

Editorials

“Framing” the Age—Cautionary Observations

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Organizing narratives by periods, types, and similar schemes has long been a staple of historical analysis. The reason for doing so is sound. History is more than the simple listing of events in an accurate chronology. Neither events nor the people who participate in them are disconnected accidents that appear in random sequence. Historical analysis seeks to illuminate the deeper connections that allow us to understand more clearly the time and place we inhabit and the people who are around us.

Historical periodization is not neutral in its intentions. Even a simple genealogy such as “Abraham begat Isaac” implicitly frames a narrative that has an inner logic and a message to proclaim. The intentions of the broadest narrative framings are often obvious. Augustine’s six ages of the world located his life and work in a time expectant of Christ’s return. The fourteenth-century poet Petrarch coined the term “Dark Ages” (only recently abandoned) in order to define an earlier period’s culture as moribund and to distinguish the creative intellectual agenda of his time as a “rebirth” or “Renaissance” (still used today).

For at least two generations, a narrative announcing “the end of Christendom” has shaped much discussion about the Christian community’s life and mission in the world. Some tell the story broadly. Christianity is dying in an age defined by modernity’s secularism. Others—aware of Christianity’s explosive growth in the global south and elsewhere in recent decades—make a more nuanced claim. We have entered a post-Constantinian era in which established Christian churches are no longer “in charge” of society. Their control of the larger culture is collapsing, at least in the West.

Whether nuanced or not, this narrative framing is used to advocate for radical change in Christian life and mission. Consultants and bloggers have joined theologians and pastors of all confessions in offering a rapidly expanding body of proposals for an “emerging church.” The proposals range widely, for example, from

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engaging the latest technology and pop culture genres in contemporary worship to reclaiming historic liturgical practices and art in a turn to “ancient future” worship.

However, those who educate servants of the Gospel are wise to ask whether this narrative provides an adequate framing for understanding mission in our time. The issue is not simply whether the “end of Christendom” accurately describes the present moment but also whether it serves a truly evangelical end. Four larger questions are especially pertinent.

1. *Does the narrative accurately capture the messiness of concrete reality?* Even when nuanced, does the narrative that announces the death or collapse or end of Christianity’s place in the larger culture accurately describe the complex reality of Christianity’s status globally, or even in Europe and North America? Even the traditional measures of *institutional* vitality that are usually cited as evidence of decline are more ambiguous than usually acknowledged. Participation in Christian congregations and institutions in the United States still vastly outnumbers all other religious communities combined. Beyond participation in institutional life, the outlines of the Christian narrative and the significance of Christian symbols are still recognizable to vast majorities of North Americans (and Europeans), much more so than the core narratives and central symbols of any other religion. By a whole range of measures, Christianity continues to occupy a prominent and privileged place in these societies.

A more accurate historical analysis is that in North America and Europe the relationship between the dominant culture and its still most prominent religion is changing. Within that analysis, there is a range of questions to consider.

For example, in the United States membership in Christian churches constituted only a minority of the population in the United States at the time of its founding. Did “Constantinian” Christianity ever exercise cultural dominance in the national life of the United States *outside* the enclaves of transplanted immigrant communities the way it did *within* those communities? Was culture’s supposed role of inculcating Christian teaching and practice only a passing moment in America’s larger history, with a scope and influence larger in imagination than in fact? Is it possible that the influence of Christian teaching and witness, social service, and political activism on the American *national* culture may be greater *now* than at any previous time in the United States? Might it even be possible that the recent growth of disaffiliation from organized religion in the United States is a reaction against the growing *strength* of influence in *national* life of a particular kind of public Christian witness (what might be identified as a subvariant of “public Protestantism”) that is experienced as toxic?

2. *Does the narrative make cultural assets and opportunities visible, as well as liabilities and challenges?* This second question follows immediately from the first.

The cultural context for mission in the United States and other places in “the West” is likely to be much more complex than the end-of-Christendom narrative usually allows observers to see.

One brief example illustrates some of the complexity. The song “Amazing Grace” has a familiarity, resonance, and power in the cultural life of the United States that is unparalleled by the religious song of any other religious tradition. President Obama sang it when he eulogized Clementa Pinckney and the other victims of last summer’s shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The same song was on the lips of Kelly Gissendaner as she was being put to death by the state of Georgia on September 30. The familiarity of “Amazing Grace” is an asset for Christian mission in American culture. Its resonance and power open a space in the emotional life of many Americans for a witness of Jesus Christ.

Yet at the same time, the song’s strong association with Anglo-American evangelicalism can be a hurdle for those communities whose witness of Christ is less millennialist and more sacramental. In other words, there are real opportunities and real challenges for mission in the larger cultural life of “the West” that a simplistic death or collapse narrative will not allow one to see, explore, or engage. A more adequately framed narrative will illuminate both assets and liabilities, losses and gains, as well as the ambivalences and ambiguities that attach to each.

3. *Does the narrative lead to greater responsibility and faithfulness in mission?* Recent politicized Christian polemic in American public life has included astonishing claims that, despite all the freedoms and advantages they enjoy in the United States, Christians are being “persecuted” and their faith is being “criminalized.”

The narrative of Christendom’s death or collapse easily plays into these distortions of American life and hides the reality of life-threatening persecution experienced by vulnerable religious minorities around the globe, including Muslims and others in the United States. This is no time for privileged American Christians to play the religious persecution card for partisan advantage in our petulant national politics. A more adequate and faithful framing for mission will lead American Christians to see the real peril of religious minorities both in the United States and elsewhere in the world and not to divert attention to themselves.

4. *Does the narrative allow us to see how God is acting?* Renewed attention to Trinitarian theology has reinvigorated missiological thinking. However, where the supposed collapse of Christendom frames the narrative, the call for radical change can reduce the Trinitarian influence to a set of missiological instructions. Then the

narrative curiously presents God as a detached observer (and judge?) of the church's striving, rather than as an active participant and force in the life of the world.

A more adequate framing for mission will foster a narrative rooted in the abundance of the Triune Life pouring out into the life of the world. Faithful preparation for mission will not get lost in laments that Christians are no longer "in charge" of the culture. An evangelical Trinitarian theology will invite those who serve in mission into the narrative of God's love for the world so that we, too, can approach it in a freeing love, rather than in a fear of collapse. Theological education for mission rooted in the witness of the Acts of the Apostles will provide apostolic vision that sees beyond the falling and rising of church institutions to a historical moment filled with fresh outpourings of the Holy Spirit, who is already at work in the places where we have yet to arrive.

Finally, when education for mission is no longer encumbered by the fearful narrative of lost control, it becomes free to tell of the healing and reconciliation for the world that Jesus embodied and enacted.