

The Rise & Alienation of Christianity in Western Culture - A Cautionary Tale

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This material combines insights from Richard Tarnas, Rodney Stark, Steve McAlpine, Andrew Isker, David Koyzis, and Richard Edlin

A. PREDISPOSITIONS

1. RJE Experience at university studying English history (under Sir Michael Cullen). The English Civil War and Puritan periods were taught (at a postgraduate level) as if they were purely nonreligious, social movements (note Cullen's attraction to E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*) with the elimination of religion/spirituality from any consideration.
2. False Understanding of God's Hand in History. Most historians are dualistic and think that any potential divine direction in history has to be noted through extraordinary events.
 - a. On the contrary: For the Christian, and to truly understand reality, history must always be read in the primary context of a sovereign, omnipotent God who determines the cause and course of history, and who gracefully uses the affairs of men to demonstrate his purposeful, covenant-keeping love for a world He created, redeemed in Christ, sustains moment by moment by His word of power (Heb. 1:3), and is leading to ultimate consummation on the day Jesus returns to fully inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth.
 - b. Only this exclusive, biblically-grounded worldview gives Christians purpose and hope, knowing that even if the present Age of Bewilderment is beset by evil as people seek to triumph without obedience to Christ, we know that they and their biblically antithetical ways ultimately will crumble and fall (Stalin is a good example).
 - c. The Beatles and their romantic fantasy of "Imagine there's no heaven, no hell, no countries, no country, people living in peace...is a pagan hope for history that can never materialise.
3. True Historical Study. History has direction, cause and effect, & hope in the light of God's creation ordinances. How frustrated secular historians are with our dating system!

B. RODNEY STARK & THE RISE OF CHRISTENDOM

Stark (1934-) is prof of social science at Baylor University. Stark has written over 30 books, and more than 140 scholarly articles on a wide range of sociological issues including prejudice, crime, suicide, urban living - and the rise of Christianity. Stark, like Cullen, views Christianity as a sociological movement (though Stark does allow for the possibility of the supernatural - though he dualistically doesn't recognise God's hand over the ordinary)

Stark suggests that Christianity has grown at a rate of approx 40% per annum, resulting in a growth chart as shown on the next page.

Stark identifies 5 features that contributed to Christianity's growth from a minority cult in the armpit of the Mediterranean, to a global mass religion.

1. Success among the Jewish Diaspora.

Remember Paul's policy on his missionary journeys (eg Athens) to preach "in the synagogue" and then in the market place ... Archaeological evidence for the location of early churches shows them concentrated in Jewish quarters of cities around the known world. => Early Christianity popular not only with Greeks, but also Jews.

2. The Role of Societal Catastrophes

- Epidemics and mass loss of life were frequent events in the early Christian era. Christian attitudes of love and charity began early on, and made Christianity very attractive to non-believers (note the misinformation secularists spread about religion being the cause of all wars & evils in the world - not true)
- Epidemics also cause social fragmentation, loss of family ties etc., and Christianity offered hope, friendship and connectedness during times of social upheaval.

Year	Number of Christians, given 40% growth per decade
40	1,000
50	1,400
60	1,960
70	2,744
80	3,842
90	5,378
100	7,530
150	40,496
200	217,795
250	1,171,356
300	6,299,832
350	33,882,008

3. Christianity's Appeal Among Women (and the socially dispossessed)

- Traditionally in the Greco-Roman world, women were seen as being of lesser importance, even property of their husbands. The message of the gospel viewed women as equal to men, made in God's image. Infanticide (usually carried out against baby girls) was an anathema in the Christian moral code.
- Christianity gave women dignity, for example viewing their status in marriage as precious and beloved.
- Slaves who had no social standing or status had value, meaning and purpose as, just like their master, being made in God's image and precious in his sight.
- These factors resulted in an increase in the number of women and in larger families in the Christian subculture.
- Thus a moral attraction and a higher fertility rate contributed to the rise of Christianity.

4. Christianity's Urban Appeal

- Typically cities in the early world were filthy, unattractive places, divided by violent ethnic strife, crime, and squalor. Christianity offered a charitable concern for others, and Christian health codes that were attractive.
- Using historical studies of miserable urban Antioch as his model, Stark comments that more than Roman plumbing or technological advancement, it was Christian probity and virtues that made cities attractive and liveable.

5. The Blood of the Martyrs

- Early Christians were martyred by Jews (e.g. the stoning of Stephen) and by successive Roman emperors as they refused to recognise the divinity of the Emperor.
- Stark suggests that the number of martyrs was less than many think.
- Nevertheless, the fact that any number of people were willing to die for an idea raise the question, "Why would anyone do this?" and this alone made Christianity attractive. As early

church historian Tertullian commented, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity."

NOTES:

(1) Stark does seem to recognise the value to the spread of Christianity of Roman rule. This provided a constancy of authority which aided Paul, for example, in his ability to "appeal to Rome" when his life was threatened by Jewish dissidents. This saved him from impending death, extended his imprisonment, and gave him an opportunity to preach the gospel in Rome. (Acts 25-26).

=> Roman rule and communications systems (roads etc) assisted in the spread of the gospel.

(2) Remember in all of this, that God is sovereign and uses the ordinary as well as the extraordinary to bring about his will.

C. McALPINE, TARNAS, KOYZIS (with comments by Edlin), AND CHRISTIANITY IN EXILE

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1. Pre-Enlightenment

- The church had become a part of the establishment. Its faith became cultural rather than dynamic, its power became temporal rather than spiritual, and its practice became steeped in error, abuse, and decay.
- Despite this, the Renaissance produced reform (the Reformation) so that society at large still accepted that "there was nothing back of God."
- The ascent of dualism: Platonic dualism infected the church. Living situations were ignored, and it suited the religious and political elite to channel Christians' hopes and dreams towards a post-death experience.
- For example, note that pre-Enlightenment art focussed only on "sacred" paintings (the Madonna with child etc.) and largely ignored the real world.

2. The Enlightenment (1750 onwards)

- With the dualistic marginalisation of religion to the private sphere, it was only a small step towards the ascendancy of secular reason.
- The authority of logic, fact and reason over belief, opinion and theism became entrenched.
- The marginalisation of the church even became acceptable to the church itself, so that evangelism and the message of the gospel was re-interpreted to mean exclusively the saving souls for eternity. "Christianity was becoming a suicide cult."

3. Post-Enlightenment & the Rise of Post-Modernity (early 20th Century -> today)

- Humanity's less than ideal expression of life, with its self-centredness and depravity, violates the integrity of the modernists' dream of a reason-led, inevitable progress towards utopia.
- The ultimate expression of human wickedness, World War One, collapsed any logical belief in reason and technology's inexorable progress.
- In 1887, political sleaze and self-interest led Lord Acton to claim that, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely, and great men are almost always bad men."
- Many leading philosophers and academics transferred ideological allegiance from modernity to postmodernity. They pretended that there is no metanarrative, nothing that makes sense of the world, nothing beyond current pleasure and individual preference that gives hope and purpose.
- Note that despite at times admiring the church [eg Albert Einstein] they continued to endorse secularism, deliberately refusing to accept Christianity or any theism which limited their individual autonomy.
- Many scientists, as well as popular opinion at large, couldn't see the common sense of post-modernity, and continued to cling to a residual modernity.

4. Stage One Exile: Tolerance (late 21st century – today according to McAlpine)

- Christianity, in its marginalized, dualistic form, was largely ignored and tolerated because of its cultural legacy – as long as it did not interfere with public life outside of social welfare activities.
- Most western pulpits “have become filled with preachers with all the courage of bed-wetting kindergartners” whose actual influence on the culture around them has degenerated into being “like telling fire-fighters not to use too much water on a raging house fire lest they create mildew in the furniture.”
- Perhaps increasing urbanisation and mobility (due to the motor car) has meant that church-goers have turned church away from being a local, ongoing commitment. Church attendance has become a church-shopping – selecting or de-selecting a product or commodity from choices across a wide geographical area according to what best suits the church-goer. To continue the retail theme, this in turn prioritises ecclesiastical window-dressing in many churches where they focus on felt-needs rather than collective worship in all its rigorous aspects. Koyzis calls this a defective, motor-drive ecclesiology (<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/10/the-death-of-the-parish>).

5. Stage Two Exile: Hostility (approx. 2010 onwards)

- The vestiges of Christianity in the post-Christian west become fewer and fewer:
 - o abortion legalised;
 - o same-sex unions receive government-endorsed and legally sanctioned marriage status;
 - o Sunday no longer a sacred day;
 - o Jesus mainly a swear word,
 - o churches become coffee bars,
 - o palatial shopping malls become the contemporary cathedrals,
 - o firm belief is viewed as unacceptable intolerance
 - o etc
- The culture at large is becoming increasingly irritated by, and hostile to, a dormant Christianity that seems to have no backbone. At times, Christianity rears its hopeful head, but then retreats into dualistic, docile submission at the first sign of opposition.
- Christianity becomes not only increasingly marginalised, but also increasingly targeted as the cause of contemporary uncertainty and confusion (eg this week’s debate in NZ on Bible in Schools – be aware of the dangerous fallacy of the argument that we need to keep schools free of religion (which really is the monopolistic imposition of the religion of secularism!). See diagram on p5.
- Rather than projecting a message of purpose and hope for now and for eternity, the church withdraws into a flurry of frenetic navel-gazing whilst the world that so desperately needs its message is left rudderless, without a loom to weave wisdom into a fabric (Edna St Vincent Millay).
- Note Rorty’s comment: *[W]e do our best to convince students of the benefits of secularization... We are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your [Christian] religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours. [Leading scholar Prof Richard Rorty, 2000]*

D. WARNINGS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

- Today may well be the high point of the acceptability of Christian schooling, as the hostility of stage two exile descends upon us.
- Remember that the integration of schools pattern in NZ that has been so financially helpful to many Christian schools did not occur because politicians liked Christian schools, but

because it was a cheap economic alternative to allowing the Catholic school system to collapse.

- Increasingly, how Christian schools operate, and what they nurture in students, are becoming more and more unacceptable to our post-Christian culture. A few examples are:
 - o Corporal punishment
 - o Changing date patterns (BC->BCE)
 - o Employment discrimination
 - o Social values:
 - Homosexuality
 - Equality (not just respect for) of all religions
- Note the recent experience in England of the government targeting Christian schools:
 - o The Durham Free School – closed after 1 year, in Easter 2105
 - o Grindon Hall Christian School – put on special measures (despite highest academic results in the county)and threatened with closure because of school’s social values were deemed by school inspectors to be at odds with British values (eg its male students could not specify the sorts of things that lesbians do; they refused to have a local Imam lead a school chapel service...)

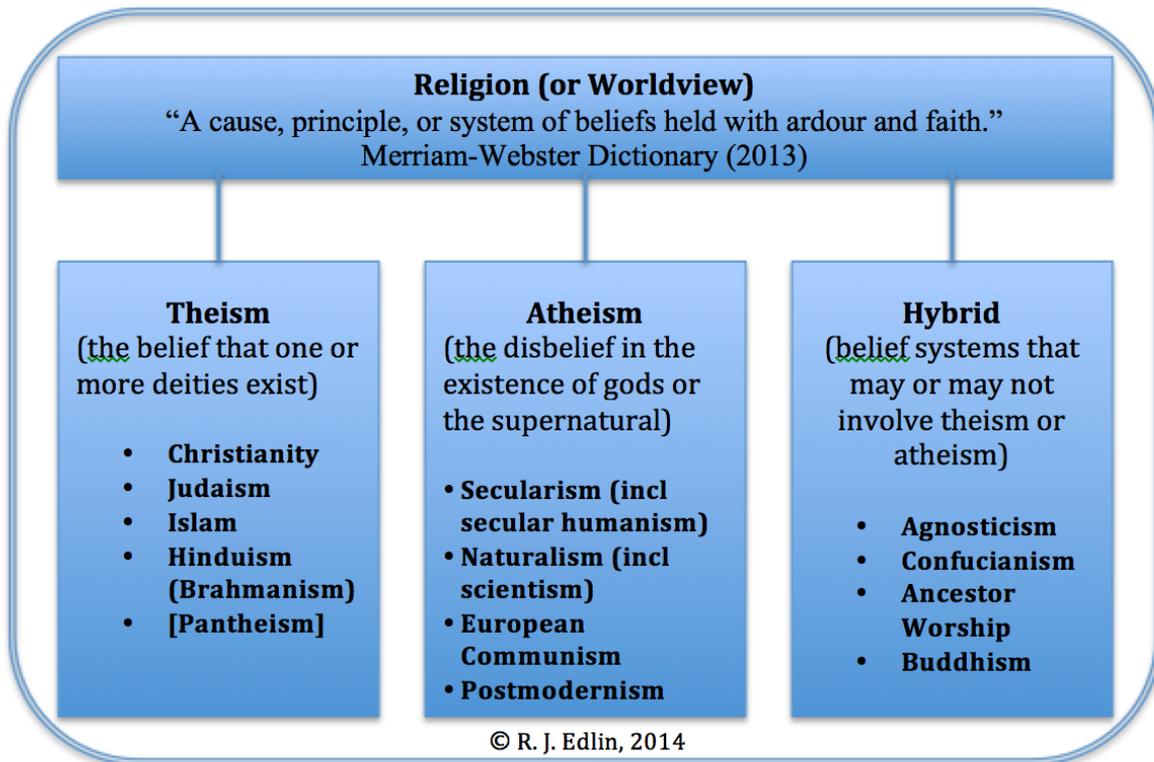
E. HOW NOW SHALL WE LIVE?

- In faithfulness and hope, winsomely but non-apologetically proclaiming by word and deed God’s kingdom of truth, justice and mercy through Jesus Christ. God is on the throne.
- Says Andrew Isker (slightly altered):

The reign of Jesus Christ in this physical world is a reality. When God’s people find themselves in exile, it is a refining furnace to prepare them for dominion. The church will no longer be able to remain the same. The dross of seeker-sensitivity and cultural withdrawal must be burned away. Let us pray the refined gold of the kind of boldness that preaches the Word out of season will remain. Unlike the false gospels of modernity or postmodernity or materialistic individualism, the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ is our culture’s only hope.

Readings:

Hebrews 2: 6-8; Psalm 8 Psalm 110



Remember the importance of the above diagram.

- Some might move secularism into the Hybrid column, but the basic point remains – secularism is just another religion.
- Don't confuse religion with theism. There are all sorts of non-theistic religions (including secularism!