in an article which engages in a critique of David Bosch's seminal volume, *Transforming Mission* (1991). Alan Kreider does not consider that Bosch 'came to terms with the advent of Christendom and its consequences for mission'. For Kreider there are two critical missionary paradigms – 'pre-Christendom' and 'Christendom'. These are outlined in terms of eight categories: the Christendom shift moved the perspective of Christians from the margins of society to the centre; buttressed Christianity's appeal with imposing and attractive incentives; moved the church's reliance from divine to human power; changed Christianity from a voluntary movement to a compulsory institution; meant that Christianity lost the capacity to be distinctive; suggested that the teaching of Jesus was applicable only to a minority of 'perfect' Christians; turned gatherings for worship into grand assembles; and altered the focus of the church from mission to maintenance.³⁰ Other writers have similarly drawn from the early Church. David Smith, in *After Christendom*, comments that 'the further Christendom recedes in our rear-view mirrors, the more relevant the experiences of the fathers of the church will be found to be'.³¹ The strength of Alan Kreider's case is that he is being true to his own Anabaptist tradition in seeing Christendom as missionally deleterious.

Free Church alternatives

There is much common ground between the Anabaptist and the Free Church (or, in England, Dissenting or Nonconformist)-understandings of mission.³² In his famous *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* of 1612, Thomas Helwys, pastor of the first Baptist congregation established in England, argued that while God had given the king 'all worldly power' there was a heavenly kingdom and that 'with this kingdom our lord the king hath nothing to do (by his kingly power) but as a subject himself: and that Christ is king alone'.³³ W. K. Jordan considered that Helwys 'gave to religious toleration the finest and fullest defence which it had ever received in England'.³⁴ At the same time, Helwys did not wish

30 A. Kreider, 'Beyond Bosch: The Early Church and the Christendom Shift', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29: 2 (2005), 59-68.

31 Smith, *After Christendom*, 124.

32 I am going to use the term Free Church for all churches/denominations that out of principle do not have a link with the state.

33 T. Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1935), 41; cf. I. M. Randall, 'Early English Baptists and Religious Liberty', *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 4, October 1993, 10-16.

34 W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* (London, 1936), 274.

to play down the distinctions between different religious traditions merely for the sake of 'tolerance'. Like the Anabaptists, he was uncompromising in his adherence to what he saw as vital ecclesiological distinctives such as separation from the state church and the practice of believer's baptism. In some of the most famous words of the *Short Declaration*, however, Helwys bravely announced, in terms that had been articulated earlier by the Anabaptists, that 'men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it, neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure'.³⁵ Mission was not to be undertaken through coercion.

Churches in the Free Church tradition and within the earlier Anabaptist movement share many common concerns in areas such as mission. But compared with the fresh interest in Anabaptism there is much less popular awareness of the missional contribution of the Free Churches. In *Post-Christendom* Stuart Murray devotes only one short paragraph to the Free Churches. He also describes evangelistic leaders in the nineteenth century as preaching a gospel in which 'conversion meant commitment to shared social norms' and suggests that such mission was 'not politically, socially or economically disruptive' but 'inculcated personal spirituality, reinforcing the status quo'.³⁶ Free Church leaders of the nineteenth century would have found it hard to recognise themselves in this description. Timothy Larsen, in his study of the socio-political activism of the Free Churches in this period, argues that Baptists and Congregationalists derived their view of their role in the public square from their ecclesiology. They were also evangelicals, giving support to the Evangelical Alliance.³⁷ While rejecting any church-state link, many nineteenth-century Nonconformists saw their mission as involving communal change. Thus the ministry of R. W. Dale, a remarkable Congregational minister in Birmingham, had a revolutionary impact on civic life as he tackled fundamental causes of poverty and crime.³⁸ Later in the century C. H. Spurgeon, the Victorian 'Prince of Preachers', although known for his strong emphasis on evangelism, also addressed issues such as war. He asked: 'Are we to go on invading and slaughtering, in order to obtain a scientific frontier...how many of our weaker neighbours will have their houses burned and their fields ravaged by this Christian (?) nation?'³⁹ This is not the gospel of the status quo.

Whereas the Anabaptist *Schleitheim Confession* (1527) stated that 'it does not

35 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 69.

36 Ibid, 224-25.

37 T. Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 253, 258.

38 See A. W. W. Dale, *Life of R W Dale of Birmingham* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902).

39 Reproduced in M. K. Nicholls, *C. H. Spurgeon – The Pastor Evangelist* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), 65.

befit a Christian to be a magistrate',⁴⁰ the general Free Church view has been that this is too restrictive an approach to societal involvement. The English Free Churches came from a position of marginality and indeed exclusion in terms of national life but by the later nineteenth century they were presenting a vision for society. Their political involvement reached a high point in 1906 when they fought for the return of the Liberal Party in the election of that year. Liberals came in with a huge majority, and it was reckoned that there were nearly 200 Free Church MPs (mainly Methodists, Congregationalists and Baptists) in Parliament.⁴¹ Free Church ministers such as the Baptists, John Clifford and F. B. Meyer, and the Methodist, Hugh Price Hughes, had been articulating a 'social gospel'.⁴² It is sometimes thought that the social gospel was a product of liberal theology. For evangelicals like Clifford, Meyer and Hughes, however, it was the application of the gospel to society. Hughes advocated a 'blending of evangelical theology and socialist ethics'.⁴³ F. B. Meyer was the leading Free Church speaker at the annual Keswick Convention, the main meeting place of evangelicals, yet at the same time Meyer pressed for mission that involved social change. His own ministry was holistic and in the early twentieth century he campaigned widely at Free Church meetings for better provision for old age pensions, better housing (people, he asserted, were living 'like pigs in a sty'), and action over women's wages. These issues were not dissociated in the minds of Meyer and others from the gospel, since, as Meyer argued, the gospel created 'a kingdom of social justice'. He hoped for 'the redemption of the State', with a consequent righting of wrongs which made a few rich and many poor.⁴⁴ In 1906 the widely-read *Christian World* rightly recognised Meyer's influence in countering the 'Plymouth Brethren limitation of religion to purely spiritual exercises'.⁴⁵

It is true that by the mid-twentieth century many evangelicals, including evangelicals within the Free Churches, had played down this wider missional vision. The loss of a commitment to social transformation has been called 'the great reversal'.⁴⁶ More recent decades have seen social involvement being reaf-

40 *The Schleithem Confession*, trans. and ed. by J. H. Yoder (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1977), 15.

41 D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 142-7; D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 311.

42 For a treatment of the social gospel in England, see D. M. Thompson, 'The Emergence of the Nonconformist Social Gospel in England', in K. Robbins, ed., *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America c1750 - c1950: Essays in Honour of W R Ward* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 255-80.

43 C. Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 5.

44 Meyer's speeches were reported in detail in the *British Weekly* and the *Christian World*. For details see I. M. Randall, *Spirituality and Social Change* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), chapter 6.

45 *Christian World*, 26 April 1906, 12.

46 D. O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal* (London: Scripture Union, 1972)

firmed, but given the talk of the church being 'at the margins', there may be a need for a fresh look at the Free Church story. In 1994-5, Nigel Wright wrote articles for *Anabaptism Today* on church and the state, arguing that the church could be a major source of 'inspiration, values and innovation' for society as it drew upon divine resources to 'incarnate something new in the world'.⁴⁷ Writing almost a decade later, he suggested that the discussion of mission and Christendom had moved on: 'The persuasion that Christendom was a bad idea is now commonplace but in being rejected the issues surrounding "Christendom" are often oversimplified and unclear.' Wright posited the possibility of re-inventing Christendom, pointing out that if the loss of Christendom meant public policy was determined by a secularist world-view, he found it hard to rejoice in that. In a key passage in terms of the debate about mission in post-Christendom he wrote:

Are we to abandon the powers to idolatry? Sometimes I gain from Anabaptist friends the impression that they are so keen to be free from Christendom that a godless state is exactly what they would prefer. By contrast, I want to contend that the vision of a non-sectarian state can actually be a Christian vision for the state.⁴⁸

This vision was set out much more fully by Nigel Wright two years later in his seminal book *Free Church, Free State* (2005), which is a call for the renewal of Free Church commitment to imaginative mission that includes a vision for societal change.⁴⁹

A new Christendom?

Many of the writers engaged in debate about 'post-Christendom' live and work in the West, and have mission in the West as their primary concern. Interest has been generated, however, in the idea that the new global Christian community (in which Western Christians are a minority, and are in decline) might produce a new non-Western Christendom. Indeed Philip Jenkins has written a book, *The New Christendom* (2002), which argues for this perspective. In a section of the book entitled 'The Rise of Christendom', Jenkins notes that Christendom – in the sense of the European Christian culture – ultimately 'collapsed in the face of the overwhelming power of secular nationalism'. Jenkins is aware of the work of Douglas John Hall on 'Confessing Christ in Post-Christendom'. But Jenkins' concern is with the changing global configuration and with a future in which

47 Nigel Wright, 'Respectful and Subversive', *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 9, June 1995, 19. Nigel Wright's PhD examined these issues. It was published as *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, church and the social order in the theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jurgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

48 Nigel Wright, 'Re-inventing Christendom', *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 33, June 2003, 7.

49 Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2005).

the Christian world will be 'anchored in the Southern continents'.⁵⁰ The shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity during the twentieth century is undisputed.⁵¹ But the language of the 'new Christendom' has been critiqued, for example by Todd Johnson and Sandra Kim who suggest that because in the Christendom model mission is seen in terms of territorial expansion, with the goal being acquisition of more Christian territory, it is better to think (as recent scholars have been doing) of the rise of 'global Christianity'.⁵² Dana Robert speaks about the new global Christianity developing as a result of the 'increasing indigenization' of the Christian faith within a postcolonial framework.⁵³

The growth of Christianity outside the West is arguably a subversion rather than an extension of Christendom. Indeed Andrew Walls spoke in 1996 in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* of 'the fortunate subversion of the church' through the world Protestant missionary movement (and especially voluntary societies) from the eighteenth century onwards.⁵⁴ Wilbert Shenk has argued that although these missionary movements – beginning with the Pietists and the Moravians in Germany and spreading to the Anglo-Saxon world – had an enormous influence, nonetheless 'mission' and 'church' remained separate. He sees the need for a 'Post-Christendom Ecclesiology' which is missional in its identity.⁵⁵ What is not always clearly identified in this discussion is that the Free Church tradition has always objected to territorial Christendom. At the famous World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, Western Christendom's territorial view of mission prevailed. But, as Andrew Walls argued in 2002 (following the lead given by Leslie Newbigin), by the late twentieth century Western culture was in need of missionary assistance from the non-Western world.⁵⁶ As well as the shift of the centre of gravity there had also been a shift in missional thinking. It was the Free Church vision of pioneers such as William Carey that had largely prevailed. For Baptist pioneers such as Carey, Andrew Fuller (the first Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society), and others like them who shaped Baptist life in the nineteenth century, mission was not an adjunct to the life of the church. Indeed the formation of the Baptist Union followed the formation of the Missionary Society and was specifically intended to support mission. As John Briggs

50 P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10-14.

51 See Dana L. Robert, 'Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24: 2 (2000), 50-58.

52 T. M. Johnson and S. S. Kim, 'Describing the Worldwide Christian Phenomenon', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24:2 (2005), 80-84.

53 Robert, 'Shifting Southward', 56.

54 A. E. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), chapter 18.

55 W. R. Shenk, 'New Wineskins for New Wine: Towards a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24:2 (2005), 73-79.

56 A. E. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), chapter 3.

argues, no history of Baptists in the nineteenth century can be properly focussed unless it underlines Baptist commitment to world mission.⁵⁷

Given that there has been such remarkable growth of the Christian faith in its Free Church rather than State Church forms, contemporary mission in Western culture in the twenty-first century has the opportunity to draw lessons from the witness of the world church.⁵⁸ This is not something completely new. In the 1830s William Knibb, a nineteenth-century Baptist missionary in Jamaica, changed his views about mission in the light of his experiences in Jamaica. He abandoned the belief that mission could be undertaken without reference to social issues. Knibb was politically disruptive through his crucial evidence to Britain's political leaders about how British landowners were treating slaves: his first-hand testimony helped to bring about the abolition of slavery in British territories.⁵⁹ The potential of cross-over from non-Western to Western missional experience has not always been appreciated in the writings of those in Britain who are seeking to re-emphasise the Anabaptist tradition. The Anabaptist Network Newsletter in February 2004 spoke about seven significant (and inter-related) ecclesiological shifts taking place in the West.

- *From the centre to margins*: in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central; in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority*: in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority; in post-Christendom a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners*: in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story; in post-Christendom – aliens, exiles and pilgrims.
- *From privilege to plurality*: in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges; in post-Christendom they are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness*: in Christendom churches could exert control over society; in post-Christendom influence is only through witnessing.
- *From maintenance to mission*: in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo; in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- *From institution to movement*: in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode; in post-Christendom as a Christian movement.⁶⁰

This analysis is illuminating, and deserves serious attention. What it does not recognise is that much Free Church world mission has been undertaken by mi-

57 J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 293.

58 See L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

59 E. A. Payne, *Freedom in Jamaica: some chapters in the story of the BMS* (London: Carey Press, n.d.).

60 Anabaptist Network Newsletter, February 2004.

norities undertaking 'mission within a contested environment'.

More account could also fruitfully be taken of what has been called 'reverse mission'. The growth of the church in the non-Western world (especially Pentecostal growth) is having a highly significant impact in Britain through large and growing Black majority and ethnically diverse churches.⁶¹ Already under half the worshippers in London's churches are white and the largest Baptist churches in London are Black majority congregations. Kingsley Appiagyei, who has pastoral responsibility for 2,000 people in Trinity Baptist Church, West Norwood (a church which began under two decades ago as a Bible study group), said in 2001 that he saw himself as a missionary seeking to strengthen the church in the UK.⁶² What might the significance be of the aim that Chinese Christians have of sending out a minimum of 100,000 missionaries to other countries over the next ten to twenty years?⁶³ In China there were approximately 700,000 Protestants when the Western missionaries left. It seems likely that the loss of missionary 'power' galvanised the Chinese Christians, and their number grew to perhaps thirty-six million by the end of the twentieth century.⁶⁴ David Smith speaks of Christian growth in China – given the role that China seems destined to play on the world scene – as 'a phenomenon of incalculable significance'.⁶⁵ While it is good to give attention, as is being done by many analysts, to phenomena like the small 'emerging churches', almost all of these are white and middle-class. Minority ethnic growth in British Christianity is a prime example of how groups that were at one time marginal to British church life can reach a stage where they (in all probability) represent the future. In this they are replicating to some degree the growth of other Free Churches in earlier centuries.

Conclusion

The debate about mission in post-Christendom is an important one. The way in which both scholars and missional practitioners (who are in some cases the same people) have been examining the changing culture in which mission is being undertaken in the West is itself a sign of hope. The re-appropriation of Anabaptism has offered inspiration. Nigel Wright, although a critical participant in the revival of Anabaptism, has argued consistently for the relevance of the Ana-

61 See M. Sturge, *Look what the Lord has done!: An exploration of black Christian faith in Britain* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2005)

62 *Spurgeon's College Record*, April 2001, 3.

63 See D. Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003). David Aikman, a former senior foreign correspondent for *Time* magazine who has covered China for over thirty years, predicts huge growth in China's Christian population.

64 Dana L. Robert, 'Christianity in the Wider World', in H. Kee et al., Part VI, *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 570.

65 Smith, *Mission After Christendom*, 119.

baptist movement as an example of a 'dissenting minority which nonetheless has immense transformative potential'.⁶⁶ However, at times simplistic conclusions are drawn. Some of the material coming from the contemporary Anabaptist world tends to lump all churches, including the Free Churches, together under the banner of 'Christendom'. Coupled with this there has, arguably, been a trend towards an unquestioning acceptance and even celebration of the marginality of the Christian faith in Western Europe. Could an Anabaptist vision go beyond such marginality? The extraordinary ministry of the Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier in Moravia in the 1520s did not operate only at the margins of society and indeed Hubmaier himself opposed such a policy.⁶⁷ Similarly, the story of the Free Churches has not been one in which being a movement at the margins has been accepted as 'the way it should be'. This particular story deserves to be better known as a model for mission. Finally, the remarkable growth of Christianity in the Majority World in the twentieth century suggests that Christian communities living out their faith in non-Christendom settings can grow and can increase their influence – without State Church power. Often those looking at mission in the West today do not draw sufficiently from the excellent missiological work being done on global Christianity. Insights from the Anabaptism tradition, the Free Church tradition, and the global Christian mission that now finds its energy coming largely from former 'mission fields', can all enrich and make more effective contemporary mission in the Western, post-Christendom context.

Abstract

The idea that the missional context in the West is a 'post-Christendom' context is increasingly seen as something not only to be acknowledged but celebrated. For several influential writers, Christian identity in the post-Christendom world is clarified when the church loses official power. This article examines how 'post-Christendom' thinking has evolved, looking at the influence of views drawn from the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, who rejected the Christendom model. The recovery of Anabaptist perspectives means more attention has been given to mission in pre-Christendom. The article then explores what the Free Church tradition offers when thinking about contemporary mission. While the Free Church view has been that church and state should be separate, the Free Church story includes many examples of mission that seeks to transform society. Finally, the article argues that the growth of non-Western Christianity suggests that Christian communities in non-Christendom settings can increase their influence – without state power.

66 N. G. Wright, 'Catching the Bell Rope: Renewing the church for discipleship and mission', *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 1, November 1992, 19.

67 C. A. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1995), chapter 13.