Post-Christendom, Post-Constantinian, Post-Christian…does the label matter?

Post-Christendom

The term 'post-Christendom' has become increasingly familiar in conversations about church and mission in contemporary western societies. Some first encountered this term in the 'After Christendom' series, published by Paternoster and written by members of the Anabaptist Network since 2004.[1] These books offer resources to help us understand and engage creatively with the challenges and opportunities of post-Christendom culture. But many others are also using this language, and have done so for many years, even if its significance has not been widely recognised until quite recently. 'Post-Christendom' appears to be a significant lens through which to view the emerging cultural landscape.

However, different people use the term 'post-Christendom' in different ways. Sometimes this helps us engage with the issues we face; but sometimes it simply causes confusion. In the emerging church conversation, for instance, 'post-Christendom' is often used as if it were a synonym for post-modernity. Understanding and engaging with post-modernity is undoubtedly important, but referring to this as 'post-Christendom' does not aid clarity of thinking. The transition from modernity to post-modernity and from Christendom to post-Christendom confronts us with a cultural and missional 'double whammy'. These shifts overlap, complement and reinforce each other in various ways, so we do need to explore their inter-relationship and dual impact. But post-Christendom is not the same as post-modernity. Post-Christendom presents different challenges and opportunities.

The first book in the 'After Christendom' series offered a definition of post-Christendom: *the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.*[2] It also identified seven transitions that mark the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom, each of which has implications for how Christians understand their role within society:

- *From the centre to margins*: in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority*: in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners*: in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- *From privilege to plurality*: in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness*: in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.

- *From maintenance to mission*: in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- *From institution to movement*: in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement.[3]

This definition and these transitions appear to be gaining widespread acceptance, even if the significance of the transitions and how we respond to these continues to be debated.

It is within these debates that more helpful differences emerge in the ways the term 'post-Christendom' is used. Some, for example, use the term to signal the end of a historical era in western culture but apparently see no need to investigate the legitimacy or legacy of this era. Christendom is coming to an end. An emerging culture will require fresh ways of thinking, speaking and acting.[4] The authors of the 'After Christendom' series propose that a more thoroughgoing disavowal of the Christendom mindset is necessary – both for the sake of the church's integrity and to enable us to see clearly enough to envision new approaches. For some, the demise of Christendom represents a major cultural shift; others are less convinced that it is as significant as authors of the 'After Christendom' series are claiming.[5]

There is also some discussion about different kinds of Christendom. Using the same term to cover the diverse cultures and political arrangements in Europe between the fourth and twentieth centuries (and extending this to other western and non-western[6] contexts) is undoubtedly problematic. In the eyes of some it is illegitimate. Christendom, they argue, degenerates into an all-purpose swear word, devoid of historical accuracy and focus. The perspective from which the 'After Christendom' series is written is that, underlying these diverse forms of Christendom (which are recognised and discussed in *Post-Christendom*), are fundamental assumptions, attitudes, theological and ecclesial commitments, missional priorities and expectations. For this reason, the term is meaningful and heuristic, even if distinctions and clarification may sometimes be needed.

An insightful and provocative contribution to this debate appears in Nigel Wright's *Free Church, Free State*[7]. Developing recommendations for how the church (especially in the 'free church' tradition) might engage with the state, Wright agrees with other critics that Christendom 'is often used in an undifferentiated way which overlooks the complexity of the phenomenon.'[8] He proceeds to differentiate between three approaches.

The first approach is 'theocracy' or 'Caesaro-papism' in which any significant distinction between church and state disappears. The head of state is invested with divinely ordained authority over both church and state. For several centuries Byzantine emperors exercised this role over the church in the East.

The second approach is 'Constantinian Christendom', associated with the relationship in the West between the emperor, or national rulers, and the Catholic Church. Church and state are partners, the church legitimising the activities of the state and the state enforcing

the decrees of the church. This partnership was not without its tensions, competition for supremacy and hesitations on both sides. But it was an enduring and effective partnership that enforced Christianity throughout Europe and suppressed dissent.

The third approach, which Wright calls 'non-Constantinian Christendom', is presented as a possibility, rather than an experienced historical reality, although he argues that the free church tradition has laid the foundation for this approach in its advocacy of freedom of conscience and religious liberty. State and church are decoupled; coercion in the sphere of religion is renounced; but 'Christian truth' is 'determinative for the public realm'.[9]

Separating out these three approaches is helpful. Christendom was certainly constituted and experienced in different ways at different times and in different regions. But perhaps the distinction between the first and second approaches is one of degree rather than kind. The seven transitions from Christendom to post-Christendom noted above seem equally applicable to either form of Christendom. There were different kinds of Christendom – just as there are different expressions of post-Christendom (post-Protestant versions are rather different from post-Catholic versions) – but the generic term still serves to focus attention on fundamental, and deeply problematic, features of this system.

The third approach is intriguing. What if Europe had been converted through persuasion rather than imperial incitement, favours and pressure, followed by force of arms? What if a community or people embraces 'Christian truth' without coercion and enthusiastically?

Some might suggest that the United States is the prime example of 'non-Constantinian Christendom', with its constitutional separation of church and state but the persistent influence of Christian rhetoric in the public domain. If this is so, many would have very serious concerns about such an arrangement, wondering to what extent 'Christian truth' is always liable to be co-opted and domesticated rather than truly being determinative.[10]

My only personal experience of anything like what Wright posits was a few days among the Karen people in the hill country of North Thailand. Although I was well aware from reading mission history that in cultures that are less individualistic than the West 'people groups' (villages, clans, tribes) are converted, I had never before encountered a whole community that was Christian, indeed Baptist. Everyone belonged to the church as well as to the village, and there was no apparent sacred/secular divide. Although I was unable to probe deeply some of the questions I had about the depth and diversity of commitment to Christ in this community, I found these days exhilarating and hopeful. But for someone with deep-seated objections to the notion of Christendom, they were also disconcerting!

But is this Christendom in any of the senses Wright describes? The Karen are a marginal Christian community in an overwhelmingly non-Christian nation. They lack the power to coerce religious conformity or suppress dissent (hopefully their Baptist convictions also discourage any such instincts). There is no state, as such. Nor are there other religious or secular minorities, whose treatment would be the acid test for any 'non-Constantinian' expression of Christendom, and who might contest 'Christian truth' as determinative for the public realm.

The phrase ‘the gospel as public truth’ is associated especially with Lesslie Newbigin[11], who insisted that he was not advocating a return to Christendom. Wright adopts a very similar turn of phrase, suggesting that Christian truth can be determinative for the public realm but, unlike Newbigin, he does not dissociate this from the notion of Christendom but proposes a ‘non-Constantinian’ version of Christendom.

I am attracted by Wright’s proposal and endorse his vision of a society where the state does not attempt to coerce conscience or favour any religion, and where the church does not attempt to bolster its witness by seeking state support. But I am not convinced that it is helpful to suggest that Christian truth should be ‘determinative’ for the public realm or that the language of ‘non-Constantinian Christendom’ is appropriate (any more than I am persuaded that Newbigin’s programme could lead anywhere else but to a reconstituted Christendom).

If at some point in the future the Christian community increases so substantially as to comprise a significant majority of any society, there will be crucial decisions to make about how that community proclaims the truth it professes, how it embodies this socially, politically and culturally, and how it copes with those who do not accept its convictions and norms. The separation of state and church, freedom of conscience and advocacy of ‘Christian truth’ in ways that do not disparage or disadvantage those who hold firm to other convictions (rather than calling for Christian truth to be determinative in the public realm) would be essential foundations for such decisions. But what emerges from this decision-making process should not be labelled ‘non-Constantinian Christendom’. It is simply not feasible after so many centuries of Christendom (however many expressions of this we identify) to rehabilitate this term. Nor is it possible to detach it from notions of imposition and the privileging of Christian faith over against other faiths (which is surely the implication of Christian truth being determinative for the public realm). We really do need to embrace post-Christendom now.

The term ‘post-Christendom’, contrary to the claims of some critics, does not imply the withdrawal of Christians or the church from the public realm.[12] Rather, it suggests that the nature of our involvement in politics, culture and society needs to be renegotiated in light of changing circumstances *and* changing theological convictions. The ‘post’ aspect of the term invites us to leave behind the compromises of the past; the ‘Christendom’ aspect is a reminder of the legacy with which we must grapple and from which we must learn as we explore uncharted territory.

But Wright’s term ‘non-Constantinian Christendom’ does invite further reflection. What does ‘Constantinian’ mean, why do some writers use this term rather than ‘Christendom’ to refer to the era which is coming to an end, and is this helpful?

Post-Constantinian

The term ‘Constantinian’ points us back to the beginnings of the Christendom era in the fourth century and to the emperor Constantine I, who adopted Christianity and began the process of replacing paganism with Christianity as the imperial religion. Historians argue about Constantine’s motives and the depth of his commitment to Christ. They also make very different assessments of the effects of the so-called ‘Christendom shift’ on church and empire. These are not issues we can explore further here.[13]

Undoubtedly, Constantine’s ‘conversion’ and his invitation to the church to partner him in Christianising the empire set in motion a train of events that led inexorably to the full-blown Christendom system of succeeding centuries. Although Christendom would take shape over centuries, it was Constantine who initiated the process. To call what emerged ‘Constantinian’ acknowledges his foundational role. In other regions, especially beyond the empire in the East, the Christian community waxed and waned over the centuries but never had an equivalent political champion. There was no Asian Christendom.

But there are reasons to query whether ‘Constantinian’ is an appropriate synonym for the Christendom era.

First, although Constantine identified himself as a Christian, lavished favours and finance on the church, increased its influence to the disadvantage of paganism and made it clear that he wanted everyone in the empire to follow his lead, he did not impose Christianity on the empire. There were inducements to convert, but no coercion. These inducements were effective and the church experienced massive growth during the fourth century, to the consternation of those who advocated a return to the old imperial religion. But under Constantine and his immediate successors paganism and other religions were permitted to continue unmolested. At the end of the fourth century no more than half the population of the empire was Christian, and the Roman senate was still almost entirely pagan in 380.

Only under the emperor Theodosius I, at the very end of the fourth century, did imperial pressure begin to mount significantly, and not until Justinian in the sixth century was the full force of imperial law invoked to require all to be Christians. The totalitarian system, the full partnership of church and state, the imposition of compulsory tithing and the use of coercion to suppress dissent that characterised the Christendom era for many centuries was not operational until long after Constantine’s reign. It is arguable that Constantine set this process was in motion, that he refrained from using coercion for political rather than ideological or theological reasons, and that an imperial system will inevitably move to crush dissent sooner or later. But perhaps the term ‘Constantinian’ should be reserved for designating situations where the political authorities favour Christianity, but refrain from imposing it.[14] Perhaps ‘Theodosian’ (or ‘Justinianian’ if it were pronounceable) would be a better term for the emerging Christendom system?

Second, although Constantine’s influence revolutionised the social context within which the fourth-century church operated, it was not the emperor who revised its theology and transformed its ecclesiology and missiology. Indeed, many early church practices, such as the baptism of believers rather than infants, persisted throughout the fourth century. It was Constantine who summoned the church leaders to great councils to debate theology

and formulate creeds, and it was his patronage and that of his successors that influenced the outcomes of these, often rancorous, gatherings. But it was the theologians and bishops who adapted Christianity to its new imperial setting – not least the famous Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was more critical than Eusebius of Caesarea of some features of the new regime, insisting that this was not 'the city of God', but he introduced many novel theological, hermeneutical and ecclesial ideas that enabled the church to adjust to its new social and political context. Some of these flew in the face of three centuries of tradition but with little opposition they became the new orthodoxy. Maybe 'Augustinian' (if this term were not already used with a different meaning) would be a preferable alternative to 'Constantinian'? For it was Augustine, not Constantine, who laid the philosophical and theological foundations for the Christendom era.

There are other, more mundane, reasons why the term 'Constantinian' is problematic. It does not exactly slip off the tongue and may suggest that the subject under discussion is primarily for academics. 'Christendom' is a much more accessible term. It also connotes a specific historical development and may not facilitate the wide-ranging conversations about church and mission that the term 'Christendom' often does.

However, 'Constantinian' and 'post-Constantinian' are labels favoured by many writers, especially those who discovered these concepts in the writings of Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, reflecting on the political demise of Christendom but the persistence of Christendom ways of thinking and behaving, writes: 'Constantinianism is a hard habit to break.'[15] Liberation theologian, José Miguez Bonino, insists that Christians can no longer be primarily concerned with upholding the social order: 'the question of the Constantinian church has to be turned completely around. The true question is not "what degree of justice...is compatible with the existing order?", but "what kind of order, which order is compatible with the exercise of justice...?"'[16] Lesslie Newbigin warns against the dual temptation of either trying to restore Christendom or of imagining ourselves back in the days of the early church, as if the Christendom shift had never occurred. He writes: 'We are in a radically new situation and cannot dream either of a Constantinian authority or of a pre-Constantinian innocence.'[17] And Yoder himself identifies 'Constantinian reflexes' in the areas of ethics (validating actions on the basis of calculating costs and benefits) and ecclesiology (the fear of separatism).[18]

Yoder also introduces the term 'neo-Constantinian' to describe a transmuted version of Christendom that may look quite different politically, but shares basic assumptions about the role of the church in society.[19] In a consultation involving Latin American liberation theologians, Mennonites and radical Protestants in the late 1980s, Mennonites raised the issue of neo-Constantinianism. Noting an incident in early Anabaptist history in which an attempt was made to build a radical new Christendom, Willard Swartley warned of the danger of liberation theology taking the same course.[20] Other participants rejected this concern but Yoder countered: 'The respondents are not to blame for thus underestimating the weight of the Constantinian question. It is, after all, not their language. It is the code language of radical reformers at least since Waldo, and designates threats to a Gospel ethos more deep-seated than what our respondents assure us will not happen.'[21]

The danger of neo-Constantinianism is very real, especially if Christendom is interpreted merely as a historical era or political arrangement, rather than an ideology and 'a hard habit to break'. Yoder even introduces categories such as 'neo-neo-Constantinianism' and 'neo-neo-neo-Constantinianism' to underline his concern about the capacity of this ideology to reproduce itself in new and more subtle forms. But if he is correct that this is actually 'code language' within the radical dissenting tradition (of which the Waldensians and Anabaptists are representatives), this is all the more reason to use terminology that is more readily understood than 'post-Constantinian'.

Post-Christian

So, why not go further, abandon both 'post-Constantinian' and 'post-Christendom' and adopt an even simpler term, 'post-Christian'?

This is certainly a term that many writers are using to describe an increasingly secular but also multi-religious western society. It picks up the common assumption that Britain and other western societies were once 'Christian' nations and acknowledges, generally with regret, that this is no longer the case. Some urge strategies that might help to restore the Christian foundation of our societies; but most recognise that there is no way to turn the clock back and that we need to develop new approaches in this emerging context.

'Post-Christian' may be simpler than the alternatives, but using this term involves serious risks of misinterpreting the past and misconstruing the opportunities and challenges of the present.

Just as those who are critical of the Christendom synthesis can easily fall into the trap of imagining that the pre-Christendom church was pristine and glorious, so those who hark back to when our society was 'Christian' can assume that most Europeans were church-going, God-fearing and steeped in Christianity. The reality is more complex. Secularism and other faiths were far less significant throughout the Christendom centuries; there was a widespread belief in the reality of God and the spiritual life; and the church was central to culture in a way that we now find hard to imagine. But church-going (in itself a term steeped in Christendom assumptions) was rarely as consistent as we might expect; many priests – let alone ordinary church members – were profoundly ignorant of the basics of the faith; moral standards were often really low; and pagan ideas and practices survived for centuries, either mixed with Christianity or existing in parallel. Christendom was not as Christian as we might assume.[22]

Furthermore, using 'post-Christian' language may cause us to ignore or avoid the issue of the Christendom system. However Christian or otherwise individuals and communities may have been, was Christendom itself Christian? Was any European nation ever truly 'Christian' – and what would this have meant? Particular emperors, popes, monarchs or princes may have been godly people, but were they enmeshed in a structural framework that was fundamentally non-Christian or even, as dissidents persistently claimed, 'anti-Christian'? Is there any way of legitimately calling 'Christian' a system that persecuted

these dissidents, oppressed the poor, justified crusades and wars of aggression, denigrated cultures and colluded in injustice?

But the term ‘post-Christian’ can too easily gloss over such concerns and prevent us from engaging at sufficient depth with the very mixed legacy of the Christendom era. There were, of course, remarkable and deeply Christian aspects of the Christendom era that we rightly celebrate and need to retain as we move into post-Christendom. However critical we may be of the malign features of Christendom, we will not write off the thought and experience of many centuries and a multitude of Christian people. But there was much that we equally rightly reject, grieve over, disavow and renounce as being fundamentally unchristian, even anti-christian. Using the term ‘post-Christian’ does not encourage us to discriminate carefully enough.

Another problem with this term is that referring to western societies as ‘post-Christian’ undervalues the persistence and quality of Christian faith in contemporary culture. The churches are shrinking and the influence of the Christian story is much less than it was previously, but there are still millions of Christians in these societies. Western culture may be post-Christendom, but it is not entirely devoid of Christians.

Differentiating ‘Christian’ from ‘Christendom’ is especially difficult in several European languages. Suggesting that we should celebrate the end of Christendom (as I have done in seminars in a number of European nations) results in confused and anxious glances: am I really suggesting we should celebrate the end of Christian faith in Europe? It is surely not insignificant that in these languages ‘Christianity’ is conflated with ‘Christendom’, as if this were the only way in which the Christian faith can be embodied in a culture! Clarity is essential here: post-Christendom is not necessarily post-Christian.

Indeed, the end of Christendom might open up space for the recovery of authentic forms of Christian faith. Post-Christendom could be more Christian than Christendom, not less. As imperial Christianity in its various guises disintegrates and we reflect on the impact of the Christendom shift on our theology, hermeneutics, ethics, ecclesiology and missiology, what emerges might not only be contextually more appropriate in a changing culture but more authentically Christian, more faithful to our true heritage, and more hopeful. For the foreseeable future, Christians will be a small minority in most western societies. These societies may legitimately be labelled ‘post-Christendom’, for the Christian story will no longer shape their culture, even if its memory does not entirely fade. But they need not be designated ‘post-Christian’ if the church rediscovers its capacity to form communities of resilient, counter-cultural disciples who will witness faithfully and creatively in a plural culture.

There are no guarantees. The western church may simply not survive the shock of post-Christendom. The necessary adjustments in thinking and practice may be too much. The churches may wither. There are historical precedents for the virtual disappearance of the church from regions of the world where it was once dominant. Missionaries from other parts of the world, handicapped by Christendom assumptions of their own that western Christians exported to them, may try in vain to call Europeans to faith in Christ. Europe

and other western societies could then become truly 'post-Christian', believing another story or losing faith in all stories.

But there is more hopeful scenario. As post-Christendom advances and we discriminate carefully between the treasures, trinkets and treachery of the Christendom era, perhaps we can find the resources we need for this emerging culture. As we embrace the reality of post-Christendom and recognise the opportunities as well as the challenges, perhaps we can find the courage and creativity to re-imagine a church on the margins that is humble, faithful and winsome. As our imperial aspirations and attitudes gradually fade, and as the incoherence of our post-modern, secular, consumerist and increasingly nihilistic culture becomes more obvious, perhaps we can live out another story and invite others to join us. And perhaps our brothers and sisters from the global church can help us do so. For there are resources in the Gospel, in the dissenting tradition through the centuries, in the world church – and even in the Christendom era – that can enable us to testify persuasively to the way of Jesus.

So, does the label matter? Yes, I think it does. 'Post-Constantinian' and 'post-Christian' may allow unchallenged or even unrecognised assumptions to undermine our attempts to re-imagine mission, church and discipleship in contemporary culture. 'Post-Christendom' may have its own limitations, too, but it is probably the best way of signalling the nature of the challenge we face and encouraging creative responses.

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[1] [1] Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom: church and mission in a strange new world* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); Stuart Murray: *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005); Jonathan Bartley: *Faith and Politics after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006); Jo & Nigel Pimlott: *Youth Work after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); further books forthcoming.

[2] Murray: *Post-Christendom*, 19.

[3] Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 20.

[4] This appears to be the approach of Loren Mead: *The Once and Future Church* (Washington: Alban Institute, 1991) and Bob Jackson: *Hope for the Church* (London: Church House, 2002).

[5] A recent example is Martin Robinson: *Planting Mission-shaped Churches Today* (Oxford: Monarch, 2006).

[6] As in Philip Jenkins: *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[7] Nigel Wright: *Free Church, Free State* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 272-274.

[8] Wright, *Free*, 273.

[9] Wright, *Free*, 274.

[10] The extent to which the US is moving towards, or is already in the throes of, post-Christendom is widely debated. Some argue it will be an exception; others that it will follow the pattern of other western societies.

[11] See, for example, Lesslie Newbigin: *The Gospel as Public Truth* (London: CEN Books, 1992) and *Truth to Tell: the Gospel as public truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[12] See Craig Carter: *Rethinking* Christ and Culture: *A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), which exposes the serious flaws in H. Richard Niebuhr's famous typology of Christian social involvement and challenges the widespread perception that Anabaptism inevitably advocates or results in withdrawal from society.

[13] See Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 23-46, 74-108.

[14] Maybe, in fact, the situation Nigel Wright envisages and labels 'non-Constantinian Christendom'!

[15] Stanley Hauerwas: *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 18.

[16] José Miguez Bonino: *Towards a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 83.

[17] Lesslie Newbigin: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 224.

[18] John Howard Yoder, 'Orientation in Midstream: A Response to the Responses', in Daniel Schipani (Ed.): *Freedom and Discipleship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 163.
[19] John Howard Yoder: *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 142-143
[20] Willard Swartley, in Schipani, *Freedom*, 70.
[21] Yoder, in Schipani, *Freedom*, 163.
[22] See further Anton Wessels: *Was Europe Ever Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994).