# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

## VOLUME 23

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith*

**EDITOR: DAVID PARKER**

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

**Volume 23 • Number 4 • October 1999**

When the apocalyptic writers of the Bible proclaimed the kingdom's coming, they spoke of its nearness in time. Jesus had the same message of immediacy, but he also emphasized its urgency. The kingdom was not merely a future phenomenon but a dynamic force in the here and now. Thus Christians are called to struggle now for kingdom issues—social and economic justice, world peace, racial and ethnic equality, and stewardship of the environment. We pursue these goals with a certainty born of the conviction that the Christian hope leads somewhere—to the triumph of God. As people who have heard God's loving invitation to share in his victory, we long for the day when the shout will resound throughout the heavens and earth: 'Praise God! For the Lord, almighty is king!' It is this assurance that gives the millennial hope such power.

We look forward to a time when peace and justice will embrace, prevailing on earth as in heaven. The millennial vision reminds believers that no matter how discouraging the situation is today, kingdom glory waits us in the future. One day assuredly believers will rule the world with Christ. All that is broken will be repaired, and the entire earth and its population will be renewed. However, in the meantime we are to continue working faithfully at the tasks to which God has called us. As we enter the new millennium, let us continue to proclaim the good news and perform good works as we confidently await the Lord's promised and sure return.

———————————

**Prof. Richard V. Pierard is Professor of History at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, U.S.A., with interests in evangelical Christianity, religion and politics, and the global expansion of the church. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Iowa, and was a Fulbright professor at the University of Frankfurt/Main and the University of Halle. He is a frequent conference speaker and one of his latest books, *The New Millennium Manual* (Baker) is reviewed in this issue.**

# Ebb and Flow of Hope: Christian Theology at the End of the Second Millennium

John Macquarrie

**Keywords:** Liberalism, revelation, existential, mythology, transcendentalism, anthropology, hope, immanence, church

The earliest endeavours in Christian theology are found in the New Testament, and since then it has developed and diversified in innumerable ways, yet has consciously sought to maintain continuity with its origins. The world of the New Testament was, of course, conceived in ways very different from the world as we conceive it almost two thousand years later. Theology cannot and indeed has not stood still through that long period, but has responded to social and cultural changes and particularly to intellectual changes, in philosophy, the sciences, the understanding of history. When the New Testament was composed, people were still thinking in prescientific and even

mythological terms. Theology in our time, therefore, cannot be merely a repetition of the New Testament themes. A very different conceptuality and language are needed. But in spite of all the changes and vicissitudes of twenty centuries, there are some constants of human nature that have remained recognizable through all the transitions. We can still recognize our affinity with the men and women of the New Testament, and acknowledge that many of their problems, hopes and values are close to our own. I do not say they are unchanged, for they may possibly have assumed new forms. But they are not just foreign to us, and indeed they can still attract and inspire some of the most influential people of modern times, such as Gandhi, Tolstoy, Mother Theresa and countless others. But even those who believe that there are great spiritual treasures enshrined in the New Testament acknowledge that much difficult and demanding work of interpretation needs to be done if these treasures are to be made available to generations whose cultural and intellectual environment is so different from that of the ancient world. This interpretative work is the task of theology, and it has to be done again and again as the centuries move on and new situations arise. Sometimes radical rethinking and reinterpretation are demanded, and this has been especially true in modern times; sometimes there are periods of relative stability, such as the Middle Ages in Europe; sometimes there is need for a return to the sources, an attempt to recapture the original creative vision, lest we become engulfed in a meaningless interpretation of interpretations of interpretations!

So what is the present state of the question? In order to understand where we are today, I think we must look also at the immediate past, as far back, let us say, as the beginning of the twentieth century. The story of theology which unfolds itself during these hundred years may, I think, be entitled 'The Ebb and Flow of Hope'.

The early years of the century were simply a continuation of the century that had gone before. The western world was (on the surface at least) at peace and enjoying prosperity. The prevailing philosophies were, in the main, optimistic, science was steadily advancing, industry was expanding. Perhaps theology was too much concerned to adapt itself to this 'brave new world' and too little mindful of some of the sterner teachings of the New Testament, but it did reflect the general upbeat tone of secular society. The great historian and scholar, Adolf Harnack (1850–1930), represents the spirit of his time in his book *What Is Christianity?* For the modern mind, he believed, Christianity must be reduced to its simple essence. This means cutting away all the dogmas and theological accretions that have grown up over the centuries. He believed that Christianity is primarily a practical affair, directed, like the preaching of Jesus himself, to the realization of the kingdom of God. The fatherhood of God, the infinite worth of the human soul, the ethical idea of the kingdom—these are the essentials, but they have been obscured by a mass of dubious doctrines. Other liberal optimistic theologies flourished at the beginning of the century, some of them drawing inspiration from the philosophy of Hegel who was still influential, especially in the English-speaking countries. Later, others drew on the philosophy of Whitehead, whose world-view was based on an interpretation of nature in the light of modern physics. Theologies based on evolutionary theory provide another version of the optimism of those days, and one such theology, that of Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), was still flourishing in mid century.

But most of these liberal progressive theologies were abandoned by about 1920. The reason for this is obvious, for the Great War (1914–18) had shattered the complacent belief in progress that had for so long held sway in the West. The war itself with all its horrors and tremendous slaughter, followed by bloody revolutions in some countries, by economic depression and mass unemployment in other countries, including the United States, induced a sombre mood that had not been known in the West for a long time. Now, when theologians turned to the New Testament, they became aware of other themes that

had been ignored by the liberals: the presence of sin in human nature, the finitude of man amid the vastness of the cosmos, human powerlessness in the face of vast impersonal forces at work even in society itself. The most important theological figure to emerge in the post-war world was Karl Barth (1886–1968), one of the greatest Protestant theologians since the Reformation. Like the Reformers, Barth went back to the New Testament to seek the authentic vision of Christianity, as he believed. His first major writing was a commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. For the people of that time (just after the end of the Great War) this was a new kind of commentary. The commentaries of the time had been mostly taken up with purely academic questions—questions of syntax and semantics, questions of textual criticism, questions of historical scholarship concerning date, authorship, the influences coming from Hellenistic society, and so on. Barth did not ignore such questions, but his main interest was in the theological content of the text and what it might have to say to the western nations in the post-war confusion. In fact, Barth did not hesitate to lay part of the blame for the war and the suffering it had produced, on the theologians of Harnack's generation who, he believed, had paid no attention to some vital themes in the biblical message because they had been blinded by the brilliant achievements in material progress made by the nineteenth century. As Barth read the Bible, its teachings were in flat contradiction to the human values that had been so eagerly pursued in the previous century. The Bible does not contain a confirmation and endorsement of the type of human culture that collapsed in 1918, but is rather a judgment against it. The Bible contains a revelation of a humanity that is both finite and sinful, and of a God who is transcendent yet merciful.

The contrast between this new understanding of Christian theology and the one which Harnack had used may be illustrated from an exchange of letters between Harnack and Barth in 1923. Harnack maintained that 'the task of theology is one with the tasks of science in general'. By this he meant that theology has to treat Christianity as a historical phenomenon and to deal with the tasks mentioned earlier—problems of language, text, historical background and the like. Barth, in his reply, held that the task of theology 'is one with the task of preaching; it consists in taking up and passing on the word of Christ'.[1] Here Barth is introducing, shall we say, a more existential or personal note into the idea of theology, which he understands not as a disinterested or 'value-free' study of some objective phenomenon that we may call 'Christianity', but in trying to understand it as a word addressed to the human race in its actual life-situation.

Looking back to the Harnack-Barth debate from a much later date in the twentieth century, I think we might agree that both of these scholars were guilty of exaggeration. Harnack exaggerated the importance of the strictly scientific approach. This approach can indeed supply a great deal of information about Christianity. Even though there are great difficulties in the way of obtaining a detailed and accurate account of events that happened nearly two thousand years ago, the patient labours of many scholars have amassed a very considerable amount of trustworthy information concerning the life of Jesus, the beginnings of the church, the composition of the New Testament, and the spread of Christianity. This factual information does not, indeed, bring us to the heart of Christianity itself, yet it serves as a kind of control, filtering out the legends and mythology that invariably attach themselves to a religion, and enabling us to get a clear sight of the original phenomenon, so far as that is possible after so long a period of time. But however much material is accumulated and however carefully it is sifted, there remains a gap that cannot be bridged by more information. Something different is needed before the authentic message of Christianity can be heard. This was the point that Barth grasped, but

[1] 1. Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), pp. 10ff.

unfortunately he too exaggerated the importance of his insight, and he tended, certainly in the earlier part of his career, to set aside the labours of critical scholarship as if they were of very secondary value. This kind of exaggeration, found in the early Barth, tends to discredit the whole theological enterprise as a serious study.

What then was of value in Barth's protest against the old liberal or scientific theology? Actually, the point at issue had been put very clearly by Kierkegaard in the middle of the nineteenth century. He argued that no amount of historical information would bring one nearer to understanding the meaning of Christianity, but only 'the consciousness of sin'.[2] But this is not an additional piece of information. It is indeed something that can be known, but such knowledge is of a different order from the knowledge of objective facts. It is awareness of the human condition, an awareness that arises through one's participation in that condition. Barth was misleading in saying that theology is closer to preaching than to science, for this could be misunderstood to suggest that theology is indistinguishable from mythology or from ideology. But given that Barth's choice of words was unfortunate, his essential point was correct. Theology cannot be value-free. It is doubtful if any study affecting the nature and destiny of human beings could be 'value-free', and certainly theology does touch very closely on these human questions. If theology is the intellectual interpretation of religion, then it must take into account the fact that the human person is not a purely intellectual being but encompasses also feeling and willing and whatever else is essential to a truly personal mode of existence. If religion is concerned with the enhancement of human life, what is traditionally called 'salvation', then it makes a lot of sense to say that theology, as the interpretation of religion, needs for its understanding not so much factual information about historical realities as rather that first-hand acquaintance with sin, for sin is the sense of falling short, and this in turn awakens the quest for that enhancement or fuller existence, promised by the religions. Of course, as I have already said, any developed theology will embrace both the kind of knowledge championed by Harnack and the existential awareness that seemed so important to Barth and to Kierkegaard before him.

In what I have just been saying, I have confined myself to the teaching of the early Barth and to only some aspects of that teaching. To fill this out, one would have to speak also of his doctrine of revelation, his distinction between revelation which comes from God and religion which (in his view) is the human quest for God and therefore the reverse of revelation. We cannot expand to take in all these other topics, but I think I have drawn attention to a decisive moment in the development of twentieth-century theology in highlighting the disagreement between Harnack and Barth as the moment when there is a turning away from liberal humanistic theology based on historical scholarship to a new style in which historical knowledge should not be despised but which stresses even more an intimate existential grasp on the part of the student of theology.

In the early part of the century, Barth was the leading light in a quite widespread revolt against the older liberal theology. Perhaps some of the theologians who belonged to this movement succeeded better than Barth had done in injecting the rediscovered existential dimension into theology without abandoning or, at least, putting in question the value of the academic historical approach. Among these theologians may be mentioned Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). He was, by common consent, the greatest New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, but, as one who had lived through World War II and had an excellent record resisting the attempts of Hitler to subjugate the German Church to the Nazi ideology, he was also keenly interested in the affairs of the contemporary world and spent most of his energies in an attempt to show how the message of the New Testament

[2] 2. S. Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 71.

is still a message for men and women in the world today. Equally with Barth, he had turned against the liberal theology of Harnack and others like him, though he retained a great respect for Harnack's historical researches. Also, like Barth, Bultmann stressed the existential interpretation of the Christian message, but whereas Barth had been influenced by Kierkegaard, Bultmann's enthusiasm for existentialism was derived from Heidegger, who had been his colleague for several years after the Great War.

Bultmann's early work was directed mainly to the critical analysis of the New Testament. His work was reminiscent of that of Strauss almost a century earlier. Though they used different methods, both of these scholars raised serious questions about the reliability of the New Testament, especially the Gospel records of the career of Jesus. In particular, they both argued that the narrative had been strongly influenced by mythologies current in the first century. In Bultmann's view, men and women who have been educated in the twentieth century and have imbibed something of the scientific understanding of the world simply cannot accept the strange phenomena reported in the New Testament—miracles, voices from heaven, diseases caused by demons, and other ideas of the first century. But (and here we see some common ground with Barth) he believed that this mythological language is a kind of framework, the only one available in the Jewish-Hellenistic culture in which the New Testament was written, and within this framework may be discovered the essential message of the New Testament, if only we can find the key to interpret it. The first step toward a right interpretation is to ask the right question. The question is not, 'What happened?' but 'what does this mean for my existence?' That is because a religious document, such as the New Testament, is concerned, as we have said, with the enhancement of life, with setting before the reader a new possibility of existence. A religious document is not primarily a history book, though of course it may contain some history. This method of existential interpretation devised by Bultmann was called 'demythologizing', though perhaps this designation was too negative, for while the method eliminated the mythological strand in the New Testament narratives, it could also be applied in an affirmative way. For instance, ethical commands were understood existentially as demands made directly on the hearer or reader of the word, not just as general principles of conduct. The effect of Bultmann's hermeneutic was to stress that Christianity is in the first instance a way of life and only secondarily a doctrine. For instance, he taught that to believe in the cross of Christ is not primarily to believe that this event actually happened in the year 33 or thereabouts or to believe in a doctrine of atonement, but 'to make Christ's cross one's own'.[3]

Some critics claimed that Bultmann had subjectivized religion and abandoned any objective reference either to history or even to God. It is true that for him the narratives are primarily expressions of possibilities of human existence and that God is understood not as a 'substantial being' but as an event, when the human being is confronted with an ultimate demand. It is also true that in the aftermath of Barth and Bultmann, there was an attempt, especially in the United States, to devise a form of Christianity that would demythologize even the concept of God. Bultmann himself would not go to such lengths. He always opposed the objectification of religious beliefs, not because he denied that they referred to realities, but because such objectification obscures their more immediate significance as guides to human conduct.

In any case, the third part of the century, say from about 1965 onward, brought in a new phase of theology. Whereas the liberalism of the Harnack years had been optimistic, while the existentialism of such men as Barth and Bultmann had been more conscious of the sin and finitude of human life, this third phase was ushered in with a reaction in which

---

[3] 3. R. Bultmann, in *Kerygma and Myth* (SPCK, 1953), Vol. 1, p. 42.

hope for the future and a new stress on the fundamental goodness of the human being began to assert themselves. The major event which led to this reorientation of theology was the Second Vatican Council, held at Rome in the years 1962–65. It is difficult to say why this Council took place when it did. It may have been due largely to the vision of one man, Pope John XXIII, for it is difficult to see how the public events of that time could have brought about a new wave of hope.

In any case, Pope John summoned his Council, and it brought a surge of new life not only to the Roman Catholic Church but to the Protestant churches of Europe and America as well. The philosophy which dominated the thinking of the Council was called 'transcendental Thomism'. For many centuries Thomism, the system of philosophy constructed by Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages, had been dominant in the Roman Catholic Church. Even at the beginning of this century, it was a philosophy of static entities, and much of its argumentation seemed to consist in ever finer definitions and distinctions. But in the present century, it has come alive again, perhaps demonstrating its claim to be the 'perennial philosophy'. This is due to the attempt by some Thomists to come to terms with modern European philosophy, especially the ideas of Kant, then later with evolutionary philosophies and with existentialism.

The Catholic theologian who had perhaps the greatest influence on the thinking of Vatican II was Karl Rahner (1904–84). He had embraced some ideas from the new 'transcendental Thomism', and had also been a student of Heidegger. Fundamental to Rahner's thinking is his anthropology or doctrine of man. Whereas the existentialists had stressed human finitude, Rahner saw the human being as a finite centre which reaches out toward the Infinite. The essence of man is spirit, and spirit is to be understood not as some thing or substance but as the capacity for going out. (In traditional Christian language, the Holy Spirit 'goes out' or 'proceeds' from God into the world.) A human being, therefore, is not a static entity with a fixed nature, but is a 'transcending' being, that is to say, is always passing across into new phases of existence.[4] This is not a doctrine of automatic progress, like the doctrine widely held in the nineteenth century and tragically proved wrong since then. It is not the doctrine of a brash optimism, that everything will come right in the end, but rather a doctrine of hope, and we must remember that hope is vulnerable. The end or goal of human transcendence is God. Since Rahner had a strongly mystical element in his make-up, he often speaks of God as the Nameless (which perhaps reminds us of the Tao of Chinese philosophy), but as a Christian theologian he also believed that the human spirit, with its capacity for transcendence toward the Infinite, is our best clue on the finite level to the meaning of God, and he believed also that the human spirit is seen at its most transcendent in the self-giving life and death of Jesus Christ.

Just about the same time as these developments were taking place in Roman Catholic thought, a parallel development had begun among Protestants. The leading figure in this was Jörgen Moltmann (b. 1926). His book *Theology of Hope* appeared in 1964. He severely criticized the theologians of the previous generation. Barth, he claimed, was in error in making revelation rather than promise the basis for his theology; Bultmann was wrong in thinking that eschatology is merely a mythological framework for the Christian message whereas it belongs to the essence. He was particularly critical of Bultmann, and believed that resurrection is not a mythological idea but a reality, though some of the things he says in this connection make one wonder whether he is not guilty of a measure of remythologizing. Part of the philosophical conceptuality of Moltmann's theology is derived from the neo-Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, whose book *Principle of Hope* expounded a worldview in which not only the human race but even inanimate nature is

[4] 4. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (Sheed & Ward, 1957), p. 220.

claimed to be in a process of 'transcendence' toward an as yet unidentified goal. But no more than Rahner can Moltmann be blamed for teaching a bland optimism. He followed up his book on hope with a second called *The Crucified God*, in which he makes it clear that hope is not fulfilled automatically but demands effort and suffering from human beings and even from God.

So much then for what I have called the 'ebb and flow' of hope as we find it expounded by some of the leading theologians of the century. The story opens with the inheritance from the nineteenth century of an unbounded optimism, though events were soon to show that it had no solid foundations. Then the pessimism of the years following World War I and extending beyond World War II brought a more chilling mood, culminating in the episode of the 'death of God' among some American theologians. The final third of the century has seen a revival of hope, but it is a chastened hope, quite different from the uncritical optimism of the early decades.

But to complete our survey, it will be useful now to look at some of the principal doctrines of Christian theology, and consider how they have changed, not only in the major theologians already discussed, but across the whole theological spectrum. The doctrines to be briefly examined are those of God, Christ, the church and the nature of the human being.

In Christian theology, although God has usually been regarded as both transcendent and immanent, that is to say, as both beyond the world and yet within it, the emphasis was usually placed on his transcendence. He was beyond or above the world, a *deus ex machina* who might from time to time intervene in the world's affairs. Since the time of the Enlightenment, the world has been increasingly regarded as a self-regulating mechanism, and it has also been thought that the interventionist role assigned to God was, to say the least, somewhat undignified. Already in the nineteenth century, God was being more and more understood in terms of immanence, sometimes coming near to a pantheism. The reaction against the nineteenth century by Barth and his collaborators included a new emphasis on the transcendence of God. This was especially the case with Barth, who in his early writings wrote of God's acting 'vertically from above'.[5] In 1963 there was something of a crisis when an English bishop, John Robinson (1919–83) published his short but celebrated book *Honest to God*. This called for a rethinking of the concept of God, and this rethinking has in fact taken place in the later part of the century. It has moved, not in the direction of pantheism, but towards a combination of transcendence and immanence in a more complex concept. This is sometimes called 'panentheism'—a word which means literally 'everything in God', but is also understood as 'God in everything', a kind of mutual indwelling. Some such idea seems to be already implicit in the Christian idea of God as Trinity—God over us (Father), God with us (Son), God in us (Spirit). Some such understanding of God is to be found in many contemporary theologians, such as Moltmann, discussed above.

On the question of the person of Jesus Christ, the traditional theology has again tried to hold a balance between Christ's consubstantiality with God and his consubstantiality with the human race. But although it has always been deemed a heresy to deny the true humanity of Jesus Christ, this has often been virtually ignored. But once more we can see in this doctrine the same profile as in the doctrine of God. The nineteenth century made much of the quest for the 'historical Jesus', that is to say, for the human Jesus of Nazareth before he became swallowed up in the theological construction of the God-man. So it is a very human Christ that we meet in Harnack. In Barth, on the other hand, we seem in some places to strike against what is virtually a monophysitism, that is to say, the doctrine that

[5] 5. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (OUP, 1933), p. 102.

Christ had only one nature, a divine nature into which the human nature has been absorbed. But again, in the more recent theology, the humanity of Jesus Christ is being uncompromisingly reasserted. This is clearly the case with the Catholic theologian Rahner, and the same is true of a great many other theologians of our time.

There has likewise been a considerable modification in the conception of the church. Especially since Vatican II, what are called 'triumphalist' ideas of the church are increasingly disavowed. Though it is a mistake to associate the church too closely with the expansionist aims of European colonialism, there is little doubt that sometimes Christian missions were in fact contaminated by the imperial idea. However, this does not seem to be supported by the New Testament, where one of Christ's parables suggests that the kingdom of God (and so the church as a stage on the way) is like a little leaven which works in the whole lump of dough, leavening the lump but not itself claiming to be the lump. This has led to the idea of the church as a representative body, aiming indeed to make its contribution and to render its service to the whole, but not aiming to dominate the whole. Perhaps the most obvious symptom of this new attitude is to be found in the change that has taken place in the church's relations to other religions. Here again Vatican II has played a significant part through its 'Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions'. The Council declared that the church should recognize whatever is good and true in the non-Christian traditions, though once again the precedent for this goes back to the early days of theology, and can be found in such pioneering Christian writers as Justin and Origen. Protestants are moving in the same direction, and already a vigorous dialogue is in progress among the various world religions.

Finally, there is the question about human nature. Is man by nature good or bad, or perhaps a mixture? Following the Enlightenment and through the nineteenth century, especially after the influence of evolutionary theory made itself felt, belief in an inherent human goodness and an inevitable human progress gained ground, and was reflected in such a theology as Harnack's. But the wars and upheavals of the twentieth century put this optimistic belief in question. As we have seen, Barth and his colleagues in Europe spoke once more of man's limitations and of his sinfulness, while even in the burgeoning United States of America, Reinhold Niebuhr ventured to revive the doctrine of original sin. But once again, from about 1965 onward, a different voice was heard. When Paul Ricœur declared, 'However radical evil may be, it cannot be as primordial as goodness',[6] he was only reminding us of the teaching of the Bible, in the creation stories of Genesis. Certainly he was not returning to the naïve optimism of the Enlightenment and its aftermath, but trying to achieve that proper balance or dialectic which is truer to the authentic tradition. He goes on to say: 'Sin does not define what it is to be a man; beyond his being a sinner there is his being created. Sin may be older than sins, but innocence is still older.'[7] Karl Rahner has frankly acknowledged that in his theology, sin and evil have not been given a prominent place. It is because it has achieved this more nuanced understanding of the nature of the human being that modern theology can claim that it is in his very humanity that Christ manifests (so far as this is possible) the image of the invisible God.

Such then is one man's impression of the present state of Christian theology in the West, as it has emerged after a tumultuous and even chaotic century. I think it is still alive and well.

———————————

[6] 6. Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Harper & Row, 1967), p. 156.

[7] 7. Ibid, p. 251.

**This lecture by Professor John Macquarrie, Lady Margaret Professor of Theology in the University of Oxford from 1970 to 1986, was originally given at Beijing University in October 1995, and was published in *Expository Times* Vol 107 (1995–96) pp. 205–210. It is reprinted by permission of the publishers.**

# Christianity Facing a Third Era and a Third Millennium

James Veitch

**Keywords:** Armageddon, crisis, renewal, Charismatic, change, church, technology, revolution, orthodoxy

## INTRODUCTION

We had been waiting a long time for the death of the church, steeling ourselves against its crash, watching from the pulpit the greying of the pews, projecting from the weekly attendance figures and offerings, the breathing space salvaged from the bulldozer's blade. We gather statistics and our computer uses them to shape a graph tracing for us the decline and fall of a dream. 'Eighteenth century philosophers had a very simple explanation for the gradual weakening of belief; religious zeal they said, was bound to die down as enlightenment and freedom spread. It is tiresome that the facts do not fit this theory at all.'[1]

The decline Tocqueville saw in the 1830s, pales in comparison to the decline in church attendance and membership plotted today on computers in church offices, in many different countries in the Western world. While the facts he was referring to may not fit the theory explaining the decline he had in mind, there is by now information at hand which will help us understand what is happening to the Christianity with which we are so familiar in the Western world.

'Sunday morning in the sanctuaries of Christendom is as other-worldly as ever, from prelude to invocation, to anthems, hymns, prayers, to benediction, to sevenfold amens, to the dress of the clergy, to the shape of the building and its furniture—it is straight out of the middle ages or even earlier. In spite of the choir's latest hairstyles, the minister's quotations from contemporary literature, and the organists' dissonant crashes, all of which exhibit an overlay of modernity.'[2] But in spite of all this and the death threat, Christianity survives and in some places is doing quite well. But there is a puzzle: while less and less people attend church, not only adults but also children and teenagers, traditional forms of Christianity seem to blossom—with accents on unchangeable ancient beliefs, non-negotiable moral norms and excitable enthusiasms.

---

[1] 1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 364.

[2] 2. Mary Jean Irion, *From the Ashes of Christianity* (adapted).